

Jonah, my father

Llandaff's Peter Jones was recently given a batch of letters written by his father, the artist and sculptor, Jonah Jones. Peter details what was in them, and how the artist developed over the years

Next year will be the centenary of the birth of my father, the artist Jonah Jones, on 17th February 1919.

He spent his last 13 years in Llandaff, living in The Crescent on the Western Avenue-Cardiff Road crossroads. Every morning he would walk his whippet Leah on Llandaff and Pontcanna Fields, long before the breed became popular.

During his lifetime Jonah built up quite a reputation in Wales and beyond with his carvings and inscriptions. From the first, he was determined 'to be like the old blacksmith or the carpenter, to be a member of the community and to be accessible' as he put it. So public commissions were a key part of his output and the result can be seen around Wales.

Three works in Cardiff are representative of his craft. In the Bay, an inscription done in 1954 outside what is now the Juboraj restaurant commemorates the French chef Abel Magneron, who in the years after 1945, achieved a great reputation for his excellent cooking. Nearby, the bronze Panorama Stone points to landmarks and ports around the globe with which Cardiff docks were connected during their heyday.

Most imposing of all, high on the north-west corner of the National Museum of Wales stand two Portland stone figures of a slate worker and St Melangell, each some 11 ft high, representing industry and agriculture.

Fine lettering and public sculpture represents only the best-known part of Jonah's artistic output. During the 1960s, he carried out commissions for a number of Catholic churches around Wales and England. This includes the Church of St Patrick in Newport, where he made a large window in slab glass, a mosaic of Christ Resurrected and a painted altar canopy.

He was also a writer, publishing five books, and a prolific water-colour painter in his later years - many homes around Cardiff are graced by his Welsh landscapes and colourful texts. Besides this he gave sterling (and voluntary) service to public arts bodies such as the Arts Council of Wales, and in his capacity as an examiner at arts colleges all around the British Isles, mentored many emerging artists over the years.

I described all this in a biography which was published in 2011 by Seren Books with the title *Jonah Jones: an Artist's Life*. As my father had died in 2004, and my mother knew very little about the period before they met, much of his early life had to be pieced together in a process that involved an amount of detective work.

Although Jonah adopted Wales and its culture and considered himself a Welshman, he was actually born on Tyneside into a coal-mining family. From journals written in his later years and a handful of published essays, I knew that the Joneses experienced long periods of poverty.

Len, as Jonah was then known, won a scholarship to the local grammar school in Jarrow, where he showed an early interest in art; he even gained a scholarship to study at the King Edward School of Art in Newcastle, but his family needed him to bring in an income, so instead he took up a post as an assistant librarian at a newly opened branch in Felling near his home.

His manager was a Quaker lady called Mona Lovell and it was partly under her influence that he decided to register as a conscientious objector (CO) at the outbreak of the Second World War. He worked as a forester in Exmoor, south-west Scotland and Wensleydale in North Yorkshire for over three years, but he eventually changed his stance and decided to enlist, albeit as a non-combatant.

He took part in the war in Europe with 224 Parachute Field Ambulance before being posted to Palestine, where he met and married my mother, the writer Judith Maro (Grossman) in 1946. They moved back to Great Britain in 1947 and Jonah found work in North Wales at the Caseg Press with his army colleague, the artist John Petts, the following year.

Two years after the publication of the biography, my mobile phone rang and an unknown voice asked if I was Jonah Jones' son, and if the name Mona Lovell meant anything to me. The caller explained that he was David, Mona's nephew, and that he had inherited from his father a box containing almost 500 letters which my father had written to Mona in the 1940s.

He asked if I was interested and of course, my answer was affirmative. Transcribing these letters (together with my wife Maggie) and then editing them has taken much of my time since we moved to Llandaff five years ago. They were recently published by Seren Books under the title *Dear Mona: Letters from a Conscientious Objector*.

In the letters, we first meet Len Jones - a working class Geordie - at the age of 20, after Mona Lovell has come into his life. The story told in *Dear Mona* is a fascinating evolution of character: Mona introduces Len to art, literature and sculpture, facilitating his transformation into the artist known today - Jonah Jones.

The letters shed a lot of light on Len's evolution into an artist. They make it clear that he long expected to pursue a career in librarianship. Only gradually did his aspirations change; finding himself in Wensleydale with his Tyneside poet friend James Kirkup, he began to explore outlets for his creativity, dabbling in writing. Then he turned to water-colour painting, learning from a group of artists who lived and worked in the area, most notably Fred Lawson, a respected figure in Yorkshire. Mixing with artists in the army, especially John Petts, clinched the transformation.

Having left home for the first time in October 1940, Len writes to Mona about the tough process of mastering forestry and other occupations. The letters soon reveal his personal struggle as he and his fellow COs face local hostility. As the Second World War fighting intensifies, Len begins to question his pacifist stance, and *Dear Mona* culminates in his experiences as a non-arms bearing medic - first parachuting into northern Europe, where he took part in the Ardennes and Germany campaigns, and was present at the liberation of Belsen concentration camp. Later we see through his eyes as he is posted to Palestine, when in the closing stages of the British Mandate, he observes the issues surrounding the establishment of Israel.

Surprisingly, it is in these times of conflict that Len is able to hone his artistic talent, to the benefit of his unit.

The letters paint a vivid picture of life in wartime Britain and later on in the army and Palestine. We gain an insight into the experience of conscientious objectors during the Second World War (a subject that has not been written about much, compared with the Great War). Len was treated as a pariah on Exmoor, exploited as defenceless by his farmer employer on Tyneside, but treated fairly tolerantly in Wensleydale - although even there he remained aware of being something of an outcast because of his stance.

He recorded the stark reality of fighting in Belgium and Germany late in the war, going on to document his reaction as a member of the armed forces in Palestine, where he became bitterly critical of British Government policy. All this makes the letters a substantial historical record.

Dear Mona also records a powerful emotional story. Mona, who was 15 years older than Len, was in love with him, as was James Kirkup for a time. Len loved both as dear and highly valued friends, but could not return their love in the way they wanted. This strain runs like a thread throughout the letters, surfacing from time to time and playing a huge part in Len's life. It is this continuum that knits the letters together as a story, and gives the book the feel of a novel.

Mona was a truly remarkable woman, who played a vital role in enabling Len to broaden his horizons and gave him the confidence to follow his own path in the arts. He wrote to her, "You have helped to mould my being these growing years." In publishing the letters, my aim is not only to shed light on my father's early years and his emergence as an artist, but also to pay tribute to a brave and generous woman, Mona Lovell.

Jonah's centenary will be marked by a substantial exhibition at Oriel Plas Glyn-y-Weddw, Llanbedrog, in Gwynedd between 26th January and 17th March 2019. Some 80 works will be on display, showcasing the whole of his artistic career and the diversity of his output. For details see <https://www.oriel.org.uk/en/whats-on>

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