

Jonah Jones: The Gregynog Journals

If it is hard to lose a much-loved father, it is harder still to work out at a practical level what to do about a life that left a considerable mark. For the family of Jonah Jones it took the best part of a year before we began to discern the first faint outlines of what would eventually become the *Cofio Jonah Jones* project (*Cofio* is Welsh for ‘remembering’).

Jonah’s life had indeed been remarkable. He was born in 1919 to a working-class family in the Durham coalfield and showed early artistic talent, but like so many young people of his era his life was interrupted by the Second World War. Initially registering as a conscientious objector, Jonah was eventually enlisted in the British Army as a non-combatant. He served in 224 Parachute Field Ambulance, within the 6th Airborne Division, taking part in the Ardennes campaign and the airdrop over the Rhine at Wesel in March 1945.

Following demobilisation in 1947, Jonah’s career began in a shared practice with the artist, engraver and printer John Petts in North Wales, followed soon after by a short, intensive stay at the workshop of the late Eric Gill, where he learned the techniques of lettering and carving in stone. Then, during the 1950s, Jonah established a full-time workshop practice, one of the few in Wales who at that time were able to earn a living solely from art.

Jonah worked in many media. He cut letters in slate, carved in stone and produced bronze busts. He taught himself both the traditional techniques of stained and leaded glass and the newer ones of concrete glass and dalle-de-verre. He painted in watercolour, a medium in which he produced a distinctive body of work based on vernacular lettering, a technique in which the artist and poet David Jones was a major influence. His treatment of Welsh subject matter and working of Welsh-language texts were abiding themes throughout his half-century career in Wales. He also produced two published novels, a book of largely autobiographical essays, an illustrated book about the lakes of North Wales, and a biography of Clough Williams-Ellis, the architect of Portmeirion.

In 1981–82 Jonah spent a year at Gregynog Hall near Newtown, Powys, on a University of Wales Art Fellowship at Gregynog. Eric Gee was then the Controller of the Gregynog Press, with David Vickers, who himself went on to become Controller in 1998, as his assistant. Together the three men worked on the *Lament for Llywelyn the Last*, for which Jonah designed the title page. In later years Gregynog commissioned several designs from Jonah, including a collection of linocuts and decorations in collaboration with Sir Kyffin Williams and Michael Harvey.

Jonah spent his last 15 years in Llandaff, near Cardiff, no longer able to do heavy sculpture but still painting prolifically and actively engaged in Welsh life and culture until the end. He died in 2004, aged 85.

And so on to the rest of us, as 2004 slipped into 2005 and then 2006. Gradually our project began to emerge, in several parts, including a biography, an exhibition, an online catalogue of Jonah's work, and a proposed studio for recently graduated artists, working in partnership with Portmeirion, the village designed by Clough Williams-Ellis in Gwynedd, North Wales, and a network of art schools.

All these and other elements were long-term projects, and in 2010, as this article is being written, they all continue as works in progress, some with years still to go until they are completed. But back in 2006 we also felt the need to make a commemorative mark — to create something that would give a lasting flavour of Jonah's long, rich and creative life. From this emerged the idea of a limited-edition collectors' set, entitled *Jonah Jones: An Artist's Life in Wales*, comprising a selection of printed watercolours by Jonah from the family's private collection; a CD-Rom including newly commissioned photographs of church art work by Jonah produced when he was perhaps at the peak of his artistic powers during his forties (most of which is unknown because it is inaccessible to the general public), memorial essays by family, friends and colleagues, and various other articles and video clips in an affectionate tribute to Jonah; and a new book, *The Gregynog Journals*, based on the first three volumes of illustrated artist's journals kept by Jonah from his year in Gregynog until his death.

I had the great pleasure and privilege of editing the text and choosing the images (there are 79 in total, ranging from illuminated capitals to full-page watercolour sketches, from cartoons or doodled calligraphy to small studies of the flora and fauna surrounding Gregynog), and typesetting the book to a page design by David Vickers. The format is the old Demy Quarto (8½" x 11" — nice generous proportions) and the text is set in Perpetua (aptly designed by Eric Gill). The cover was designed by Alan Batson, the book was printed by Northend Creative Print Solutions, and the binding is by Stephen Conway (Bookbinders) Ltd of Halifax. Northend also handled the image scanning from the original journals with immense skill and sensitivity, working long and hard to restore the scanned images to something close to our memory of what they must have looked like originally before the journals became working documents carried and left lying around everywhere, slightly battered and with greying parchment. Although I am no expert on fine-press publishing, my personal conviction is that the final result is a seductively beautiful and collectible volume.

To provide a flavour of the book, let Jonah speak for himself. Here he is in the first days of his year in Gregynog, in October 1981:

“Worked with Eric Gee on the projected Llywelyn painting [*Oer Calon*, 1982, a rendering for Gwasg Gregynog of the opening of the *Lament for Llywelyn the Last* by Gruffudd ab yr Ynad Coch]. I've

designed a title-page, based on Kells [Book of Kells] caps. They fascinate. In some places, they're as abstract and intricate as a true 'Arabesque' — an Arab text filling out a set space. Yet the capitals, between two firm parallel lines, are very simple strokes, with triangular terminals. I've taken these and simply drawn out 'LLYWELYN' with that catastrophic date beneath, 1282, and then an eagle à la Kells, which seemed appropriate for *Eryr Eryrod Eryri* [The Eagle of the Eagles of Snowdonia]."

Or this, from February 1982, concerning the spacing of lettering:

"Was showing [...] the Dylan stone [to someone who] understands lettering, [who] was once a draughtsman. We discussed the difficulties of spacing out an awkward name like DYLAN THOMAS, which develops some very arbitrary spaces. I said I disliked angular letters and much preferred curved ones. SIEGFRIED SASSOON would have been more in my line. Which goes to show — the inherent difficulties of Welsh lettering, and especially typography, where individual characters won't accommodate. For instance, it is impossible to set *Gregynog* in lowercase italic in most, if not all, faces, because *g* and *y* — and even worse *y* and *g* — don't fit without filing off a ligature. The ubiquity of the *y* as opposed to the *e* is the difficulty, to which must be added that *w* is a vowel too."

For Scene & Word *The Gregynog Journals* and the *An Artist's Life in Wales* set represent a first venture into fine-press publishing. David Vickers at Gregynog and Keith Stubbley at Northend were our mentors as my family and I found our way these past several years. We can only express our gratitude to both of them and the hope that there will be more to come from Scene & Word as future years go by: perhaps a volume of Jonah's illustrated poems, or an exquisite small journal and sketchbook he kept at the request of a grandson during a trip, in old age, to Venice?

David Townsend Jones, 3rd January 2012

(1,308 words)

The collectors' set, *Jonah Jones: An Artist's Life in Wales*, is available for sale in a limited edition of 350. Write to Scene & Word, 9 Overland Road, Langland, Swansea SA3 4LS, or visit the website at www.sceneandword.org. The price is GB£300.00 plus shipping.