

‘He Placed Himself in the Order of Signs’: The Catholic poet David Jones, First World War poet and artist.

Author: Dr Mary Coghill

English Catholic History Association AGM 23rd October 2014, Plenary Presentation

This talk begins with a very brief overview of David Jones’s life. I apologise to those members of the audience for whom this is all old information. But it is always helpful to have a few dates and places. The focus of this presentation is 1935-1940, the years that Jones lived in Sidmouth, Devon. It is a part of his life which is often glossed over, even completely omitted, and discounted as unimportant. Seaside towns on the south coast have this effect on biographers it seems. I would like to gratefully thank Sister Clare Veronica of The Convent of the Assumption, Oxford for all her hard work in tracking down some very interesting information and photos relevant to this paper.

David Jones was born in 1895 in Brockley, Kent, South East of London. He died in 1974 in Calvary Nursing Home Harrow, North West London. His father, originally from North Wales, was a printers’ overseer with The Christian Herald Press. His mother’s father was a ship’s carpenter and his mother’s mother was a lavender seller. His mother grew up in the east End of London and had high Anglican tendencies. David Jones had one surviving sister. He was a talented artist and became a student at The Camberwell Art School. The First World War intervened and in 1915 David Jones signed up with the Royal Welch Fusiliers [show slide]. His poem *In Parenthesis* is a poetic account of both his own experiences and that of his comrades at arms. This was published by Faber in 1937. It has a glowing Introduction written by T.S.Eliot who stated that he regarded it as a work of genius. The edition has one of David Jones’s distinctive drawings on the front cover. When the war was over, Jones went back to study art at the Westminster School of Art where he met, amongst others, the artist Eric Gill. David Jones, not unexpectedly, was greatly unsettled by his war experiences. He was wounded in action and returned to the frontline after recuperating back in Britain. He also caught Trench fever and had to spend several months in a hospital behind the lines in France. After the war was over his health worsened and he seems to have suffered from chronic depression and insomnia. However, these were also formative years for his faith and in 1921, with the catechetical guidance of one Father John O’Connor he was received into the Catholic Church. In 1922 he joined Eric Gill’s Guild of St Joseph and St Dominic at Ditchling, Sussex. He then spent two years living with Eric Gill and others in

Capel-y-Ffin, South Wales. In 1925 and 1926 he visited Caldey Island to stay with the monks there. At the time they were Anglican Benedictines. His artistic output was very successful there. Over the next few years his health deteriorated and almost in desperation, in 1934, his friends took him on a trip to the British Protectorate of Palestine, as it was then known, to visit the holy sites. This was to have a profound effect on both him and his work. In 1935 his friends paid for him to stay at The Fort Hotel in Sidmouth. In 1940, when war broke out, oddly, I think, he moved back to London. His stay, or perhaps convalescence in Sidmouth seemed to help him very much. He painted some pictures, finished his book *In Parenthesis* for publication and began to write what would eventually become his later long poem *The Anathémata*. His preserved correspondence is published in *Dai Greatcoat* (Faber, 2008). His letters written in Sidmouth are of interest to anyone interested in biographical influence of place on a person's work. Jones's own response to Sidmouth, as is further detailed below was not altogether one of approval.

This paper now turns to a discussion of the theology of Maurice de la Taille S.J. and its implications for Jones's work *In Parenthesis*. In 1915 de la Taille finished writing a masterpiece, in Latin, entitled *Mysterium Fidelis*, this is translated as *The Mystery of Faith*. He concludes his brief Preface with the words: 'I had scarcely finished this work when I was summoned to a military camp as war chaplain' (1941, vol. I p.x). This work was first translated into English and a summary printed by Sheed and Ward in 1934. The full 2 volume text was published in 1941 and 1950 respectively. It is from the 1934 edition that the quotation in the title of this paper comes from: 'He placed Himself in the Order of Signs'. This was one of the texts which so inspired David Jones and his group of friends in the twenties and thirties. A second significant text was Jacques Maritain's *Art and Scholasticism*. This was originally written in French and first translated into English in 1930. *The Mystery of Faith* by de la Taille is a masterpiece of research and knowledge, sometimes the notes at the bottom of the page outweigh the actual text. His scope of learning and knowledge is formidable. It would be fair to name him as a 'Little Aquinas'. In the manner of St Thomas Aquinas, this paper now covers the theological discussion which, I think, informed the heart of Jones's faith and artistic expression in *In Parenthesis*. Again, for those of you, for whom this is familiar material please bear with the rest of us. The doctrine discussed is beautifully informed and analysed and is very rewarding in terms of an understanding of all Catholic art – by which I mean all forms of art – painting, drawing, music, poetry etc. The Maritain is also very significant but the depth of analysis and study is

not comparable with the de la Taille. Later in his life, with obvious reference to this work, David Jones wrote an essay entitled 'Art and Sacrament' (1955). This was published by Faber in the collection *Epoch and Artist* (1959). This will be discussed if there is time.

The Mystery of Faith by Maurice de la Taille is in 2 volumes. The footnote on page 46 (all page references are from the 1941 edition by Sheed and Ward) reveals an artistic scheme which informs the religious basis of the narrative of *In Parenthesis*: **[show slide]**

Note that to give oneself to death (like soldiers and martyrs), and to give oneself to death by way of sacrifice to God, are not identical: for sacrifice includes the concept OF GIFT PRESENTED TO GOD (as a sign of internal dedication). This gift concept is intrinsic to all true sacrifices, without it a sacrifice can neither be nor be known to be' (p46).

The text which follows this footnote is as follows: **[show slide]**

Do we not find the same or similar in the martyrs of every age both before and after Christ, and yet their death was not a sacrifice, except in the broad or metaphorical sense? Now SACRIFICE MUST BE IN ITSELF PLAINLY EVIDENT AS A SACRIFICE, because sacrifice is in the nature of a sign – a pragmatic locution signifying an invisible thing; before all else therefore it should be self-evident. Now nothing is self-evidently a sacrifice – hence an adequate sign – hence a sacrifice at all – if it is wholly indeterminate in the line of sacrificial *being* (p46).

This argument is in the context of de la Taille's discussion and definition of the difference between immolation and sacrifice and Christ's offering of the sacrifice before his immolation on the cross. With reference to Jones's poetry it is important to unravel the theological point that is being made here. It is necessary to go back through de la Taille's argument to understand this point more clearly.

De la Taille begins his thesis by demonstrating that many theologians understand sacrifice and immolation to be one and the same thing (p14). This he regards as a fundamental error. In the development of his argument he begins by quoting St Augustine (from *Civitas Dei*): **[show slide]** 'Sacrifice therefore is the visible sacrament of the invisible sacrifice, that is, it is a sacred sign This implies two elements: a sign and a thing signified' (1941, p7). On the following page, de la Taille makes the point: **[show slide]** 'But as truth, the negation of fiction, accrues to the sacrifice from the invisible element, [the invisible sacrifice referred to above] we sometimes find in the works of St Augustine, [and later theologians]... the expression *true sacrifice* used for the internal [invisible] sacrifice (1941, p8).

For de la Taille, sacrifice is in the nature of a gift, it must involve a sensible (that is, conscious) sacrificial act. It is therefore not the slaying of the victim (as in the Old Testament, the sacrificial animals at the altar) which is the sacrifice, it is the offering for the slaying. The slaying is therefore separate from the sacrifice and is named the immolation. Thus the two are separate parts of the sacred process, the sacrifice, that is, Christ's offering of himself as a sacrifice, the passion of Christ; and the immolation, the slaying of Christ, that is the crucifixion and death of Christ. It is perhaps easier to refer to de la Taille's own words: **[show slide]**

The word *immolation*, therefore, in its very strictest sense implies the destruction or the slaying of the victim, though not without reference to some kind of offering. Sacrifice, therefore, in its proper sense has two factors: the (outward) act of offering and the immolation. The victim IS EITHER OFFERED TO BE IMMOLATED, OR IS OFFERED AS IMMOLATED. Neither the offering in itself alone, nor the immolation in itself alone suffices to confer victimhood; both are required (1941, p14)

De la Taille's thesis moves on to elucidate the true nature of the sacrifice of Christ in the Last Supper, the institution of the Eucharist. But for the purposes of this paper the definition of sacrifice and immolation are the important aspects of his argument which inform Jones's *In Parenthesis*. An apologia is required for the far too brief examination of de la Taille's theology. My excuse is that the points mentioned above elucidate the artistic narrative behind *In Parenthesis* as a poem of the First World War. It is armed with this theology that David Jones was able to write what he did and it is by sharing this theology that his work can be fully understood.

In Parenthesis is written as a narrative. The seven parts describe different aspects of the soldiers' training and life in the trenches. David Jones was not a pacifist, but the horrors he witnessed, some of which are described in the poem, stayed with him so vividly that in 1935-1940, twenty years after the war, when he lived in Sidmouth, much of his poetic work was a continued reworking of the soldiers' suffering and the action on the battlefields in France. Very briefly the 7 parts of the poem are all set in winter with descriptions of terrible cold and wet weather. They are as follows: Part 1: 'The many men so beautiful' is about the soldiers' brief training in England and their journey to France; Part 2: 'Chambers go off, corporals stay' describes their march through France ending with the brutal sudden death of the troop's sergeant; Part 3: 'Starlight order': details further manoeuvres and marching of the troops to their position in the trenches; Part 4: 'King Pellam's Launde' has a sense of dramatic unity as it approximates the actions of one day and night with Private Ball standing on sentry duty. This part contains a literary device, a boasting monologue by Private Ball which possibly

reflects a literary device in the long Welsh poem *Taliesin*; Part 5: ‘Squat garlands for the White Knights’ provides details of how the soldiers, living for months in the trenches constructed a routine of life for themselves, including a boxing match and details of orders to march in one direction and then after a change of mind to march back to where they came from; Part 6: ‘Pavilions and Captains of Hundreds’, here the description of the weather indicates that it is now summer, the sound of gunfire is nearer and more intrusive and in a kind of bitter paradisaic interlude, Private Ball and two of his closest friends in the troop discuss their future plans, and hopes of going home, the part concludes with the orders to march up to the frontline for an offensive. Part 7: ‘The five unmistakeable marks’ is the conclusion where there is a running battle for the control of a copse and where Private Ball is apparently killed.

It is such a travesty to summarise the poem in this way. The narrative thread is strong and providing the reader does not allow the sometimes unfamiliar vocabulary or sentence structure, or the allusions to mediaeval literature to hold up the process of reading, it is possible to follow this narrative. David Jones is a complex artist, even great familiarity with the text still reveals levels of meaning which are not apparent immediately. Many would say the same about his paintings, drawings, woodcuts and lettering.

The final section of *In Parenthesis*: ‘The five unmistakeable marks’ is the section which reveals Jones’s religious and literary intentions. Jones is perhaps disingenuous when he refers the reader to these title words as a quotation from ‘The Hunting of the Snark’ by Lewis Carroll. Though it is possible to see a grim humour in this, that the soldiers are part of a nonsense game, the religious significance is more obvious, especially in the light of the action as it unfolds, bringing the poem to its close. How does the reader understand that the narrative of war quickly becomes the religious narrative of sacrifice? On page 158 there is the silent human *cri de coeur*: **[show slide]** ‘Perhaps they’ll cancel it.’ And then two lines later: ‘Or you read it again many times to see if it will come different:/you can’t believe the Cup wont pass from/ or they wont make a better show/in the Garden.’

As the attack continues Jones describes the regional identities of the soldiers – from parts of London (pp160/1), and then the gaps in the line as they are killed (pp167/8); how he lobs a grenade at a sighted German soldier and cowers to avoid ‘ruby drops from young beech-sprigs’ (p169); and the cries of the dying soldiers in no-man’s land. In a terrifying passage of

grim dark humour, which perhaps ratifies the reference in the title of this part, he writes

[show slide]:

Nothing is impossible nowadays my dear if only we can get the poor bleeder through the barrage and they take just as much trouble with the ordinary soldiers you know and essential-service academicians can match the natural hue and everything extraordinarily well.

Give them glass eyes to see
and synthetic spare parts to walk in the Triumphs, without anyone feeling awkward
and O,O,O, its a lovely war with poppies on the up-platform for a perpetual memorial
of his body (p176).

As Jones moves on to the final passage of the poem there is an example of the mythopoeisis that was so important to him. Mythopoeisis is the appropriation and reworking of mythical material. For Jones this includes the legends of ancient Wales, Malory, the pre-Christian imagery of the Goddess. For Jones, this was not heresy it was the way he proved that pre-Christian religions were precursors of Christianity. The passage where the ‘Queen of the Woods’ plucks for each of the dead soldiers a ‘fragile prize’ is deeply poignant. There are different flowers which reflect the personalities of the men that Ball knew: **[show slide]**

Emil has a curious crown its/made of golden saxifrage.

Fatty wears sweet briar, he will reign with her for a thousand years....

Ulrich smiles for his myrtle wand.

That swine Lillywhite has daisies to his chain – you’d hardly credit it (p185).

When Private Ball is hit and can no longer walk he crawls to an oak tree and leaves his rifle propped up against it. The symbolism of the cross, or ‘the wood of the tree’ as Jones preferred to call it is immediately apparent. The narrative implies his forthcoming death. So too is his grim humour: ‘But leave it [the rifle] – under the oak/leave it for a Cook’s tourist to the Devastated Areas and crawl as far as you can and wait for the bearers.’ (p186).

The links with the theology of de la Taille which were referred to at the beginning of this paper now need to be more closely looked at. I quoted his sentence: ‘Note that to give oneself to death (like soldiers and martyrs), and to give oneself to death by way of sacrifice to God, are not identical: for sacrifice includes the concept OF GIFT PRESENTED TO GOD (as a sign of internal dedication)’ (p46). Is the death of the soldier, as understood by David Jones, therefore not one of religious sacrifice? If it is not a religious sacrifice then how is the death to be understood. It is an easy thing to think, in the common phrase, of the soldier’s ‘ultimate sacrifice’. The term is therefore a human one not a religious one. The soldier is rather given to death than gives himself to death. *In Parenthesis* is a detailed narrative of how the soldier’s life is one where orders are obeyed and instructions (however odd – see

pp128/9 for example) then the ‘giving oneself to death of the soldier’ is indeed a sacrifice but not the divine one. My own suggestion is that, after reading the poem, Jones is perhaps exploring the possibility of a human passion rather than the divine passion of Christ. The orders given and obeyed are not for a glorious divine cause, they are given and obeyed because of the human order of things – as Jones points out with his constant references to mediaeval poetry. The ‘ultimate sacrifice’ is engendered because of the human construct of war. The death of each soldier is not mitigated by this, rather, it illustrates the futility of the human condition.

If de la Taille, I think correctly, as discussed earlier, differentiates between the sacrifice and the immolation in the Divine Passion, then Jones understands clearly the difference between the two, and therefore he understands the difference between the soldier’s death and the martyr’s death. As de la Taille understands it, and I quote again: ‘Do we not find the same or similar in the martyrs of every age both before and after Christ, and yet their death was not a sacrifice, except in the broad or metaphorical sense? Now SACRIFICE MUST BE IN ITSELF PLAINLY EVIDENT AS SACRIFICE, because sacrifice is in the nature of a sign – a pragmatic locution signifying an invisible thing;’ (p46). But Jones gives Private Ball the position of death at the foot of ‘the wood of the tree’, even the symbol of England – the oak tree. But as quoted above de la Taille describes this kind of death as ‘metaphorical’. It is beyond the scope of this paper to enter into the intricacies of a discussion of metaphor but perhaps, in this context, it may be broadly understood in a literary and poetic sense as the description of two things that are one and the same at the same time: Private Ball’s death at the foot of the oak tree, with his rifle forming the arms of that cross, is at one and the same time a sacrifice, as I would go so far as to suggest, a human passion. As the soldier’s death is as a result of human commands, then at one and the same time this death is also a sacrifice. Is the ‘Queen of the Woods’ a pre-Christian image or is it a name, as in a Litany for the Blessed Virgin Mary? As a pre-Christian image, she is a pre-cursor, as the human sacrifice is a precursor perhaps for Christ’s Passion – sacrifice and immolation.

As defined in the quote from St Augustine referred to earlier: ‘Sacrifice therefore is the visible sacrament of the invisible sacrifice, that is, it is a sacred sign (from *Civitas Dei*). This implies two elements: a sign and a thing signified’ (1941, p7). It is clear that Private Ball’s death is a sacrifice but it is not a ‘visible sacrament of the invisible

sacrifice'. His death is pitiable, all the soldiers' deaths are pitiable, it is a sacrifice but a human sacrifice.

This is a very difficult area for discussion. It is not my intention to propose any interpretation of Jones's Catholicism which is, in any way heretical. I do not think his work is heretical. But what I think is important is to interpret how he understood the soldier's sacrifice within the theology of his Catholicism. I think that de la Taille provides the key.

Now it is time to look at David Jones's life in Sidmouth, his link to the West Country. I have fulfilled my directive from St Thomas Aquinas – to put forward the theoretical and complicated theory first – and what follows is material which is more readily accessible.

[show slide] Sidmouth was a pretty seaside town when Jones lived there, as it still is today.

This slide shows the view of the sea front which is similar in perspective to the one which he had from his hotel bedroom window. It is indicative of Jones's distressed state, that whilst he lived in Sidmouth he was still unable to move on from the experiences of the First World War. Poetry which he wrote was collected and published in *The Sleeping Lord and other fragments*. This was first published by Faber in 1974, the year of Jones's death. However Jones had other successful projects to hand. *In Parenthesis* was going to press (1937) whilst he lived at The Fort Hotel. **[show slide]** This is an aerial photo, though of slightly later date showing the Fort Hotel where he stayed. The building is almost identical to this today.

Having this First World War poem finally come out into the public domain must have been a release and relief. What was still an internal experience became a part of the wider world once it was in print. However *The Sleeping Lord* contains much material which, twenty years on from the end of WW1 was still a grim recollection of the dying cries of the soldiers in no-man's land. Did Sidmouth influence David Jones's work or did his years in this small quiet seaside town rub off in his work in any way? This is a question which has both serious and some humorous answers.

David Jones lived in The Fort Hotel when he stayed in Sidmouth which was from the Spring 1935 until the summer of 1940. This building is now a block of flats. The curved room at the front of the Hotel is now a cafe and well worth a visit. As a devout catholic he went to Mass at **[show slides]** the chapel – Our Lady Help of Christians – in The Convent of the Assumption which was one mile back through the town. This was founded in the 1880's, first as an orphanage and later, as a result of WWI becoming a school. **[show slide]** Here is a

photo of the Hughes sisters, one a nun and the other a novice (without the cross on the royal blue habit). The foundation stone of local parish church **[show slides]** was laid in April 1935. The parish priest, Fr Alan Power and the Bishop, the Right Revd. Dr John Patrick Barrett, are present. Inside the church the High Altar was dedicated to the Catholic soldiers who died in the First World War. Jones would have attended Mass here – also walking back from the seafront and into the town of Sidmouth. Father Alan Power, who was a very energetic priest **[show slide]** was also a scholarly and artistic man and it is tempting to think of him as a friend of David Jones as well as priest.

David Jones's room at The Fort Hotel was paid for by friends. He spent much of his time in Sidmouth reading and writing – both his own work and extensive correspondence. But he was often travelling to visit friends as the following slide shows **[show slide]**. This shows a prescription which was made up for Jones. It was found amongst his papers at The National Library of Wales. The date it was made up was 13th June 1938. The practice at the time was to use the same prescription a number of times with each chemist stamping it when it was cashed in. It seems to have been used the very next day at Aberdovey – though the name is unclear. Jones would have travelled by train from Sidmouth. At the time the station was a mile back through the town from the Hotel and there were regular services which would have taken him up country. Subsequent usage is undated but demonstrates that Jones was travelling a great deal – Alnwick, Northumberland, High Wycombe, Bucks; Kings Road, S. W. London; Sidmouth again and Oxford. It is interesting to note that the prescription is for aspirin, quinine and cinnamon water, three mild drugs for pain relief, relief of tremor or shakes and indigestion respectively. There is no drug prescribed for insomnia or depression. **[show slide]**. David Jones made several pastel drawings whilst in Sidmouth. This is one which appears to be from the roof of his Hotel in Sidmouth. And once again it demonstrates that Jones' predominant interest is the town, not the sea. The drawing highlights an emphasis on people rather than buildings. It shows a cricket match on the pitch which is still behind the Fort Flats today **[show slide]**. **[go back to Jones picture]** There is plenty of movement in this picture and a kind of concertina-ed admixture of activity. Dog walking and cricket taking place at the same time for example.

David Jones describes The Fort Hotel as '*very comfortable*'. When a friend visited him there 'He was somewhat surprised to find David chatting to elderly ladies and retired colonels in the hotel, but when there came a pause...David would whisper to Tom 'Let's go for a wet'

and they were off to the nearby pub for a pint' (Aldritt, p91). This story should be seen in the context of the role of commemorating the WWI dead in the new parish church. Jones would have been a respected ex-soldier and survivor in both the catholic and wider community of Sidmouth. Shortly before his final departure from Sidmouth he was operated on for appendicitis in the local cottage hospital. In a letter of 16th May 1940 (D.G., p97) he describes the hospital with the 'white iron bedstead' reminded him of being in hospital in France in the war, and he wrote to a friend: 'I had a wireless earphone thing over my bed in hospital, so for the first time in my life listened rather a lot to it' (*Dai Greatcoat* p97). It is also known that he was visited during his stay in hospital by the then priest, [show slide] Father A G Herring, a thoughtful late convert to Catholicism. Here is a [show slide] drawing he made, again from The Fort Hotel. It is dated 1940, there is smoke coming from the chimney of what is now The Bedford Hotel which would indicate that it was drawn before he had appendicitis.

Jones began to write poetry in Sidmouth some of which was included later in *The Sleeping Lord and other fragments*. In his short introduction to the extracts of *The Book of Balaam's Ass* which is included in this collection, he wrote that this work was drafted during the years that he was in Sidmouth in the late 1930's. He writes that it specifically recalls conversations from 1919-20 and subsequent discussion. He writes that it has 'something in common with *The Anathémata*', the poem which he wrote after *In Parenthesis*. The graphic and distressing passages describing the soldiers' last cries in no man's land are reminiscent of the Ophelia passage (quoted above) in the closing pages of *In Parenthesis*. Jones stated in a letter that he drafted more than 40 pages of poetry whilst at The Fort Hotel. He writes about this work first on 31st May 1938:

'Have only done one drawing after all and then started to take up again the writing I read to you when last I saw you, but have only done about 40 more pages...*I.P.* [*In Parenthesis*] was chained to a sequence of events which made it always a straightforward affair, whereas this effort is, I fear about 'ideas' the *one* thing I have always disliked in poetry...' (D.G. p86).

And over the year he writes in more detail about this exploratory writing:

It is rather disjointed and rambling and may have to be (if it ever appears) a kind of thing in sections with only the continuity of my own rambling mind to give it a kind of unity. Let me see – this is not public information – but I think it is really about how if you start saying in a kind of way how *bloody* everything is you end up in a kind of *praise* – *inevitably* – I mean a sort of Balaam business. Yes perhaps it will be called *The Book of Balaam*, or *The Book of Balaam's Ass*. A spot of Job too! It started off by talking about how things are conditioned by other things – a person

comes into a room for instance and all the disorder and deadness takes shape and life – but it has wandered into all kinds of things – got a lot more ‘religious’ than I anticipated in a way. (D.G., pp90/91).

The story of Balaam’s Ass is from Numbers Chapter 22. I am happy to answer questions on the details of this story afterwards if anyone wishes. This title and the mention of the Book of Job, in the above quoted letter, indicates that Jones was reading the Old Testament whilst at The Fort Hotel. Just briefly there is more Old Testament material in the *Sleeping Lord* version of ‘The Book of Balaam’s Ass’ as he names one of the soldiers who is indestructible whilst fighting as Private Lucifer. Jones’s description of this allegorical figure is chilling. This is rich material for analysis of different levels of the soldiers’ interaction between the savage trials of war and the seemingly devil driven motivations of those who send them.

On the following page the editor mentions that ‘The opening part of *The Book of Balaam’s Ass*, in which ‘all the disorder and deadness takes shape and life’, is based on the town of Sidmouth and David’s deep affection for Prudence Pelham’ (D.G. p92). The quote he gives is from the opening lines and does not mention Sidmouth, it is a description of Prudence herself. There is a fuller published extract of this piece writing in another collection of Jones’s poetry entitled *The Roman Quarry* (published by Agenda Editions, 1981). Parts of it, in style rather than content, can be seen to be later worked into *The Anathémata*. I would like to quote from the second page of *The Roman Quarry* version of *Balaam’s Ass*. Firstly because it explicitly describes Sidmouth and secondly because it demonstrates how Jones used his skills as an artist to describe a scene in words:

a living sail turns the headland close in to change the shape of the small sea, sets free the constricting esplanade and bends the rigid sea-rail to a native curvature (for space itself, they say, leans, is kindly, with ourselves, who make wide deviations to meet ourselves). Even the Hotel *Victoria* [show slide] shouts for joy and nods her vile proportions; the *Bedford* [show slide] finds it easier, for she has anyway a freedom of her own. Her square-set walls carry, where her windows bay, a refinement of iron to strut the virid baldachin [canopy – including over an altar, balcony roof]; her balconies have leaned out or another century. She’s inclined herself, she’s been conditioned, she’s felt her proportions modified by, gained a passing fullness from, each surprising advent that comes to break the waters and to shake the town (*The Roman Quarry*, ‘The Book of Balaam’s Ass’, p188).

But Jones’s own response to the distinctive red cliffs [show slide] in Sidmouth is not appreciative. He wrote in a letter in March 1935: ‘P.S. I don’t much like the red cliffs about here. On some days it’s like living under a vast baulk of chocolate – they turn the bitter sea also into a kind of cocoa lake, however.’ (p65 *Dai Greatcoat*). This image is perhaps picked

up in a reference to ‘the dun sea’ in *The Book of Balaam’s Ass* (p101). Is his dislike of the red cliffs perhaps because they remind him of dried blood? He does however also mention the pleasure of sitting on the beach (D.G. p71 29.4.1935). I suggest there is a connection with the convent and the parish in the lines from pages 179/80 of *The Anathémata*. These lines refer to ‘the shapeless and dowdy pious’ and there is a reference to school on p180: ‘mostly a penny flame or two?/often the votive bunch/plucked out of school?’. In a letter from March 1935 he writes;

‘I go in the afternoon and hear the nuns say compline which I like and see the little Dawson girls [daughters of Christopher and Valery] from behind. So old man O’Connor has been about has he – you want to be careful with the hassocks. And wasn’t he the bold priest and wasn’t I the poor victim. One of the swans from the [river] Sid (you remember that miserable stream) came sailing white and proudly on the sunny waves the other day – a marvel to see....’ (DG p66).

[Jones bore the brunt of Fr O’Connor’s anger when serving at Mass at the Convent. He omitted to place a hassock correctly and Fr. O’Connor kicked it away.]

There is also a reference to the game of ‘pin the tail on the donkey’ in *The Roman Quarry* version of ‘The Book of Balaam’s Ass’. This might well be a reference to a local church or convent fête. Jones had a close friend, Christopher Dawson who was closely connected to the convent school of St John’s. He might well have attended public events at the school. There is a photo [show slide] of his daughter, Christina Dawson, in the book *St John’s, Convent of the Assumption: A History* (she is the girl at the back).

In conclusion, [show slide] David Jones’s life in Sidmouth was obviously a rich and fruitful episode in his life. It seems he had already read a summary of de la Taille’s *Mystery of Faith* as it was first published in English in 1930. And that he had also studied Jacques Maritain’s *Art and Scholasticism* which was first published in translation in the early 1930’s. Both of these books informed his poem *In Parenthesis* although there has not been time to discuss the Maritain. *In Parenthesis* went through its final stages of preparation for publication while he was living in Sidmouth and it was in Sidmouth that he seems to have finally laid to rest the voices of the dying soldiers of the First World War that he remembered from twenty years earlier. He began to move on to explore material which was strongly influenced by his visit to The British Protectorate of Palestine in 1934 and which became his later major work about London, *The Anathémata*. Sidmouth had a healing role; the seaside town gave him the rest that he needed. The Second World War began in 1939 and he moved up to London in 1940. There is no strong reference to Sidmouth in his work and he does not seem to have ever

returned. It was a pretty and quiet seaside town when he stayed as it still is today. It is an attractive place for a holiday and now for those Catholics who are interested in David Jones's life and work, there is a reason for a pilgrimage as well. Thank you.