New study of American novelist

A conversation with Tony Williams, author of *James Jones: The Limits of Eternity*—Part 1

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James Jones: The Limits of Eternity by Tony J. Williams, Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016, 298 pp.

"'Why does the world have to be like it is?' Warden said, letting himself go completely. 'I don't know why the world has to be like it is.'" James Jones, *From Here to Eternity*

Tony J. Williams, professor of English at Southern Illinois University, has produced *James Jones: The Limits of Eternity*, a new study of the American novelist. It is a serious, thought-provoking book about a serious artist.

Other works by Williams include *Structures of Desire: British Cinema, 1939-1955 (2000), The Cinema of George A. Romero: Knight of the Living Dead (2003) and Body and Soul: The Cinematic Vision of Robert Aldrich (2004).*

Jones (1921-77) is best known for *From Here to Eternity* (1951), *Some Came Running* (1957), *The Thin Red Line* (1962) and the posthumously published *Whistle* (1978), as well as short stories collected in *The Ice-Cream Headache and Other Stories* (1968).

Jones is an intriguing and complicated figure. A contemporary, more or less, of Saul Bellow (born 1915), Norman Mailer (1923) and James Baldwin (1924), Jones wrote a very different kind of book than those three authors: less intellectually and psychologically sophisticated, set in wartime or small-town America, and also capable of delivering energetic and remarkable insights into American class and social relationships of the mid-20th century. At his best, Jones cut through a great deal of establishment mythology and offered, as Tony Williams notes in our conversation below, "some very unpalatable home truths that many people don't want to hear."

Born in Robinson, Illinois, a town of a few thousand people near the Indiana border, Jones grew up in a difficult, intense family. Unable to go to college, he enlisted in the US military in 1939 at the age of 17. He was stationed in Honolulu at the time of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941 and subsequently took part in the bloody Guadalcanal campaign in 1942-43. He was discharged in 1944.

Jones's first novel, *From Here to Eternity*, written in the late 1940s, is set on the eve of US entry into World War II. Its central figure, Robert E. Lee Prewitt, is a young career soldier stationed at the Schofield Barracks in Hawaii. The son of a coal miner from Harlan County, Kentucky, Prewitt turned hobo during the Depression before joining the military.

This is the description of his mother's death: "When the boy Prewitt was in the seventh grade his mother died of the consumption. There was a big strike on that winter and she died in the middle of it. If she had had her choice, she could have picked a better time. Her husband, who was a striker, was in the county jail with two stab wounds in his chest and a fractured skull. And her brother, Uncle John, was dead, having been shot by several deputies."

Prewitt, labeled a "Bolshevik" by fellow soldiers and superiors, is stubborn and fierce. He gets into trouble with his company's commanding officer, Captain Dana Holmes, by refusing to join the regimental boxing team (Prewitt once blinded a sparring partner). Despite receiving "The Treatment," which includes extra duties, abuse, punishment, exhausting physical demands, Prewitt refuses to give in.

First Sergeant Milt Warden effectively runs the company. He has contempt for the officers above him, who are invariably lazy, incompetent and stupid. Warden enters into an affair with Captain Holmes' wife, Karen, who is bored and unhappy with her life. She sets her sights on Warden becoming an officer, something that makes him distinctly uneasy. ("And now I'm supposed to go on and become an Officer, the symbol of every goddam thing I've always stood up against, and not feel anything about it. I'm supposed to do that for you.")

Prewitt undergoes various difficulties and torments, eventually ending up in the stockade. The prisoners there are routinely beaten and placed in solitary confinement. Prewitt meets Jack Malloy, a charismatic (and not entirely convincing) former member of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and now a proponent of Gandhian "Passive Resistance." Tony Williams argues that Jones views those who find themselves in the stockade "as orphaned heirs of the early socialists and IWW."

In the book's most brutal scene, Staff Sergeant "Fatso" Judson, the prison second-in-command, beats a man to death in front of the other prisoners. Prewitt vows to kill Judson, a vow he makes good on once he has been released. He thereupon goes AWOL and into hiding at the home of his girlfriend Alma, a prostitute. After the Japanese attack, Prewitt decides to return to his unit. He is stopped by guards, who prepare to arrest him because he has no identification. Prewitt runs off, and the guards shoot him.

Mailer, whose *The Naked and the Dead*, published in 1948, was based on his experiences in the Philippines campaign during World War II, described Jones' work as "a big fist of a book with powerful virtues and serious faults, but if the very good is mixed with the sometimes bad, those qualities are inseparable from the author. Jones writes with a wry compassionate anger which is individual and borrows from no writer I know."

From Here to Eternity does have serious faults. Jones is prone to abstract psychologizing and soliloquizing that make for a good many tedious passages and even entire chapters (in this book and others). However, those failings are more than compensated for by the insights he provides into American life at the end of the Depression, the military and the nature of modern warfare.

The reader needs to discover this for him or herself, but these are a few examples.

This is Warden, thinking to himself: "Warden had a theory about

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officers: Being an officer would make a sinner out of Christ himself. No man could swallow so much gaseous privilege and authority without having his guts inflated.… In every war there were two wars, the war for officers and the war of the enlisted man."

And this is Prewitt: "So that he had gone right on, unable to stop believing that if the Communists were the underdog in Spain then he believed in fighting for the Communists in Spain; but that if the Communists were the top dog back home in Russia and the (what would you call them in Russia? the traitors, I guess) traitors [i.e., the victims of Stalin] were the bottom dog, then he believed in fighting for the traitors and against the Communists. He believed in fighting for the Jews in Germany, and against the Jews in Wall Street and Hollywood. And if the Capitalists were top dog in America and the proletariat the underdog, then he believed in fighting for the proletariat against the Capitalists. This too-ingrained-to-be-forgotten philosophy of life of his had led him, a Southerner, to believe in fighting for the Negroes against the Whites everywhere, because the Negroes were nowhere the top dog, at least as yet."

This is Warden again, contemplating the approach of war: "If the Government was getting ready for a war in July of 1941, that was not the same as being in one. That it was bound to come eventually did not mean it would be here tomorrow. It would take something pretty big, before the country would be willing to get in; and all the rifles in the world did not make a war-Army until you had talked the people into shooting them."

Tony Williams insists correctly throughout his book and in our interview that Jones was not merely a "war novelist," but a commentator on the contradictions of American society and the human condition generally. Significant sections were cut out of *From Here to Eternity* before its publication, especially those treating sexual behavior and homosexuality in particular. Williams argues that the recent availability of the unexpurgated version of Jones's first novel "reveals the presence of an author who was a humanitarian and sexual radical combating the psychological and physical manifestations of authoritarianism that extend into our current generations."

From Here to Eternity is an honest, angry book. It teaches mistrust in the military and every other subdivision of the establishment. It suggests that countries do not go to war for high ideals, including the United States in the "good war," World War II. (As Warden tells Karen Holmes, "Each country calls it [their national identity] by a different name so they can fight all the other countries that look liable to get too powerful.") It urges tolerance and compassion, even as it casts a critical eye on its damaged human subjects.

This comment by Jones that Williams cites seems to sum up the novelists' view: "The meaning of the army for me is one of personal degradation, a degradation that is inescapable once a man is hooked, a degradation rising directly out of the system of caste and privilege and arbitrary authority."

From Here to Eternity was turned into an award-winning film, directed by Fred Zinnemann and released in 1953.

Some Came Running, Jones's next novel, opens in 1947 and closes with the onset of the Korean War. It takes place in a fictional Parkman, Indiana, a version of Robinson, Illinois. Williams suggests that the book is "closely aligned with its author's knowledge of another changed America of the 1950s where conformity and materialism have taken a firmer grip on American consciousness … America is changing and for the worse."

Dave Hirsch, the novel's central character, is a cynical World War II veteran and a writer, who returns to Parkman after 16 years. His brother Frank, who owns a jewelry store, is a pillar of respectability, with dreams of suburban shopping malls and interstate highways. The brothers clash. Dave Hirsch hangs around with a crowd of gamblers (above all, Bama Dillert), drinkers and "loose women," although he falls in love with the virginal Gwen French, a teacher.

There are good things here, and some bad. The conversations in bars, restaurants and poolrooms are convincing and authentic. The picture of postwar economic life and the enrichment of the town's elite also ring true. The road trips and drinking sprees speak to both the economic optimism of the time and its spiritual confusion and even demoralization. The population will not go back to the terrible years of the Depression, but where is it going?

In one scene, Hirsch observes a "tough," damaged World War II veteran in a barroom. "There goes all of us, he thought. In Raymond Cold, imbued with an almost classical Greek inevitability of self-destruction and carrying the same sense of tragic fitness. … What a nation we were turning into. It was like living in the last wild days of the Roman Empire. Everybody drinking and discussing and destruction sweeping down in hordes from the north. We will maintain our policy of Business As Usual."

Jones goes on, keeping up the ancient Roman metaphor: "These were the Plebs, he [Hirsch] thought looking around the booth. The maimed veterans of the Legions, the shopkeepers without shops, the wives without husbands, the whores without cribs. The teeming, life-devouring ant heap of the Forum, living their lives out in the taverns and the occasional circus given them for their vote …"

This is unusual and interesting. Not too many American artists were dealing with the problems and even bleakness of working class lives in 1957.

What Hirsch has to say about his brother Frank, in Williams's words, "on the way to becoming a millionaire 'big shot' as the novel ends … with his succession of mistresses and self-destructive activities," is also refreshing: "It was like watching some foreign person, a Russian or somebody, about whose strange incomprehensible life you really knew absolutely nothing. He [Frank] really *believed* all those damn sanctimonious things he spouted. … He really knew no more about life than he did about flying a jet airplane. He was a walking mass of other humans' ill-considered, un-thought-out opinions, which he had accepted, something hed read, something hed heard, something hed been told. And he believed he was *right*." [Jones's punctuation.]

Other sections of the books, especially those involving Hirsch and Gwen French, are far less insightful and intriguing. The breathless talk about sex, or the lack of it, owes something at times to the "soap opera" novels of the time. It is not effective, and Jones at his weakest.

Williams writes early on in his study that "Jones sees twentieth-century society as a battleground between the forces of Eros [Love] and Thanatos [Death] with American institutional Puritanism fully subscribed to supporting the latter against the former." Kaylie Jones, the novelist's daughter, once commented that the "subject" that angered her father the most was "the American Puritan ethic and sexual repression, which he fervently believed was at the root of most of America's problems. He wanted to blow the lid off the whole thing."

Jones's attitude was a very commonly held one in the 1950s and 1960s, when the class struggle and economic questions seemed to many intellectuals and artists to have dropped off the map. What remained, it appeared to them, were the psycho-sexual issues, irrationalism, alienation, "aloneness," manifestations of human angst and so forth. Williams observes in his introduction that "the messianic promises of socialism, and the IWW were no longer feasible in postwar America." Whether the promises of socialism in the earlier part of the 20th century were "messianic" or not (and, in our view, they were not), the situation had certainly changed—but the contradictions of capitalism had not disappeared.

Indeed, the resurgence of conformism and the propagation of straight-laced, ultra-conventional morality in the postwar era had everything to do with the fraught economic and political state of affairs. It was not the resurrection of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. The American ruling elite,

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now presiding over the leading capitalist economy and in the process of absorbing into itself all the contradictions of the global social order, had a more desperate need than ever to inoculate the mass of the population against any hint of radical or left-wing thought. It was not a sign of enduring health. Official piety and sanctimoniousness went hand in hand with the quasi-state religion of anti-communism, intended to subordinate the working class through the Democratic Party and the trade unions to the status quo. As the Russian Marxist Plekhanov once argued, "at the basis of all this complex dialectic of psychological phenomena there were facts of a social nature."

Vincente Minnelli directed a film version of *Some Came Running*, released in 1958.

James Jones's next novel, *The Thin Red Line* (leaving aside *The Pistol* [1959], which is something of a novella) is considered the second work in his war trilogy. It treats the landing of US forces—whose first taste of battle this is—on a Japanese-held island during World War II and the bloody, ferocious campaign to oust the enemy troops.

Jones's experiences at the Battle of Mount Austen, the Galloping Horse, and the Sea Horse during World War II's Guadalcanal Campaign weigh heavily on the novel. Several of the characters in *From Here to Eternity* reappear here and later in *Whistle*, with different names in each book. Warden, for example, becomes Welsh in the second part of the trilogy and Winch in the third, while Prewitt comes back as Witt and, later, Prell.

The Thin Red Line follows C-for-Charlie Company as it is thrown into the brutal and dehumanizing reality of combat. Jones's fierce desire to demythologize war, the military and every leading institution is evident early in the book. Private Doll, for example, we read, "had learned something during the past six months of his life. Chiefly what he had learned was that everybody lived by a selected fiction. Nobody was really what he pretended to be. It was if everybody made up a fictional story about himself, and then just pretended to everybody that that was what he was."

Sergeant Welsh takes a clear-eyed view of the war and America's reasons for being in it. He keeps muttering to himself, "Property. Property. All for property." The novel continues: "Because that was what it was; what it was all about. One man's property, or another man's. One nation's, or another nation's. It had all been done, and was being done, for property. One nation wanted, felt it needed, probably did need, more property; and the only way to get it was to take it away from those other nations who had already laid claim to it. There just wasn't any more unclaimed property on this planet, that was all. And that was all it was." Welsh (and Jones) likes the phrase about "property" so much, he repeats it four more times in the book.

Terrible things go on in the novel. The American troops disinter a Japanese corpse for sport. They execute soldiers trying to surrender. They extract gold teeth from the mouths of the dead. There are also moments of tenderness and expressions of sexual love among the soldiers.

When Private Doll kills a man, he has this revelation: "Doll felt guilty. He couldn't help it. He had killed a human being, a man. He had done the most horrible thing a human could do, worse than rape even. And nobody in the whole damned world could say anything to him about it."

Jones maintains a calm, objective tone throughout, at times perhaps almost too calm, verging on the slightly cynical. Nonetheless, as Tony Williams suggests, Jones places the overall blame for the atrocities on circumstances within which the soldiers find themselves. As Jones writes about an individual member of Company C, the troops as a whole are "trapped in every direction," no matter where they turn.

There are extraordinary revelations and insights in *The Thin Red Line* (filmed twice, in 1964 and 1998)—as there are in *Whistle*, based on Jones's time in a veteran's hospital back in the United States during World War II.

Considering the civilian and military authorities, one wounded veteran in *Whistle* thinks to himself: "It was not because they were insane. He had suspected that before, from the beginning. It was not that modern war itself was insane. He had known that, too. It was not even that in ten years these same men battling down there, those who survived, would be making trade agreements with each other, signing mutual business deals for mutual profit, while the dumb luckless dead ones moldered in some hole. Landers had been cynically aware of all that, long before. It was that, seeing it, it was all so foolish, so abysmally stupid and ridiculous and savage, he could not consider himself a part of it."

Jones told an interviewer in 1958, "modern war … isn't even war anymore, as far as that goes. It's an industry, a big business complex."

Jones's short stories are also worth mentioning. Tony Williams spends some time on *The Ice-Cream Headache*, set in a Midwestern town in 1935. Its central character is adolescent Tom Dylan, whose family history is painful and blighted. His grandfather, a tough sheriff, produced four sons, all "drunken weaklings."

The Great Depression and the boom in the auto industry have impoverished the family (the sons were directed by their father to become veterinarians, but horses, of course, were put "out of business" by automobiles). Tom has vague sexual designs on his sister and a friend of hers. His date with the two girls, with its disturbing overtones, never comes to pass because he is overcome by a strange illness as he enters his grandfather's house. The story brings together many of Jones's concerns in an unusually concise and dramatic fashion.

Jones, at his best, represented something radical, raw and honest in American letters. He underwent bitter experiences that he did not run away from. He attempted, to the best of his ability, to bring out the truth of his life and times for the benefit of others.

One of the more remarkable comments about Jones was written by his granddaughter, Eyrna Jones Heisler, then a high school student, in a 2012 essay. She argued that the most devastating event in her grandfather's life was the "hand-to-hand combat" in which "he took the life of a Japanese soldier. The man was in his very early twenties, a poor farm-boy, with nothing in his wallet but a few pictures of young women, no money, and a membership card for a soldier's club in the Philippines. Discovering that his enemy was his counterpart changed my grandfather's view of war forever. He kept the Japanese soldier's wallet with him for the rest of his life. …

"Pearl Harbor spurred my grandfather to take action. He spent his life writing about the experience of war and warfare. He wrote novels that were controversial because they did not describe the war as 'good' or the soldiers as heroic. His main goal as a writer, he always said, was to 'tell the truth.' Historians and novelists portraying Americans as morally correct heroes enraged him."

To be continued

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