New study of American novelist

A conversation with Tony Williams, author of *James Jones: The Limits of Eternity*—Part 2

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The first part of this article discussed the life and work of American novelist James Jones (1921-77). In mid-November, I spoke to Tony Williams, the author of a new study of the writer, *James Jones: The Limits of Eternity*, about his book and about Jones's significance.

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David Walsh: May I ask first, what is the reaction, or what *are* the *reactions*, at Southern Illinois University and in Carbondale to the presidential election result?

Tony Williams: I've been deliberately avoiding those who are traumatized by Donald Trump's victory, but I have a feeling that the university community is devastated. Those outside voted the way they did because they were so fed up with the Democrats in general and Hillary Clinton in particular.

DW: At the university, you feel that people are in shock?

TW: I think they are, but I'm keeping away from them to preserve my own mental health.

DW: To the matter at hand. It's a very interesting book about a very interesting guy. I am curious to know how you developed the interest in James Jones.

TW: Back in the latter part of the 1980s, I was involved with a Vietnam Generation group that used to meet at the Popular Culture Association, and one of the key figures was Kali Tal, author of *Worlds of Hurt*, about Vietnam veterans, along with rape and incest survivors. Our interest also extended to earlier conflicts like World War II and the American Civil War. The name of James Jones cropped up in conversation, and in 1989 I picked up a paperback copy of *From Here to Eternity* and read it from cover to cover.

I developed from there. I read all of Jones's work, and decided I was going to write a book on him. I visited the Harry Ransom archives in Austin, Texas where Jones's work is located, including letters and so forth. It took me about 25 years to complete the book.

DW: Do you feel that Jones is underappreciated in academic circles? And if so, why?

TW: He's not appreciated because he's not a postmodernist, flamboyant writer. He's writing about people's everyday lives in a particular historical context, telling some very unpalatable home truths that many people don't want to hear. So if Jones crops up in academia it's merely as a "war novelist." Many figures are pigeon-holed in that fashion so they can be easily discussed, and misinterpreted.

DW: Your book is obviously an intense study of his writings, not a biography, but for the benefit of our readers could you give some general overview of his life?

TW: James Jones was born in 1921 in Robinson, Illinois, a small town in what is regarded as southeastern Illinois. His father was a dentist and his family suffered downward mobility, as well as a high degree of dysfunction. He had a cherished younger sister, Mary Ann, who eventually died of a brain tumor. His mother died of diabetes, and his father committed suicide by shooting himself in the head, both deaths occurring while Jones was in the military.

In the 1930s, he couldn't go to university because his family had lost its money, so the only choice he had was to go into the military, just like many of the other victims in *From Here to Eternity*. He was in Hawaii, at the Schofield Barracks, during the attack on Pearl Harbor. He fought in the Pacific campaign at Guadalcanal and other battles. He not only suffered physical injuries, but PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder], which wasn't defined at that time.

When he returned to Robinson, he was really angered at and appalled by the superficiality of the country club set. He also became an alcoholic. It was Lowney Handy, who established a writers' colony in nearby Marshall, Illinois, who basically adopted him and helped him on the path to becoming a writer, which led to *From Here to Eternity*. Jones remained in Robinson after that book. He helped fund the writers colony in Marshall, but he had outgrown that area. So when the opportunity arose to relocate to Paris, in 1958, he did so. As in the days of F. Scott Fitzgerald and others, Paris was the place to be.

So he remained in France for about fifteen years, until the exchange rate made it difficult for him to remain. He returned to America and first taught creative writing at Florida International University in Miami. And eventually he settled down in Long Island, New York. Throughout all this time he remained a very critical commentator on the American scene and world politics, although he played his cards very close to his chest. You have to remember this was the period of the Cold War and McCarthyism. Lingering elements of that atmosphere were still in the air and ready to tarnish any writer.

He wrote in a particular manner to make evident to anyone who read his work seriously and in depth what his real subject matter was all about. To those who read him and wrote to him, if Jones felt they were on the right wavelength, he would reply in detail and go into an elaborate discussion by letter about the ideas in his books.

He suffered from congestive heart failure that he inherited from his family. He died in May 1977 in hospital, one year before his final novel, *Whistle*, was posthumously published.

DW: Did he make a living as a writer in the 1950s?

TW: Yes, he did. He was also—particularly when he and his wife Gloria moved to Paris—doing screenplays on the side. His widow told me that he regarded it simply as a way of making money in between writing his books. He worked with American directors like Nicholas Ray and John Berry, who was blacklisted. Some of his film work, I think, had an element of seriousness and was not just done for money. He was more or less living on his royalties as a writer, which you could do in France at

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that time.

DW: You explain a number of times that in your view Jones is not merely a "war novelist," but a writer dealing with American society and its contradictions and dilemmas in the 20th century, someone who treated the "historical and material aspects of American society" and the "oppressive mechanisms thwarting the full development of human personality." Could you elaborate on that a bit?

TW: As I mentioned earlier, it's very convenient to categorize Jones as a war novelist and limit him to that particular tradition. But he was a commentator on the American experience and *From Here to Eternity* has as much to do with the oppression of human beings in the 1930s and 1940s as it does with war. Novels like *Some Came Running*, which was slammed by the critics after the success of *From Here to Eternity*, dealt with the postwar era, from 1947 to the beginning of the Korean War.

And what Jones was doing in *Some Came Running* was to criticize American society and its social and personal rigidity, a society in the pursuit of material wealth, a society that regarded the less well-off, the working class, as disposable. It was a society that operated within a strict system of sexual and religious morality, designed as a form of social manipulation.

His novels in one way or another tried to reveal the mechanisms which instilled mental and intellectual conformity into people and got them to follow the status quo, even though it was against their best interest and caused a lot of emotional damage.

DW: You mention that *Some Came Running* was greeted with hostility in 1957. I have to say I think it's a very uneven book. I think there are wonderful passages and some far less than wonderful passages. Overall, why do you think it was treated so harshly?

TW: First of all, there is the American habit of attacking someone who's had a successful first book or film. Look at Michael Cimino, and what happened to him after *The Deer Hunter* [1978], when he tried to make *Heaven's Gate* [1980]. *Heaven's Gate* is a Western critical of the status quo.

I would agree that *Some Came Running* is uneven, it's a mammoth book. Critics jumped on him because he didn't use any apostrophes or any kind of academic grammar. He was trying to reproduce everyday speech as it was performed by ordinary people, as well as revealing the total hypocrisy of small-town American society in the fictional milieu of Parkman, Indiana, which was really Robinson, Illinois. It's an attack in part on the world of *Father Knows Best* and *Leave It To Beaver*, and the type of bland movies that were coming out in the mid-1950s.

DW: There's a remarkable comment from Dewey Cole in *Some Came Running*, one of the young guys in the bar: "My folks was always too busy fighting. What do they give my generation to believe in: A happy home. A happy home, a union to increase my wage, a new car, and an automatic washing machine. We're not even a *lost* generation, my generation. We're an unfound generation. The 'Unfound Generation' of the 'Forties.'"

TW: He is one of the young veterans and he's commenting on their status. A particular disposable, non-affluent generation. It is a remarkable comment. It's based on feelings Jones had and those of many of the people he associated with. He was a writer who did not treat the working class and ordinary people with disdain. He understood their feelings, frustrations and hopes, and never stereotyped them.

DW: I want to speak a minute about Jones's literary influences. He has his central character in *Some Came Running* carry around the novels of the "big five," F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, John Steinbeck, Thomas Wolfe. Do you think that Jones felt those were the biggest American influences on his own writing?

TW: At the time, yes. In his later letters, he speaks about the influence of Stendhal, *The Red and the Black*, and of course Stendhal's treatise on love, the demolition of romantic love. And also Dostoyevsky.

DW: And you mention Jack London. Was that an unconscious influence?

TW: I think he's there consciously, because the end of *Whistle* is pretty much a reproduction of the end of Jack London's *Martin Eden*. Prewitt also discovers London's political works in Alma's apartment in the later chapters of *From Here to Eternity*.

DW: He never mentions Theodore Dreiser, who came from nearby Terre Haute, Indiana. Why do you think that is?

TW: Dreiser is one of the absences. But I think you have to look at the time he was writing. Dreiser had joined the Communist Party toward the end of his life and Jones knew very well about HUAC and the Red Scare, and the general attack on radicalism. He knew that if he wanted to be recognized as a writer and not labeled as a political writer, he had to be very careful about how he referred to certain people in certain things. It was only in the complete manuscript of *From Here to Eternity* that you find references to "monsters" like John Rankin [ultra-right Congressman from Mississippi] and others. The editor asked him to remove a lot from that manuscript and I think many of the revisions went out for political reasons.

DW: When were they editing that?

TW: Toward the end of the late 1940s and at the beginning of the 1950s. The first editor was the legendary Maxwell Perkins, and then someone else took over. The publishing house could see the writing on the wall in terms of what they could publish in a period of reaction in America.

DW: How did Jones get his feeling, which you refer to, for the Industrial Workers of the World [IWW] and the early Socialist Party?

TW: Of course, he grew up in the Great Depression and there were political influences from that period. I also have a feeling that he learned about socialism and radicalism from his fellow enlisted men in the army, many of whom had joined up to escape the Depression and several of whom had been involved politically during that time. He tapped into a particular oral tradition which was still alive.

Jones was very alert to what was going on in the Soviet Union at the time and he mentions the decline of Marxism as a result of Stalinism. I think he basically gained his knowledge from working class men in the army or outside, as well as having a very deep interest in world affairs.

DW: Are there any references in his correspondence to his following events in the Soviet Union? Of course there are references in *From Here to Eternity*.

TW: His letters do refer to what's happening in the Soviet Union, the failure of the Communist experiment there and the search for a much freer form of existence. But like certain other writers he despaired of political systems because he felt they became rigid ideologies.

DW: There's a passage in *From Here to Eternity* where Prewitt the "Bolshevik" is speaking about his sympathy for the underdogs and his identification with those being persecuted by Stalin. Prewitt says if he were asked by a House Committee what his views were, he would reply that he was "a sort of super arch-revolutionary, the kind that made the Revolution in Russia and that the Communists are killing now, a sort of perfect criminal type, very dangerous, a mad dog that loves underdogs."

TW: He definitely knew what was going on in his historical epoch. He was never blinkered into denial.

DW: Jones is unlike most (or all) present writers in expressing skepticism about the motives for war, even the "good war," World War II. He is angry and mistrustful about those who are making war.

TW: Yes, he poured cold water on the "Greatest Generation" nonsense and the notion of the self-sacrificing home front in *Whistle* in particular.

DW: You cite him, "In every war there were two wars, the war of the officers and the war of the enlisted men." Such a view is practically unheard of today, even in the best writing on Iraq and Afghanistan, even Vietnam. And you have the line of Sgt. Welsh in *The Thin Red Line*: "Property. Property. All for property"?

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TW: And if Jones were around and writing about the Iraq war, you'd have another sergeant saying, "Oil, oil, all for oil." He is very clear-eyed and almost Marxist without naming the philosophy behind that perception.

DW: At the same time I think also it reflects the fact that even within the military at the time there was a far higher social consciousness. There was a far more critical view of the war than is presented 50 years later. The soldiers had come out of the Depression and they had no reason to be in love with the American ruling class.

This is typical of Jones: "They are sons of bitches, but the fault is not theirs. The fault belongs to the society, the system under which they live—not just the economic system, but the moral system of righteousness." That insight is largely lost today …

TW: This gives Jones's war novels the necessarily wider context within which they really should be read, not just according to narrow generic classification.

DW: It's not prettification, that comment. People do some pretty awful things, but why do they do these awful things?

TW: Exactly, and he was onto the mechanisms that made them do these awful things.

DW: And he was present in some of the places where the worst things were done. I would like to refer to the first piece you deal with in your book, a short story, *The Ice–Cream Headache*. It's a beautiful story, one of the most perfectly composed of his works.

TW: That's why I chose to deal with it in the opening chapter. It really is the key to understanding what Jones's work in all its variations is really about.

DW: Because it brings together a number of themes and elements in a convincing fashion. Both the economic issues—the Wall Street crash, the auto industry boom and all that—and the presence of the grandfather, the oppressive authority, the law, the state, the military, the repressive psychic structure of American capitalism. It also gives a very concrete feeling of small-town America.

TW: Definitely, he understands it, he's from it, he knows its faults, but he's not condescending. He's critical in the best sense of the word without putting people down, people who often are acting badly for no real inner fault of their own.

DW: What do you make of the incestuous element in that story?

TW: At the time, he was a deep reader of Sigmund Freud, he also read the Kinsey Report. He was concerned with the complex motivations within the human personality, good, bad and destructive. I think the critic Robin Wood once pointed out that the closeness and rigid conformity of the family system often operate in such a manner as to bring those incestuous feelings out. It is a disturbing story. He brings out the negative aspects in many of his writings of the American personality in that period.

DW: Jones was not immune to the pressures of the times. How did he resist the Cold War propaganda barrage, and how did he accommodate himself to it?

TW: I think he resisted it in terms of his fiction. He never participated in any demonstrations or protests, he never followed any crowd of any description. Basically, I think he isolated himself during this period from the official barrage, if only to preserve his identity as a writer living an independent existence.

Jones was a product of a dysfunctional family and an equally dysfunctional society. Then he was in the military, in which the institution owns you, body and soul. I think he was very concerned to preserve his freedom of expression and not be too outspoken in that era. So in the sense of accommodation, that's how I would define it. But I would define that in terms of the goal of personal survival and not for any selfish or careerist reasons.

DW: I'm struck by the numerous references in Jones's work to "the next war." He is always predicting that the present war or the present peace is a mere interlude. Where did that understanding come from?

TW: That sentiment is not confined to Jones in the postwar period. The play *Fragile Fox* [Norman Brooks], which is the basis for Robert Aldrich's film *Attack* [1956], ends with two stretcher bearers talking about the next war. In the film noir *Crossfire* [1947], the dubious individual played by Paul Kelly speaks about enlisting soon in "the next war" and making some money.

The film I ran in my [filmmaker] Anthony Mann class here last night, *Men in War* [1957], has Robert Ryan's Lieut. Benson say to Sgt. Montana [Aldo Ray], "I think this war is going to last a long time." It's a Korean War film. One of the screenwriters, who was not credited because he was blacklisted, was Ben Maddow. The name on the screenplay is Philip Yordan, but he was well known to be a front for many blacklisted writers. So I think that that feeling about "the next war" was a common one among radical thinkers and writers in the postwar era.

DW: This is from *Whistle*, his last novel: "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."

TW: Doesn't this fit in with what the WSWS says about the state of perpetual war? Jones is really farsighted in making that statement.

DW: What do you think of the various films that were made from his books?

TW: Well, Jones basically disliked [Fred Zinnemann's] *From Here to Eternity* [1953]. He came around to seeing why it had to be adapted. He always hated *Some Came Running*. That film works well as a Vincente Minnelli melodrama, if you've never read the novel. But once you've read the novel, you can't look at the film in the same way. Again, the film was made immediately after the publication of the book. It's a commercial product of its time.

There is an earlier version of *The Thin Red Line* by [Hungarian-born director] Andrew Marton released in 1964, made by the same company that did *Men in War* and *God's Little Acre* [1958], two films directed by Anthony Mann with Robert Ryan. The Marton film I think is more interesting in some ways than the transcendentalism that Terrence Malick chose to focus on in his later remake [1998]. I would say the film versions to one degree or another have always been unsatisfactory, because Jones's ideas contain too much dynamite for a Hollywood film, which aims to please the audience and make money.

DW: Malick did keep the Welsh line, or a version of it: "Property! Whole fuckin' thing's about property." Minnelli's *Some Came Running* is a much narrower work than the book, but it does capture something about the disillusionment or disappointment with postwar America.

TW: Jones praised the performance of Dean Martin as Bama Dillert. He is something of the salt-of-the-earth, charismatic American. The central character idolizes him very much like Prewitt in *From Here to Eternity* idolizes the Wobbly [IWW member] in the stockade. But in both cases the characters are found to have feet of clay.

DW: All in all, Jones was an interesting figure and certainly someone who deserves to be read. You would obviously encourage people to read his books.

TW: Yes, I would.

Concluded

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