

Jones, Thomas (1870–1955), *civil servant and benefactor* by Rodney Lowe

Jones, Thomas (1870–1955), civil servant and benefactor, was born on 27 September 1870 in the valley town of Rhymni, a pocket of Welsh-language culture in north-west Monmouthshire. He was the first of the nine children of David Benjamin Jones (*d.* 1919) and his wife, Mary Ann (*d.* 1903), the daughter of Enoch Jones, who managed the truck shop owned by the Rhymney Iron Company. On his father's promotion within this shop, he was moved from the Upper Rhymni board school to the fee-paying Lewis School, Pengam, where he showed considerable academic promise; but on his grandfather's insistence he was withdrawn from school at fourteen to work as a clerk in the ironworks so that his bookishness could be tempered by a knowledge of the world. By 1890, however, he had started to establish a reputation as a preacher and, having won the Calvinist Methodist scripture gold medal, he left to study for the ministry at the recently established University College of Wales at Aberystwyth.

Academic life in Scotland, marriage, and return to Wales

It was to be some eleven years before Jones graduated, and then it was from the University of Glasgow with a first-class honours degree in economics. The length of his studies, financed to an extent by his own preaching, was partly involuntary. He consistently failed examinations in mathematics. It was due more significantly, however, to a life of 'perpetual motion' in student activities and in particular political and philanthropic work: at Glasgow, for instance, he joined the Independent Labour Party and founded the local Fabian Society as well as living in the university settlement between 1896 and 1899. One of his fellow students at Aberystwyth was Eirene Theodora (1875–1935), the daughter of Dr Richard John Lloyd, reader in phonetics at Liverpool University, whom he married on 31 December 1902 and with whom he enjoyed a rewarding partnership until her death in 1935. Of their three children, Eirene White became a Labour minister and Tristan became manager of *The Observer*. A second son, Elphin, died tragically in 1928.

At Glasgow, Jones gradually lost his Christian faith, although its ethical values (reinforced by the teaching and continuing friendship of Henry Jones, the professor of moral philosophy there) were to govern his public life. Consequently it was not to the chapel but to an academic career that he turned. In 1899 he was appointed a part-time assistant in political economy in Glasgow and, after gaining his honours degree in 1901, he became a full-time lecturer. He specialized in practical issues, such as unemployment and juvenile labour, which informed his continuing immersion in philanthropic and political work. He acted as a special commissioner in Scotland for the royal commission on the poor law, of which his professor (William Smart) was a member. Earlier in 1904 and 1905, to supplement his income, he had become the Barrington visiting lecturer in Ireland,

which required him during his vacations to deliver some fifty lectures in small towns; and, after flirting with several other possibilities such as the principalship of Ruskin College, Oxford, and standing as the parliamentary Labour candidate for Merioneth, he returned to Ireland in 1909 as the first professor of political economy at Queen's University, Belfast. There he threw himself into his usual social commitments, including the foundation of a local branch of the Workers' Educational Association.

While in Scotland and Ireland, Jones remained drawn to the vitality of civic and cultural life in south Wales which, at a time of exceptional economic prosperity, was the key to the forging of a new Welsh national identity. This was the reason for his superficially surprising decision to leave Belfast after only a year and return to south Wales as secretary to a new philanthropic initiative: the King Edward VII Welsh National Memorial Association, financed by David Davies MP, the millionaire coal owner, and designed to reduce the incidence of tuberculosis. The association was an embodiment of the new Welsh consciousness. So too was the organization to which he next became secretary in 1912, the Welsh National Insurance Commission, which was responsible for the implementation of the Liberal government's new health insurance scheme. This was a job that he did not wholly enjoy. He had applied to be a commissioner and, impatient of office routines, he was not a born bureaucrat; but the principal reason for his exasperation was the intrigue centring on John Rowland, the Welsh commissioner and protégé of Lloyd George. At this time, however, he was able to make a favourable impression on Lloyd George, when persuading him to include state financing of tuberculosis sanatoriums in the 1911 legislation. He was also able to consolidate his friendship with David Davies, who—together with his sisters Gwen and Margaret—was to become one of his greatest benefactors. It was Davies, for instance, who provided the financial backing for *Welsh Outlook*, a monthly magazine committed to promoting a wider appreciation of political and cultural developments in Wales, which continued in publication until 1933 and of which Jones was the initial honorary editor between 1914 and 1916. It was Davies also who took him to London in 1916 to work for Lloyd George in his bid to become prime minister. This placed him, together with many other Welshmen, on a wholly new stage.

Whitehall: the cabinet secretariat

Jones, or T.J., as he quickly became known, was to remain in Whitehall from December 1916 to 1930. There he served four very different prime ministers in the unique capacity—as he had originally hoped—of ‘a fluid person moving among people who mattered and keeping the P.M. on the right path so far as is possible’ (Jones, *Whitehall Diary*, 1.15). He acted as the liberal conscience of successive governments, best expressed by Baldwin (with whom he developed a remarkable empathy despite a fundamental disagreement over the virtues of Lloyd George) when he admitted:

I am a Tory P.M., surrounded by a Tory Cabinet, moving in Tory circles. You don't let me forget or ignore the whole range of ideas that normally I should never be brought up against if you were not in and out of this room. You supply the radium. ... You have such an extraordinary width of friends in all classes, and so many interests that through you I gather impressions of what is being thought by a number of significant people. ... I think every Tory P.M. ought to have someone like you around the place. (Jones, *Whitehall Diary*, 2.167–8)

The one prime minister with whom he did not initially have such an intimate relationship was ironically the leader of the party for which T.J. almost always voted, Ramsay MacDonald.

Officially, T.J. was first assistant and then deputy secretary to the cabinet, responsible for domestic issues while Maurice Hankey, as secretary, concentrated on military and foreign affairs. He took and circulated cabinet minutes, acted as secretary to many cabinet committees, and deputized for Hankey on his frequent absences abroad. As a member of many informal groupings of officials and public figures, such as 'The Family' and the Romney Street group, he kept abreast of progressive opinion, which he discussed candidly with Lloyd George. He used his extensive contacts within the labour movement to act as a go-between in the continuing industrial unrest, particularly in the coal industry. Even more importantly, he used his knowledge of Ireland to participate actively in the formal discussions and informal negotiations which ultimately led to the Anglo-Irish peace treaty of 1921 and the creation of the Irish Free State. As secretary to the British delegation in the negotiations between October and December 1921, he could converse with Lloyd George in Welsh both to maintain secrecy and to impress Sinn Féin. He also acted as a vital go-between between Lloyd George and the Irish leaders, most notably securing Arthur Griffith's pledge to accept a boundary commission which was to prove critical to the eventual success of the negotiations (Jones, *Whitehall Diary*, 3.156–7).

On Lloyd George's downfall, the future of the cabinet secretariat was uncertain and in both Bonar Law's and Baldwin's first ministry T.J. acted, on Hankey's admission, virtually as a 'political secretary', writing speeches and providing general political assistance (Ellis, 258). The speeches included virtually all Baldwin's election speeches in 1923 advocating protection which, given T.J.'s commitment to free trade, was—in the words of his biographer—as 'bizarre as a confirmed teetotaler writing advertising copy for the brewers' (ibid., 259). His closeness to Baldwin, publicized in a press photograph of the two walking together, aroused MacDonald's suspicions and consequently he was consigned to more conventional civil service duties during the first Labour government. Indeed, it was the accuracy of his cabinet minutes that MacDonald dishonestly tried to challenge in an attempt to disguise his misleading of the House of

Commons over the decision not to prosecute in the Campbell 'incitement to mutiny' case, which brought the government down in October 1924.

On Baldwin's return, T.J. reverted to a more political role advising on the membership of the cabinet, acting as go-between (especially through J. H. Thomas) during the build up to and duration of the general strike and then trying to reinforce Baldwin's aversion to any punitive legislation. More conventionally he became secretary to the committee of social research which was intended, but failed, to stimulate the scientific examination of pressing domestic issues, as a counter to official negativity. It evolved under the second Labour government into the economic advisory committee, of which T.J. was also initially secretary. By this time, however, his faith in the ability of political action to instil greater moral responsibility into both public and private life had been undermined as thoroughly as had been his religious faith in the 1890s. He was ready for other challenges.

Welsh appointments, appeasement, and unemployment

T.J. did not totally abandon a political role after his resignation from the civil service. He continued to move widely in political circles and was so regularly consulted on Welsh appointments and honours that he earned the sobriquet of the unofficial secretary of state for Wales—a position he used to press for greater devolution and for a separate BBC Welsh service. He also met Baldwin regularly and—despite voting Labour in 1935—wrote most of his election speeches including the one controversially committing the future government to 'no great armaments'. Baldwin remained, however, as deaf to his advice on the readmission of Lloyd George to office as he was inactive in the face of pleas arising from two other of T.J.'s independent actions. Both exposed T.J.'s political naïvety. The first was his use by Von Ribbentrop in an abortive attempt in 1936 to arrange a meeting between Baldwin and Hitler. T.J. met Hitler—as notoriously he was to do again in the same year in the company of Lloyd George—and was temporarily convinced of his good faith in seeking to revise the treaty of Versailles. This was despite his awareness of Nazi brutality, not least through the assistance he arranged for Jewish refugees. His continuing association both with All Souls and the Cliveden set eventually led to an attack upon him as a 'mystery man' advocating appeasement in high places as late as April 1938 (*Daily Herald*, 6 April 1938). Second, as a member of the Unemployment Assistance Board, which was established in 1935 to take unemployment relief 'out of politics', he was irate when the government—as a result of public unrest, not least in south Wales—suspended the initial benefit scales of the supposedly 'independent' board and permitted the uninsured for two years to receive whichever was the more generous: the new board benefits or the old payments made by local authorities. Aware of the corruption that had resulted in illegally high payments by local councils in south Wales and of the danger to the self-reliance of claimants which over-generous government handouts could pose, he refused to accept the advice of his closest friends that the concession was politic at a time of exceptional distress. Thereafter, his interventions were mainly limited to

advocating Lloyd George's return to government in 1940 and advising Cripps in his battle against Churchill in 1942. As a result of his friendship with the Astors, he also became a founding trustee of the Observer Trust in 1946.

Philanthropy and education

Most of Jones's time after 1930, however, was spent as the linchpin for a wide range of philanthropic, cultural, and educational activities, particularly in Wales, to which he had remained devoted despite his heavy workload in Whitehall. From 1930 to 1945 he was secretary to the Pilgrim Trust and served later as a trustee (1945–52) and chairman (1952–54). Financed by the American oil tycoon Edward Harkness, the trust distributed some £2 million in the 1930s on the relief of the unemployed and longer-term protection of the heritage. Among its achievements was the 1938 report *Men without Work*, which exceptionally concentrated on the psychological and moral problems faced by the unemployed. As a member of various subcommittees of the National Council of Social Service, the main authority for co-ordinating official and voluntary relief, Jones also helped to direct further resources to schemes designed to promote self-reliance and self-belief in areas of high unemployment. His principal cultural achievements centred on Gregynog Hall in Montgomeryshire, the home of the Davies sisters. Here a press was established in 1926 which produced some forty-two books of high quality and a series of annual musical events was held, under the inspiration of Sir Walford Davies, which exposed the vibrancy of Welsh culture to the wider world. The success of these initiatives led him in 1939 to promote another joint venture between the national government and the voluntary sector, the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts, of which he became deputy chairman. The council was later transformed into the Arts Council.

Education, however, was T.J.'s overriding interest. Here the initiative with which he was 'divinely obsessed' (Ellis, 299) was Coleg Harlech, a residential adult education college in north Wales. He masterminded its establishment in 1927 and 220 full-time students (largely manual workers) had passed through it by 1937. It epitomized his abiding faith in the power of education, through its demonstration of 'the many-sided nature of truth', to foster self-knowledge, individual responsibility, and mutual understanding. Targeted above all at 'the future leaders of tomorrow', this, he was convinced, was the principal way in which democratic society could be enriched and safeguarded from the twin evils of moral rootlessness and class warfare. More prosaically, it was also designed as an alternative to the Marxist-inspired Central Labour College in London, to which the South Wales Miners' Federation made a sizeable financial contribution. A similar initiative was launched with T.J.'s assistance in 1937 at Newbattle Abbey in Scotland. In addition, as secretary of the York Trust (1934–40), funded by the Astors, and of the Elphin Lloyd Jones Trust (1933–45) he was also to disburse grants to needy students. T.J. was also closely involved in formal education in Wales. He was deeply disappointed not to be selected as principal of the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth, in 1919 and rejected a similar

post at Cardiff in 1928; but in 1944 he became president at Aberystwyth (where one of his less commendable actions was the appointment of Goronwy Rees as principal). It was a year after his retirement from there that he died on 15 October 1955 at 6 Heather Gardens, Golders Green, Middlesex. He was cremated at Golders Green.

Assessment

T.J. was a small man (a self-styled 'microbe') with a quick and alert manner and yet with a certain lack of physical co-ordination and a notorious carelessness about his appearance. Grey-blue eyes gave a hint of the steel which lay beneath his infectious enthusiasm, his easy naturalness, and his genius for friendship. This made him particularly attractive to women, especially after his wife's death. Energy and integrity were his key qualities. 'His industry was immense', as his close friend Ben Bowen Thomas wrote in the *Dictionary of National Biography*, 'his use of time remorseless'. His integrity derived from his Calvinist Welsh upbringing, 'which never left him': significantly, despite the many official honours that were offered him, he accepted only the CH (in 1929) and, despite the immense amount of money that passed through his hands, he left an estate of barely £5000. It was this integrity that made him a trusted adviser to successive governments. 'I believed a little in each of the three parties', he once wrote, 'more in the Left than the Right' (Jones, *Diary with Letters*, xxiii); but what really created the trust was the certainty that his advice was based on clear principles and was wholly disinterested.

This integrity also provides the best defence against those criticisms which the apparent contradictions provoked. A believer in high moral principles in public life, Jones parleyed with Hitler. Committed to relieving poverty, he moved regularly and easily among the opulent and sought to reduce benefit payments in the 1930s, while opposing many of the more radical initiatives to reduce unemployment. Committed also to the political and cultural renaissance of Wales, he became embattled with Labour leaders in south Wales and scorned popular passions such as rugby. In addition he exercised considerable political influence at a time when Welsh fortunes, as reflected by exceptional depopulation, were at their nadir. As a pronounced democrat, moreover, his influence was wielded with all the secrecy that brought his friend Sir Horace Wilson such obloquy. Finally, it could be argued, all his philanthropic and educational initiatives—advanced with a certain degree of self-congratulation—benefited relatively few people. However, in everything he did he personified the principles of 'public service' and 'active citizenship' which inspired leading civil servants and philanthropists at this time as they sought to adapt to a period of rapid social and political change; and, if the motivation of others may have been to protect their class interests, this patently was not the case with T.J. His actions never involved personal gain and, even if they did arguably contain an element of self-delusion, they were always driven by deeply held beliefs.

One final service T.J. rendered was as an author and diarist. Among his books are the first full biography of Lloyd George (1951) and a series of memoirs based on his extensive diaries: *Rhymney Memories* (1938), *Cerrig Milltir* (1942), *Leeks and Daffodils* (1942), *Welsh Broth* (1951), and *A Diary with Letters, 1931–1950* (1954). The pamphlet *The Native Never Returns* (1942) includes a powerful indictment of Plaid Cymru. Equally important are his detailed diaries for 1916–30, published in three volumes as *Whitehall Diary* between 1969 and 1971. Together with his private papers held in the National Library of Wales in Aberystwyth, these books provide an unrivalled insight into high politics and policy making, political and cultural life in Wales, and the world of philanthropy during a critical period in Britain's recent history.

RODNEY LOWE

Sources

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Likenesses

P. Artot, drawing, 1914, NMG Wales □ W. Rothenstein, chalk drawing, 1924, NPG □ L. S. Merrifield, bust, c.1928, NL Wales □ W. Stoneman, photograph, 1930, NPG □ S. Morse-Brown, drawing, 1938, NMG Wales □ S. Charoux, bronze bust, 1939, Newport Museum and Art Gallery, Monmouthshire □ I. Williams, oils, 1939, NMG Wales [see *illus.*] □ E. Perry, oils, 1951, U. Wales, Aberystwyth □ S. Mrozewski, wood-engraving, NPG

Wealth at death

£9319 3s. 5d.: probate, 12 Jan 1956, *CGPLA Eng. & Wales* □ barely £5000 (net)

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