The James Jones Literary Society Newsletter

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Here are the headlines of this newsletter. Click to go to the article.

1997 Symposium Examines Modern War In Fact & Fiction

On January 17, 1975, while at the Blackstone Hotel in Chicago, James Jones drew and captioned a self-portrait on a cocktail napkin. Later this droll sketch hung in a bathroom at Chateau Spud, Jones' home on Long Island. Later still it became the logo for the society created in 1991 to honor his literary legacy.

Jones adapted his caption from the famous conclusion of General Douglas MacArthur's farewell address, "Old soldiers never die. They just fade away." With characteristic irreverence and insight, Jones paraphrased this to read, "Old soldiers never die. They write novels."

In my final presidential column for the newsletter, I am inspired by Jones' use of poetic license to declare, "Old presidents never die. They host symposia." On Saturday, Nov. 1, the University of Illinois at Springfield will welcome friends and fans of James Jones for the society's seventh annual symposium. I hope you will join us.

The 1997 symposium is co-hosted by the University of Illinois at Urbana through the good offices of former society president George Hendrick, who will retire in 1998 after a distinguished career in the Department of English there. George and Barbara Jones of the Rare Book Library on the Urbana campus will bring with them Jones treasures from that collection, including manuscripts of *From Here to Eternity* and *The Pistol*, as well as the screenplay for *The Thin Red Line*, now being

remade in Australia. The theme of the symposium "Modern War in Fact and Fiction" allows participants to explore how Jones and other 20th-century writers transformed the experience of global warfare into nonfiction and fiction that endures as art. This topic informs both the morning panel moderated by Michael Lennon, English professor at Wilkes University and past Society president, and the afternoon address by Paul Fussell, professor emeritus of English at the University of Pennsylvania and author of 13 books. Titled "James Jones' War in Fact, Fiction and Film," the panel features presentations by UIS and Society archivist Thomas Wood on Jones' critique of *The Red Badge of Courage* from his perspective as a combat veteran; Wright State emeriti Carl Becker and Robert Thobaben on Jones' various versions of the Pearl Harbor attack in light of military history; and Southern Illinois scholar Tony Williams on the cinematic interpretation of Jones' war fiction--especially *The Thin Red Line*--in terms of the author's stated contempt for "phony war films."

"James Jones and His Tradition" will be the focus of Paul Fussell's lecture. Although Fussell entered World War II via a different route from Jones, enlisting in the infantry from an ROTC program at Pomona College and shipping out to France as a young officer, they had at least two things in common: Both were wounded in action, and both won the National Book Award for books about the toll of war on the human spirit.

Fussell won the award for his nonfiction study of *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975), about how British literature reflected the struggle to comprehend and communicate about World War I. Two of his later books *Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War* (1989) and *Doing Battle: The Making of a Skeptic* (1996) probe the way individuals and societies remember and misremember World War II. In *Wartime*, Fussell agrees with Walt Whitman that the real war never gets into books, but among novels about World War II he ranks *The Thin Red Line* as perhaps the best.

A full symposium schedule appears elsewhere in this issue of the newsletter, along with a form for making reservations to attend the buffet luncheon and/or banquet provided by UIS' award-winning chef. The university has reserved a block of 25 rooms at the nearby Holiday Inn East (3100 S. Dirksen Parkway) for Oct 31-Nov. 1 at a reduced rate of $66 plus tax; if you want to book one of these discounted rooms, call at least two weeks before the symposium (217-529-7171) and mention the Jones Literary Society. Other conveniently located, inexpensive motels close to campus include the Hampton Inn (217-529-1100) and the Pear Tree Inn (217-529-9100), both of which are also on South Dirksen Parkway.

--Judith Everson, President

On The Set Of *The Thin Red Line*: An Exclusive Report By Ray Elliott

James Jones lived through the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, survived Guadalcanal (the first in a series of landings on the islands of the South Pacific necessary for the eventual invasion of Japan) and came back to his Midwestern roots to become one of World War II's most famous novelists, writing about the war years and those immediately following.

He found his voice in *From Here To Eternity*, which gave him the audience he needed to write about the war and the Army, telling what he saw, what he did and what he heard before, during and after the war and how it affected the people who were involved In later years, he once said, "I write about war because it's the only métier I've ever had."

Some Came Running brought the soldier home after the war and showed how the world, and particularly the small-town Midwest, had changed during the war years. Jones knew as much about that part of life as he did about war.

Both of those novels were credibly adapted to film. But if art imitates life to any degree, I've always thought that the novel offers the best canvas you could find. Nothing can quite capture the reality of life the way it is. Real life is often boring and mundane for long stretches. Art is more romantic and captures the essence of the real thing. And there's more room to do that in a novel.

After seeing some of the filming of Jones' *The Thin Red Line* in Australia in August, I could see that it has the look and feel of a movie that captures the essence of one of the greatest combat novels of World War II or any other war and could rank with the novel artistically. Jones' effort is a literary novel that looks at the terrible experience of war through the eyes and minds of several soldiers in Charlie Company from the time they land on Guadalcanal in November 1942 to the day they leave. The novel explores how the men are thrust into combat, what they think and how they handle the fear and uncertainty of man's insane propensity to fight each other to the death.

The fighting for both Marines and soldiers was some of the fiercest and longest of any of the three-year-long march through the islands. I'm not sure how the film will portray the significant thoughts of some of the characters, but if the filming I observed is any indication of the quality of director/screen writer Terrence Malick's adaptation of Jones' Guadalcanal novel, the movie will be true to Jones' novel and a great film adaptation It also will be interesting to see how *The Thin Red Line* will fare against the war film Steven Spielberg is reportedly making in Europe now.

Malick declined to be interviewed about his film, saying he was "shy," the medium "was a vicious business," and he didn't want to be spotlighted because he was only one of the "stone masons." For those reasons, apparently, the set was closed to all regular media.

My agreement with Malick, who directed *Badlands* (1973) and *Days of Heaven* (1978), and Grant Hill, the film's producer, was that I wouldn't write anything for any publication other than The James Jones Literary Society newsletter, not take any photographs on the set and not spotlight Malick. (Twentieth Century Fox, which will distribute the film for Phoenix Pictures, provided photographs for the newsletter.)

Within that framework, I had no other restrictions on my visit to the rain forest in north Queensland, Australia. During the first hour on the set, I sat in Malick's chair and watched both the monitor and Malick direct the action in a small gully down the hill. Time after time the actors would assume their positions and listen to what Malick or one of the assistant directors was saying before first assistant director Skip Cosper would then holler, "Is there anybody not ready?"

Kirk Acevedo (Tella) and Australian actor Dan Wiley (first medic) had been ready all morning and had just finished a particularly tense scene with Sean Penn (Sgt Welsh). The former two were resting in a tent on a hill across from where Penn had made a mad dash under fire to carry the gutshot Tella back to safety to die. The medic was already dead and Tella was dying, but his tormented screams were driving Welsh mad.

Penn, who was just about to turn 37, only a few years older than his character, ran from the bottom of the ravine half way up the hill on a fool's mission. Even if Tella hadn't been dying, he was in too much pain to be moved--it was too dangerous to try anyway. It's a tough, touching scene, and Penn runs the 25-30 yards up the hill at top speed each time, even after the filming begins at the spot where the two Charley Company men were hit.

Like many of the actors in *The Thin Red Line*, Malick has much to do with them being in the film.*Newsweek* recently reported that when Penn was down a few years ago, he saw Malick in a bar and told him, "Give me a dollar and point me in the right direction."

Acevedo and Wiley wanted to head in that same direction, too.

"I wanted to be in the movie because of Terry," Acevedo said. "He's sort of a cult figure, a great director. And it's a war movie."

Nick Nolte, another of the big names in a star-laden cast, has similar reasons for participating in the film. As Lt. Col. Tall, he stomps up and down the ravine from his rear-echelon position and vantage point to Charley Company's forward position and curses and cajoles Capt. Staros (Elias Koteas) and his men about their lack of advancement, then leads them toward their objective on the hill with only a bamboo swagger stick in his hand.

Throughout the afternoon and evening, Nolte listens to after-action critiques or requests, offers some of his own, sometimes pounds his chest and growls, "Arrrgh," before the cameras roll. His Col. Tall leaps off the pages of Jones' novel, and his language comes directly from the jungles of Guadalcanal 55 years ago.

"Yeah, I wanted to be in the film because of Terry," Nolte said between scenes. "And when somebody said I should be Tall, I said, 'Absolutely.' But I also wanted to do research on Jones and the war years before I'd go to Paris to do Kaylie's (Jones) movie. She wrote a helluva book."

Her father wrote a "helluva book," too. I had read the book a couple of times over the years; I read it again on the flight to Australia. By the time I reached the movie location, I had Jones' bird's eye view of his time in Guadalcanal freshly in my mind again. I saw Malick, the actors, the tech people and all of the assorted behind-the-scenes people make the characters come to life much as they had in my mind as I read how naive, green troops landed on the beach in time to look back at a hit on one of the ships they had just left. I saw the film taking shape with Malick's strict adherence to Jones' keen eye for military life and combat.

For the soldiers, the scene from the beach was their initiation to death and destruction and a furthering of their evolution as soldiers. They marched and slept in the rain, found Japanese soldiers buried hastily after a battle and smelled the putrid odor of death and rotting flesh drifting out of the mud, watched another company take a beating on the hill across the way and finally knew the horror and terror of combat themselves.

The Thin Red Line actors and extras had a two-week "boot camp," run by military consultant, two-and-a-half-tour Marine Vietnam veteran Mike Stokey and other former Marines and ex-GIs. The actors bivouacked in the hills of Queensland, a few miles off the coast and played Army, learning a little about the military, the weaponry and the way men lived in combat.

Stokey and his men fired rounds over the actors' heads and used other tactics to keep them awake to achieve some of that end. With make-up, the sweat from the usually warm weather and the dirt from the hills and ravines on their clothes and faces, the

actors looked like soldiers. John C. Reilly as Storm particularly had the "rode-hard-and-put-away-wet" look of troops living in the rain, the mud and the killing that took place in the jungles of Guadalcanal 55 years ago and that gave Jones more realistic war experience to pack into his life's work about how men responded to fighting and dying in far-off places before they had hardly lived.

Shooting for the film will finish up with the landing scenes in the Solomon Islands shortly before Thanksgiving, just about the time of the year when Jones and his 25th Infantry outfit landed on Guadalcanal in November of 1942. In a visual media age, the film version of *The Thin Red Line* should go a long way in supporting Willie Morris' comment that "it is a compelling thought to ponder that this boy from Robinson, Illinois, from all the countries, is the one person to have given us this stunning corpus of work which will be read and remembered and reread 500 years from now."

Malick and his crew seem to be on target.

"I hope this (the movie) does something for Jim," Malick said. "I like his work. He wrote about people from North Carolina, from Texas. He just didn't write about people from New York and the East Coast."

Some Came Running: A Brief Reappraisal Of Two Characters

After the dramatic dislocation in domestic life during World War II, the post-war years saw a renewed emphasis on traditional family values, and critics, despite the effort to remain objective, still tended to evaluate characters according to these mainstream beliefs and morals.

Burroughs Mitchell, Jones' editor at Scribners, foresaw the possible rejection of the characters of *Some Came Running* (1957) by some readers. He wrote Jones: "I think your book will be understood--best understood, probably, by the readers who do not struggle for definitions of what you have done but who simply accept the truth of it."

Mitchell's fear that the novel would be misunderstood proved to be prophetic, and I would like to offer a brief reappraisal of two of *Running*'s characters from a feminist perspective.

I begin with Gwen French because she is the least understood and most critically maligned female character in the novel. Gwen went to extraordinary lengths to present a false persona to others--that of a worldly woman who had had so many lovers she became bored by sex. In truth, however, Gwen was a virgin who, despite being ashamed of her status, suffered sexual repression (instilled by her mother) which was so ingrained that she could not give herself to a man sexually. In Freudian

psychology, the mother is typically the villainous impetus for her child's manifested abnormalities and the references to Gwen's mother and Dave's mother, Elvira, might partially account for the critical contention that Jones was exploring the psychoses of his characters.

In addition, Philip Wylie had coined the term "Momism" in the early 1940s to refer to women who were overprotective of their children. He believed that sexually frustrated mothers with weak or absent husbands would channel their sexual energy into their children, thus creating passive men who would, in turn, make the nation vulnerable to a communist takeover. But insights from his collection of short stories, which he admittedly modeled on his own boyhood, indicate that Jones was modeling these fictional portraits of motherhood less on his knowledge of Freud and Wylie than on his unhappy experiences with his own mother, with whom he had a poor relationship.

Gwen, like Jones, had an antagonistic relationship with her mother, who favored the Victorian ideal of womanhood (highly valued female purity). But Gwen had witnessed American society's changing attitude toward women who began to work outside the home as part of the national war effort. Torn between these two disparate societal positions, one traditional and the other innovative, Gwen tried to accommodate both--to remain a virgin but to portray herself as sexually active. This represented an ironic reversal of the typical situation of the 1950s whereby a sexually active woman feigned virginity to maintain her public reputation. This reversal was no coincidence but was rather a deliberate attempt to reveal American society's enslavement to false moral dictates. Jones accomplished this feat by paralleling two characters whose devotion to maintaining society's standards is equal, even though their interpretations of those standards is not.

Doris Fredric is a vivacious woman who portrays herself as pure while philandering with the town's infamous scoundrel, 'Bama Dillert. While Doris wants to have many lovers privately while being perceived as a virgin, Gwen desires the exact opposite--to remain a "closet" virgin while being considered a worldly woman. Doris serves as a foil to Gwen's troubled sexuality, and they both use concealment and deception in order to maintain their false identities.

Despite critics' dismissal of Gwen as credible, her motivations, when explored in the context of conflicting familial and societal signals, become clear and convincing. Gwen was unable to allow herself sexual intimacy, and yet America was experiencing a return to traditional role definitions for both sexes after the war. For Gwen, this meant she should marry and have children. Therefore, she was faced with a difficult decision concerning her public image: to permit gossip to call her either a prudish spinster or a sophisticated seductress. Either image would have been considered

deviant for this time, a result of society's recertification of marriage and motherhood as the only acceptable adult female lifestyle.

Contrary to critical expectation or verdict, then, Jones accurately portrayed the female perspective in accordance with society's expectations. Even more surprisingly, he explored the female psyche not only in relation to adult heterosexuality, but also in terms of women's interactions with each other. Gwen and Ginnie compete for Dave's affection: Ginnie desires Dave for the respectability she craves, while Gwen truly loves him. Blinded to Ginnie's marital intentions and the cunning which her dull facade belies, Dave does not consider her a threat to his more spiritual relationship with Gwen. But Ginnie is a serious threat to Dave and Gwen's relationship because she instinctively knows the best way to come between them. The fastidious Gwen finds Ginnie repulsive, and her pride is hurt that Dave seems to place her and this sluttish "creature" in the same category. She feels that Dave either finds Ginnie attractive and lovable or that her mother was correct in her assertion that men are driven only by their libido. Either assumption is enough to cause Gwen to turn her back on Dave despite her love for him.

Ginnie's ability to perceive and take advantage of Gwen's pride speaks volumes for her survival skills. Ginnie represents the classic femme fatale, who had emerged as a popular stereotype of the time--the woman who would coldly exploit her desirability and destroy a man's life to advance her own agenda. Ginnie is not, however, a typical femme fatale because she is not alluring. She could never have won the traditional hero of a novel, but Dave, enacting the role of anti-hero, found her pitiable and, to that extent, appealing.

Smarting from the critical consensus that he couldn't "do" women characters in *Eternity*, Jones had sought to prove otherwise in his second published novel. Therefore, the attacks on Gwen French and other female characters must have been particularly disheartening for him. I believe that the characters in *Some Came Running* deserve a re-evaluation. Perhaps a reappraisal is possible now--nearly 40 years after their conception: years that saw the women's movement and radical changes in American society's attitudes toward and expectations for women.

--MARLENE EMMONS