

Birmingham and Oxford

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Edward Jones, as he was known until some years into his professional career, when he annexed his last Christian name to make his surname more distinctive, was born on August 28, 1833, at 11 Bennett's Hill, Birmingham (fig. 41). William IV was on the throne, but Queen Victoria, who was still reigning when he died, acceded only four years later. Birmingham was in the throes of the great industrial and economic expansion that followed the slump in its fortunes caused by the Napoleonic Wars, and Bennett's Hill was a newly constructed street in the commercial heart of the town. No. 33, which was built for his parents, has long since been demolished, but parts of the Neoclassical terrace to which it belonged still survive, tenanted by banks and insurance offices as they were during his boyhood. No pilgrim who visits Birmingham in search of Burne-Jones, especially if he or she is approaching the Art Gallery from New Street railway station, should fail to walk up Bennett's Hill.

The child's father, Edward Richard Jones, was a Londoner of Welsh descent who had moved north a few years earlier. One of many immigrants attracted by the prospect of work in the rapidly developing town, he was also drawn by love, marrying a local girl called Elizabeth Coley in 1830. The couple were blissfully happy, perhaps because they were very different in character. Edward Jones was dreamy, rather ineffectual, and easily moved by nature and poetry, while Elizabeth was a strong and lively personality. Recent research has shown that her father, Benjamin Coley, was the head of a family firm that made (as distinct from retailed) jewelry, a trade for which

Birmingham had long been famous and which at the time supported about a tenth of the population. 2 He was evidently a successful businessman, living in the prosperous suburb of Edgbaston, and felt that his daughter had married beneath her. Nonetheless, he may well have put up money to build the Bennett s Hill house, with the idea of launching the young couple at a good address. Edward Jones opened a small carving, gilding, and frame-making business, no doubt hoping for trade from the local Society of Arts, for which Thomas Rickman had designed handsome new premises nearby in New Street in 1829. Birmingham had a nourishing artistic community. It supported two institutions of this kind, the other being the easily confused Society of Artists in Temple Row; and it had produced at least one outstandingly talented painter in David Cox (1783— 1859). No other Birmingham artist would achieve such eminence until the rise to fame of Burne-Jones himself.

Both sides of the family seem to have contributed to the child's mental constitution. From his father he inherited his Celtic melancholy and deep-seated romanticism, while the hard-headed Coleys gave him an almost ruthless determination

Figure 41. No. 11 Bennett s Hill, Birmingham. From a drawing by R L. Griggs (1876— 1938) in Georgiana Burne-Jones, Memorials (1904)

Figure 42. King Edward s School, Birmingham. From a photograph in A. C. Benson, Life of Edward White Benson (1900)

Figure 43. William Morris (1843-1896) at Oxford, aged twenty- three

and will to succeed which belied first appearances — his ner-

vous disposition, delicate health, and puckish, whimsical humor. As Stanley Baldwin put it at the opening of the 1933 exhibition, he was "gentle, and some may have thought, yielding; but like iron and granite where the ideals he worked for were concerned." 3 The true romantic is a realist, and Burne-Jones was no exception to this seeming paradox. It is also tempting to see the Coleys' creative involvement with jewelry as the source of his artistic talent — even a determining factor in his approach to painting. "I love to treat my pictures," he once observed, "as a goldsmith does his jewels. I should like every inch of surface to be so fine that if all were buried or lost, all but a scrap from one of them, the man who found it might say: < Whatever this may have represented, it is a work of art, beautiful in surface and quality and colour." 4 Whatever the boy's maternal inheritance, one thing is clear: his father's being a frame maker did not imply any feeling for art or craftsmanship on his side of the family. Indeed, Edward Jones showed a decided lack of aptitude for the trade he had adopted, and the business never flourished.

The Joneses had lost their first child, a girl, in infancy, and the birth of another was eagerly anticipated as a new beginning. It was therefore a particularly cruel stroke of fate that Elizabeth Jones herself died within a week of her son's birth. In many ways the mainstay of the family, she left her husband a harassed and inconsolable widower, and her son (since Edward Jones seems to have been too devastated to contemplate remarriage) an only child. 5 He was looked after by a housekeeper, a local girl called Ann Sampson who was possessively attached to him but could offer him no intellectual companionship, and the house soon lost whatever signs of taste it might have had in happier circumstances. "I recollect," wrote Lady Burne-Jones, "how destitute [it] was of any visi-

ble thing that could appeal to imagination; chairs, carpets, tables and table furniture each duller and more commonplace than the other." 6 Nor were the wider horizons more enticing. The family's religious life was grimly Sabbatarian, and no one could fail to be aware of the horrifying social conditions that obtained in large parts of the town as it ruthlessly pursued its destiny to become the rich, brash, teeming capital of the Midlands.

But we should not overdramatize the picture. Bennett's Hill was respectable enough, and in 1851 the family moved to the suburbs. The boy also had friends and relations in the country to whom he could escape. Above all, his very isolation gave him a unique opportunity to develop that perennial resource of the deprived or lonely child, a vigorous imagination. From an early age he was a voracious reader of history, travelers' tales, Scott, Byron, and other Romantic authors. In the rather gushing but nonetheless accurate words of his widow, "Books, books, and always books were the gates of the new world into which he was entering." 7

Here were the beginnings of the intensely literary turn of mind that was to prove such a stumbling block for twentieth-century critics; and it was developed dramatically when he entered the local grammar school, King Edward's (fig. 42), in 1844. Like the Society of Arts, the school was situated in New Street. It was also another symbol of Birmingham's aggrandizement, having recently been rebuilt in the Gothic Revival style to designs by Charles Barry and A. W. N. Pugin which anticipate their new Houses of Parliament by several years. Destined at this stage for business or engineering, Burne-Jones was placed on the "commercial" side, which trained boys for such careers; but by 1849 he had risen to be head of this

department, and his father, persuaded by his schoolmaster, allowed him to transfer to the "classical" side with a view to going to university. By nature precocious, he had encountered the school at a particularly exciting time, when the headmaster, James Prince Lee, a brilliant classical scholar who had taught under Thomas Arnold at Rugby, was setting the highest academic standards. In fact, Burne-Jones had little personal contact with Lee, who left Birmingham in 1847 to become Bishop of Manchester, but he was undoubtedly stimulated by the feats of scholarship performed by Lee's closest pupils, among whom were E. W. Benson, a future Archbishop of Canterbury, and other luminaries of the Victorian Church.

Although literary and intellectual interests dominated Burne-Jones's mind at this formative period, with profound and far-reaching consequences, it should not be thought that he had no artistic leanings. On the contrary, we are told that he was "always drawing" as a child, and could "cover a sheet of foolscap" with figures "almost as quickly as one could have written." ⁸ Already these drawings were consistently imaginative, with a strong element of fantasy. He had a great reputation among his schoolfellows for comic drawings of devils, but other subjects were more serious. We hear of scenes from Roman history, an illustration to Gottfried Burgers famous ballad *Lenore* (1773), and evocations of such stirring events of the day as the massacre in the Khyber Pass and the exploits of Lady Sale, the heroine of the First Afghan War. Two illustrations to Alessandro Manzoni's novel *I promessi sposi* (1825-27) actually survive. ⁹ The drawings were strongly influenced by such currently popular illustrators as George Cruikshank and E. H. Corbould.

He also had a certain knowledge of modern painting.

Much gossip on the subject went on between his father and a Mr. Caswell, a retired businessman with pretensions to connoisseurship. Their talk seems to have been inspired by the annual exhibitions organized by the Society of Artists, which included the works of many contemporary masters. These were often lent by local collectors such as Joseph Gillott, the steel-pen manufacturer who patronized J. M. W. Turner, William Etty, W. J. Midler, John Linnell, and others. By 1852 the exhibitions even included works by the Pre-Raphaelites, Millais's *Ophelia* and Walter Deverell's *Twelfth Night* both appearing that year. It was Mr. Caswell who first noticed Burne-Jones's attempts to draw, gave him encouragement, and predicted that one day he would be "a great historical painter."¹⁰ He also introduced him to relations by marriage, Mr. and Mrs. Charles Spozzi, who lived at Hereford and had known David Cox when the artist had settled there in the 1820s. Burne-Jones stayed with them on numerous occasions, and must have seen the Cox drawings on their walls.

The boy even had a little formal artistic training, both at King Edward's and at the Birmingham branch of the Government School of Design (situated in the Society of Arts building), where he attended evening classes during his years in the commercial department. In both cases he was taught by Thomas Clark, a landscape painter who had traveled widely in search of subjects and exhibited regularly at the Royal Academy. Unfortunately he was also a disastrous teacher, so much so that he had to resign from the School of Design in 1851. A more fruitful contact with a practicing artist awaited Burne-Jones in London when he stayed with an aunt, Mrs. Catherwood, in Camberwell. On one occasion in the early 1850s he met her brother-in-law, Frederick Catherwood, a former pupil of Sir John Soane and an acquaintance of Keats,

who had made his name as an explorer and topographical draftsman, risking his life to penetrate the Mosque of Omar in Jerusalem and publishing pioneering books on the monuments of Mayan civilization buried deep in the Central American jungle. Burne-Jones was fascinated by Catherwood's drawings and firsthand accounts of places that had long haunted his imagination. But none of these experiences had the power at this stage to crystallize his own artistic aspirations. Even the presence of Pre-Raphaelite paintings in Birmingham seems to have made no impression on him — if indeed he was aware of it at all. 11

By the time he left school Burne-Jones was determined to be ordained, and was a committed adherent of the Tractarian, or Oxford, movement. This great attempt to evangelize the Anglican Church by reviving its Catholic doctrine and practice had been initiated in 1833, the year of his birth, by three outstanding churchmen, John Keble (1792-1866), John Henry Newman (1801-1890), and Edward Bouverie Pusey (1800-1882), all of whom held Oxford fellowships. Its appeal to the past and its emphasis on ritual, church furnishing, and everything summed up by the phrase "the beauty of holiness" captured the hearts and minds of many young men and women whose idealism and sense of poetry had been awakened by the

Figure 44. Merton College Chapel, Oxford. From a photograph in B. W. Henderson, *Merton College* (1899)

Figure 45. Hubert von Herkomer (1849-1914), *John Ruskin*, 1879. Watercolor, 29 x 19 in. (73.7 x 48.3 cm). National Portrait Gallery, London

Romantic movement. Burne-Jones was no exception. He was,

as he later told the novelist Mrs. Humphry Ward, "rebellious" against the narrow puritanism from which he had suffered as a child, as well, no doubt, as reacting against the ugliness of his home surroundings. 12 More positively, he was responding to a variety of stimuli: his reading of Sir Walter Scott, whom Newman himself recognized as a powerful influence in creating an intellectual and spiritual climate favorable to Tractarian values; his knowledge of the choral music and the still unrestored fabric of Hereford Cathedral, which he encountered when staying with the Spozzis; the friendship of a young Tractarian priest attached to the cathedral, the Reverend John Goss; and a visit to Mount Saint Bernard's Abbey, not far from Birmingham in Charnwood Forest, which had been built by Pugin in 1841 to house a community of Trappist monks under the patronage of the Roman Catholic layman Ambrose Phillips. Newman was his special hero, and Burne-Jones must have known that since 1849, four years after he had rocked the movement to its foundations by seceding to Rome, he had been based at the Birmingham Oratory. He was certainly familiar with Newman's books, which had been introduced to him by Goss. He may even have attended his mesmerizing sermons.

In January 1853 Burne-Jones went up to Exeter College, Oxford. His early life may have had its hardships and deprivations, but from now on he was to enjoy some extraordinary strokes of luck for which he can only be envied. The first of these was to meet William Morris (1834- 1896; fig. 43), a fellow freshman at the same college, and in him discover the perfect friend at the perfect moment, someone totally committed to the same ideals who would give him a lifetime of intellectual and moral support. Their backgrounds were very different, Morris coming from a large and well-to-do family living

on the edge of Epping Forest. Both, however, were born romantics with a passion for the Middle Ages, strongly drawn to Tractarianism, and destined for the Church; and within a fortnight they were inseparable. They had little use for Exeter men, but they found congenial companions among a group of Burne-Jones's school friends who had gone on to Pembroke College, where Dr. Francis Jeune, Lee's predecessor at King Edward's, was master. This set were all keen students of modern literature; their great hero was Tennyson.

Burne-Jones and Morris had expected Oxford to fulfill their fondest dreams, and it did so far as outward appearances went, being still an almost untouched medieval town. They would spend long afternoons in such "shrines" as Merton College Chapel (fig. 44) or New College cloisters, and Burne-Jones, returning from his "terminal pilgrimage to Godstowe ruins and the burial place of Fair Rosamund," saw so intense a vision of the Middle Ages as he walked beside the river that he had to "throw stones into the water to break the dream." 13

But Oxford was on the brink of change. The railway had already arrived, and the Oxford Act of 1854 would soon begin the overdue process of modernizing the university, sweeping away old statutes, depriving the clergy of their monopoly on fellowships, and in general implementing an ever-growing secularization. Nor was Oxford any longer throbbing with Tractarian excitement. It was now eight years since Newman's secession, and the inevitable reaction had set in. Some colleges were experiencing a lively liberal revival; elsewhere, as Matthew Arnold observed in 1854, apathy prevailed. To many, like Mark Pattison, the future Rector of Lincoln College who had lived through the turmoil of the Tractarian heyday, the change was a welcome return to sanity, but Morris and Burne-Jones, viewing matters from a different perspective, were bit-

terly disappointed. During their first year they were still engrossed in religious affairs, and spent much time planning a conventual order or brotherhood with their friends. Such schemes were not uncommon in the wake of the Oxford movement, Newman's community at Littlemore being the most famous. But by 1854 Burne-Jones was suffering one of those agonizing spiritual crises which the clash of religious and liberal ideologies made so typical of the time. An interview with Charles Marriott, Newman's saintly successor at Saint Mary's, brought little comfort. He seriously considered converting to Rome, and even tried for a commission in the Crimea, with wild thoughts of death on the battlefield. Fortunately this drastic solution was averted when he was turned down on grounds of health.

Burne-Jones's religious convictions were no doubt sincere enough, but ultimately he had embraced Tractarianism for secondary reasons. It is therefore not surprising that it proved unequal to his needs or that, as its influence waned, he was prepared to consider some startlingly different alternatives. As early as 1853 he was voicing admiration for Charles Kingsley (1819-1875) and the Christian Socialists, although he must have known that Kingsley was among the Puseyites' sternest critics. More radically, he was reading Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881), whose "life-philosophy" sprang from disillusion with all conventional Christianity. Carlyle was to exercise a profound influence on the Oxford circle, showing them that the moral imperatives of religion could be retained without the theological trappings. They embraced his assertion that honest, responsible work was the only true agent of social regeneration, and they identified closely with his concept of the "hero," the prophet or man of vision who interprets for

ordinary mortals the transcendental will. For Carlyle saw literature as the form of prophecy most relevant to the modern world. In so doing he not only ensured his own ascendancy, casting himself in the role of "Hero as Man of Letters," but pointed to conclusions that no young man burning with moral enthusiasm and disenchanted with the Church could escape.

The impact of Carlyle is vividly reflected in the Oxford and Cambridge Magazine, the short-lived journal that the Oxford set and their friends at the sister university produced in 1856. But it was John Ruskin (1819-1900; fig. 45), Carlyle's self-confessed disciple, who gave the argument the further twist that made it of real significance for Morris and Burne-Jones, associating poetry with painting and claiming that the artist too had a prophetic role to play, since the imagination could convey, through the medium of allegory and symbolism, profound insights into the nature of God. There is evidence to suggest that Burne-Jones had encountered Ruskin's works at school, but he began reading them in earnest only in 1853, under the influence of Morris. Ruskin too now acquired "hero" status, becoming, as it were, the "Hero as Critic." "In aesthetics he is authority," Burne-Jones wrote; and again, "His style is more wonderful than ever; the most persuasive oratory we ever read." 14 Nothing was more "persuasive" than the doctrine of prophetic imagination as it was defined in *The Stones of Venice* (1851-53) and the second volume of *Modern Painters* (1846). For here was precisely the clue he was seeking as the clerical ideal faded — nothing less than the assurance that by indulging his love of drawing imaginative subjects he was doing something that was socially valuable and even

retained a measure of priestly significance. It was long before he outgrew the habit of referring to his prospects as an artist in quasi-religious terms. "Up till now," he wrote in 1856, "I seem not to have done anybody any good, but when I work hard and paint visions and dreams and symbols for the understanding of people, I shall hold my head up better." 15 Indeed, behind the facade of jokes and banter he would always approach his work with an intense seriousness which stemmed from Ruskin and Carlyle, even if it came to assume a form, an unshakable belief in the moral efficacy of beauty, that Carlyle at least would have repudiated with Calvinistic scorn. Carlyle's stern work ethic is also reflected in the relentless application — the "savage passion for work" for which he used to "thank the Lord in heaven" 16 — that made his career so astonishingly productive.

Of course in Ruskin's book it was not enough simply to use imagination. Many artists did this, and he would never have called them prophets. To qualify for this elevated title they had to exercise the faculty properly, as Giotto, Tintoretto, Turner, the Pre-Raphaelites, and all his other heroes had exercised it,

Figure 47. John Everett Millais (1829-1896),
The Return of the Dove to the Ark, 1851. Oil
on canvas, 34 1/2 x 21 1/2 in. (87.6 x 54.6 cm).
Ashmoian Museum, Oxford

Figure 46. William Holman Hunt
(1827-1910), The Light of the World,
1851-53. Oil on canvas, 49 1/2 x 23 1/2 in.
(125.5 x 59.8 cm) - By permission of
the Warden and Fellows of Keble
College, Oxford

by basing it on a profound understanding of objective reality. As he put it in a much-quoted passage at the end of the first volume of *Modern Painters*, artists "should go to Nature in all singleness of heart, . . . rejecting nothing, selecting nothing, and scorning nothing; believing all things to be right and good, and rejoicing always in the truth. Then, when their memories are stored, and their imaginations fed, and their hands firm, let them take up the scarlet and the gold, give the reins to their fancy, and show us what their heads are made of." 17 Taking this exhortation to heart, Burne-Jones began to make studies of landscape and flowers in the Oxford countryside. Nor did he neglect his imaginative compositions. In March 1854 he was illustrating Tennyson's "Lady of Shalott" (1832), and about the same time he began work on an ambitious set of designs for a collection of metrical fairy tales by Archibald Maclaren, a versatile character who ran a gymnasium in Oxford which he and Morris frequented. This is his earliest substantial work to survive (cat. nos. 1-3).

Meanwhile, the friends were discovering the Pre-Raphaelite pictures that Ruskin had extolled in *Modern Painters* and the *Edinburgh Lectures* (1854). At the Royal Academy in 1854 they were thrilled to find Holman Hunt's *Light of the World* (fig. 46), and the following summer they visited its owner, Thomas Combe, the director of the Clarendon Press in Oxford. One of the Brotherhood's staunchest early

Figure 48. Charles AHston Collins (1828-1873), *Convent Thoughts*, 1850-51. Oil on canvas, 32V2 x 22 3 A in. (82.6 x 57.8 cm). Ashmoian Museum, Oxford

patrons, Combe was a fervent Anglo-Catholic and had

brought out a Tractarian tendency in the movement. This was reflected in some of his most important pictures, such as Hunt's *Christian Missionary* (1849-50; Ashmoian Museum, Oxford), Millais's *Return of the Dove to the Ark* (fig. 47), and Charles A. H. St. John Collins's *ultra-Anglo-Catholic Convent*

Figure 49. Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882), *The First Anniversary of the Death of Beatrice*, 1853-54. Watercolor, 16 1/2 x 24 in. (42 x 61 cm). Ashmoian Museum, Oxford

Thoughts (fig. 48). But the picture that impressed the friends most was a watercolor by Dante Gabriel Rossetti that had only recently entered the collection, *The First Anniversary of the Death of Beatrice* (fig. 49). This, Burne-Jones later recalled, was "our greatest wonder and delight, . . . and at once he seemed to us the chief figure in the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood." 18 The picture's intensely poetic evocation of the Middle Ages corresponded exactly to their own ardent romanticism, and they were captivated by the artistic personality behind it.

1. It was not until as late as 1886 that he was listed as "Burne-Jones" in the index of the Grosvenor Gallery catalogues (appearing as "Jones, E. Burne" before this); and the double-barreled surname was made official only when he accepted a baronetcy in 1894 (*Memorials*, vol. 2, pp. 241-42).

2. I am grateful to Shirley Bury for drawing my attention to this interesting fact.

3. Stanley Baldwin, *This Torch of Freedom* (London, 1935), p. 176.

4. De Lisle .1904, pp. 170-71. It is curious that Lady Burne-Jones makes no mention of the Coleys' jewelry business in her biography; indeed she goes out of her way to stress that "there was no foreshadowing of the gifts of this child in the family of either parent" (*Memorials*, vol. 1,

- p. 3). Perhaps this pointed disregard had its origin in some rift between Benjamin Coley and his son-in-law, two men of very different character.
5. Edward Richard Jones did, however, marry his housekeeper in old age (Memorials vol. 2, p. 125).
 6. Ibid., vol. 1, p. 155. The writer was actually describing not the Bennett's Hill house but 1 Poplar Place, a suburban house to which the Joneses moved in 1851.
 7. Ibid., p. 18.
 8. Ibid., pp. 8, 38.
 9. Arts Council 1975-76, no. 1, with one illus.
 10. Lago 1981, p. 133.
 11. A more detailed account of Burne-Jones's earliest artistic experiences will be found in Christian 1985.
 12. Lago 1981, p. 28.
 13. Memorials , vol. 1, p. 97.
 14. Ibid., pp. 79, 85.
 15. Ibid., p. 143.
 16. Ibid., vol. 2, p. 6.
 17. Ruskin, Works > vol. 3 (1903), p. 624.
 18. Memorials, vol. 1, p. no. 110