A decorative border surrounds the text, featuring intricate floral and scrollwork patterns. At the top center, there is a large, stylized monogram. At the bottom center, there is a small illustration of a factory with two tall chimneys and a building with windows.

The poems of
Jim William
Jones
- a selection

Chris Baker

Introduction

Jim William Jones was born in Coseley on February 15th, 1923, and spent his childhood and school years there. After leaving school he began work with the engineering firm Joseph Sankey and Sons as a junior clerk. He was conscripted into the army at the age of 18 in 1941, taking part in the Normandy landing in 1944 and also serving in India and Ceylon, reaching the rank of Warrant Officer. After the war he returned to Sankey's and was trained in works management, before leaving industry to join local government in 1955 where he worked in education administration, marrying Jesse Ralphs at Wednesbury in that year. He was a qualified teacher of speech and drama and a member of amateur dramatic societies, hosting a radio programme on Beacon Radio and working with the Black Country folk music group Giggetty. He had a strong Christian faith and was a gifted speaker and Methodist local preacher. He became a very well-known Black Country poet, both for his dialect poetry (Black Country ballads) and for his poetry in more conventional English. Some of these can be found in three small publications by the Black Country Society – "*From under the smoke*" from 1972, "*Factory and Fireside*" from 1974, and "*Jim and Kate*" from 1986, all sadly long out of print. He contributed numerous poems to the first 25 years of the Society magazine, the *Blackcountryman* from 1967 to 1992. He died in 1993.

Some of Jim Jones poems were included in a 1976 anthology “*Widening circles*” edited by Edward Lowbury. Following Jones’ death, Lowbury wrote an appreciation for the Blackcountryman (26.4, 1993). He acknowledged the humour and the pathos in the dialect ballads, which at the time of publication of “*Widening Circles*” he felt to be more successful than the poems in standard English. By 1992 however he had somewhat modified his views and concluded that his standard English poems were perhaps “*nearer to the heart of poetry than the more immediately entertaining dialect ballads*”.

In a much later Blackcountryman article (45.3, 2012) Trevor Brookes again writes in appreciation of Jim Jones, and in particular his dialect poetry, emphasising that as well as humour, they contained much that showed a profound understanding of people and their lives. He regretted that these were not easily available, being scattered across many newspapers and other publications, and not accessible to modern readers.

Personally, I first became aware of Jim Jones work in the early 1970s, when my mother gave me a copy of “From under the smoke” as a Birthday present. This little volume became a prized possession and has travelled around the country with me over the last 50 years, regularly read and re-read.

To enable others to either reacquaint themselves with his work, or to enjoy it for the first time, in this booklet I have brought together 33 of his poems that span the period from 1968 to 1992 – from “Under the Smoke”, “Factory and Fireside” and the Blackcountryman. Most, but not quite all, of these are in standard English. Another volume could easily be produced containing a selection of his dialect poetry, but as Trevor Brookes noted, these are more scattered, and the collection of them would be a major task. Nonetheless it is perhaps something I will attempt in the future.

Any compilation of an author’s poetry will inevitably reflect the likes and personality of the compiler as much as that of the author, and that is certainly the case here. I have tried to include poems that seem to me to reflect the main themes of Jim Jones’ work – the nobility of those who worked in the industries of his beloved Black Country, and the sharp eyed, and far from idealistic descriptions of the industrial environment; the extensive use of the imagery of dawn and sunlight; and his gracious and moving descriptions of love and loss, which seem to take on a darker tone as the years pass. But I will freely admit that I have chosen some for the personal memories they evoke – “Wheels in the morning”, bringing back to me the times when I accompanied my father in his lorry taking pumps from Lee Howell in Tipton to customers around the country; and “At a disused canal arm” which describes the same sensation of horror that I have, inexplicably, felt in similar places. And there are those

where his verse simply becomes sublime – “The level crossing” ranks amongst the best railway poetry I have ever read; and the astonishing description of the Black Country, after the ravages of the 1980s “.... *lying down, like a sick dog, no fight left...*” in “Across the Leys” is one of those phrases that simply remains fixedly in the mind.

The poems are arranged in chronological order of publication, with the those from the Blackcountryman split into four sections, with those from *Under the Smoke* (1972) and *Factory and Fireside* (1974) and a 1980 poem from a Black Country Society Christmas Card between them. This does not of course mean that this is in chronological order of writing, but probably approximates this.

Chris Baker, September 2023

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[16.1 1982 Early morning Inter City](#)

[18.1 1984 Night watchman](#)

[19.3 1986 Morning images](#)

[20.1 1986 Black Country Idyll](#)

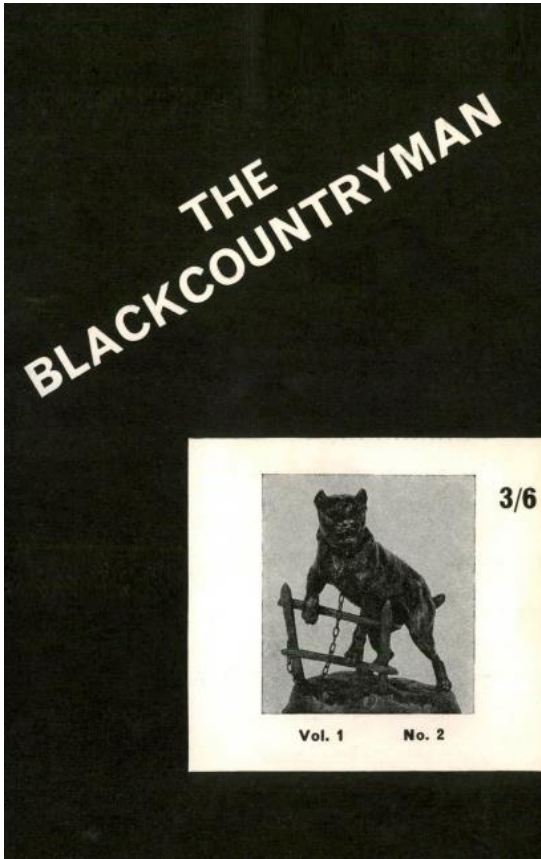
[20.3 1987 A child’s grave in Gornal](#)

[22.2 1989 Across the Leas](#)

[26.1 1992 Galton Bridge](#)

The poems of Jim William Jones – a selection

Blackcountryman 1967 to 1971



Barges

I have watched barges slip, like floating dead,
Beyond the reed bed's silent, slimy, pool,
With crusted hulls, foul bottomed, riding deep,
For Wolverhampton and the smoking dawn
That wraps the rooftops in a misty bed.
And every barge was manned by lusty men,
Who scanned their course with bright unsleeping eyes,
Thrusting iron strength at coal blackened tiller bars,
At the murky tunnel's
Yawning mouth, drooling damp;
Cold lichen, smoke and echoes up the ramp.
Then out between the walls they softly churn,
Crispy the oily green against the stone,
Where belching chimneys give the light their tone.
But I have seen,
Chugging its drowsy rhythm to the day,
Barge painted image in an oil slick thrown,
A lazy barge of gay and reckless tone
And, following its way,
I watched, and wished, and saw—appear and sing,
(suntan from a bottle, lips of fires, Rings flashing at her
ears),
The “gypsy” wench that beckoned in the Spring:
Birmingham born and bred,
And full of lies about her Latin sires,
Up in Soho coal wharves round the bargees fires.
A painted barge, a gaudy wench; and yet,

I swear I heard above the engine's beat.
The clicking of an urgent castanet;
The heels of a Flamenco in full heat.

The moulder

His shallow chest, reflecting hungry fires
That curl bright tongues around their iron mouths,
The moulder bends; a worthy Vulcanite,
And tilts his seething cup of liquid light,
His frame, more sorely than he seers the steaming sand,
Has borne the burning pain of restless toil
In dust: with smoke to breathe and calloused hands
To wipe dull tears. The bubble and the boil
Of molten steel stirs in those tautened veins.
And now I see, in this gaunt artisan of fire;
Above the sweat soaked flesh and sullen mirth,
The endless, noble patience of such men
Who grub their sustenance on factory floors
And power the mighty cog-wheels of the earth.

Morning Shift

We rise at dawn; the dying moon
Like a faded balloon, wanders down
The wan sky. The town lies dormant,
Muffled in countless blankets.

Talk soon dies, knocked down by sleep
Unfulfilled: stench of stale sweat
Mingles with soap, bacon and boiled tea,
In a depression of dim light.

In the street, the dawn wind capers
With last night's newsy supper papers,
Snatches the lung-tainted smoke
Of the first sour cigarette.

We join others in walking silence,
Impervious to the wild glory
Of a torn and bleeding sky
Shedding blood into the creased canal.

The hot breath of the foundry
Reeking with sulphur comes to meet us.
The night shift comes filing out, sweating,
Their eyes frantic for sleep.

Robotised by need or nature,
We take up our positions.
The mind focusses on heat,
Tendons flex, sweat glands secrete.

We have put off our humanity
Until after the first heat
Has dribbled from tuyere into mould,
And we begin the long, hot lust for cold.

Night Shift

Amongst the incessant din,
A deliberate power-hammer
Comes thudding in,
Beating the juice out of succulent iron.

Black, half naked Titans,
Rush plastic bars
Like hot sealing wax
Between gleaming rolls.

You can take a peep of hell
Through a tiny disc of glass;
See the restless Lucifer
Dancing in the pit of the cupola,
Bright enough to blind.

Out on a narrow rail,
Above the reek of the furnace,
One grabs out to inhale
The cool breeze of the night.
Sulphurous vapour,
Streaked with pungent bitterness,
Shudders the bright points of light.

The moon rolls out
From adrift of cloud,
Spreading a silver shroud
On roof sheets
Throwing shadows down
From the steel bars of dead cranes.

Beyond the gleaming curve of a bridge,
Lazy water blinks a thousand eyes.
The projectile roar of trains
Fills the deep bowl of sky,
And a distant bell tolls for the dawn.

The Brook

Once a year, the brook
Would rumble through the fields,
Brown-muscled, raucously
Drunk with summer madness.

Reeling into the street,
Peeping through open doors
Of cottages, hiccupping,
Sprawling into crowded drains.

It would halt the lazy cart,
Tempt children to play truant,
Patch up neighbours' quarrels,
Give voice to dumb men.

Its clear brown integument
Opened like a white oven
Over the lip of the marl
And fell roaring to sleep.

That was its life until
Overcome by progress
It was tamed and channelled,
Forced to toe the line.

It surrendered its gutters
To a stern concrete age,
Demoralised and piped;
Was made to crawl

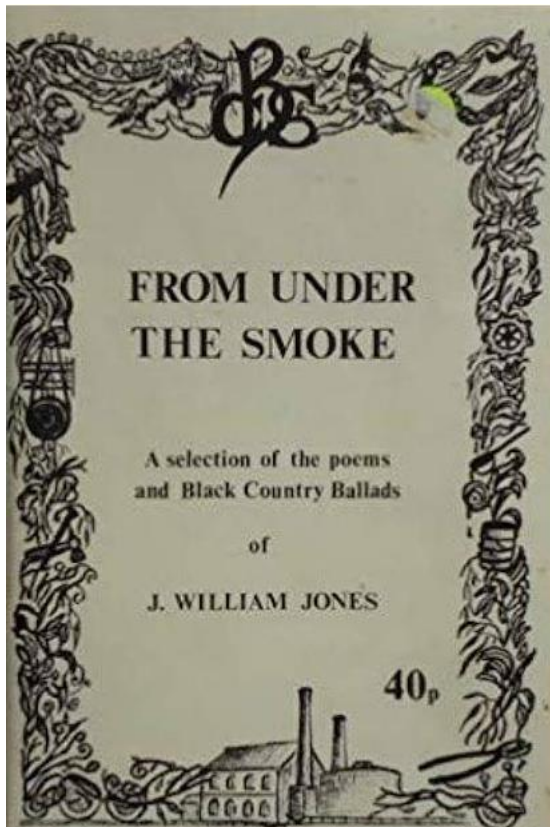
Deep below bright marley tiles
Of modern matchbox semis.
Under the wider, smoother street;
Furtive, like an alien on the run.

Now along the foundry wall
It totters into the light;
Worn to a trickling shadow.
Cackling with old age

It stumbles like these wizened
Dried up iron men, the foundry
Reek still on them; tired
With age and hanging on to life.

Who leaning on the wall,
Remember how the brook once
Rumbled through the fields, and
No one gave a damn about progress.

From under the Smoke 1971



From under the smoke

From under the smoke,
The voice of the fire
Is speaking in many tongues:
From the throats of furnaces
It roars its gutturals,
In an agony of boiling steel.
The iris of its eye glows
At star heat, beaming in sooty corners,
Where men, like troglodytes
Munch their bread and cheese,

Crouched against boulders of iron.
From under the smoke,
The red glow spreads,
Embroidering the solemn clouds;
And men are marching,
Their clothing stiff with old sweat;
Their iron-shod boots,
Striking sparks from paving stones.
As though they themselves
Were crackling with hidden fire;
And as they march,
Their voices crash together.
They have long since lost the art
Of quite speech; vying with the shriek of steel,
And the tireless clamour of machines.

From under the smoke,
The song of the people
Swells, elemental as an old hymn

Rising with the traffic of souls
Their triumph spins around the world,
Wherever talk of fire and steel
Inspires the muscle and the will
Of men, whose alters reek of power.
The bursting channels of the sun
Have washed their offspring,
And the speckled universe
Has felt the beating of their hearts.

The Steel Man

He stands, completely unperturbed,
Before the awful opening flower of crimson fire.
He is unmoved by the radiant cataract
Throwing its burning spray aloft,
His glistening arms, thronged with sinew
Seem made of gold, with golden hands;
His wet brow flaked with golden strands.

Dwarfed by monstrous shape and noise,
He yet attains a god-like poise.
Master of the burning moments
King of the hell he has unleashed.

He may well stand, quietly unmoved
Watching the wanton fury he controls;
For in that stolid, silent, fragile frame,
Stirs a greater force than fire and flame;
A power that tossed the world in space,
And drew from it the human race.

Wheels in the morning

Jerked from their cold rigid slumber in oil beds,
The pinions growl protest, the gears cry aloud,
Then slowly, half circle, the great load moves forward,
With shudder and sigh like a man after tears.
Out through the gates as the faint light is dawning,
Past the grey walls of the town's empty streets,
Over the bridge where the water lies winking,
Down where the steelmen are counting their heats.
Up into Sedgley and over the high land,
Into the green of the meadows and rills;
Steel rings on steel as the load sways and trembles;
The lorry rolls out to the sun wandering hills,
Sand of the foundry seeps down through the floor boards,
Is blown in the hedgerows and caught in the flowers,
Through township and village the tyres hum their progress,
Spinning their song to the slow-waking hours.

At last, at the docks in the full bloom of morning,
The load comes to rest where the tall gantries swing;
By midday the steel from a foundry in Milltown,
Is stowed in a ship and the loud sirens ring;
The slap of the water; the spume crested backwash;
Great bows cleave the ocean; white gulls spread their
wings.

The lorry returns to the far stretching highway,
More leisurely now in the bright afternoon,
Its wheels spin the sunlight, the gears move with ease;
Fine product of Milltown is on the high seas.

Closing of Trinity Church – Great Bridge

There was a day
When this old building
Rang with song,
And mighty was the throng
That came to hear the Word
Preached with fervour and devotion

As in that other time,
On a mighty wind
The tongues of flame fell here,
And found in many hearts
A place in which to burn.

What do we learn
From looking bow
Upon its desolation?
Has God closed its doors,
And shuttered up its windows
In despair?

Ask yourself....!
Does a seed
Sown in fertile soil
Cease to grow
Because a door is shut somewhere
Or here and there
A stone may crumble?

Man cannot board God up
Or bury him in dust,
Or sell him out to commerce.

Trinity is closed!
But God has gone His way
About the streets of Tipton,
Large and powerful
In the hearts of men
To grow, and thrive, and speak again.

Factory Fold

Jenny is gone, who kissed so gladly,
Jenny is gone from Factory Fold,
And the old gate swings in the night wind so sadly,
And ever since then the house is cold
And the dust has settled on Factory Fold.

Factory Fold is a crumbling ruin,
Windows agape and the garden bare,
And ghosts call out to the smoky moonlight,
Old ghosts that know her, calling her there,
Ghosts searching long in the bleak night air.

Ghosts that call, but get no answer,
Factory Fold, and life, are done,
Wind and nettle for music and dancer,
And not one pale rose left for the sun,
Not one pale rose; no, not one.

Derelict Foundry

The foundry, vast in its desolation, is haunted
With the hollow murmurs of departed time.
Grey phantoms of waning light
Move fitfully across the dusty floor.
Echoes from the past
Seem to linger where the rusting girders
Thrust into the distant roof,
And there is that yearning emptiness
One finds in vacant places
Where men once lived and toiled together.

Could one share in this unconsecrated air,
A feeling of sanctity,
As in some cool and spacious church,
Where the deepest passions of the soul
Have risen, blended and distilled?
For here there is no alter,
No stained-glass saint, no clean white stone;
Yet suddenly, one feels constrained to kneel
In the gray sand and flaking rust.
And sense a superb fitness in the fact
That one should feel His presence here,
Amidst this mass of ruinous gear
Where once men wrought with glowing steel,
Defined its shape on lathe and wheel,
And rich in strength made richer still,
The spirit of toil, the power of skill.

The Level Crossing

In leaping sound the notes are borne,
The clarion call of a two-toned horn,
As we sit and wait in gasping cars,
Or stand expectant at the wooden bars;
Then suddenly with flash and roar
The air is torn apart, and more,
A furious throbbing, steel on steel,
An iridescent stream of wheel
Rocks the earth beneath our feet,
And thunders up and down the street;
A blur of faces pressed on glass,
Whipping ropes of light that pass
In furious kaleidoscopic spin.

Like a maddened giant's indrawn breath,
The train growls on, and leaves a death
Of senses suspended in the quivering air.
And now the gates draw back, and there
With a sluggish movement life moves on
Over the road the giant strode upon.

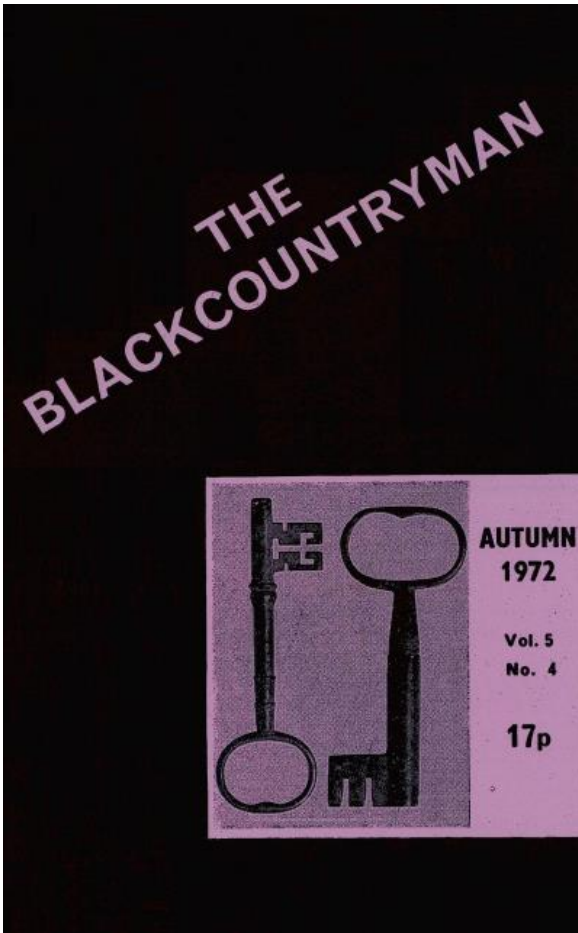
The distant horn calls onward into time;
Yet other triumphs, more than this sublime,
Will draw its frantic length to distant towns;
And the blur of faces, hurled at speed,
Will take on features, smiles and feed
Into threads of life where they are known,
And greeted, loved, and called their own.

Another Summer

Another summer dies slowly,
Writhing with heat and violence
On a bed of sharp spikes.
At the heart of all things,
There is persistent irritation,
Stabbing the aching sores
Of a war-weary world;
And men are dying
For immature causes.
Blood is flowing freely
For aims that are not high.
At the very core of life,
The maggots are breeding
With frightening fecundity,
Spreading their rottenness
Into our garnered fruits.
Good men are capitulating,
Shedding their beliefs
As great trees shed leaves
With the first pinch of Autumn.

Another summer dies slowly,
And there is no joy left
In remembering.

The Blackcountryman 1971 to 1974



A night on the Galusha

Dedicated to Joseph Jones of Penn, alas now deceased, who was affectionately known as “American” Joe because he had lived and worked in the USA in his younger days, and with whom I spent many happy, but often uneasy nightshifts on an industrial gas-production plant at Sankey’s Rolling Mills, Lanesfield in the late 1940s. A Galusha was an industrial gas production plant, long discarded.

The night is hugging its own shapes
Beyond the square pool of yellow light,
Where the giant’s ashy excreta
Stems and trickles and settles itself.

The great steel anus of the tower
Is now sealed with almost fearful care;
No air can be allowed to enter there
To rise and belch with fury through the fire.

The steel stairway clangs like crackled bells
As we climb back through the gas-filled gloom:
On the first floor the murky air, like warm wool
Swirls and clings to our bodies, drawing sweat.

The odour of yellow marsh gas
Is homely; strangely reminiscent
Of kettle boiling and the promise of tea
With butter and jam heaped on a knife.

Joe looks at my bright new tea can
Sparkling blue; as new to toil as I,
Feeling as strange as I in the smoke and the dust;
I lift the lid and take my cap.

Joe is a broad chap with thick arms;
Skin brown as old oak from sun-filled wanderings
A character from one of Steinbeck's novels,
Casting a big shadow when he moves.

At 2 a.m. the real work begins,
Breaking down clinker through the poke holes,
The fire must be kept black to produce good gas;
Our sweat falls and steams on the steel floor.

At 4.00 a.m. and still sweating,
We feed the monster with anthracite;
I fill the fast-moving hopper, while Joe,
Seventy feet above controls its speed.

The moon's fire banked with ashes of cloud
Ignites the white shroud of morning mist
As we meet to light pipes on the high cat walk
And puff the smoke into serious talk.

About work, or families, our homes,
The risks involved working with the gas;
How a simple error could wreck the whole plant.
Or blow a man into a mangled pulp.

At 5 a.m. we ash-out again;
Joe shows me how easy it would be
To let air in during this messy process;
What a mess we would make exploded.

We laugh, as men do at death dormant
Under some industrial guise, controlled
By human hand; kept at bay each night and day
In a channel of power for human need.

The last drags of cold tea from my can
Wash away the grey dust from my throat;
I get my coat in readiness to leave;
6 a.m. and sixteen hours reprieve.

Day becomes unreal for night workers,
We bear traces of the long dark hours
In our eyes, the stale sweat of our bodies;
And our shadows fade like ghosts in the sun.

Tommy ‘Redpenny’ and Uncle Sam

Some observations of a boy

I like watchin’ Tommy Redpenny
‘Cos I don’t think there’s any
As strong aa him.

I like to see him in a tussle,
His arms alive with muscle,
His face like brick,

A ‘tuggin’ the bright steel sheets apart
Like a hoss ‘aivin a cart,
Sweat runnin’ down.

Some blokes said ‘ow ‘e got ‘is nicknairme
But I think it’s just a gairme,
An’ ar’ll not know;

They say ‘e backed on to a ‘ot bar,
An ‘it left a round red scar,
On ‘is be’ind.

I don’t take no note o ‘ such talkin’;
I like to watch ‘im walkin’,
Big as a door.

Once or twice ar've tried to talk tew 'im.
But 'e seems full ter the brim
Wi' 'is own thoughts.

Not like my Uncle Sam. He can jaw
On politics or the war,
On annythin'!

He just talks for the sairke o' talkin'.
I like to watch 'im walkin'
Short an' bow-legged.

My Uncle Sam wairks in the ware'uss
An' 'e can alliz spare us
A minute er tew,

Ter tell stories about the war,
An' 'ow he wun it: an' more
About life an' such.

Uncle Sam's muscles am like sparra's knees,
But yo' feels warm and at ease,
When yo'm wi' 'im.

I 'opes when ar'm a mon ar con talk
Like Uncle Sam; but ter walk
Like Tommy.....Big.

Breakdown—No 2 Rolling mill
(a Recollection)

A volley of shouts
Rises above the disjointed thunder
Of splitting iron rolls:
Glossy sheets of fine steel
Crumpled like discarded paper
Eject and slither across
The plated floor,
Slowly with rattle and groan,
The mill dies,
Heaving its coal smoked breath
Into silence

In a circling cloak of warm air,
There is a cadence of images:
Frantic managerial faces
Caught in a sudden screen
Of sunlight, jostle their commands
Into pewter gloom,
Goaded limbs, in silhouette,
Contort the saffron rays
Of pent furnaces.
Above the black oily miasma
Of the great wheel's pit,
Vizor'd spectres.
Locked in cocoons of blue lightning
Spray molten stars

From their burning wands.
In deeper gloom,
Tired mill workers
Tackle their reprieve
With cold tea and tobacco
Making jungle eyes
With the grimy stubs
Of cigarettes.

Now hovers the singing crane.
Maneuvering new rolls.
With electric edginess.
Tension begins to ease;
A new shout triggers out.
From the brain's muffled explosion:
The monster resurrects
Bounding into thunderous life.
Its world agog. Its slaves smiling.

Black Country Slaughterhouse

The executioners bestride the road,
Their white gowns flecked with blood,
Their arms are thick and dark with hair,
Swift in movement, eyes aware,
As they form their grisly barrier
Across a sunlit morning street
Slowing the tramp of morning feet;
Halting the rumble and the rhyme
Of wheels, with the imminence of blood.

The smells of death and cringing fear
And fleshly rottenness are here.
Intermingling in the air
We breathe its odour with despair,
And retch in our souls clean depths,
For the carnivorous strain
That keeps us on our carnal plain
Of hungering for fresh killed meat
And the salt-sweet taste of blood.

Now the doomed herd tumbles forth
In close packed hordes of jostling pink,
Squealing, leaping on each other,
Running the rubber-booted gauntlet
Of those white-gowned, blood-flecked giants
Who crouch and weave; and flex
Their hairy arms like trees in wind.
Watching for the pig with shifty eye
Who might espy an opening and fly
Blind with fear into the watching street,
To dodge the wheel and crowding feet
And seek escape, he knows not where,
Nor why!

When they are gone, or life moves on;
Forgetting soon, the tragedy we looked upon.
Nor could we ever comprehend
The blind unreasoning race to death
Of pigs, whose tiny, pink-toed feet
Ran fearfully across a sunlit street.

Compensation

When the policeman came
I was frying eggs and chops
And singing the latest ‘pops’.
He cleared his throat and said
Jim was dead!
Killed by a falling billet from a crane.

No pain, he said.
Instant dead!
My wide world shuddered and reeled;
The chops and egg congealed.
I sat a long time staring without sight
I lay, unsleeping, all that night.

They were kind; the neighbours,
And my mother,
She cried at times I knew, hidden,
But not with me.

They would not let me see
The body in its box
“It’s best!” they said,
“You would not want to see him dead
- the way he died -
Let him be!”

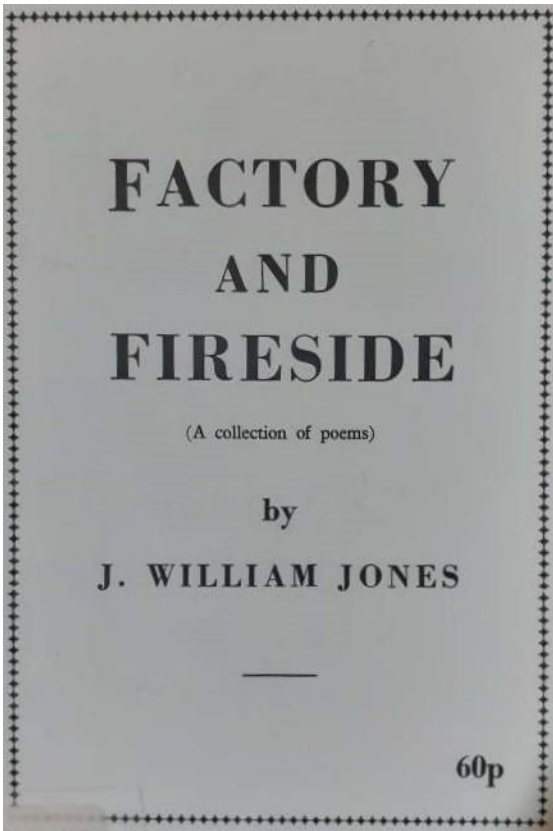
Then one day they sent for me
Down at the works.
They said there would be compensation
“A very tragic situation!
I’m sure you know how we all feel,
Jim was a good chap
Good at his job.....”
I answered with a sob,
To hear such praise
For him that lay in earth,
Cold in endless dark.

When the cheque arrived
My mother smiled, and said,
“Jim is dead; you are alive!
Now we must strive
To live on and forget -
At least to try”

I do not cry; not any more
Tears will not come,
Nor will the smiles he loved to see;
For I am rich,
Richer than I ever dreamed,
When he and I sat and schemed
As counted five, or ten, or twenty
As our bonanza.
Now there are plenty,
Many thousands; one by one

To count alone
And weigh against
The many thousand kisses that are gone.

Factory and Fireside 1974



Take the Sun

Take the sun
And break it
In a bowl of cloud;
Spread it amongst trees
And factories
And in the street,
Where people's feet
May splash in it,
Wash it into meadows:
Flood the flowers
Into oceanid hours
Of rippling fire;
Brim with light
Each cupped valley
And wooded ridge
Until the earth glows.
Draw out bright beams
Of fire, touch off each pyre
Of boarded shadow.
Let all the earth
Be alive with summer.
Take the sun
And rub it in your hands.
Touch my face
With its huge gold
And my lips;
Let your finger of sun

Run along my eyes
Dwelling there a moment
In surprise at its reflection
Caught on their fluid crest;
Wrap your arms of sun
Around my body
Warm as gold.
Let us lie in sun
Immersed, but floating,
Like the sea.

Demolition in progress

Poor lifeless shell,
Spilling out dust.
Fragments of your past,
Caught up by the wind
And carried away.

We stand and stare,
Through the dark cavity
Of your eye, searching
For the faded years, hoping
For some faint glimmer
Of what we were
To manifest itself
In your darkening walls,
Or cross this shattered floor,
To creak through warped doors,

Now held in wedged silence.

We were your life,
I, my wife, our children.
We filled your arteries
With our vitality.
You were strong then;
Your eyes bright gold,
Your mouth mobile
With warm hospitality.
Each path a tongue
Of flowered invitation.

We too have faded
With the years; we
Have now become your soul
Departed from your body,
Watching the final scene
Of your extinction;
As, one day, our souls
Will stand, outside ourselves
And stare, wistfully perhaps,
At our own destruction.
Remembering a whole lifetime –
In a quick fall of dust.

Sunny Corner

The sun's huge gold
Spreads and dries
On the crumbling wall,
Transfixing dusty flies
Into a mad still-life
Of warm ecstasy.
Velvet lips of wallflowers
Puff their holiday scent
Into the humming air
Where swaggering sunflowers
Tower against the sky;
And I lie low
In my deckchair, beatifically
Smoking a rusty pipe,
Savouring the beauty
Of that vivid corner
Brought to life by my hand.

These plants do not know me
Or see, or understand
My function here.
And yet suddenly,
A solitary dandelion,
Having escaped my hoeing,
Peers out from a clump of grass.
Fixing me with its yellow stare,
As if comprehending.

At a disused canal arm

I fear this water,
Whose surface contorts
In dark oily creases;
On whose brink I waver
Watching the sodden frame
Of a dead barge
Slowly rocking in its grave.
I fear this water
Greater than I fear
The lion-hearted sea;
But I am drawn
By its sullen languor
Like a prostrate man
Watching the groping hand of death
With quick and fearful eye.

Gairbriel from Gornal

Ar'm thinking o' Gairbriel,
Gairbriel from Gornal.
The chap as waiked by me
At the coal fairce below.
'E dae do much talkin'
About wheer 'e cum from,
'Is fam'ly, 'is life
Kep' 'isself to 'isself.

Just a quiet chap 'ar thought 'im,
Gairbriel from Gornal.
A'airning 'is livin'
Never botherin' wi' none,
Till one day it 'appened
Down theer at the coal fairce
The rewf timbers groaned
An' the stoones spluttered down.

Then up springs this Gairbriel,
Gairbriel from Gornal.
'E props 'is great shoulders
Wheer the rewf threatened me,
"Gerrout, yer saft gawbee!"
Says 'e, "Yo' got childrin!
Ar doe mind dying',
'Cos theer'll nob'dy mourn me."

Ar dae try ter stop ‘im,
Gairbriel from Gornal.
‘Cos ar wuz a coward
An ‘ar run for me life
Ar run an’ ar stumbled,
The blind fear wuz on me
Ar thought o’ me children,
An ‘ar thought o’ me wife.

Now ar think about Gairbriel
Gairbriel from Gornal,
A’lying there smothered
Moore than ‘arf a mile down.
An’ ar calls ‘im softly
In me ‘eart I calls ‘im.
“Yo’n got some’dy wot mourns yer
Me ode mairte – yo’ got me!”

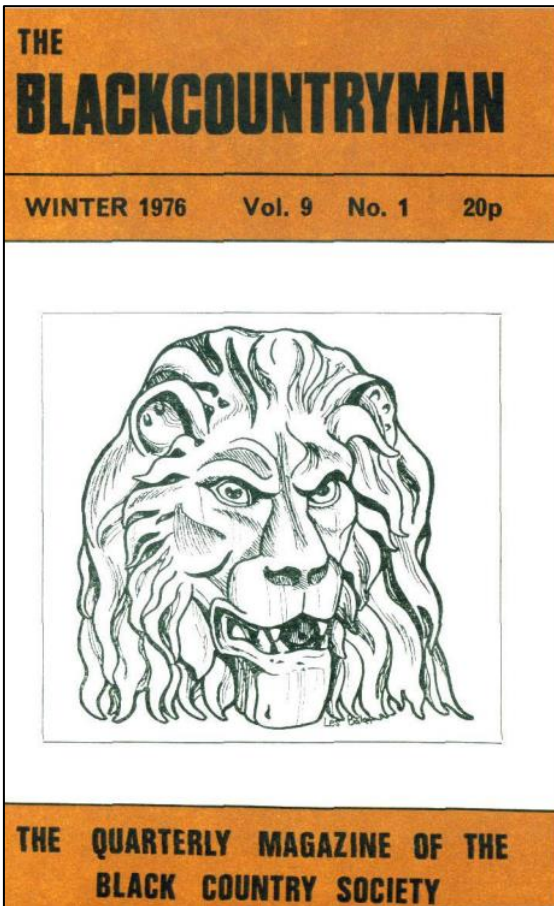
Departure by train

Suddenly it is departure time;
Bells ring; a strident voice
Peels out from the Tannoy;
The crowd surges forward
Like fragments of iron
Drawn to a giant magnet.
It is happening too soon.
There is no time left,
For more than a perfunctory kiss,
An embarrassed flurry
Of ill-chosen useless words.
So much is left unsaid
That could have consummated
The waiting hour.

Now at the dark tunnel's mouth
A last fond glimpse, a wave
From those who are left behind.
And in the roaring gloom,
The things that were left unsaid
Cry and clamour through my brain,
Then in the sudden light beyond
Are caught naked and ashamed
In the stony gaze of strangers.

The poems of Jim William Jones – a selection

The Blackcountryman 1975 to 1980



I was born here

Iron and coal
Conceived me; I was born
In this heroic smoking basin,
Where time is sung
On factory sirens; and days
Number on notches of quick fire.
I grew up in the shadow
Of steep walls; chimneys
Taller than mythical giants,
Reaching with arms of smoke
Into a bronze-dark sky.
I was weaned on sweat:
Words came to me
On a breath of flame.
Tongues of ringing steel
First spoke my name.

I was born
Where the sun's raging fire
Transmutes at early dawn
Into a lustre of gold
Richer than Solomon's hoard;
And where, as night falls,
Slowly, a burnished moon
Lifts above these towns
Like a forged shield
Trailing its smoking dross.

Yes, here I was born.
And I shall die
Here, I shall lie
Under the throbbing soil
Of my Black Country,
Embraced forever in its loving clay.

All those names

(A tribute to Black Country workers of long ago who, by their heroic labours forged a reputation for hard work and skill second to none in the world)

I stand
By the old factory gates
On a winter evening
With all those names
Crying from the walls
In fading light.

They, who
In their bright and youthful day
Burned their singing blood
In flames of steel,
Spent their power
On wheels of chance.

Those wheels,
Silent now in rusting gloom,
Spun swift and endless gold
For iron gods,
Whose relentless greed
Shaped schemes in flesh.

Their flesh,
Dust now in the depths of time
Bore in grime and heat
Their burdened life
Like a dragging chain
Anchored in death.

Their death,
Quick as plumes of fading smoke
Barely dimmed the light,
Nor wakened grief
In weary eyes,
Barren of tears.

Their tears,
Locked fiercely in breaking hearts
Burst in storms of toil:
Their pain was scourged
By the hammer's blow,
Forging their fate.

Now ‘er comes

Between foundry stacks
An’ the humped shoulders
O’ blast furnaces,
A jet plane
Small as a gnat,
Cuts a slice out of the sky
An’ drags cloud from it.
A scarf o’ smoke
Winds round in the wind:
The ‘bulls’ am blartin’.
A bundle o’ loud voices
Goz rollin’ by.
Its time ter goo.

But ah’m a’ waitin’ - a bit
Hesitatin’
By the big gairtes,
‘Onds in pockets,
Kickin’ the foundry dust
Off me bewts
Tired an’ sick -
Me throat thick
Wi’ smoke an’ grit,
Me yed split
Wi’ the noise
O’ wheels and clatterin’ steel.

Now ‘er comes
Across the grimy yard
As though ‘e wuz in Himley Woods
Trippin through bluebells;
Sweet - clean -
Fresh as dawn
On a mountain.
‘Er sees me—’er’s a-smiling’.
Quickenin’ ‘er step.
An’ then—an’ then
- A miracle -
The foundry - the yard -
The roarin’ road -
All thoughts o’ the day’s wairk load
Am gone -
An we’me one,
Me an ‘er
Walkin’ in liquid gold
An’ the light all about we.

Night storm

Night winds
Crowded
Against my window;
From all sides
They came.
Swelling their lusty choirs
Tossing their strange harmonies
Across the sky;
Striking giant chords
From an iron moon.

And I sang
In those dark hours;
Sang, as I lay
Counting time,
Waiting for dawn's face
To laugh out darkness;
And I was drawn
Into the racing sky,
My leaping brain
Danced
From star to star
Keen as ice
I climbed beyond mind's reach.
And I sang with the winds.

When day came
I returned
As a man drawn from death,
Reluctant
For the sense
Of bone and blood
For the futility of brain.
I opened my window
And reached out
To catch the world
Before the winds
Blew it away.

Christmas Card 1980



The Sportsman - from a painting by Ewart Chapman, reproduced courtesy of Mrs M. Chapman.- Black Country Society Christmas card of 1980.

The Sportsman

From a BCS Christmas card 1980

Sportsmen all,
Man, beast and bird;
Girth and grit,
Muscle of resolution;
Iron jaw,
Fang and claw;
Born in the iron echo
Of the foundry's din
The engine's beat:
Fire and flame
Is the surge of their game,
Animal power,
Primitive lust for blood
Stirs their ferocious pride.
A violent trinity –
The man, their manipulator,
Their urge, their driving force,
Their mentor:
They, his children,
His champions,
They are his challenge
To the world,
His fight against life.

The poems of Jim William Jones – a selection

Blackcountryman 1981 to 1992



Man on a Bridge

His soul,
Sheathed in steel,
Glints through his eyes,
Watching
The timeless freckling
Of sun-sequined water,
Pall-black shadows,
Light-carved,
Crinkling out from factory walls.

A moist impress
Of summer heat
Clings about him:
Solar flame
Teasing his weary flesh
With tropic fire.
Voice of water
Rustling, inviting
To cool, painless vaults of green.

His mind recalls
The many summers
Of his youth -
Hazy beyond the edge
Of a flayed wasteland.
Wistful memories
Turning up

To feed on his despair,
Like nibbling rats.

Calling, pleading,
The water rolls
Beneath the bridge.
Slowly he turns,
Slowly walks away
His soul shrieking:
And as he walks he is aware
Of the grimace of cheated death
Lingering there, on the bridge.

Early Morning Inter-City

*Composed after watching the London Express pass
through Princes End, Tipton, on a December morning.*

Exploding
From stone lips
Of the tunnel's yawn,
The train
Whistles down the line
Bristling with sun-sparks,
Dragging into perspective,
Life's creeping hours.

Keen sky-cleaving towers
Of the town's ramparts,
Shrink backwards
Into infinity
The sun's level sea
Frosted into gold.

Sizzling might,
Hurling immense weight
Through steel-tracked distances,
Sun-awakened;
Storming the air, arrow-like
Or like a fiery comet
Whispering its flight
To gaping stars.

At the controls,
Goggled in tinted glass,
Bridging windowed space
With shoulder span.
A man, god-like at speed,
Riding the rim of time
In a chariot
Ejected from the sun.

Night Watchman

Night watchman of old,
Watching the night go by,
Full of spangling stars in a big sky,
Or the moon bouncing through clouds;
Keeping your red lamps trim,
Guarding a hole in the road,
In case it got stolen,
Or sneakily filled in.
Or (more sensibly),
To avoid accident
To unwary passers-by;
Your brazier firmly aglow
Boisterous with sparks.

Beyond its radiance
You sat, illumined
In your little box,
Like some sacred Buddha
Framed in wood,
Bound for Nirvana
With your hands on your belly;
Lulled by the night sounds,
You dozed and dreamed.

Then in the mornings,
Stirring your fire aflame
With a scrubbed shovel,

Cooking bacon and egg
On its hot iron blade,
Sending up food-fragrance
To mouth-water the air:
The sweet aroma of tobacco,
Smoked with old fashioned relish
In a good brier pipe.

All this made
The hole in the road
A pleasure to endure
These days most likely,
You would be attacked,
Beaten up, your lamps smashed,
Your simple life made miserable,
By a strange new breed
You would never have understood;
You were beloved of children;
You brought a homely excitement
To our street,
For which, my memory, thanks you.

Morning images

Upright smoke
Hunches its shoulders under a raw sky:
Silver roofs are sweating and steaming -
Reflecting the pewter matt finish
Of secretive sun-peering light
Tangled in threadbare clouds.

Traffic sucks and puffs and scrapes;
People come shuffling in
Tap-dancing their routine
On a pavement stage:
Smiling their artificial Monday smiles,
Talking their artificial Monday talk:
They slow to a kind of martial walk
At the High Street check point -
Tesco corner, the Woolworth Wall,
Office, banks, market hall -
Damp awning over stripey stalls
Sagging like cold udders of striped cows
Dripping watery milk on to cold hands:

The pace of the crowds
Has become funereal,
A procession of doom
Out for a day's death of the soul -
The office prisoner,
The shop fawn,
Production liners so forlorn.
A sweating tea shop slave
A labourer digging his grave,
Sick money-gleaners finger licking
Notes and coins; chinking pockets,
Smoking 'revenue' mixture rolled in Bank paper,
Coughing out copper breath
And blowing silver down their noses.

Then come the slack-eyed office cleaners
Smelling of mops and slops and table-tops
And polish sprayed under their arms.

Black Country Idyll

When clouds come in low,
They grab the chimney smoke
And roll it like dough
Kneading it out on roofs.
Curling the edges over,
Crimping it on the wobble-pattern of tiles:
Oh—the sooty tar black smell
Of house-fires; and the wash tub smell
Of the brewery; and the burnt-rust smell
Of the foundry; and the phwaah smell
Of the gasworks;
And the smell of Miranda at the Miner's Arms -
Light night-scented stock on a velvet moon-stricken
Summer-drunken, wine-misted night in June,
With the foundry sillouhettted
Like a relic of some ancient dynasty -
Marbled by the moon:

'Ah Miranda!' sighs Sammy Spink -
Greek statue of the Millfield Parthenon;
He never smokes or drinks
Or sleeps around;
He eats muesli and peanut butter
And sunflower margarine
And lots of 'bottle' from Whitey the Milko.
In secret he prays to Thor and Odin
(Who were never Greek);

He dreams about Greek idylls;
He would like an idyllic experience -
To leap like a satyr
Out of that copse of trees
Up by Tranter's Timber Yard,
Just as Miranda floats by
On her way to the Miner's -
Or, he would be caught in a classic pose
At the massive gate-posts of Wilkes' Foundry,
And Miranda - floating through pink mists
Bearing him grapes in a cornucopia.

'Ah Miranda!' he sees her
Running slow-motion towards him
High-breasted through the couch-grass
Back of Wilkes' foundry on a June afternoon;
He strikes a pose -
Hand on the brown gloss of the kitchen table,
The pillar of his brawny arm
Thickening up to the escarpment
Of his sweeping shoulder.

The scatter and fumble of unseen mice
Are Achilles and Ajax playing with dice.

A child's grave in Gornal

An old jam jar
Holds a few battered daffodils
And two shrivelled sills
Of frost-bitten green;
And the stones are green
In the crumbling wall:

An infant's grave....
It seems to rock
In the biting breath
Of bitter winter's lingering death;
Only an illusion:
It is the pitiful flowers that rock
In the glass jar's jellied slime;

A tiny grave...
From those old times,
Framed with bits of old brick,
And littered with old stalks
Of long-forgotten flowers;
Sixty years they say
Since this infant passed away:
His short life
Was in a day
When poverty held sway,
And disease stalked
Where children played and walked
And ran in and about
This Gornal street.

A lonely man....
Eighty-two now,
Remembers the young boy,
And comes stealthily,
Out of the shadows of day,
With is wistful flowers:
And as the light vanishes,
The cold muffling darkness,
Seems a huge and crying thing.

Across the Leas

In the night
You would hear the big steam trains
Shouting to one another
Across the leas.
And the bark of their funnels
As they strained
At the snake-line of singing tricks
Loaded with coal, pig-iron,
Sheet steel from the mills.

In those days
The Black Country was an ‘empire’
Of industry; fire and smoke,
Iron and steel,
The wrenching of coal from deep earth,
And limestone
For the flux of boiling furnaces;
Foundries, rolling mills; big men
Grappling with great power.

And women,
Aproned in sacking, head-tied.
Tough as the men they married,
Working as hard,
And bearing crowds of children,
Some to die
In the constant battle to survive
In the boxy cottages, back to back
Sometimes six to a bed.

In the night
You would see, like an early dawn,
A yawning glow of red fire
Across the leas;
And hear the heart-beat booming
Of pistons.
Thrusting great wheels and heavy rolls;
And the furnaces puking
Their radiant vomit out.

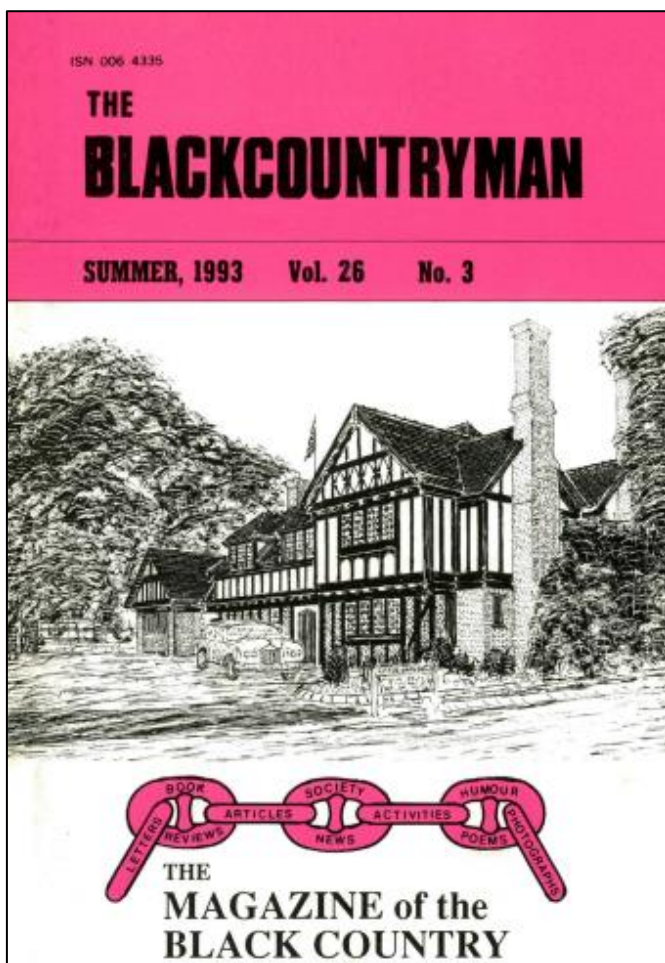
In those days
Factory sirens would start the day
In grand symphonic manner;
What wondrous notes!
With the sun's baton beating.
And the sky
Shouting 'bravo', with clapping clouds
Giving standing ovations
From the galleries of heaven.

In these days
The Black country is lying down
Like a sick dog, no fight left:
Iron and steel -
The dribblings of an old tack tin;
Crumbs of fire
From the kicked ashes of bygone days;
Foundries, rolling mills, all dead,
Like the men who gave them life.

Galton Bridge

Dawn rears up angry
Drawing its blood finger
Down the blade of the canal;
The bridge smoulders
Black as fretted cinder
In the ancient fires
Of day;
Dogs chant their slogans;
Magic chimneys
Hold their genies
On strings of blue smoke;
The town is quivering
Under the bell of dawn.

Now the bridge writhes
In a distortion of flame.
Stretching its steel legs
Against the water's flint.
The sun's red mirror
Hangs itself upon the day.
And the bridge
Brandishes its image
Like a warrior king
Bestriding the awful field.



From the Blackcountryman 26.3 1993

Jim William Jones R.I.P

It is with great regret that we report the sudden death on 4th June 1993 of Jim William Jones. aged 70 years. He was well known as a poet throughout the Black Country and beyond. One of his public readings was at Himley Hall in 1970 when he appeared on a programme which included the Giggey Folk Group. This group made several records which included Jim as a guest artiste. He ran a poetry circle at The Painters Arms. Coseley and a creative writing class at Wolverhampton. Some years ago he made a memorable contribution to a BBC 2 programme on dialects. made numerous local broadcasts and won several national poetry competitions. most recently. one this year at Leicester University. Jim was a frequent contributor to 'The Blackcountryman', some 68 of his poems and 7 articles having been published. The Black Country Society also published in 1986 'Jim and Kate', a selection of 28 poems by him and 28 by Kate Fletcher. A retired local government officer, Jim was also for over 30 years a Methodist lay preacher and he arranged and conducted the funeral service in May 1992 of Harold Parsons, this magazine 's Editor from 1967 to 1988. We extend our deepest sympathy to Mrs. Jones and family.

The poems of Jim William Jones – a selection



Jim Jones, drawn by C L Baker, from the Black Country Society Calendar 1977