

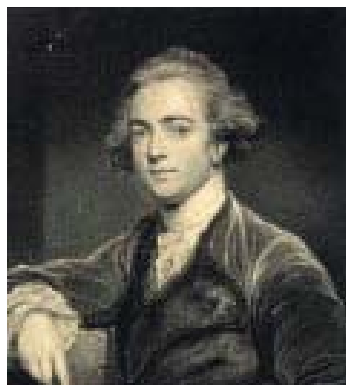
A Welsh wizard's Indian genius

by Andrew Robinson

**ORIENTALIST JONES:
SIR WILLIAM JONES,
POET, LAWYER, AND
LINGUIST, 1746-1794**

by Michael J Franklin

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**Giant of the Enlightenment :
Sir William Jones**

Beneath the dome of St Paul's Cathedral, in the four corners formed by its pillars, are statues of four of the greatest Britons of the Enlightenment: Samuel Johnson the dictionary maker, Sir Joshua Reynolds the painter, John Howard the prison reformer, and Sir William Jones the Orientalist. A superb Reynolds portrait of Jones as a young gentleman about town in the 1760s adorns the jacket of Michael Franklin's readable and thorough biography. But at St Paul's, Jones's god-like statue holds a large book, on which appears a single word, "Menu" - suggesting that Jones was some kind of waiter.

Johnson, Reynolds and Howard are names familiar to most people, whereas Jones is probably not. He was an important judge of the supreme court of India in the late 18th century; "Menu" is a reference to Jones's pioneering translation from Sanskrit of the laws of the greatest Hindu law-giver, today spelt as Manu.

Jones was one of the greatest polymaths in history, as even his most gifted contemporaries conceded. Above all, he was the first to establish beyond dispute that the classical languages of India and Europe had sprung from the same root. In 1786, speaking to the Asiatic Society of Bengal, which he had recently founded, Jones remarked: "The Sanscrit language, whatever be its an-

tiquity, is of a wonderful structure; more perfect than the Greek, more copious than the Latin, and more exquisitely refined than either; yet bearing to both of them a stronger affinity... than could possibly have been produced by accident... no philologist could examine them all three, without believing them to have sprung from some common source".

Jones was born in 1746, the grandson of a small farmer in the Isle of Anglesey and the son of a mathematician who became a fellow of the Royal Society. At Harrow, Jones showed exceptional promise in classical and modern languages. At Oxford, he taught himself Arabic and Persian; his first seven major publications, appearing in his twenties, were all connected with these two languages and his translations are still admired. By the age of 26, he was elected a member of Johnson's Literary Club and a fellow of the Royal Society.

Jones was not wealthy; early on he realised that to support his passion for scholarship, he needed an income. He became a barrister, working extensively in his native Wales, and acquiring a knowledge of Welsh

and a sensitivity to the use of more than one language in court that he would later apply in the polyglot court in Calcutta. For several years he petitioned as a would-be nabob for a lucrative judgeship in Bengal, but his republican views - he strongly supported the American revolution - were an obstacle to such a career.

In 1783, George III intervened, and Jones left England with a knighthood and a devoted wife for Bengal. He intended to remain for six years and amass enough money to retire into a life of pure scholarship as a country gentleman, but he stayed twice as long, and died suddenly in 1794, on the point of departure for home.

It is in India that Jones did the work for which he is chiefly remembered. After his "Indo-European" breakthrough, Jones's next greatest achievement was his 1789 translation of *Sakuntala* by India's greatest dramatist, Kalidasa, which Franklin calls "a revolutionary contribution to Orientalism". It inspired the prologue to Goethe's *Faust*, influenced Schubert and Shelley, and appeared in 12 languages in the century after Jones's translation.

In his own day, Jones was simply known as "Oriental" Jones. Franklin's title is obviously more loaded. Inevitably much of the biography deals with the extent to which the knowledge Jones accumulated as the quintessential Orientalist was tainted by his services to British imperialism as a judge. Overall, Franklin justly concludes, the political taint is vastly outweighed by Jones's love for, and services to, Indian, and Middle Eastern, culture. Jones more than merits his heroic statue in St Paul's.

Andrew Robinson is the author of biographies of Satyajit Ray and Rabindranath Tagore

