

## ETHICAL DIMENSIONS OF FAMINE REPORTING: GARETH JONES AND THE 'JOURNALISM OF ATTACHMENT'

Dr. Ray Gamache, 20 June 2013, Association of Ukrainians in Great Britain, London, England

As a point of departure for my discussion this evening, I'd like to contextualize my remarks by saying that the very first code of ethics for journalism was adopted by the American Society of Newspaper Editors in 1923 as the 'canons of journalism', and in 1936 a Code of Conduct was adopted by the National Union of Journalists in Great Britain and Ireland.<sup>1</sup>

I should also note that just who might be considered a journalist up until this time was not nearly as well defined as it is today. Indeed, as Mark Hampton has noted, 'Journalism did not involve skills that could be taught but talents that one either possessed or did not'.<sup>2</sup> In this way, journalism was an open profession with few obstacles to the practice; and journalism education was looked upon with skepticism. In 1890, the National Union of Journalists defined a journalist as someone who 'must be professionally and habitually engaged as editor of a journal; or upon the staff of a journal in the capacity of leader-writer, writer of special articles, artist, special correspondent, literary manager, assistant editor, sub-editor, or reporter; or in supplying journals with articles, illustrations, correspondence, or reports...'<sup>3</sup>

Having majored in languages, and having received a mere one-month trial at *The Times* in 1929, Gareth Jones would seem to fall in the category of 'special correspondent' and beginning in 1930 supplied various journals with articles, based on his travels to the USSR, first in 1930, then again in 1931 when he escorted Jack Heinz II through the USSR while employed by public relations expert Ivy Lee, and then again in the early months of 1933 while still employed as the foreign affairs adviser to former prime minister David Lloyd George. It was only after he had returned from his third trip to the USSR at the end of March 1933 that Gareth became a full-time journalist with the *Western Mail*, a position he held for a little more than a year and a half before he decided to undertake his 'Round the World Fact Finding Tour', which eventually led to his death in Manchukuo at the hands of Chinese bandits on the last day of his 29<sup>th</sup> year.

As a special correspondent, however, Gareth Jones produced some of the most profoundly important journalism on the USSR's Five-Year Plan, which eventually led to one of the most catastrophic events of the twentieth century, the famine of 1932-33, an event that killed more than four and a half million people and left many others exiled and imprisoned. It was a moment in history that Jones witnessed himself, and it was for that reason I titled my book *Gareth Jones: Eyewitness to the Holodomor*.

Eyewitnessing has special significance in journalism mythology, for to have been there, to preserve for posterity something of the individual human experience within historical events and conditions gives journalists an authority that no training can impart. Barbie Zelizer has noted that eyewitnessing 'offers members of the journalistic community a way to reference what journalists do, should do and ought not do'.<sup>4</sup> In this way, it governs practice, setting boundaries around

which kinds of practice are appropriate and preferred. Equally important, eyewitness evidence is crucial to establish journalistic authority, for as British critic John Carey has observed, ‘eyewitness evidence makes for authenticity.... Eyewitness accounts have the feel of truth, because they are quick, subjective and incomplete’.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, Jones was criticized by Walter Duranty in the *New York Times* for this last point. Duranty wrote, ‘the writer thought Mr. Jones’s judgment was somewhat hasty and asked him on what it was based. It appeared that he had made a forty-mile walk through villages in the neighborhood of Kharkov and had found conditions sad. I suggested that that was a rather inadequate cross-section of a big country, but nothing could shake his conviction of impending doom’.<sup>6</sup>

On the surface, Duranty’s criticism might seem valid. But eyewitnessing cannot merely be measured by the distance covered; in fact, as Locke notes, what is key is the witness’ proximity to the event. Jones got as close as he could to the people: he slept on the floor of their huts, he talked directly to them, recording them in his reporter’s notebooks/diaries, and he shared with them the little food he had packed in his rug sack.

Most importantly, Jones gave voice to people who in all likelihood would not survive the famine. Only by keeping their experiences alive through the discursive act of writing his newspaper articles did Jones assure access to truth and authenticity. Herein lies the difference between fact and fiction. John Durham Peters notes, ‘In tragedy, the representation of pain (and pain is definitional for the genre) is not supposed to excite the spectator to humanitarian service but to clarify through representation what is possible in life. The drama offers terror without danger, pity without duty.... Factual distress calls for our aid, not our appreciation; our duty, not our pleasure’.<sup>7</sup> The boundary between fact and fiction is an ethical one; it demands respect, or bearing witness, to the pain of victims.

In the next section, I’d like to move the discussion from Gareth Jones as eyewitness to the moral responsibility that accompanies the eyewitness’s accounts. While courts of law favor the objective witness, offering only the facts, bearing witness requires more than a dispassionate reporting of what happened. Similarly, journalism’s desire for objectivity and impartiality reflects a paradigm in which the reporter’s subjectivity does not adulterate the public record of events as they ‘really happened’. However, when it comes to witnessing the distant suffering of others, Jones’s reporting reminds us that objectively rendering what happened, that attempting to present a fair and balanced report, that giving voice to all constituencies, that seeking authoritative sources is ultimately inadequate. Rather, I believe Jones’s reporting offers an exemplar of what Martin Bell, BBC correspondent before becoming a member of the British parliament, called the ‘journalism of attachment’, a journalism ‘that cares as well as knows; that is aware of its responsibilities; that will not stand neutrally between good and evil, right and wrong, the victim and the oppressor’.<sup>8</sup>

Part of journalism’s moral responsibility invariably involves trust. As Matthew Kieran notes, ‘Without trust the news media cannot fulfill their function of conveying significant events and

stories of human interest to the public'.<sup>9</sup> And the public rightly demands that journalists tell the truth. But must a journalist always tell the truth? Can a journalist ever break promises? Should a journalist use deception in order to bring to light matters of public importance, or the distant suffering of others? Is it enough that the end justifies the means, or should we also consider the motives and intentions under which the journalist's actions and reports were created? I'd like to consider the fact that Gareth Jones lied to the Soviet authorities and argue that he was justified in doing so.

Before Gareth Jones arrived in the USSR in early March 1933, the Soviets had imposed a ban on all travel outside of the cities in February, preventing Western journalists from traveling unescorted within the USSR. Despite this ban, Jones managed to secure permission to travel unescorted from Moscow to Kharkov, ostensibly to visit a tractor factory. In letters he sent friends and family, he gave no indication of exactly where he was going. On the 3rd of March (from Berlin): 'It is probable that I will go from Moscow to Kiev.' On the 5th of March (Moscow): 'I am not sure what my plans will be. I may go South.' Finally, on the 7th of March (Moscow): 'On Fri 10th I leave for Kharkov and return to Moscow on about 17th'. Having secured permission to travel unescorted from Konstantin Umansky, Head of Press and Information Department of the Soviet People's Commissariat of Foreign Affairs, Jones used the confidence entrusted to him and him alone in order to confirm what he had suspected since the previous fall when reports from people like Jules Menken of the London School of Economics and Bruce Hopper of Harvard University suggested that the harvest had been a failure and people were facing starvation. There is no question that the Soviet authorities would not have granted him this opportunity had they known he intended on getting off the train and walking forty miles through districts in which famine had ravaged the population. It was only by lying that he was able to avert detection and see firsthand what impact the famine was having on the peasants.

Another characteristic of the 'journalism of attachment' is the injunction to care. A care ethic gives priority to the problems, concerns and suffering of marginalized or oppressed people. As Linda Steiner noted, 'Indeed, the development and articulation of an ethic of care in journalism is less about radically changing journalists' behavior than revising journalism mythology in ways that give them permission and validation to do what they, as human beings, already may want to do and even try to do—to care about problems and to acknowledge that they care that their work has impact, produces care responses and actions, which is knowledge seeking grounded in and inspired by concrete, caring relationships'.<sup>10</sup>

This injunction to care can certainly be seen in the actions Gareth Jones took during his forty-mile tramp through famine-stricken villages. One incident occurred on the slow train to Kharkov involving a Communist who was denying the famine and the other deals with Jones providing food to one of the peasants that he encountered as he was walking. Both involve the use of food, which, within the context of a famine, needs to be scrutinized. The incident on the train appeared in articles written by two Pulitzer Prize winning journalists who were present at the press

conference Jones gave in Berlin on March 29<sup>th</sup>, as well as in his diary. Jones did not use the incident in his article dealing with this part of his journey.

H. R. Knickerbocker of the *New York Evening Post* quotes Jones directly:

‘In the train a Communist denied to me that there was a famine. I flung a crust of bread which I had been eating from my own supply into a spittoon. A peasant fellow-passenger fished it out and ravenously ate it. I threw an orange peel into the spittoon and the peasant again grabbed it and devoured it. The Communist subsided.’<sup>11</sup>

Edgar Ansel Mowrer of the *Chicago Daily News* quotes Jones directly but much more succinctly.

‘I saw a peasant fish out a crust of bread and an orange peel which I had thrown into a cuspidor in the train’.<sup>12</sup>

In the Knickerbocker version, the throwing of a crust of bread and an orange peel is not only grouped together but also done as a deliberate, calculated way of contesting the communist’s denial of famine conditions. In this scenario, the communist’s denial precipitates Jones’s response. In the Mowrer version, there is no cause and effect. The incident is presented as independent action to illustrate the severity of the famine. Because Jones was acting as the source of this information and not the author of the articles in which this incident appears, he obviously did not have control over how the information was used. In this case, each journalist used the information independently. By the time Jones gave the press conference, he would have had time to process and to synthesize the information; it’s certainly something he would have remembered quite clearly.

The throwing of a crust of bread appears in Diary 1, Part 3, immediately following a brief comment from a communist: ‘You must have a Cheka [secret police] in England. World revolution will come. Boy on train asking for bread. I dropped a small piece of bread on floor and put it in spittoon. Peasant came and picked it up and ate it.’ Jones certainly knew that by dropping the piece of bread and placing it in the spittoon, somebody would eat it. His intentions seem clearly to provoke a reaction in response to the communist’s claim.

Witnessing disasters requires journalists to move from merely witnessing death and dying to humanizing the suffering involved and encourage readers to recognize their shared humanity as well as differing contexts and cultures. That he would challenge the Communist's claim that there was no famine by throwing a crust of bread and an orange peel into a spittoon on the train clearly provides evidence of what Jones saw as his moral imperative to challenge oppression. It is one form of emotional commitment--the mode of denunciation, a perspective 'in which compassion is combined with indignation and anger and turned into an accusation of the perpetrator’<sup>13</sup>

The second incident involved giving a peasant some bread. Duty or de-ontological ethics is primarily related to the rights and duties of an agent. According to the Center for Journalism Ethics, ‘Rights and duties allow people to interact in responsible ways. Ethics is less about individuals seeking to maximize their goods and more about right relations among people. Therefore, concepts of justice and fairness figure prominently in duty theories.’<sup>14</sup> Is giving food to a source who talks about the lack of food a way of mining for source material? Did Jones compromise his relationship with this source by giving him food?

Immediately after receiving the food, the peasant tells him, ‘You couldn’t buy that anywhere for 20 roubles. There just is no food.’ Jones certainly did not provide food to everyone with whom he spoke or with those he stayed. In the newspaper article in which this event is used, Jones mentions that the bearded peasant brought him to his hut where there was only ‘a very dirty watery soup, with a slice or two of potato, which all the family—and in the family I included myself—ate from a common bowl with wooden spoons.’ Eating from the same bowl as a starving family certainly builds compassion, but there are those who would suggest that he should not have placed himself in that situation and that he should not be taking food from a family on the brink of starvation. Jones also explains that the family ‘had not enough potatoes to last until the next crop.’ Even though Jones shares his bread with this family, it is clear that they would not have enough to eat in the coming weeks and months. Determining an ethical boundary in this situation is difficult.

It’s important to remember that the villagers invited Jones into their homes, freely spoke with him, and shared whatever they had with him. The distinction that needs to be made is between agency—when Jones precipitates an action—and responsibility—which in this case means putting himself in the midst of a famine and reporting on it. Jones cannot be held accountable for the starvation conditions that the people he engaged were experiencing. Nor was he responsible for alleviating their suffering; Jones was not there to provide aid or assistance. The important question revolves around the use of food: To what ends did Jones share his food with the peasants—as an act of kindness or to elicit information? And it is not always clear how Jones negotiated that boundary in the newspaper articles. He notes, ‘When I shared my white bread and butter and cheese one of the peasant women said, ‘Now I have eaten such wonderful things I can die happy.’” Perhaps it is a distinction without a difference, but the fact that Jones does not try to hide the context of his having shared the food with this woman distinguishes this incident from throwing down the crust of bread to spite the communist. The former is an act of kindness and compassion; the latter an act of defiance.

Lastly, I’d like to take up a dimension that Simon Cottle from the University of Cardiff discusses in his article titled ‘Witnessing Disaster: From the Calculus of Death to the Injunction to Care’. Dr. Cottle notes that the ontology of witnessing comes with at least three senses of privilege. First, the privilege of ‘being there’, witnessing and yet not enduring the terrible fate that has befallen others; second, the social privilege of occupying a high-status, well-paid position in the comfortable ‘first world’ that becomes all the more ‘felt’ when reporting on those who, often in

the ‘third world’ and experiencing disaster, have little or nothing left to lose; and third, the privilege of bearing witness as ‘sacred duty’, the felt obligation to those whose plight and suffering has been observed and that now silently commands that this must be communicated to others, because the dead and dispossessed are not in a position to tell the world for themselves.’<sup>15</sup>

It is worth noting that Gareth Jones financed this third trip to the USSR by himself. And though he was part of the comfortable first world, he risked arrest, deportation or worse when he detained and began walking through the villages. Rather than accessing authoritative sources, as Duranty claimed to do, Jones crafted his news stories with the ‘deliberate use of visceral images and embodied in the evocation of bodily sense of sight, sound, smell, taste and touch’.<sup>16</sup> This invocation of the senses rather than gratuitous or base sensationalism formed the core of his famine reporting, which was anything but impartial and detached journalism.

The privileged role and articulated sense of responsibility comes with a price, however. According to the journalists’ own accounts, it can produce ambivalent ideas about professionalism and personal responsibility. Unfortunately, Jones never had the chance to reflect on his coverage. While many others from this time period produced memoirs, including Duranty, Lyons, Chamberlin and Muggeridge, Jones did not offer very much in the way of self-reflexivity. So one can rightly ask, What price did Gareth Jones pay for his famine reporting?

On the surface, we know that he was publicly denigrated by Duranty, cut loose by Lloyd George, denied access to audiences by *The Times* and the *Economist*—both of which reneged on agreements to publish articles—and airbrushed from journalism history, thanks in part to colleagues like Muggeridge, who created a duplicitous portrait of Jones in the character of Pye in his novel, *Winter in Moscow*. Was it these undercurrents that drove him to his ‘World Fact-Finding Tour’ that ultimately brought him to Manchukuo and the sphere of Dr. Mueller and Adam Purpiss—both of whom had connections with the NKVD [Soviet secret police]? Why was reporting on Wales and Ireland and even Germany not sufficient to sustain him in 1933-34? If he had lived into his thirties and beyond, perhaps we would have a greater understanding of his motivations and what he thought about reporting on this catastrophic famine.

Ultimately, the legacy of Jones must be judged on his reporting, which was shaped by an understanding the political and economic realities that ultimately precipitated the famine of 1932-33. Jones had a thorough understanding of and knowledge about the Russian people, thanks to his study of the Russian language and culture, what he learned from his mother’s experiences in Russia, and his first two trips to the USSR in 1930 and 1931. Jones’s reporting of the famine anticipates today’s ‘journalism of attachment’, the ontology of witnessing a disaster and bearing witness to it through a series of newspaper articles that satisfy the injunction to care for people who had no way to communicate what was happening to them, whose voices were being muffled by the official Soviet denials that were subsequently echoed by journalists like Duranty, and whose only recourse was through personal correspondence.

Gareth Jones's reporting of the famine was indeed ethical and courageous, for he not only challenged the might of Stalinist repression, disregarded personal safety and sacrificed personal and professional advancement, but he also endured public denigration at the hands of Walter Duranty and *The New York Times*. That denigration persists to this day.

Calls in the early 1990s to rescind Duranty's Pulitzer Prize were not accepted by the Pulitzer Prize Board, who revisited the issue again in 2003. In July of that year the board notified the *New York Times* that it was reconsidering the request, but ultimately decided that no action was warranted. In its statement the board argued that there was no evidence of 'deliberate deception' by Duranty.

Revoking a prize 71 years after it was awarded under different circumstances, when all principals are dead and unable to respond, would be a momentous step and therefore would have to rise to that threshold.... A Pulitzer Prize for reporting is awarded not for the author's body of work or for the author's character, but for the specific pieces entered in the competition...<sup>17</sup>

Arthur Sulzberger Jr., publisher of the *New York Times*, commended the board's decision, noting the 'many defects'<sup>18</sup> in Duranty's journalism without acknowledging the newspaper's culpability in publishing Duranty's work, as well as in its editorial decisions in terms of assigning headlines and giving prominence to his famine-denying stories. Additionally, *New York Times* editorials clearly followed the same pattern of denials found in Duranty's articles. Even though the newspaper may 'regret his [Duranty's] lapses'<sup>19</sup> until it fully acknowledges its own part in disseminating famine denial stories, that newspaper remains every bit as culpable for misrepresenting the *Holodomor* as Duranty.

Rather than commending the Pulitzer Prize board's decision not to rescind Duranty's prize, the *New York Times* should voluntarily return it, for the newspaper knew that Duranty's reporting reflected Soviet policy. Evidence shows that they were complicit in duping the public. In a memorandum dated June 4, 1931, A. W. Kliefoth, a member of the US Berlin Embassy, summarized a meeting he had with Duranty. The final sentence of the memorandum Kliefoth writes: 'In conclusion, Duranty pointed out that "in agreement with NEW YORK TIMES and the Soviet authorities," his dispatches always reflect the official position of the Soviet regime and not his own'.<sup>20</sup> The series that Duranty wrote about the Five-Year Plan for which he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize ran from June 14-27, 1931, only ten days after this meeting. Significantly, Kliefoth was careful to quote Duranty directly regarding the crucial point about this agreement between the *New York Times* and Soviet authorities. Given this agreement and having abrogated the trust placed in it by the public, the only ethical course for the *New York Times* to follow is to return the 1932 Pulitzer Prize awarded to Walter Duranty.

It is my hope that the British Parliament will one day heed the calls of Pauline Latham, MP from Derbyshire, and recognize the *Holodomor* as a genocide; it is my hope that Gareth Jones is

recognized throughout Wales as a national hero, for his death serves as a reminder of journalists' moral responsibility to cover distant suffering with an injunction to care; and finally, it is my hope that we never forget our moral duty to make sure that the victims of the *Holodomor* are never forgotten.

Thank you.

Notes

1. Accessed from <http://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp> ; <http://media.gn.apc.org/nujcode.html> on 28 May 2013.
2. Quoted in Mark Hampton, 'Defining Journalists in Late-Nineteenth Century Britain', *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, Vol. 22 (2), June 2005, p. 140.
3. Ibid.
4. B. Zelizer, 'On Having Been There: Eyewitnessing as a Journalistic Key Word', *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 24 (5), pp. 408-28.
5. Quoted in B. Zelizer, 'On Having Been There: Eyewitnessing as a Journalistic Key Word', *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 24 (5), pp. 408-28.
6. Walter Duranty, 'Russians Hungry, But Not Starving', *New York Times*, 31 March 1933, p. 13.
7. John Dunham Peters, 'Witnessing', in *Media Witnessing: Testimony in the Age of Mass Communication*. Eds. Paul Frosh and Amit Pinchevski. Houndmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. p. 39.
8. Quoted in Birgitta Hoijer, 'The Discourse of Global Compassion: The Audience and Media Reporting of Human Suffering', *Media, Culture & Society*, Vol. 26(4) p. 516.
9. Matthew Kieran, *Media Ethics: A Philosophical Approach* (London: Praeger, 1997), p. 65.
10. Linda Steiner and Chad Okrusch, 'Care as a Virtue for Journalists', *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, Vol 21(2&3), p. 115.
11. H. R. Knickerbocker, 'Famine Grips Russia, Millions Dying. Idle on Rise, Says Briton', *New York Evening Post*, 29 March 1933, p. 1.
12. Edgar Ansel Mowrer, 'Russian Famine Now as Great as Starvation of 1921, Says Secretary to Lloyd George', *Chicago Daily News*, 29 March 1933, p. 2.
13. Birgitta Hoijer, 'The Discourse of Global Compassion: The Audience and Media Reporting of Human Suffering', *Media, Culture & Society*, Vol. 26(4) p. 522. See also L. Boltanski,



*Distant Suffering: Morality, Media and Politics*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

14. Stephen J. A. Ward, "Ethics in a Nutshell," Center for Journalism Ethics. Accessed on August 18, 2012, from <http://ethics.journalism.wisc.edu/resources/ethics-in-a-nutshell/>

15. Simon Cottle, 'Journalists Witnessing Disaster: From the Calculus of Death to the Injunction to Care', *Journalism Studies*, Vol. 14(2), 2013, p. 242.

16. Ibid., p. 239.

17. David D. Kirkpatrick, 'Pulitzer Board Won't Void '32 Award to Times Writer', *New York Times*, 22 November 2003, A13.

18. Ibid.

19. Ibid. On several occasions in late 2003, Dr. Colley and Mr. Colley sent letters to the public editor of the *New York Times* seeking a public apology. Those queries were ignored.

20. A. W. Kliehoth, "Memorandum," US Embassy in Berlin. Accessed on May 22, 2013 from <http://www.garethjones.org/Embassy-1.pdf>