

## **Q and A with Jessica Kilburn, former Westfield pupil and author of Thomas Hennell: The Land and the Mind**

### **What inspired you to write this book? Why did you choose Thomas Hennell?**

When I was in my mid-twenties, I worked at an art gallery in London which specialised in selling English drawings and watercolours dating from the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the present day. One day, I saw my fellow gallery assistant looking through a box marked 'H'. She lifted out a watercolour by Thomas Hennell as she searched for another picture by a different artist. I had never heard of Thomas Hennell at that time, and there was something about his watercolour (a scene called 'Harvesting Crops', probably painted in the late 1930s) which stopped me in my tracks, and made me wonder what he was like as a person. Hennell had a distinctive and original style of painting, and his pictures are beautifully coloured. As a friend of Hennell's said, 'his works are light, luminous and lovely.' They are remarkably fresh and full of life, even though made over 75 years ago.

I discovered that a biography of Hennell was published in 1989. The author of that book, Michael MacLeod, who is now in his nineties, and has become a good friend, encouraged me to write a book of my own on Hennell. When Michael's book was published by Cambridge University Press over 30 years ago, books rarely included colour reproductions – it was too expensive. So my initial motivation was to produce a book about Hennell which included colour photographs of his pictures for the first time. But the book became bigger than I originally envisaged, because although Hennell was only 42 when he died (he was killed while working as an official war artist in the Second World War) his life was remarkably full and his output astonishing. He was also a great letter writer, and there are many letters by Hennell in museum archives (for instance, in the Tate Archive in London) which bring him vividly to life, and have never been published before now.

I was inspired to write this book about Thomas Hennell because he is an artist (and writer) who deserves to be more widely appreciated. He was greatly admired in his lifetime by his fellow artists. Two of his most famous contemporaries were the artists Edward Bawden and Eric Ravilious, who like Hennell were born in 1903. They regarded him 'as a man of genius'. His pictures give an insight into an era: Hennell loved the countryside deeply, and his drawings and watercolours record a vanishing way of life, as farming methods and country crafts which had been practised for centuries were passing out of use because of mechanisation and social change. Hennell's life as an artist was interrupted by a severe breakdown in his late twenties, when he was diagnosed with schizophrenia and hospitalised for three years. He made a remarkable recovery (his parents were told that he was going to die), ultimately thriving as an official war artist when he worked in France and Holland with the Royal Navy, and in the Far East with the RAF. So while Hennell's death in Java in 1945 was a tragedy, there is much that is life-affirming about his story and his art.

### **When did you begin writing in a serious way, and what motivated you?**

When I was at Westfield, English was one of my favourite subjects, and when I did my GCSEs and A Levels there, my English teacher was the inspirational Mr Matthews, an American who had previously taught at a school in Washington DC. He was passionate about the subject, in the way that Robin Williams' character of (English teacher) Mr Keating is in the film *Dead Poets Society*. GCSE English was 100% coursework then, and I think that was when I began to write in a serious way – the course was demanding but I enjoyed it, and I realised then that I wanted writing to be a part of my life.

I am not sure what motivated me! I felt comfortable when writing, whereas with several other subjects I knew I was out of my depth. I enjoyed reading from an early age, and a love of reading led to a love of writing. In the case of Thomas Hennell, I was motivated by wanting to tell his story. The journalist Cathy Newman recently interviewed the writer Michael Morpurgo on Channel 4 News. She asked him how we honour the generation of Captain Sir Tom Moore, who lived through the Second World War and are now slipping away from us. Michael Morpurgo answered by saying that we honour them by telling their stories. Thomas Hennell was one of three official war artists to be killed while serving in the Second World War in that capacity, and his story – not for that fact alone but because of the person he was and all he achieved – deserves to be told.

### **How long did it take you to complete the research for the book?**

I began to research the book in December 2013, and finished writing it in the summer of 2020, so the research and writing took about six and a half years.

There are over 280 pictures in the book, and many of these have not been exhibited or photographed before. I enjoyed the detective work of tracking them down, and meeting their owners, several of whom have become good friends.

### **What would you say to anyone that might be interested in writing a book?**

I would encourage them to buy a copy of *The Writers' and Artists' Yearbook* for that particular year. As well as containing lots of practical advice and contact details for publishers and agents, each annual edition includes chapters by successful authors such as J.K. Rowling, Oliver Jeffers and Jacqueline Wilson, describing their own routes to publication in an honest and inspiring way. Even if you have not started to write a book, but are thinking about it, *The Writers' and Artists' Yearbook* is still a great place to start: it makes writing a book and getting it published seem an achievable thing.

### **As you know, Westfield school provides much emphasis on creative arts, what advice would you give to anyone who wants to pursue a career in arts?**

I think most people know that it can be difficult to make a living working in the arts, but if you really want to do something then it is important to try. As the actor Ethan Hawke said recently, 'art's not a luxury – it's actually sustenance. We need it.' When the poet Ted Hughes knew that his daughter wished to be a poet and a painter, he advised her to have another string to her bow, one which would bring in a regular income, such as being an estate agent – I think this is very sound advice, although I have rarely been sensible enough to follow it!

### **Jessica Kilburn Biog**

**Place of Birth:** Newcastle upon Tyne

**Education:** I became a pupil at Westfield in 1985, when I was 11, and completed my education there, leaving in 1992 after taking A Levels in English, Art and History. I then read English at Merton College, Oxford (BA Hons), and after this went to Glasgow University where I took a one year postgraduate degree in History of Art (MPhil).

### **Brief summary of book**

The book is an illustrated biography of Thomas Hennell (1903–1945) who was one of the three British official war artists to be killed in the Second World War. Hennell had a deep love and knowledge of the countryside, and he cycled great distances in England, Wales and Ireland, in search of scenes to paint. He recorded a vanishing rural society, when farming methods which had been used for centuries were dying out or becoming scarce due to mechanisation and social change. Hennell was also interested in the way of life of the craftsman, and his drawings and paintings show wheelwrights, blacksmiths, thatchers, ladder-makers, lace-makers, scythers and hedgers: these traditional country crafts were in decline and Hennell wished to document them while he could. The book also describes Hennell's experience of mental illness, which led him to be hospitalised for three years in the 1930s, and his triumphant recovery from it which culminated in his appointment as an official war artist and the admiration of the leading artists of his day.

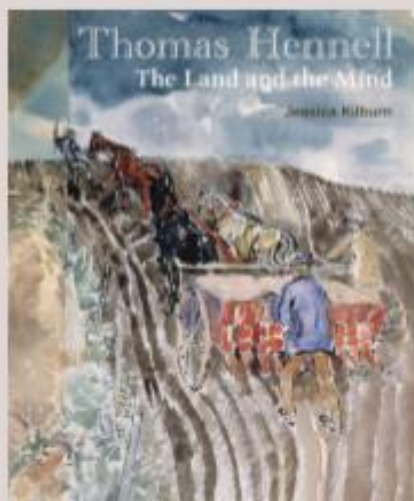
*Jessica's book 'Thomas Hennell, the land and the mind' was officially launched on the 4<sup>th</sup> March 2021*



# Thomas Hennell

## The Land and the Mind

Major reappraisal of the life and work of watercolourist and war artist Thomas Hennell



*Thomas Hennell: The Land and the Mind* by Jessica Kilburn will be published in hardback on 4 March 2021, RRP £60.

Signed copies at 10% discount plus only £1.50 postage & packing can be preordered from our independent bookshop partner Hewson Books.

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Thomas Hennell (1903–1945) was regarded by his peers, among them Edward Bawden, Eric Ravilious and Graham Sutherland, as one of their finest creative talents.

Hennell's first love was the English countryside, through which he developed an appreciation of England's traditions and crafts. His art, imbued with poetic intensity, provides an insight into an era on the brink of change.

He was a gifted – and brave – writer as well as a painter. In the early 1930s he suffered a severe breakdown and later described the three years he spent in mental hospitals in his memoir *The Witnesses* (1938), an astonishing document in a period when severe stigma attached to mental illness.

In 1943 he was appointed an official war artist. After the pastoral evocations of inter-war England his portrayal of war's brutality is shocking. In October 1945 he disappeared in the Far East, in tragic circumstances on which Jessica Kilburn casts new light.

*Thomas Hennell: The Land and the Mind* is richly illustrated, reproducing many of Hennell's paintings in colour for the first time, while Jessica Kilburn's sensitive and deeply researched new biography brings Hennell the man vividly to life.

JESSICA KILBURN is a writer and researcher from Northumberland. This is her first book.



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