

Durban Years

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JENNINGS, Hubert D. (1966). *The D.H.S. Story 1866-1966. A Great Book About a Great School.* Durban, Natal: The Durban High School and Old Boys' Memorial Trust, 323 pp.

With the empathy of one who knows an institution from within¹, Hubert Dudley Jennings writes the story of the Durban High School (DHS), spanning a full century, from when it opened its doors (June 1, 1866) to the publication of the book here reviewed (1966). In twenty-five chapters (and a preface, a prologue, appendixes, and indexes), Jennings traces not only the “inner” story of the educational institution (professor and student anecdotes), but also the “outer” story: the historical context and its influence on the decisions made by the colonial authorities and the trustees of the school, the international academic and sporting achievements, and the services the “old boys” gave in both World Wars. To articulate his account reliably, Jennings interviewed old boys and headmasters, and worked with the documentation available in the school’s archives.

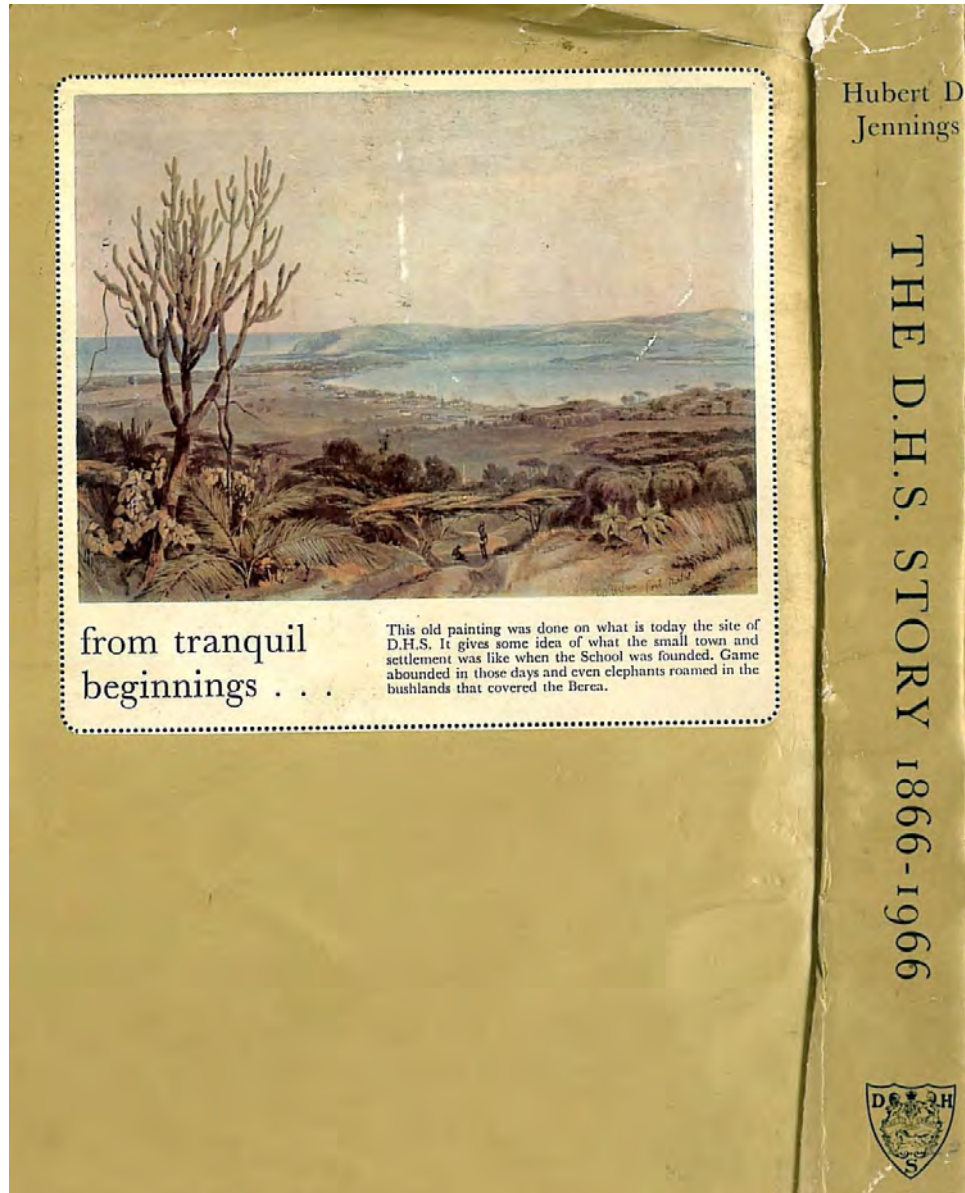
When the chapters refer to a single person rather than a group, the characters developed are normally the administrators of the school: the headmasters (R. Russell, W. H. Nicholas, A. S. Langley, Bill Payn). Few chapters refer to the students of the school: one of them is dedicated to Ernest G. Jansen, who came to be the Governor-General of South Africa from 1950 to 1959 (chapter 13: “Governor-General”); another, to Roy Campbell (chapter 17: “Don Roy Quixote Campbell”); and two more (chapter 14: “That Long Patience which is Genius...” and chapter 15: “*Judica Me Deus*”) to Fernando Pessoa, who attended the DHS, with an interruption in 1902 when he travelled to Portugal on a visit; at his return he matriculated for a short time in the Commercial School of West Street in Durban (p. 100, note 2).

This emphasis on Pessoa seems strange if we are to consider that Pessoa was not part of any sports teams and that his identification with the “British way of life” was rather problematic. His classmates did not remember him (for example, the elder brothers of Roy Campbell, who studied with Pessoa, as Roy himself notes); or barely remembered him (like Dr. Norman Mann; p. 100); or they remembered the person well, but forgot his circumstances (as Clifford Geerdts). Clifford Geerdts used to sit beside Pessoa and was his greatest academic rival. In 1904, Geerdts won the award of the Cape Intermediate Examination. As a consequence, he went to Oxford and studied there. Fifty years later, when Geerdts

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¹ H. D. Jennings was an assistant to the headmaster of the DHS from 1923 to 1935.

was informed by Jennings that Fernando Pessoa had been “second” in that examination², Geerdts was surprised: he had always believed that Pessoa did not sit for the examination, because, in his opinion, if he had, he would have obtained a higher grade (p. 103). In short, Pessoa appears in the collective imaginary of the DHS as a shadow, although a genius in the shadows.



[The D.H.S. Story – dust jacket back cover & spine]

² Actually, Pessoa obtained a higher grade than Geerdts, as Jennings discovered during the research for his second book (*Os Dois Exílios de Fernando Pessoa*, 1984). The reason Pessoa did not obtain the award was prosaic and bureaucratic, as Zenith observes: “uma das condições para a obtenção da bolsa era que o candidato tivesse frequentado uma escola do Natal nos quatro anos anteriores. Pessoa, devido à viagem da família a Portugal em 1901-1902, ausentara-se durante um ano” (*one of the conditions to obtain the grant was that the candidate had to have frequented a school in Natal during the four prior years. Pessoa, because of the family trip to Portugal in 1901-1902, left the school for a year*) (*Escritos Autobiográficos, Automáticos e de Reflexão Pessoal*. Lisbon: Assírio & Alvim, 2003: 440).



D.H.S.— The frontage of the School familiar to many thousands



THE D.H.S. STORY *1866-1966*

A GREAT BOOK ABOUT A GREAT SCHOOL

[The D.H.S. Story – dust jacket front cover]

In chapter 14, Jennings refers extensively to the essay on Macaulay for which Pessoa won the Queen Victoria Memorial Prize in 1903. At the insistence of Maria da Encarnação Monteiro, in 1954, M. J. Armstrong (who was then the headmaster of the DHS) found Pessoa's essay in the 1904 issue of the school's magazine, of which Pessoa was an editor (Armstrong also found a page in the 1952 issue of the school magazine, written by Bill Payn, which contained information and opinions about Pessoa taken from a letter of Roy Campbell; p. 103).

Jennings admires Pessoa both for mastering the English language and for his profound and analytical mind. He also notes Pessoa's humor and a free, fresh, and unprejudiced attitude towards the established opinions, which was rare in young men aged fifteen—and really foreseeing of Pessoa's style and mature vital attitude.

Macaulay, who, according to Jennings, was treated with reverence during the Victorian period, is judged by Pessoa with the even-handedness—but also the strength—of an experienced critic, as the subtleties present in the introduction of the Pessoaan essay prove:

In this essay (on Milton) we see already Macaulay's virtues and faults. We note his initial grasp of the subject and his subsequent lack of depth and breath, and even of a certain constraint. And yet the insight of it and the discrimination is everywhere evident, as indeed are the studied abruptness of the style and the occasional felicity of the paragraph.

(pp. 101-102)

The irony of the following judgment shows an achieved writer, with expressive resources that go far beyond the bare use of correct English:

We have yet to refer to Macaulay's ballads. Of these Mrs. Browning wrote to Richard Hengist Horne that he was very right in admiring Macaulay and that one could not read him and keep lying down. Many critics seem to think that not only is it possible to read him lying down but also to go to sleep doing so.

(p.102)

Regarding the judgment above, Jennings states: "A daring touch this for a boy in those days!" (p. 102). In my opinion, it is this free-mindedness united with an exquisite sensibility towards the prosodic and musical aspects of language that is astonishing about the young Pessoa:

It was the same lack of the perception of harmony that lead Macaulay to break up his style into short sentences, which he thought would be more impressive. So at first they were. But as we read more and more, and we get nearer and nearer to the heart of him, the abruptness and snap of his sentences become painfully apparent. Their rattle may be compared, and this, I hope not inaptly, to the discharge of musketry, which, when we are distant, does not seem to us very harsh or unpleasing, but on our approaching nearer and nearer to the scene of the action the rattle of the volleys becomes more and more unpleasant and abrupt, while having arrived at the very spot of engagement we find it difficult to

believe that this once could sound otherwise than rough, though somewhat irregular, and startling.

(p. 102)

This final image is an extra which we may thank, because it completes the idea with elegance and implies the martial, thick, rough and even provincial regularity of Macaulay's rhythm.

Continuing the chapter, Jennings informs us about the originality of the Portuguese poet, while addressing the South African readers of 1966, most of whom, surely, were old boys of the DHS, unaware of Fernando Pessoa and his invention of "heteronyms" (the most well-known: Alberto Caeiro, Ricardo Reis, Álvaro de Campos), even though Jennings does not use that term. We are also informed about the strange prestige of someone who revealed, through the few works he published during his lifetime (the "Ode Marítima" – "Naval Ode" – is described by Roy Campbell as: "the loudest poem ever written"), a somewhat bohemian and aristocratic lack of interest in receiving the recognition of others. Jennings ends the chapter with Campbell's translation of a poem by Pessoa, "A morte chega cedo" ("Death comes early"):

Death comes before its time,
Life is so brief a stay.
Each moment is the mime
Of what is lost for aye.

Life scarcely had begun,
Nor the idea diminished,
When he whose task was done
Knew not what he had finished.

This, doubting Death presumes
To cancel and to cut
Out of the book of dooms,
Which God forgot to shut.

A morte chega cedo,
Pois breve é toda vida
O instante é o arremedo
De uma coisa perdida.

O amor foi começado,
O ideal não acabou,
E quem tenha alcançado
Não sabe o que alcançou.

E a tudo isto a morte
Risca por não estar certo
No caderno da sorte
Que Deus deixou aberto

[PESSOA, *Poesias*. Lisboa: Ática, 1942, p. 177; detail]

Chapter 15 is a fantasy, the only one Jennings allows himself in an otherwise historical text. In it, W. H. Nicholas, "Old Nick," after some speeches and greetings in a ceremony, remembered times gone:

When was it?...when that young Portuguese was there...what was his name? Fernando something...Fernando Pessoa...

(p. 113)

Euripides's *Alcestis* was being read. Suddenly, the magnificent final chorus overtook Nicholas's imagination, taking him to unexpected places. When his thoughts returned to the class, he noticed only one or two of his students were paying attention. All the rest were uneasy, expecting the school bell to ring. Old Nick gave them an assignment:

"Now take out your books", he said abruptly, "And write what you can of it in English."
(p. 113)

Mann and Geerds obediently set to work, scribbling away. Others stared at the roof and chewed at their pencils. Only Pessoa remained quiet, looking out the window as if he had not heard the order. "Pessoa!" Nicholas called him. Only then did he pull out his notebook and start scrawling hurriedly, without looking at what he wrote. The bell rang. The students started to leave the classroom (Pessoa among them). "Pessoa!" Nicholas called anew, "Let me see what you have written." Pessoa handed him his notebook, which contained the following text:

Dawn chasm hard by
Yawns fathomless deep,
What availeth to cry
To the gods, or to heap
Their altars with costly oblations,
Or to plead against the slaughter of sheep?

I have mused on the words of the wise
Of the mighty in song;
I have lifted mine heart to the skies;
But naught more strong
Than fate I have found, there is naught
In the tablets of Thrace,
Neither drugs whereof Orpheus taught
Nor in all, that Apollo brought
To Asclepius' race
When the herbs of healing he severed
And out of anguish delivered
The pain distraught.

Nicholas recognized the text: it was Way's translation. Nevertheless, there was something wrong with it. Nicholas called Pessoa's attention to it:

"Very interesting," he rasped scathingly, "But your memory has failed you in one respect. It should be 'to plead *with* the slaughter of sheep' not '*against* the slaughter of sheep'."
(p. 115)

Pessoa assented without objection. Nicholas then perceived an intention he had not noticed right away:

Old Nick lowered his eyes again, feeling curiously abashed. The change, he saw now, was deliberate. We were the sheep. Confound the boy! He was mocking him. No, not him, Euripides. There was indeed something spurious in Euripides high-flown harangues, not like Aeschylus, or Sophocles at his best. No wonder Aristophanes would always laugh at him. But how could he, this boy of sixteen know that. We were the sheep, eh? "As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods!"

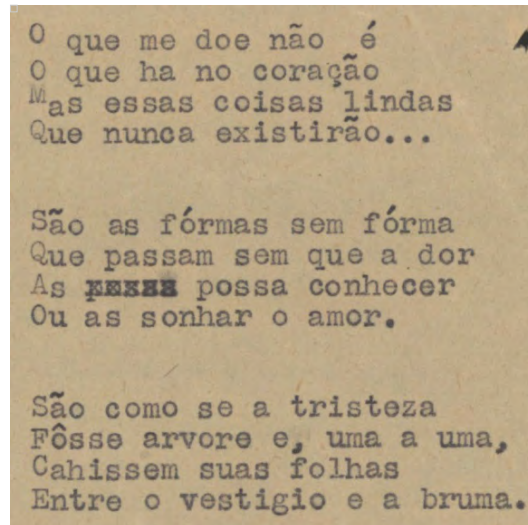
(p. 115)

He flipped the page of Pessoa's notebook and found the following poem (p. 115):

The thing that hurts and wrings
Was never in my heart.
It is one of those fair things
In life that have no part.

Shapes without shapes—each shade
Seems silently to fit
Ere known by grief, and fade
Ere love can dream of it.

They are as if our grief
Were a dark tree from whom
They flutter leaf by leaf
Into mist and gloom³.

[PESSOA, BNP/E3, 118-16^r; detail]

Nicholas was deeply moved by the beauty of the lines and the pertinence of the commentary on Euripides:

"And where", he said, quite gently, "does this come from?"

"Oh, from the Portuguese", the boy answered, "A friend of mine wrote it."

Old Nick handed the book back.

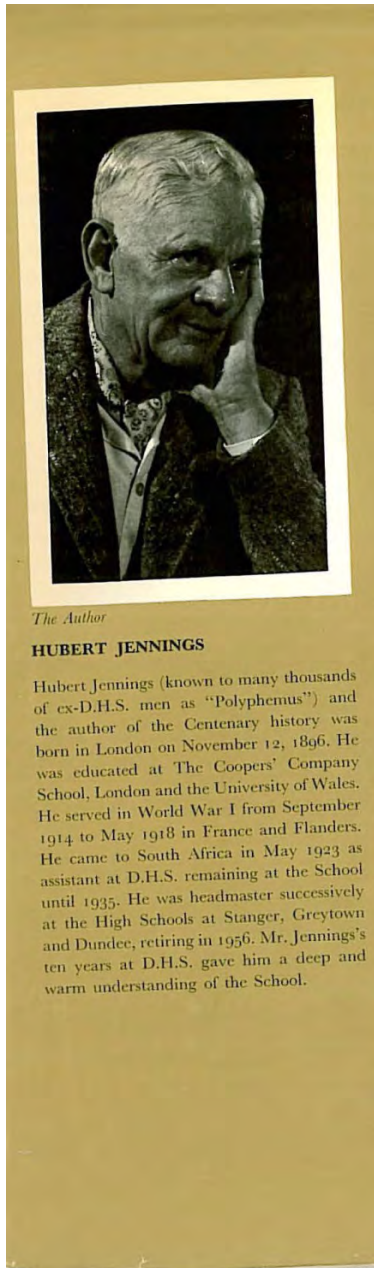
"Tell your friend", he said drily, "that he has a great poetic gift. Far better than Arthur Way's. But not better than Euripides, although you may not believe it now."

(p. 115)

We do not know how consciously Jennings was thinking of Pessoa's heteronyms, but, in that final dialog, the reference to the "friend" may serve for all of them.

³ The poem cited above is Way's translation of Euripides's *Alcestis*, modified. This poem is Pessoa's "O que me dói não é" (PESSOA. *Poesias*. Lisboa: Ática, 1942, p. 168), in Roy Campbell's translation (p. 116 of Jennings's book; see footnote).

Finally, it is notable how often, throughout the book, the names of Fernando Pessoa and Roy Campbell coincide. The Iberian destiny of the two best poets that tired out the DHS classrooms should not be ignored. Campbell lived in Spain and translated, among other texts, San Juan de la Cruz's *Cántico Espiritual* (*Spiritual Canticle*); Campbell's commentary is used by George Steiner in *After Babel* (Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press, 1992, p. 327) to illustrate the stage of translation in which the translator surrenders to the original, with the intent of fusion.



[The *D.H.S. Story*—dust jacket front flap & coat of arms of p. 3]