

# We'll Put Our Muzzles to the Lake: the passionate inner life of Hubert Jennings

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## Keywords

Hubert Jennings, Jennings family history, World War I, Benoni, South African Poetry, Durban High School, Fernando Pessoa in Durban, Os Dois Exílios.

## Abstract

This introduction to the life of Hubert Dudley Jennings (1896-1991), one of the first biographers of Fernando Pessoa, includes his early years in England, his experiences in World War I, and his teaching at Durban High School, the same school where Pessoa had studied while in South Africa. This sketch relies in part on *A Cracked Record*, a memoir consisting of four notebooks penned when Jennings was in his nineties—697 handwritten pages, revealing a writerly and romantic imagination. A fragmentary fifth instalment of this memoir—a 21-page typescript—is discussed elsewhere in this issue of *Pessoa Plural*.

## Palavras-chave

Hubert Jennings, história da família Jennings, Primeira Guerra Mundial, Benoni, Poesia Sul-Africana, Durban High School, Fernando Pessoa em Durban, Os Dois Exílios.

## Resumo

Esta introdução à vida de Hubert Dudley Jennings (1896-1991), um dos primeiros biógrafos de Fernando Pessoa, inclui sua infância na Inglaterra, suas experiências na Primeira Guerra Mundial e seu magistério na Durban High School, a mesma escola onde Pessoa tinha estudado quando na África do Sul. Este esboço baseia-se em parte em *A Cracked Record*, um memorial escrito em quatro cadernos por Jennings aos seus noventa anos—697 páginas manuscritas, revelando uma imaginação romântica e literária. Um quinto volume fragmentário dessas memórias—um datiloscrito de 21 páginas—é apresentado alhures neste número da *Pessoa Plural*.

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\* Matthew Hart is a veteran writer and journalist, and the author of eight books, including *Diamond: the History of a Cold-blooded Love Affair*, which won a Barnes & Noble “Discover” award, was translated into eight languages, and described the work of Hubert’s son, Christopher Jennings, as a diamond explorer. Dr. Jennings and his wife Jeanne, née Nel, later commissioned Hart to write a history of the Jennings-Nel family, to be published privately in 2016, and also to help organize and dispose of the literary archive that became the “Jennings gift,” donated to the John Hay Library at Brown University in October, 2015.

*In a thousand thousand years  
 We'll creep back, the gemsbok and I,  
 And stamp our feet o'er the rifled earth,  
 Where miles of red-brick ruins lie;  
 And go down to the lake by the white silt  
 Where a rusting crane like a starved bird  
 Creaks wearily in the moonlight, and there  
 We'll put our muzzles to the lake,  
 And taste its waters, bitter still with tears.*

(Hubert Jennings, "Benoni"<sup>1</sup>)

In these lines the poet expresses a classic theme—the solitariness and pain of life. He was at heart a solitary man himself, with an intensely romantic inner life steeped in the rhythms of literary speech. He must have kept an inner door shut against intrusion, because he displayed to the world instead that bluff authority that it takes to keep a classroom in order.

Hubert Jennings spent his formal working years in that teeming world, yet his colleagues understood so little of him that his obituary in the journal of the Natal Teachers' Society, a group he once headed, failed to mention the most singular achievement of his life: a body of scholarship on one of the most enigmatic literary figures of the twentieth century. *Fernando Pessoa in Durban* was written when Hubert was almost eighty. The Portuguese version, *Os Dois Exílios*, was published when he was eighty-eight!

When I first set out to write about Hubert Jennings, these facts seemed only charming and bizarre, evidence of an accidental passion ignited in retirement and indulged by a man with a restless mind, a good pension, and plenty of spare time. I had no inkling of either the extent of the Pessoa world, or of Hubert's place in it. For it wasn't Hubert's world that I was chronicling, but his son's, an intellectual terrain as arcane as Hubert's own. And although father and son were in many ways dissimilar, they shared a quality of implacability, or single-mindedness, that drove each of them in the pursuit of an elusive quarry: for the one, a great poet, and for the other, the secrets of the Earth. But I had better start at the beginning.

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In 1991 explorers discovered diamonds in the Canadian Arctic. The discovery sparked the greatest staking rush in history. A territory the size of western Europe was staked into mineral claims, and the ensuing mines made Canada the third largest diamond producer in the world. A crucial mover of these events—indeed, the prime mover—was Hubert's son, Chris Jennings.

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<sup>1</sup> *South African Poetry: a New Anthology*, London: Collins, 1948. p 133. See annex.

In my book about the hunt for Arctic diamonds<sup>2</sup>, I detailed the decades-long process of reflection and discovery, of suspicion and experiment, of rising optimism and dashed hopes that began in the Kalahari Desert and ended in a breathless, almost desperate campaign of exploration across the vast reaches of Canada's Northwest Territories.

All this made for an engrossing tale (if I say so myself!). But a reporter wants to know what made his character who he is, and this brought me to Hubert. Hubert was the wellspring of his son's love of the outdoors. When they lived at Greytown, in the Natal Midlands, and later at Dundee, father and son would trek up into the foothills of the Drakensberg to fish for trout in the mountain streams. Everything around them caught the attention of the boy—the rocks, the insects, and the animals that thronged the countryside. "Every call of a bird brings back the small boy who loved birds so much and taught us to love them," Hubert wrote to Chris, when the 'small boy' was almost forty and the father seventy-eight. "Such little things, my son, but they are the very stuff of life, and as I came into the rondavel to write this, I found myself hoping that when you too reach the evening of life you will have as many pleasant little things around you."

But of course, that was not all that Hubert was writing in the rondavel. For by then—the year was 1974—he was already an active member of the scholarly community devoted to Pessoa. Yet of this life his family knew little, and my own portrayal of Hubert was threadbare. To be frank, all I really wanted was to account for his emigration to South Africa and the production of a son. Once I'd wrung those details out of Hubert's life, I could head off on what I saw as my real story. Even Hubert's war service—injured three times in the First World War—was there to support a hardy trope: the imperial Englishman, complete with animus towards the Boers, the Afrikaans-speaking descendants of South Africa's original Dutch settlers, against whom Britain had fought a series of discreditable wars. In this case Hubert's role was to provide the model of contemporary prejudice that his son could shatter by crossing enemy lines, so to speak, and marrying into a prominent Afrikaner family, a marriage that Hubert did not like and never warmed to. So there he stood, in what is after all the common fate of parents: yoked by posterity to the harness of someone else's narrative, until a day in May, 2013, when Peter Ibbotson, the husband of Hubert's granddaughter, Jeannine, discovered a large box stowed in the rafters of his Johannesburg garage.

The box contained an archive of Hubert's papers and books, enough to fill a small trunk. That material fell into two quite different parts. One was a mass of literary papers, correspondence, and the typescript of an unpublished book about Pessoa. This edition is devoted to those papers, which provide further evidence of Hubert's importance to the early years of Pessoa studies.

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<sup>2</sup> *Diamond: a Journey to the Heart of an Obsession*, New York: Walker & Company, 2001 (published in paperback, and in the UK, as *Diamond: the History of a Cold-Blooded Love Affair*).

The other part of the archive consisted of four hardcover notebooks. Called *A Cracked Record* and numbered one to four in Roman numerals, these holograph documents were not included in the preliminary inventory prepared by Carlos Pittella-Leite<sup>3</sup>, as Hubert's heirs had not yet decided to include them with his other papers in a planned gift to Brown University (they have since decided to include them). A 21-page typescript called *Cracked Record V*, wholly unlike the preceding handwritten volumes in tone, was included in the inventory.

*A Cracked Record* was a titanic production for someone of Hubert's years. Beginning a month before his 90<sup>th</sup> birthday, he embarked on a chronicle that streams along page after page, margin to margin, in a torrent of recollection that lasted 33 months. He did not stop writing until he had filled 697 pages and was staring his 93<sup>rd</sup> birthday in the face. Much of the following account is taken from its pages.

### Early Life

Hubert Dudley Jennings was born November 12, 1896, in the parish of Tetherdown, in the old borough of Hornsey, County of Middlesex. Hornsey survives today as a north London neighbourhood, part of the borough of Haringey. In those days the metropolis had not entirely swallowed Tetherdown; it was still a semi-rural precinct, with woods and a pond. Hubert was the baby of the family, the last of seven children. One had died in infancy.

His father William was a travelling salesman for a London department store called Maple's. He was a distant figure in his son's life. He wrote in a "beautiful, clerkly hand," had a good head for sums, and that's about all we hear of him. Hubert's mother, Alice White, was "a bright, cherry-cheeked woman about five feet tall, but with immense restless energy and with twice the force of character of my father."

Both Hubert's grandfathers were craftsmen. His paternal grandfather, a blacksmith in Honiton, Devon, specialized in monumental iron gates for the gentry's country houses. His mother's father, Arthur White, made the stylish top boots favoured by the London dandies of the day. "He sold them for a guinea a pair," wrote Hubert, "enough for him to live in considerable estate for a week."

Tetherdown lies in a part of London called Muswell Hill, a leafy neighbourhood that even today is somewhat off the beaten track. Its famous feature is the Alexandra Palace, a sprawling, hilltop pleasure dome that Londoners fondly call the Ally Pally, and where the Jennings family often went for picnics.

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<sup>3</sup> Editor's note: since the preliminary inventory was prepared, besides the memoir *A Cracked Record*, various other documents, photos and books were found by the family and added to the Jennings literary estate; Brown University's John Hay library is preparing the final inventory.

When William lost his job at Maple's, the family had to move from Muswell Hill. Hubert remembers stopping strangers in the road to tell them plaintively that "we are poor."

They let the maid go and moved to Leigh-on-Sea, a hamlet on the Essex coast, on the north side of the Thames estuary. It was a lonely, weather-swept place, with no other houses nearby, a fact that doomed the little store that was part of the house, and that Alice ran by herself. William commuted to London for work, returning to the family only on weekends.

"It was always my mother who dominated the household," Hubert wrote. "No Victorian father could have exerted more discipline than she. A switch was kept on the table to enforce good manners—and she was not too slow to use it, particularly on Will, who was as quick-tempered as she was." On Sundays, when not at church, "we were only allowed to sit and draw, or in the case of the girls, sew."

When the store failed, William moved his family back into London, into a terrace house in East Ham, a suburb of identical, bow-windowed, yellow-brick houses, the homes of people with a toehold in the middle class. Not far away lay Dagenham, now the site of the Ford motor company's European engine plant, but in those days a quaint village. Hubert and his sister, Doris, would roam the nearby fields with jam pots and nets, scouring the ditches that drained the marshy plain on the lookout for tadpoles and newts.

The local school was, to a young boy, a forbidding pile. There were the usual rites of passage—scuffles and fistfights in the playground—and for Hubert, the discovery that he was smart. Academic standing was publicly marked by classroom seat assignment. As top of the class—a position he held for his whole time at the school—Hubert occupied the leftmost desk in the front row.

At 13, Hubert's parents sent their bright son to The Coopers' Company School, one of London's ancient guild schools, an academy founded in 1536. In Hubert's day the school was located in Tredegar Square at Mile End. With their tradition of scholarships and modest fees, and rooted as they were in the venerable and powerful trade associations of London, the guild schools offered a standard of education otherwise reserved to the children of the upper class. It was at Cooper's that Hubert acquired the facility in French that he kept all his life.

When his parents could no longer afford the modest two-guinea annual fee (more than £1,000 in today's money), Hubert cycled rapidly through a number of jobs—office boy, payroll clerk in a piano factory, trainee at a real-estate agent's—until he landed in the shop of Harcombe Cuff, a pharmacist. Not a simple employee, he was now an apprentice, "or more grandly, pharmaceutical student," as he recalled. "I felt it was a privilege, and enjoyed the changing scene, the generally respectful customers, and the sense of being gradually initiated into the mysteries of an ancient and occult craft."

He remembered the summer of 1914 as an idyll of contentment, riding his bicycle through nearby woods and, at work, settling into a pleasurable routine serving the customers and learning his profession. All this came to an end on June 28, 1914, when the crown prince of Austria, the Archduke Franz Ferdinand, and his wife, Sophie, were shot dead by an assassin as they rode in an open carriage through the streets of Sarajevo.

The murder of the imperial couple by a Balkan nationalist was the spark that ignited European war, unleashing tensions that had been building for decades. In swift succession: Austria declared war on Serbia; Russia took a stand against Austria; the Germans and Turks made a pact against France; Germany invaded Belgium; Britain declared war on Germany. The halcyon world that Hubert had been pedalling through disappeared into smoke, and into that acrid cloud he marched.

## **The Crucible**

He was 17 years old. The prospect of an orderly transition from boyhood to adult life vanished into the distant roar of artillery. Hubert volunteered.

Apparently he looked even younger than he was: the first regiments he tried to enlist in refused him. One month after the declaration of war he was accepted into the 12<sup>th</sup> London Regiment, the Rangers. He reported to a marshalling depot at the White City in west London, and later, as winter deepened, was posted to an encampment in Ashdown Forest, an area of open heath and wooded hills in the High Weald, a swath of English countryside that embraces parts of Surrey, Kent, and West Sussex.

In April, with the war already chewing its way through the ranks, the regiment asked for volunteers, and Hubert sailed for le Havre. After a stormy night crossing of the English Channel they entered the River Seine and made a slow ascent upriver through the farms and villages of Normandy. The war seemed far away.

“Sometimes a few peasants would wave to us from the [bank] or raise a small cheer, but mostly we had the river and the rich, smiling countryside to ourselves.”

The troops disembarked at Rouen, and began a march through the Pas-de-Calais. The landscape became steadily drearier and more foreboding as they neared the front. They reached the town of Saint-Omer and crossed into Belgium. Now they filed through villages battered by war. They stopped at a camp three miles from the Flemish town of Ypres, a name made infamous in the annals of war by the sheer scale of the carnage on its battlefields. The 17-year-old chemist's apprentice and his equally untested comrades arrived in the midst of one of the most savage of those contests, the Second Battle of Ypres.



[Hubert Jennings at enlistment, 1914; courtesy of the Jennings family]

At Ypres the Germans were making a determined drive towards the Channel ports, a strategic objective that, if reached, would put them on England's doorstep. As the fighting raged back and forth across the muddy ground, it took a hideous toll. The Germans used poison gas for the first time in the history of war. In a single charge at the German line a Canadian force lost seventy-five per cent of its men. Into this hell went Hubert's battalion.

The regulation issue of equipment and arms weighed 60 pounds, and most of the soldiers carried extra supplies—food from home, a writing case, warm clothing knit by loving hands. All around them the night seemed to be on fire as vast explosions tore up the battlefield. Machine guns made their deadly chatter, and for the first time they heard the unnerving, murderous whiz of bullets passing close.

"At length we came to a high railway embankment and here we found the battalion living like troglodytes in caverns they had hollowed out into a massive interior. A piece of sacking was cautiously lifted and we saw the red glow of a brazier inside.

"'Shut that bleeding thing!' someone said in the dark inside. 'What do you want?'

"'We're from the Second Batt,' a corporal said meekly.

"'Christ! How many of you?'

"'Half a platoon.'

"'No room!' they shouted, but we barged in and edged our way towards the brazier, dropping our burdens as we went.

"There we stayed some days. How we survived with braziers of coke going all the time and no ventilation except through the sacking door, I do not know. Perhaps there was some chalk in the filling of that embankment that absorbed or neutralized the carbon dioxide."

The work exhausted them.

"For hours we toiled with our spades digging vast heaps of clay and throwing them on either side and quite often we came upon a heap of corpses from previous battles, and the stench would reduce us to vomiting. When day began to dawn we were ordered back and were so utterly played out that we leaned against one another, and as soon as we got to the open road and were able to do so, marched on asleep, waking by fits and starts to get our bearings. Then we lay down in the dugout by the poisonous brazier, not knowing whether we were dead or alive—or caring!"

Not long after, they moved up to the front line. The enemy was thirty yards away. Hubert wrote that they could not see the enemy position without standing up on the firing step and peering through the wire, and that a blanket of silence lay over the battlefield. This interlude did not last long.



On the afternoon of April 22, Hubert's battalion was ordered onto the firing platform and told to empty their magazines at the enemy.

"We did so hastily and then dodged back to recharge the magazines, and then fire again, taking care as we were doing so not to reappear at the same place. There was little reply from the other side. They just kept their heads down and waited."

What the enemy were waiting for was their own artillery to find the range of Hubert's line, and soon they did. A German shell landed squarely in an ammunition store in a nearby trench, and the world exploded.

"I was suddenly wrapped up in fire, noise and smoke, and probably senseless. What I first became aware of was the painful throbbing in my ears, and standing in semi-darkness. 'I must be hit,' I thought, 'and probably dead.' Slowly I began to feel and look at myself. The first I saw was a small hole through the webbing of my equipment, just above my heart. I probed the hole with my finger and found it stopped short of my grey army [under]shirt. Then exploring slowly downward, I saw the left leg of my trousers in tatters and blood soaking the ragged ends, and on my puttees. 'It must be hanging by a thread,' I thought, and shook my leg to see if it would fall off. It didn't, so I used it to move away from the smoke and acrid stench that still filled the trench. Rounding a revetment, I saw dead men on the ground, one with his scalp taken off and the white brains scattered. It was, I saw, a man who had, it seemed, a grudge against me, and used to taunt me. But I had no other feeling except that I was alive and he was dead."

Hubert was injured three times in the war, and was invalided out for the last time in May, 1917. A year later, in 1918, he left the Army and enrolled in the B.A. program at the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth, now Aberystwyth University.

At Aberystwyth he struck up a friendship with Belgian sisters named de Saedeleer, and their father, Valerius, a well-known landscape painter. On weekends Hubert often walked the three miles from Aberystwyth to the de Saedleers' country house. Battered by war as the young man was, the painter's peaceful habits struck him as an ideal way of life.

He was also attracted by the women.

The de Saedeleer household teemed with girls. At 22, Hubert was alive to their charms. Elizabeth had "pale gold hair, blue eyes and a milk-white skin," and Marie-Jozef, "or Chefke as we called her, was a mischievous and slight young imp with dark black hair and brooding dark eyes."

Nevertheless, a streak of ambivalence marked his relations with these nubile teenagers; in later life, one of them ridiculed him for impotence. He himself characterized it as a "brother and sister" relationship; his memoir tells a more nuanced story. More frankly electric was the charge between Hubert and Gabrielle

Grandsire—Bielle—a young Belgian friend of the family who arrived in Wales on a visit.

“Bielle and I soon struck up a lively exchange of banter which did not escape the notice of the de Saedeleer children and of my fellow students. Austin christened her “Yum-Yum,” and the name seemed to take on, and when we appeared at football matches or any other public occasion they seemed to regard us as a kind of peep-show, and they would be rewarded by seeing her shout ‘Oh, I ate them’ when the other side scored, or turn round and bite my ear if the reverse occurred. At a dance when she appeared, the game was to leave the floor to us, and I can still see her pirouetting around in a short, black dress dotted with white moons with a bar across them.”

On a country walk, they “dawdled and ran and kissed and clashed and shivered and ran and fell into one another’s arms again while the wind sang (sobbed, I said afterwards) in the trees above us, just as generations had done before us. At length we reached the house, dark, silent, sleeping. Bielle gave me the huge key and I unlocked the door. We stood a moment in the hall. Silently, we kissed again and then she fled upstairs. Quietly, I went out and closed the door.”

## Claire

In 1920 Hubert spent a summer in Strasbourg to improve his French, and became infatuated with a fellow student. To the young Englishman, Claire Rauche was an exotic and tantalizing creature, reserved and aloof.

Slowly, they became friends. She would allow him to walk her to the tram, “but no further.”

“After about a month the pressure eased. We would meet sometimes and have tea at the shop in the Rue de la Mésange [...] Then later I would meet her under a stipulated lamp post at one end of the Place Kléber or Place Gutenberg. She was usually five or ten minutes late, and when I had almost given her up she would materialise beside me as if by magic.”

Their intimacy increased. On the surface they must have looked like any young couple in the midst of a flirtation; but for Claire, much more powerful emotions had taken hold, as Hubert discovered to his consternation when Claire had an errand in Nancy, some two hours away by train, and he went with her.

“After a while we had the carriage to ourselves and I put an arm around her and kissed her lightly on the cheek. It was not the first time but the effect this time was electric.

“She pushed me away and said in English ‘Do you want me to let myself go? Do you want me to let myself go?’ It was said in a fierce intense whisper as though it was something that had been simmering for a long time. And utterly different from our normal airy persiflage.

“It was an invitation, a challenge to throw ourselves over the moon and to make what the French would call a ‘declaration.’ But the young man that I was then did no such thing, but held back, disconcerted and ill at ease. She must have seen it because she quickly resumed our usual light chatter and so it remained the rest of the day. She did her business at the consulate. We took a brief look at the historic city which had been somebody or other’s capital, had lunch on the *pavé* outside a restaurant in the Grand Place, and an excellent bottle of Sauvignon Blanc, and then contentedly took the train back.”

But it was not “contentedly” at all, not for Claire.

They never consummated their affair. Sailing home to the United States, Claire poured out her love in a series of desperate letters.

“I must end this,” Hubert wrote seven decades later. He meant his own regretful gaze back down the years at the young man who would not return Claire’s love. “On the 10<sup>th</sup> September, Claire wrote a letter which after all these years shames and depresses me. It is the shortest of her letters and begins “*Hubert! Pourquoi ce silence?*” and ends with another cry, ‘*Hubert! Hubert!*’ Why had I not written just one little word to say that I was ‘*bien portant?*’ She waited and waited every morning, and nothing came.”

On graduation from the University of Wales Hubert took a teaching job at the Tideswell Grammar School, in the Peaks district of Derbyshire, arriving in time for a bitter winter. The Tideswell school had been founded in 1560 “by some enemy of the human race,” as Hubert liked to say. “It had stone walls, stone floors, a resident ghost, and a deep, penetrating chill everywhere.”

In 1923 he left the chill behind for good, and sailed to Natal.

### **D.H.S., Eleanor, and Peggy**

Of the three love affairs to follow here, the first was the most enduring – the one with Durban High School. D.H.S., as it was always known, was one of the leading boys’ schools in the country. When Hubert arrived at the establishment on the Berea where his life in South Africa began, it was love at first sight. Founded in 1866 with an enrolment of seven boys, D.H.S. had grown into a splendid school, with a redbrick Victorian façade that surveyed an expanse of lawns and sporting grounds. It was a far cry from the frigid purgatory of a northern English winter. Among the newly arrived young master’s duties were the school’s sports, and cricket and rugby were his passions.

In his account, *The D.H.S. Story, 1866-1966*, Hubert chronicled the school’s first century. The writing of the book must have raked up vivid memories. A boys’ school is not like other experiences in men’s lives. In its closed, masculine world, the emotions of young life blaze away without the presence of mothers or sisters. Although their times at the school did not coincide, D.H.S. was a special bond for

father and son, and in the flyleaf of the copy of the history that he gave to Chris, Hubert wrote of “happy memories of your own fine record at this school to which we both owe so much.”

Even at the end of his life, Hubert remembered his fellow masters in Dickensian detail. C.E. Carpenter—“Chaka” to the boys—was “a lean, cadaverous man with hooded eyes [who] hated anyone to cough in his presence or even passing his room, and was even said by one boy to have chased him along the dormitory verandahs and down the fire-escape stairs with a revolver in his hand.”



[D.H.S. 1<sup>st</sup> Rugby team, 1927; Hubert centre back row; Jennings archive]

At the summer break in July, Hubert took the rugby team on tour, first to East Griqualand. One morning, out riding with the boys, “we came upon a party of young girls of about the same age as my boys, obviously home from boarding school. The boys stopped, of course, to chat with them. Then one of them detached herself from the others, came up and took my horse by the bridle-rings and looked up at me with an impish, smiling face and began to talk to me. I saw then that though one of the smaller there, she was older and more maturely dressed, and I thought I caught a glimpse of a gold ring on her finger. She was, in fact, two years younger than I. After a moment or two of laughing talk, she informed me that she

was coming riding with me the next morning, pulled the horse's nose towards her, kissed it on the velvety lip and then ran back to her companions."

Eleanor Perry was a 25-year-old married woman from Yorkshire. The next morning she came to fetch Hubert at his hotel in Matatiele, riding her horse up onto the verandah and calling in through the doors of the billiard room where he was watching a game.

"Are you ready?" she shouted.

And apparently he was, for he mounted the horse she'd brought for him and off they went, riding through the cold, crisp air of a highveld morning into an affair that would last five years.

But what exactly was the nature of this liaison? Hubert describes a dance at the Imperial Hotel in Matatiele soon after they met, when she emerged from a "knot of young men who had formed a solid phalanx around her" and advanced to him across the floor, her arms outstretched. She wore "a dazzling blue frock [that] went perfectly with her reddish-gold hair coiled round her head—I was to find out later that uncoiled it reached to her waist."

Another time he watches "moonlight creep in through the honeysuckle fronds on the window and run over her sleeping by my side, touching her face with the fringe of dark lashes, her river of red-gold hair."

Rapturous prose, yet they were never physical lovers. She told him "that an accident while she was a young girl had brought about a fallen womb, so we slept in one another's arms in the honey-suckle covered rondavel, but no more. I accepted it, glad in one way since it saved me, as I suffered from betraying [her husband] Harry whom I liked. And perhaps she thought something of the same, but we were never quite easy because we knew that we were taking away love that properly belonged to another, even if there was no consummation."

Uterine prolapse—a 'fallen womb'—would have made sex almost impossible, as no doubt Harry already knew. This may account for his apparent indifference to his wife's friendship with Hubert. It was a risky attachment anyway. They were flouting convention. The assumption would be that the affair was physical. She was a married woman and Hubert a schoolmaster whose charges' parents would look ill at such an association. You could say that Eleanor offered Hubert all the downside of an affair and none of the upside. That it lasted five years is more a testament to imagination than to lust.

Eleanor's successor, Peggy Bangley, was "distant, aloof, dignified, the very opposite of the prattling child who had so engrossed me for five years. She accepted my attentions in her slightly amused, detached way [...] And now for the next five years, I spent all my holidays with Peggy instead of with Polly [as Eleanor was sometimes called]."

And so the writer sets sail upon another well described but ultimately fruitless voyage.

"By driving to Maritzburg after school on Friday, I could catch the night train and we would spend the day together swimming in the Boksburg Lake and the evening dancing at the 12 o'clock Club in Johannesburg. She was a great clubwoman and the most athletic of all my women companions.

"We climbed mountains, bounded like goats over the rocks in gullies, swam in icy mountain lakes or warm ocean waters, danced till the small hours and played golf, where she always won."

Peggy's sister was married to Hubert's friend A.G. Goldwater, also a master at D.H.S., and Hubert says that his intention when he courted Peggy was to marry her. But Peggy's was not an affectionate nature.

"Tall, dignified, slightly sardonic, always unimpressed, she had impeccable manners and dignity. When we entered a room for a dinner or a dance, it was evident that all eyes were on us. But after our impressive entry to the dining rooms of the best hotels, the meal was often a mournful experience. Peggy would treat the waiter with exquisite charm and then fall into a musing fit of her own."

By the time this passionless fixation crumbled from its own inertia, Hubert was 37. Leaving aside the de Saedeleer girls and Gabrielle Grandsire, he'd had romantic connections with three women: Claire, Eleanor, and Peggy. The first he did not consummate, although he seems to have had the opportunity, and the other two were also, for different reasons but with his compliance, physically incomplete. No matter the romantic lens through which he viewed these relationships in his memoir decades later, at heart they were barren. Nothing makes this clearer than what happened next, when he met a young schoolteacher named Irene Kennedy—a golfer and musician, a woman not only beautiful, but emotionally available. The overwrought suitor of the past vanished into a man of purpose. In the twinkling of an eye Hubert had a wife; 10 months later, a son; and two years after that a daughter. Into a closet that he would not open for 50 years he placed the cool disdain and musing fits of one relationship, the creeping moonlight of another, the tormented letters and tristesse of a third. The door clicked shut on them. Here instead was life.

## **Irene**

"Irene rescued me," wrote Hubert, "and brought me back to normal."

He met her on a trip with the school rugby team to play a match in Dundee, a coal-mining town 200 miles north of Durban. She was a tall, fair-skinned young woman with green eyes "flecked with gold," as her daughter would later describe them.

Irene was the daughter of the district police commander, Alexander Angus Kennedy, always called A.A., a New Zealander of Scotch descent, and of his wife, Theodora Barnard, an Afrikaans-speaking South African of Dutch and British

ancestry. The Kennedys covered both sides of the law: Irene's father upheld it, and her infamous, dashing uncle, Cecil Barnard, broke it. He was a notorious ivory poacher whose exploits inspired the 1954 potboiler *The Ivory Trail*, by T.V. Bulpin, a prolific South African spinner of adventure tales.



[Mule cart in the Transvaal; c. 1901-1910; courtesy of the Jennings family]

Irene's early life was an adventure too. In a family memoir, Bridget Winstanley, Irene and Hubert's daughter, described the discovery of an old photograph, hidden among her mother's things, that brought back in a flash the stories that Irene had told her, of a time spent roaming the northern Transvaal wilderness with her parents. The photograph had been used as backing for another picture. When she discovered it, Bridget peeled it off, and immediately recognized the scene as one her mother had often described. The picture showed a mule cart on a trail through deep grass, and the people in the picture were Irene's parents. The photograph dated from the first decade of the twentieth century, at about the time Irene was born, when A.A., a young officer in the British South African Police, had been put in charge of a huge territory in the Transvaal.

"Their method of transport," Bridget wrote, "was by mule cart. Horses were not used because they were susceptible to mosquito-borne horse sickness, a fatal disease of horses, but not of donkeys and mules. My mother told me that they would often be halted for days at a time, when travelling, by vast herds of antelope and zebra."

In his own memoir, Hubert recalled the first time he met the family at their home in Dundee.

"I had already met the mother—a large and formidable old lady, who was by no means besotted with her daughter's choice. She wanted her to marry the local dentist, whom she regarded (rightly!) as being a much more profitable proposition and who had the added advantage of being, like herself, an Afrikaner. The old lady subjected me to quite a barrage to try to persuade me to withdraw. But Irene gently but firmly would have none of it. Irene's father [...] had no visible objections. He had retired [...] and was greatly enjoying himself as the popular secretary of the local club. Irene's three sisters and three brothers were prepared, apparently, to take me in their stride."

Hubert and Irene were married at St. James's church in Dundee in April 1933. The groom was flush with the proceeds of a profitable flutter in gold shares the year before, and in the midst of the Great Depression was able to splash out on a lavish honeymoon.

At Durban they boarded the German liner *Ussukuma*, and sailed up the east coast of Africa and into the Red Sea. They transited the Suez Canal, and took time out to visit Cairo. In the Egyptian capital they stayed at one of the most famous hotels in the world, Shepheard's—a palatial watering hole on the banks of the Nile, the haunt of movie stars and millionaires. Hubert took his bride to Giza to see the pyramids and the Sphinx. They travelled on to Venice, where they drifted through the twisting waterways in a gondola. At last they crossed the Alps, journeyed down the Rhine, and crossed to England, where Hubert introduced his glowing South African bride to her new relations. Then they headed north.



“The day we crossed the border into Scotland constantly comes back into my memory. I can see Irene bounding about getting ready for our lunch on the road with an air of happiness and fulfilment about her. It was the first time either of us had been in Scotland, but for her it was the land of romance, the home of her ancestors, Walter Scott and what not else [...] mildly undulating green meadows and a little wood with bluebells in it, not the bluebells of Scotland, which I’m told were really what we call harebells, but the wild hyacinth common in England and which we only saw in this one place in Scotland.

“But it was Scotland! Not ‘Caledonia, stern and wild,’ but a calm, pleasant, welcoming place. Windy, and we had to light our primus in the shelter of the boot, but it still remains the day that comes back with photographic clearness to my memory. Dear Irene! How often does this simple scene come back to me!”

On their return to Durban Hubert bought a house in Windermere Road, near the school. Chris was born on February 15, 1934. The next year, Hubert accepted the headship at the school in Stanger<sup>4</sup>, a town forty miles up the coast from Durban. Bridget was born in October 1936, while the family was living at the Stanger schoolhouse. A picture of Hubert, Irene and their children in the shade of their garden dates from about this time.



[Family on the lawn at Stanger schoolhouse; courtesy of the Jennings family]

<sup>4</sup> In the time of the Zulu war-king Shaka, the townsite was a royal cantonment called KwaDukuza. When Shaka’s brothers assassinated him in 1828, the whole place was burned to the ground. Europeans built a town on the same site in 1873, naming it for William Stanger, the Surveyor-General of Natal. The present government has restored the name KwaDukuza.

In 1941 Hubert took over the high school at Greytown, a flourishing farming centre in the heart of the Natal midlands, where my first interest in him ended. At Greytown Hubert's son Chris met Jeanne Nel, his future wife, the daughter of a landowning family of Huguenot descent, and my storyline went plunging off in pursuit of the life they made together. I had got from Hubert all I needed. I suppose that's just as well, for I was not qualified to judge his passionate engagement with Pessoa. Fortunately, there are such people, and many of them are writing in these pages.

## Annexes

I. *Three poems by Hubert Jennings published in the South African Poetry: a New Anthology (London: Collins, 1948. pp 133-135).*

## HUBERT JENNINGS

## THE PROMISE

O who shall love you as I do? I cried,  
 As at the love-long day's unwearied close  
 I lifted up her face—a dew-drenched rose  
 The evenlight had paled and sanctified.  
 Then in a riot of exultant pride  
 Whispered: Or whom shall you love more than me?  
 And challenged with my eyes; and slowly she  
 Returning from some twilight dream, replied:

“None other, love, none other . . . yet” and paused;  
 Then in the gathering dusk I heard, “save one . . .”  
 And while I mused and puzzled, shadow-fraught,  
 She, reading in my eyes the pain she caused,  
 Breathed out the promise of her secret thought,  
 And slowly added two words more: “Your son!”

## BENONI

In a thousand thousand years  
 We'll creep back, the gemsbok and I,  
 and stamp our feet o'er the rifled earth,  
 Where miles of red-brick ruins lie;  
 And go down to the lake by the white silt  
 Where a rusting crane like a starved bird  
 Creaks wearily in the moonlight, and there  
 We'll put our muzzles to the lake,  
 And taste its waters, bitter still with tears.

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## HUBERT JENNINGS

## MID-SUMMER AND MID-RAPTURE

Mid-summer and mid-rapture at that hour  
Of midnight bliss a three-fold magic keep,  
That swoons along the twilight verge of sleep  
Half-drowsed by oblivion's opiate flower;  
For now love bends long-idle hands to reap  
The fallow wishes sudden harvest dower,  
And garners in my arms at last the gain  
That all the dreaming years had sought in vain.

So dark it was that round us there seemed naught  
Save endless darkness of an elder day:  
Or if the rondhavel still round us lay,  
That ebon hands its circling walls had wrought  
With midnight toil, and taken sable clay  
From sunless glades of forests closed to sight  
And thatched it with the pinions of the night.

Then through the window's honeysuckle frieze  
A moonlight nymph of Dian's crept, whose wings,  
Moth-pale, shewed like the first faint dawn that  
springs  
Through milk-white haze of calm unruffled seas.  
Her curious fingers changed to elvish things  
The wan gray walls, cupboard and rafter trees,  
And straying on she paused to linger where  
Your snow-drift linen slept across a chair.

## HUBERT JENNINGS

Ah, who can say with what unearthly brush,  
 Steeped in unearthly dews, she whiter limned  
 Half-shrouded grace of you than white foam dimmed  
 By whiter breasts, as thrilling on the hush  
 Of dawn's loth waking, Nereids soft-hymned  
 Still whiter beauties where the pearly flush  
 Of Venus' form amazed the Paphian shore,  
 While the caressing wavelets round her pour.

O ancient world that slumbers lost in dream!  
 O morning-world whose dawn-dewed visions rise  
 Ever again when love unclouds the eyes!  
 Lo! Cytherea here in yet lovelier guise  
 Lies lapped in the coverlets' foamy gleam . . .  
 Rich flotsam on the shores of present cast  
 By seas enchanted of the sunset past.

Lo! Cytherea in loveliness arrayed  
 Of moonlight tissue, whose opaline smoulder  
 Runs rippling o'er the rhythms of hip and shoulder,  
 Glistens in the hair's down-tumbling cascade,  
 Which daintiest of robes doth soft enfold her;  
 While see! her eyes their dusky fringe have laid  
 On fair pale cheeks, and clasped across her breast  
 Her lax pale hands enshrine ambrosial rest.