

## ‘The polymathic magpie-scholar’: Humphrey Jennings and Kevin Jackson

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My first memory of the writings of Kevin Jackson is a student article he wrote about ABBA, so this must have been the late 1970s. ‘ABBA WE ACCEPT YOU’, it ended in shouty capitals. Something must have tickled me about that in my solemn youth and I’m still tickled to remember it forty-plus years later. The gusto, the loudness, the absurd fun of it, the embrace of a big range of cultural pleasures – all these gave a foretaste of his prolific writing career to come. Despite producing books of all shapes and sizes, often more than one a year – a rate only a notch or two slower than one of his literary heroes, Anthony Burgess – Kevin managed sometimes to think of his default setting as Oblomov. This was hard to reconcile with the facts, for instance when the CV supporting his visiting professorship at UCL had to compress ‘several hundred broadcasts and articles’ into a half-line, in contrast to the academic habit of squeezing in and spinning out the teeniest published offerings (I plead guilty). But the prodigious writing output clearly took quite an effort of will as well as exercise of talent.

Even more than most of us writing here I’ve much to be grateful to Kevin for, both personally and professionally. He introduced me to two people who’ve published me and set me up with the one I’m married to. And lowering the stakes a little he sent my way many many reading and viewing recommendations, not to mention the jokes and drinks and social introductions. Most of these came when we met, but his facebook page was latterly a rich resource too, making a note of what he was reading and often making it clear why other people might enjoy doing the same. The Jackson advocacy I’m most lastingly grateful for was his introducing me to the films of Humphrey Jennings, first in conversation and then in two of his books, which stand as the two most important, packed and continually rewarding books yet published on Jennings: first, the *Humphrey Jennings Film Reader* he edited in 1993, and then the biography, *Humphrey Jennings*, published in 2004.

It’s agreeable to give these books a vigorous puff partly because their author was profoundly modest. Thoroughly forgiving about plenty of human foibles, he took a dim view of conceit. He erred indeed on the side of too little self-esteem and had a very Anglo distaste

for blowing one's own trumpet, so that many of his sentences, like these ones from the Jennings biography, really deserve a boosting footnote:

There have been one or two minor flurries of renewed attention: late in 1993, for example, when Carcanet Press published a collection of his letters, radio scripts, articles, notes and other writings that I had edited, entitled *The Humphrey Jennings Film Reader*, and on which I have drawn substantially for this book. The *Reader* was accompanied by an exhibition at the Mayor Gallery – still faithful to its old Surrealist links – and a day event at the Tate Gallery.<sup>1</sup>

Buried deep in that first sentence we find the phrase 'that I had edited', as though the admirable work of recovery and re-presentation within that book only incidentally involved the agency of Jackson. Moreover, the Mayor Gallery exhibition and the day at the Tate, presented here almost as natural occurrences, wouldn't have happened without the energy and enterprise of Jackson. Modest to a fault about himself, he was warmly appreciative of the efforts of others. Of Lindsay Anderson's 1954 essay on Jennings, for instance, he writes that 'there is a sense in which all subsequent writing on Jennings – including the present volume – is nothing more than an elaboration of this seminal essay ... Anderson said it first, said it (one could argue) best, and said it most influentially.'<sup>2</sup> But the biography (one could also argue) is a good deal more than an 'elaboration'; it's a grandly researched and appreciative portrait of Jennings that assesses his many-sided creative life both in the round and in his time – and it's hugely informative and entertaining. Revisiting it last year I was prompted – thank goodness – to send an appreciative email.

Dear Kevin,

I was teaching a seminar on *Between the Acts* and *Listen to Britain* on the last afternoon of term – and also watched the KJ-KM Jennings docco, in which you cut a dashing as well as eloquent figure – and this sent me to your bio, which I picked up idly post-seminar and didn't put down for 70 pages. It would have sent me to your Carcanet edition too, but that must be on a shelf elsewhere. Anyway, I just wanted to

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<sup>1</sup> *Humphrey Jennings*, p. 381.

<sup>2</sup> *Humphrey Jennings*, p. 361.

say how great your biog is, so knowledgeable plus so balanced and lucid as well as warmly an advocacy, and a page-turner as well. What a great bit of recovery you did with HJ. I also have fond memories, albeit a little distant now, of your talk at UCL.<sup>3</sup>

I sent that on 9 April 2021 around 5pm and Kevin must have been online (pre-yardarm) as the reply came pinging back a few minutes later.

GOLLY!

BLESS YOU!!!

I had no thought this might be our final email exchange but it's a good one to look back on – and I now see the upper case habit had endured, though it sounds more modest than shouty this time.

### **Jennings and Jackson**

It's not hard to see why Kevin Jackson (sometimes KJ from now on) was drawn to Humphrey Jennings (sometimes HJ). The resemblances between the biographer and his subject are many, not that these are ever flagged up by KJ, who would have thought that a fault of decorum and relevance. Both were brilliant students of English literature at Pembroke College, Cambridge, deciding after graduation against a career in academia and branching out into wider cultural engagements, poetry and painting for HJ, arts journalism for KJ. These choices moved them out of financial comfort zones, but they each took that in their stride. Jennings was 'serenely negligent about finances – and, as a result, chronically strapped for cash – almost all his life' – like his biographer in that respect and others. Among these other affinities discoverable in the biography we hear that Jennings possessed quantities 'of arcane knowledge ... ceaselessly and prodigally bestowed on the nearest bystanders'; he had an 'appetite ... for occult tradition'; and 'the size and scope of Jennings's many private and

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<sup>3</sup> Kevin had given a graduate seminar on Jennings at UCL, including showing clips from *Spare Time* and *Listen to Britain*. The documentary was *Humphrey Jennings: The Man Who Listened to Britain* (2000), directed by Kevin Macdonald.

freelance projects over the next few years must be attributed not only to his exceptional vitality but to the fact that his periods of paid employment continued to be sporadic'. And one of HJ's projects that keenly interested KJ was the unfinished *Pandaemonium*, which he describes as an 'extraordinary literary collage of eye-witness accounts of the Industrial Revolution'. KJ found in that work a 'portrait of the artist as polymathic magpie-scholar', a phrase that suits both the biographer and his subject.<sup>4</sup>

The word polymath is bound to recur in this volume. We might think of a polymath not so much as somebody who has mastered many fields but as somebody who is intensely interested in them. The real mark of the polymath is not the flourishing of their credentials but the quality of their engagement with a wide world. KJ's polymathic tendency made him both voracious and prolific, and in the Jennings biography it contributed to a sense of balance and perspective. The reach of his knowledge about cinema, painting, literature, leads to the book's reassuringly broad-based understanding of contexts, a big general picture held in equilibrium. Topics for discussion are given their due as part of a larger sense of the world, whether (for instance) the educational aims of the Perse school after the 1914-18 war or the development of European surrealism. I can't imagine a better short account of surrealism in literature and painting than the five pages in this book,<sup>5</sup> rapidly lucid about the different currents in the movement, and laying the ground for a central claim about Jennings – namely that his own version of surrealism 'managed to reconcile apparently contradictory commitments to revolutionary idealism and to conservative patriotism'.<sup>6</sup>

Thinking about patriotism brings in the question of Englishness. I haven't managed to unearth one of Kevin's facebook posts that I half recall, where he says he's as English as ... toad-in-the-hole? Cumberland sausages? Something less culinary? But he recognized himself as thoroughly and immovably English, and the biography depicts Jennings as no less thoroughly but also mysteriously a product of England. The second chapter of the book ends with a long quotation on this topic from Jennings's Cambridge contemporary Gerald Noxon:

The works of these men [Milton, Bunyan, Constable, Blake] remained in Humphrey's background as a permanent frame of reference. Their kind of Englishness was Humphrey's kind of Englishness. To say that Humphrey Jennings was a typical Englishman is, of course, a contradiction in terms, for the most characteristic quality

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<sup>4</sup> Quotations in this paragraph from *Humphrey Jennings*, pages 19, 26, 108, 147, 5 and 379.

<sup>5</sup> *Humphrey Jennings*, pp. 159-63.

<sup>6</sup> *Humphrey Jennings*, p. 177.

of the English is their nontypicalness, their eccentricity. In fact, he was most English in his eccentricity, which happened to include a complete lack of what are often considered English characteristics – snobbishness, intellectual and social, hypocrisy, insularity, arrogance and indifference. For in spite of his brilliance and his sophistication, Humphrey remained utterly nonsnob, utterly candid, utterly noninsular, essentially humble, and completely and enthusiastically involved and in love with art and life everywhere.<sup>7</sup>

There's much here that strikes a chord about Jackson as well as Jennings, especially 'utterly nonsnob' and 'completely and enthusiastically involved ... with art and life everywhere' – a cosmopolitan quality in their Englishness. The Jennings profile by Allen Hutt (as 'George Pitman') in *Our Time* in 1944 finds a dark flip side to this generous involvement. Hutt ends his profile, quoted at length by Jackson, by expressing his anxiety that

the encyclopaedism that he extols and seeks to express in himself might conceivably degenerate into eclecticism – that still too common English fault. And since Humphrey Jennings is English to his marrow, that is something he will need to watch out for.<sup>8</sup>

But when does being polymathic 'degenerate' into eclecticism? And what's so bad about being eclectic? Hutt gives no further explanation of why eclecticism should be a 'fault', but I suspect KJ would have unapologetically pleaded guilty to it. If pressed further he might have called for support on an essay by one of his mentors, Donald Davie, who taught him when he was a postgraduate at Vanderbilt University (and once rhymed 'Jackson' with 'klaxon' in a piece of light verse for Kevin's birthday). The title piece in Davie's collection *The Poet in the Imaginary Museum* championed Ezra Pound for being the same sort of 'polymathic magpie-scholar' as Jennings. Amateurism and even dilettantism, Davie argued, are a way of responding to the multiplicity of the modern world and a good alternative to specialist narrow-mindedness.

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<sup>7</sup> *Humphrey Jennings*, pp. 97-8. See also Roland Penrose's remark that Jennings 'had a life about him – a sparkle about him. A wit. A violence – which was perhaps almost a bit un-English' (p. 159), and Jennings's own *TLS* article on 'The English' (1948), reprinted in *The Humphrey Jennings Film Reader*, pp. 236-43.

<sup>8</sup> *Humphrey Jennings*, p. 295.

The version of patriotism we find in Jennings's wartime films took some time to mature. In the early pages of the biography he adopts some dissident positions: 'I sit about and paint and try not to lose my temper with this country and its ludicrous inhabitants'; 'England is persuading itself for the seven millionth time that it is beginning to face reality'; 'for the English to awaken from the sleep of selectivity, what a task.'<sup>9</sup> We could hear in these rallyingings an early tendency in Jennings towards the haughty rhetoric of high modernism. The biography aligns Jennings's development into a great filmmaker with his shedding of such attitudes as these. It records his describing *Fires Were Started* as 'definitely an advance in film making for me – really beginning to understand people and not just looking at them and lecturing or pitying them.' KJ proposes that the time he spent in Wales making *The Silent Village* 'consolidated the final stage of a sentimental and political education that had begun for him in the making of *Fires Were Started*'. He quotes a letter from Jennings to his wife:

I really never thought to live to see the honest Christian and Communist principles daily acted on as a matter of course by a large number of British – I won't say English – people living together. Not merely honesty, culture, manners, practical socialism, but real love: with passion and tenderness and comradeship & heartiness all combined;<sup>10</sup>

Words like 'Christian', 'Communist', 'honesty', 'manners' and 'love' don't usually belong in the same frame of reference. But both Jennings and Jackson have a sense of the world that means such values can and should consort together – with the proviso that HJ's view of Communism in 1944 reflects his conviction that 'not only have the Russians saved us from the Nazis, but also that they are beating them for us all. I hope and trust we shall not forget'.<sup>11</sup> One less than obvious implication in which HJ and KJ would concur is the idea of celebrating 'heartiness' as an 'honest principle', making social generosity really matter.

KJ may have given such moral weight to the trajectory he describes in Jennings partly because it could reasonably be linked to a sentimental education of his own, taking him away from the severities of Cambridge English in the 1970s and 1980s towards the distinctive warmth and magnanimity of his later years. One stylistic feature of his writing expresses just such an open-eyed magnanimity. This is his habit of giving a proper airing to plausible

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<sup>9</sup> *Humphrey Jennings*, pages 119, 122, and 177.

<sup>10</sup> *Humphrey Jennings*, pages 258, 272 and 272-3.

<sup>11</sup> *Humphrey Jennings*, cited on p. 249.

strictures before with equal plausibility setting them aside for a more generous view of matters. On Peggy Guggenheim, for instance, he writes that she

has been variously dismissed, condescended to or reviled as a spoiled brat, a dilettante, a chancer, an ignoramus and a nymphomaniac – it seems only fair to modify this prejudice a little from the outset. Whatever her lapses of taste and intelligence may have been, Peggy Guggenheim nonetheless went on to be one of the twentieth century's most influential and far-sighted patrons of art, a major champion of contemporary European artists ... as well as a pioneering advocate of some of the leading American artists of the next generation.<sup>12</sup>

That starts as quite a funny derisive caricature and becomes a persuasive and humane appreciation. Along similar lines the biography includes cogent little essays on John Grierson, Tom Harrisson and Ian Dalrymple, unshowily rescuing them from what's been reductive or ungenerous in their reputations.<sup>13</sup> Such revisions represent not just a habit of being nice but a vigorously intelligent embrace of the charitable. Here for instance is Jackson's crisp evocation of how the wartime Crown Film Unit brought documentarists and commercial film-makers together:

It was a clash of two very different, and mutually suspicious worlds, each of which entertained a hostile caricature of the other. To the commercial-features crowd, the documentarists were bolshy, scruffy and technically incompetent. To the Crown faction, the features people were frivolous, pampered and morally corrupt – McAllister, for instance, used to refer to them as 'lice'. But, according to other accounts, the strange bedfellows soon began to learn a little grudging respect for each other's ways...<sup>14</sup>

'Bolshy, scruffy and technically incompetent' versus 'frivolous, pampered and morally corrupt': only a very good writer could come up with those forceful and elegant triplets. They

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<sup>12</sup> *Humphrey Jennings*, p. 196.

<sup>13</sup> One of his very funny and Jacksonian sentences mingles irony with respect in describing how John Grierson forced members of the Empire Marketing Board to watch Soviet propaganda films: 'As he might have predicted, many members of the Board either slumbered noisily through these revolutionary splendours or sloped off home for supper' (p. 136).

<sup>14</sup> *Humphrey Jennings*, p. 234.

quickly and vividly place us in a British sitcom world of social antagonism and its reparability.

Jackson's habit of briskly sketching a counter-argument often adds conviction to his warm appreciations of Jennings's films themselves. He can concede that '*Listen To Britain* does, of course, idealize the British', but adds that 'it does so in a deep and subtle way; it shows their eccentricity, their individuality, their humour and their capacity to create and enjoy beauty.'<sup>15</sup> There's a generous implication here that the charge of idealizing needn't and shouldn't be the end of the matter. Elsewhere he cites a Hawksian moment in *Fires Were Started* when a bomb hits the fire station HQ as a young woman is answering the phone: 'the young woman, bleeding from a cut on her forehead, climbs back up to the phone and, unfazed, apologizes for the interruption'. Jackson calls this

the only moment in the film that smacks of the stagey: everyone likes to see a plucky English girl showing advanced stiffness of the upper lip. And yet Jennings's notes for the film suggest that her real-life original did indeed behave with exactly this degree of coolness.<sup>16</sup>

This is a guide you can trust not to be gullible but also not to be mean-spirited, with opinions that condense a history of critical debate with exhilarating speed. Sometimes this freshness of judgment issues in the defence of an undervalued film: 'In short, the potentially anodyne material of *Family Portrait* – and some of it is just that – is repeatedly shot through with threads of highly idiosyncratic scholarship, unconventional juxtapositions and bold imaginative leaps'; at other times in a shrewd acerbity about a film that he felt had received more than its due, *A Diary for Timothy*: 'there can be few viewers who do not feel that they, too, are being patted on the head by this know-it-all uncle.' Best of all is his piercingly simple tribute to *Listen to Britain*: 'I watched it again while revising these passages: it never fails to move and astonish me.'<sup>17</sup>

Appreciation lay at the heart of Kevin Jackson's work as a critic, and I want to end with one of his most vivid and poignant appreciations; it describes a scene from *Heart of Britain*, made in 1941.

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<sup>15</sup> *Humphrey Jennings*, p. 254.

<sup>16</sup> *Humphrey Jennings*, p. 262 and p. 419.

<sup>17</sup> *Humphrey Jennings*, p. 351, p. 304, p. 250.



But the film is not quite over. Now we meet Mrs Patterson, a plump, slightly posh middle-aged lady who talks directly into the camera about her work with the WVS, making tea for the emergency services. At first brisk and cheery, she seems a little silly, a little comic ... until her face grows more sombre and her voice more hesitant as she speaks of the sense of futility she often feels when standing in a bomb crater, in the darkness, surrounded by the dead and the barely living. (Her words would draw tears from the toughest audience.) But then she rallies herself, smiles again, remembering the grateful words of the men as they wash down the dust and the blood with those cups of tea.<sup>18</sup>

What a superb evocation of the film – far from an easy thing to achieve when you’re trying to paraphrase film into prose. It makes you want to see the sequence for yourself to witness the visual detail and emotional truth he has found there, in which – as so often in this admirable biography – we feel that Humphrey Jennings’s attentiveness and accuracy and decency have been matched by Kevin Jackson’s.

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<sup>18</sup> *Humphrey Jennings*, p. 238; ellipsis as in the original.