

## Martin Jennings

*Article by Joanna Barnes in 3<sup>rd</sup> Dimension Magazine 2<sup>nd</sup> April 2014*

White, bright and spacious, Jennings' studio is surprisingly well-ordered, brimming with intriguing models of portraits and figures in a variety of sizes. The sculptor explains, almost apologetically, that he has just tidied up after his last commission, the statue of Charles Dickens for the author's native city of Portsmouth.

Astonishingly, at one and a quarter life-size, this is the first full-scale statue of Dickens in the United Kingdom, although the author has already been commemorated with statues in Philadelphia, USA and Sydney, Australia. In his will, Dickens stated that he did not want a memorial, expressing his desire to be remembered by his published work alone. The Portsmouth branch of the Dickens Fellowship, however, commissioned this public statue to celebrate the bicentenary of the author's birth, arguing that the wording of the will was ambiguous. Unveiled on 7th February this year, on what would have been his 202nd birthday, it seems the statue met with the approval of Dickens' descendants, forty of whom attended the ceremony, and Jennings himself believes that those questioning the suitability of a memorial to so great an author are 'being rather pedantic.'

In preparation for this demanding commission, Jennings re-read some of Dickens' novels, as well as Clare Tomalin's biography. He depicts the Victorian author seated beside a rather precarious stack of books, surrounded by a theatrical swathe of drapery. The books are designed, he says, to convey Dickens' 'richness of imagination and abundant output' and are piled up as though they might topple over at any moment, making reference to Dickens' 'super-rich outpouring; characters so crammed full of personality that they often tip towards caricature.'

The statue's sedentary pose has received some criticism. Steven O'Brien, editor of *The London Magazine*, insists that '... he was the most restless of writers' and so '...a striding and lithe Dickens, his hair dishevelled, would have been much better.' Jennings, however, does not regard his statue as at all passive, pointing out the sitter's latent energy: the author is not sitting comfortably, but is 'poised to leap up and deliver one of his theatrical readings.' He explains that the statue of Dickens was designed to be seated because the Guildhall behind is a long horizontal building and he felt his sculpture needed to echo this horizontality in order best to occupy the space.

The relationship between a work of art and its setting is always an important consideration for Jennings when he conceives his designs. One wall of his studio displays a photographic collection of famous statues and monuments such as Hamo Thornycroft's *General Charles Gordon*, re-sited from its Trafalgar Square location to the Victoria Embankment, and Sargeant Jagger's *Royal Artillery Memorial* at Hyde Park Corner. These act as points of reference, not only for inspiration or for the way each work relates to its surroundings, but also because he recognises the tremendous artistic struggle involved in the creation of each piece; a process he values highly. It is Jennings' philosophy that 'a good work of

art should be tough to make' and this is something he seeks to emulate in his own sculpture.

Plaster faces in serried ranks gaze down from high shelves on the other studio walls. The late Queen Mother, who sat for the sculptor two years before her death, is easily distinguishable. Explaining that when making a portrait the sculptor needs to be at eyelevel with his subject, Jennings reveals that he had to kneel on the floor for the whole of the process of modelling her because she was so small, adding he was somewhat bewildered by the fact that 'at no point did she comment on the fact that I was kneeling in front of her'. Although society portraiture is demonstrably atypical of his oeuvre, it does not seem to have taxed his considerable talent.

The extent of his skill is seen to better advantage in works such as the small, two-thirds life-size silver mask of Lord Bingham, which was a commission from the National Portrait Gallery in London.

Jennings was keen to produce a portrait which would be distinctive amongst the Gallery's standard bronze busts. He wanted to try out a different material and Pangolin Editions, the foundry with which he works, happened to be developing sterling silver for casting at the time. All Jennings' work is cast by Pangolin, the largest foundry in the country, he describes this as 'a collaboration' and he would like to see foundries receive more recognition.

I point out to Jennings that the white plaster cast of the Bingham mask in his studio parallels the classical Roman tradition of veristic portraiture, inspired by the death-masks of the Republican elite. He agrees there is a certain similarity to 'those wonderful old Roman portraits' in striving for a life-like portrayal. He then describes how 'every now and again Bingham would purse his lips and furrow his brow in thought, looking as I imagined he might have done when coming to some legal judgement. That was the moment I wanted to catch, a moment of pointed concentration.' For Jennings, it is often the way that the lines and structure of the sitter's face are constructed that he responds to: 'with some people there is a kind of rhythm in the structure of the face which isn't present in another'. Lord Bingham had a particularly interesting face, 'a wonderful set of creases and structures that came together to make a great pattern.'

There is intriguing intellectual perception in much of Jennings' best figurative sculpture. Clearly well-read, a fascination with literature, literary figures and historical context is apparent in his choice of subjects, ranging from poets such as Larkin and Betjeman to heavy-weight authors like Dickens and Orwell. When pushed to explain the source of this interest the sculptor mentions the fact that he read English literature at Oxford, before he went to art school.

Jennings is an admirer of John Betjeman's work, claiming he was 'a greater lyric poet than people give him credit for' particularly with regard to his beautiful pastoral work: 'those descriptions of the way the sea sweeps around the rocks in Cornwall are like a Turner painting in verse.' The poet was the subject of the 2007 commission Jennings won by competition for St. Pancras Station in London.

Betjeman, a passionate aficionado of Victorian architecture, played an important role in opposing the redevelopment of St Pancras in the 1960s and helped save the Victorian structure. Jennings speaks of the importance of the statue relative to the site: 'You have to think carefully about the site. The piece has to complement it, to the point where it couldn't be anywhere else and work as well.' This certainly seems true of the bumbling Betjeman captured at the moment he clutches his hat to look up admiringly at the architecture.

In Jennings' own words: 'There was a chance with the Betjeman figure to create this triple relationship between architecture, sculpture and poetry. The intention was to make something which only made sense because of the place it was in, that was indivisible from it. I could use his words to talk about what great architecture - like the magnificent train shed at St.Pancras - does to us emotionally. I think it acts on our imaginations in ways that are similarly suggested by great landscapes. So in reading through his collected works when I was choosing quotations to inscribe, I found myself naturally gravitating towards the poetry of Cornwall and the sea. It's beautiful work. It makes it clear why this rather rotund poet is so worth remembering'.

The excellent quality of Jennings' carved lettering, a feature of much of his work, is due to his training as a calligrapher and lettercutter at City and Guilds in 1980 and to his part-time apprenticeship to Richard Kindersley in Kennington. Initially he carved lettering commissions for churches, buildings and memorial work, but after returning from a brief period working in Carrara, Italy, he turned to figurative art, taking a course at the Sir John Cass School of Art in Whitechapel. From that time Jennings has increasingly concentrated on creating figurative work because it is the process which he enjoys most, but he still carves lettering round his statues because he says 'if you are making statues of authors it's a lost opportunity if you don't.'

Jennings' work can also have a light-hearted side. He observes that '...statues traditionally show fairly heroic people, whereas intellectuals and artists tend to be great minds often in rather shabby clothing. I like the humorous contrast between those two.' A juxtaposition well-illustrated in his statue of John Betjeman, a 'great mind', who was nonetheless capable of making a new suit look like a potato sack within a fortnight of being supplied with it by his tailor son-in-law.

Similarly, he is seeking to portray a 'great mind' in 'shabby battered' clothing with 'shambolic trousers that start at the chest and wander off down to the ankles' in the maquettes which he is currently working on for a statue of George Orwell for the new BBC site in Portland Place. Orwell had been an employee of the BBC for a short period organising talks to broadcast to India, but had left because he came to the conclusion that it was propaganda and no-one was listening to him.

That work is continuing on this statue takes me by surprise because I was under the impression that the commission had been turned down by the BBC. Jennings explains that before he left the BBC, director general Mark Thompson mentioned in passing to Joan Bakewell that he thought George Orwell was too left-wing for

the BBC and that the media then blew the remark out of proportion. So work on the modelling is going ahead, although the project is still dependent on receiving planning permission. The statue will stand on BBC land outside New Broadcasting House and a further bronze cast for a bust will be taken from the statue for Eton College, where Orwell was a King's Scholar.

Although Jennings considers it too passive, his first maquette is a fine representation of a standing Orwell dressed in Oxford bags and shirt. The model is well-grounded, its stance reminiscent of *Le Grand Paysan* by Aimé-Jules Dalou, which is visible amongst the photographs on the studio wall. Jennings is trying to capture the personality of the writer as expressed through bodily shape and stance, a man who on one hand was 'one of the great minds of his generation,' but on the other 'was happy growing vegetables for his little village store in Hertfordshire.' My attention then turns to the current model, a sketchy terracotta figure on an armature which captures Orwell's tall, lanky figure in more argumentative pose. This, Jennings feels, is a far better representation of the controversial author.

As a portraitist, Jennings is fascinated by his subject's character and psychology, but as a sculptor, he finds himself drawn increasingly from live portraiture to portraying historic figures. He believes this requires a different skill set: 'With a portrait bust you don't have to consider the space being occupied in the way that you do with a larger statue.' Jennings distinguishes between portraiture which 'is a constant education in studying the head and the personality, but as far as possible needs to be with the sitter in front of you' and historic statues where 'you are working from photographs, or footage if you are lucky, and that gives you a certain amount of information, but you have to invent a pose and a way of representing the figure that gets to the essence of who that person was.' Accordingly Jennings has researched Orwell carefully, discussing him in detail with Richard Blair, Orwell's son. The sculptor concludes that Orwell is 'a fascinating person to be working with at the moment' with all the media coverage about 'our data being collected all the time - he was extraordinarily prescient.'

The statue of Jamaican born nurse, Mary Seacole, also stands at second model stage. Jennings was selected from a short-list of eight artists for this 2009 commission from the trustees of the Mary Seacole Memorial Statue Appeal and is now moving forward with models for the project, although the last part of the funding is still to be raised. Mary Seacole stands in front of a raised disc, an impression of the ground in the Crimea where she set up her base during the Crimean war. Jennings recounts his adventures in striving for historical accuracy: taking a team last September to scan a rock face on the road between Balaclava and Sevastapol where Seacole had her base, having scoured maps from the National Archives to try to find the actual site. When they reached the site he had identified they 'found bits of old bottles and pots in the undergrowth from the period of the Crimean war' which confirmed they had found the correct location.

With the lights dimmed, Jennings uses the model to demonstrate how the statue will be illuminated from the front, causing Seacole's shadow to fall across the impression of the Crimean ground. Jennings' enthusiasm for the concept is clear:

'You can make all sorts of implicit commentary about what monuments are for; to what extent the representation that you make is just a shadow of who the person actually was; to what extent our stories continue after we have gone; as well as the whole idea of what am I doing in the 21st century making a monument to somebody who lived in the nineteenth'. It is his intention that the statue should not just address who Seacole was, but what she represents. The shadow is intended to carry many meanings; it is an important part of the monument for the very reason that it is not something substantial. Jennings says there is a 'permanence about these lumps of bronze. I like the idea that alongside this there is part of the monument that does not have corporeal existence.' The statue will be positioned in front of St. Thomas' Hospital behind Gabo's fountain, *Revolving Torsion*, and facing directly across the river towards the Palace of Westminster.

As the first statue of a named black woman in England, this memorial has provoked a great deal of comment. Most of the controversy has centred on the site, with criticism levelled that Mary Seacole has no association with St. Thomas' Hospital and that the statue, which will measure almost 10' high, is too large and will 'diminish' the garden. Jennings, however, thinks it a 'wonderful location' and Sir Hugh Taylor, Chairman of Guy's and St. Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust agrees that the site is perfect: 'there couldn't be a better place.'

Jennings is making a valiant contribution to increasing the relatively small number of monuments to women in this country. He is currently working on another with female subjects. This is a commission from Sheffield City Council to commemorate the women who worked in the steel industry during World War II. Jennings has researched his subject thoroughly and recounts how, through their solidarity and comradeship, these women survived five years of gruelling labour. He has even met some of these 'Women of Steel', now in their eighties and nineties, calling them 'a feisty bunch of onetime welders, riveters and crane operators'. The statue comprises two young women, a welder and a riveter, arms linked, walking together at ground level through Sheffield's central square.

It is the treatment of the clothing and attention to detail, even on a small-scale plaster model which enhances the quality of the sculpture and gives a historic authenticity to the piece. Jennings explains 'the women went into the steel works and were handed the overalls of the men who had gone off to war. The war would not have been won without them.' Besides, he admits: 'I love drapery and the way that baggy clothing hangs off a figure.'

The final sculpture I am shown also treats the subject of war and has huge personal significance for the sculptor. It is the plaster maquette of the plastic surgeon, Sir Archibald McIndoe, portrayed in scrubs, standing behind his patient; a generic Second World War pilot. The pilot's badly injured claw-like hands are based on those of Jennings' own father, who was very badly burned in a tank battle during the war and was transferred by McIndoe from a Birmingham hospital to his burns unit at East Grinstead. The surgeon treated 650 burned pilots, who came to be known as the 'Guinea Pig Club' because of his experimental treatments. East Grinstead, the 'town that did not stare', welcomed the burn victims into their

community, allowing them to socialise without comment and it is here in West Sussex that the monument will be unveiled in June this year.

Although Jennings' composition strikes me as slightly hieratic, the sculptor is quick to explain that there are no intentional religious undertones. The surgeon stands behind his patient resting his hands on the pilot's shoulders. 'I wanted to convey his capacity to transfer his own confidence to his patients. McIndoe had a very practical form of compassion'. In the throes of their despair, the surgeon gave these men real hope and the sculpture seeks to illustrate this. 'He believed absolutely that his patients could go on to lead productive lives despite their disfigurements. I wonder how much the assurance with which my own father approached his continuing life, not least in marrying and producing a large family, owed its existence to the confidence inspired in him by McIndoe and his team'.

Just as I turn to leave a stunning little maquette catches my eye. It is a preparatory plaster for the statue of Philip Larkin unveiled at Hull Paragon Station in 2010, the station to which the poet refers at the beginning of his poem 'Whitsun Weddings'. Jennings depicts Larkin rushing for a train, the figure canting to the left, as the poet's weight transfers in his haste. Beady-eyed, bespectacled, jacket buttoned in the centre, mackintosh flapping, the pages of the book in his hand almost visibly fluttering as he walks, the sculptor creates a real sense of movement and purpose in the statue. He has captured the essence of his subject. It is a piece of true quality and Jennings at his very best.