

UNRECOGNISED GEMS

You may have found one in an old box of prints on Greenmarket Square or hanging disconsolately from a nail in Ashby's auction house. The scene: a Cape Dutch Homestead "etched" meticulously and signed in pencil "H M Pemberton". Were you to ask around, many people "in the know" would tell you that they've seen his work often; that, though very fine, the works aren't of great interest; but were similar works using the self-same subjects and wrought in a related manner signed "Tinus de Jonge", that would be different. Persist a while longer, delve a little deeper, and you will find that no one can actually tell you anything of H.M.Pemberton.

It took me short of two years of correspondence involving the South African National Gallery, Victoria & Albert Museum and the National Art Library, London to answer the question: who is H.M.Pemberton? Well, in brief, he was a woman - and a woman of some note in her day. Here is part of her story.

HILDA MARY WILSON (née Pemberton) was a decorative designer, painter and etcher born in Hammersmith around the turn of the century. Her father, Frederick B Pemberton, was a noted civil engineer. She was educated at Goldsmith's College, London, and, as a student, received silver and bronze medals from the Royal College of Art in recognition of her talents. She was a skilful and prolific artist who attracted a wide audience of admirers. Her favourite method of expression was through "dry point" - a form of etching. She exhibited at the Royal Academy 1897-1940 (on 10 occasions), Royal Cambrian Academy (9), Royal Scottish Academy (6) and in Society of Women Artists (24). Wide public recognition resulted in her election as an Associate of the Royal Cambrian Society and the Society of Women Artists in 1922.

She visited Cape Town in 1931/2, a visit that was remarked on in the *Cape Times* for her works, inspired by the beauty that is the Cape, were

to be exhibited in The Royal Academy in 1931.

The subject of her art was diverse: scenic and vernacular architecture of the United Kingdom, Cape Town and environs; portraits, in which our indigenous peoples were to feature; flowers, book plates, stained glass and tapestry designs for the British market. Her work was always executed to the highest standards and persistently attracted a substantial clientele.

Her last known art works are dated 1955. She married a certain Eli Marsden Wilson A.R.E., A.R.C.A., moving her home from Brockley to Acton and later to Blewbury in Berkshire.



Kronendal, Houtbaai



Tokai Manor, Cape

Since first publishing this article in July 2003, the following family members have contributed information relating to H M Pemberton: Maureen Pearce, Linda Taylor, Andrew Clay and Steve Wilson. Other parties, writing from Canada, South Africa and the United Kingdom have shared information regarding their collections of her art.

I summarise their correspondence below under the heading POSTSCRIPT.

Hilda Mary Pemberton was born into a family of standing, the which was able to trace its roots back to 1501.

For the possible interest of family members, I have transposed ¹, and complemented from South African Archival Records, a family tree which may be viewed elsewhere on this site in the section headed GENEALOGY.

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1. Primary Source: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints : <http://www.familysearch.org>

POSTSCRIPT Sunday, 30 November 2008

Ian Staniland, an architect of Cape Town, South Africa writes 18.3.2005 : The amount of detail and accuracy in terms of shadows, perspective etc. to create these plates in loco would take an enormous amount of time - to get the detail from field sketches almost impossible. Besides I don't see a woman of that era hanging around the countryside on her own for great lengths of time unaccompanied. It was a vogue with (Hugo) Naude and (Tinus) De Jong doing almost identical work. Naude with almost the same amount of exacting detail and De Jong with more artistic interpretations. Elliot's photos were around and many other "commercial" photographers provided artist with material to work from.

This opinion is borne out when examining Elliot Collection No.5708 *Jonkershoek, Stellenbosch. Side gable & Bell tower* against her etching *Jonkershoek, Stellenbosch*.

Linda Taylor writes: Hilda was my great, great aunt. My father and aunt (Maureen Pearce of Kent) used to spend time with her at her cottage at Blewbury in Berks. I have Hilda's wedding dress & hat and numerous etchings and a watercolour of hers. I do have a photo of her (see below)



My great grandmother Minnie Pemberton, twin sister to Francis, married Hedley Holman in Durban and they had land and lived at Harrismith (my grandfather Hubert was born in SA) but of course they both died very young (Hedley in SA and Minnie a few years later in London not California) and long before Hilda visited SA. Hilda probably visited South Africa because her brother George Pemberton lived in Durban. That family line still continues in South Africa .

My aunt is intrigued by the information on the family tree about her grandmother Minnie. She was not aware of Minnie dying in California but it is possible she brought her three sons to England and then went there to recover from consumption. Her sister Francis may have lived there.

Hilda lived in Acton .. and she taught at the Acton or Ealing School of Art. The Acton house was sold after Eli died and later [sic _ see Stephen Wilson below] Hilda had to sell the cottage in Blewbury (see illustration below) when she became crippled with rheumatoid arthritis. The cottage was quite damp and my aunt remembers sleeping in damp feather beds. When it became law to have mains water in homes, Hilda would not allow it to come beyond her front gate because she preferred to draw water from the well. The village was beautiful with straw thatch bridges and watercress streams, my aunt remembers.



Andrew Clay writes 24.2.2005: E M Wilson was my grandfather's uncle had no children and subsequently much of their archive material has passed to me. I have a collection of her etchings and family memorabilia ... around 200 etchings relating to her South African tour. I am currently writing a paper on his life and work.

Stephen Wilson writes: Eli Marsden Wilson is descended from my family based in Ossett, now part of Wakefield in West Yorkshire. The Wilson family were woollen cloth manufacturers, but EMW broke the mould and moved away from the Yorkshire family completely to become an artist. He was a complex man with many interests and skills. He died at the age of 89 in 1969 at his home in London (Hilda Mary died at the age of 86 in 1957). Many of Wilson's possessions, including letters and photographs (were passed on) to Andrew Wilson Clay, the great-grandson of Eli's eldest sister, Annie Lois Wilson who had married Ossett mill owner John Arthur Clay in 1895.

End note: in 2005 a detailed history of Eli Marsden Wilson was in the process of being written separately by Andrew Clay and Stephen Wilson.