



'Launch the small ship' 72

Blair H. 33.

Launch the small ship

Blair Hughes-Stanton

Not on display

Title/Description: Launch the small ship

Artist/Maker: Blair Hughes-Stanton

Born: 1933

Object Type: Graphics

Materials: Ink, Paper

Technique: Wood engraving

Measurements: Page: h. 265 x w. 180 mm

Accession Number: S.86p

Production Place: England, Europe

Blair Rowlands Hughes-Stanton (22 February 1902 – 6 June 1981) was a major figure in the English wood-engraving revival of the twentieth century. William McCance who worked with Hughes-Stanton said of him, 'He was an expressionist...but to find an expressionist who is able to take an intractable medium like wood engraving and make it a flexible instrument for his fancy and sensuous flights is unique.' [1]

Wood engraving is a printmaking technique, in which an artist works an image into a block of wood. Functionally a variety of woodcut, it uses relief printing, where the artist applies ink to the face of the block and prints using relatively low pressure. Hughes-Stanton's wood engravings have only been known to a narrow public, largely because the majority appeared in private press books of limited circulation. Similarly, the few dozen of his personal independent engravings were printed in small editions.

Hughes-Stanton was taught by Leon Underwood at Byam Shaw School of Art. Underwood's influence on him and several of his contemporaries was to be considerable. In 1921 Hughes-Stanton was among the first students (that also included Henry Moore) at the Leon Underwood School of Painting and Sculpture. He was also officially attending the Royal Academy Schools, along with Gertrude Hermes (his future wife). The American Marion Mitchell started the students wood-engraving. Underwood encouraged and joined his students in the new activity. His woodcuts probably inspired and influenced the students technically and emotionally.

In the early 1930s Robert Sainsbury was a collector of private press books and he was keen to offer Hughes-Stanton the financial and moral support to set up his own Gemini Press in 1933. Robert Sainsbury was originally a friend of Ida Graves, the artist's second wife. It was she who in fact

introduced Sainsbury to Jacob Epstein, and Hughes-Stanton who introduced Robert Sainsbury to Henry Moore and to the contemporary art world in general, which allowed him to amass the amazing collection now housed at the Sainsbury Centre. [2]

Hughes-Stanton became strongly influenced by D.H. Lawrence. The two met through Frieda Lawrence's daughter, Barbara Weekley Barr, who also attended the Underwood school. He worked with Lawrence on a folio volume of poetry, *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* (1930), published just after Lawrence's death. The two men were similar in temperament and got on well. Hughes-Stanton was excited and inspired by the liberating philosophy of the older man. Lawrence seems to have taken an encouraging interest in Hughes-Stanton's work too. [3]

Hughes-Stanton grieved Lawrence's death in 1930 and started an affair with Ida Graves, poetess, reader for the Stage Society and later novelist, the same year. For the next three years, the affair would cloud his family life, and his professional relationships at the renowned Gregynog Press. However, the relationship energised an output of work for Gregynog, and later his own and other presses, which lasted until the outbreak of the Second World War, nine years later, and which was to prove the best of his career.

This wood engraving is the third of thirteen illustrations made by Blair Hughes-Stanton for *The Ship of Death and Other Poems*, a selection of D. H. Lawrence's *Last Poems*, put together by Hughes Stanton and Ida Graves at the Gregynog Press, upon the writer's death in 1930. The thin, bearded figure which appears throughout the poems is patently Lawrence himself.

Entitled *Launch the small ship*, this is one of three illustrations for *The Ship of Death* (on page 6). This large full-page illustration depicts the crux of the poem:

[VII]

'...Now launch the small ship, now as the body dies
and life departs, launch out, the fragile soul
In the fragile ship of courage, the ark of faith
with its store of food and little cooking pans
and change of clothes,
upon the flood's back waste
upon the waters of the end
upon the sea of death, where still we sail
darkly, or we cannot steer, and have no port.'

A smaller female figure appears top left of the image, similarly to the one in the front-page image, *The Ship*. The main male figure looks to her and their fingers touch, whilst his body faces the other direction. Jutting angles and busy swirls, made up of hatched and cross-hatched fine lines, provide stark contrasts of black, white and grey angular sections in the dramatic scene. The tipping boat is ready to launch into the treacherous waves, into the 'sea of death'. There is a true sense of anguish,

and the idea of leaving behind loved ones and stepping into the unknown. A small, dark male figure mirroring the same arm gestures as the first, and also looking towards the female figure, is presumably the same man, in time, looking back as he recedes further into the distance.

Inspired as he was by Lawrence's views on death and by his death itself, Hughes-Stanton was even more impressed by his utterances on morality and life. The artist was permanently affected by Lawrence's belief in the vital importance and indeed rightness of responding to one's basic animal instincts, rather than any superficial, taught morality, and by his new and frighteningly frank, if ultimately unresolved, examination of relations between the sexes. Hughes-Stanton's approach to his work was always unashamedly personal rather than attempting to be completely objective. As a result, the engravings carry a highly emotional charge. [4]

Katharine Malcolm, June 2023

[1] Penelope Hughes-Stanton, *The Wood-Engravings of Blair Hughes-Stanton* (Private Libraries Association, 1991), ix

[2] Hughes-Stanton, p.66

[3] Hughes-Stanton, p. 35

[4] Ibid.
