

Hugh Cecil Charles Monahan

Born in Dublin, Ireland, September 1, 1914

Died in Vancouver, British Columbia, November 20, 1970, age 56

Hugh Monahan was born in Dublin, Ireland, son of George Monahan, a high court judge of the Indian Civil Service and his wife Helen (née Kennedy). So Hugh spent his early childhood in India. When it became time to send Hugh to school, George and Helen shipped him back to England to attend Stoneyhurst, a catholic boarding school in Lancashire. In the 1920's travelling to India every year for Christmas and summer holidays was out of the question, so instead, Hugh and his brother James spent their vacations with a bachelor uncle "Harry" and a spinster aunt "May", who lived together in the family home near Dublin. Characteristically, the boys named them "Uncle Dad" and "Aunt Hen".

Hugh studied History at Pembroke College, Cambridge, and art at the Royal Hibernian Academy, but



when he graduated with a Masters degree, he chose to join the Indian Army as an officer, "because I didn't think I was good enough to make a living painting". Once in India, he joined the famous Gurkha Brigades and served two and a half years on the Northwest Frontier, now the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan.

During the Second World War, Hugh remained with the Gurkhas and fought with the British Eighth Army in Palestine, Lebanon, North Africa, and the Italian campaign. He was awarded the Military Cross for his actions at Monte Casino, but the bitter fighting had taken its toll, and he returned to England—a casualty of "shell shock" (post traumatic stress disorder). At the time "shell shock" was not well understood; he was treated with electroshock therapy, and when he was released, he returned to his original love of painting.

In order to support himself, the artist took a job at University College, London, by day and attended the Slade School of Fine Arts at night.

During this time he met Agnes Triggs, née O'Brien, the sister of a school chum, and her young daughter Caroline. Presently Hugh and Agnes married and started a family, settling in to a small house in London. Their first son, Patrick, was born in 1948 and Kevin followed in 1951.

Hugh's goal was to be able to support himself with his art, and in 1949, he discovered that he was earning more from his art than he was from his job. He promptly quit and devoted himself full time to painting. He exhibited in Dublin at the Victor Waddington Galleries in 1950 and at the 'British Bird Art' exhibition at the Belfast Museum and Art Gallery in 1954. He was president of the Wildfowler's Association of Great Britain and Ireland 1953-1956, and co-author of *The Wildfowler's Year*, published 1953.

In post-war England, money was tight, and he found that most of his sales were to American and Canadian buyers. So he began a series of trans-Atlantic painting trips, usually on commission to wealthy sportsmen. In six years he crossed the Atlantic almost 30 times, a notable feat considering the air transportation of the day. This gave him the opportunity to travel throughout Canada and the US, but also took him away from his young family for months at a time—resulting in his decision to move to North America as soon as he could.

In 1956, Hugh and Agnes relocated to Vancouver, British Columbia, where the entire family enthusiastically embraced their new country. Hugh discovered in the Canadian west an unspoiled natural landscape, though he foresaw the conservation concerns of the future long before the environment was a popular cause. He travelled throughout Canada, always with his brushes, his easel, his hunting dog and his camera. He painted Musk Ox in the high Arctic and Canada Geese on the Prairies. He painted coastal scenes in British Columbia and the Maritimes. In the early 1960s, the National Museum of Nature commissioned him to paint several dioramas, five of which are still on display. He was on the first board of directors for the George Reifel Waterfowl Sanctuary at Westham Island B.C. and he worked tirelessly for Ducks Unlimited and other conservation organizations. . He was a member of the Federation of British Columbia Naturalists, of which he served as president, and the British Columbia Waterfowl Society, of which he served as director. He exhibited in Vancouver, British Columbia, and Calgary, Alberta, among other places.



On November 23 1970, Hugh took his painting gear to the Fraser River estuary, near the Reifel Sanctuary. He arrived in the yard of a farmer friend that morning and, intending to spend the afternoon sketching and painting, accepted an invitation for dinner that evening at the farm. Then accompanied by his yellow labrador retriever “Happy”, he hiked out over the dike and onto the mudflats. When Hugh did not return for dinner, his hosts became concerned and went looking for him. They found Hugh lying on the grass with Happy at his side. Hugh had suffered a fatal heart attack, and would paint no more.



Throughout his later life, Hugh was plagued with bouts of depression, a result of his wartime traumas. Though he spiced up any gathering with his colourful observations of life and his inevitable stories, he could never get past the inhumanity of war. So he found solace in the natural world, and honoured it with his art. By the time he moved to Canada, his style had matured considerably, becoming more and more lifelike. The earlier paintings are characterized by almost impressionistic skies.

By the time Hugh died he had created over 3500 paintings, leaving a huge legacy for next generations.

Kevin Monahan
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