



ARENIG

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## **SACRED MOUNTAIN**

ARENIG FAWR & J.D.INNES

On a stormy evening in October 1910, a pale-faced, thin young man, dressed in a long black coat and a black-brimmed Quaker hat, staggered, soaking wet and exhausted into the remote inn at Rhyd-y-Fen, below the northern slopes of Arenig Fawr. He was a 23 year-old Llanelli-born artist. His name was James Dickson Innes.

Two years previously, he had been diagnosed with TB, and after spending days sleeping out on the Migneint, the wild moorland above Llan Ffestiniog, his health had once again collapsed.

The kindly landlord, Washington Davies, took him in, ran a hot bath, fed him, and gave him a bed for the night.

Innes had graduated from the Slade in 1908, got to know fellow Welshman, Augustus John and his bohemian circle, and had made a trip to Collioure, a small fishing village in the South of France, where three years before Derain and Matisse were painting in their new Fauvist style. Early in 1910 he was staying in Paris with fellow artist Matthew Smith, fell in love with the model Euphemia Lamb who became “the lady of his dreams”, and set out with her to walk back to Collioure.

In the late summer of 1910 he was in North Wales, staying with his Aunt Agnes in Penmaenmawr, using her house as a base to explore the mountains. He carried his watercolours, inks, pens, brushes and paper in a leather satchel; and by plotting the locations of his paintings, we can have some idea of his route: Bangor cricket ground with the Carneddau in the distance, Mynydd Mawr from Waenfawr, the Snowdon Horseshoe from Llyn Cwm Ffynnon, Moel Siabod and Llyn y Foel, and Cnicht from Croesor.

He had visited and painted the highest and most dramatic mountains following in the tracks of many notable artists, including Turner whose book *Liber Studiorum* was always with him. It is unclear why he ventured onto the comparatively featureless moorland of the Migneint; however, maybe he was reading George Borrow’s “Wild Wales”, written fifty years before, and decided to follow his account of his walk in the area. Whatever the reason, the Migneint was to have a huge and lasting affect upon him: emotionally, artistically, physically and spiritually.

The Migneint is 15 square miles of low, undulating moorland with the high ground of 1,700feet around its perimeter, dropping to 1,000feet in its flat, marshy centre where the slow, winding Afon Serw eventually drains north to meet the Afon Conwy.

Innes seems to have been indifferent to his health, maybe believing that a cure for his consumption would be found in fresh air and exercise. His habit of sleeping outdoors could be an extreme assertion of this belief but to practise it in a place where the average annual rainfall is six-and-a-half feet, is sheer folly, when the only shelter on offer is the isolated farm of Cefn Garw at its very centre.

From the centre of the moor, Innes would have looked south-east towards the only isolated, twin-peaked summit in Wales; three miles away as the crow flew and 2,800 feet high. He had now seen Arenig Fawr for the first time. It drew him into its orbit, fixed his gaze and filled his soul. He had been looking for a subject that would have meaning for him but he needed to get closer, so with lowering rain clouds and failing health, he stumbled off the moor.

After a few days rest at the inn at Rhyd-y-Fen, Innes must have felt well enough to start drawing and making watercolours. He first started working from the back of the inn, overlooking the marshland of Uwch Mynydd towards Craig Hyrddod where the Nant Llaith tumbles down, and left towards Daeaf Fawr, the prominent north-east spur of the mountain. Later, he would explore the Afon Tryweryn as it headed east with the waterfalls of Boch y Rhaeadr dropping in a series of cataracts towards the flat valley of Cwm Tryweryn. He had an exhibition date to meet at the Chenil Gallery, Chelsea in the following January but he must have felt happy with his situation and the progress of his work.

Innes was a frail-looking young man, softly spoken, with “great personal charm”, kind, amiable, and well-liked. By some of his friends he was referred to as “Sunny Jim”. He would have fitted in well with the other guests and “the local playboy” landlord, as playing music and dancing jigs seem to have been part of the agenda, alongside food and drink.

The inn had its own supply of fresh water from off the mountain, locally cut peat for the glowing fires, carbide gas lamps giving off their soft yellow light, and the sides of “splendid bacon” doubtless hanging from the ceiling hooks.

By November, Innes was back in London, working on his last watercolours for his show in January. However, in December at the Chenil Gallery, Augustus John showed a series of small oils painted on wooden panels which he had completed in the South of France. Innes must have looked hard at these bright, fresh, Fauve-like, plein air landscapes, for it gave him the key to his next move.

He had extolled the virtues of Rhyd-y-Fen and the Arenig area to John, surely reflected in the pictures of his January show which proved to be a reasonable success; and he was continuing his intense love-affair with Euphemia. However, by early March 1911, he was back at Rhyd-y-Fen, armed with oil paints and small wooden panels, waiting for Augustus to show up.

Innes is at Arenig station waiting on the down line platform between the signal box and the water-tower, his back to the mountain, looking over the opposite platform and across to the river below with the rounded shape of Arenig Fach rising from the flat marshland. He is waiting for the train from Bala, can see the smoke as it stops briefly at Capel Celyn Halt, now hears the engine as it comes in sight and steams slowly into the station.

The carriage doors are flung open and various items of luggage are thrown onto the platform. As the steam clears, Innes sees that his friend has arrived: Augustus John has come to Arenig. He is 33 years-old, wealthy, hugely talented, notorious, famous, infamous, a demon draughtsman, a painter of people from rich celebrities to vagrant gypsies, and he has just fetched up at a tiny railway station in the wilds of Merionethshire at the instigation of his young artist friend.

Innes was nervous, on edge, and showed a “certain reserve” at introducing John to his newly-discovered world. Maybe, a pony and trap took John’s luggage by road to the inn, whilst Innes showed John the way back over the rickety footbridge that crossed the river to the path that leads through the marsh, back to the inn. Their conversation must have been animated, as Innes relaxed and shared his enthusiasm and excitement for their new venture together.

This was to become a highly significant meeting in the story of British painting, akin to Van Gogh bringing Gauguin to the Yellow House in Arles. Both John and Innes were at the forefront of avant-garde practise which seemed to be confined to urban subjects as exemplified by the Camden Town Group; however, both Welshmen had returned to the remotest part of their homeland to carry on their work in a way which would deliberately emphasise their plein-air approach with vigorous, direct brushwork inspired by a wild and mountainous landscape.

Innes need not have worried for John loved the place. John wrote to Dorelia to say that Innes had shown him around: “This is the most wonderful place I’ve seen. The air is superb and the mountains wonderful”. He later said that “he felt full of work” and that they had found “the reflection of some miraculous promised land”.

John’s friend John Sampson lived fifteen miles away at Betws Gwerfyl Goch, and very shortly after arriving at Arenig, John and Innes paid him a visit. In fact, they both signed Sampson’s Visitors’ Book on the 12th March, 1911: Innes making an imaginative drawing of mountains which pre-empted his work of a few years later, and John drew a self-portrait wearing a hat and beard. John Sampson was an authority on the Welsh-Romany language, professor and librarian at Liverpool University, and had introduced John to the gypsies ten years before. Sampson’s dictionary of the Romany language was published in 1926, and he was instrumental in teaching John to speak and write the language. With this encouragement, it was John, along with his expanding family, that pushed things further, trying to emulate the gypsy lifestyle by taking a caravan out on the road.

The fascination with the gypsy way of life and all things Romany, manifested itself on a drinking spree in Corwen where both John and Innes took a great liking to a young gypsy girl. She and her family were moving on, so Innes resolved to catch them up. Once again, his health let him down and he was found in a collapsed state on the road to Ruthin.

Back at Rhyd-y-Fen they started painting different aspects of the mountain, using Innes' knowledge of the area from the previous Autumn. John painted a view of the inn which is now sadly untraceable, as Innes began to roam further afield, coming back in the evening with a couple of finished panels, doubtless carried with corner spacers, wet to wet, and tied with string. As John said of Innes: "He was never happier than when painting in this area."

It was going well, and they decided to stay, looking for a more permanent base. They found a cottage at Nant Ddu, one-and-a-half miles south-east from Rhyd-y-Fen for a rent of £10 a year. From here they were looking onto the west side of the mountain and its twin peaks, the very view that had drawn Innes off the Migneint the previous October. Dorelia and Euphemia came to join them but these Spartan surroundings were not conducive and they left fairly soon.

At Nant Ddu, John and Innes worked side by side, as their paintings testify: up the track overlooking the valley between Arenig Fawr and Moel Llyfnant, down by the Afon Tryweryn, and along the path to Amnodd Bwl immediately under the twin summits. The railway line went just below the cottage alongside the stream, less than a mile to the next Halt at Cwm Prysor which was situated by Llyn Tryweryn. In that Spring of 1911, the two artists would have been seen standing next to each other working on their small panels with rapid brushstrokes of fluid oil paint. Their paintings at this time are almost interchangeable with the white clouds scudding over the choppy surface of the lake, and the blue conical shape of Moelwyn Mawr in the distance.

In 1907 John had exchanged studio visits with Picasso in Paris but now in 1911, as John was working with Innes, so Picasso had teamed up with Braque to work together on their Analytical Cubist paintings. Again, their work in Paris was interchangeable with each other; Braque famously saying that they were like two mountaineers roped together on a mountain. However, John and Innes didn't need a rope, for it was the mountain that tied them together.

It was at this time that they were both producing their best work: John's "Llyn Tryweryn" (Tate Britain) is one of his greatest paintings, a vibrant, direct landscape from a master of portraiture; and Innes' "Arenig" (Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge) is topographically and meteorologically accurate, emotionally engaging, awe inspiring, and demonstrates that Innes now had a confident and fluent facility with his new approach. The influences of Hokusai's "Mount Fuji" and Derain's Fauvism are felt in the opaque painted cloud formation placed above the transparent rendering of the mountain slopes, constructed with quick broad, assured brushstrokes. They capture the sunlight and shadow moving over the upper slopes above the farm of Amnodd Wen, where their Welsh Black cattle are grazing in the surrounding fields. The northern flank of Daeaf Fawr is in a Prussian Blue inky shadow, as are the twin summit peaks, whereas the nearer top of Craig y Hyrddod is sunlit and dominated above by the huge formation of cumulus cloud.

On the other hand, another interpretation is possible: the mountain was painted in hot earth colours, volcano-like, with the explosive cloud above emanating from its molten core. Was his possessive attachment to the mountain and his strong feelings towards Euphemia merging together; was the very shape of the summit translating into the female form; the towering clouds above, a climatic consummation of his overwhelming passion and his consuming illness? John had said that he felt that in Innes' mind, Arenig Fawr and Euphemia, were associated together, interchangeable, and becoming one.

As some of the subject-matter was close at hand, so others required a little more walking; as John said: “long rambles over the moors in search of the magical moment”.

The close proximity of the railway line, meant that they could use the train to go further afield, if only for a few stops down the line, as with the series of paintings of Llyn y Garn. One feels that even the resolute-looking Harriet James, the station-mistress at the Cwm Prysor Halt, would have sanctioned a short pause, three miles away at Bryncelynog for her famous passengers to leave the train with their painting gear. From there, a short scramble would have got them to the lake, where they could look east towards the Arenig and south to view the long ridge of Cadair Idris. Again, this beautiful remote location produced a series of paintings by both artists that capture the distinct heather banks that characteristically edge and fall into the waters of the lake.

During this period both artists periodically came and went from Nant Ddu: Innes often travelling back to the South of France where the mountains of Canigou and Tour Madeloc continued his fascination for high peaks; whilst John took off on various drinking expeditions with the like of Howard de Walden, the then tenant of Chirk Castle.

On one occasion before returning to Nant Ddu, Innes wrote to Mr Davies: the quarryman, amateur geologist and father of Washington; asking him if he would light the fires to warm up the cottage before his imminent return. The peat cut around Nant Ddu was black, as opposed to brown around Rhyd-y-Fen but the heat generated was the same.

Euphemia would return periodically with Innes, and influenced by John's use of models posing in the landscape, stood for him in front of Arenig Fawr, amongst the boulders of the stream, on the shore of Llyn Tryweryn and uniquely sitting at a dressing table inside the cottage at Nant Ddu.

Some of these paintings appeared in the great Armoury Show in New York in 1913, their inclusion being arranged by John's patron, John Quinn. Innes showed six works, and John thirty-eight; he was the second largest contributor after Odilon Redon. Euphemia not only appeared in the exhibition as a model in Innes' pictures but was the subject of a statue by Jacob Epstein.

In April of that year Innes had his second one-man exhibition at the Chenil Gallery, and this proved to be a huge success, both critically and financially, with sales grossing over £700; a considerable sum of money for the time. The major, large-scale and final statement on Arenig Fawr was the centre-piece of this show: "Arenig, North Wales" (Tate Britain) painted in London from sketches, an intimate knowledge of the location and the memories of the last two-and-half years of intense activity.

Innes' health was deteriorating but at some point he must have felt strong enough to go back up the mountain for one last time, carrying a silver casket of Euphemia's love-letters which he buried in a stone cairn on the summit. It was a votive offering that joined his two great passions together in one selfless, deeply romantic act of love. A way of saying thank you and adieu.

He now spent his time in Morocco recuperating and convalescing but soon returned to his parent's home in Tavistock. From there he writes that he is still sleeping out of doors and knows the night sky well. However, in one deeply tragic letter, a feeling of hiraeth overwhelms him, and he wishes he was back in Wales as "I find myself to be very much the Welshman".

In 1914 he was admitted to a nursing home in Kent, where John and Dorelia took Euphemia to visit him. "The meeting of these two was painful - we left them alone together: it was the last time I saw him." He died on the 22nd August, 1914, aged just 27.

John said that he would have liked to rest beside the summit cairn of Arenig Fawr. He was buried with his family in Tavistock.



John gave up the rent of Nant Ddu ( the cottage was demolished in the 1960's). Washington Davies, the kindly landlord at Rhyd-y-Fen, was declared bankrupt, and the property sold at auction. It became a farm and has remained so ever since. John moved on to become even more famous and wealthy, as a society portrait painter.

He did return in 1931 to give the gypsy funeral oration in Romany for his friend John Sampson, on the slopes of Foel Goch, above the village of Llangwm, surrounded by gypsy harpists and fiddlers. It was said that tears were streaming down his face as he walked back down the mountain but he said that it was only the wind in his eyes.

Finally, in 1955, he made his last visit to North Wales to make a chalk drawing of John Cowper Powys in Blaenau Ffestiniog. His daughter Vivien drove the car so that John would have seen the old places that he had known passing by: they would have gone right past Rhyd-y-Fen, as the old road still went that way; looked across the marsh and river to the little station of Arenig, as the trains were still running; then going over and along the winding road that takes you through the wild, open emptiness of the Migneint, and looking back on the left at the twin peaks of Arenig Fawr. He knew that it was here, forty-five years ago, that he was involved in a unique episode in British art, and that he had produced his best and most vital work.

His regard for Innes' work was immense: "By the intensity of his vision and his passionately romantic outlook, his work will live..."

Did Innes' many paintings of Arenig Fawr become symbolic stations and lit candles placed at the foot of his altar-mountain that with a religious-like fervour and commitment, was now as one with the woman he worshipped? As John wrote, Arenig Fawr had become and "remained ever his sacred mountain".

Keith Bowen

J. D. INNES (1887 -1914) 'THE HEAVY CLOUD ARENIG'

oil on panel c.1910 30 x 40cm



J. D. INNES (1887 -1914) 'THUNDER IN THE MOUNTAINS'

watercolour and pencil c.1910 28 x 38cm



J. D. INNES (1887 -1914) 'LAKE AND MOUNTAINS'

oil on panel c.1910 30 x 40cm



J. D. INNES (1887 -1914) 'ROCKY COVE'

oil on panel 32 x 40cm





KEITH BOWEN b.1950 'ARENIG FAWR, AMNODD BWLL'

pastel and conte crayon 2014 38 x 50cm



KEITH BOWEN b.1950 'ARENIG FAWR, MOUNTAIN WALL'

pastel and conte crayon 2014 76 x 50cm



KARINA ROSANNE BARRETT b.1981 'FARM, ARENIG VALLEY'

acrylic on linen 2014 40 x 40cm



KARINA ROSANNE BARRETT b.1981 'EIRA, ARENIG'

acrylic on linen 2014 40 x 40cm





MARTIN COLLINS b.1941 'MOONRISE OVER ARANIG FAWR'

oil on canvas 2014 24 x 29cm



MARTIN COLLINS b.1941 'ON ARENIG FAWR'

oil on canvas 2014 49 x 55cm



CLIVE HICKS-JENKINS b.1951 'STILL LIFE UNDER ARENIG'

oil on panel 2014 33 x 31cm



DARREN HUGHES b.1970 'ARANIG FROM LLYN CELYN'

mixed media on canvas 2014 40 x 100cm





DARREN HUGHES b.1970 'TOWARDS ARENIG QUARRY'

mixed media on paper on board 2014 32 x 96cm



MARY LLOYD JONES b.1934 'ARENIG I'

mixed media 2014 34 x 70cm



MARY LLOYD JONES b.1934 'ARENIG IV'

mixed media 2014 20 x 25cm



GARETH PARRY b.1951 'ARENIG FAWR A LLYN TREWERYN'

oil on canvas 2014 50 x 60cm





GARETH PARRY b.1951 'O'R MIGNEINT, ARENIG'

oil on canvas 2014 50 x 60cm



IWAN GWYN PARRY b.1970 'THE HIGH SLOPE OF ARENIG'

oil on linen 2014 25 x 30cm



IWAN GWYN PARRY b.1970 'ARENIG AT SUNDOWN'

oil on linen 2014 25 x 30cm



GWILYM PRICHARD b.1931 'ARENIG I'

oil on canvas 2014 38 x 55cm





GWILYM PRICHARD b.1931 'ARENIG III'

oil on canvas 2014 33 x 46cm



GWILYM PRICHARD b.1931 'ARENIG V'

mixed media 2014 25 x 32cm



WILF ROBERTS b.1941 'ARENIG FAWR I'

oil on canvas 2014 30 x 60cm





WILF ROBERTS b.1941 'ARENIG FAWR II'

oil on canvas 2014 40 x 60cm





WILLIAM SELWYN b.1933 'ARENIG FROM LLYN TRYWERYN I'

mixed media 2014 37 x 52cm



WILLIAM SELWYN b.1933 'ARENIG FROM LLYN TRYWERYN II'

mixed media 2014 19 x 27cm



SARAH THWAITES b.1959 'LOOKING ACROSS LLYN CELYN'

acrylic on board 2014 15 x 61cm



SARAH THWAITES b.1959 'LOOKING UP, ARENIG FAWR'

acrylic on canvas board 2014 20 x 20cm





CATRIN WILLIAMS b.1966 'YN ÔL I / RETURN I'

mixed media 2014 20 x 28cm



CATRIN WILLIAMS b.1966 'YN ÔL II / RETURN II'

mixed media 2014 20 x 28cm



DAVID WOODFORD b.1938 'DYFFRYN TRYWERYN, UNDER ARENIG FAWR'

oil on panel 2014 41 x 94cm





DAVID WOODFORD b.1938 'GLISTENING ARENIG FAWR'

oil on board 2014 17 x 40cm





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