

JAMES DICKSON INNES ~ *by Brian Davies*

This short article gives a brief look at the life and work of a young, Llanelli-born artist who, in a short lifetime (he died at the age of twenty-seven), became an important figure in British Art, and is deservedly recognised as Llanelli's most famous artist. Since his death, in 1914, his significance as an artist has received recognition in several exhibitions, including one at Southampton Art Gallery in 1977, which subsequently went on to the National Museum of Wales, Cardiff, The Fine Art Society, London, and Manchester Art Gallery. In 1961, an exhibition was held at the Graves Art Gallery, Sheffield, and subsequently at the Glyn Vivian Art Gallery, Swansea, and the National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth. In 1982, the work of Innes, together with that of his two close friends, Augustus John and Derwent Lees, was exhibited at the Mostyn Art Gallery, Llandudno, under the title 'Some Miraculous Promised Land: J. D. Innes, Augustus John and Derwent Lees in North Wales 1910-13. In 1987, Llanelli itself arranged an exhibition to commemorate Innes's birth, with the artist's works being exhibit in the Nevill Memorial Gallery, Llanelli Public Library. Moreover, Innes's importance as an artist is recognised by the wide range of important British art galleries that hold examples of his works, and particularly that a fine collection is held by the Tate Gallery, London. A good collection of his work is also held by the Parc Howard Museum and Art Gallery. This article, therefore, seeks to explore what it was about Innes that brought such acclaim.



James Dickson Innes
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James Dickson Innes was born in Llanelli on 27 February 1887. At that time his parents, John and Alice Innes lived in Greenfield Villas, in Murray Street, though they were shortly to move to live in New Road, and later to Old Road, both locations being close to the village of Furnace. These locations, were to be significant in James Dickson's life as he was attracted to the quarry in Furnace where he produced a number of fine paintings in his early career, and was also attracted to the gipsies encamped in Furnace at the time.



John Innes Llanelly Guardian
17th May 1923

From an early age he showed his ability in drawing, and this was encouraged by his parents. His father, John, is best known as a historian who produced the fine history of the town, *Old Llanelly*, published in 1902, but it is important to recognise that he was also interested in the idea of promoting art classes in Llanelli. When the Revd Iona Williams, minister of Park Congregational Church from 1900 to 1913, was himself in promoting art in Llanelli, he consulted several leading men in the town, including John Innes, who encouraged him in an attempt to form an art school, and promised his wholehearted support.¹ Williams stated that John Innes said that he had attempted to do this but had failed. John Innes, therefore, had a great interest in art, and would have been pleased at the talent his son showed from an early age.

Similarly, Alice Innes had a great admiration of her son's works. This was borne out by Alice Ley who, from 1910, was in domestic service with the Innes family at their home in Old Road, putting her in the position of being able to observe the family at first hand. When interviewed at her home in Miles Street, years later, by Harry Davies, she said that Mrs Innes was 'very retiring', and spent much of her time in her bedroom, where the walls were covered by Dickie's

¹ Samuel, W. John, *The History of Park Church, Llanelly, 1839-1954* (Cardiff: Western Mail & Echo Ltd.), p. 51.

watercolours and oil paintings from skirting to ceiling.² Evidently, however, Alice Innes's admiration for her son's works was not shared by Alice Ley, who told Harry Davies 'I never much cared for them. Many of them seemed to be a blaze of pink. He was nearly always painting sunsets.'³ Alice Miles's observation, in fact, is very interesting, as Innes was well acquainted with Turner's paintings of sunsets. His friend Fothergill wrote of Innes that 'the Turner watercolours, then in the National Gallery, were his ideal and almost daily visitation, and, so long as I knew him, he always carried a book of Constable's coloured reproductions'.⁴

Given this support and encouragement from his parents it was not surprising, then, that John and Alice Innes supported their son's entry to the Carmarthen School of Art in 1904, where he was able to focus his attention on the subject that mattered most to him. Here again he was fortunate in the fact that the School of Art had an outstanding Principal, and a capable landscape artist, in William Jones, under whose guidance the school had prospered.

Evidently, Innes's remarkable artistic ability was appreciated and encouraged at Carmarthen and, after a successful year, he gained admission to the prestigious Slade School, London, in 1905, where, in effect, he was now among some of the elite art students of his generation. One of his contemporaries at the Slade was Derwent Lees, who was himself to become a significant figure in British Art, and there can be no doubt that they were the two most outstanding students of that year's intake. In fact, they were to become close friends, and went on painting journeys together. They even collaborated on one painting, with the finished product signed D Leesinnes.

It was during his first academic year at the Slade of 1905-06 that Innes effectively proved how outstanding his ability in Art was, as he was one of the two students to be awarded the prestigious Slade Scholarship in Fine Art, after competing for the award in a very demanding competition.

To enter the competition for this award, students had to have attended the day classes in the Fine Art School of the College during the Session preceding the date of election, and no-one was admissible who had not entered those classes before the 16 November in the session in which he competed. Each candidate also had to produce satisfactory evidence of having studied with credit in some public school or approved place of secondary education or, in default, of having passed an examination in General Knowledge as determined by the College. Innes, of course, had registered from the beginning of the session, and had been a regular attender at the classes. Moreover, his acceptance for the competition shows that he had obtained a creditable standard in his past education. All this did, however, was to enable him to proceed with the competition itself.

The competition for the Slade Scholarship was very demanding, as it began with an examination that was held in the College in January. Candidates had to send written notice of their intention to be examined not later than the 31 December. Also, on the practical side, the competition for the Scholarship consisted in various works of drawing and painting, or drawing and sculpture, including composition, which was prescribed by the Slade Professor from time to time, and the times when those works were to be executed were announced every year.

Innes had sufficient confidence in his ability to merit entering the competition, even though he was competing against some of the finest young artists in the country. In the event, his confidence was justified as, together with another student, M. Symons, he was awarded the Slade Scholarship of £35 per annum for the next two academic sessions over 1906 to 1908. When it is recalled that his fee for the entire session of 1905 to 1906 had been £21 it can be seen how valuable this award was, as it would allow him extra money, after the fees, for the session had been paid.

² Harry Davies, 'John Innes and his artist son', in *Looking Around Llanelli with Harry Davies*, ed. by Gareth Hughes, illustrated by Vernon Hurford (Llanelli Town Council, 1985), 127-128 (p. 127).

³ Harry Davies, 'John Innes and his artist son', p. 128.

⁴ Fothergill, *James Dickson Innes*, p.11.

At the Slade - and indeed in London itself with its numerous public and commercial art galleries - Innes was in a milieu in which he thrived. Moreover, at the Slade itself, he was undoubtedly influenced by Wilson Steer, even going so far as to follow in Steer's footsteps to Chepstow where he painted the castle very much in Steer's style. This is not to say that he found everything easy, however, as figure drawing, for example, was not Innes's forte, even though he won a competition for figure drawing at the Slade. His friend John Fothergill wrote that 'At the Slade School Innes found figure drawing as impossible to learn as he had always found spelling and he hated his wretched efforts.'⁵

During his time at the Slade Innes kept in touch with his close artist friend in Llanelli, Walter Cole, who lived in Als Street.⁶ Cole, who was four years older than Innes, was enthusiastic about art and was a very competent artist. Later in his life he was to play an important role in the development of art in the town, in the late 1920s and early 1930s acting as an encouragement to young, competent artists Bromfield Rees, Robert Portsmouth, and John Bowen, who met at his house to discuss art.

The strength of this friendship between Innes and Cole is shown by a letter written by Innes to Cole in October 1908 from his new home in 10 Fitzroy Street, and inviting his Llanelli friend to visit, saying that 'I would like to see you very much while you are up here', and giving Cole advice on how to find his house from Tottenham Court Road.⁷ He suggests that Sunday afternoon would probably be the best time for Cole to visit, when he would be able to show some work to him, and then suggests that Cole 'take dinner' with him in the evening when he would be able to meet some of Innes's friends. Cole, who enjoyed discussions about art, would have loved that, and he would also have appreciated Innes informing him that 'you are coming at a marvelous (sic) time, as the pictures at the Franco-British Exhibition (sic) are marvelous (sic) and of course (sic) one seldom has an opportunity (sic) of seeing such a good collection of French pictures anywhere except in Paris.'⁸

Importantly, this close friendship with Cole kept Innes in touch with what was happening in Llanelli, and he was particularly pleased to hear from Cole of the formation of the Llanelli School of Art in 1907, commenting to Cole that it was a brave man who could take this on. That 'brave man' was, in fact, Henry Giles who lived in Carmarthen and was an accomplished artist himself. Innes, of course, would have been well aware of the efforts his father had made to form such a school, and of the difficulties that would be involved in sustaining it. Giles's appointment, in fact, was to prove a huge success, and he was to remain as Principal of the Art School until ill-health caused him to resign in 1911, playing a significant role in establishing it as an important institution in Llanelli. As well as teaching the techniques of Art, Giles ensured that Art was the subject of discussion and, after the School had closed for the day, Cole relates how he and other students would walk down to the station with Giles, talking about Art.

Innes was also gratified to hear from Cole of the involvement of William Charles Mansel Lewis of Stradey Castle in the formation of the Art School. Mansel Lewis, who was an outstanding artist himself, had done much to promote Art in Llanelli through lectures, and loan exhibitions.

In 1908, Innes went on a painting journey with John Fothergill, which took them through Bozouls and on to Collioure, a beautiful and picturesque Catalan town situated at the foothills of the Pyrenees, on the shore of the Mediterranean Sea, and close to the Spanish border. Collioure, with its castle, church, and brightly painted buildings forming an arc around a pretty port with its intensely blue water, had already attracted important French artists in Henri Matisse and Andre Derain. Their new style of painting in the town, developed as an emotional response to its landscape rather than attempting to be a faithful representation, was to lead to them being called 'Fauvists', derived from the French word for 'wild beasts'.

⁵ John Fothergill and Lillian Browne, *James Dickson Innes* (London: Faber and Faber, 1946), p. 6.

⁶ Brian Davies, 'Walter Cole' in *Llanelli Miscellany*, ed. by John Edwards, 18, 90th Anniversary Edition (Llanelli WEA in collaboration with Llanelli Historical Society, 2004-2005), pp. 69-74.,

⁷ James Dickson Innes, Letter to Walter Cole, 19 October 1908, Llanelli Public Library Archives, ref: LC 251.

⁸ Innes, Letter to Cole, 1908.

As with Matisse and Derain, the visit to this town also had a profound effect upon Innes, for ‘now he had his fill of heat, light and gaudy local colour, and his all-excelling sense of colour was awakened’.⁹ In fact, later, the effect of the visit to Collioure was seen in Innes’s Welsh paintings in which, as Fothergill says, ‘he gave to Wales the same vivid greens, purples and changing colours that he had seen in France.’¹⁰ This was also observed by Lillian Browse who, after doing some climbing near Arenig, commented to Fothergill about ‘how laughingly ‘Innes’ the scenes were’.¹¹

Fothergill himself made the shrewd observation that if it had not been for the visit to Collioure ‘we might have had in Innes just one more exponent of pale English sunshine and veiled charm’¹². Interestingly, Fothergill who, of course, as a lecturer at the Slade was very familiar with the other lecturers, says that Wilson Steer had once told him that Spain was unpaintable which, to Fothergill, meant that he preferred the approach of ‘veiled charm’. For all the influence of Steer on Innes, however, Fothergill recognised Innes’s independence of mind, and he comments that ‘Steer liked the veil [...] Innes tore it away and got nature with the brilliance of stained glass.’

In 1909, Innes spent a considerable time convalescing at St Ives in Cornwall, where he was nursed by his mother. Already he was showing signs of the illness that was eventually to lead to his early death. Something of the fear he experienced can be detected in eight letters to Fothergill, which are now preserved in the Tate Gallery’s archives. In one of these he wrote a chilling poem unfolding his feelings, three lines of which read:

Pneumonia and drink appeared to me, and terror appeared in Heaven above
And in Hell beneath and a mighty and awful change threatened my earth
‘And the Germicidal war began. All its dark horror passed before my face.’¹³



Brian Davies at Collioure, 14 June 2008. The author felt that it was important to visit Collioure, in the footsteps of Innes, to appreciate the intense light and colour of the place that had so inspired the artist.

It is important to appreciate, therefore, that Innes was working continually under this cloud, and goes some way to explain the haste with which he produced works. Augustus John, with whom he worked so much,

⁹ Fothergill, *James Dickson Innes*, p. 8.

¹⁰ Fothergill, *James Dickson Innes*, p. 8.

¹¹ Fothergill, *James Dickson Innes*, p. 8.

¹² Fothergill, *James Dickson Innes*, p. 8.

¹³ Letter by James Dickson Innes to John Fothergill, Tate Gallery Archives, London, ref: 7121.5.

commented that ‘his passionate devotion to the landscape of his choice provided so a way of escape from his consciousness of the malady which already was casting its shadow across his days [...] This it was that hastened his steps across the moors and lent his brush a greater swiftness [...]’¹⁴

By 1910, the Innes family in Llanelli lived at ‘Orchard Croft’ in Old Road, where they had been for some years. Their housekeeper, Alice Ley, informed Harry Davies that, during this time, James Dickson used to come home once or twice a year, but not at the usual holiday times such as Christmas or Easter. ‘We used to think’, she said, ‘that he only came home for a clean-up.’¹⁵ She said that, like his brothers, he was ‘kind and nice’. However, laughing at the recollection to Harry Davies, she recalled Innes as ‘a very thin young man, with hair down to his shoulders, and in a frock coat which was torn and greasy, and wearing a flat black hat’, dressed, as she saw it, in such a way as made him look like a character out of Dickens.¹⁶



Orchard Croft ~ courtesy of Steffan Day
~ Davies Craddock



Photo of gipsy encampment at Furnace at the time Innes painted in the area

Importantly, Alice also recalled to Harry Davies that Innes ‘was fond of the gipsies and used to live very rough’. On these occasional holidays in Llanelli, when Innes often went on painting expeditions around Furnace and elsewhere in the neighborhood, he didn’t have far to go to meet gipsies as, further up the road from the Furnace Quarry and close to Furnace Pond were the caravans of the gipsies who lived in the area. Innes, therefore, on these periodic visits to Llanelli, had plenty of opportunities to spend time with them. Clearly, the long-haired, long-coated, bohemian young man found in them a people whose life-style he identified with.

Nevertheless, for all his eccentricity, Innes was an attractive man, as portraits of him by Rutherstone and Strang in the National Portrait Gallery confirm. Like his close friends, John and Lees, he had affairs with women but, for all the women that Innes was associated with, however, the love of his life was undoubtedly the beautiful, artist’s model, Euphemia Lamb, wife of the artist Henry Lamb. A letter written by Innes to Fothergill in January 1909 shows that Innes wrote poems about her, but it was when they met at a café in Paris, in 1910, that Innes fell in love with her.¹⁷ From here, the two of them set out on foot on a romantic journey to the south of France, supporting themselves by Euphemia dancing in the cafes, and Innes, probably, able to offer drawings of localities to the inhabitants of villages on the way.

In the autumn of 1910 Innes began a close friendship with Augustus John. Holroyd asserts that Innes had met Augustus John in the autumn of 1907, and this dating is followed by most writers, though it should be noted that John himself said of Innes that ‘I met him in London shortly after he left the Slade, and ever since we were much together.’¹⁸ Probably there had been a casual meeting in 1907, but it was not until late 1910 that the friendship became close.

By this time Innes had become enthusiastic about the mountains of North Wales, and he spoke to John of an inn that he had discovered in the Arenig valley, near Bala, suggesting that they go there. John went to Llanelli to meet Innes at his house in Old Road, as agreed, but found that the younger man had already left. Nevertheless, Innes’s parents made John welcome to stay and, next morning, he left for Bala, and joined Innes at Arenig. The meeting between the two artists was cordial, though John writes that ‘I seemed to detect a certain reserve on his part: he was experiencing, I fancy, the scruples of a lover on introducing a

¹⁴ Augustus John, *J.D. Innes Exhibition Catalogue* (Sheffield: Graves Art Gallery, 1961), p. 4.

¹⁵ Harry Davies, ‘John Innes and his artist son’, p. 127.

¹⁶ Harry Davies, ‘John Innes and his artist son’, p. 127.

¹⁷ Letter by James Dickson Innes to John Fothergill, Tate Gallery Archives, London, ref: 7121.6.

¹⁸ John, *J.D. Innes*, p. 3.

friend to his best girl – in this case, the mountain before us, which he regarded, with good reason, as his spiritual property.¹⁹ This mountain, Arenig, was in fact, was to become the dominating artistic motif of Innes's life.

The inn at Rhyd-y-Fen that Innes had found was very suited to John's taste, with its publican, Washington Davies – the 'playboy of the district', as John called him – feeding Innes and John on Welsh mutton, and sometimes entertaining them in the evenings with Welsh jigs.²⁰ Moreover, it was conveniently placed for their painting of the mountains. There they became engrossed in their work, and decided later, to acquire a more permanent place to stay. Looking around they discovered several dwellings which were unfortunately in ruins, but eventually they discovered a cottage at Nant-Ddu, a mile or so to the west of Rhyd-y-Fen. Importantly, as John wrote, 'it looked out on Arenig'²¹.

Innes, John felt, was never happier than when painting in this district of North Wales, and he also recognised and appreciated the vision of the younger man 'as he set down in a single sitting, view after jeweled view of the delectable mountain he loved, before darkness came to hide everything except a dim but inextinguishable glow, perceived by him as the reflection of some miraculous promised land'.²² Here on the moorlands and mountains they were both free from any academic theorizing about what should be painted, or how.

Undoubtedly, John influenced Innes in creating quick oil sketches on wooden panels, but it is also true that Innes greatly inspired John. It is not so much that John copied Innes in any way – he was far too great an artist to do that – but simply that Innes's passion for the landscape of North Wales, and his lucidity and immediacy of touch in painting it, were inspirational. For John, painting on the mountains next to Innes was a liberating experience, and this is seen in his landscapes of 1911 to 1912 which display this new freedom. Nine years older than Innes, and greatly admired for his ability, John was impressed with Innes's output which was he described as 'prodigious', and wrote of the younger artist that 'he rarely returned of an evening without a couple of panels completed'.²³ As John's excellent biographer, Michael Holroyd comments, 'The effect of this upon Augustus was extraordinary. Never before had he met someone whose swiftness exceeded his own. What he had done at the Slade for others, Innes, acting as a pacemaker, could now do for him.'²⁴

However, although Innes painted rapidly, it was not that he was simply trying to put a lot of paintings together with little effort, as artists often did. Rather, to Innes, these were serious paintings executed quickly only to capture the intensity of certain moments. Moreover, for Innes, this was not simply packing his equipment in the morning and going to a fixed spot. Rather, it meant long and arduous walks over the moors in search of what John described as 'the magic moment'.²⁵

This period in 1911, and subsequently, cannot be adequately covered in this article, but it should be mentioned that, in 1912, Innes and John were joined in North Wales by Derwent Lees, and that these three men created something that was unique and important in British art. As such, their work in this period was, with great justification, the subject of an important exhibition at the Mostyn Gallery, Llandudno, in 1982, appropriately entitled with a phrase taken from John's writings, 'Some Miraculous Promised Land'. For this, a catalogue was produced, with a good introduction by Eric Rowan.

John thought highly of Innes's work, and generously mentioned this to John Quinn, an important American collector of Modern Art. It was John who kept Quinn informed about contemporary British art, and he

¹⁹ Augustus John, *Chiaroscuro: Fragments of Autobiography* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1952), pp. 202-203.

²⁰ John, *Chiaroscuro*, p. 203.

²¹ John, *Chiaroscuro*, p. 203.

²² John, *J.D. Innes*, p. 5.,

²³ John, *Chiaroscuro*, p.203.

²⁴ Michael Holroyd, *Augustus John: The New Biography* (London: Vintage, 1997), p. 355.

²⁵ John, *Chiaroscuro*, p.203.

informed him about Innes's ability and persuaded him to purchase four of Innes's watercolours. This was a big break for Innes not simply because of the new patronage of Quinn, but also because of Quinn's international status as an art collector. In 1913, for example, all six of Innes's paintings in Gallery G at the important Armory Display were loaned by Quinn, so Innes's works were hanging in the same gallery as those of Augustus John, Gwen John, and others. In this prestigious exhibition, which included works by Van Gogh, Monet, and so on, Innes's art reached the widest audience, and his status as an important contemporary artist was assured.

By 1914, however, Innes was suffering from the final stages of tuberculosis, and his life was drawing to a close. He was taken to Brighton where he was cared for devotedly by his mother, and he was visited on several occasions by Augustus John together with another friend, Horace Cole. He was also visited by Frank Slade who, on his visit, found Innes 'in a good room almost opposite the West Pier', and that wrote that he was 'pretty bad but cheery'²⁶. Innes told Slade that he had been visited by Augustus John and Trelawney Reed, and that he had been amused by them exciting a crowd on the pier by doing a mock suicide, jumping off the pier, but landing on the beach instead of the sea.

From Brighton, Innes was taken to a nursing home in Swanley, Kent, where his mother continued to care for him. Here, again, he was visited by Augustus John and Horace Cole, who came, very poignantly, accompanied by Innes's great love, Euphemia Lamb. It was only four years earlier that, as an attractive couple, they had made the romantic journey together to the south of France but now she was seeing Innes in his final days. John wrote that 'The meeting of these two was painful: we left them alone together: it was the last time I saw him.'²⁷ From John's account we also learn that Innes, romantically, had buried a silver casket containing love letters from Euphemia under the cairn on the summit of Arenig, and, he adds, 'I think he always associated Euphemia with that mountain and would have liked at the last to lie beneath the cairn.'²⁸ .

James Dickson Innes died of tuberculosis on 22 August, 1914.

Innes's greatness as an artist lay in this vision of the landscape that he had, which he was able to express uniquely in form and colour. He had the ability to see things quickly, and with an acute awareness of colour, which he could then translate into his own artistic form. In a letter to Fothergill, written from St. Ives in January 1909, for example, he describes how, in a storm that was then raging in the town, he had seen 'Huge waves breaking over a rock which is about 70 foot high and spray becoming like rain and drifting a great way. The sea is like a mackerel all purple and green with great white horses all chassing (sic) each other about.'²⁹ This was the quick perception of form and colour that he brought to his paintings.

In conclusion, therefore, it can be said that he was a true original. As might be expected of a young and developing artist, many of his earlier works owe something to the influence over him of others, notably Wilson Steer, John Sell Cotman, and indeed, Augustus John. However, as Fothergill, who had observed Innes painting at first-hand, comments, 'At his best he was a lone star. He seems to have followed no-one [...].'³⁰ Augustus John, who was not easy to please, and was well aware of Innes's weakness in drawing, described him as a 'naif' and, in a letter dated to John Quinn dated 15 June 1911, as an 'entirely original chap and that's saying a lot. He is not the sort who learns anything. He will die innocent and a virgin intellectually which I think a charming and very rare thing.'³¹

²⁶ Frank Slade, 'Memories of Dick Innes', manuscript (1958), Tate Gallery Archives, 937.1, p.6.

²⁷ John, *Chiaroscuro*, p. 206.

²⁸ John, *Chiaroscuro*, p. 206.

²⁹ James Dickson Innes, letter to John Fothergill, 15 January 1909, Tate Gallery Archives, London, ref: 7121.4.

³⁰ Fothergill, *James Dickson Innes*, p. 12.

³¹ Quoted in Michael Holroyd, *Augustus John: The New Biography* (London: Vintage, 1997), p. 355.

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