

INTRODUCTION

In November 1985, two exhibitions opened in Manchester which had the symbolic effect of a family reunion. Gwen and Augustus John had been brother and sister, they had studied at the same art school and had shared overlapping circles of friends. Yet they had gone on to live and work in quite separate worlds. And it was only in Manchester – forty-six years after Gwen’s death, twenty-four years after Augustus’s – that so much of their art would be seen in such close proximity.

‘Augustus John and Friends’ was hung in the grandly neoclassical space of the Manchester City Gallery, and with its parade of portraits – of poets, painters, actors and expensive women – it played to all the swagger of Augustus’s public image. ‘Gwen John: An Interior Life’ was, by contrast, everything its title intimated. Housed within the cool grey space of the Athenaeum, the paintings and drawings were not only smaller, but their palette was more muted, their forms and atmosphere more quietly strange.

As critics observed, the pairing of these shows was a unique opportunity to analyse the contrasting registers of the siblings’ work – the ‘variable, strident chords’ of his, the ‘sustained minor key’ of hers – an opportunity, also, to speculate on the contrasting registers of their lives.¹

Augustus had been the younger of the two by eighteen months, yet his career had rapidly outstripped his sister’s. His draughtsmanship had been compared to Raphael, to Rembrandt; his painting had crossed

genre from portraiture, to modernist landscape, to epic, lyric fantasy. By the time he was thirty-five, he was recognized as one of the most imposing personages on the London art scene, and the writer Virginia Woolf was only being half ironic when she described the early years of the twentieth century as ‘The Age of Augustus John’.

But the trajectory of Augustus’s success was driven not only by his art but by his personal notoriety. He was charismatically handsome, he dressed like a bohemian, he lived, drank and travelled like one too. And the women in his life became the stuff of legend – not only his wife Ida and lover Dorelia, with whom he tried to create a radically open marriage – but the many, many others with whom he had affairs. This, at the time, was fabulously wicked behaviour, and the prices Augustus was able to command for his work were driven in part by the thrilling adumbrations of his image.

Living and working in the shadow of her prodigious brother, Gwen’s story inevitably appeared smaller. Talented though she was, she lacked Augustus’s boldness and, when she settled in Paris in 1904, she had no interest in emulating his world. She had a decade-long relationship with Auguste Rodin, yet she never chose to advertise her intimacy with the sculptor, and never sought to become part of his milieu. Her own work, as it evolved from meticulous self-portraits to rapt explorations of colour, texture and form, became, in part, a study of her inner life. By the time Gwen converted to Catholicism in 1913, she was already regarded as something of a recluse – a pale anchoress who was dedicated to God and her art. She died in 1939, and it would be several decades before her talent received the same critical and biographical scrutiny as her brother’s.

Much of that scrutiny would centre on the differences between them. Yet, although the two Johns were powerfully complex as individuals, the starting point of this book is what connected them as siblings – the forces that shaped their lives, the friends they shared, the books and the art they had in common, and, above all, the tangle of love, antagonism, exasperation and sympathy they felt towards each other.

As Augustus himself acknowledged, the closeness between them had been forged in the darkness of their childhood. Growing up in the Welsh seaside town of Tenby, they and their two siblings had suffered the

bewildering early death of their mother, and the painfully inadequate parenting of their father. Edwin John had tried to do his best by his children, but, an anxious inhibited man, he'd turned into a petty disciplinarian. The four little Johns had feared him at first, then they had learned to mock him.

However, if this sad, semi-orphaned childhood had blighted the Johns, it had also steeled in them a determination to escape. For Gwen and Augustus, who'd been drawing since they were small, their route out of Tenby was art. In 1894, when sixteen-year-old Augustus was allowed to enrol at the Slade, it was imperative to Gwen that she would follow, and when they were students in London, shedding their awkwardly provincial teenage selves, they shared a rickety lodging house in Fitzrovia, went to parties and anarchist meetings, fell in and out of love – and recorded much of it on paper and canvas.

Years later, when Augustus wrote about Gwen, he would argue that, however widely their lives had diverged, they had always been cut from the same temperamental cloth: 'We were not opposites but much the same really . . . we took a different attitude.'² Beneath the surface of his own public flamboyance and Gwen's reclusiveness, they had other qualities in common – a scorn for banality, a yearning for beauty and love. They were also, equally, victim to tendencies which Augustus believed were genetic – a susceptibility to depression (which in his case could be crippling) and an awkwardness with strangers (which he was much more successful at concealing). They recognized themselves in each other and, when Ida died in 1907, and when Rodin died in 1917, they came instinctively to each other's support.

Gwen would be almost the only person to continue calling her brother by his childhood diminutive 'Gus'. Yet their relationship was not easy. If there was love and sympathy between them, there was also conflict – a conflict which, for Gwen in particular, was bound up with an old and unexamined sibling rage. Growing up as the two middle children of the family, and very close in age, they had naturally been competitive with each other. But Augustus, infuriated by his sister's eighteen-month advantage, had gone through a period when his competitiveness had hardened into bullying. Gwen had battled against him then, and, long after she'd gone to Paris, she still had occasional nightmares about their

fighters. When Augustus, generously flush with money and contacts, had wanted to help Gwen, she had sometimes felt only that he was trying to control her.

Augustus had been a foot taller than Gwen, larger in every way, and he'd been able to dominate her with all the advantages of his sex. As a boy, he'd been given a far more solid academic education than her, and even at the Slade, famously progressive in its acceptance of women students, there had been a subtle enforcing of that same inequality. With an all-male teaching staff and a curriculum focused around old masters, it was tacitly acknowledged that, once the students graduated, only the men were likely to have successful careers.

In 1898, when Gwen and Augustus left the Slade, the art world was a harsh place for women to thrive. Very few of them ran their own studios or schools, very few of them sat on the juries which selected work for exhibition, and – unless they had money, exceptional luck or nerve – most of them would be forced to put aside their painting ambitions and accept the security of marriage.

Gwen was too proud, or too stubborn, to cast herself as a victim of the patriarchy or of any other system. Yet the difference in how she and her brother survived the first years of their careers was striking. Augustus may have been the more naturally assertive, yet the success he enjoyed was boosted by a network of men – friends, artists, buyers and patrons – who provided him with material and public support. He might often have been broke, and badly in debt, but he could always count on sufficient commissions and sales to pay for his studios, his art materials and models.

Gwen had no such network, and for a long time she could only support herself and her art by hiring herself out as a model. Living alone, often in small, squalid rooms, she might have looked wistfully at the comfort of her married friends. But she had made her own choice: 'I think if we are to do beautiful pictures, we ought to be free from family conventions and ties', she wrote, and although she would fall in love several times – with men, with other women and, above all, with Rodin – it was never domestic happiness Gwen sought, but passion and grandeur.

Freedom worked both ways, though. While Augustus appeared to roam in a more privileged world, the life he chose also cost him part of

his liberty. In 1904, when he first set up house with Ida and Dorelia, he thought he'd embarked on a glorious experiment. Over the years, however, that experiment spawned nine children, plus the expense of several households and studios, and the financial burdens that seemed to gather around Augustus were one reason why he drifted into painting the rapid portraits that came so easily and profitably to him. He never quite sank to being an artist for hire, but neither did he ever fulfil his youthful ambition of finding his own way to put the world down in paint.

If debts and responsibilities became an impediment for Augustus, so too did the exhausting puzzle of his own personality. When he was young, the 'heaven and hell' of his moods, the mania of his excitements, the blackness of his despairs had all been fuel for his art, but by early middle age they were sapping his powers and driving him to greater excesses. There were times when Augustus deeply envied his sister's ability to recuse herself from the world and focus on her painting, many times when he wished they'd been able to live and work more closely together. But Gwen became increasingly protective of her solitude and, in her final decade, she not only stopped visiting Augustus, she all but stopped writing to him.

When she died in 1939, Augustus grieved for the distance between them, and when he came to sort through the mass of paintings, drawings and writings she'd left behind, he was haunted by their delicate rigour. 'I feel ashamed of wasting my time, thinking that life could last almost for ever,' he wrote. But although he still had over two decades to live and would become celebrated as one of the grand old men of British painting, Augustus never did recover the joyous brilliance of his youth. However hard he worked, he could never achieve the one final vision that would absolve him of his wasted years.

History, in fact, would turn against him. After his death in 1961, the market was flooded with too many of his late, inferior works, and, two decades later, when the world began to take notice of Gwen, a critical consensus began to form that not only had her talent been greater than his, but so too had her character, her integrity as an artist. Just as there was a move to disparage Gus as a philanderer and a charlatan, a painter who'd used the cheap magic of his personality to convince the world he was a genius, so too was there a move to cast a halo around Gwen, to

sanctify the discipline that she'd brought to her life and work, and the indifference she'd cultivated towards money and artistic fashion.

But the truth of a life is hard to excavate and even harder to judge – even those who knew the Johns well could struggle to decide whether they were admirable or awful. Augustus, with his reckless volatile passions, could be a danger to himself and to others, but to those who loved him he could also be a hero, a kind of visionary who saw his life in brighter, more exciting colours. Gwen, in her refusal to compromise her independence and her work, could equally be revered as a saint, yet to her family and friends she could also appear cranky, ruthless and even coldly ungenerous.

The one unarguable fact about the Johns, however, is the extraordinary journey they made: two shy and angry young teenagers who, without money or influence, made the world of art their own, and found distinction and acclaim. Critical fashions may fluctuate, the verdict on their work may change, but as a story of two siblings, of two unexpected and idiosyncratic talents, the lives of Gwen and Augustus John must always be remarkable.

Chapter One

TENBY

‘Even at that early age we were vaguely
aware of Art and Beauty’

AUGUSTUS JOHN¹

For a few weeks in summer, when the waters of Carmarthen Bay glittered blue under a sharp sea breeze, the Welsh town of Tenby was transformed into a busy seaside resort. Music from the local brass band competed with a visiting troupe of black-faced minstrels; elegant couples strolled along the curving esplanade; bathing machines lined up at the water’s edge, cumbersome wagons on high spindly wheels. And there were children everywhere, flying kites in the sharp summer winds, paddling in the shallow surf and begging for rides on the donkeys that padded patiently up and down the sand.

For many of those children, the beach was their annual treat, but for the four John siblings it was their familiar playground. The rock pools where they paddled and fished for shrimps, the dark caves, the secluded swimming spots – all these had been known to them since they were small. And, for Gwen and Gus, who kept pencils and scraps of paper in their pockets wherever they went, the beach was also their studio. It rarely failed to throw up new subjects to sketch – the beaky outline of a seagull, a bleached sculpture of driftwood, the faces of new children. And, when they were lucky, there were visiting artists to spy on, too – amateur painters, who set up their easels to capture views of the sea, the cliffs and the old town walls.

‘Gwen and I, full of curiosity, would approach as near as we dared, to watch the mystery of painting’, Gus recalled, and years later, when Gwen was a student, she would paint her own landscape of Tenby. It was a

panoramic view of the beach, with the harbour wall curving steeply round a crescent of golden sand; and it captured the moment between daylight and dusk, when families were taking their last seaside stroll. In the foreground, a young woman in a fashionably trimmed hat was walking with a small girl, their closeness evident in the child's bright upturned face. A little way behind was a slightly older mother, talking attentively to her own small daughter. The only other figure in the painting – a youth in a hat – walked alone.

As a painting, *Landscape at Tenby with Figures* was the work of a novice, its detail undercut by awkward hitches in perspective. But as a biographical image, it was tantalizing. There were no fathers in either family group, and something about Gwen's placing of her figures on the otherwise deserted beach, her exaggerated contrast of light and shadow, had given the scene a quality of dream or memory. The woman in the foreground (who'd been modelled on Gwen's sister Winnie) may have been a dim recollection of her own dead mother, Augusta; the child may have been Gwen herself; and this painting may have drawn on the last happy moments Gwen could recall before Augusta John had fallen seriously ill and Edwin John had shuttered himself away in grief.

Gwen had been eight, Gus just six and a half, when tragedy struck. 'I used to cry all the time,' Gwen claimed, 'I never expected any happiness in my life'. To Gus it seemed that the death of their mother had robbed them not only of joy, but confidence too, causing all four children to retreat behind a wall of 'invincible shyness'.² They had no help from their father, who was unable to articulate his own loss, let alone comfort theirs, and Augusta's death remained a bewildering mystery to the little Johns, an inexplicable rupturing of their childhood.

There had been a time before that rupture when the family was happy. They lived in Haverfordwest, a market town twenty miles northwest of Tenby, where their slightly cramped, narrow home was graced by dramatic views of the old ruined castle and the surrounding hills. It was graced too by the lightness of touch which Augusta brought to 7 Victoria Place when she came to live there as Edwin's wife in 1873, and by the gentle transformation she worked on her husband, turning him from a painfully shy and undistinguished young solicitor, to a contented family man.

As a small child, growing up in Haverfordwest, Edwin had been a bright and inquisitive boy, musical and fond of books, but as a teenager he'd developed a disabling social anxiety, which had been provoked in part by his father's determination to turn all of his three sons into gentlemen. William John had been a dynamic adventurous man, working and studying his way out of poverty and eventually buying a lucrative solicitor's practice. His decision to send Edwin away to school, however, to board among richer, more entitled boys, had wrecked the child's confidence. Edwin had returned home a timid misfit, ashamed of his Welsh accent and origins, yet ignorant of how to rise above them. While his older brother Alfred had run away to study art and play the flute, Edwin had seen no option but to join his father's practice. Half-hearted about the job, and having no local friends, the future seemed to spread drearily ahead of him.

Then, at the age of twenty-seven, he went to Brighton to visit relatives and met Augusta Smith, a delicately pretty young woman with an expressive light in her eyes and a tumble of dark curls. She was artistic too. Her father, Thomas, a master plumber and glazier, had sent her to a modest finishing school in south London, where she was encouraged to study music, painting and drawing. Her work, though girlishly sentimental, showed a gift for colour (years later, a landscape signed *A. John* was hung in an American gallery, having been mistakenly attributed to her son), and when the Slade School of Art opened its doors to both men and women in 1871, it's possible that Augusta dreamed of continuing her studies there.*

However, 'Mrs Leleux's Establishment' was all the education Thomas Smith would permit. A widower of vehemently religious and patriarchal opinions, he expected his oldest daughter to return home and take over the running of the house. The two younger daughters, Rosina and Leah, were excused because they'd joined the Salvation Army and were doing God's work. For Augusta, alone in the house, there had seemed no chance of escape from the making of lists and the managing of servants, but, in February 1873, Thomas Smith suffered a fatal stroke. When

* The painting was titled *Landscape with Cows* and had been part of the Dalton Collection, Charlotte, North Carolina.

Edwin appeared in Brighton three and a half months later, timid but rather handsome, with an upright posture and a ginger moustache, Augusta was ready to accept him as a suitor.

The early years of their marriage were sunny; the young couple played music together, read books and had four healthy babies: Thornton in 1875; Gwendoline Mary, a year later, on 22 June 1876; Augustus Edwin on 4 January 1878; and Winifred in late 1879. Although Augusta may have felt the effects of delivering four babies in almost as many years, she had a small staff to cook and clean, and a nursemaid, Mimi, to help with the babies. She played the piano, she painted and she took pleasure in her children, teaching them their letters and numbers, encouraging them to draw and colour as soon as they could hold a pencil, and taking them with her on her errands around town.

Edwin thrived in his marriage: his shyness eased and he blossomed, a little stiffly, into fatherhood. Every Sunday after church, he led the children on a walk, marching them along the banks of the river Cleddau, or through the country lanes above the town. He took them to the circus once, leaving Gus with the indelible memory of a 'superb woman in spangled tights'.³ And, anxious for his children to benefit from the nearby coast, he had a small holiday house built in the seaside village of Broad Haven, a magical place the children remembered, where they learned to swim and where they fell asleep to the gentle wash of the waves.

One summer at Broad Haven, the children witnessed a crowd of skimpily dressed young women immersed in the sea for a collective baptism. Such scenes were an indelible part of the colour of their lives. Haverfordwest, on market days, was loud with pig farmers and cattle drovers, with oyster women in tall Welsh hats, with gypsies who appeared from the countryside. These ragged, dark-featured strangers, said by Edwin to kidnap unwary children, became figures of romance to the little Johns, as did the miller who used to emerge from his work with a coating of flour, the little workhouse girls in their ill-fitting pinafores, and the woman in her ramshackle cottage who they believed was a witch.

'Had our mother lived it would all have been different', wrote Thornton, years later.⁴ But early in 1880, shortly after Winnie was born, Augusta fell ill. Her doctor believed it was rheumatism and advised her