

Woodlawn Cemetery:  
The Mausoleum of Herbert Brenon



Problem 3: Field Documentation and Formal Analysis  
Fall 2010 HP Studio  
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Alexander Herbert Reginald St. John Brenon, more commonly known as Herbert Brenon, was born on January 13, 1880 to Edward St. John and Frances Brenon of Dublin, Ireland.<sup>1</sup> His father was a London drama critic, and his mother was a regular literary contributor to local newspapers and magazines until just prior to her death in 1931.<sup>2</sup> Herbert's three siblings were equally accomplished: Algernon St. John was a music critic for *The Morning Telegraph*, Chandos St. John was a naval officer, and his sister Roma was a mother of two. Brenon died on June 21, 1958 in Los Angeles and was interred in the mausoleum at Woodlawn Cemetery. His wife, mother, sister and brother Chandos are also at rest in the same mausoleum. At the time of his death, he was survived by a son, Dr. Herbert Cyril Brenon.<sup>3</sup>

Brenon's uniquely designed mausoleum stands out amidst its classically inspired neighbors. The rusticated castle form is set far back on its lot, creating a grander approach towards its central, Gothic-detailed entrance. Two rusticated towers with lancet windows flank the smooth-finished stones that comprise the central axis. The stone crenellation at the parapet wall and at the two towers offsets the delicate details of Brenon's surname, centrally carved, and the bronze clock set above the entryway.

Herbert Brenon was known for his recurring use of fantasy elements and grand scenic backdrops in his films.<sup>4</sup> The south-facing mausoleum incorporates these elements in its stately castle appearance, particularly when seen in context with the original landscape plan, which would have set the mausoleum against a backdrop of dense, brightly-colored flowering foliage.

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<sup>1</sup> "Herbert Brenon, Filmmaker, Dies," *New York Times*, June 23, 1958: 23.

<sup>2</sup> "Mrs. Frances Brenon Dies On Coast at 82," *New York Times*, July 4, 1931: 22.

<sup>3</sup> "Herbert Brenon, Filmmaker, Dies."

<sup>4</sup> William Stevenson, *American National Biography Online*, "Brenon, Herbert," accessed October 4, 2010, <http://www.anb.org/articles/18/18-00149.html> (February 2000).

Generally, the façade design consists of a concentration of bronze and carved detail elements along the central axis. Dressed stone courses of Woodbury Gray Granite comprise the material surrounding the entry.<sup>5</sup> Each successive architectural element becomes increasingly rusticated as the viewer's eye moves towards the building's edge. Thus, the materiality of the building is integral to understanding the building's form.

These design choices begin to blend the mausoleum into nature and into the intended heavily-forested landscape setting, which may have been influenced by his frequent travels to England, Wales, France and Bermuda. Although the Brenon mausoleum now appears isolated and without its intended landscaping, the original design embodies his love of the motion picture, with "the sweep of its canvas, its scenic beauty, its suggestive images, the finesse of its action or interpretive movement, [and] all its significant photographic detail."<sup>6</sup>

Herbert Brenon began writing scripts for Carl Laemmle of Independent Moving Pictures, and in 1912, made his first film breakthrough titled *All For Her*.<sup>7</sup> Many of his subsequent films were well-received by critics and audiences. He later came to be known as one of silent films' "Big Three," along with his colleagues D.W. Griffith and Cecil B. DeMille. He was particularly well-known for directing the first film adaptation of *Peter Pan* in 1925. The author's friendship influenced him throughout his life, and the timeless themes of *Peter Pan* encouraged Brenon to always remain young at heart.<sup>8</sup>

With the introduction of talking pictures, Brenon became a spokesman for the opposition, notably in a 1928 article titled "Opposition to Sound Film," denouncing the new medium as a fad

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<sup>5</sup> Correspondence, *Woodlawn Cemetery Archives File*, "Brenon, Herbert," Avery Archives (1929-1958), Columbia University Library, New York.

<sup>6</sup> Herbert Brenon, "Opposition to Sound Film," *New York Times*, October 21, 1928: 124.

<sup>7</sup> "Herbert Brenon, Filmmaker, Dies."

<sup>8</sup> Gladwin Hill, "'Peter Pan' of Brenon's Fond Memory," *New York Times*, April 12, 1953: X5.

and referring to it as “this blight of sound and fury.”<sup>9</sup> He firmly believed that actions were louder than words, and used as few subtitles as possible in his work. Brenon also felt that the advent of talking pictures made an ungainly attempt to compete with the legitimate art forms of silent films and the stage.

Although it is one of his oft-overlooked films, Brenon was nominated Best Director at the First Academy Awards in 1929, for the drama *Sorrell and Son*. He was more well-known for the critically acclaimed films *Beau Geste*, *War Brides*, and *A Daughter of the Gods*. Over the years, Brenon endured a number of protracted legal battles with actors and producers. Based on his personal correspondence with the director of Woodlawn Cemetery in 1933, it appears that creditors, who may have attempted to appropriate the mausoleum’s side benches as collateral, were pursuing him.<sup>10</sup> Although the correspondence is inconclusive, it is possible that related financial troubles in the film industry led to removal of the two mausoleum benches, which extended from each side of the building’s structure. Ghostly outlines of these benches can still be seen in the rusticated stone slabs at the side elevations.

Brenon was a true artist-director, and the confines he sometimes felt by the Hollywood industry led him to create his own independent production company in 1917.<sup>11</sup> However, he continued to produce work with the major Hollywood film houses including Paramount, RKO, Famous Players-Lasky Corporation, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, and Independent Moving Pictures. Brenon relocated to England in 1934 and continued to make films, having converted to the new

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<sup>9</sup> Brenon, “Opposition to Sound Film.”

<sup>10</sup> Correspondence, *Woodlawn Cemetery Archives File*, “Brenon, Herbert,” Avery Archives (1929-1958), Columbia University Library, New York.

<sup>11</sup> “He Is Independent,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 28, 1917: III21.

medium of talking productions after filming the movie *Lummox*.<sup>12</sup> He retired in the early 1940s in Los Angeles.<sup>13</sup>

Upon examination of his life and the recurrent themes and artistic direction in his film works, perhaps it is no surprise that he should choose a grand and picturesque castle reminiscent of his childhood and the grand European settings he loved, as his final resting place. The castle form of the mausoleum, with its combination of Gothic and Romanesque medieval architecture, epitomizes a place of maximum safety and security. Thus, it is a fittingly symbolic structure to provide a secure resting place for the Brenon family. As with any brilliant artist, Brenon keeps us guessing past the finale, and the clock on the mausoleum's façade, set at 12:20, remains a mystery.

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<sup>12</sup> "Herbert Brenon, Filmmaker, Dies."

<sup>13</sup> Stevenson, "Brenon, Herbert."