

CHAPTER IX

PICTURES OF THE SEA

1889-1910

BORN within sight and sound of the Atlantic, where it flashes and thunders on the sands of Machrihanish, the call of the sea was strong in McTaggart's blood. He loved it in all its moods, and he painted it as only a great painter, who was also a lover of its might and magic and an initiate into its haunting secrets, could. To unique imaginative apprehension, he added an equally wonderful power of rendering in pictorial terms the material and dynamic qualities of the sea—its vastness and unity; its liquidity and marvellous colour; the endless variety of its evanescent forms; its never-ceasing and irresistible movement. From dawn to sunset, and from calm to storm, he painted every phase of the sea's fascination with insight and mastery, and so his sea pictures attained, naturally and without conscious effort, an infinite variety which "time cannot wither nor custom stale." And often upon these ever varying waters, fishers, engaged in their perilous calling, sailed their boats fearlessly, or beside them children, singing in glee or silently intent, played amongst the rough seaweed tangled rocks or on the smooth yellow sands. The sea and incidents associated with it had, of course, figured in his pictures for many years prior to 1889, and had been treated with splendid spirit, sincerity and skill. But, through the more radiant light and colour, the finer sense of movement, the greater unity between incident and setting and between subject and style, and the maturer and subtler technical skill which vitalise them, his later pictures give fuller, freer, and more significant expression to the poetic feeling which had always underlain his treatment of such themes. The culmination of his achievement in this direction, they not only surpass anything McTaggart had done previously, but, in their vivid



"CALLER OO!"

beauty, imaginative appeal, and vital power of execution, are incomparable as pictures of the sea. While others have also made admirable, and at times affecting, records of the sea's colour and form and movement, McTaggart is almost alone in that he invariably used these elements of beauty, which he understood profoundly, to express that mysterious sense of inner life and unbroken continuance which the insensate and ever-changing sea holds for those to whom it is perhaps the most living and wonderful thing in the world. He stands to painters of the sea in much the same relationship as Mr. Conrad does to the authors who merely write about it. The heart-beat of the tides pulsates in his pictures, and from them "murmurs and scents of the infinite sea" seem to be wafted. For more than any man who ever painted old ocean, except Turner perhaps, he appeals to the imagination. Turner, however, obtained his effects by dramatic contrast and through the introduction of subsidiary and striking incident rather than by his rendering of the sea itself. On the other hand, without the aid of exaggeration or the associations sprung upon one by sight of shipwreck or disaster, McTaggart touches the innermost chords of feeling more poignantly because more simply and directly. Pregnant with the sea's hidden witchery, each of his finer pictures is a realisation of some aspect of its mighty magic never before captured by painting. In the broad daylight of his pictures, the immensity and mystery of the sea knock more calamity at the heart than the reality usually does, except in twilight or storm.

THE LIFE OF THE FISHER

"O weel may the boatie row"

A few years ago, when writing of Scottish painting,¹ I had occasion to summarise what seemed to me the special qualities and distinctive character of McTaggart's conception of human life in connection with the sea. These I have tried more than once to estimate afresh for this biography. But, as what I wrote turned out mere paraphrase of the previous attempt, it is better, perhaps, that that should be repeated here.

"It is seldom given to a pioneer in art—to one experimenting with new material and forging for its expression an appropriate manner—to produce complete and

¹ *Scottish Painting, Past and Present* (1908).

satisfying art. Constable and Millet are rare examples of triumph in this difficult venture, and in our own time McTaggart has achieved a similar success. What Constable did for landscape and Millet for peasant people, McTaggart is doing for the sea and fisher-folk. He stands with Millet and Israels—a poet of the every-day event and of the common people. But, while they all deal with man's struggle with nature, and his wresting from it with exceeding toil the means of sustenance, McTaggart's attitude to life is different from theirs. They seem to see in life nothing save the toil and weariness of it all: he is not insensible to its sadness, but he feels its joy and gladness too. In his pictures the wind blows lustily across the sea and the waves dash themselves upon the rocks or weave a fringe of white along the sands: the possibility of disaster is there. But from the sea comes the spoil by which the fisher lives, and on the shore there await him a quiet haven and a happy home. The emigrant leaves his native land with tears and sighs, but through the rain-squalls, which sweep the sound, gleams the bow in the cloud. Most beautiful of all, perhaps, are the many pictures in which, with rare insight and sympathy, he has recorded the unpremeditated happiness of children—their laughter, quaintness and roguish glee. His conception is full of the compensation of circumstance and the solace of Nature."

The combination of quest and danger which forms the romance of the daily life of fishermen is very finely expressed in such a picture as 'Dawn at Sea—Homewards!' (1891). The sun is not yet up and the horizon lies veiled in the dim mystery of twilight; but the tender rose and pale golden light of coming day suffuses the clear rifts in the windy sky above, and glows softly upon the fringes of the severing clouds. Woven of light and darkness, the spell of dawn has fallen upon the sea. While the distance, glimmering through the dusk, is only dimly touched by reflections from the growing glory overhead, the nearer water sways and gleams softly bright in low-toned but clear golden hues against which the shadowed foam of the little waves, crisping before the wind, shows not white but delicate lavender-grey. From out the menace of the night and the vastness of the sea, a little boat emerges. Silhouetted against the mingled mystery and glory of sky and sea, but with soft gleaming lights touching her gear and gunwale and glinting upon the yellow oilskins of the crew, the boat speeds shoreward. She is nearly home—the corner of a rocky ridge, on which the sea frets, shows on her quarter, and the sail is being lowered by a man in the bow. The colour is exquisitely blended, though strongly struck; the light and shade most subtle; the sense of movement remarkable. As one looks, one seems to see the light

grow and the boat move, to feel the freshness of the morning breeze and taste the salt in the caller air, to hear the sharp sibillant rustle of the low singing waves, the quick glad splutter of the foam at the bows and the soft gurgle and run of the water along the boat's sides as, leaving a sheeny bubbled track behind, she cleaves the softly glimmering sea.

Painted a decade later, 'The Lobster Fishers, Machrihanish Bay' (1901), shows a different aspect of this same phase of fisher-life. If there is less mystery, there is quite as much romance and perhaps even more of the spirit of adventure in this brilliant daylight piece. Upon a sea which, running in rippled surges, reflects in its flashing facets of blue and green and silver, the clear sun-steeped morning sky, two fishing boats, one quite near, the other farther off, ride buoyantly. There is little wind, the hoisted white sails are brailed, and, guided in their quest of lobster-pots by a man standing beside the mast, the crews have taken to the oars. The blades gleam in the sunshine, but one sees the flash of their sweep rather than the oars themselves, and that unites with the pulsing sway of the rowers, the rise and fall of the boats, the spouting white feathers at the bows and the rhythmic lift of the sea to produce a wonderful illusion of harmonious motion. But with this, there is intermixed a compelling sense of adventure. The keen glance of the look-out in the foremost boat, the dash of the straining oarsmen, the alertness of the steersman suggest that something more thrilling than a good fishing might be in prospect. Quite easily to the imagination, the sea becomes again the path of adventure and conquest, the boats the dragon-prowed galleys of Norway, the rowers the roving Vikings, whose blood long ago mingled with that of the fishers' Celtic forebears. A page from the life of to-day, it yet goes so deep that the life and reality of the past, the ancestry of the west-coast fishermen and the spirit which they have inherited are all suggested.

There are other days when the possible dangers of the sea are unveiled and become actively and cruelly menacing. Then the fleet has to run for shelter, and the men have to struggle for dear life with wind and wave. In 'The Storm' (1890), probably the artist's most notable realisation of a great elemental disturbance, human action is accessory rather than principal; but in the dramatically conceived 'By the Skin of their Teeth,' a fishing boat on a lee shore battling with great billows which threaten to

engulf her, man dominates the pictorial impression if not the actual situation. Unfortunately, however, this fine idea was never carried out on the great scale upon which it was projected, and one can only judge of what a splendid page of the sea's story it would have been from two smaller studies made for it.

Such tense moments on the sea have their counterpart ashore, when women and children wait on stormy days for the return of the boats. One sees them in 'Wives and Mithers maist despairin'' crowding together in anxious vigil beside the low breastwork upon the wind swept hill above a little east-coast harbour. Silver spindrift, rising from the smoking seas below, fills the air and veils the watchers—clinging to the wall or fighting with the wind, which tosses and coils their spray and rain drenched clothes about their struggling limbs—in a soft vapoury haze, through which a boat, swept by the foaming waves, can be descried dimly staggering towards safety.

Days such as these are, however, the exception in the fisher's calendar ; and, unlike some powerful artists who have dealt with the sea, McTaggart did not dwell greatly on its sorrow. He loved rather those moods of gaiety and gladness in which gloom is eclipsed in brightness, or only exists as an undertone in the silent carry of the clouds, the sigh of the wind or the pulsation of the waves. So against sunny beach and calm or breezy sea, he wove idylls of cheery homecoming or unhurried shore-labour. Two of the most delightful of these are 'A Summer Day—Carnoustie' (1890-9) and 'Love Lightens Labour' (1890-9). A placid calm pervades the first. The unrippled sea sleeps delicately blue beneath a sky, cloudless save where, above the low faint coast line of Fife, a filmy belt of silver floats in the genial sunshine which, flooding the ether, shimmers on the horizon and sheds a gentle brightness across the water. And in front upon a flat rocky ridge almost awash in the quiet tide, which comes right to our feet, a delightful group of bare-armed and legged women and children, in softly toned and weathered garments, are placing the catch they have carried from the boats lying a considerable distance off, beside the low rocks towards the left, which seem to mark the outer edge of the long shallows. The other, if less sun-suffused and radiant, is fuller of movement and even gayer in mood. Yet it is perhaps in the large figure subject, 'Caller Oo!' (one of the comparatively few pictures with life-size



THE SAILING OF THE EMIGRANT SHIP

figures he painted), that this aspect of sea-side life reaches its fullest and most trenchant expression. An idyll of love and labour, it shows a young fishwife, creel on back, hurrying up from a landing-place amongst rocks with her crowing and kicking child tucked under her left arm.

“How muckle lighter is the lade
When love bears up the creel,”

the lines from “O weel may the boatie row,” which were attached to the title, are not required to help out the meaning. It is implicit in the action of the woman; it shines in her eyes and illumines her lovely face. The colour is magnificent. Very pure and almost primary tints, which seem crude when viewed closely, blend together in a potent harmony, when the picture is looked at from a due distance. Simultaneously also, the trenchant, but apparently needlessly rough, handling comes together and assumes an expressive unity. Thus combined, colour and handling produce a very vivid effect, which is, however, as always with McTaggart, dominated by the poetic conception, which underlies and indeed determines the pictorial design.

THE EMIGRANTS

“... borne on rough seas to a far distant shore
Maybe to return to Lochaber no more”

From very early in his career, the pictorial possibilities of the epic of emigration had haunted McTaggart. In his youth he had seen many of his friends and acquaintances leave for America to find there the scope and the land to live on, which they had been denied at home. He had seen more than once that suggestively named ship “The Gleaner” sail from Campbeltown Loch crowded with emigrants, cleared or clearing from Argyll. And a Celt himself, he had felt imaginatively all the bitterness of parting with loved ones, and of separation from the dim shielings and the misty islands of the Hebrides. He had, however, never tackled the theme in a big way on an important canvas. ‘Word from the West’ and ‘Lochaber no More’ were only episodes in the drama. He now wanted to paint the drama itself. So about 1890, taking a five foot canvas,¹ he grouped men, women and children, with their household gods

¹(36½" × 55") : Landscape portion painted at Carradale in 1883.

about them, upon grassy knowes above a rocky cove, whence they are being ferried in fishing boats to the sailing ship which lies anchored off the shore. There is a story for every figure and group in the design, and, when looking at the picture with visitors, the artist used to tell them with a delightful combination of humour and pathos. Pictorially, however, the emigrants tell rather as an animated, if somewhat sorrowful, whole against the high horizon of bright blue water, which, now a venture-some way of escape to liberty, will soon be to them "the unplumbed salt estranging sea." If mingling fears with hopes, the whole aspect of this beautiful picture was yet too fair and bright to express the full emotional significance of Highland emigration. As it progressed, he felt this more and more; and it was scarcely finished before he had commenced another.

This was begun upon a canvas about 25" × 38" (dated 1891), and was then—the new conception being fixed in its essentials—expanded on to one of the largest canvases (57" × 85") he ever painted. The progress of the big picture was comparatively slow, however, and it was nearly four years later before it was finished. During its evolution numerous studies were made, such as the brilliantly touched small versions which belong to Mr. W. Boyd and Mrs. McTaggart, and 'A Sprig of Heather,' a study or rather an independent and very lovely picture of the girl who, in the centre group, waves to a departing boat-load of friends. In general design, the picture itself is very similar to its predecessor. It has the same groups—the waving girls, the children with the dogs, the old man blessing his daughters, the lover and his lass, the men carrying packages aboard fishing boats already crowded with passengers and sheep, and the boat, with the piper in the bow playing "Lochaber no more," pulling out from the cove to the ship in the offing—and they wait upon the same rocky shore to take the same long voyage. But there resemblance ends. It is afternoon now, and the brooding rain-clouds, shot through though they are with ruddy and golden tints,—

"Do take a sober colouring from an eye
That hath kept watch o'er man's mortality."

Yet the showers, which sweep the broad heaving bosom of the sound like a rain of tears, glisten brightly in the straying sunbeams, and amid the

tumultuous sky, so full of pathetic glory, and over the bitterness of coming separation, there gleams the bow in the clouds. Emotionally there is thus a great difference in the treatment of these two phases of this one theme. The one is a beautiful lyric, touched with gentle pathos; the other a romantic epic of exile and adventure, sweetened with human smiles and tears.

The finest issue of this idea, which had haunted McTaggart so long and over which he had brooded so intently, came, however, just after the completion of this noble and epical work. From the animation of the first picture with its setting of bright sky and blue sea, he had passed to the dramatic and more appropriate mood which dominates the second. And now, the strain and stress of creation over, he proceeded to paint without effort, and as an after-thought, as it were, another aspect of the drama. This was 'The Sailing of the Emigrant Ship' (1895). Here it is nearer sunset. The subdued splendour of an evening after rain fills the cloudy sky and, though the sun and shadow-barred water ripples, a solemn silence, melancholy yet serene, seems to hold sea and sky. Nature is attuned to the mood of sadness and regret which has fallen upon the apparently deserted shore. Then as one looks, he becomes conscious that, if the pain of parting is over, the bitterness of separation remains. For on the shore, at first sight tenantless, there remain a few watchers—an old man and woman standing dejectedly together watching the ship which, gliding on the gleaming horizon, is about to sink with all they love below the verge, and a girl sitting sorrowfully and apart upon the central knowe, with her back to the glowing sky and her head bowed over a child held convulsively to her breast. Farther off, in the little rocky cove below, fishers are quietly making snug the boats in which the emigrants had been ferried out. Two of them have come ashore to make fast the berthing ropes, but while one is busy securing an end, the other stands with head thrown back and, following his gaze, you see that he has been arrested by a rainbow gleam amongst the clouds over the departing ship. And this brings in another note of feeling, which, further accentuated by the rosy light upon the vanishing sails, redeems the sadness of the scene and touches it with the benediction of love and the spirit of divine hope.

ST. COLUMBA

While McTaggart was in Kintyre in June, 1897, the thirteenth centenary of the death of St. Columba (8th June, 597) was being celebrated in Iona, and, stirred by the accounts of Columba and his mission which then appeared, he felt drawn to paint a picture which would be connected in some way with the advent of Christianity in Scotland. The Cauldrons, usually shored with pebble beaches, was filled with golden sand as he had never seen it before. Some seventeen or eighteen miles from the nearest point in Ireland, towards which it looks, that bay was just such a spot as Columba and his followers would look out for to beach their frail coracles upon after crossing the stormy waters of Moyle. McTaggart decided to paint him making his first landing there. For, as he said, "The great fact was not that Columba landed in Iona, but that he came to Scotland."

The landscape in 'The Coming of St. Columba' (now in the National Gallery of Scotland), was painted by him, as we see it, on the spot, and, shortly after returning home, he introduced the figures and the boats. To the archaeological accuracy of the latter he gave no heed. The figures lying upon the daisy gemmed green knowe, the tall red-haired man, dressed in a rude brownish tunic and with leathern thongs upon his legs, turning lazily round to look seaward, and the white kerchiefed woman, playing with her child, typified the happy careless heathen Scots; the two white sailed boats, drawing in silently from the sea, the approach of the missionaries of the Cross. Thus it was very probably that the incident, now looked back to with such interest, would have presented itself to an onlooker. To the artist that was enough. Yet I noticed that when he looked at the picture with anyone, he would murmur softly, as if to himself, "What a day for such a mission." It is a slumbrous opalescent day of early summer. Sunshine suffuses the filmy clouds which fill the sky, and, stealing through here and there, glitters gently upon the sea; the horizon is faint and far withdrawn; the water moves softly in smooth and widely separated surges, which only show their strength by the swaying of the boats and by the wave into which each curls as it nears the shore. This effect is rendered with extraordinary delicacy combined with great power. Airy and luminous, the wide sky spreads in the subtlest gradations, film beyond film of prismatic light



THE COMING OF ST. COLUMBA

rather than of coloured pigment, and the great expanse of sea, lying beneath it, bathed in the same air, leads the eye back across the swaying surface from the horizon to the beach on which the white surge breaks with sudden thunder. And the figures and the green brae on which they lie, played over by the soft sunshine and the gentle wind, are one with sea and sky. Nor is the colouration less exquisite. The pervading silver light is suffused with lovely colour. Changeful within its atmospheric envelope, the sky is flushed with hints of the rosy purples in the water and of the pale gold of the foreground sands, while the sea, echoing the sky, mingles with its silvery shining touches of sheeny purple and green, which in turn are repeated in deeper tones in the green of the grass and the purple bronze of the seaward jutting rocks. The keeping and harmony of the whole is wonderful. Strength of handling and delicacy of perception were never more happily wedded.

That same year the equally splendid and rather larger 'Preaching of St. Columba' was commenced also. Here again the scene was the Cauldrons; but, painted higher up the braes, the view is more expansive and one looks more into the bay. And while the keynote of 'The Coming' is delicacy mingled with a strength so elusive that its presence is felt rather than seen, that of 'The Preaching' is splendid power sweetened by sensitiveness. Rich and resonant, it is yet, like the tones of a fine orator, full of nuance and subtly expressive. The day is different in character. Although the sky is also partially veiled, the light is keener and the colour more intense. Passages of clear bright blue sky alternate with filmy white clouds, and the sea swings in from the open, past the distant rocky headland, into the sand and rock fringed bay, a heaving mass of wondrous blue, blended with purple and green, against whose deep tones an occasional surge hurrying shorewards breaks in gleaming white. Far down beside the sea, at the bottom of the deep green semi-circle formed by the steep grassy slopes, which curve about the bay and close it in like the sides of a Greek theatre, a white robed figure, dwarfed by distance, stands with outstretched arms upon a flat ridge beside which other white cassocked figures are gathered. These are the Saint and his followers. The native Scots to whom he preaches, to the accompaniment of wind and wave, are seated in groups upon the green turf before him and heedless children play upon the higher braes. As in the other, the

treatment of the incident, which gives the picture its name, is accessory rather than principal and more typical than realistic. So while the figures tell their stories and are delightful and essential passages of colour and form in the pictorial designs, it is less for them than for the passionate seizure and splendid rendering of nature's beauty, which pervades these pictures like a perfume, that one places them high amongst McTaggart's greatest achievements.

CALM

“ . . . Her Spell is on earth and sky
Over land and over sea ”

While most of McTaggart's earlier seaside pictures are steeped in calm and sunshine, one finds after the middle seventies a quickening of love for unrest and mutability. Increasingly the elusive and evanescent elements in effect attracted him—the envelopment of atmosphere, the play of light and wind, the movement of figures and boats, the living and dynamic motion of the sea. They appear oftener in his pictures, and are treated with increasing mastery. Calm, however, is but motion seemingly in repose. The light vibrates and the tide-streams flow, however overcast the sky, however windless the day. So his rendering of the spell of fine still weather also grew in subtlety of observation, fullness of expression and finesse of execution. With this greater sensitiveness, there came likewise a deepened sense of the thrill of life, which pulsates beneath even the most sunny and silken calm. Apprehension of this inner stir—like the music of the spheres or the singing of the morning stars, audible to the imagination alone—appears from time to time in his work both before 1889 and afterwards. Painted as early as the later seventies, the ‘Quiet Sunset,’ with its quivering twilight waters shot with gleaming lights and its gold rifted grey sky, and the ‘Summer Idyll—Bay Voyach,’ in which a quiet tide shows its irresistible power only in its sway up the sunny sands, thrill with its mystery, and later came the sun-kissed tranquillity of ‘A Summer Day—Carnoustie’ (1890-9), the white still calm of ‘Ailsa Craig from Port-an-Righ’ (1901) spreading from the far horizon to the shore at our feet, and the glistening blue radiance of ‘Arran Hills from Ardcarrah.’



AILSA CRAIG FROM WHITE BAY

In 1889, however, during a month spent at Southend he painted several important pictures in which these qualities are present in quite exceptional degree. The sense of airy distance, of soft spread radiance and of haunting silence in 'Ailsa Craig from White Bay' and 'Away o'er the Sea—Hope's Whisper' is almost magical. In the former the Ayrshire coast, faint as a vanishing cloud, floats, between sky and water, an impalpable film of blue and grey, blurred here and there by a shaft of light or a passing shower. The forty miles of sea over which the eye ranges lie quiet in the summer sunlight. No movement breaks the delicate hues of airy blue which play over the unruffled but gently swaying surface, except at our feet, where a fringe of white shows against the pale yellow sands. And in the foreground, amongst the blue-green bent grass, two girls lie dreaming as they gaze out to sea. The radiant harmony of soft gleaming mother-of-pearl and pale luminous opal, in which the sunshine, filtering through filmy clouds, bathes 'Hope's Whisper' is equally fascinating and even more brilliant.

There is more motion but scarcely less serenity in 'Girls Bathing: White Bay, Cantyre' and 'When the Smuggler came Ashore.' Wonderful in its delicacy of handling, colour and aerial tone, the drawing and design in 'The Bathers' are no less delightful. A delicate blue and green summer sea, flecked outside by a gentle breeze, curves into a little white-shored bay in a low-running and infrequent surge, which does not break even where it frets the sands with softly whispering foam. Tempted by the beauty of the clear cool water in the sunshine and by the seclusion of this lovely spot, a party of young girls is bathing. Save the black-haired gipsy-like girl, who leads two chubby little ones, scarcely bigger than babies, splashing into the shallows, all are naked; but never was the "modest colour of life" painted more exquisitely or seen with such innocence, while no "bambino" of the early Italian Masters or dancing or singing child by Della Robbia or Donatello is more naively beautiful or more full of joy.

In 'Where the Smuggler came Ashore' the effect is one which has always appealed to me personally as perhaps the most impressive in the whole wide range of the sea's infinite variety. There is not a breath of wind. A delicate sheeny expanse of sunny white, exquisitely graded with silver greys and with little rifts through which the faint far blue

shines softly, the quiet sky over-arches a silvery sea, which, save for the single surge in which its gentle breathing expires upon the beach, seems fast asleep. It is, however, just in this combination of the silken and unruffled calm of the wide sea with the sudden stirring of its meeting with the land that the appeal to the imagination lies. If the mighty monster sleeps, it is with one eye open; and, like the unexpected gleam of sharp claws from under velvet paws, the swift leap of the playful surf strikes the heart with a quick sense of the sea's capacity for sudden treachery and its great power. Most subtly suggested by the artist's consummate treatment of the elements which produce the effect in nature, this feeling is accentuated in the picture by the introduction of figures. Yet if the joy of these children, excited by the discovery amongst the floating foam of a length of lace, dropped by some smuggler when landing, seems in certain moods to deepen the strain of sadness which underlies the calm beauty of the day, in others that undercurrent stops its flow, and one floats gaily forward on the upper stream of their unpremeditated happiness.

BREEZE

“The white wave is tossing its foam on high
And the Summer breezes go lightly by”

Perhaps of all the many varieties of seaside weather that he painted, McTaggart liked best those bright days of early summer, when sunshine raises the pitch and enhances the colour of all nature, and a light or moderate breeze floats the white clouds across the blue, and sends the little ripples or the big surges laughing or foaming in from the open sea. The mood of gladness, indeed, expressed in the lines which stand at the head of this section. The picture with which they were specially associated—all the headline verses quoted here and in the preceding chapter were used by the artist either as titles or title-tags—was ‘Playing in the Surf’ (1895), and it is eminently characteristic of that large group of his pictures in which the charm and innocence of childhood or the beauty and high spirit of transient youth are associated with the might and magic, the loveliness and allure of the always varying yet ever abiding sea. Beneath a sky of tender blue and rosey grey in which a few warm white cloudlets float, a sea of heavenly blue is running in far-extending but not



THE WHITE BAY—JURA IN THE OFFING

high rollers towards the beach. The surges come at long intervals and in the swaying shallows, where changing hues of tawny and green and purple mingle and yet remain distinct and sharp struck, children are at play. To reach an outlying rock and return before the next wave comes is their ploy. One travelling faster than its fellows has nearly caught them, however, and, as rolling white along the shore, it breaks in spouting foam upon the rock, the children hurry shoreward. The older girl, carrying the baby, looks with some anxiety over her shoulder as, watching the approaching wave, she speeds towards safety; but the merry little lass in front is more amused than frightened, while the boy with flounder spear and basket, who wades towards them from the right, seems to jeer at their precipitate retreat. But verbal description can only hint at the beauty of the wonderful colour harmony, at once so rich and so delicate; can give no idea of the cadenced sweep and visual music of the rhythmic design; and fails utterly to convey any impression of the sheer joy which emanates from this triumphing work of high creative art.

With this lovely picture of blue unclouded weather one could easily group a dozen others, all different but each in its own way not less beautiful. Yet mention, almost at random, of 'A Rescue' (1895), in the collection of the Scottish Modern Arts Association, and 'Salt Pans, Machrihanish' (1895), where the north wind gives the blue of sea and sky a harder hue; of the aerial 'Amongst the Bents,' the splendidly potent 'Atlantic Surf' (1898) and 'A Summer Day, Machrihanish' (1898), which he used to declare was the most wonderfully coloured summer sea he had ever seen; of 'Father's Boat' (1900); of 'White Bay, Jura in the Offing' and 'A June Day—Crab Catching' (1903), so charmingly fresh and so splendidly vivid; and of that delightful sketch, 'Watching the Boats' (1902), in which everything is said though nothing is finished, must suffice. It may be remarked, however, that all of those named were painted after 1895, when he began to go regularly to Machrihanish in June.

There is more cloud with the breeze in some of McTaggart's other pictures, and perhaps one sees this oftenest in his East-coast scenes. Most of those done at Cockenzie in 1894 combine cloud with a breezy sunshine which is less genial than that of the West. That they were painted in August and not in June does not account fully for the difference. They have a keenness and a character of their own. On the East coast the wind

is shrewder, the sunlight often harsher and seldom so softly luminous. Looking north with one's back to the sun, the fall of the light at Cockenzie, as previously noted, is different also, and that combines with the keener air, the darker foreshores and the less translucent and browner seawater of the Forth estuary to produce quite different effects. Still, if lower in tone and as a whole less brilliant in lighting, these Cockenzie pictures, most of which are painted upon a cocoa-and-milk coloured priming, are very full and rich in their harmonies, and possess a deep lustrous quality of broken colour which gives them a special place in his work. 'Gullane Sands and Berwick Law from Cockenzie,' 'Firth of Forth looking towards Edinburgh,' and 'The Natural Harbour' may be instanced as examples of what is meant ; and to these 'Wet Weather, Port Seton' may be added for its wonderful rendering of that combination of wind and rain which we describe as scoury weather in the North. Even the pictures painted in 1891 or 1893 at Carnoustie, where the outlook is to the South, are, as a rule, suffused in this less kindly and less brilliant air. Thus in 'West Haven, Carnoustie' the very vivid and fine effect of breezy weather is touched with a sharpness scarcely ever felt in the West. Piercing a sky filled with light moving clouds, bright bursts of flying sunlight shine and then flicker out upon the windy sea, which shows over the flat tidal rocks in whose shelter the little haven and its stranded boats lie. Shadows fitting across these rocks and the ebb-tide shallows beside them form a breadth of definite yet transparent half-tone between the sun flecked sky and sea and the sunny foreshore sands, where a charming group of fisher-girls gives added animation and beauty to the design. And contrasting again with the lambent glow of sunset over the Atlantic, we have in 'Wet Sands, Carnoustie' a lavender grey evening beside the cold North Sea.

As has been indicated, his rendering of cloudy weather in the West is usually suggestive of a milder and more genial atmosphere. The clouds are more sun-suffused, the blue rifts more translucent and tender, the whole colour and tone at once more vivid and more exquisite in their higher-pitched and pearlier harmonies. It is from a cloud-drifted yet wonderfully luminous sky that the West wind blows the curling waves shorewards in the splendidly vital 'Sound of Jura' (1895), a smaller version—with delightful figures—of a magnificent seven feet sea-piece

still in the artist's studio ; and in 'April Showers, Machrihanish' (1895) the sun breaks through the soft warm clouds, flitting before the now falling south-west breeze, which has sent a brisk sea rolling into the bay. The most remarkable pictures of this type were painted, however, during his last decade, when his poetic conception of nature attained its fullest and most subtle expression through the enhanced power of significant abstraction and of vitally expressive handling which mark his style in its latest development. Such a picture as 'Broken Weather changing to Fine' (1904) is unsurpassable in the vividness with which it gives expression to the all prevailing influence of light, and combines that with a sense of breezy movement. The veiled silvery sunlight, which fills the gently moving cloudy sky, plays across the swaying sea of delicate though sharp struck blue and green and silver grey and spreads its quickening gleam over the shingle beach, where whites and greys and delicate purples and blues mingle in a pearly brightness, against which the sunny faces of a suggestively handled group of children come as warmer notes. At the same time the rhythmic sweeping lines and sustained colour harmonies, of which the design is wrought, confer not only emotional significance but pictorial beauty upon the whole. Steeped in ambient air, completely free from irrelevancies and without a superfluous or meaningless touch, its unity of poetic, pictorial, and naturalistic effect is well nigh perfect.

One of the greatest charms of nearly all the pictures described, and of many others, comes from the very happy way in which the artist introduced incidents of child-life. To the lover of the sea there are, however, moments when he would be alone upon the shore. Then the august beauty and grandeur of the sea is enough, and more than enough. It was under the impulse of this mood that McTaggart produced some of his best and most important pictures.

The seven foot 'Machrihanish Bay,' painted there in 1898, is one of the finest things he ever did. The west wind is falling, for, while sheeny white clouds are sailing across the blue, a long low line of cumuli shining in the sunshine, which falls shadowless upon the sea, hangs almost motionless just above the airy skyline, and the high surf still running shows the not yet exhausted impulse of a stronger breeze. One, two—four—six lines of breakers are speeding shorewards, each roaring as, rising and breaking and falling and rushing, it chases its predecessor in

from the ocean, right up to where we stand upon the margin of the wet shining sand. Each of these walls of surging white, divided by lanes of smoother water, in which the colour of the sky mingles with that of the sea and the reflections of the foam, has its own character and action due to the depth where it breaks, and the momentary poise which the artist has chosen in its continuous movement. Yet so subtly are they related to one another in action, that the impression produced by the whole is that—one of the most difficult to compass in painting—of unceasing energy, unchecked speed, and ever-changing form enveloped in an enfolding sense of unity and vastness. Painted during the same summer, the equally large but rather less complete 'Machrihanish from Bay Voyach' is equally vivid in clarity of lighting, atmospheric quality of high pitched colour and liveliness of movement. If scarcely so impressive as the other, where the far flung lines of parallel waves in themselves produce that feeling, there is here a greater variety of movement and a richer arabesque of design. In a third large canvas, dating a good few years later (c. 1902), the effect is at once keener and breezier, and the colour even more out-of-doors than in either of these. Yet 'The Paps of Jura' was a studio picture. Overspread by a lovely cloud drifted blue sky, many waves, not coursing in serried ranks but breaking crisply in short agitated lengths, as if hurried by the pursuing wind, are running straight towards the shore, on which foam-flecked shallows wash and sway. Dark but aerial blue on the horizon, where the purple-cobalt peaks of Jura, emerging from a silver haze, float between sky and sea, the water heaves in broken greens in the middle distance and then, amongst the nearer waves, becomes a wonderful harmony of sky blues, faint purples and tawny yellows, shot with touches of vivid green and rose. At once powerful and delicate in handling and colour, and designed with great skill, there is in this picture a combination of the dynamic and the ethereal qualities such as is rarely found in painting.

Arguing that the impression of grandeur and vastness, which Machrihanish produces on the mind, was in no small degree due to its airy spaciousness, McTaggart believed that to suggest these qualities pictorially size was, if not absolutely necessary, at least highly desirable. Doubtless he was right, as these and other large pictures, such as 'The Choral Waters' and 'Wet Sands and Stormy Seas,' remain to prove. Never-



ATLANTIC SURF

theless in smaller, though still considerable, canvases, he succeeded in conveying a scarcely less potent impression of the bigness of the ocean. Two five foot pictures painted in 1907 are admirable examples of this. In 'The Summer Sea' the surging tumult of many rollers travelling fast and flashing bright under a clear sky is suggested with great vividness and power, and in 'Atlantic Surf' the same mastery applied to a different problem of movement and light issues in an effect in which orderly progression imposes itself upon liveliness, and endows the ensemble with an element of stateliness, which expresses another aspect of the sea's mighty vastness. Amongst his very latest works, these pictures are also amongst the most vital and beautiful of his many fine pictures of the breezy sea.

SUNSHINE

"The air and the water dance, glitter and play,
And why should not I be as happy as they"

If it is impossible to separate McTaggart's love of quickening breeze from his passion for vivifying light, there are certain pictures of his in which the sunshine seems to play the leading part. Then, brilliant or soft, dazzling or diffused, it becomes the very life of the picture, as it is of the visible world. As of old "It is a pleasant thing for the eyes to behold the light of the sun," and, when "the air and the water dance, glitter and play," he would indeed be a miserable soul who did not feel stirred to gladness. Apparent in McTaggart's work from the beginning, his worship of the sun—"the oldest and perhaps the most easily understood of religions" he sometimes called it—reached its culmination during the last twelve or fifteen years of his life. In a number of pictures, sea-pieces and landscapes alike, he then attained a radiance, a clarity and a diffusion of real sunshine, which have never been surpassed, and rarely equalled, in art. Even Turner's golden dreams of light, after he had formulated his creed, "The Sun, it is God," are not more brilliant, and they are never so real or healthily true. Landscapes such as 'Sunset Glamour' (1894), 'Cornfields' (1896), 'Christmas Day' (1898), 'The Soldier's Return' (1898), 'The Harvest Moon' (1899), 'Broom, a June Day' (1901) and 'September's Silver and Gold' (1905) are flooded with it; but with them we are not now directly concerned. Our immediate

theme is his painting of the sun-smitten sea beneath the sun-steeped sky.

Both breeze and sunshine pervade the masterpiece, to which Swinburne's splendidly descriptive line, "And all the Choral Waters sang," was given as title. Yet, while the mighty music of great waves breaking in many rhythmic chords of thundering surf upon the Atlantic shore is recreated to the imagination by the artist's wizardry of line and colour and design, one feels as keenly the "Light that leaps and runs and revels through the springing flames of spray." Looking north-west, the radiant early afternoon sunshine of June falls upon the ordered on-rush of these charging regiments of rearing and plunging white horses sweeping into the long curving bay, and raises their white foaming manes and flying silver tails to a brilliance greater than that of sun-illuminated snow. And, between the gleaming lines of racing white, the wind-swept sky throws reflections of vivid changing blues, which, mingling with the lustrous greens amid the leaping waves and the rosy purples and tawnies afloat in the shoreward shooting ripples, make a wonderful and potent colour harmony. Words, however, are woefully inadequate to convey any real impression of this splendid picture—this great sea symphony in colour and light and movement. And, pathetic though "a symphony transposed for the piano" may be, reproduction of such a picture is even more disappointing.

Two smaller canvases painted about the same time as the 'Choral Waters,' if less impressive and splendid, are in their own way scarcely less beautiful. In 'Summer Sunlight' (1903) we see again waves running upon a sandy beach, but they are more infrequent and not so high, and, rising more slowly and falling more softly, their parallel but undulating lines roll less rapidly shoreward. Softer also, the sunshine spreads gently down the slightly veiled sky and across the mother-of-pearl coloured sea, which it touches here and there with a brighter gleam. Delightful in its delicate nuances of colour and so subtle in atmospheric effect and in handling that it seems to have been breathed upon the canvas, it is a very lovely thing. On the other hand, the radiance which illumines 'The Sun on the Sea' (1903) combines splendour with gentleness. The sky, in which a few delicate filmy clouds float silvery white yet almost impalpable against the faint azure, is flooded with sunshine, and beneath it, beyond



THE SOUNDING SEA

the dark rocks which rise from the shining opalescence of mingled white shingle and yellow sand in the immediate foreground, the sea lies spread, wide and quiet, a sheet of gleaming silver, shot to right and left with quivering touches of the most delicate turquoise. To this exquisite concord of sun-bright sky and sea and shore a deeper touch of feeling and a more balanced sense of design are given by the introduction of sketchily treated figures. Dressed in light garments, in which flickers of pale blue and pink appear, these children are an instance of how he occasionally made the tone of his figures higher than their relation to the lighting in which they are placed would seem to demand. Yet by so doing he increased the pictorial unity of his designs, and, contrary to custom as this device was, greatly enhanced both the brilliance and the luminous spread of his lighting.

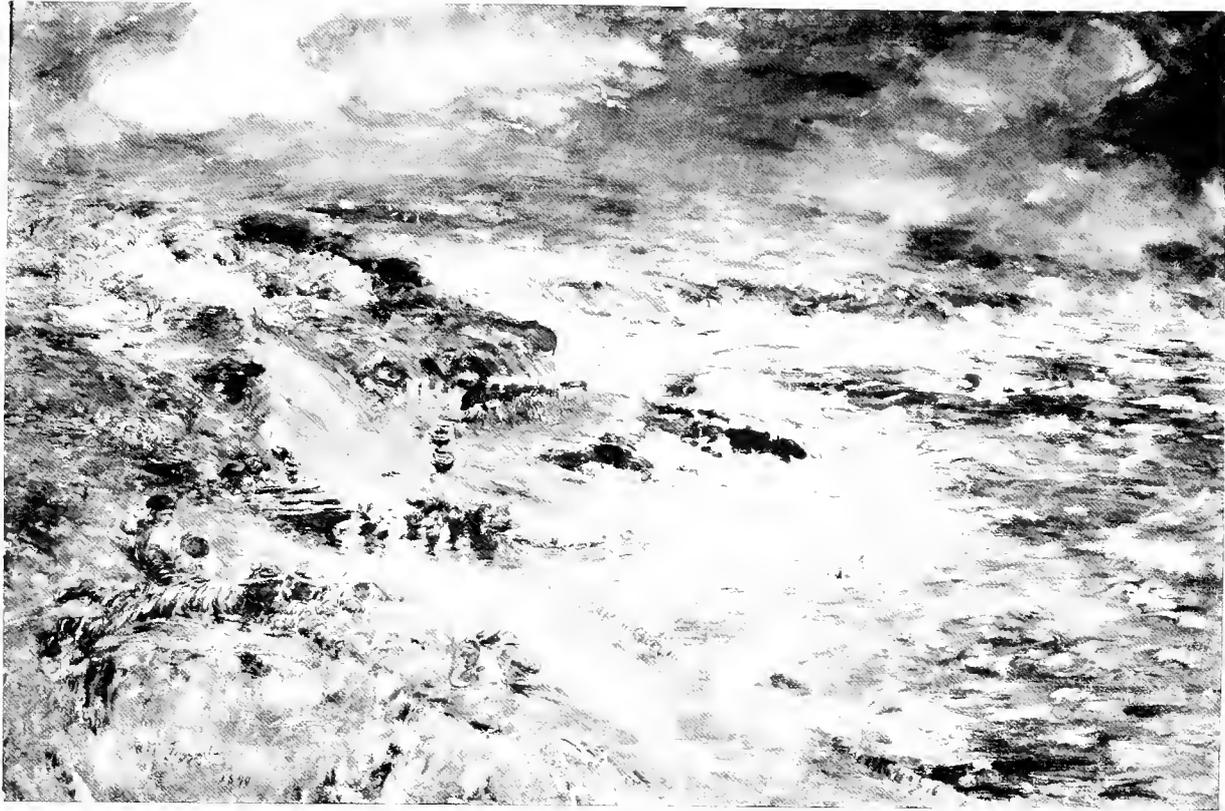
Bathed equally from edge to edge of the canvas in ambient air and designed with subtle simplicity, 'Off-shore Wind, Cauldrons' (1903) is another example of McTaggart's exceptional power of capturing the lustrous unity with which the sun-suffused atmosphere endows seemingly sharply contrasted elements in nature. Sweeping right across the foreground, a raised white gravel beach borders a brilliant blue sea beneath a clear sky: but (so delicately are the tones adjusted and so cunningly is the prevailing colour of one part echoed in the other) the result is complete pictorial harmony. While amid the shingle the touches of creamy grey and tender blue and purple, which vary its brightness and suggest its complexity, culminate in the sheeny blue gown of the girl who, in the middle distance, holds up a child to watch a brown sailed boat standing out to sea, the rippled blue water, barred with darker patches where the off-shore wind strikes more strongly, is touched in places by a shining gleam of the clear sunshine, which, influencing every colour and tone in the picture, blends the whole into an effect as delicate as it is brilliant. 'Whaur the Burnie rins doon to the Sea' (1904) shows yet another of the many moods wrought by the sun. The tide is out and, looking from the bent-grass tufted dunes which rise above the Machrihanish water, where it emerges from the links, the sunny sands, across which the burn steals like a twisted thread of blue and purple, spread between us and the sun-kissed ocean. Faintly blue under a tender sky, the sea flashes in silvery ripples upon the beach, where a sprinkling of gravel weaves grey and purple and

blue chords through the tawny brown, which in turn passes into delicate silver and pale golden greys amongst the foreground tussocks where rosy faced children lie basking in the warm summer air.

Somewhat similar effects in rather earlier pictures of this period are the sheeny opalescence of filtered sunlight in the expansive 'Away o'er the Sea' (1889) and the clear tender lighting in 'Where the Smuggler came Ashore' (1889); the elusive and gently veiled yet sun-bright luminosity in 'The Coming of St. Columba' (1897); the vivacious sparkle of 'Love Lightens Labour' (1890-9) and the marvellous scintillation of straying sun gleams in 'The Sailing of the Emigrant Ship' (1895), all of which have already been described. To these may be added the "sundered sun-gold of the Main," which dances on the waves and glitters amongst the flying spray in 'The Sounding Sea' (1889), another of the fine Southend pictures, and the duller golden glow of afternoon sunshine on the East coast, which suffuses the cloudy skies and gently lapping seas in 'Cockenzie—Afternoon,' 'Noon-tide—Jovie's Nook,' and 'Cockenzie Harbour,' painted in 1894. All are remarkable for the wonderful way in which the illusion of sunlight is conjured up and combined with a poetic conception of nature; but, while one would not perhaps assert that the later pictures of this period are more beautiful than the earlier, there is little doubt that they give larger and robuster, as well as more elusive and poetic, expression to the vital spirit of love and beauty, which wraps the world in a garment of light.

STORM

Capable of expressing the hidden witchery of calm, the living and rhythmic motion of the wind-stirred sea, and the vivifying and beneficent influence of sunshine, McTaggart brought rare gifts to the pictorial interpretation of storm. Moreover his immediate sense of drama was controlled by a profound depth of imaginative comprehension, which related all the elements in effect and situation in one harmonious whole. Melodrama and sentimentality alike were alien to his poetic interpretation of life and nature. The result is that his pictures of storm are peculiarly vivid and yet completely free from exaggeration. Already we have seen how he treated the tense moments in the life of fisher people. Now we



THE STORM

have to consider rather his rendering of wild weather. This may perhaps be said to find its most powerful expression in 'The Storm,' which, founded upon a smaller though important picture painted out-of-doors at Carradale in 1883, was painted in the studio in 1890.

Looking from the rising ground towards the outer edge of the bay, where some fishers and children are lying on the heather tufted grey rocks, one fronts a spectacle of wild turmoil. The storm-tossed waves swing inland a little distance, to where a road descends a wind-swept, bush-clad brae to the water's edge, and then rush, still foaming, into another bight with high shores backed by heather-clad hills. The air is full of spindrift from the seething seas which, crowding fast into the bay, break upon the shore in surging white and fall back in tortured resurge with a joined clamour like that of engaging armies; ominous clouds drive fast and low along the dark hillsides, and bursts of vivid sunshine flash dazzlingly athwart the angry scene; the solid earth itself seems to tremble. Yet even this elemental agitation is setting for human action, and, as ever on our coasts, imminent danger calls out the sailor-man's best qualities. Two fishing smacks, almost buried in the hurtling seas, are dragging their anchors and, from the spray-swept road beneath us, men, watched by wind-blown women, are launching a boat to attempt a perilous rescue. These are, however, only the facts and design of the picture. They can be seen in the reproduction; but the splendid colour and the significant and vital handling, which give full emotional life to the conception, are scarcely suggested in black and white, and can only be hinted at in words. In spite of the stormy effect, the colour harmony is not cold, nor the contrasts of light and shade exaggerated. While the one, shot through with flushes of purple-blue or gold in the sky and with passages of green and blue and lilac in the sea, culminates in points of pure colour amongst the crimson heather, the autumn tinted bushes and the blue or oilskin clad figures, the other is luminous, even in its darkest part, with the pervading influence of the sun behind the clouds. And without a meaningless touch, the impulsive yet calculated handling, defining forms here and blurring them there, as the light touches or leaves and the spray and wind influence them, evokes in a quite wonderful way the visual impression of the moment, and, at the same time, stirs in the spectator the sensation of being out-of-doors in the midst of the turmoil.

Amongst McTaggart's other pictures, probably 'The White Surf' (1904) approaches 'The Storm' most nearly in the vividness with which the elemental power of the sea is expressed. The wan yet bright sunlight, which silvers the stormy sky and kindles it to life, flickers upon the heaving horizon, and then, missing the foam flecked blue beneath, falls full upon the nearer water, which, beginning to break far out, fills a full half of the picture with its wrathful agitation. A mass of white glistening surf, shot with sheeny lavenders, glittering greys, and pale blues and greens, seething over sunken rocks and blown to spindrift by the gale, the tortured waves batter their way onward, only to fall back exhausted from the spray-swept but steadfast land, where, heedless of a woman who crouches amongst the dark damp rocks, looking anxiously out to sea, two wind-blown and happy children play on the white pebbled beach. It is, however, the wild beauty and tumultuous splendour of the sun-touched windy sky and stormy sea, and not their sinister import and tragic possibilities, which hold the eye and appeal to the imagination.

Masterpieces of that highest kind of impressionism, in which imaginative apprehension and poetic conception are united to keen observation of natural phenomena, the only compeers of 'The Storm' and 'The White Surf' are such wonderful things as Turner's 'Rain, Steam and Speed' and 'Rockets and Blue Lights.'

Quite as powerful in its own way as either of these, which have the tumult and agitation of the wind torn and tortured sea, surging and writhing over ledges or amongst sunken rocks on an iron-bound coast, for theme, 'A Westerly Gale' (1897) mirrors the mighty onslaught of the ocean, when it rolls and thunders in great billows upon a shelving shore. In 'Wet Sands and Stormy Sea' (1895-04), on the other hand, we are shown the aftermath of storm rather than storm itself. A big surf is running, but the fury of the howling wind has abated and the sting has gone out of its lash. If clouds continue to fly fast and low, the sky gives signs of clearing and the fair calm blue beyond is beginning to peep through the widening rifts. It is ebb-tide, but the empurpled sea, which rages landwards with foaming lips and sweeps the outlying rocks with the glittering venom of silver spray, is blown far up the smooth shining sands, where children are busily engaged digging for bait. Seen under different conditions, the same scene in the 'Rainy Day, Machrihanish'

(c. 1892) stirs quite other feelings. Pitched in the minor key, as it were, and without strong contrasts of either colour or tone, the suggestion of wild weather passing away does not now dominate the sentiment, but plays through it as a sweet and sad undertone. Although the day is cloudy and fine rain is falling, the magic touch of the veiled sun transmutes the greys of sky and sea into an exquisite harmony of delicate mother-of-pearl and soft sheeny silver, and quickens the tender browns and blues and yellows of the wet beach and the distant sand-hills with faintly opalescent tints of rosy pink and golden grey.

But the culmination of McTaggart's pictures of this type, perhaps indeed the culmination of his sea-painting as a whole, came in what was practically the last oil picture he painted at Machrihanish.¹ Vital with all the knowledge of nature gathered in a lifetime of loving study, and expressed with consummate and unlaboured art, this 'Mist and Rain' (1907) is a very wonderful and fascinating creation. There is nothing in the picture but a welter of waves beneath a misty sun-suffused rainy sky, and they are suggested rather than realised. Yet the whole baffling mystery and ethereal beauty of the wide sea and of the living air seem to breathe in the few pregnant touches which give the vision permanence. It is the very soul of Machrihanish that is painted there.

¹ Except for a big oil sketch of a sunset, his work at Machrihanish in 1908 was done entirely in water-colour.