

CHAPTER X

STYLE—PRACTICE—OPINIONS

ART being a compromise between the artist's own feelings and technical skill, the legitimate claims of nature, and the special characteristics of the medium of expression, any readjustment in the relationship of these cardinal factors leads to alteration in the results attained. The ultimate issue, when the balance is struck, may be gain or it may be loss ; but, almost invariably, progress involves both. Certain qualities are incompatible with certain other qualities, and the vital question is whether what is gained is of greater or of less importance than that which is lost.

In McTaggart's case the issue is clear. If his earlier work possesses some elements of beauty, which one misses in his later, or which his later seems to possess in less positive degree, it is because they have been sacrificed or minimised so that greater and more subtle beauties may prevail. What these are and what the significance of the modifications in technique, which accompanied their ever increasing dominance, form the theme of the early part of this chapter. The second section deals with his actual practice in the field and in the studio, and in the third an attempt has been made to indicate, from recollection of his talk and other sources, some of his ideas about art.

CHARACTERISTICS AND SIGNIFICANCE OF HIS STYLE

Comparing McTaggart's late pictures with those of his early or even of his middle period, one notes at once that the draughtsmanship, especially of figures, is apparently less accurate and complete than it had been ; that the handling has become extraordinarily bold, free and loose—what the indiscriminating are apt to describe as “unfinished” ; and that



THE WHITE SURF

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elimination of detail is carried to a point where those unfamiliar with the unconventional and subtle means by which he attained his effects are frequently baffled at first. Yet his later style of drawing, though deficient in realisation of absolute form, and much sketchier in manner, is really more expressive than his earlier and reveals higher powers of draughtsmanship. Vividly related to life, it is dynamic with suggestion of that transition from one position to another which is the very essence of unarrested movement, whether in figures, landscape, or the sea. It is in short drawing of that imaginative and interpretative kind, which, visualising the vital significance of action rather than its momentary pose, captures its essence and attains effects beyond the reach of the perfectly correct academic draughtsman and completely outwith the grasp of the instantaneous camera. The wonderful sense of movement and of the living air, and the spaciousness of effect, which mark the heaving seas and far-spreading landscapes of his late period, are dependent in the last resort upon mastery of drawing, and his figures, if now and then faulty in construction and even in proportion, are alive with the same vital power. Nearly always also, when his pictures are looked at from the distance at which they tell as a whole, the figures seem right not only in action and placing but in actual form. Finally, engrossed in what they are doing, the actors in his little dramas appear to be quite unconscious that they are being watched.

Simultaneously his treatment of faces and of hands and feet underwent a somewhat analogous evolution. While during the first half of his career they had been carefully modelled and completely rendered in both form and expression, they came gradually to be suggested rather than realised. Latterly this suggestion was frequently so slight that, although the faces always retained their beauty of type and character, the charm of intimate characterisation which had been such a delightful element in his figure incident in the seventies and eighties was to a certain extent lost. This was part of the price paid for his advance in creative power. What had once been a delight in itself had become incompatible with the larger aims which dominated his art in its latest development. Briefly these were the weaving of the emotions stirred by external nature and those associated with the life of man into one complete and closely related artistic whole. In this larger and more cosmic conception figures and all

the separate elements in natural effect, however charming in themselves, came increasingly to play not independent but contributory parts; variety and incident ceased to be primarily of individual importance; the theme became the harmonic unity and spiritual relationship of all nature and was expressed, orchestrally as it were, in purely pictorial terms. McTaggart's art, always interpretative, had become fully creative, and, while retaining close touch with reality, embodied a profound and poetic apprehension of the essential life and emotional significance of the world.

The tendency towards what seems at first sight an arbitrary lightening of cast shadows and of the tone of his figures in relation to their surroundings, which appears in his latest phase, is also connected with this more creative impulse. Although the accepted theory of *chiaroscuro*, derived from study of the old masters, is that contrast of tone increases illumination, McTaggart felt that strong tones and shadows often interfered with the breadth of effect and delicacy of pattern which were to him amongst the chief beauties of nature. His later practice was therefore based upon unity and suggestion rather than upon contrast and factual representation. Instead of forcing the shadows to intensify the light and focussing the central light by lowering the tone of the surrounding passages, he tended to lighten the shadows and carried the light right from edge to edge of the visual field. And, contrary to tradition though this practice was, by its use he not only increased the pictorial unity of his compositions but greatly enhanced both the brilliance and luminous spread of his lighting. Relieved of strong shadows, his design assumed much of the jewelled brilliance of colour which marks the great European primitives, and acquired some of those abstract and delicate decorative qualities which form to Western eyes perhaps the most immediate charm of Oriental art. At the same time, he made a notable advance in realistic truth, for these effects were fused in ambient atmosphere, which, suffusing every part, bathed the whole in diffused light. Yet his pictures, however light in key, never look feeble or wanting in relief. Brilliant in effect and colour, they are alive with a suggestion of sunshine-suffused atmosphere and of tremulous aerial space more vivid and subtle than anything that had hitherto been accomplished in painting. Further, as regards the figures, what was lost in absolute truth of tone and solidity of mass was more than counterbalanced by the vitality given to them by the skill and grace

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with which he accentuated an outline here or a feature there by swift dark line or touch. So, despite occasional false relative values, his figures always retain—what is rarer—their true places in the decorative and emotional effect of the whole. Whether occupying a prominent part in the conception or so elusive as to be unnoticed at a first glance, his fishers and country-folk and children are always one with nature, and, enriching and mingling with the poetry of earth rather than dominating it, his incidents are woven into its texture like strands of heavenly melody through the symphonic music of the spheres.

If apparently loose and sketchy, McTaggart's handling was never careless or unfinished. He possessed a very complete command of the technique of painting, and his later style was the issue of this mastery adapted to the expression of the qualities in art and nature which he most admired. Trenchant and brilliant, where power and intensity of effect were desired, and combining subtlety with delicate incisiveness, where the theme demanded grace and tenderness, his brushwork varied responsive to the dominating mood. To the last his handling was vital, and, without a meaningless touch, is marked by a swiftness and lightness which implies rather than imitates the complexity and movement of reality. When over seventy, he still lived in the hope of doing better next time ; but in the work of his later years he came very near realising Hokusai's aspiration that every blot and every line from his brush should be alive. This, of course, adds greatly to the joy given by his pictures, not only to those capable of appreciating finely expressive craftsmanship but unconsciously to all. His bold subordination of detail contributes to the same result. Throughout his career, after the first few years when delicate precision and wealth of detail dominated his inherent, but as yet comparatively inactive, feeling for breadth and unity of effect, he had gradually been shedding the unessential. Controlled by wonderful knowledge of natural detail and by a hand experienced in rendering it with the greatest refinement, in his late pictures this leaving out is done in a way which, while suggesting much, brings the essential elements into that simpler and more elemental harmony which is of the essence of creative art, and in its subtly articulated rhythm suggests the very life and stir of nature herself.

Harmonious in colour and refined in tone from the first, when his

manner, although showing signs of individuality, was still related to the earlier Scottish tradition with its transparent brownish *fond*, one finds in pictures painted quite early in the sixties a very notable expansion towards the purity of colour, clarity of tone and brilliance of light, which were to be amongst the most characteristic elements in the work of his maturity. But at the close of that decade, he seems to have become engrossed for awhile with other problems. These were connected chiefly with the significant expression of that synthetic conception of nature which, superseding his interest in the beauty of detail for its own sake, was henceforward to be the determining factor in his development. When two or three years later he emerged from this, the most obviously transitional phase in the evolution of his style, his innate passion for colour and light asserted itself once more. Now, however, atmospheric colouration was associated with a greatly quickened feeling for movement which shows, not only in the greater vividness with which the action of figures and the sway and motion of landscape or sea under the influence of wind or tide are painted, but in a heightened interest in changeful and transient atmospheric effects. Increasingly evident and expressed with ever increasing technical power, these qualities of atmosphere, colour and movement had attained very powerful and significant expression long before his removal to Broomieknowe in 1889.

Still, remarkable though his work during the eighties had been in these respects, that done later was even more remarkable. Light and colour were then combined in an indivisible unity which, being attained by the most subtle use of pure colour—the colour combinations producing the aerial tones—gives the rendering of nature throughout his latest period a strangely vivid beauty and a lasting fascination all its own. If not wholly determined by it, colour was also perhaps the most important element in his design. He continued to use light and shade, of course; but, while it remained an element in the pictorial ensemble, it was subordinated to the colour harmony which had become the dominating factor. Composed in masses of broken and vibrating colour, at once tint and atmosphere, and having little relationship to the chiaroscuro-charged masses of traditional design, his later pictures are held together pictorially by his unique power of evoking a colour scheme, which, beautiful in itself, expresses very fully the emotional mood and the atmospheric effect



BY SUMMER SEAS

which dominate the conception. Within this ensemble, in which poetic feeling and sensitive observation of reality mingle, his boldly conceived, yet delicately adjusted, combinations of warm and cold colour suffused with real light, clear or subdued, produce exceedingly rich and full harmonies. These chromatic harmonies again are enriched and enhanced by the more formal rhythm added by a very skilful use of sweeping and culminating lines. For, although this linear element exists only in the juxta-position of tones and colours, its influence articulates, as well as relates, the parts and accentuates both the visual melody and the emotional significance of the design. The increased sense of movement and of the vibration of light possessed by these later pictures through the modifications in drawing and handling already described, and through the unerring instinct with which he eliminated unessential detail, was also accessory to the total artistic result. But it is in the combination of all these qualities, each remarkable in itself, into a pictorial unity, rhythmic in design, balanced in conception, and vital with a rare and personal apprehension of the inner life of things that the ultimate triumph of his later work resides.

Energy, freshness and masterly disposition, the three elements which St. Beuve considered the marks of a classic, McTaggart's work possesses in rich measure. The energy is elemental in kind: powerful and passionate, yet controlled by law. The freshness is not only that of the living air and the wide ocean and the rich green earth he painted, but springs from a fresh unprejudiced eye and a heart attuned to the spiritual significance of reality. The disposition, spontaneous as it looks, is the ordered expression of profound thought, which, beating out, from the facts of nature used, that rhythmic harmony which underlies and vitalises all natural phenomena, endows the pictorial beauty so achieved with heightened powers of appeal.

If it is exceedingly difficult to find words at all equivalent to, or even suggestive of, the elusive pictorial qualities just discussed—after all are they not just what they are from emotional characteristics inherent in painting and not to be found in words?—it is no easier to explain that they are the issue of the painter's thought and emotion and express a profound intellectual grasp of the significance of painting and of its intimate and moving relationship to life. Yet undoubtedly this is so. They are the expression in terms proper to the painter's art of that

“interpretative power,” which Matthew Arnold described as “the grand power of poetry,” and they bring McTaggart’s later pictures nearer to Aristotle’s definition of the beautiful in art—“the shining of the idea through a sensuous medium”—than any other landscape painting known to me.

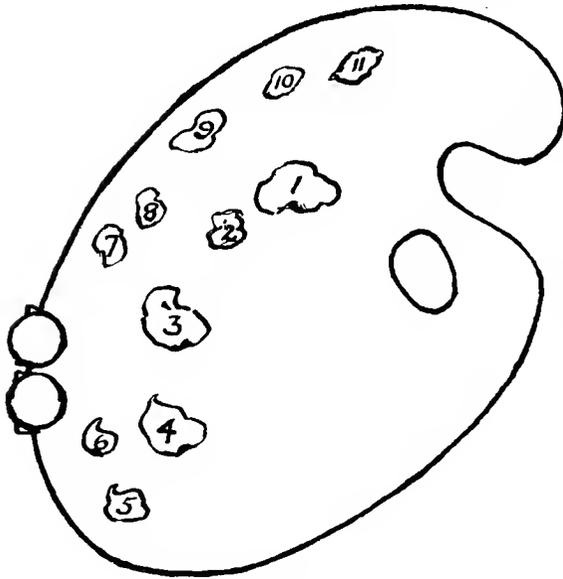
TECHNICAL METHODS AND PROCEDURE

Although the effects achieved by McTaggart during his maturity are marked by extraordinary fullness of colour and brilliance of lighting, his palette was simple and comprised comparatively few colours. Lemon yellow, yellow ochre, the two siennas, rose-madder, vandyck or caledonian brown, cobalt blue and flake-white were the ordinary range. Occasionally cadmium-yellow, brown-madder and prussian-blue were added, and usually vermilion and ivory-black appeared on his palette. The two latter, however, were sparingly used.

Moreover, believing that simple and related colours meant harmony, he employed his in harmonic series. While cobalt was nearly always (except in foliage and grass, where he frequently used prussian-blue also) the basis of his wonderfully varied blues, greens and purples, the yellows and reds associated with it were chosen to harmonise with the prevailing quality of the particular colour scheme in view. So one finds cobalt, lemon-yellow and rose-madder prevailing pigments in some pictures; and cobalt, yellow-ochre and burnt sienna in others. Yet, no matter what the scheme and quality of colour or the brilliance of the lighting, he seemed always to have on his palette a touch of colour or of light with which to accentuate the harmony or carry the pitch still higher. Thus never using black or even very dark brown in his main colour effect, he had these tones in reserve to intensify a light passage or, by sudden contrast, to clarify the darker masses. On the other hand, he always seemed to be able to add an ultimate flash to a spread of light, which in itself appeared to have reached the limit of illumination, and by the subtle opposition evoked between the mass and the sparkle, give the latter the suggestion of a glitter which emits light rather than transmits or reflects it.

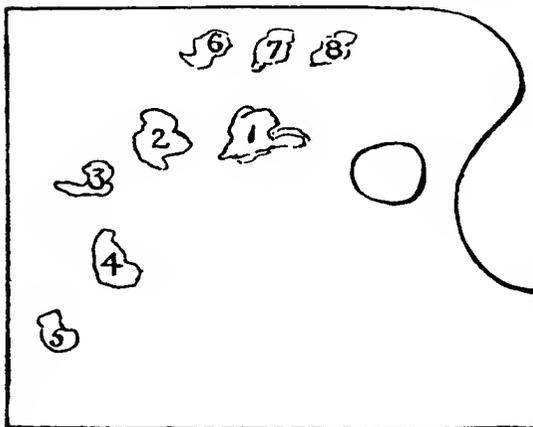
During the early and middle parts of his career he painted with

SETTING OF PALETTE LAST USED IN STUDIO



1. Yellow Ochre
 2. Lemon Yellow
 3. Flake White
 4. Cobalt
 5. Caledonian or Van Dyck Brown
 6. Prussian Blue
 7. Raw Sienna
 8. Burnt Sienna
 9. Rose Madder
 10. Vermilion
 11. Ivory Black
- Dippers with Nut Oil and Turpentine

SETTING OF PALETTE USED AT MACHRIHANISH IN 1907



1. Flake White
2. Cobalt
3. Lemon Yellow
4. Rose Madder
5. Vermilion
6. Yellow Ochre
7. Raw Sienna
8. Ivory Black

Robertson's medium, but later that was given up and he used only nut-oil—with sometimes a good deal of turpentine when great speed was required. On the other hand, there were times when no vehicle was considered necessary. But incited by the character of the effects he loved, and perhaps affected by his practice in water-colour, he preferred easy working and fluid pigment, and, in later years at least, utilised the canvas ground—left bare, stained here, impastoed there—in the result. He was very insistent also upon the great influence which the consistency of the paint and the character of the brush-work had upon the quality of colour and upon its power of suggesting the light and bloom of nature. Usually his brushes (although he had a few small round sables) were large and of the ordinary flat hog-hair type, and his handling was straightforward and fearless. Now and then, however, when blending tints on the canvas, he would drive his brush, filled with the colour with which he wished to modulate that already laid, right backwards from right to left. Not infrequently the palette-knife likewise came into play. Of all technical devices he had complete mastery, and, while he did not like to be watched when at work, and visitors were never introduced into the studio until he had been warned and had laid his palette aside, it was an inspiring sight to see him tackle a big canvas, particularly out-of-doors. Time is proving that his methods were also sound. His pictures retain their brilliance exceedingly well, and one very rarely comes across any work of his which is not in excellent condition.

His earlier pictures were painted upon fairly smooth canvas, primed white ; but during the eighties he came to prefer a rougher surface and a creamy ground. Then, for a good many years after 1890, he often employed a light cocoa-and-milk or a pale flesh coloured priming, which, chosen for its suitability for certain colour schemes, was made accessory to the final result. Meantime he also experimented with various textures, and during the last eight or ten years he was specially fond of a stout make of canvas, of pretty strongly marked grain, primed a dead white, inclining to blue rather than to yellow. Latterly also he frequently painted out-of-doors upon canvases strained not upon stretchers but over boards. Experience had taught him that there were times when it was absolutely necessary that no unexpected stirring of the canvas by the wind should interfere with the certainty of the swift brush strokes, by which



McTAGGART PAINTING AT MACHRIHANISH

From a snap-shot taken in 1895

alone it was possible to give successful expression to certain momentary elements in natural effect.

The combination of grit and fire, which was an inherent element in McTaggart's character, was reflected in his method of work. He never started a picture without a clear conception of what he desired to express, and, working at great speed, he carried it forward with great dash and splendid élan. When at Carradale in 1883, during which year he began to paint even his largest canvases outside,¹ the landscape and sea portions were frequently painted at one "sitting," and fifteen years later pictures of even six or seven feet would be very largely completed, as regards out-of-doors work, the day they were begun. At the same time, although painting at white heat and completely absorbed in the problem on hand, he always had his impulse well under control. Whenever a picture began to drag, or there emerged a point in the working-out of which he was not quite certain in his own mind, he would immediately stop, and would not again take up the picture until he had definitely decided what ought to be done.

McTaggart thought *off* the canvas, as it were, and to watch him paint was to see his idea blossom like a bud unfolding into full flower. Or, to vary the metaphor, the vital germ of the idea already active in his mind seemed to grow under the alchemy of his brush in much the same progressions as the image imprinted upon a photographic plate by the action of light emerges under the influence of the developing agent. The finished picture existed implicit in the first touches, and the development of the whole proceeded simultaneously, so that, no matter at what stage between start and completion one happened to see the canvas, the idea was always there as a balanced unity.

Seldom going beyond a mere indication in charcoal of the leading points of the composition in his preliminary drawing, he drew with the brush as he painted, and depended on the turn and sweep of his hand at the moment of a representation for the realisation of the form. In the particular field of art, which he made so peculiarly his own, this power was a great asset. For through it he was able to carry light and life and

¹ From the very beginning McTaggart had painted much out of doors, but prior to 1883 the larger pictures were frequently begun in the studio from sketches, and when considerably advanced were taken to the country to be worked on there.

movement throughout every passage and form, and to retain the freshness and vitality of the first vivid conception in the finished picture. To see him at work was like being a spectator of some gallant adventure. His attack was unhesitating, and he seemed to know instinctively what to do and what the result of what he did would be. One hung almost breathlessly upon the brush strokes, each of which made his intention clearer and carried the struggle to give life and movement to mere material paint nearer a finish, as if they had been sword thrusts in some deadly combat. The truth of Millet's saying, "Art is not a pleasure trip. It is a battle, a mill that grinds," came home to you with irresistible force. And, when he ceased painting, one was divided between wonder at the splendid display of accomplished skill just witnessed, and admiration for the living and breathing impression of life and beauty it had fixed permanently upon the canvas.

The invention of the figure incidents, which enrich so many of his pictures, while occasionally preceding and more rarely following the commencement of the actual painting, usually coincided with and formed part of the original conception and was essential to its dramatic intention and pictorial completeness. But, whether simultaneous or following in point of time, these episodes never look as if they had been added to or inserted into their environment. They are introduced with such rare and unobtrusive art that figures and landscapes always seem to have been painted at once. Often, when you examine one of his pictures closely, you find that a good part of the patch of sea or shore or landscape, where a boat or a figure comes, has been left almost untouched in colour as well as in tone, and passes, one might almost say, right through the incident, to which life and reality are given less by detailed and solid modelling than by vivid abstraction and masterly suggestion. Unity of effect is always preserved: incident and landscape are happily and indissolubly wedded. Occasionally indeed figures were not introduced until years after the landscape had been painted,¹ and often, in the case of large pictures especially, they were tried first upon a considerably smaller canvas painted for that special purpose. Painted into the big pictures freely and at once from these reduced versions, as if from nature rather than from studies, they possess a spontaneity and abandon which, bringing them into complete

¹ The double dates which appear on a good many of his pictures indicate this interval.

harmony with the first fine rapture of conception, give the whole that sense of at-oneness and that feeling of inevitableness which are the very essence of high lyric inspiration. It is to a considerable extent through this considered and conscious practice of solving subsidiary doubts and difficulties by previous trial that he succeeded in preserving in even the most important works of his latest period all the freshness and charm of a first sketch from nature, while, at the same time, securing the balance of design and colour and the breadth or emphasis of brush-work and accent, which their scale required.¹ Some charming medium-sized or smaller pictures resulted from this habit; but neither these nor the delightfully brilliant miniature versions on panel (sometimes painted to help with the placing of the figures and sometimes as a souvenir for his own keeping), which are in such request by collectors, are ever literal transcriptions of the larger pictures to which they are related. Each seems to have something quite its own, which the others do not possess. The little panels indeed have a peculiar bloom and brilliance: a lustre of colour, as if gleaming fresh from the brush, and a singular felicity and daintiness of touch, which give them a place apart in his achievement.

In his earlier period he had resource to models and took considerable trouble to find suitable types and to induce them to sit, for what he wanted was not of course available amongst professional models. In Kintyre and at Tarbert or Carnoustie he obtained amongst the fisher people and their children exactly what was required, and in Edinburgh he commandeered the children of his friends as well as his own, and would at times get an old man past work, children he chanced upon, and fisher-girls from Newhaven to pose for him. After going to Broomieknowe, however, he hardly ever used hired models. The child figures in his pictures were studied rather than painted from his own children, and now and then he would ask a friend to sit for a particular figure. Like Rodin, he did not impose attitudes upon his models, but took from nature free movements and unpremeditated attitudes he had observed. So, while he would occasionally arrange a group of children upon skins spread over boxes or

¹Very frequently in the later part of his career, McTaggart, when again taking up a picture, added to it, either by letting out the spare canvas (he usually had a good few inches to spare), or by having pieces sewn to the original canvas. These additions were usually suggested by compositional requirements or by the desire to give additional spaciousness to the impression produced.

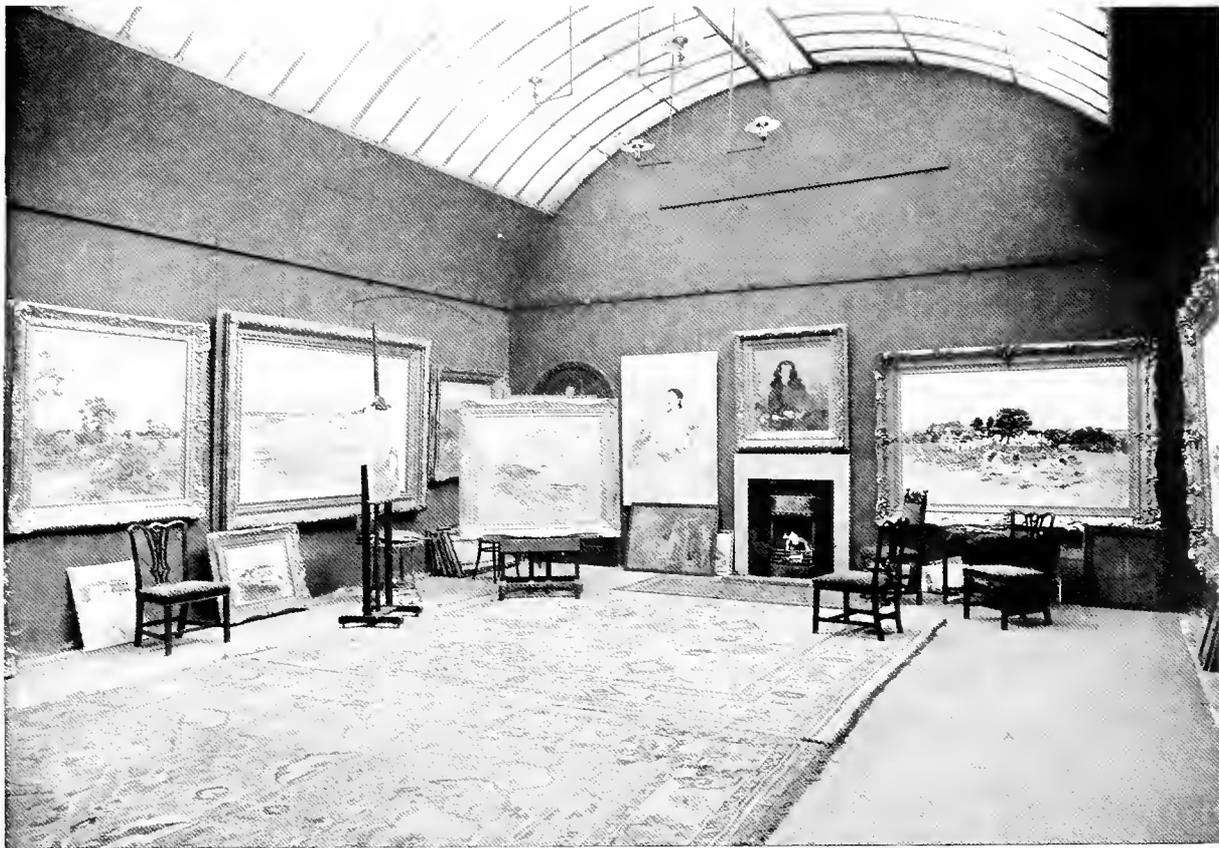
bundles on the studio floor to simulate rocks or knowes, he did not ask rigidity of position to copy from but suggestion of reality to keep his eye in tune with nature.

There are one or two other points regarding his relationship to his art which are worthy of note. He possessed a curious kind of insight which enabled him to form a distinct impression of how a certain place would look under particular atmospheric conditions; and, on occasions, he would start out fully equipped to paint a picture long cherished as a project (size, arrangement and effect all preconceived) and find exactly what his instinct had told him would be there. But as a rule, he did not go far afield for subjects. At Broomieknowe most of his landscapes were painted within a few hundred yards of his home, and at Machrihanish, Carradale or Carnoustie many pictures were painted on the beach before the house in which he happened to be staying. Then, while he used to declare that he liked all his pictures equally and all for different reasons, and could hardly ever be induced to express a special preference for any particular one, it was his habit, during the years he was exhibiting regularly, to devote a day each year to studying his work in relation to what was being done by others, with a view to finding out in what way he could improve upon his past and in what manner he could best develop his personal gifts. Finally, he never allowed anything to interfere with his work. That was the reason why in later life he was so reluctant to make engagements. Once made they had to be kept and to do so might interfere with a strong impulse to paint, or prevent him taking advantage of the combination of circumstances which now and then produce a unique effect.

Thus beneath the fascinating spontaneity and ease, which mark everything McTaggart did, there was a firm structure of thought, a wonderful knowledge of nature, and a very complete mastery of the technique of his art.

SOME THOUGHTS ABOUT ART

Always suggestive, racy and original, no matter what the subject, and he was a great talker, McTaggart's conversation was specially illuminative when the topic was painting. When in the mood, he would discuss it in all its aspects—as a craft or as a means of expression or in its relationship



INTERIOR OF GALLERY-STUDIO, DEAN PARK

From a Photograph

to life. I wish that I could remember more of his talk. Still some things he said remain vividly in my memory ; and as they not only help to explain certain elements in his own practice, but embody the reflections of an unusually original and penetrating mind upon some of the larger aspects of the art, which had formed its completest outlet, I propose setting them down here. With these more personal recollections, sayings of his gleaned here and there from others will be associated : and, if the treatment is scrappy and unconnected, perhaps the content may justify the want of form which in the circumstances cannot well be avoided.

McTaggart felt keenly the close relationship between life and art. To him there was no opposition between the two. Any honest work was good enough for any man, and the cultivation of one's gifts, whatever they might be, was as important and as great an achievement as the creation of masterpieces. Indeed, deep down, he believed that art and character were inseparably connected. To a clever young artist, who was leaving the Life-class, he said, "Remember that an artist must first of all be a man, and then use his talents as best he can for his fellows." The full use of artistic talent could not, however, be attained without cultivation of all the faculties. Speaking at a distribution of prizes at the Academy School in 1885, "Mr. McTaggart suggested that it might be well if some of the older members of the Academy were to advise the students as to the subjects they should choose. He was in a gallery the other day, and, if what he saw there was fine art, he certainly thought artists had better take to some other honest employment. While striving after technique, the students should also endeavour to make themselves thoroughly educated in every other training possible to man. No amount of finish would ever make a lie a truth, and unless an artist was first of all a man, he would give very little indeed for his pictures."

His attitude towards life as the material of art was summed up in a remark made to a young girl, "People talk about the commonplace," he said, "but only commonplace people see the commonplace in the ordinary. The natural, the everyday, is the most wonderful thing in the world. All things are possible, but the sensational and abnormal have less of the divine than the natural. To the truly spiritual, the 'supernatural,' as it is usually called, is far less wonderful than the miracle of daily life." He believed also that gaiety and gladness are perhaps the best things that art

can give and, like Wordsworth, he found them in the daily activities and ordinary relationships of men, and most of all in "joy in widest commonalty spread."

In art, as in life, it was the use that was made of things, and not possession, which really counted and made for happiness. And in art, as in other and higher things, one required Faith—faith to grasp the greater and larger truth believing that it included the smaller. That was what he meant when he spoke of "the generosity of easy seeing."

"In looking at nature, which is more than palings and green-fields and will not sit to one, you take a good deal on faith. To peer into nature is not to discover her beauty, which is spiritual, and in painting one should appeal to faith also. Of course elaboration when the result of serious study appeals to us because of its evident earnestness—the same as a stutter in speech seems to give additional truth to what is said. But the expression of the impression of the whole, if serious, is a far higher thing than the accumulation of things beautiful in themselves."

Then (it was a day of south-east wind and sunny mist and we were walking by the sea) he called my attention to the rising and falling of the mists, which, he said, gave a splendid lesson in selection and showed how much selection and concentration could do in creating an impression. Moreover, one could learn more from watching their play than in trying to record each variation. This idea he amplified later that same day when the sky had cleared and the fishing fleet was putting out to sea. "It is only after long observation of boats sailing that one is able to give their liveliness and the spirit of their motion. To draw a few boats carefully is to get some knowledge of their build and form ; but it does not enable one to give the impression of their actual sailing, and of the play of light upon them, which sometimes gives them an appearance quite different from what close examination would reveal. You must trust to your observation and give a frank rendering of what you see. Sometimes a glint of sunshine will so modify the appearance of a boat or a group of distant sails, that it becomes difficult to say what the actual form is, but one accepts that in nature for what it suggests, and in rendering it in a picture one should do the same."

"There are effects so ethereal and transient," said McTaggart at another time, "that you must not attempt to grasp them too tightly else,

like the fabled golden apple, they will turn to dust and ashes in your hands. All you can do, the best you can do, is to suggest as much as will come swiftly and easily, to render the impression broadly, appealing to the imagination and permitting it to fill in the details.¹ That indeed is ever the way where mystery of effect is at issue. To attempt more is to gain less, for to elaborate the detail of such effects is to prevent the play of the imagination which gives them their charm and suggestiveness in nature and in a picture equally."

"Imperfection," he continued, "has a charm for some minds greater than perfection. Indeed perfection cannot be attained ; while if it could, I wonder if we would recognise it as such. As the sailor said to the barometer, 'I wonder if you would know rain, if you saw it.' Most people who criticise pictures want something that's not there, something different from what the artist can give, and, if they came on a perfect thing, they'd probably want something taken away or added to make it just right."

His passion for the beauty of light was deep and abiding. To him, as to the Psalmist, it seemed the very garment of God. "It is the most beautiful thing in the world," I once heard him say. "Why wisdom and knowledge, we call them light. It is light that reveals everything to us." His very personal and original treatment of this, perhaps the most emotional, element in natural effect having been analysed elsewhere, here it may be sufficient to add that he dealt with it as a living presence rather than as merely a source of illumination. Always it was the life and movement of things that fascinated him, and in his work that was what he aimed for. In his painting of the sea, one has the realisation in art of his observation "Like an attitude, a breaking wave is a conception," and in looking at some of his sunshiny pictures, one feels the truth of his remark, "Sometimes the sun gets into your eyes. Then you cannot see certain things and are the better for not seeing them."

Yet it was not only the sight of nature that stirred him. He was very sensitive to its sounds and used to declare that, if he could not hear the roar of the sea or the rustle of the grass, he would not care to paint

¹ Compare Browning's

"the incomplete
More than completion matches the immense."

any more. "Deafness—it is like colour-blindness ; all impressions are deadened, as if by mist," was how he summed up his experience of a few days' dullness of hearing. This exceptional sensitiveness to the power of sound is reflected in his work. Transformed by him into finely rhythmic design, expressive nuance of tone, subtly wrought harmony of colour and delicate or powerful accent of brushwork, the audible music of nature seems to assume visible form, and, through the eyes, his pictures conjure up to the ear of the imagination the softest breathings of opalescent calm, the gay and changeful animation of breezy sunshine, or the sinister fury and black menace of storm. Speaking for myself, in their power of evoking a mood and of stirring the emotions they come nearer music than any pictures ever painted. Looking at many of his sea-pictures one seems to hear "the winds quiring to the choral sea," and before not a few of his landscapes one recalls that wonderful verse in Isaiah, in which ecstasy reaches supreme verbal utterance: "The mountains and the hills shall break before you into singing and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands." And like music, his painted harmonies linger in the memory and haunt the imagination. This aspect of his work was very happily dealt with by the writer of the fine appreciation of the artist which appeared in *The Manchester Guardian* at the time of his death.

"It is, however, as a colourist that McTaggart first wins the affection of the critical. In a high key of colour he has reached lyrical beauties and evolved combinations whose charm once apprehended never fades. It is a peculiarity of McTaggart's work that often when one sees a particular picture again after an interval the beautiful reality comes at first almost as a disappointment after the splendid vision which one carried of it in the memory. And after leaving it again the vision comes back more splendid than ever. It is as if art were indeed only a vehicle for carrying emotions of the inner beauty of the world from one soul to another, and the vehicle itself had seemed a little frail for the splendour and potency of what it carried."

Strong as McTaggart was on thinking, which widens one's views, freshens one's ideas and increases one's possibilities ; on constant observation, which keeps one's eye in tune with nature ; and on allowing the imagination to play round effects and things, which helps one to fathom their secrets, he believed that these should have little place in the actual

painting of a picture. You should do your thinking before you painted. Having discovered what you wanted to paint, having settled on the effect you desired for a certain scene and waited for it, when the moment for painting came, you should throw your whole energies into the doing. With the thing before you, you should give yourself entirely to the painting. Pictures painted before nature, although missing elements of design which could be thought out quietly in the studio, possessed certain other vital qualities which could only be got outside. So he considered that the best procedure was to think out and arrange a big picture beforehand, and then paint it in the open. Yet, although feeling this and saying that it was difficult to get a fine thing away from nature, he added, "But, if the mind is full of nature, sometimes the finest things come that way." More important than all, however, was the necessity of being true to one's own impressions. "There's Frith," said he on one occasion, "a truly admirable workman, a keen observer, and a master of description, but a very typical example of fine English commonplace in painting. His realism is most valuable, but it is not of the highest order. He suffers from the English dread of giving expression to his inward promptings—a feeling that makes so much of their art commonplace. We all know the conventional figure-piece, moonlight or landscape. Fools paint them, the true artist never. He is ever on the outlook for something more beautiful, more subtle, possibly more evanescent. A painter who is also a poet is carried away by his impressions and must express them, though it is necessary, if he would not sink into a rut, to keep his sensitiveness of impression fresh by constant reference to nature. How can an artist, who has no impressions of his own, hope to impress others? Such a one may give us brilliant description and narrative, keen analysis, and fine craftsmanship; but he is no poet. As all great literature is poetry, so is the greatest art, and such a painter as Frith stands in much the same relationship to the Masters as a brilliant war-correspondent does to the true poet."

As regards actual craftsmanship it is more difficult to glean the things he said, for he talked less of that than of the mental and emotional aspects of art, and his remarks about technique bore more perhaps upon special problems than general principles. But the following hints given to a young artist have a wider application; and all of them are exemplified in his own work.

“The simpler and more direct the method, the finer the picture.”

“Never put a touch on your canvas unless you mean something by it.”

“There are always accentuated parts in nature and they give life to a picture.”

“Remember that an object may be dark without being black.”

“Thick or thin painting does not matter provided one gets the effect one desires.”

On another occasion he spoke of the painting which is taught in the schools as right in itself and perfectly safe and sufficient as long as one remained “a good boy,” and did not make adventures on one’s own behalf. But, whenever you came to have anything of your own to say, this academic style had to go or, at least, had to be modified to give expression to the new ideas. And, just because it was a break away from the accepted, this modification presented difficulties to critics, amateurs and even artists. In this connection he referred most sympathetically to Whistler. “I remember when his pictures first began to appear. They struck me as very beautiful. They were beautiful colour, but they were also something new. Now I see that this was what he had to say, and that his present work is the outcome of the past.” A personal way of expression was likely to grow with a man’s age also, and, though with greater familiarity the difficulty of acceptance might disappear, the usual complaint was that the work was “unfinished.” Yet a picture was perhaps oftener (and usually better) finished by painting out than by painting in. It was fine to push a picture on as far as one could when you were fresh on it, and then lay it aside to go on with later. “But,” and he smiled, “it is even more delightful to go back and find that it expresses so much that it is better to leave it as it is.” It was not the pictures that went swimming along that one wanted to finish: it was those that commenced to stick on the ways. If one got even three-quarters of what you were trying for, it was better to leave the picture so than to go on and finish it with the risk of its going back on your hands. He himself made a point of never working on a picture unless he felt certain that he could improve it.

McTaggart’s talk about individual artists and the characteristics of their work was not less interesting and informative than his reflections upon the significance of art and the problems it involves. Keenly alive

to the qualities which separate the real from the counterfeit, there were times when, with a good humoured laugh or a delicate touch of irony, he would reveal his contempt for pretensions based upon anything except inherent merit ; but, as a rule, he was exceedingly generous in his estimate of other men's work. It is not proposed, however, to record these opinions here. But some of his ideas about Claude, Turner, Constable and Claude Monet struck me as being of exceptional interest, for these artists, like himself, were great as painters of the light.

During his stay at Rosehill on Campbeltown Loch, in 1906, the weather was lovely, and during the calm tranquil evenings, when the setting sun threw the shipping clustering round the pier and the church steeples and the distillery chimneys of the distant town into soft silhouette against the quiet golden sky, and cast a glittering track across the still or gently rippling surface of the water, Claude was often mentioned. For was not he the first who set the sun in the heavens. On one of these evenings, McTaggart directed my attention specially to the wide spread light which suffused the scene. "It is," said he, "an undoubted and genuine Claude in all details, for sometimes he also painted the shining sun. Frequently I'm inclined to think him greater than Turner. He gave the full suffusion of light over the entire landscape. And he was so much simpler. Turner was inclined to gradate the light, making the sun the focus and darkening his picture gradually all round to the corners. Now look at that sky," and he pointed across the loch, "the light is equally spread right across it. Then Claude's simplicity is more telling than Turner's accumulation of riches, which was too lavishly piled up when his pictures were painted, and has been increased by the additions time has made to his hatchings and scumblings. Claude's suffused light and simplicity of effect save him from that and seem nearer the beauty of nature." Later we got back to the same theme. We agreed that Turner's piling up of detail and accessory had something of the miser's gloating over his wealth about it (it was sun-gold instead of guineas) and might be associated with his recluse and miserly habits, though McTaggart added that we must not forget that he left his £120,000 savings for the benefit of poor artists. He thought that Turner's dramatic instinct had a great deal to do with his gradating the light round the sun, for he was always dramatic, and he knew every trick of picture-making :

but with him it was no trick but complete mastery. At the same time, Turner's desire for emulation with other masters was a weakness. Probably it resulted from ambition and a certain "thrawnness" of nature. "But why should one emulate other men's work when nature was there," he exclaimed. Yet his admiration for Turner's genius was profound. After the bequest of the Vaughan series of Turner water-colours to the National Gallery of Scotland, McTaggart made a point of going in specially to see them each year in January when they are on view to the public.

For Constable also he cherished a great admiration. His naturalness and the vitality of his colour appealed very strongly to him, and he thought that—considering the freshness of Constable's vision and of how his atmospheric colouration differed from everything before it—it was surprising that he had been appreciated even as he was.

With the work of Monet, McTaggart was much less familiar. Indeed the only pictures by the famous French impressionist which he ever saw were the two shown at the exhibition of the Society of Scottish Artists in 1902. They struck him, however, as the work of a man in love with light and nature, who had learned much from nature and owed nothing to the schools. If they lacked some of the qualities one valued in art, fine design and fine form and poetic feeling, they were full of fine realism and beautiful atmospheric colour, and were entirely free from conventionality. From discussing Monet, he passed almost at once to discourse of the effect engraving had had upon painting, and particularly upon composition—of how consideration of the way in which a picture would tell when engraved had influenced the building up of design in masses of light and dark, which would make an effective arrangement in black and white. Even Turner had been much influenced by this and had trained a school of engravers to interpret his work, much of which was painted with the definite intention of having it reproduced. On the other hand, McTaggart loved best the broad suffusion of light, and designed more in masses of colour, articulated by line, than in masses of light and dark. "I often think," he said, "that the shadows caused by cross lighting are a hindrance rather than a help in composition, for frequently they are holes in the design and disturb that unity of light and breadth of effect which are so beautiful."