

CHAPTER I

CHILDHOOD AND YOUTH

1835-1852

As the wind bloweth when and where it listeth, so is it with that breath of inspiration men call genius. None can tell whence or why it comes. It originates in most unlikely places and takes quite unexpected forms. But, whether cradled in purple or born on a bed of straw, education and opportunities, which mean so much to mere talent, have little influence upon its bent, and small effect upon its development. For of the former it ever obtains what is essential to its unfolding, and the latter it makes for itself. Of none of the manifold forms taken by genius is this truer than when it manifests itself in music or painting.

Nobody could have suspected when, in 1835, the name "William McTaggart"¹ was registered amongst the births in Campbeltown parish, that the name of one of the most original and fascinating painters of the nineteenth century had been recorded for the first time. He came of a race of small farmers and crofters, in whose veins a strain of seafaring blood was mingled. His father's people, who had long been settled in the southern part of Kintyre, that beautiful arm which Scotland stretches in greeting through the gleaming western sea towards the green shores of Ireland, were mostly connected with the land. The passion for the sea came rather from his mother's side. Of his great-grandfather, Edward McIntagert, who died 7th April 1794, aged 79, and his spouse, Margaret Stewart, little is known except the inscription on an old head-stone in Kilkenzie churchyard, which, with its ruined pre-Reformation chapel and

¹The Gaelic name MacTaggart means son of a priest. The artist wrote the name and usually signed his pictures in the form used in this book.

broken tombs of Highland chiefs and shepherds, occupies a grassy knoll on the northern edge of the Laggan of Kintyre. But Edward's son, Archibald, lived at Longisle, a little farm with a cottage nestling amongst a bouquet of thin trees on a burn-side, some three miles from Campbeltown on the South-End Road, and his son Dugald, the artist's father, at Aros, a holding on the moss between Campbeltown and Machrihanish. To Longisle in 1830, a year or two before he settled at Aros, Dugald McTaggart took home a bride. Barbra Brodie belonged to the same worthy class as her husband; but in her pedigree there are one or two points which suggest interesting, if inconclusive, speculation.

The story of this family is best told, perhaps, by summarising the account given in "The Brolochans of Cantyre," a MSS. sketch written many years ago by the late Neil Brodie of Halifax, Nova Scotia. According to this, the first of the Brolochans in the district were two brothers, who emigrated from Ulster in the reign of Queen Anne. Neil settled in the Laggan, William up the west shore, where he prospered, he and his descendants for three generations farming Barr Uachdaraich, in Upper Barr. "Neil, son and successor of the first William, was born in the year 1711. His wife's name was McMurrich, sister of the piper-poet who composed the famous song 'The Campbells are coming' when Argyll and his men were on their way to oppose Charles Edward in 1745. This Neil and his wife had that industry and thrift strongly characterising them which have been seen as a family trait in a few of their posterity in our own day. Niall and his wife McMurrich had two sons, William and Duncan. William received a better education than was common there at that time, and his father got a schooner built, in which William was to trade to and fro between Cantyre and Donegal. . . . William was forty-one when, long after his father's death, his aged mother still living in the family, he married Barbara, an excellent and intelligent young woman, the daughter of Duncan McDougall, the religious poet of Cantyre, who died about the end of last century (eighteenth)." Dugald McTaggart's wife was the fifth child in their family of four sons and four daughters.

At the time Dugald McTaggart migrated from his father's house, the tract of flat country which lies between Campbeltown Loch and Machrihanish Bay was less extensively cultivated than it now is. Peat

mosses occupied much of its gently rolling surface, but reclamation was in progress, and the small farmers and cotters, whose homesteads gave a human touch to the somewhat bare and barren expanse, were slowly and laboriously adding to the arable lands. Near the centre of this plain, about mid-way between the heather-clad hills which rise to the north and the green hills which lie along its southern verge, but nearer the loch than the sea, the cottage in which the artist was born stands on a green knove above a burn. From the door one commands a wide and airy prospect ; but although the thunder of the Atlantic, breaking on the sands of Machrihanish, can be heard on stormy days, the sea itself lies out of sight below the long chain of sand-hills which bounds the western horizon. In addition to corn and potatoes, lint or flax was grown in the Laggan, and (the manufacture of linen being a local industry then) formed the most easily marketable part of the cotters' crop. It was not easy, however, for even the hardworking and thrifty to win a livelihood from a few acres, and Dugald McTaggart, who, aided by his wife, was both, added to the meagre income derived from his holding by leasing a stretch of moss on which, with the occasional help of hired labour, he dug and prepared peats for sale to the distilleries in Campbeltown, where they were used in the preparation of the malt. He was a singularly silent man, and something of a dreamer I fancy ; but one who had thought deeply and for himself on the true relationship of things. His wife was of a more practical and vigorous temperament. A good manager and a strict disciplinarian, she conducted her household affairs with wisdom and economy, and won the respect and affection of her children. Both parents were deeply religious, and were touched with the fervour which issued in the Disruption of 1843. If one substitutes the Gaelic¹ for Lowland Scots and the open and treeless Laggan of Kintyre for the tree-fringed fields and wooded riversides of Ayrshire, one has, I have often thought, in the circumstances and atmosphere of Dugald McTaggart's home an environment which in many essential respects resembles that of Robert Burns's father's house, as the poet describes it in "The Cotter's Saturday Night." During the ten years they lived at Longisle and Aros, four sons and one daughter were born to them, and subsequently another son and two more daughters

¹ The father and mother spoke both Gaelic and English ; the children knew both, but usually spoke English.

were added to the family. The third son, who was born at Aros on 25th October 1835, and was christened William, after his maternal grandfather, the skipper and owner of the trading schooner already mentioned, is the subject of this biography.

From the first he was a healthy and stirring boy, and, when no more than four years old, he was sent with his older brothers, and to free his mother's hands more probably than for education, to a little school, some three-quarters of a mile distant, at the clachan, which clustered round the Lintmill—as the linen factory, now disused, was called—on the Campbeltown-Machrihanish road. But Aros was not much longer to be his home. For reasons which are somewhat obscure, but probably because the rent was raised beyond what the croft could stand by the Duke of Argyll's factor, who bore the reputation of 'a hard man,' or because the land was wanted to form part of a larger farm, Dugald McTaggart had either to leave or was evicted.¹ He removed to The Flush, a holding then tenanted by a relative, about a mile and a half nearer Campbeltown. But here again troubles gathered round him, and, turned out of the cottage he had built with his own hands, he took his family and his belongings into the town. From there he continued to work the peats on Aros Moss, and with the horse and cart, saved from the croft, undertook carting in the neighbourhood. In these ways, soon added to by the earnings of his older sons, he managed to make a living which sufficed, with strict economy, for the pressing needs of his increasing family.

In Campbeltown, where they lived in Rowat's Close, on the site now occupied by Fleming's Land, near the top of the Main Street, William was sent to a school kept by one McNaught. A 'stickit-minister,' as not a few Scottish schoolmasters were, this dominie, who was known as 'Gloomy' and wore the knee breeches in fashion with a previous generation, possessed considerable learning and great character. Like most other boys who become artists in later life, McTaggart is said to have drawn precociously well. At all events he was caught, slate-pencil in hand, making a graphic, if necessarily rude, sketch of his teacher applauding the cock-fighting which took place at school once a year. Strange to

¹The croft now forms part of the farm of Aros, and the cottage in which the McTaggarts lived is used as one of the cot-houses.

say, he was not thrashed. On leaving McNaught's, he went to a school originally founded by the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge, where under the master, Mr. Daniel Morrison, he proved an apt pupil, and received a sound elementary education, which included a smattering of Latin. An old schoolfellow describes him as fond of fun and full of energy and the spirit of adventure—a 'throwther' boy, but of the right stuff. He took part in the bickers between the town lads and those of Dalintober, on the other side of the Mussel-ebb, the upper part of the loch, now filled in; he had no doubt his own private quarrels, for he was quick tempered and not to be put upon; he tramped the countryside with his companions; and, having taken to the sea as to his native element, had many a fine sail in boats, not always borrowed with the permission of their owners. But even then the quiet beauty of the little sea loch—with its dancing waters and embosoming hills, and the significant picturesqueness of the little white town at its head, where the herring-boats lay at anchor or clustered round the quay, and the tall poles for drying nets vied with the steeples in height—had commenced to steal into his soul. When over seventy he told me that he remembered as clearly as if it had been but yesterday, how he, then little more than a child, had been moved when he saw for the first time, from the rising ground to the south, the loch spread out below him, with Kilbrannan Sound and the Arran hills beyond, and the fishing fleet going out. Truly he could have said with Constable that his own parish, half seaboard and half landward, had made him an artist; and, like Constable, he repaid the debt with love.

After some occasional employment as a summer herd, McTaggart became bound for four years as an apprentice apothecary in the dispensary of Dr. Buchanan, the leading medical practitioner in the town.¹ He was in his thirteenth year, and his wages to begin with were half-a-crown a week and his dinner on Sundays. The doctor was not long in discovering that the new boy was exceptionally bright and intelligent, and, taking a warm interest in him, proved a wise counsellor and a kind friend. This was fortunate in every way. Association with a man of education

¹The dispensary was situated at No. 9 Long Row, at the corner of Burnside Street. These premises are now occupied by a firm of painters and decorators, who also sell artists' materials.

and knowledge of the world brought the youth into touch with a broader and more liberal kind of culture than was possible in his own home, with its deeply religious but rather austere ideals. It tended to widen his horizon and liberalise his mind; and it gave him more confidence to follow the promptings of his own awakening artistic instincts. Encouraged by his master, who placed his own library at his disposal, McTaggart, at first half shamefacedly and then with real delight, read Shakespeare, Cervantes, and Scott and other masters of romance. He also went on with Latin, studied Fife's 'Anatomy' and other medical books, and carefully improved his penmanship until he wrote a very good hand. As his duties consisted in receiving messages for the Doctor or informing callers when he could be seen, and in dispensing, he was not constantly employed, and had considerable time to devote to drawing, which had become a passion. He wanted to be a painter, though he did not know how to set about it. Before this, however, he had attempted modelling, and had practised carving until he was capable of making a very fair shot at a figure in wood; and these preliminary experiments had helped to train both eye and hand. He now made surreptitious portraits of patients waiting, sketched local characters, and induced friends to sit to him. Even his earliest portraits, executed in pencil or crayon, seem to have been excellent likenesses. They were regarded by those who saw them with something approaching wonder I am told, a drawing of a blind man, an uncle of my informant, being considered particularly remarkable. To the budding artist they must have been even more surprising. So far removed was he from all art influences and effort that for a short time, having the idea that any portraits he had seen were in some way the result of daguerreotype, he cherished the illusion that he himself had discovered the way to make portraits direct from personal observation. Before long, however, he found that portrait painting was not the new thing he had imagined. Through Dr. Buchanan, who sympathised with these aspirations, he was shown portraits by Graham-Gilbert, Macnee and other Scottish artists, in the possession of well-to-do families in the neighbourhood; but neither then nor later did any of the rich people of his native place show tangible token of any real interest in his career. Sight of these portraits, no doubt, stimulated his ambition, as it increased his knowledge, and during the rest of the time

he remained in Campbeltown, he produced many portraits in crayon, water-colour or oil, receiving for them sums varying from 10s. 6d. to £3, the latter for kit-cat portraits in oil. Meanwhile his desire to be an artist had crystallised, and had been openly avowed. As was not unnatural, his parents were opposed to it. To them an artist's career was a venture into regions unknown and dark, and the old Scottish distrust of "the things of sight and sense" made them fearful of its influence upon their son's moral welfare. The Free Church minister who contemptuously dismissed painting as 'a dravelin' trade,' spoke to his mother of art as vanity and even wickedness, and pointed to its connection with the Church of Rome, which had dragged Italy down until it was a land of fiddlers and painters and such like irreligious folk. McTaggart, whose determinations to be an artist had at that time only one possible rival—a half-formed wish to be a missionary in the foreign field—never quite forgave the cloth for the interference of this probably devout, but certainly narrow-minded, representative. But he had been born a painter, and a painter he would be. Undeterred by the affectionate doubts and fears of his own people and the wise headshakings of friends, who smiled at his youthful enthusiasm and prophesied failure, he decided to leave Campbeltown, at the conclusion of his apprenticeship, to pursue his art studies. The spirit in which he approached this departure from the traditions of his family, and the conventions of the community in which he had been reared, is revealed in a letter written at this time (15th January 1852) to his eldest brother, then resident in Glasgow. It begins with a reference to a proposal which had evidently been made, that he should try to obtain a situation in a chemist's shop, and devote only his leisure to study.

"I don't think that an apothecary would give me any time for myself, but I will try. As to patronage, I have not the least doubt but what I will get some portraits to execute among the Campbeltown young men that are in Glasgow. There is one or two bespoke, and as soon as my portraits are seen the rest will be wanting theirs done also—no doubt they will give the job to me before they will give it to a Glasgow artist, as they charge enormously. I don't think it will be so dreadfully difficult to get work for a few months. I am not very particular, if I have time and a few shillings a week. I think I will be out [of his apprenticeship]

next week. A few months in Glasgow will do me altogether, so I don't think it will be difficult for me to get employment for that time. I can get plenty of work here, but I may get into bad habits in drawing, so that I will need a few months studying under efficient Teachers."

So in the middle of February 1852, with a little money saved from portrait-making, a letter of introduction to Daniel Macnee, R.S.A., a high spirit and a resolve to succeed, William McTaggart, then aged a little over sixteen, set sail in the Glasgow packet on his great adventure.

Upon his arrival in Glasgow, where he shared his brother Duncan's lodgings, McTaggart looked up a number of people with Campbeltown connections, and found, as he had hoped, some employment in painting portraits for them and their friends. He also called upon a portrait painter named McFarlane, whom he had previously met in Campbeltown, and presented Dr. Buchanan's letter of introduction to Daniel Macnee (1806-1882). While the former, unsuccessful himself, was kind but very discouraging, and told him of the dozens of clever artists starving in Paris and London, the latter, then, and for many years afterwards, the leading portrait painter in the West of Scotland and subsequently President of the Royal Scottish Academy, not only received him with characteristic geniality, but gave him good heartening and advice. The facilities for study in Glasgow were inadequate, Macnee said, and he advised him to proceed to Edinburgh as soon as possible and join the Trustees' Academy, where many artists had been well trained. Scott Lauder, an excellent artist, had just been appointed Head Master, and Macnee offered his caller an introduction which would ensure admission to the school. Thanking him sincerely, McTaggart went to Edinburgh, and, on 19th April 1852, was enrolled as a student.