

CHAPTER III

ASSOCIATE

1859-1870

AFTER election to Associateship (November 1859) McTaggart's life becomes a story of achievement rather than of struggle. His battle was not over of course, but it was subsequently, and later rather than now, less for tangible recognition, which he always had, than for fuller appreciation of the special qualities in his art. For his was a talent which, while it blossomed early, went on developing and expanding right up to the close. And, in its expansion, it was apt to give offence to those who thought that what he had already done was just right, and to those who, not realising that he was dealing with novel problems and solving them in an extraordinary expressive and beautiful way, believed that he was trespassing what they took to be the sacred and unalterable canons of art. That part of the story, however, though one can trace its beginnings very soon, belongs to a rather later stage of this chronicle.

Shortly after his return to Edinburgh in November, McTaggart and the other two artists elected Associates at the same time—his fellow-student, Mr. Hugh Cameron, and J. C. Wintour (1825-1882), whose romantically conceived landscape was destined to take a high place in Scottish Art—were entertained to dinner in the Library of the Academy by their supporters. Fifty years ago Academical affairs seem to have been conducted, if no more ably, on less formal lines than now, and this friendly and unofficial gathering appears to have been marked by much geniality and good fellowship. I do not know what, or by whom, speeches were made; but Erskine Nicol entertained the company with

Irish songs, Sam Bough gave "A Friar of Orders Grey" with abundant gusto, and the Secretary, D. O. Hill, relaxed his official gravity and sang "John Peel," with a rousing chorus supplied by all present.

Although an Associate, McTaggart continued to attend the Life Class recently transferred to the care of the Academy, and, at the close of the session, escaped a prize through some one remembering that he was no longer eligible. He was also a constant attender at the meetings of "The Consolidated," which, as regular school study was now over for most of the Lauder group, afforded, not only valuable stimulus towards pictorial design, but welcome opportunity for social intercourse and for that endless discussion in which most young artists delight. These reunions were held in rotation at the lodgings or houses of the members, and all the sketches made at each meeting became the property of the host of that evening.¹ McTaggart, who had left New Street in 1855 for lodgings at 63 Cumberland Street, now removed to 44 Howe Street, and a year later to 13 Pitt Street, where his sitting-room made a good studio. In Howe Street he gave the finishing touches to 'The Builders,' now definitely titled 'Past and Present,' and completed 'Impending Retribution' and 'The Dead Robin,' the pictures which, with a portrait, accompanied it to the Royal Scottish Academy in 1860.

That year's press criticisms were less favourable than any to which his pictures had as yet been subjected. The work of the younger men had been asserting itself gradually in the exhibitions, and McTaggart and Cameron had just been elected Associates. In these circumstances the critics seem to have combined to take stock of the situation. While the leading Edinburgh paper, hitherto very appreciative, accused them of loose, sketchy execution, and a consequent want of solidity and relief, and instanced 'Past and Present' in illustration of its thesis,² and *The Art Journal*, anticipating the new journalism, dubbed their efforts 'sketchy bits,' one of the numerous pamphlets about the Academy Exhibition, which then appeared, complained that their pictures lacked

¹ A large collection of these drawings were in McTaggart's possession at his death and now belong to his family.

² To judge from contemporary notices, McTaggart seems to have been regarded as the most talented and perhaps even as the leader in his group.

finish, were objectionable in colour, and showed a low taste in subject.¹ Some of McTaggart's warmest admirers seem to have been disturbed by these strictures. Mr. Craig, who had been delighted to secure 'Impending Retribution' as well as 'Past and Present,' wrote to the artist in May: "And will you excuse me if I offer a remark which I mean in kindness. It has been very generally remarked that my two pictures are deficient in *finish*, just too much like *sketches*, a feeling which has grown upon me the oftener I have seen them. Well, just give it [the larger picture] a thorough overhaul like a good soul and send it me when ready, and I shall give you some Baw-Bees." His artist friends thought otherwise. Chalmers, writing from Montrose in January, tells him, "I have heard a great deal about your picture. Pettie and Smith are high in its praise. Leggatt came home quite enthusiastic about it, so much so that he puts me into dumps about my own. . . . You are a lucky dog—got all your pictures sold since you began. Man, I would be the happiest cove alive if I could get anything like remuneration for mine. . . . Mind you give me some news in your next, and not be writing a lot of *Moral Philosophy*. Upon my word I was struck by the second part of your last. Surely that last picture has impressed you, so deeply reflective was its tone. All very good, but give me a regular stirring, rollicking letter, interspersed with a lot of news."

In 1860 McTaggart's annual sojourn in Argyllshire was preceded by a trip to Paris. During the previous summer Pettie had been urging that they should go together: "Since I got your letter I have been a-castle-building. Of late I have been proposing to myself to see Paris next year. If I have the money to spare I *will* go, but I feel crushed a good deal at the idea of not having your company. It would make the jaunt complete." Eventually the jaunt proved even more complete than was originally planned, for Tom Graham joined the party. In preparation, Pettie and Graham had taken lessons in French, but as it turned out, McTaggart, whose only knowledge of that language was acquired by cramming a phrase-book during a stormy crossing, when

¹ *Scottish Art and Artists in 1860*, by "Iconoclast." From internal evidence, the writer was probably Alexander Smith, the poet-essayist. The criticism is given in full in Mr. Martin Hardie's *John Pettie*.

his companions were otherwise engaged, had to act as spokesman. They were too late to see the Salon, but no doubt enjoyed the Louvre and the Luxembourg; and their first trip abroad remained a pleasant memory to all. Many years passed before McTaggart was again in Paris, and then it was only for a day or two on the way to and from the Riviera. On that occasion (1876) he saw the Salon for the first time, and he did not renew acquaintance with it until 1882, when he made his last trip abroad.

His chief picture this summer was suggested by Longfellow's 'Wreck of the Hesperus,' and illustrated the lines:

“ At Daybreak, on the bleak sea-beach,
A Fisherman stood aghast,
To see the form of a maiden fair
Lash'd close to a drifting mast.”

In order to study the effects and setting which he considered appropriate, he induced a shepherd's wife to let him have a room in her cottage at New Orleans Glen, on the Lee'ard-side shore, some miles south of Campbeltown. During the three weeks he stayed there, he was out of bed every morning by three o'clock to watch the dawn come up out of the sea; and he made many studies, some of which possess a quite curiously vivid sense of the shudder and expectancy of daybreak.

New Orleans is a retired and solitary spot, and is reached only by footpaths down the burn or along the shore, for, some distance off, the main road turns inland to climb the steep hill down whose rough slopes the romantic little glen, with its silent hanging woods and tinkling waterfalls, winds to the sea. There was only one other cottage near; but, as it happened, it also had a visitor. McTaggart had known Mary Holmes as a little girl, but her father, a builder in Campbeltown, having died, her mother had removed to Glasgow, and they had not met since. Now the acquaintance was renewed and, before long, resulted in their engagement.

At that stage of his development at least, neither the finely observed setting, with its subtle low-toned atmospheric effect, nor the admirably drawn and elaborately wrought figures in 'The Hesperus' could be painted outside, and the picture was to a great extent a studio work.

His parents removed from Campbeltown to Glasgow in November,¹ and the sister, who was being used as model for the captain's little daughter, then came to Edinburgh, where she stayed with him for some weeks. He had obtained a broken mast, and to this, laid upon the studio floor, his sister was lashed, as shown in the picture. To obtain greater truth of effect, her costume was at times soaked in water and draped upon a lay-figure placed in the same position. This was the first occasion on which McTaggart seriously faced the difficult problems involved in painting the open sea. And, if inadequate in its suggestion of the sea's dynamic energy, rhythmical movement, and liquid transparency, qualities of which he was subsequently such an incomparable master, his treatment here reveals innate feeling for its mystery and vastness and records with great precision and truth its wave-forms and the effect of light upon its ever-swaying surface. A good many years were to elapse, however, before he again painted a subject in which the sea figured so prominently. This picture is also notable as marking the more definite emergence of shot and broken colour in his work, for, while already showing a strong tendency to the high pitch of illumination which he ultimately attained, his actual handling had hitherto been fused in character. The torn cloud masses which hang above the dusky golden radiance along the eastern horizon and the expanse of dark heaving water beneath, touched here and there with low gleaming lights, are specially remarkable in this respect. Yet the colour as a whole, perhaps because of the lowness of tone involved by the dawn effect, is related, through a certain warm brownness of hue, to the traditionally Scottish convention rather than to what his own was soon to become.

While very highly praised by one of the leading critics, who thought it "a masterpiece of colour and effect and finely felt throughout, the whole composition acting in unison to tell the sad tale," and who concluded, in a second notice, that "In powerful and sustained harmony of colour, in careful study and completeness as a picture, it is not surpassed by any work exhibited," the 'Wreck of the Hesperus' was rather coldly received. But as the criticism quoted was admirably descriptive of its qualities, both emotional and technical, the coldness must have been due

¹His father, whose health had been failing for some years, died in Glasgow in May 1861.

to the 'sad tale.' Sir George Harvey, a warm friend of the young artist, told him that there was enough sorrow in the world without painting such subjects: and others spoke of it—a canvas about three feet by two—as a work for a gallery and not for a private collection. Nobody would buy it. Later, however, Mr. Hargitt gave £9 for it, and promised the artist half of any profit he might make if he ever sold it. The picture did not again change hands until after that purchaser's death.

So much time had been devoted to the 'Hesperus' that the only other pictures shown by him at the Academy in 1861 were 'A Cornfield,' 'A Girl Knitting' (catalogued as by J. McTaggart), and 'Portraits of the Children of Colonel Fraser.' Probably he painted a few minor things also, and he finished and sold two or three of the sketches made for the large picture. Mr. Strahan, the publisher, who had founded *Good Words* in 1860, had got Pettie and Orchardson to make drawings for it, and this year he commissioned two illustrations from McTaggart. But neither these nor the three wood-cuts after designs by him in the edition of Burns's poems, illustrated by Scottish artists, which Messrs. Nimmo published in 1868 on similar lines to the famous 'Moxon' Tennyson of ten years earlier, are really successful. The steel engravings by J. C. Armitage in 'Allan Ramsay and the Scottish Poets before Burns,' issued by Messrs. Virtue about 1866-7, are in every way happier, and convey much more fully a sense of his style at that period. They illustrate 'My Boy Tammy' and 'Lochaber no more,' and the latter is peculiarly interesting as marking perhaps his earliest elaborate treatment of the theme of Highland emigration, which was later to occupy so much of his attention.¹

Although his people were no longer resident in Campbeltown, he spent the greater part of the sketching season of 1861 there, and completed 'The Yarn,' which, as one of the figures in it was painted from his father, had probably been commenced the previous year. As the title implies, the subject is a sailor telling a story. A young man-o'-war's man, just back from foreign parts, he is relating his adventures eagerly to an elderly countryman and a smiling-faced little girl as they

¹ A quite different design, which in some ways foreshadows the late Emigration pictures, was done at the "Consolidated" before 1862. It once belonged to Tom Graham,

jog homewards in a blue-bodied and red-wheeled farm-cart, drawn by an old white horse. A breadth of golden cornfield, in which harvesters are working, separates the dusty roadway from the placid sea loch beyond, and the whole scene, except the right corner, which is filled with over-brown shadow, is suffused with clear and warm, if somewhat low-toned, sunshine. The other equally important picture painted at this time was 'The Old Pathway,' and, like 'The Yarn,' it was purchased from the following Academy Exhibition by the Association.¹ After passing through several hands, 'The Old Pathway' has been since about 1880 a cherished possession of Mr. W. D. McKay, R.S.A., upon whom, as a student, it had made a deep and lasting impression when first exhibited. For, as he says, to the younger artists of that time McTaggart's work stood more clearly than that of any other artist for the most vital tendencies about them and pointed the way to further developments. Considerably higher in tone than 'The Yarn,' Mr. McKay's picture shows also a keener feeling for atmospheric effect and a more developed sense of colour, the greens being peculiarly fresh and lustrous; and, although the charming group of figures seated at the cottage door and the lovely child pursuing the butterfly were evidently painted indoors, they are pictorially in perfect keeping with the setting to which their rich colouration forms a splendid foil. The other pictures sent to the Scottish Academy in 1862 were 'The Sprained Ankle'—a schoolboy acting the part of a good Samaritan—'Homeward Bound,'² the nature of which I have been unable to ascertain, and a portrait of Colonel R. W. Fraser, H.E.I.C.S., whose children he had painted previously.

This was the first year of 'the Exodus,' which in the end took nearly all the most notable of the Lauder group, except Chalmers and McTaggart himself, to London. Orchardson went early in the year, and was followed by Pettie a few months later. Tom Graham joined them in 1863, and, although waiting until after they had been elected Associates of the Academy in Edinburgh, Peter Graham and MacWhirter left before 1870. It was later before Mr. Cameron took the great South road, but, not finding London very congenial, he returned after a few years. Nothing

¹ Price of 'The Yarn,' £40 : of 'The Old Pathway,' £40.

² Purchased by a friend of Erskine Nicol on his advice.

could break the ties which bound McTaggart to these dear friends of his student days, but he felt their going very much, and ever afterwards bore a grudge to London for having robbed him of their close companionship. Probably the deprivation, which each felt, drew Chalmers and McTaggart closer and deepened their already warm regard for one another.

In 1862, after five years, during which he had found practically all his subjects in his own parish, McTaggart changed his sketching ground to Meikle Earnock, a picturesque village in Lanarkshire. Situated some two miles from Hamilton, and not far from Barncluith and Cadzow Forest, it was at that time, the adjacent coal-field not having yet been opened, a rural hamlet, embowered in trees and surrounded by unspoiled country. There in the village street, with its beautiful old pump-well and its quaint thatched cottages set in pleasant little gardens, and in the tree-fringed roadways leading to the farm places round about, he found an equally beautiful, if different, kind of setting for his idyllic incidents. At Campbeltown, though he had scarcely ever painted it for its own sake, the sea always impinges on one's impressions, and, whether seen or out of sight, haunts the imagination. Moreover, in the southern part of Kintyre woodlands are infrequent, and the trees, except in specially sheltered spots, are scanty in leafage and wind-blown in form. On the other hand, the whole sentiment exhaled by Earnock in its green leafy setting was that of inland calm and wooded richness and quietude.

These new surroundings were stimulating, for the six pictures and two portraits by him in next year's Academy were very varied in subject, and showed a marked advance in both colour and handling. One of the most important, 'The Old Pump Well,' was bought from the exhibition by Mr. T. S. Smith of Glassingall, and is now in the collection bequeathed by that talented amateur to the town of Stirling. While sunshine, falling somewhat diagonally across the picture, sparkles in the open and throws soft reflected lights into the shadows which dapple the old well and the roadway, which occupy the foreground, the slight trees in the garden, which come against the shadowed cottage beyond, gleam not only in the direct light but with that transmitted through the transparent green leaves. Even the deeper shadows, if still somewhat brown, are luminous and cool, and the charmingly fresh colour of the

whole—lovely greens, rich but not hot browns, and greys and whites of vibrating quality and subtle modulation—is quite a long distance already from the warmer and more conventional tone of ‘The Wreck of the Hesperus.’ There is nothing by Millais of the pre-Raphaelite period more intense in lighting, and nothing so harmonious and atmospheric in colour. The handling again is free, spontaneous and descriptive, and, delicately drawn and modelled as they are, the figures of the children about the well are not unduly emphasised, but take their places admirably in the ensemble. The paint itself is beautiful in quality, and possesses a delightful lustrousness of surface without metallic gleam or hardness. Somewhat similar qualities marked ‘The Village Appleman,’ which was acquired by the Association; but in depth of sentiment both were surpassed by ‘Puir Weans’¹ and ‘Going to Service,’ the former a peculiarly appealing picture of two pretty barefooted lassies standing somewhat disconsolately at a street corner, the latter a mother waiting, with tender solicitude, at crossroads in the country to see her young daughter off to her first place by the carrier’s cart, which is seen approaching from far down the road. The simplicity and directness of appeal possessed by these pictures was present also in rich measure in ‘Give us this Day our Daily Bread,’ a woman seated in a bare attic listening to a child, kneeling beside her, saying her prayers. In all of these, in addition to great dexterity and charm of handling and beautiful tone and colour, McTaggart showed a unique faculty for the sympathetic comprehension of the tenderness and sadness of simple human life, and an unusual gift in combining beauty with significance of facial expression and a sensitive selection and treatment of appropriate setting and atmospheric effect.

After an engagement of about three years, McTaggart was married on 9th June 1863 to Miss Mary Holmes. The wedding took place in Glasgow, and immediately thereafter he and his young wife went to Fairlie, a lovely village embowered in trees and backed by green pastoral hills enclosing romantic wooded glens, on the Ayrshire coast a few miles from Largs. But, though the beach is beautiful and the distant views of Arran are exquisite, except in a few water-colours, he

¹The background of cobbled street and quaint houses is probably a reminiscence of Old Edinburgh, and the children look city bred.

does not seem to have been much drawn to the shore. From Fairlie he wrote to Chalmers, who had been his best man—"I have been working a *little*. Two pictures I have begun: one is a bridge and distance, an ordinary bridge on the road, with distant view of the sea and afternoon light.¹ The other is a small rustic bridge across a glen or burn, all closed in with foliage. I have also finished the landscape of my little sketch of 'Spring.'" But the letter, from which this passage is quoted by Mr. Pinnington in his life of Chalmers, is amongst those that have disappeared. One regrets this the more, for Chalmers's reply seems to suggest that it was of a more than usually interesting and intimate character. "Your letter was brimful of splendid feeling. Now I begin to know you. The past has been a false representation of yourself. Now your *own true, genuine* feeling is welling out at every crevice of your nature. Let it out, Mac, you have enough and to spare. It will do you good and every other body that gets a share of it. *A fine thing is sympathy.*"

From Fairlie the young couple went to London on a brief visit about the end of July, when Mrs. McTaggart met some of her husband's early friends, and they saw the Royal Academy Exhibition, which does not seem to have impressed him much, as he told Chalmers that he did not think he would care to go often, even though he had the chance. Then, early in August, he proceeded to Birnam to paint the portrait group of the children of Mr. W. W. Cargill, which appeared in the Exhibition next year. The rest of August and the month of September were spent at Meikle Earnock, and resulted in 'Autumn,' 'Helping Grannie,' and a picture of 'An Unwilling Schoolboy,' to which lines from Shakespeare's "Seven Ages" were subsequently appended. Peter Dunbar, whom he had met the previous year, and W. F. Vallance, an old school acquaintance, were painting there when he arrived, and from Earnock McTaggart and his wife visited Mr. and Mrs. Alexander Fraser at Barncluith, at that time Fraser's favourite sketching ground. Finally, in October, they returned to Edinburgh in time for the opening of the special exhibition of "Works by Deceased and Living Scottish Artists," organised by the Academy in connection with the meeting of the Social Science Association.

¹ This picture, which had been worked upon later, when figures were introduced, was in his studio, as was another Fairlie picture, at the time of his death.

The pictures which represented him there were 'Give us this Day our Daily Bread' (Mr. Craig) and 'Puir Weans' and 'The Well' (Mr. C. Hargitt). Some indication of the extent to which his work was in request and of the pictures upon which he was engaged during the following winter is given in a rough note found amongst his papers. It runs as follows: "To paint for Virtue & Co.—1. Maggie Lauder; 2. My Nanny, O; 3. Bessie Bell and Mary Grey—to be done by end of May. For Hargitt—1. The Orange Girl; 2. The Fishwife; 3. ——. For Mr. Simpson, Dundee—1. Spring; 2. Autumn. For Mr. Shiells—Two Girls at the Pump. For C. E. Johnson—A small picture (figures)."

Of all McTaggart's quite early pictures known to me personally, 'Spring' is perhaps the most delightful. Moreover, it marks emergence from the conventional brown tone, so long in favour with Scottish artists, to such a degree that it is in some sort an epoch-marking work. Indeed, it deserves the distinction which a well-known Continental connoisseur conferred upon it, when he said to me that this picture, and others by McTaggart of about the same period, seemed to him to predate and contain the germ of the interest in real light and its effect on nature, which has been one of the most marked characteristics of modern painting in Europe. As a rendering of light and air and colour harmonised and combined into a unity of pictorial effect, they excel anything by the English pre-Raphaelites, whose work is lacking in atmosphere and inclines to crudity and exaggeration of local colour, while one has only to think of what was being done in France by the Barbizon group, splendid though the best of it was, and of the low tone which also pervaded the declared realism of Gustave Courbet (1819-1877) or the as yet old-masterly work of Edouard Manet (1833-1884) to appreciate the notable step forward these original and self-evolved essays of McTaggart were in the representation of the magic of natural lighting.¹ It was almost a

¹ Turner, with his passion for light and colour and his wonderful power of rendering atmospheric effect, was an exception. His position has been admirably summarised by M. C. Moreau-Vauchier in his fascinating study *The Technique of Painting* (English translation, 1912): "He lived the life of a recluse, and had no influence among his contemporaries. He died intoxicated with light, murmuring 'The sun is God.' The cry was a prophecy which the end of the century was to see realised. But the era of bitumen, of dull earthy colour and of heavy handling, lasted in France until after 1870."