

## CHAPTER IV

### ACADEMICIAN

1870-1880

THE cynical have said that a young man married is a young man marred, and the observant have remarked that the better part of the career of an artist elected Academician too often dates before rather than after promotion. In McTaggart's case, however, marriage, as Chalmers had noted, helped to make him by quickening the flow of his innate sympathies, and election served but as a point of departure for future development in his art. The consistent increase of power and expressiveness in handling, which is observable in his work between 1860 and 1870, becomes still more marked during the following decade, and went on growing right to the end; while more and more as he aged, he gave freer expression to that quick sense of the joy of life and that intense and sensitive apprehension of the beauty and significance of nature, which together formed his special gift on the emotional side.

Although the artist always declared that London had never had any attractions for him, and that he had never felt tempted to follow his friends, Pettie, Orchardson, Tom Graham and the rest there, a letter from Pettie in March 1870 would seem to imply that the possibility had been talked of at least. Every now and then, indeed, in his earlier correspondence one comes upon suggestions that he should remove to London. Even as late as 1876 MacWhirter wrote—"I wish you would come and settle here." McTaggart, however, while well aware of the greater rewards attending success in the south, laid greater stress upon securing the environment in which he could most congenially live his life and develop his art. He was not of those to whom keen competition

and a wide field are necessary stimulants. His chief ambition was ever to express the best that was in him, and, while very appreciative of genuine appreciation of his work, he was not greedy for applause and shrank from publicity. Edinburgh, with its homelier ways, more intimate associations, and less socially ambitious artistic circles, with its picturesque streets, airy situation and romantic surroundings, suited him temperamentally much better than London would have done, and, being the man he was, he chose to remain at home.

During the summer of 1870 he again revisited his native district. Instead, however, of a lodging on the shores of Campbeltown Loch, which had hitherto been his usual sketching ground in Kintyre, he took a farmhouse near the western fringe of the Laggan. There the cultivated fields and the meadow pastures, which spread right back to Campbeltown, are bordered by the wide billowy links and great swelling dunes which stretch for miles along the bay, where the Atlantic flashes and thunders in glory or in gloom on pale golden sands. Kilkevan is situated about a mile inland from the point where the Machrihanish burn runs into the sea; but, although he does not seem to have gone down specially to paint the sea, the sea, as was inevitable perhaps, called him, and this visit left an indelible mark upon his whole after-career. A number of pictures painted amongst the bents or in the little sheltered sandy nooks between the rocks were finished and exhibited or sold at once, but 'Something out of the Sea,' the chief picture begun at this time, was not shown until 1873.

Just after this sojourn in Kintyre, he spent two or three months at South Shields painting portraits of the children of Mr. J. Stevenson, M.P. for Newcastle-on-Tyne. His host's brother, through whom he probably received this commission, for he was intimate with Chalmers, Pettie and other of McTaggart's friends, was keenly interested in art, and at his house McTaggart met Fred Walker (1840-75) and other artists then working at Tynemouth. Like nearly all his work in this kind, of which these were amongst the earliest of a series, which was to be carried on during the next twenty years, each of them was treated rather as a genre picture than as a simple portrait. It was a delightful form of portraiture, and if those painted at Shields at this time are somewhat lacking in the grace and spontaneity which were to mark later

essays of the same type, they are already far removed from the formal likeness-making or conventional picturesqueness which characterised and still mars much child-portraiture.

In June he had presented 'Dora,' which was still unsold, as his diploma work, and, when writing to the Secretary of the Academy, had expressed some half-jesting regret that the canvas was somewhat larger than was customary. Mr. Dick Peddie was equal to the occasion, however. He replied that "when a picture is of such high order of excellence as the one in question, the greater its size the more acceptable must it be to the Academy." And, indeed, it was acceptable, and has remained so. One of the most perfect of the artist's works in his earlier style, of which in some respects it is the culmination, it is probably the most beautiful picture in the Academy's collection, to which since then it has become the practice to present works of importance.

As a newly-elected Academician, he was placed upon the Council in November, and in the spring of the following year Mr. Hugh Cameron, who had been chosen a member in 1869, and he were asked to act as special visitors for the morning session of the Academy's "Life School." Hitherto that class had met in the evenings only, but, in response to a petition from the students, it had been decided to hold forenoon meetings also during the early summer months. These were McTaggart's first official duties as an Academician, and, during the next eighteen or twenty years, he took a great interest and a prominent part in the various activities of the Royal Scottish Academy.

In addition to three of the Stevenson portraits, he was represented in the Exhibition of 1871 by 'Adrift,' shown the previous year in London; by a delightful portrait picture of his eldest son, sitting up in bed playing with a toy watch and other things taken from a stocking, which was called 'Faëry Treasure'; and by a study of 'An Old Fisherman.' Purchase of the last by the Association for the Promotion of Art in Scotland, which society, after buying four or five of his quite early pictures, seems to have dropped him when the critics took to abusing his work, roused rather than soothed his ire. He did not refuse their proposal, but in accepting he wrote with scarcely veiled irony—"Having been at the Exhibition, I found your note containing offer of £21 for my picture 'An Old Fisherman,' which I accept with many thanks. And

I beg to express to the Committee my gratification in having after eight years at last succeeded in painting a picture of which they could approve." A little later another of his pictures was acquired by the Art Union of London. This was 'A Runaway' from the Royal Academy, 1871.

Although profoundly impressed, as is obvious from the work done or commenced in 1870, by the might and magic of the open sea, some years elapsed before McTaggart went back to Machrihanish. Next sketching season saw him again at Tarbert. Here he reverted to incidents of fisher-life, and obtained suggestions and material for 'Through Wind and Rain,' one of the most important pictures painted during the seventies. 'Lasses at the Fair,' shown in 1874, was also begun. He seems, in addition, to have visited the little clachan of Whitehouse, which lies embowered in trees some six miles away on the Campbeltown road. There he commenced the subject subsequently carried out on a large scale as 'The Village, Whitehouse.' More immediate issue of the summer were 'The Fisherman's Noon' (R.S.A. 1872), a fisher lad, accompanied by a fair-haired little boy, seated in a boat mending nets; 'Among the Heather' (R.A. 1872), a landscape with an exquisite dreamy distance; and 'Weel may the Boatie row,' which was sent to the Glasgow Institute in 1873.

After living for five years in Melville Terrace, McTaggart removed at Whitsunday 1872 to 13 Hope Street. The flat occupied by him was situated on the first floor, and the front windows looked into Charlotte Square. He chose the corner room for a studio, but used only the window towards the north, and this continued his studio even after 1881, when he rented the lower floors also, and 24 Charlotte Square became his address. Hope Street is very central in situation, and, as the artist and his wife were exceedingly popular with all their acquaintances, their house became a great centre in the social life of artistic circles in Edinburgh. Friends were constantly dropping in, and were always sure of a hearty welcome; and many a happy gathering, unmarred by pretension or display, took place there, especially when Pettie or some other early friend came north again.

Long-standing friendship with collectors in the Dundee district, and a commission to paint a portrait of a daughter of Mr. T. S. Robertson, a Dundee architect, who soon became a very intimate friend, led to his

spending some time at Carnoustie in the early summer of this year (1872), and eventually resulted in Carnoustie becoming one of his favourite painting resorts. When he commenced to go there, it was a considerably smaller place and much less frequented than now. There were an inn or two and the golf links, of course; but golf was not the rage it has since become, and letting summer lodgings had not developed into the chief occupation of the local residents. The splendid cycle sweep of the bay towards the great pink sand dune to the west was unbroken by band-stands, tennis-courts and pierrot-booths—the few visitors shared the beach with the cobbles of the salmon fishers, the village children at play and the crying sea birds. Farther east the scene is less changed. The “Westhean,” as the little natural harbour amongst the seaward jutting rocks is called, is still marked by the groups of guiding beacons which appear in so many of his pictures, and is still used by the hardy fishers of the North Sea, now, however, greatly fewer in number, while the red-tiled or stone-roofed cottages which cluster round the common, on which nets are dried and unused boats are drawn up, and the foreshore of flat weather-worn rock and grey shingle are much as they were. The sea is ever the same. These were the elements—the bay into which the waves rushed in glory or rippled in glee, the sands with blithe bathers or busy bait-gatherers, the haven with its fishers going to sea or homeward returning—from which he was to distil many fine pictures in succeeding years. There was, however, another feature in the immediate surroundings which was to furnish many subjects. Batty’s Den<sup>1</sup> is a little glen with a stream which debouches on the shore about half a mile from the Hean. Stepping eastward along the bare and open shore road, one comes suddenly upon a gentle green valley, through which a limpid burn wimples over a sandy or pebbled bottom in fast-running streams, or lies, transparent and golden and still, in pools, which mirror the sky or the few thin trees on its banks, on its way to the sea. For a long time this was a happy sketching ground for McTaggart. Many a fine water-colour was painted there, when the whins were in bloom and the spring green had just begun to show on the trees, during the fortnight at the end of April, which between the early seventies and the middle eighties, no

<sup>1</sup> The lower part of this dell is known as Craigmill Den, and it was here, between Caernazrie Mill and the sea, that McTaggart chiefly painted.

matter where he might go in the summer, he usually spent at Carnoustie.

This year portrait painting interfered with his usual summer programme, and the month of August was spent at Helensburgh, where he painted half or three-quarter lengths of Mr. and Mrs. John McGregor (Glasgow Institute, 1873) and of Mr. and Mrs. Alexander Anderson (R.S.A. 1873), and a head and shoulders of Mrs. Leiper, mother of Mr. William Leiper, R.S.A., the architect, through whom he then and later received not a few commissions. While all these were very successful, both as likenesses and pictures, the bust of Mrs. Leiper is a peculiarly charming example of his art. Few more exquisite pictures of an elderly lady have ever been painted. But, although thus busily occupied, McTaggart managed to comply with Pettie's urgent suggestion—the Petties were at Lamlash—that they should walk round Arran together. To both this excursion, which lasted three days, was a delight, as is obvious from a note written by Pettie a year later—"Yon walk we had was a pleasure I enjoy again and again."

During the autumn and winter he seems, besides painting a presentation portrait (with a replica) of ex-Provost Hunter, Partick,<sup>1</sup> and perhaps working upon the Helensburgh ones, to have taken up two of the chief pictures commenced at Machrihanish in 1870. At all events, 'Amongst the Bent' and 'Something out of the Sea'<sup>2</sup> were sent to the Scottish Academy in the following spring (1873). While the former, if on a greater scale and painted with more skill and power, repeated with variations a kind of subject which he had frequently treated before, the latter broke new ground, or at least touched it in a new way. Of course the critics preferred the more familiar theme of 'Amongst the Bent,' and the "more careful finish that used to characterise his productions" was used as a reproach against the "slap-dash freedom of touch" and "the utterly sketchy and unfinished details," which, they complained, made it necessary to stand a long way off from 'Something out of the Sea.' The evolution of the artist's style, his ever-growing power, even the difference of treatment involved in a change of motive were not allowed for, or were seemingly not understood. More than in anything he had

<sup>1</sup> Original presented to Partick Corporation.

<sup>2</sup> Both were secured by Mr. J. G. Orchar.



WEST HEAN—PAGE FROM SKETCH-BOOK USED IN 1874

yet done, the idea of changeful light and unceasing movement emerges in this picture and controls its manner of expression. It was the first time, since he had painted the 'Wreck of the Hesperus,' twelve years earlier, that he had treated the open sea in agitation upon a considerable scale.<sup>1</sup> And, if less subtly and magically suggestive than many of the sea pictures painted later, it was alive with the qualities which were noted as lacking in the storm-tossed water of the 'Hesperus' dawn. To keen observation and sensitive apprehension of mystery and vastness, there was now added an exceedingly vital expression of the sea's dynamic energy, rhythmical movement, and liquid transparency. No less remarkable is the rendering of the changeful glitter of the sunshine falling from a brilliant sky upon the seething welter of broken and swaying water between the great roller (rising dark in a curling and nodding and fast-moving mass almost up to the far bright horizon which peeps over it) and the shoreward rush of the preceding wave up the sand right in front, where three delightfully natural fisher children haul vigorously on a line attached to something afloat. It was for the attainment of such effects that McTaggart had gradually modified and broadened his style, and, though he had still a long way to travel ere his handling and colour attained their full expressiveness, they here begin to show their real possibilities, and not a little of their ultimate power.

From correspondence with Mr. Alexander Macdonald of Kepplestone in the early months of 1873, it is evident that that gentleman was again thinking of acquiring a picture by McTaggart, but, as before, the negotiations came to nothing. Amongst the pictures mentioned was that of 'Lasses at the Fair,' commenced at Tarbert in 1871 and now practically finished. When shown at the Royal Scottish Academy the following year this charmingly composed picture of three pretty and delightfully contrasted country girls looking at a photograph, evidently just taken, of one of them, was received with greater favour than a good many of its predecessors had been. Yet it did not escape censure. It drew, indeed, what was its author's favourite press criticism—"Of course the picture is not finished, but then it would not be a fair example of the artist if it were otherwise!" Portraits were also engaging his attention. Two

<sup>1</sup> 'The Fisherman's Children on the Beach' (a smaller picture finished before May 1872) shows a very similar effect.



of these were painted at Carnoustie, where he was thrice that year, and one or two at South Shields. During his April visit a number of Edinburgh artists entertained their Dundee admirers and friends to dinner—"five o'clock and not full dress"—at the Dalhousie Hotel, and he occupied the chair. In August, besides a charming cabinet picture of Miss Jeannie Halley, a little lady, in a black frock relieved with a blue sash, seated on a sandy knoll, he painted several seaside studies, and at the end of the year he returned to do a portrait of Mr. William Halley. 'Molly, daughter of Arch. Stevenson, Esq.,' also exhibited in 1874, was equally attractive. Meanwhile, after a struggle, which perhaps shows in the result, 'Following the Fine Arts' was brought to a finish, and, before being sent to the Royal Academy in March 1874, was purchased by Messrs. T. Lawrie & Son, Glasgow. The delightful trio of portraits of the children of Mr. Robert Carfrae, who was so well known as a tasteful and learned collector of antique coins and formed such a remarkable collection of the noble imaginative works of that too long neglected genius, David Scott, were also completed this spring.

A note, written from Carnoustie on June 25, 1874, shows how he was then engaged—"I am busy and the weather is delightful, so I think of staying on here a little longer. I am pitching into the 'Boys Bathing.' " Preceded by a charming water-colour, painted the previous summer, and by other studies, the progress of this picture during the winter had been watched with special interest by his friends, and while he was at Carnoustie it was purchased by Captain Hill, of Brighton.<sup>1</sup> McTaggart was much pleased. "I am very glad of this," he wrote to Captain Hill, "for I shall be proud to have it in your collection alongside so many of my friends. I mean to do my best to make it fine, and it may be completed in four or five weeks, but I shall give myself more time if necessary. I was very pleased that Pettie liked the picture so much. When it is finished I shall send it to your address, and I hope to have your permission to exhibit it either in the R.A. or the R.S.A. Exhibition next year." Eventually, however, the owner would not lend. Still, if unshown

<sup>1</sup> For an account of Captain Hill's collection see *The Magazine of Art*, 1882. It contained fine examples of Orchardson, Pettie, Frank Holl, Fred Walker, and G. H. Mason, and amongst foreign artists represented were Millet, Corot, Israels, Degas, and Claude Monet.



BOYS BATHING

publicly, 'Boys Bathing' had evoked great admiration amongst those who had seen it in his studio, and, undoubtedly, helped to enhance his reputation. A peculiarly delightful picture, in which carefully studied and charmingly drawn figures—each full of character and instinct with movement, and all related in one common, if complicated, action—are subordinated to a wonderfully realised ensemble, where vapoury summer sky, air-steeped glancing water and sun-kissed sands form a subtle atmospheric whole, it was perhaps the highest mark the rising tide of his maturing genius had as yet touched. Pettie's generous estimate gives one an idea of the impression it had made on him. "I saw Captain Hill's picture at Brighton. It is a stunner and looks a hole in the wall, letting sunshine and fresh salt breezes into the room: the *best* piece of colour he has. He gets my R.A. picture,<sup>1</sup> and I'm bound to say it won't stand beside yours for colour." But amongst artists who knew his work, McTaggart's outstanding position as a painter of light and air was now pretty fully acknowledged. About a year later than Pettie's letter, G. A. Lawson, the sculptor, wrote apropos of drawings sent to him and John MacWhirter—"Man, they are both of them *positively charming*. They are nothing short of just downright fresh air, and if that isn't everything, I don't know what is. Man, Mac, you have got the gift of putting such delicious freshness into your work, that it's nearly as good as going to the country." And in 1877 one finds MacWhirter writing—"I always insist you are the best painter of open-air in Great Britain." Finally, although retrospective rather than contemporary, I may quote the gist of a conversation I had with Mr. Hugh Cameron shortly after McTaggart's death. "I always looked upon him," said he, "as doing pioneer work. He put aside convention after convention in his consistent and purposeful development towards the expression of the things in nature which fascinated him. The figure incidents with which he began were gradually subordinated until they became accessory to the atmospheric effects he painted. I do not think that the more formal part of art interested him much, for he seems to have designed from his wonderful instinct for selecting the paintable elements in what was before him and by his fine sense of colour and atmosphere."

<sup>1</sup> 'A Scene in Hal o' the Wynd's Smithy,' now in the Aberdeen Art Gallery.

In addition to working at 'Boys Bathing,' McTaggart was engaged, while at Carnoustie, upon a portrait group of the children of Mr. James F. Low. Like that of the Carfraes, this was as much picture as portrait; but here the incident was a boy fishing in a Highland burn, while his two sisters recline upon the farther bank watching him. It is a charmingly designed and beautiful thing, and with the Carfrae group may be said to mark attainment of complete pictorial effect in his special type of portraiture. That unity of ensemble, which he had achieved a good many years earlier in his uncommissioned pictures, appears fully in these portraits also.

The 'Boys Bathing' finished, he went to Kintyre in the beginning of September. His intention had been to paint at Carradale, the fishing port halfway between Tarbert and Campbeltown, which was to yield him many fine pictures some ten years later; but the inn there was full, and he took Kilkerran farmhouse, on the shore near the south-west corner of Campbeltown Loch. Here he had sunshine nearly all the time, and the chief new picture commenced was 'The Young Fishers,' which, shown at the Scottish Academy of 1876 and subsequently in the Glasgow Institute, ranks amongst the happiest of his many fine renderings of the tender and tranquil aspects of nature. It was a decade since he had painted in the shadow of Ben Ghulean, and that picture, no more tender or charming in feeling perhaps than its predecessors, reveals in its greater fusion and subtlety of atmospheric effect, no less than in its finer and freer dexterity of drawing and handling, the great advance he had made in mastery during the interval. From Kilkerran, about five on a dark October morning, McTaggart, accompanied by his wife and family, set out to join the Campbeltown-Tarbert coach on its long journey northwards, for he had made up his mind to go on with the big picture of Whitehouse village which he had begun some years before. At Whitehouse he also painted 'The Leaves in Autumn,' a tangled woodland with sunlight showing through the foliage and glittering on the pathway, and commenced an important picture of children crossing 'A Highland Burn,' which was secured from the Academy of 1877 by Mr. James Donald, the Glasgow collector.

The pictures and portraits mentioned, with some minor oils and a number of water-colours, already made a great record of work for the



THROUGH WIND AND RAIN

year; but, after returning home, he took up and finished 'Through Wind and Rain' in time for the 1875 Exhibition, to which he also sent 'The Leaves in Autumn,' 'Fern Gatherers,'<sup>1</sup> the Low group, two other portraits and the water-colour of 'The Bathers.' Progress was also being made with the 'Village,' which was ready to go to London by the end of March.

The appearance of 'Through Wind and Rain' at the Academy seems to have brought sudden grace to the critic of the *Scotsman*—if the writer were the same as he who had written the notices during the preceding decade. "Among the most notable pictures in the Exhibition," he said, "must undoubtedly be ranked the large sea piece by William McTaggart, an artist who for some years past has cultivated a broad style, presenting what may be called a contrast to the finish of his earlier work. The rendering of general effect in landscape ought, of course, to be the painter's controlling aim, and for the student of pictures a great point of interest lies in observing with how much or how little of imitative detail this is successfully achieved. To understand such pictures as Mr. McTaggart has been painting for some years past, one must try to get into the artist's point of view, and look not so much for exact reproduction of the shape and texture of objects as for general impression of form and colour as seen under the influence of light and weather. So regarded, this 'Wind and Rain' (234) will be found a masterly performance." His appreciation of the 'Fern Gatherers' as a fine example of the magical power of light and colour is in the same vein, and indeed for a few years to come there was generous enough recognition on this critic's part of the wonderful unity of effect and the brilliance of lighting and of the skill and deliberation which underlay the seemingly careless execution in McTaggart's work. Later, however, the artist, in the evolution of his style, having moved on to a fuller and deeper, if apparently slighter, expression of his ideals, there was a reversion to the earlier complaint that his execution was too sketchy, and one had to stand a very long way off before one could understand his intention. Others held on the old tack without a break, as is obvious from a note from Mr. J. G. Orchar, who had purchased the larger picture before it

<sup>1</sup> Probably the same picture as 'Amang the Heather' shown at the London Academy in 1872.

went to the Exhibition—"The *Advertiser* critic says, "Through Wind and Rain" is sketchy, but it would not be a fair sample of the artist were it otherwise' (put that in your pipe and smoke it). Give my kind regards to Mrs. McTaggart. I must tell her the next time I am over, since what I see in the *Advertiser*, that it would be a good thing for her to hide or burn all your big brushes." But the attitude, "one must try to get into the artist's point of view," was not only juster and far more truly critical, the insistence upon the importance of "the general impression of form and colour as seen under the influence of light and weather" as a dominating factor gives the keynote for all just appreciation of landscape art.

If 'Through Wind and Rain' may be said to represent the highest McTaggart had as yet attained as a painter of the sea, 'The Village, Whitehouse,' which was exhibited in the London Academy (1875) a few months later, shows his landscape painting on the same high plane. But, although now acknowledged to be a masterpiece, it received little attention from the London critics, and on its return at the close of the Exhibition to the Glasgow dealer who had bought it, that gentleman wrote to the artist complaining of its lack of finish and asking him to make certain alterations. Ultimately the picture was despatched to Edinburgh, the purchaser writing on 1st December—"I hope you will go through with the large picture and get it finished, as the two I have nobody will look at. They say they want to be finished. If you will do something to it we can put it in the Glasgow Exhibition, as I would not like to see three of yours for sale in my shop." McTaggart's rejoinder was prompt and characteristic. "In reply to your note of yesterday, I don't consider any of my pictures which you have 'unfinished.' Still, to please you, I am willing to go thoroughly into the Village and do what I can for it—short of spoiling it—at your risk. I would be quite happy to see you with a dozen of my works in your place for sale, but, if you send the Village to the Institute, I shall be quite pleased." The picture did not go to the Institute as had been proposed, and indeed it was nearly a year later before it was sent back; but, as the alterations suggested were not made, one may perhaps presume that all the artist did was to give it a general look over. From the correspondence, it would seem that the two smaller pictures had also

been returned for revision. "I have got the three pictures," the dealer wrote on December 4, 1876. "The large one is fine, and so are the two small ones, but really it is a pity you did not put more finish on the foreground of the small ones. I sold the large one at once, but no one here will look at the small ones, the sea is so beautiful and high in finish and the principal part so sketchy. I will send the two back, and I think a little time will make them all right." A telegram was evidently sent in reply, for only the next day his correspondent wrote again—"Dear Mac," that letter begins, "what did I say to put you in such a towering passion about me making a suggestion. Two of the best collectors saw them, and I'll assure you they are no mean judges, and they, along with myself, considered that part of the foreground did not come out so well, in fact, as the sea. You see there are three idiots of us and others into the bargain. You cannot expect everyone to look through your eyes."

Acquired by Mr. John Ure, of Helensburgh, the 'Village' was never seen publicly in Scotland until it was lent by Mrs. Ure to the Scottish National Exhibition held at Edinburgh in 1908. The outstanding feature of that Exhibition was the remarkable and very complete series of Scottish pictures of all periods—from those of the precursors, through Raeburn and Wilkie, to those by contemporary artists—which had been brought together; and artistic opinion singled out this picture of McTaggart's as perhaps the finest landscape in that memorable show. "'Twas autumn and sunshine arose on the way," the line from Campbell's "Soldier's Dream" which served as a title when it was first exhibited, summarises, as well as writing can, the sentiment of this fine work. Sunshine, the glory of rich radiant sunlight, and quiet, the perfect peace and quiet of the country, enriched by the unpremeditated joy of children and the unhurried homely work of women about the open cottage doors, pervade the whole scene. Shadowed in the front, except where the light breaks through the over-arching trees and mingles in pools of swaying iridescent brightness with the wavering shadows, amongst which the children play like the gently falling leaves above them, the glowing, yet soft and caressing, sunshine falls upon the thatch-roofed and white-walled village beyond, pulsates over the warm-coloured roadway, sleeps amongst the autumn-tinted trees, irradiates the chequered shadows with luminous light. In conception a thing of beauty and of power, refinement and



strength are appropriately combined in its execution. The technique unites delicate dexterity of touch with great freedom and breadth of handling ; the colour is high-pitched yet rich and harmonious ; the design, splendidly balanced and rhythmic as a whole, is full of delightful minor passages and accents, and depends for effect upon a happy blending of colour and chiaroscuro. While less rapturous in mood than later landscapes and less magical in suggestion, this picture, painted when the artist was forty, is an indubitable masterpiece.

In the early part of this summer he painted a portrait-picture of Mrs. J. J. Cowan of Westerlea, with her two little boys, the title of which, 'On the Sandhills in Summer Time,' indicates its character, and during July and August, being kept at home by illness in his family, he completed 'The Young Fishers.' These, with 'The Wee Herd Laddie' and two water-colours, were sent to the Scottish Academy the following year.

Within a few days of arriving at Carnoustie in September he had begun his next important picture, and was hoping it would be a great one. This was the radiant 'Fishers' Landing,' but, as it was not completed until after another visit, comment may be deferred. Probably the 'Bramble Gatherers' (R.S.A. 1877), a delightful group of children scrambling amongst the tangled foreground bushes of a common, veiled in a mystery of warm haze, through which grazing sheep and the blue outlines of distant hills glimmer, was also painted there.<sup>1</sup> During the latter part of his stay, which lasted until the end of October, there was a succession of gales, and he painted several pictures and some fine water-colours of stormy seas.

At Easter next year (1876), instead of going as usual to Carnoustie, Mr. and Mrs. McTaggart went "to see the sun shine on the Mediterranean." On the advice of Mrs. Allan (later the wife of his friend, Mr. Hugh Cameron), Cannes was chosen, and a fortnight, varied by excursions along the Riviera, was spent there basking in the sunshine. He

<sup>1</sup> "On one of his visits to Carnoustie he painted a bramble bush, with its ripe berries, as real as it was possible to paint it, and I was delighted with it. On my next visit the same canvas was being shaped into a figure picture, and the bramble, with its fruit, was almost rubbed out. 'Where,' I asked, 'is the beautiful bush ?' His reply was, 'It had to give way to light and air and other things of more importance in my picture than brambles.'" From article by T. S. Robertson in *Glasgow Herald*, 14th Sept. 1912.



THE VILLAGE, WHITEHOUSE

did not paint at all, however ; and no doubt he felt the truth of a remark made by a Russian they met one day in a train, who, when McTaggart was speaking enthusiastically of the blue distances along the shore, said—“Ah, yes ; but have you seen the wonderful blues on the west coast of Scotland?” It was when returning from this trip that he had one of the only two glimpses he ever had of the Paris Salon. Home again, he found it difficult, as he always did after any unusual experience, to settle ; but, going to Machrihanish for August, he fell once more vigorously to work, and stayed a month longer than he had originally intended. At that time and for a good while to come the village was only a tiny row of fisher cottages, beside the little haven in the yellow-lichened and sea-pink tufted rocks at the far corner of Bay Voyach, the beautiful little inlet which lies just to the south of the great bay of Machrihanish, from which it is divided by the dull red grass-crowned rocky knoll known locally as the Doune. The now celebrated golf links was only played on by a few enthusiasts from Campbeltown, the inn was a public-house, with a sanded parlour, at the end of the row ; there was not a single villa and scarcely a summer visitor. But McTaggart secured comfortable enough quarters in the ‘School-house’—it was the talk of the village that Mrs. Gilchrist had let ‘the haile hoose’—and for many summers he returned there. Situated on the shore near the Doune, the upper windows of that house (the lower flat was then used as the school-room) look towards the sunset and command a fine view of the smaller bay, and from the little sitting-room at the corner, when he was not painting out of doors, McTaggart was always sketching in water-colour or watching the sea and the weather. He was fortunate also in that the cod-fishing was still prosperous, and was followed by a fine type of fisherman. In his landlord and his brothers, the Raes and others, and in their sunny or dark-haired children, he had most excellent models ready to his hand. So incidents of fisher-life or child-play figure prominently in the pictures painted at Machrihanish, both then and later ; but, as he himself said, he had gone down specially to ‘court the sea,’ and one fancies, at least, that this first long sojourn beside the Atlantic marked the beginning of a further expansion of his style. While he had often painted the open sea at Carnoustie, the compelling sense of vastness produced at Machrihanish by the unbroken horizon towards the south, over which tall ships

and great liners rose or sank on ocean voyages, and by the wide-spread bay, with its never-stilled movement, its great airy sky full of luminous light, and its gleaming shore stretching in long drawn-out perspective to the north, whence the high peaks of Jura, followed by the low green hills of Islay, lying air-dimmed or sunbright afar off on the sea's brim, lead the eye back again to the tossing sea in front, had undoubtedly a formative effect upon him. The wonderful translucency of the water ; its vivid tinting of blue and green and purple, as the sunshine comes and goes upon it when the south-west wind brings the singing waves, in long lines of dazzling foam, in from the open ; its pearly opalescence and delicate loveliness in warm still weather, when it merely sighs as it surges softly up the yellow sands ; its sinister but splendid gloom and thunderous music on days of storm—all these also went to his making as an artist. But with his pictures, so pregnant with its spirit, haunting one's memory, it is as futile as it is unnecessary to attempt verbal description of Machrihanish and its subtle and fascinating beauty and variety. It was not, however, until a good many years later that he was to put its fullest intensity of colour and light upon canvas, for prior to 1892 he never painted there in June. And in the earlier years at least he got most of his subjects in Bay Voyach, and round the little rocky harbour at the Pans.

Although McTaggart painted a number of shore pieces in oils, his attention during the first few seasons there seems to have been given principally to water-colour. While a year or two passed before he began to exhibit oil pictures with Machrihanish subjects, he showed two water-colours, 'The Sunny Shore' and 'Sou'wester,' at the Academy in 1877, and others followed in subsequent Exhibitions. These revealed, as the beautiful 'Sunny Summer Showers' (1872), the charming 'Bathers' (1873) and other water-colours painted during the preceding three or four years at Carnoustie had already done, an advance on the capacity shown in his contemporaneous oils of rendering elusive and transient effects of atmosphere upon a high key. His earlier water-colours had been founded to a great extent upon his oil pictures, and shared their solidity of effect and depth of tone ; but, from about this time, his now matured practice in water-colour, with its swift and significant abstraction, its rapid touch and fluent manner, its lightness and brilliance of handling

and of effect alike, began to influence his oil painting. Indeed, one may say that it was in water-colour, rather than in oil paint, that he began to liberate his hand to express the sparkle and flicker of light, the purity and brilliance of colour, and the dancing and rhythmical motion which mark all the work of his full maturity. It would appear as if, at this stage of his development, he had found water-colour a more sympathetic medium than oil for the expression of the pictorial qualities and emotional ideals for which he was striving, and many of his experiments towards a fuller embodiment of these were made in it. Later, however, carrying the knowledge and experience of effect so acquired into oil painting, he attained there the spontaneity and aerial quality of water-colour combined with the richness, force and effectiveness of oil.

A commission to paint the children of Mr. Henry Gourlay, of Dundee, took him back to Carnoustie in October. Further sittings were obtained in Edinburgh later, but this picture was not completed until well on in the following year, when a posthumous portrait of Mrs. Gourlay was also painted.

With the exception of the two Machrihanish water-colours, the pictures which represented him in the Royal Scottish Academy of 1877 were not quite recent work, though they may have been completed for that exhibition. The charming little picture, in which several children in a boat, lying near a beacon-marked rock, are shown sheltering under a sail from 'Sunny Showers,' was probably a result of one of his Tarbert sojourns; the more important 'Highland Burn,' beside which children crossing the little ford have stopped in the autumn sunshine, through which golden leaves flutter from the trees, to guddle trout, was a White-house picture; and 'Bramble Gatherers' had been begun at Carnoustie two years before. These had all found purchasers before the Exhibition opened, and early in March Mr. A. B. Stewart, of Glasgow, bought 'The Fishers' Landing' in the studio. The sale of Mr. J. C. Bell's collection at Dowell's on March 17th also gave very clear indication of the esteem in which McTaggart's pictures were now held by collectors, despite the complaints still made in many quarters that they were unfinished. Eminently representative of the best contemporary Scottish painters, there were ninety-three items in the sale, and the total realised, a remarkable one for that time, was well over £7000. At 330 guineas,

McTaggart's 'Willie Baird' ( $24\frac{1}{2}'' \times 29\frac{1}{2}''$ ) was the second highest priced work; but 150 guineas for 'The Pleasures of Hope' ( $23\frac{1}{2}'' \times 19\frac{1}{2}''$ ), 55 for 'Going to School' ( $14\frac{1}{2}'' \times 11\frac{1}{2}''$ ), and 33 for a very small 'Dora' ( $9'' \times 7\frac{1}{2}''$ ) were also all great advances upon what Mr. Bell had paid the artist.

Going to Carnoustie about the end of April McTaggart remained there for fully two months, and then, after a spell in his Edinburgh studio, went to Machrihanish for September. This sketching season, which, like the preceding, was devoted very largely to work in water-colour, finished with a few days spent with Orchar at Brig o' Turk in October.

The rising interest in water-colour painting, of which McTaggart's work in the medium was an indication, if not also a cause, issued during the following winter in the formation of a Scottish Water-Colour Society. Engineered in the West of Scotland, the projectors of the movement early sought his advice and support. From its inception he was an enthusiastic member of Council, and on the death of Sam Bough, only a few months after it was formally constituted, he was chosen vice-president (Mr., later Sir Francis, Powell being president), and retained not only office but interest in the Society until his death. There was scarcely an exhibition of the Society, during the whole thirty-two years he was connected with it, at which he did not exhibit, and, even after his connection with the Academy ceased in all but name, he continued to take an active part in the affairs of the Royal Scottish Society of Painters in Water-Colours.

Three water-colours, the portrait group of the Gourlays, exhibited with the title 'A Day on the Sea-shore,' and 'The Fishers' Landing' were sent by him to the Academy in 1878, while 'Wives and Mithers maist despairin'' represented him at the Glasgow Institute. In the last, full of breezy freshness and painted with abandon and breadth, a lonely woman, with her child, peers eagerly seaward across the surf which breaks in over the low-lying sand, as she waits anxiously the return of the boats seen dimly through the driving spray. To this 'The Fishers' Landing' offers a complete contrast in motive. Here again the mood was indicated by the line "The air and the water dance, glitter and play," quoted in the catalogue. For under the dazzling sun-suffused sky and against the dancing sun-smitten sea of a summer morning, fisher folk are



THE FISHERS' LANDING

seen carrying the night's catch ashore across the rocks from the boats which lie in a little creek beyond. Radiant and vivid in effect, "bold almost to the very verge of license in style," fresh, clear and ringing in colour, this picture was a triumphant as well as a "bold interpretation of an exceptionally difficult idea," and evoked the admiration of artists and critics alike. One writer, however, raised a question, which is exceedingly interesting in view of subsequent, and considerably later, developments in his art. He wondered "whether the principal figure should not show darker, coming, as it seems to do, between the eye and the luminous sea." In this we seem to have an indication of the beginning of McTaggart's later treatment of figures against light, when to increase the luminosity and spread of sunshine in his pictures he, contrary to the conventional practice, lightened rather than darkened the relative tones.<sup>1</sup>

But the exceptionally favourable reception of his own pictures that year was completely shadowed for McTaggart by the tragedy which ended the career of George Paul Chalmers on the very eve of the opening of the Exhibition. That sad story is too well known to require repetition here ; but of all the friends whom Chalmers's charm as a man and gifts as a painter had gathered round him, none missed him so much or grieved for his untimely death more than McTaggart, who had been his closest, as well as his earliest, artist friend. To him, indeed, the loss was irreparable. Later that same year the passing of Sam Bough left another gaping blank in his Edinburgh circle, for, if never intimate with him in the same sense as he had been with Chalmers, he had a very real liking for that boisterously vivid bohemian and a great admiration for his forcible and fertile talent. Left a trustee by Bough, McTaggart put all his energies into the organisation of the sale of Bough's works, which was held with conspicuous success early in the following spring.

In 1878 he visited Carnoustie in April as usual, and in August went to Machrihanish. A driving accident, in which Mrs. McTaggart had both her wrists broken, just at the end of September, delayed his return, however, and it was November before he got back to Edinburgh. A

<sup>1</sup> In October 1878 Mr. A. B. Stewart wrote : "I have just got your picture hung in my gallery and am I not proud of it? It lightens and brightens up all the room and would indeed 'make sunshine in a dark place.'"



portfolio full of water-colours and a number of pictures and studies in oils were results of this prolonged stay in the west. While many of the drawings made at the Pans during the first few years were exhibited at the time—in 1879, besides three shown at the Academy, four appeared at the Dundee Exhibition and four at the second exhibition of the Water-Colour Society in Glasgow<sup>1</sup>—few oil pictures seem to have been completed at once, and it is difficult to say with certainty which pictures belong to any particular year. From then onward, indeed, he seldom exhibited, as he had frequently done previously, a picture immediately after it was painted. Amongst those at least begun during the later seventies was the exquisitely still and sunny 'A Summer Idyll—Bay Voyach,' into which a charming group of merry children, clustered about a clumsy boat lying at the sea's edge, was introduced many years later. One of his most delightful creations—wonderful in the mingled delicacy and brilliance of its high-pitched colour, full of quietude touched with gladness and of tranquillity that is yet pregnant with life—it is dated 1876-93. The almost equally beautiful 'End of the Links' (into which the two children, lying on the exquisitely rendered beach beside the wonderfully painted pearl grey sea, were painted in 1893 also) was begun in 1878, and the more important and even more masterly 'Mid Summer Noon,' with bathers, which was not exhibited until after the artist's death, little, if at all, later. To the same period one may credit the fresh and atmospheric 'Caught in the Tide,' exhibited at the Glasgow Institute of 1881, the tender and charming 'Children on the Sands,' an ebb-tide shore piece, with a girl and boy at play, and the small but haunting and reverie-compelling 'Quiet Sunset,' where one is alone on the deserted shore in the dying light of evening before the darkening yet still mysteriously gleaming sea. A little larger than the last, 'Flotsam and Jetsam' is scarcely less fascinating in its more brilliant lighting and its more joyous mood. And, not to extend the list, there was the great study (for it was perhaps less pictorial in idea than most of the later pictures in which a similar theme was treated by him on a large scale) of the wide empty bay, with its ever-recurring and long-extended lines of waves, breaking white under a grey windy sky in a spray-veiled atmosphere, and turning back upon themselves, as it were, as they rush onward

<sup>1</sup> Of these eleven drawings, seven seem to have been painted at Machrihanish.



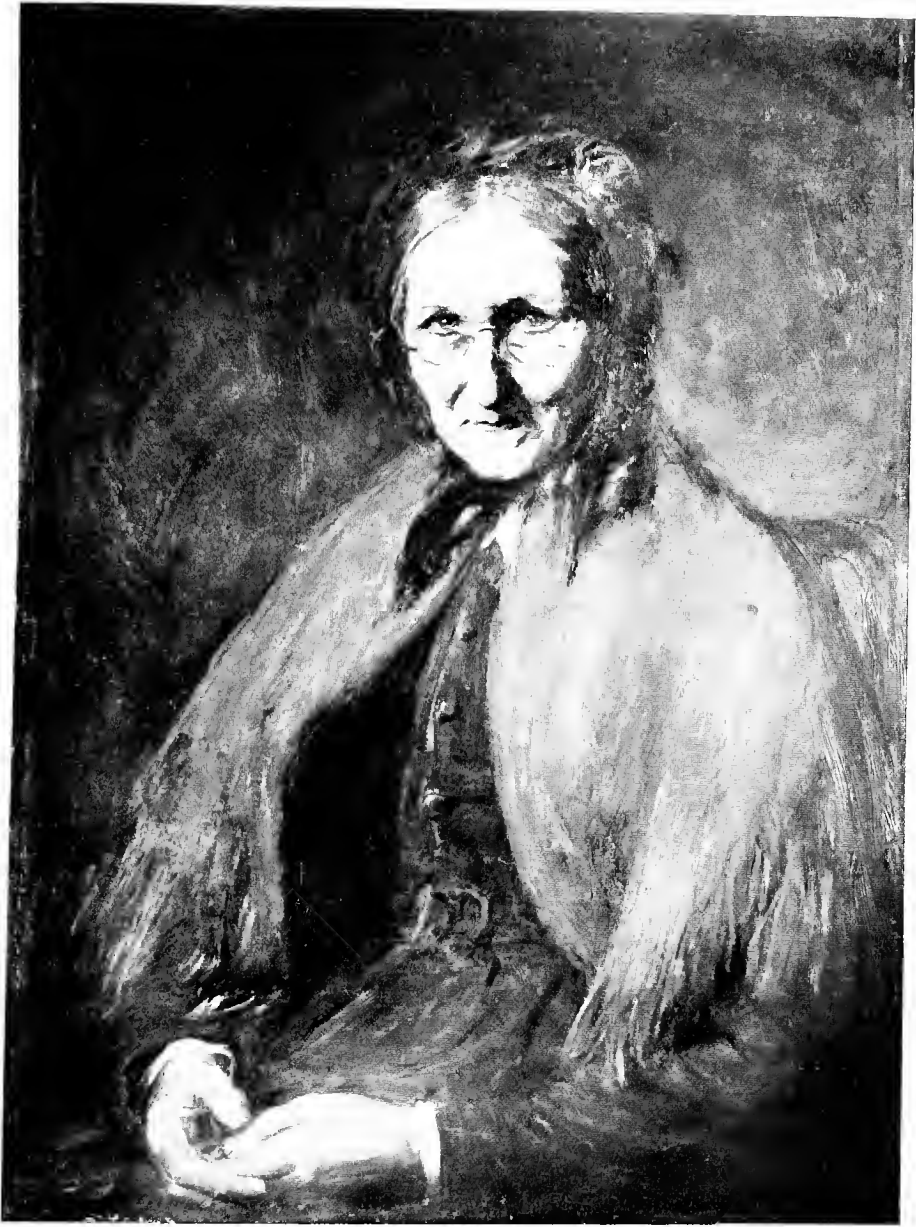
A SUMMER IDYLL—BAYVOYACH

into the far-receding perspective of the circling shore. This 'Machrihanish Bay,' although completed in 1878, was not exhibited until 1889.

Excepting 'Wives and Mithers,' which was shown at Glasgow in 1878, 'The Bait Gatherers,' sent to the Academy in 1879, seems to have been the first Machrihanish picture of this period exhibited by the artist. Beyond the shallow water which, shot and mingled in colour, sways and eddies between us and a ridge of purple and brown rocks, to which three fisher children have waded in search of bait, a great expanse of lovely blue and green sea, broken here and there by the flash of a foam-tipped wave, lies heaving gently under a quiet summer sky. The whole is fresh and sparkling and full of the savour of the sea. Bolder and more brilliant, though no less delicate in colour than anything he had shown previously, handled in a way which combined charming suggestion of detail with breadth of effect in both figures and setting, and delightful in design, it was a most vivid and beautiful picture, and was received with something approaching acclamation. Greatly admired by his fellow-artists, the younger critics were also loud in its praise, and he received many congratulations from friends. Two portrait-pictures, one of a little girl, 'Gracie,' playing with a terrier beside a streamlet, the other of two children with a big dog, 'On a Whinny Knowe,' in breezy sunshine, and a firmly modelled and admirably expressive half-length, 'David Stevenson, Esq., Provost of Haddington,' were the other oils shown on this occasion. In the early months of the year he had been engaged upon several portraits, but part of August and all September were spent at Kilkerran, where he painted a good many water-colours and the vigorous and incisive 'Through the Barley,' exhibited at the Academy two years later. From Campbeltown he went on, after a few days in Edinburgh, to Carnoustie, and was not back in his studio again until nearly the middle of November. At Carnoustie, in addition to pictures, he commenced a portrait group of two of Mr. George Halley's children,<sup>1</sup> and on returning home he was once more engrossed with portrait commissions. Indeed, though one was apt to forget it during the latter part of his career, when he dropped portraiture almost entirely, for more than twenty years prior to 1890 he was as notable, and almost

<sup>1</sup> 'Up on the Sand Hills' (R.S.A. 1881).

as busily employed, as a portrait painter as he was as a painter of pictures. Moreover, his portraits possess qualities as distinctive, original and fine as his work in other genres, and are marked by a variety almost as great as that in his pictures, no two of which are alike. What Gainsborough said of Reynolds can be applied with even greater truth to McTaggart, "Damn him! How various he is."



THE ARTIST'S MOTHER