

CHAPTER V

ACADEMICIAN—PART II

1880-1889

IF the year 1880 has no special significance in William McTaggart's life, which went on for several years afterwards much as it had done previously, or in his art, which continued to develop uninterruptedly, it is as convenient a point as any, between his election as Academician in 1870 and his removal to Broomieknowe in 1889, at which to begin a new chapter. During the first half of that period his outlook and method had been passing through a consistent and marked evolution. In one sense, it is true, the work then done was only a development from his earlier style, for the essential feelings expressed regarding life and nature were common to both. On the other hand, in response to inner promptings to express these sentiments more fully, his technique, while growing in mastery, had, with the expansion of his aims, gradually changed in character until towards the close of the seventies even some of his admirers thought it "bold to the very verge of licence." Throughout the decade which followed his painting was marked more and more by breadth, certainty and power, and a conception of the primary importance of ensemble of effect and unity of impression dominated his art more fully. Even in the pictures painted before 1870 he had seen "the parts as parts, but with a feeling of the whole," and from the early seventies at least the feeling of the whole was clearly the leading issue with him. Figure incident, as before, continued during this, his middle, period (1870-1889) a principal interest; but as the years passed, it became increasingly difficult to say whether his pictures should be described as figures with landscape or landscape with figures. Gradually he was approaching the

time when in his conception man and nature were to form a cosmic whole. Moreover, as a prominent newspaper scoffingly complained in 1881, he was not content to compromise with natural effect, but kept persistently aiming at the representation of outdoor sunshine, though sometimes only succeeding in expressing half the truth. His achievement, however, if still unappreciated or misunderstood in certain quarters, was exercising a strong influence upon the younger Scottish painters, many of whom studied under him in the Academy school, and, rather later, had a distinct, though indirect, effect upon the uprising of the group of talented artists who emerged in Glasgow towards 1890. It had also aroused the warm advocacy of cultured critics, such as the late J. M. Gray and Mr. G. R. Halkett, both of whom considered that, for vividly successful rendering of brilliant sunshine and open-air effect, he stood alone. Simultaneously, however, some of the older Academicians were much perturbed by, what they considered, the revolutionary tendencies of his style. In intimate talk, they wondered "what *has* come over McTaggart," and expressed fears that he was leading the youngsters a queer dance.

At the Royal Scottish Academy of 1880, with which this chapter opens, McTaggart was represented by seven highly characteristic works. The more purely pictorial side of his gift was seen to much advantage in the animated and powerful 'When the Boats come in,' and in a pale delicate grey seapiece with a group of 'Dulse Gatherers' on a flat shore upon which long waves are breaking. Commissioned by the Royal Association and won by Mrs. A. F. Roberts, wife of a well-known Scottish collector, the former is a peculiarly charming picture, and has been seen frequently at loan exhibitions.¹ Delightful in itself, this canvas has another interest, in that it seems to mark the emergence of a freer handling of the sea's form and movement and a fuller and richer use of potent yet aerially harmonised schemes of browns and purples and blues and greens with flesh-colour and white than had as yet appeared in his work. Between these two pictures and the four bust portraits, which one critic thought "a series which would do honour to any exhibition and be creditable to any school of art," one may place the group of 'Two Brothers' joyously interested in a bird's nest, for in it a subjective motive

¹ Reproduced in D. S. MacColl's *Nineteenth Century Art* (1902) and in Armand Dayot's *La Peinture Anglaise* (1908).

and a portrait commission were very happily combined. Of the four portraits that of the Rev. John Black was the most notable, and its qualities were so admirably summarised by the Rev. Armstrong Black, when acknowledging receipt of a photograph of the picture, that I cannot refrain from quoting what he said. "The characteristic *colour* of my father is awaiting, of course, but this, by somewhat lessening the likeness, brings out more decidedly the poetic interpretation of old age, where size and force are subdued to patience and where a strong intellect (having done its work) is waiting with composure on the edge of the battle of life. I cannot tell you how great I think the work—apart this from my affection for it, which would have been strong had the work been far poorer."

Finer, perhaps, than any of these was the portrait of his mother, also painted about this time, and never exhibited. This remarkable half-length was painted very rapidly. Begun one summer afternoon about two o'clock, he worked upon it until well on in the evening, when it was so far advanced that only an hour or two next morning was required to complete it. Perhaps seven or eight hours in all were devoted to its making.

As already indicated, much of McTaggart's energy while in town during the years 1870-1889 was devoted to portraiture, but although he painted men, women and children alike, and alike successfully, neither the Scottish aristocracy nor the municipal magnates patronised him. So he painted few formal presentation portraits, and in the whole course of his career never a *portrait d'apparat*. His portrait painting was done chiefly for people who admired his art, and were picture collectors. Almost invariably, too, his portraits of men and ladies were bust size or at most three-quarter length, and depended little for charm upon consciously decorative qualities or the adventitious, if picturesque, aid of fine costume or striking setting. Usually with plain backgrounds, their appeal lies in harmoniously simple and expressive design; freshness, clarity and beauty of colour; the powerful and trenchant or delicate and dexterous handling; the unaffected naturalness of the pose; and the sympathetic interpretation of character which informs all. On the other hand, while always showing respect for the claims of likeness, his portraits of children are conceived in the spirit of the genre picture and, if occa-

sionally life size, are usually of cabinet dimensions. The little sitters were painted engrossed in some simple act of child play or engaged in some more mature game or recreation, and the backgrounds were either interior or landscape as suited what they were doing. While the earlier of those portrait pictures were somewhat lacking in the spontaneity which marked his contemporary figure pictures, his practice in uncommissioned work gradually invaded his portraiture, and, from about the middle of the seventies, there is little difference between his treatment of the rural or fisher figures in his landscapes and seaside pieces and of the subjects of his portraits, except perhaps that the faces in the latter are rather more highly finished and, in consequence, now and then less subtly related to their surroundings.¹ It is in this very rare charm of perfect spontaneity—the entire naturalness of effect associated with the *naïveté* and complete unconsciousness of his sitters—and the wonderful harmony between the figures and their setting, which make these child portraits so delightful: and, one may add, so unique, not only in Scottish art, but in portraiture as a whole. It happens also that his portraits almost invariably gave satisfaction to his sitters and their friends. Amongst his papers there are many letters from clients expressing their pleasure in the work he had done for them. Of these, the passage about the Black portrait already given, and Mr. D. G. Howat's opinion—"one thing you have put the best of my 'character' into the expression"—of the portrait of him, shown at the Glasgow Institute in 1880, are instances.

The summer of 1880 was a splendid one, and at Machrihanish, where he was in August, and in September at Glenramskill on Campbeltown Loch, he got a great deal of work done. While the Pans pictures were chiefly oils and those from Glenramskill were mostly water-colours, all are alike bathed in sunshine. Amongst the former the most important were 'As Happy as the Day is Long' and 'Away to the West,' shown in Edinburgh in 1881 and 1882 respectively. Yet, although smaller and without figures, a picture of a wave about to break, which has never been seen publicly, was even more unique. In its own way indeed 'The Wave' is a rendering of the sea's haunting fascination that he never surpassed. The day is calm and the great breadth of pearl-grey ocean, caressed by

¹ This appears chiefly in the shadows, which for some years about that time are too dark and opaque for out-of-door effect.



SUMMER BREEZES

the hot sun-steeped air, which veils the horizon's brim in mystery, is unruffled and almost motionless, except at one's feet where, beyond the gentle ripples running up the pale tawny sand, a single summer surge quivering to its fall but still unbroken, raises its smooth and gleaming wall of cool grey-green water as it moves almost silently onward to the crash which will dissolve it in silver spray. That is all ; but the under-sense of greatness has been so finely felt by the artist and set down with such consummate and unobtrusive art, that the whole strength and vastness of the wide sea are vividly and subtly suggested. Richer in colour and glowing with the softened splendour of dwindling light, the 'Summer Sundown, Machrihanish,' also painted about this time, is quite as magical and more romantic. Here, shadowed yet gleaming in its own brightness, the single wave, which issues suddenly from out the wonder of the enchanted calm in which the sheeny ocean slumbers beneath the setting sun, surges with softly rustling music towards the silent shore. In this wonderful picture the finest essence of that Celtic imagination which, in the legendary past, created the glamoured land of Tir-nan-og beyond the gates of the sunset breathes and lives again.¹

At the following Annual Exhibition 'As Happy as the Day is Long' appeared as the property of the late Mr. W. Chamberlin, a well-known Brighton collector, who was at that time a frequent visitor to Edinburgh and a great friend of McTaggart. It was a charming thing. Under a faint and tender blue sky flecked with filmy white clouds, a summer sea of opal and grey, pale blue and delicate green, sways in long low surges towards a sandy shore, on which towards the left the last ripple spreads out in exquisite liquid sheen of warm delicate grey mingled with tawny and purple. In these shining shallows a yellow-haired laddie and a rosy little lass, eagerly intent in action and absorbed in expression, wade in pursuit of some sea-spoil they are gathering in a wicker basket, while on the golden sand in front a smaller child lies watching them in a very ecstasy of happiness. While the keynote of 'As Happy as the Day is Long' was delicacy, that of 'Through the Barley'—a fresh country girl with a great mass of auburn hair set against golden corn and blue sea and

¹ When some one said that he would buy that picture, if the artist would put figures into it, McTaggart declined. He had painted it that way because he felt it that way, he explained, and to introduce incident would be to spoil his whole intention.

sky—which was now sent to the Academy, was strength. Modelled with broad decisive touches, which look hard when viewed closely, and with the flesh tones sharp struck rather than scientifically studied in value, the face, when seen from the distance determined by the artist's treatment, is extraordinarily delicate in form and delightfully childlike in expression, while, if the indoor lighting of the features, with the too dark shadows, is somewhat out of place with the aerial landscape beyond, the pictorial ensemble is at once potent and harmonious. Technically the two portraits shown at this exhibition, of which that of 'Mrs. Lodder' was a very real success, were closely related to 'Through the Barley'; but, having plain backgrounds, they were free from the incongruity noted, though that, of course, had been the usual convention with most of the great portrait artists of the past.

Finding in Kintyre and at Carnoustie material peculiarly suited to his taste, McTaggart now seldom painted elsewhere. The summer of 1881, however, was spent at Crail, where, confining himself to water-colour, he made many fine drawings, marked by all the keenness and freshness of the East Neuk air.

As was frequently the case during this period, the interest of his exhibits in 1882 was divided almost equally between portraits and pictures. While at Edinburgh 'Mrs. Lawrie' shared the honours with 'Away to the West as the Sun went down,' in Glasgow 'Summer Breezes,' at once picture and portrait, was a joy as either. Than the last there is, indeed, nothing more exquisite in the fascinating kind of child portraiture he had made peculiarly his own. Here the two little daughters of Sir T. McCall Anderson, playing barefoot upon the sunlit shore, are grouped beside a great rock. One child, dressed in pale blue and pink, leans against the tawny and golden ridge upon which her smaller white-pinafores sister is perched, and their curly heads come together as they look with delight and wonder at a shell held by the older girl. Beside them, but neglected for the new-found treasure, a rough-haired terrier turns his attention seawards, where not far off a cobbler at the salmon nets bobs buoyantly upon the waves, which heave divinely blue and free beneath a brilliant summer sky. Delightful as story, the pictorial treatment is no less charming. The design is happy and pervaded by a rare sense of beauty, the handling and drawing easy, graceful,



‘AWAY TO THE WEST AS THE SUN WENT DOWN’

suggestive, the colour lovely on its high-pitched but full harmony, the whole effect remarkable not only for vividness of lighting but for silvery clearness of tone. In its different way the 'Mrs. Lawrie' was equally notable. Exceedingly simple in arrangement, the lady, who wears a white muslin gown, stands quietly, her hands crossed in front, before a plain brown background. But the scheme of colour—through which pass faint creamy and rosy hues, culminating in the single yellow roses at her throat and in her left hand—is wonderful in its harmony, and the face, finely and firmly modelled, is vivid, vivacious, and full of character. Painted on almost the same spot on the shore at Machrihanish as the background for 'Summer Breezes,' but with the tide farther in, 'Away to the West,' his most important picture of the year, was an effect of warm evening light. The quiet sky and the restless water, the children at play upon the foreground rocks and in the gleaming shallows, and the boat scudding out to sea are all alike suffused in the sundown's benign radiance, and even unfriendly critics were forced to admit that if you went to the other side of the room you forgot, what they called, the formlessness of the details, and revelled in the fine colour and the blaze of pure-toned light he had evoked with such unorthodox but convincing power. This reluctant admission was really a great tribute. It showed that the artist had triumphantly achieved his purpose, which was not the realisation of the detail or even the facts of nature, but the evocation by colour and form and design of the spirit of life and beauty which underlies these facts and appearances and gives them emotional significance.

To the Dundee Exhibition in autumn, to which he was a regular contributor, in addition to the portrait group, 'Upon the Sand Hills' (R.S.A. 1881), and the bust, 'John Cameron, Esq.' (R.S.A. 1882), painted for the sitter's son, Mr. Hugh Cameron, R.S.A., he sent an important picture which had not previously been seen anywhere. Like 'Seabirds' Eggs,' also painted about this time, 'For his Daily Bread' was a boat picture, and probably to a great extent a studio work. In each the boat is right in front and cut off by the frame, but while in the former one looks towards the stern and the wherry, steered by an old fisher with a child beside him, is seen under way heeling over before a brisk breeze, in the latter it is anchored off a little harbour, and one looks

forward to where, in front of the sail arranged tentwise between the mast and the bow, the same old man and a boy are about to share a meal.

McTaggart's April visit to Carnoustie that year had been followed in May by a rapid but extended tour on the Continent with his friend Orchar. They were away about three weeks, and, visiting Paris, Munich, Vienna, Prague, Dresden, Amsterdam and the Hague (where they called on Israels, whose work McTaggart admired greatly), must have had a surfeit of art. He enjoyed it in a way, I suppose, but he was not fond of travelling, and, beyond a half-jesting remark that he had once seen all the galleries of Europe in a fortnight, and an occasional reference to some picture they had seen or some incident of travel, he never talked much about it. But when he had recovered from the fatigue and restlessness, which anything out of the usual always induced, he returned to work with renewed zest, and at Machrihanish in August and September commenced two or three of the finest pictures painted by him during the eighties. Perhaps the most important of these were 'Lobster Fishers,' sent to the Academy in the following spring, and 'A Message from the Sea,' which appeared a year later. Although I have not seen the 'Lobster Fishers' since it was first exhibited, recollection of it remains so vivid that to me at least it always seems one of his greatest and most powerful works. Never before, and rarely even afterwards perhaps, did he so convincingly capture the very spirit and savour of the sea and fisher-life. From a broad-beamed varnished boat which, mellowed to a lovely harmony of browns and greys by exposure to sunshine and salt water, tosses on a lively sea, three fishermen are hauling lobster-pots. Gleaming with what Swinburne calls "the deep divine dark dayshine of the sea," the water sways in leaping surges of wonderfully shot and blended blues and greens, and, farther off, foam flecked by the crisp breeze, spreads to the far blue horizon, where the peaks of Jura, soft in colour yet sharp cut in form, lie beneath a luminous sky of wind-swept purity. The sense of atmosphere in the sky and over the sea, the suggestion of the buoyant heave of the boat upon the translucent and moving waves, the balanced and spontaneous attitudes of the men engaged in their habitual calling, and the wonderful way in which the incident is harmonised with and wedded to its aerial setting are all remarkable. If he did not dwell on form, and the drawing of figures and boat and even of the waves might

be described as dynamic and suggestive rather than constructed and complete, it was because detail was now merged in ensemble and his whole strength was given to attaining pictorial and emotional unity. And these are achieved with a power of handling and a masterly breadth and decision which make it difficult to imagine that the vital impression so vividly conveyed could have been obtained in any other way. Moreover, to quote J. M. Gray's admirable appreciation of this picture, "it has that fine sense of freedom—as though the thing had been done by some happy chance—which is always noticeable in this artist's work, for his art is of that felicitous kind which hides all sense of effort and seems to be 'finished more through happiness than pains.'" If less powerful and passionate, 'A Message from the Sea' is marked by many of the same high qualities. Here, however, we are once more in Bay Voyach, with the ocean bursting white on the rocky islet to the right and rolling in a succession of glorious breakers towards the shining sandy shore, where three fisher children have just picked up the bottle which gives the picture its title. The hurrying foam and flying spray of these nodding and crashing waves flashes in the sunshine, and seems the brighter in contrast with the deep liquid blues and purples and greens of the curving sides, which hang still unbroken though curling to their fall. Against this wonderful setting of swift-moving sea and changing light and colour, the children, wholly unconscious of its beauty and quite unaware that anyone is looking at them, are absorbed in what they have found, and, while this contrast enriches the subjective interest, simultaneously their sun-bright faces and weathered garments, lighted up here and there by a touch of orange or red, complete an exceedingly rich and full colour scheme. This beautiful picture was purchased from the artist by Mr. Orchar, and was presented by him to the Dundee Gallery (to which he made many gifts) previous to its exhibition in the Academy of 1884. 'Fishing in the Atlantic Surf,' 'The Shores of the Atlantic,' 'Their Native Element,' and the landscape portion of the delightfully clear and tranquil 'Fisherman's Return' were also painted about this time.

During the winter, 1882-3, McTaggart acted for the tenth time and the seventh session in succession as a visitor to the Academy's Life School. This was a heavy tax, for, after a visit to the morning class, he often found it difficult to settle to his own work that

day ; but he was anxious to be of service to the rising generation, and found teaching very interesting. Spontaneous in manner, fond of the young and free from all taint of superiority or patronage in his dealings with them, and always encouraging, even to effort which scarcely deserved it, he was exceedingly popular with the students. He was more than popular, however. His achievement as an artist ensured admiration and respect, while his swiftness of perception and mastery of technique enabled him to give many valuable hints as to what should be looked for and how the motive supplied by the model should be treated to bring out its essential character rather than to make it into a picture. Approaching their difficulties as if they had been his own, his criticism was directed less to pointing out faults in the parts than to assisting them to grasp the representative and technical problems involved. He was insistent, however, on the artistic importance of the extremities, and one of the few speeches he made was at a Life School prize-giving, and dealt with the necessity of careful study of the head, hands and feet. Now and then also he would take a palette and show a student how a certain thing could be done. To some his instruction was, of course, more sympathetic and helpful than it was to others ; but there was scarcely a young artist who passed through the school during the long period he was associated with it who did not owe him much. Amongst these Messrs. Wingate, Gibb, Hole, J. C. Noble, J. R. Reid, P. W. Adam, John H. Lorimer, R. Noble and T. Austen Brown may perhaps be mentioned.

Even the bald annual reports of the Academy witness to his success as a teacher. When he first began in 1871, the Council record an immediate and decided advance in the quality of the work done, which continued during the following two sessions. Next winter he was not a visitor, and "the drawings and colour studies were not quite equal to last year," but, when he returned in 1876-7, the report once more expresses "appreciation of the feeling for colour displayed," and a year later there was again "a great advance," and the work remained on a high plane until 1883, when his connection with the class came to an end. It is interesting to note also that two years later the Council point out another falling away in colour. Now, while a great deal of a teacher's success depends upon the quality of the students he chances to

get, a record of years such as McTaggart had in the Life School does not happen fortuitously. He believed, however, that young artists learn more from their fellows than from their masters, and made a point of trying to retain in the class the abler of the older students. A year or two before Campbell Noble died he told me of an incident bearing on this. Exactly when it happened is not quite clear, but it was some time in the seventies. Anyhow, McTaggart, coming in to take his month's turn as a visitor, found that Noble and others, whom he had expected to find there, were not present. Next day, meeting Noble by chance, he inquired why they had left, and, when it was explained that the second visitor had induced the third to agree that the older pupils should be requested to leave, as their presence made discipline hard to maintain, he asked him to return and tell the others to do so also. That evening they were all back. Seemingly at work when McTaggart entered, they were waiting eagerly for what was about to happen. Mr. B. took him aside at once and, laying a hand on his shoulder, whispered long and rapidly into his ear. "Mum, mum, mum, mum," was all they heard: then McTaggart said loud out "Rubbish!" The muttering was resumed, only to be succeeded by a very emphatic "Nonsense!" Finally, after a third excited whispering, he shot out, "I'll allow no man to interfere with my conduct of the class," and the incident closed.

In the spring (1883) at Carnoustie he painted a series of fine water-colours, including 'Whar the burnie rins into the Sea,' one of his chief works in that medium, and in summer he broke new ground at Carradale, a fishing station on Kilbrannan Sound between Tarbert and Campbeltown. Ten years earlier he had thought of painting there, but for one reason or another that project had never been carried out. Looking from the steamer, as he must often have done on the way to or from Campbeltown, Airds Bay,¹ with its bold and delightfully diversified shores, backed by heather hills; its old stone quay tucked into the eastern corner, under the rocky hill which shelters it from the south wind; its few cottages beyond the net-poles on the beach; its gleaming and ever-changing waters; and its many fishing boats at anchor or under sail, is

¹The little bay in which the steamer calls at an iron pier, erected in 1871, is called Airds Bay. Carradale Bay lies behind the headland and looks south.

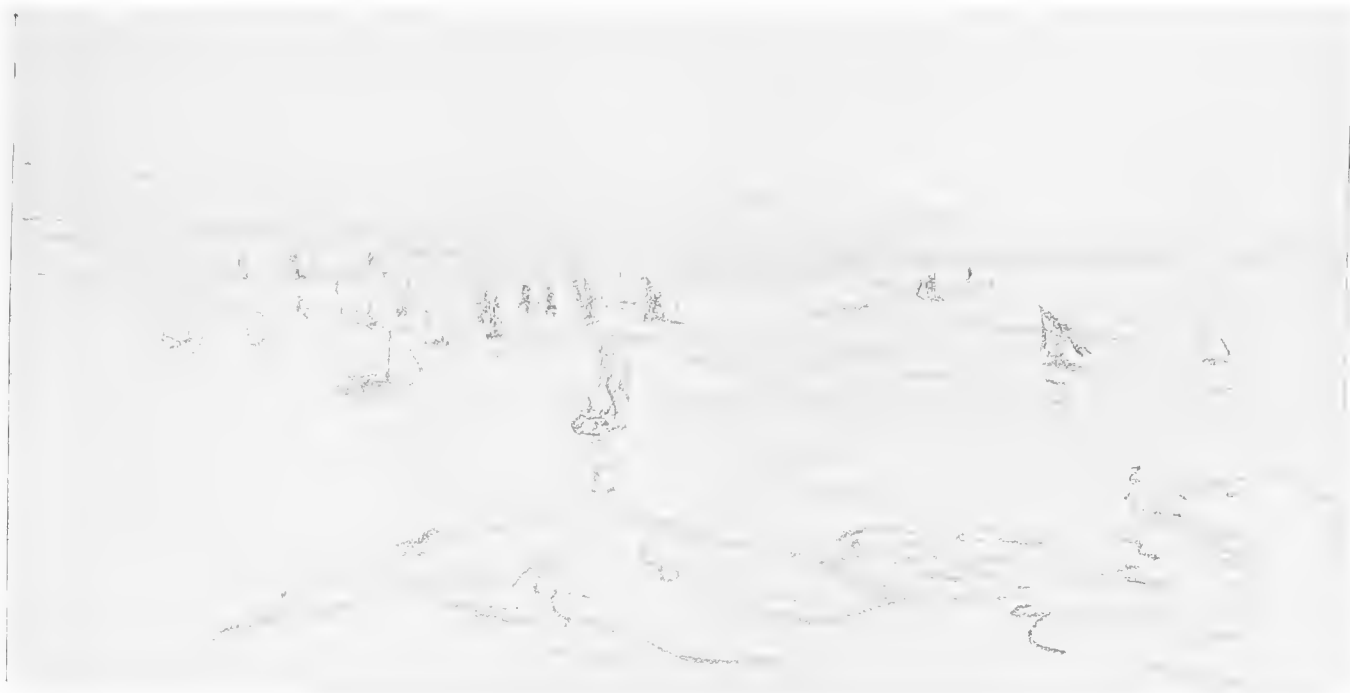
a most attractive spot. And Ard carrach, the house upon the bold bluff above the pier, in which he lived this season and in 1885, commands (at least the rough braes outside the garden do) splendid views over the Airds Bay anchorage looking north towards Skipness; eastwards, across Kilbrannan Sound to the high hills of Arran; and southwards, where on clear days Ailsa Craig and the still farther-off coast of Ayrshire float on the horizon.

The very spirit of this delightful place passed into his pictures. Indeed, he so made it his own that even such a fine and original artist as Wingate was fain to confess that he found it difficult to see Carradale except as McTaggart had painted it! Yet, reminiscent as the whole district is of his pictures, it is not easy to locate the exact spot from which any particular one was painted. True to the main facts, there are subtle differences and modifications, due to selection, suppression and design, which make them not only more beautiful pictorially, but even more expressive of the pervading charm and essential character of Carradale than more exact transcription could attain.

The record of work then done is great. He was in splendid form, and, stimulated by the freshness and beauty of his surroundings, painted constantly outside, even his largest canvases being wrought in the open. The figure and boat incidents, however, although always a record of things seen there, were often introduced or completed later. Much of this is to be read in the pictures themselves. They are carried through with an *élan*, a decision, and a gusto which even he had hitherto rarely attained in oil paint. But as the same characteristics appear in those painted two years later, and in some cases it is difficult to decide to which year a picture belongs, discussion of his Carradale work may be deferred in the meantime.

None of the oil pictures painted in 1883 was exhibited until some years later. 1884 was a portrait year, and the only fresh subject-picture shown was 'A Message from the Sea,' which now appeared at the Academy. With it he sent a vigorous threequarter-length, 'R. B. Finlay, Esq., Q.C.,'¹ a presentation portrait painted for the Liberals of East Lothian, and 'May Morning,' a portrait-picture of the children of Mr. W. W. Urquhart, of Dundee. The latter shows four children joyfully

¹ Now Lord Finlay of Nairn.



PAGE FROM SKETCH-BOOK USED AT CARRADALE IN 1883

gathering primroses by a burnside in a bright spring landscape suffused with morning sunshine. Simultaneously three bust portraits were on exhibition at the Glasgow Institute. While those of Mr. and Mrs. Robert Paterson were of "very exceptional quality," that of Mr. Robert Greenlees, if not quite so fine, was also full of character, and possessed a distinct interest of its own. Mr. Greenlees had been for many years headmaster of the Glasgow Art School, and this portrait was a token of admiration from his pupils, amongst whom were most of the local artists of the pre-"Glasgow School" period.

Iona, for ten days towards the end of June, came between Carnoustie and Kintyre this season. Although short, his visit is still remembered, for an Iona man said to me a few years ago, when we were discussing the artists who had painted there—"We liked them all, but we liked him best. He was an Argyllshire man himself." There he painted several brilliant water-colours of the white sands and lovely blue seas which encircle the sacred Island of the West, and two or three more of the ruined monuments of its storied past. At Glenramskill, near Campbeltown, during August and September water-colour seems also to have been in favour. The family had not been long there, however, before an accident occurred which came within an ace of ending tragically. This was on August 11th, when McTaggart, his wife, his two elder sons and Mr. Thomas Young, an intimate friend and an amateur artist, who spent a week or two with them nearly every summer, were out fishing on the loch. Their boat was anchored in the bay inside the Dorlin, and quite clear of the steamer track down the loch from the harbour to the outside, when the lighter "Meteor," with a drunken crew, careering right off her true course, ran them down, passed over the boat, which was smashed, and left them struggling in the water. Fortunately none of them was injured, and all could swim, except Mrs. McTaggart, who was supported by her husband until other boats came hurrying to the rescue, and they were all saved.

In November this same year the death of his mother, to whom he was greatly attached, affected him much. A woman of strong and fine character, she had reached the age of eighty, and had been active and clear-minded to the end. After her husband's death she had remained on in Glasgow, but her later years were spent in Campbeltown. On

returning from her funeral, he was at once plunged into great anxiety and then into deep grief. During the few days he had been away, a malady which had been weakening his wife's health for some time had been located, and the doctors had recommended an immediate operation. This was carried out without delay ; but Mrs. McTaggart never rallied, and on 15th December she died. It was a severe blow, for she had been an ideal companion as well as a devoted wife. Sharing all his friendships, sympathising with all his ideals, and entering into all his projects wholeheartedly, she had also, perhaps as much by intuition as through judgment, a very real comprehension of the unique qualities of his art. Moreover, her sympathetic and serene nature, forming a perfect foil to his ardent and eager spirit, with its inclination to impetuosity, had secured for him, amid the trials and misunderstandings seemingly inseparable from the career of a real creative artist, a home atmosphere peculiarly well suited for his development both as an artist and a man.

As McTaggart, whose eye for suitable and harmonious arrangement and sense of justice, mingled with sympathy, made him a specially successful hanger, had often acted in that capacity with great acceptance, his friends in the Scottish Academy, thinking that the work would occupy him and lessen his brooding over his wife's death, arranged for his being chosen one of the three members entrusted with the arrangement of the Academy Exhibition in the beginning of 1885. For the information of those unfamiliar with such affairs, it should be explained perhaps that, while the decision as to which pictures are to be accepted or declined rests with the Council, the duty and responsibility of hanging the exhibition devolves upon a small committee appointed for that special purpose. On this occasion, however, the Committee had not long begun their arduous and rather thankless task when two members of Council—both then at the height of a transient popularity and now both dead—entered the rooms and, measuring off certain spaces on the walls, informed the hangers that their (the intruders') pictures must be put in the places indicated. On behalf of the Committee McTaggart protested against this unwarranted interference with their duties ; but, on the matter being taken to the Council, he was deserted by his colleagues and the pushful Academicians got their own way. McTaggart never served again as an Academy hanger, and no doubt the incident was one of several

which, before many years, led to his virtual withdrawal from that society.

Summer saw him again at Carradale and adding to the series of pictures and drawings done there two years earlier. His Carradale work, whether of 1883 or 1885, is kindred in type and handling, and, for reasons previously given, I propose considering it as a whole. Incidentally most of these pictures deal with fisher-life afloat or ashore, and touch it at many points. None are more beautiful, however, or more characteristic of place and painter than those in which the herring-fleet is seen homeward bound in the freshness of the dawning. That known as 'Over the Harbour Bar' has always appealed to me in a specially vivid way. This is not only because the design is exceptionally happy, both in the dramatic sense and as pattern, though that, no doubt, contributes to the impression made. It is rather that, through the imaginative insight which underlies the conception, the whole story of fisher-life is subtly suggested by the fine pictorial use which the artist has made of these two boats, with their yellow oilskin-clad crews, coming in through the cool blue-grey mystery of the morning. Reality is here dealt with so vividly and so sympathetically that association awakes of itself. If in some ways the theme recalls that of 'Through Wind and Rain' (1874), the emotion stirred is deeper and touches one more keenly, while the technical accomplishment and the power of selection and suggestion are more masterly and convincing. Still, if 'Over the Harbour Bar'—of which there is a second version in oil freer in handling and even finer in its different scheme of colour, a wonderful blue pervading the whole effect—is perhaps my own favourite, 'Mist rising off the Arran Hills' and 'Daybreak, Kilbrannan Sound,' each dated 1883, are not less beautiful and almost equally suggestive of adventure and romance. In the one, beyond the fishing boat, which flits across right in front, the sea sways in rippled ridges, which catch gleaming lights from the early sunshine filtering through mists still hanging low on the distant hills. In the other the sea heaves in lilac and purple-grey half lights, against which the crisping edges of the surging waves show softly, beneath a sky which, above the rosy grey along the horizon, is suffused with the pale gold of dawn, while a boat, sailing fast before the morning breeze, is seen scudding out of the picture towards the right. If the former excels in wonderful suggestion of the

tingling fresh beauty and the sharp sweet tang of early morning on the sea, the latter unites to little less of these a greater sense of mystery and an exquisiteness of colour, tone and handling seldom surpassed in his work.

More immediately dramatic than these were the first vivid and passionate rendering (1883) of the theme subsequently carried out in the studio on an imposing scale as the 'Storm,' and the delicate and atmospheric picture (1883) in lavender and grey and yellow, from which the larger and more striking 'For Shelter,' exhibited in 1887, was to be evolved and elaborated.

Other aspects of fisher-life are touched in a number of pictures which deal more with preparation for sea than with incidents of actual seafaring. Thus in 'Noon' one sees blue-jerseyed men, watched by children, mending nets upon the knowes above the bay. Brilliant in the soft brightness of noon-tide, with sun-sparkles playing over the golden grasses and silver-grey rocks on the rough foreground braes and away up the coast, and with the yellow varnished boats in the anchorage twinkling like touches of gold upon the calm water in which a hundred hues of clear blue and soft purple mingle as they spread to a horizon which trembles through the summer air, this is a rarely joyous picture, and forms a complete contrast to 'For Shelter.' That these two pictures, although quite distinct in origin, were related in the artist's mind is clear from the fact that he sometimes referred to them as 'Fair Weather and Foul.' Contrasting with both in weather and in colour scheme, the 'Rainy Day in Carradale Harbour' (1883) shows the boats, clustered about the pier and lying in the bay beyond, making ready to sail on a still afternoon, when the soft West Highland rain obscures the hills and lays the wind, muffles the creak of the pulleys, the flap of the half-hoisted sails, and the voices of the men in its gentle mystery, and blends grey sky and water, varnished boats and brown sails, and oilskin or blue-clad fishermen into a subdued yet rich harmony of delightfully varied colour. And, again quite different, the 'Herring Boats at Carradale' (1883) suggests the sense of ease and happy content which comes to the fisher when, after the night's work, the boats lie at the quay and he basks idly in the soft radiance and gentle beauty of a windless sun-steeped forenoon. Then there was a series in which the themes were less incidents in the life of



DAYBREAK, KILBRANNAN SOUND

the fishers themselves than in that of their children, though here also the sea, in sunshine or in storm, is ever the setting. Perhaps the favourite motive in these is a group, upon the braes above the pier, watching or waving to the boats; but one never finds either the same group or the same weather repeated. Now, as in 'A North Wind, Kilbrannan Sound' (1883), these roguish and gleeful children stand out wind-blown and bright in the sunshine against the deep blue sea, the clear-cut distance and the bright blue sky which come when the wind blows that way, and again, as in 'Going to the Fishing, Carradale' (1885), they nestle amongst the sun-browned grasses and the lichened and heather-tufted grey rocks almost unobserved at first in the fused and gentler harmony evoked by the southerly breeze before which the brown sails are speeding fast to the fishing ground. Or, to take another picture, we have in 'Port-an-Righ, Welcome to the Herring Boats' (1885), the glamour of a sunny morning made brighter and gayer by the glad excitement of the women and children who wait for the return of the fleet in the bay ringed round with rocks and sand towards which the still far-off boats are making.

Mention ought also to be made of two or three canvases in which the children are so absorbed in their own ploys as to have time to spare for nothing else. One of the most vividly beautiful pictures of its period, 'Fishing in a Ground-swell' (1883-6), represents a crowd of merry youngsters fishing from two boats which, anchored off the pier—one looks shoreward—ride and glide like things alive upon the leaping and swinging swell which sweeps round the rocks from the open sound into the bay. The joy and movement of this motive find full response in the brilliance and clarity of its wonderfully intense and luminous colour and in the happy abandon and easy strength of its direct and spontaneous handling. Boys fishing from the rocks and set against a sea of grey, shot with purple and green and tawny patches, upon which a vivid burst of sunshine spreads twinkling towards the horizon and mingles, glittering like quicksilver, with the white sea-fret about a half-sunken rock near the shore form the subject of another.¹ The gaiety of the sparkle in this 'Sun on the Waters' (1883) is rivalled by the eagerness of the anglers and of the little girl who clambers across the rocks, basket on arm, to

¹ Painted from nature without the sunburst, which came just after he had finished painting. It was put in a day or two later.

claim the fish which one of the boys is landing. 'Flotsam and Jetsam—After the Storm, Carradale,' the last picture painted there in 1883, strikes a different note. Here, amongst the great rounded grey and brown seaworn rocks against which the waves are beating, restlessly now rather than wrathfully, under a somewhat sombre sky, which begins to lighten along the horizon however, four children are gathered round a seaman's chest, from which a yellow-haired little girl is abstracting some filmy stuff brought from foreign parts. The innocent curiosity and naïve interest of these fisher children contrasted with the pathetic import of the incident, of which they are so unconscious, and their flower-like beauty against the rude and abiding strength of their setting unite with rich low-toned colour and fine composition to make this a notable work.

Painted with great gusto and freedom and with vitally expressive touch, brilliant or delicate in lighting and exquisite or potent in colour harmony, and, as a whole, exceedingly happy in design, McTaggart's Carradale pictures also possess other qualities which mark the continual progression of his achievement. Compared with the work of ten years earlier, one notes the greater subtlety and fuller force with which motion, whether in figures or landscape, the sea or the boats upon it, is rendered; the more delicate and, at the same time, more emphatic way in which elusive and transient effects of light are expressed; the quicker and more sensitive selection of the elements in nature which count; and the wonderful manner in which incident and landscape are now harmonised, so that figures and setting, neither more emphasised than the other, form one pictorial and atmospheric whole. Finally, and perhaps most remarkable of all, is the sense of being out-of-doors, played upon by wind and sun oneself, which these things in combination conjure up so vividly. Later work was to show all these elements enhanced in power and touched with a still more profoundly poetic significance; but in his Carradale pictures McTaggart's unique gifts as an interpreter of the spirit and beauty inherent in life and nature are fully revealed.

Two beautiful portraits of children were exhibited next year at the Academy, when they were the only pictures shown by him. 'The Shell' was a portrait-picture of a chubby fair-haired and bright-complexioned little child, clad in white and seated beside a rock on the shore, listening, with gentle wonder in her light blue eyes, to a



THE BELLE

shell, as it whispers gently into her ear of the sea's ceaseless music. Exquisite in its high-pitched colour scheme then, it is even more exquisite now, for in 1901 the artist painted out the dark rock and set the figure against a lovely stretch of delicately-graded sea and sky. The other, exhibited as 'The Belle,' if not less a picture, was more obviously and simply a portrait. A charming dark-haired and dark-eyed girl of five or six, wearing a rose-red frock, with white lace collar and cuffs, through which the red shows, she stands half shyly, one hand slightly advanced, the other by her side, upon a golden-brown floor which merges into the rich ruddy browns of the seemingly simple yet delicately modulated background. Rich in colour and charming in design, drawn with great spirit and style and painted with brilliant delicacy combined with sensitive decision, it is, with its delightful rendering of character and of the unconscious *naïveté* and grace of childhood, at once a *tour de force* of execution and a masterpiece of child-portraiture. And that is equivalent to saying that it is a triumph in one of the most difficult fields of art.

In the spring of 1886 McTaggart married again. The lady, Miss Marjory Henderson, was the eldest daughter of Joseph Henderson (1832-1908), a well-known Glasgow artist, and had been for a considerable time an intimate friend of his own elder daughter, whose senior she was by some years. Happily this second matrimonial venture also turned out well. To this his own large-hearted nature, the attitude taken up by his new wife, and the generous spirit in which the new conditions were accepted by his older children all contributed. Even from the purely artistic point of view that was fortunate. It retained for McTaggart the harmonious home atmosphere which had meant so much to him in the past, and which was, I imagine, absolutely essential to his full activity and continued development as an artist.

After the wedding (6th April 1886), when Mr. William Leiper, R.S.A., supported him as best man, Mr. and Mrs. McTaggart went to Aberfoyle for a week or two. While there he painted a number of vivid water-colours of early spring effects amongst the moorlands and by the watersides in the country round about. Before returning home, however, this quietude was broken by a rumour that the Art Committee of the Edinburgh International Exhibition, about to be held in the Meadows, were representing him without his sanction and against his will. The

leading spirits¹ in the organisation of that collection were the two Academicians who had interfered with the hanging of the Academy the previous year, and, as McTaggart's attitude regarding exhibition awards and medals was well known, their action looks as if it might have been prompted by a desire for revenge. Whenever he heard of what had been done, he wrote to Mr. Keiller, of Dundee, asking him as a personal favour to withdraw the picture, 'Enoch Arden,' which had been borrowed from his collection. The first letter written from Aberfoyle seems to have miscarried, and he wrote again. Mr. Keiller then withdrew the picture, and McTaggart, in acknowledging his action and thanking him for it, explained very fully the reasons which had underlain his request.

24 CHARLOTTE SQUARE,
EDINBURGH, 5th May, 1886.

DEAR KEILLER,

Accept my sincere thanks for withdrawing the picture. I am sorry to have given you trouble and some explanation is due to you. My first letter from Aberfoyle (29th ult.) must have miscarried.

In our conversation at Dundee I must have left you with a wrong impression, but I was under the belief that you had made a mistake and that my picture could not have been asked for, as the Committee and every individual in it were well aware of my resolve to be absent from this exhibition and my reasons for wishing to be so. I cannot even now understand how they came to write for the picture. Why should they wish to have me against my will? If I did exhibit, I would send my full number. For the last ten years or so I have spoken against competition amongst any except very young artists. The Fine Art Committee advertised that they would give diplomas and medals to the Exhibitors at this International Exhibition. All the artists are aware of my opinions on this subject and to be consistent I was obliged to be absent.²

With best wishes and apologies for this very long letter,

Believe me,

Ever yours sincerely,

WILLIAM McTAGGART.

¹ Apart from Mr. R. T. Hamilton Bruce, who devoted himself entirely to bringing together the memorable series of French romantic and Dutch pictures by which that exhibition is remembered.

² In 1883, unaware that medals were to be given, he had consented to be represented in the collection of sea pictures brought together in connection with the International Fisheries Exhibition in London, and, when he was awarded a gold medal, even the fact that the distinction was shared by Israels and Tom Graham did not modify his chagrin.



FOR SHELTER

During the winter and spring he had been working upon the big Carradale pictures, 'Over the Harbour Bar' and 'For Shelter,' and a smaller subject, 'Past Work,' foreshadowed in a water-colour painted as long before as 1879, and tenderly pathetic in its contrast of worn old age with fresh childish beauty, had also been engaging his attention. All of these were pretty well completed before he went to Carnoustie for August and September. There he at once commenced a number of pictures, amongst which 'The Bathers' and 'Corn in the Ear' had important figures, and 'Ocean,' 'Carnoustie Bay,' and 'The Turn of the Tide' were magnificent renderings of the sea in its splendid loneliness.

Represented at the Scottish Academy by 'For Shelter'¹ and a fine portrait of Mrs. Orchar, wife of his friend, the Dundee collector, and at the Glasgow Institute by 'Over the Harbour Bar' and 'Whins in Bloom,' the latter a bright little picture of children gathering primroses beside a burn near the sea, his exhibited work attracted great attention in 1887. The 'Harbour Bar' has already been described; but the Edinburgh pictures and, incidentally, the position McTaggart now occupied in the estimation of good judges were so admirably discussed in the contemporary notice which appeared in *The Scottish Leader* that no excuse is necessary for reproducing that criticism here.

"When we turn to Mr. McTaggart's large sea-piece, No. 158, 'For Shelter,' we come again to the art of the mood and the moment, to the vivid record of most transitory effect. The aims of Mr. McTaggart's art have much in common with those of contemporary Continental landscape painters; like them he concentrates himself upon problems of lighting and atmosphere; but these problems, he handles, he solves, in a manner absolutely unique, one for which he has no example and,

¹ 'For Shelter' was mainly, if not entirely, a studio picture, painted from a smaller oil and a water-colour, and the figures were studied from fisher-girls got from Newhaven. Apropos of the latter a friend tells an interesting incident. Happening to call on the artist one week and again two weeks later, he found him on both occasions painting from his grouped models. During the second visit, McTaggart asked him how he thought the figures were coming on now, and, on his replying that he did not see much difference, the artist said: "Well, I've spent about a week's hard work on them. It's easy painting portraits of the models; but it's the devil and all to paint them in rain and wind in the studio."

stranger still, in which he has even escaped the curse of imitation. In the present picture he has rendered with marvellous freedom of touch and boldness of handling an effect of sudden storm ; the fishing-boats flocking landward for shelter, the waves crisping into whitest foam, which is cast high into air as it dashes against the rock-bound coast ; the distant hills obscured by gathering mist ; and in the foreground a group of wind-blown fisher-folk struggling towards a promontory and gazing seaward. We may note the wonderful way in which the painter has attained a feeling of open air, the thousand mingling prismatic tints which he has blended into perfect light. Look at the painting of the sea and its variety of whites and blues and crisp sharp greens ; and then go back and catch the total impression of the scene, how the picture stands out fresh and brilliant—like a piece of veritable nature—from all around it.”¹ Then, after a reference to the greater Scottish portrait painters of the past, the writer proceeds : “ We should require to search—and search amongst the greatest works of our portraitists of former days—to find anything more artistic in execution, more vivid and life-like in effect, than No. 50, McTaggart’s portrait of ‘ Mrs. Orchar.’ We are not always able thoroughly and without reserve to enjoy this painter’s examples of portraiture ; but the present is certainly one of his finest successes. We feel that here a real personality is disclosed to us in that black-clad grey-eyed lady, with face of homely shrewdness and good-natured kindness, seated there with hands laid on lap. The picture is most direct and masterly in its brushwork ; the sharp dark touches by which the painter has hewn out the face from the background—touches which look so hard in their trenchant decision, when we examine them closely, that we are surprised to observe their perfect rightness, in keeping and effect, when viewed from a due distance—remind us a good deal of the sharp decided handling of Frans Hals.”

A year later *The Scottish Art Review*, then founded by the “ Glasgow boys ” for the exposition of their views and preferences in art, gave clear indication of the admiration in which McTaggart’s work was held by the young and militant painters of the West. At the instigation of

¹ Written by J. M. Gray. On the other hand the *Art Journal* said : “ The large sea-piece ‘ For Shelter ’ has some fine qualities, but it is slovenly in execution, wanting in texture and definition, and deficient in aerial perspective.”

Mr. (now Sir James) Guthrie, his 'Highland Burn' (1874-5) was reproduced as a full-page plate and numerous references to his art appeared in the two volumes issued before the publication passed out of their hands. Perhaps the most significant of these occurs in a witty and somewhat caustic article which Mr. George Henry wrote about the eleventh Exhibition of the Royal Scottish Water-Colour Society (1888). "One of the features of the exhibition is the work of Mr. William McTaggart. He is represented by five drawings, all showing the expression of a thorough artist. 'In the Surf,' No. 188, is a remarkable work, full of air and life, and vigorous with the vitality of movement. In it will be found none of that lifeless conscientiousness, which is the guiding star or forlorn hope, as occasion demands, of so many weak painters. Swift to seize the dominant motive which impresses him, his art instincts prompt him to reveal it in the most direct way and by the simplest methods. Every brush-mark, every separate bit of tone and colour, every line has a distinct part in perfecting the completion of the picture. You cannot take away or add to his work without destroying the unity and balance of the whole." And in an illuminating paper, "Of Finish in Art," read before an Art Congress held in Edinburgh in 1889, Mr. Alexander Roche, who defined finish "as that final aspect of execution which expresses the completion of the artist's intention," instanced McTaggart, whose work was "regarded by many as *very good in intention but unfinished*," as an outstanding example of an artist who, through refined perceptions, knew "when the vitality of his impulse was exhausted."

While the more scientific and rigorous study of values, and the lower tone induced thereby, the heavier and more solid impasto and, a little later, the more consciously decorative intention, which marked the earlier work of the Glasgow School (which, with qualities quite its own, owed something to the Barbizon and Dutch painters, and more to contemporary French art, especially the phase represented by Manet and Le Page, and to Whistler), make any direct influence exerted on it by McTaggart difficult to trace, there can be little doubt that his art, and, in lesser degree, that of Chalmers and Wingate, helped to prepare the way for theirs. The high sunshiny pitch of McTaggart's lighting and the consequent brilliance of his colour, added to his very personal sentiment for nature, made his achievement unique; but the unity of effect, selection and

concentration of material and swift expressiveness of handling in his work, although personal also, were closely related to the impressionist movement, of which he had been an early and unconscious pioneer, and to which, in some of their tendencies at least, the Glasgow group belonged. Superficially, however, his achievement had more obvious affinity to that of the original group of "impressionists" who had emerged in Paris shortly after 1870. Claude Monet, Pissarro, Renoir, Sisley and the others, and Manet, in his latest phase, had made a speciality of "the rendering of objects under the fugitive and fluctuating coloration which they derive from the variation of light and from the play of the atmosphere" (M. Theodore Duret). To McTaggart these things were also of primary interest, and, isolated in Scotland though he was, they had engaged his attention before their pursuit had been taken up and made a special cult by the French artists, who are usually credited with having introduced them into painting.¹ But, whereas the Frenchmen (and later most of their English following, of whom Mr. Wilson Steer is the most notable) confined their efforts to recording the merely visual aspects of *actualité*, and founded their treatment upon a scientific theory, McTaggart, while attaining effects quite as brilliant as theirs in the actual rendering of light, colour and movement, always painted the beauty and the emotional significance of which these appearances are the external expression. As I have written elsewhere, "In his pictures the problems of modern impressionism pass from the region of experiment into the realm of art, for in them the observation of the realist is coloured and glorified by poetic thought."

During the later eighties "impressionism"—the word was by that time used generally as a term to imply a broad and selective treatment of personal impressions of things seen rather than in its strict and original French meaning—was in the air all over Europe, and was much discussed on all occasions when artists came together. McTaggart, who was little concerned about labels, although deeply interested in ideas, hearing it constantly referred to one varnishing day at the Academy, took Wingate aside and asked, "What is this impressionism they are all talking about?" "Well, I fancy," the reply came with a twinkle, "I fancy it's just what you and I have been doing for a good many years." This unconsciousness,

¹ See Chapter III. pp. 39-40.



OCEAN

however, was only as regards impressionism as a movement, with a more or less formulated theory of art expression, and as an active and extending influence. His own work was the issue not only of fine instincts and perceptions, but of a high intelligence brought consciously to bear upon the pictorial treatment of the aspects of life and the qualities in nature which interested him most.

To the Academy of 1888, in addition to 'Over the Harbour Bar,' seen the previous year in Glasgow, he sent a brilliant little portrait group of two girls, 'Lottie and Mabel,' dressed as fishwives, and two of the pictures begun at Carnoustie in 1886. Of the latter, 'The Bathers' was the more important. The wind blows fresh from the sea, and, beyond a lad who stands on the beach struggling with a reluctant shirt, which flaps in the breeze like a sail before the sheet is hauled home, a party of boys, delightfully drawn and full of life, are sporting with great glee amid the waves which run gladly and swiftly shorewards as if in pursuit of one another. As in other of his bathing pictures, the colour of life—"the modest colour of the unpublished blood," as Mrs. Meynell describes it—"so bright, so light, so soft, so mingled," with its hint of gold and ivory and its faint inner flush of rose, is treated exquisitely, and being here set against the translucent lustre of lovely blue and green water and the flash of gleaming foam, completes in the sunshine which suffuses everything a harmony of peculiar beauty and power. A scheme to tempt a lover of fine colour, it is handled triumphantly, in a way only possible to a great colourist, and withal without the least straining or forcing of effect. The smaller picture, 'Corn in the Ear,' was almost equally delightful. Beside a broken sandy path, which fringes flower-spangled golden cornfields over which the thatched roofs of cottages peep, with, beyond these again, a glimpse of distant blue sea, two happy children bask in the gleam and glitter of the autumn sunshine. The older child lies outstretched upon the warm ground, picking the grains from a head of oats held in her hand, while her little brother, perched amongst the corn near her, holds a bunch of scarlet poppies and white ox-eye daisies.

Although without figures, the other pictures begun at the same time were not shown until later. The first to appear was 'Carnoustie Bay' (R.S.A. 1890), a picture full of "the light and sound and darkness of

the sea" when an off-shore wind blows the breaking crests of charging lines of rearing and plunging white horses backwards in shining streamers which sparkle bright against the deep dark blue of the farther water tossing beneath a blue sky swept by the awakening north. 'Ocean,' which followed a year later, was even finer. Great summer surges, fringed with dazzling foam and radiant with sun-illuminated blue and green on their gleaming sides, are running straight in upon a flat sandy shore, which—tinging the shallowing and rippling foreground water with tawny and golden hues—spreads in front, wet and shining with tremulous reflections from the pale cloud-flecked blue sky. Pregnant with that seemingly active principle of life, which makes the sea more to us than mere dead matter impelled by insensate law, and vitalised by that consummate art, which alone can give enduring expression to the sea's appeal to the imagination, it is, as one critic has said, "Surely one of the most beautiful pictures of the sea ever painted."¹ While less important, 'The Turn of the Tide' (Glasgow Institute, 1892), which was the artist's wedding present to his eldest son, is, in its different and more pensive way, almost as fascinating. The sea is farther withdrawn than in the others, but, between the tawny strand on which it breaks in subtly mingling tints of grey and white and the pearl-grey sky which broods above, the waves play together in a design which in its rhythmic cadence seems to suggest the very leap and curl and on-coming of the tide.

To return to the sequence of events, he was represented at the Academy of 1889 by one of the earlier of his Machrihanish pictures—the big 'Machrihanish Bay,' painted in 1878, which has already been described—and by a lovely portrait of a child. Dated 1888, 'Corn Flowers' was perhaps the last portrait painted by him before he left Edinburgh, after which he almost abandoned portraiture. At Broomieknowe, it is true, he painted a number of fine portraits; but, excepting those of the Stephen children (R.S.A. 1892) and a few others, only one or two of which were exhibited, they were of members of his own family. But 'Corn Flowers' was one of the most beautiful of the many charming child portraits he had produced, and so may be said to have formed a fitting climax to his career as a professional portrait painter. A little child of about two, she sits beside a bank of pale golden-brown earth

¹ Note in Catalogue of Fountainbridge Loan Art Exhibition, Edinburgh, 1902.

playing with corn-flowers and poppies. Her dark curly head is slightly bent, and sitting there—in her white muslin dress, with her chubby little arms at her side and her white stockinged legs and black slippered feet tucked up below her—she looks at one, naïvely unconscious of being looked at, with an absorbed but shyly mirthful regard in her dark eyes. The colour high-pitched, yet with a hint of golden glow in its silvery brightness, is peculiarly charming, and accentuates, as all fine colour does, the grace of the design and the deft delicacy of the accomplished handling.

In view of a project he had been contemplating for some time, the sketching seasons of 1887 and 1888 had been given over almost entirely to water-colour. This was the sale of his accumulated works in that medium, which ultimately took place in Dowell's rooms in the spring of 1889. But, as that event afforded a unique opportunity for estimating his achievement as a water-colourist, discussion of what was done at Tarbert in 1887 and at Southend during the following year is unnecessary here. It had, however, a pretty direct bearing upon his subsequent career. Indeed, it was the prelude to his removal from Edinburgh, and marked the close of the middle period of his life and art. More and more with the passing of years his art had been expanding towards full realisation of the ideals implicit in it from the first, and now he felt that the time had come when he must give them free and unfettered expression. To enable him to attain this, he decided to give up portraiture, which had hitherto been an important source of income, and to live in the country. He had, of course, never painted to please the public. Always his purpose had been the expression of his own deep feelings regarding man and nature and human life, and, through misunderstanding and against adverse criticism, he had ever battled onward towards his goal. But time had familiarised art-loving people in Scotland with the unconventional and highly suggestive manner in which he expressed his original and fascinating conceptions, and, while there were always those who wished (as those who went before them had done) that he would paint as he had painted fifteen years earlier, there had gradually grown up, both amongst artists and public, a fuller understanding and a more complete appreciation of the unique qualities of his art. The financial success of the water-colour sale, combined with the wide acceptance of his work which that implied, gave him increased confidence in his resolve,

and in May 1889 he left Charlotte Square and went to live at Dean Park, Broomieknowe, which was to remain his home until the end. There, living in a beautiful country district, not far from the city but free from its distractions, and soon also free from the annoyances incidental to an active part in Academy affairs and the politics of art, he settled down to dream and think and paint, and to carry to full flowering that genius for the imaginative interpretation of the familiar, which, with his passion for light and colour and movement, was his contribution to art.



CROSSING THE FORD