

CHAPTER XI

PERSONALITY

To say that the style was the man is in McTaggart's case to use no merely conventional phrase. For, in all essential respects, his art is a mirror of what he was himself. No one who knew him well could ever have expected him to paint otherwise than he did, and this is particularly true as regards the later part of his career, when his personality and his painting were alike fully developed. Like his art, his character combined richness and variety with a large and noble simplicity. Moreover, as in his painting, this was expressed in all his relationships with an engaging spontaneity to which transparent sincerity gave depth and fullness; and, while a rich and genial vein of humour and a sympathy and understanding, quick and tender as a woman's, sweetened a nature which inclined to take a serious view of life and its responsibilities, a rare courtesy of manner made intercourse with him easy and delightful.

Beneath this habitual geniality and charm were both grit and fire. He had thought of things deeply and for himself, he had a clear conception of duty, and he was always true to truth as he saw it. His attitude to life was essentially religious and he had a profound reverence for everything that was beautiful, pure and of good report.

No artist was ever freer from jealousy of others or scorned self-advertisement more. While, at times, he could be genially humorous over kinds of art for which he did not care, he was very tolerant of, and even saw merit in, much work with which he could have had no real sympathy; and he never grudged anyone recognition or success. As for himself, he lived in the spirit which underlay a remark he once made about public recognition and official honours. "Most of us," he said, "are more anxious to be thought great than to be great, or simply as we

are." He was content to be as he was. That he was great, and, latterly at least, widely recognised, perhaps made practice of his precept easier; but the precept was in entire conformity with his character, and if he had been less gifted, he would, I believe, still have put it into practice. Contentment with him did not, however, involve lassitude. He had what he called "the true artist's greed for work," and his aspiration was to go on striving—"whether one succeeded or failed one went on trying, for there was always the hope that one would do better next time." Content also with the recognition he had received, and innately modest, he hated even the semblance of self-advertisement. As he wrote in a letter already quoted "To think of it would make me die of shame."

The clarity of purpose and high ideals which came from these elements in his character were associated with a somewhat hasty and fiery temper. Easily stirred by anything mean or base or uncharitable, and impatient of any interference with what he thought his duties or rights as an artist or a man, his resentment when roused not only blazed—it burned. Although considerably mellowed in later life, even then his anger would occasionally flash out, and I can imagine that there were occasions when the vigour with which he frequently advocated his opinions, liberal, far-sighted and informed by the finest sense of justice as these usually were, may have seemed unreasonable to those whose views were narrower and more conventional.

Temperamentally he had many of the characteristics of the Celtic race to which he belonged—natural courtesy, innate delicacy of feeling, high flashing temper, quick response to sympathy. What is more to our purpose, the intimate vision of nature and the passion for the sea, the deep love of beauty, the swift spontaneous flow of emotion and the instinctive feeling for the transitoriness of life, which are often considered the special qualities of the Celt's spiritual inheritance, were his in very exceptional degree. Yet, if a note of pensive sadness and a sense of the bitterness of exile now and then appear in his pictures, he had personally little of the Highland melancholy, and none of its too placid resignation to fate and destiny. While he dreamed, he also realised. His life and his art, full of fixed purpose and purposeful initiative, are, in these respects at least, more typical of the Lowland Scot than of the Highland Gael.

His West Highland ancestry was written on his face and shone in

his eyes, was expressed in his figure and vivified his manner and his talk. With his portrait by himself (1892) reproduced, to describe him as he was during most of his last twenty years would be superfluous. It is himself, and as wonderful a rendering of character as it is of appearance. Sunburnt and tanned by exposure to the open air, he looked, with his thick tawny beard and clear bright eyes of medium grey blue, as if he might have been one of the West Coast fishers he painted so often. And his dress, the dark blue jacket he usually wore being cut reefer fashion, and the easy swing and roll of his carriage added to his sailor-like look. In the eighties that was so marked that when he entered the witness-box at the trial at Inverary of the crew of the lighter, which ran down the boat in which he was fishing in Campbeltown Loch, the people in Court took him for the skipper. He had a splendid constitution also, and, of medium height and strongly built, his every action was instinct with vitality. Even after he was well over sixty, his movements were easy and agile, and he walked with the spring of a man who has not yet thought of giving up football for golf.

McTaggart possessed the genius for friendship in remarkable degree. He had his quarrels and he had his enemies, both more on questions of principle or policy than personal, and he used to say that sometimes one was not quite sure one was right until one was opposed by certain people. But his friendships were enduring. One might say, indeed, that he never lost a friend except through death. The companions of his youth remained perhaps his dearest friends until one by one they passed and he was left one of the few survivors of the brilliant group of pupils, who had gathered round Scott Lauder at the Trustees' Academy in the early fifties. Yet he was constantly making new friendships: amongst artists and collectors, amongst his neighbours in town or country, and amongst the companions of his elder children. In tune with the spirit of eternal youth, which flows through the world and, ever renewing life, keeps it fresh and warm and generous, McTaggart, like Meredith, loved "to keep the younger generation in hail." He was never happier than when welcoming young people, and especially young artists, to his home. During the last ten years of his life, one of the great days of the year for him was the Saturday early in July when he entertained the council of the Society of Scottish Artists—"the young artists" he called them—

and two or three of his most intimate personal friends to an early dinner and then, after an interlude of smoke and talk in the studio, to tea in the garden. These afternoons, with their geniality, good talk and generous encouragement, will not soon be forgotten by anyone who ever had the good fortune to be a guest.

Simple and natural himself, he had the knack of stimulating the best side of those with whom he was brought into contact. His very handshake and welcoming smile were of happy augury and at once set you at ease. However young or unimportant one might be, he treated you as an equal and, cordial and hearty in manner, he never oppressed anyone with a sense of superiority. As a minor artist said, "Mr. McTaggart treats us so that we forget that he is a great artist and not one of ourselves." To meet him casually in Edinburgh was to be cheered, to spend a day with him was to be refreshed and invigorated as if by a holiday in the country. He radiated good will and encouragement, and his example was an incentive to noble living. Years after he had ceased to visit the Life Class, one of the most distinguished of his pupils wrote: "It is a great comfort to me when I think of what your own life has been and your example has gone a long way to keep up my courage in living my own life—and thus we go hoping on, My Dear Old Master."

In these circumstances it was not perhaps surprising that, as his wife observed, people seemed often to go to see him when they were feeling depressed. Yet his best talk was not kept for company or his encouragement reserved for visitors. He was easy to live with, and his family relationships, of which it would be unbecoming for me to write in detail, were marked by a warmth and tenderness which made his home a peculiarly happy one.

Although more an observer and a thinker than a reader, McTaggart had a wide knowledge of things which could only have been acquired from books. He had besides a fine instinct for the essential mental and emotional qualities in literature, and the book he knew and loved best of all was the Bible. He was indeed that rare thing, a self-educated man whose culture is wide and bears no trace of its origin, except the freshness and bloom which, coming from native originality and depth of character, differentiate it from even the best culture of the schools. Not art only but life in all its manifestations, political (he was an ardent Liberal), ethical

and religious, interested him, and he was always ready to discuss any or all of them with a congenial friend.

A copious and eager conversationalist, he talked with a rare and winning enthusiasm to which the soft pleasing quality of his voice, with its soupçon of West country accent, and the spontaneity of the gestures with which he accentuated his points added richness and vivacity. Sane, vigorous and manly, he took a decided view of almost any subject that might be discussed, and, while he frequently startled one with a seeming paradox, you usually found on consideration that it was no paradox at all, but the expression of an exceptionally penetrating and original mind acting without prejudice on the actual facts and not on the conventional view of them. Played over by flashes of delicate humour, lightened by entertaining reminiscence and anecdote, and marked by happy and picturesque phrasing, his conversation, no matter what the theme, was always vivid and illuminative. Often discursive and taking a wide circle, it was, however, never far removed from the elemental things of life, and often came back to the relationship of art to life, which he held to be so close that the former, while a reflection of the emotional and imaginative aspects of the latter, was an essential part of life itself.

I HAVE been re-reading what I have written about William McTaggart and his art, and it occurs to me that it might be well if, in conclusion, an attempt were made to analyse the essential character of his gift. The development of his vision and the evolution of his style, from their delicate and detailed beginnings to their sensitive, powerful and suggestive conclusions, have already been traced. It remains to disengage and summarise the qualities which give his pictures their peculiar fascination and make them a remarkable manifestation of the human spirit.

Like all the greatest artists, McTaggart was of his own country and of his own time. What the great men of the past did was to take the ideals of their epoch and the characteristics of their surroundings and, seizing upon what was deepest and most significant, express these in forms of beauty and of power. So too McTaggart. His inspiration was drawn from the life and landscape he knew best and loved most, and his works, as the author of that delightful book, "Edinburgh Revisited,"

has said, "are the most spiritual and original expression of Scotland through painting." Yet if his roots were deep struck in Scottish soil, almost indeed in his own parish, his art blossomed in the free air of heaven and casts its beauty and its fragrance far abroad. He saw the universal in the particular ; and, like the poetry of Burns, the novels of Walter Scott and the romances of Stevenson, his pictures interpret the life, the scenery, the very atmosphere of Scotland in a way which, instinct with emotional significance and pictorial beauty, endows them with a great and an enduring charm.

His talent unfolded slowly, leaf by leaf as it were, until, during the last twenty or twenty-five years of his life, it was in full flower. To the last it revealed new beauties, but never a hint of decay. What the fully blossomed flower was at the close showed in the bud, and at each stage of its expansion it possessed a beauty of its own. But its special quality, its unique aroma, was most in evidence and most fragrant in his later maturity. Then, with fully developed powers of expression, he embodied in his pictures all the passion for nature's beauty and significance, which had haunted him from the days of his youth.

In love with the wonder and bloom of the world, it was life, or rather the impression of life created in the mind or evoked in the imagination by nature and man's relationship to her, that he tried to capture and recreate by his art. In the pictures of his earlier years this aspiration shines through his reverent and lovely, if still somewhat literal, rendering of the more purely visual or the more static elements of natural appearance, and reveals itself in delightful colour, finely observed tone and delicately modelled form. Gradually, however, as his understanding of these elements increased and his mastery of their representation matured, he came to express the life of nature rather in terms of atmosphere and motion. The very complete knowledge of things seen and the great skill in realising them pictorially, which he had acquired by sincere and devoted study, were now employed to express the wider and deeper relationship of these to human life and feeling. McTaggart held that the beauty of nature was spiritual, and the ideal which he pursued, consciously or unconsciously, and latterly realised was the liberating of this vital and spiritual essence from the bonds of the material and the conventional. And, with its realisation, he brought back to painting that ecstasy of feeling, that

pure and unsophisticated delight in the wonder and beauty of reality, which had marked the great early masters but had been largely lost to art under the influence of academies and of revolting groups with their formulated and contending tenets of eclecticism, classicism, or romanticism, realism, impressionism, futurism. Yet, while his art in its later phases is instinct with "the reason of the thing without the matter," that was not the issue of chance, but was attained by a combination of insight, knowledge and skill. Synthesis superseded analysis in conception and execution alike. While the facts became subsidiary to the whole and incident was swamped in unity, he modified his technique until, through exquisite concord of colour and light, rare suggestiveness of action and form, and finely rhythmic design, it gave fit expression to his ideals. In his later years every touch and every line in his pictures were significant and vital, and he seemed to colour with light and model with air instead of with pigment. His art had become fully creative: an interpretation of life in terms of living art and not of dead matter.

That seems to me the secret of McTaggart's charm and the source of the perennial freshness and endless variety of his achievement. That also the element, which, linking his art with the infinite, gives his pictures their exceptional power of appeal to the imagination. In them, to use M. Bergson's fine aphorism, "the veil between nature and ourselves is lifted," and, through the visual harmonies of colour and form of which they are wrought, we perceive the inner life of reality and feel ourselves at one with nature. Masterly in craftsmanship and rich in pictorial beauty, his art possesses the incomparably higher and rarer kind of significance which comes from a profoundly imaginative apprehension of nature and of human life. Expressive, lovely, reverent, McTaggart's pictures yield lasting joy and conjure up for the solace and the delight of man

"A sense sublime
Of Something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man :
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things."