

CHAPTER II

STUDENT DAYS

1852-1859

FOUNDED in 1760 by the Board of Manufactures for Scotland—a body which owed its origin to the Treaty of Union of 1707—with the object of improving design for the textile industries, the Trustees' Academy, as it came to be called, while not neglecting its original purpose as a school of design, had gradually developed into a training school for artists also. From 1798, when John Graham (Sir David Wilkie, Sir William Allan and Sir John Watson Gordon were pupils of his) was appointed, there had been a succession of able masters, all practising artists, and for more than fifty years the ablest Scottish painters, with few exceptions, had been students there. But when, in April 1852, Robert Scott Lauder (1803-1869) took up his duties as Director of the Antique, Life and Colour Classes, the most brilliant and the last epoch in the history of the Trustees' Academy began.

By experience, taste and temperament, Lauder, who had been a student of the school under Allan, was exceptionally well qualified to be a successful teacher. If he was not a very original or powerful artist, his pictorial ideals were high and his fine taste and his keen appreciation of the mature art of Italy, which he had studied during a five years' residence abroad, gave his work a certain distinction and connected it with a greater and wider tradition than that in which most Scottish painters had been trained. Moreover, he was a colourist of a high order, frequently attaining real resonance and rich harmony of effect, and he handled oil paint, not very powerfully perhaps, but with understanding of its character and with a variety and expressiveness of touch and impasto which differentiate his work from that of the majority of his immediate contemporaries.

Of even greater importance in relation to his mastership than his accomplishments as a painter, though these commanded respect, was the engaging quality of his personality. He won not only the admiration but the affection of the students who gathered round him in Edinburgh, and he possessed a contagious enthusiasm for all that was beautiful, which acted as a splendid spur to their youthful ardour.

Lauder's rare gifts as a teacher did not lie in example and precept. He did not paint demonstration studies before his classes or lay down any formal rules for work. Contact with him did not involve learning to draw in a special way or to paint in a particular manner. Although the work of his pupils is marked by certain technical affinities, he was less the expounder of a method than the source of a vitalising artistic atmosphere. At the same time, if the doing of a thing was sometimes made to appear more important than the way in which it should be done, craftsmanship was by no means neglected. The delicate precision and expressive completeness of the studies made in the school bear witness to the sincere and thorough work he got from his pupils, and the matured styles of the best of them, varied though these are, reveal the admirable character of their early training. It was seldom, however, that he touched their studies with brush or pencil. He criticised what had been done, indicated what should be striven for, and, more inclined to praise strong points than to censure weak, developed and strengthened their artistic individualities, and gave them confidence in their own gifts. Yet while Lauder's spirit was the kindling flame and the compelling influence, John Ballantyne's humbler, but almost equally necessary, share in the formation of the students' practical equipment must not be forgotten. His more academic draughtsmanship and preference for completeness made an excellent foil to Lauder's inspiring enthusiasm and devotion to colour. It was to Ballantyne¹ also that the students were chiefly indebted for hints as to technical methods and procedure.

The class hours were from 8 to 10 in the morning, when Ballantyne was usually in charge, and from 6 to 8 in the evening, when Lauder visited; but the Statue Gallery was open from 10 to 4, and for five days a week a student could work for twelve hours if he chose. Most of those

¹ John Ballantyne (1815-1897), a member of the Royal Scottish, and a painter of subject pictures. He was Lauder's assistant in the school.

who were devoting themselves to art took full advantage of these opportunities.

Under Scott Lauder the Academy rapidly recovered the prestige it had been losing during the preceding six or seven years, and soon the class-rooms were crowded. When, only a fortnight after his advent, McTaggart joined the school, a number of those who were to form the group whose achievement was to become their master's chief claim to distinction were already there. Orchardson (1832-1910), who had commenced his studies in 1845 and was now an accomplished painter and an exhibitor of some years' standing, had indeed left the classes. But he returned, and although irregular in attendance, came under Lauder's influence and in turn influenced Lauder's pupils. Mr. Hugh Cameron (born 1835), then an architect's pupil; Mr. Peter Graham (born 1836), at that time a wood engraver; and John MacWhirter (1839-1911) had been attending for three, two and one year respectively. George A. Lawson (1832-1904) and John Hutchison (1833-1910), both subsequently sculptors, were there also. A year later George Paul Chalmers (1833-1878) came from Montrose to begin his studies, and in 1855 Tom Graham (1840-1906), who hailed from Orkney, and John Pettie (1839-1893), whose home was at East Linton—all three soon intimate with one another and dear friends of McTaggart—were enrolled. The growing reputation of the Academy also attracted a number of artists who had previously closed their student careers. John Burr (1831-1893) and his brother Alexander (1835-1899) returned in 1854: W. F. Vallance (1827-1904) and J. B. Macdonald (1829-1901) in 1855. And although there is little definite evidence of Lauder's influence in their styles, the presence for even a short time amongst his pupils of Alexander Fraser (1828-1899) and Sam Bough (1822-1878), whose work, each in its different way, holds a notable place in Scottish landscape-painting, seems worth mentioning.

II

The contrast between McTaggart's youthful surroundings and those in which he found himself in Edinburgh was very marked. Instead of distrust of art, he found enthusiasm; instead of blind groping by himself for a means of expression, he found sympathetic direction from an

experienced practitioner, who was fortunately also an initiate in the rarer qualities of art ; instead of isolation amongst people who looked upon his ambitions as foolishness or worse, he found himself one of a crowd of eager youths devoted to things he loved, and following in the steps of men who had won respect for themselves and the art they practised. Such a change of environment could not fail to be stimulating to a lad of his ardent disposition. But while he was sensitive, eager, passionate, he was also self-reliant, courageous and prudent, as he had need to be if he were to win his way and make the most of his opportunities. For, in his own phrase, he "had thrown away the scabbard." He was now entirely dependent upon his own resources, and had to live by his work, while he learned the way to do it. That he succeeded is the best testimony both to the validity of his talent and the integrity and strength of his character. From the time he was sixteen he kept himself as an artist, and, during all the years of his struggles and of his success alike, he was never false to his ideals or worked in ways of which his artistic conscience did not approve.

One sees him, and even something of his new environment, in a small oil portrait painted by him a few months after he arrived in Edinburgh. Already, in handling, tone and colour, there are traces of the influences under which he had recently come ; but these are not the interest of this little picture. That lies in the face that looks out at us—the fresh smooth face of a youth of seventeen, oval in shape, with thin delicately moulded features, a sweet sensitive mouth with dimples at the corners, a well-formed chin, and half-shadowed eyes of grey-blue gazing, half shyly, half defiantly, from below a wide and rounded brow surmounted by a soft mass of wavy tawny-brown hair. The big bow tie and the wide collar give that touch of difference from the young man at business which seems inevitable with the youthful artist. There is little hint of the boy fresh from the country, and one of the town-bred lads, who was at the Academy when McTaggart arrived, says that there was nothing countrified about either his looks or his ways. But even a self-portrait, self-revealing though such are, fails to create the vivid impression he seems to have made on those who met him. That he was singularly bright and attractive, with his Celtic warmth of manner and spontaneity of wit, is obvious enough from his popularity amongst his



SELF-PORTRAIT
At the Age of Seventeen

acquaintances; but to these engaging qualities were united a deep seriousness of character and a sincerity of purpose which won not only the lasting affection but the respect and the reliance of his friends. With many of his fellow-students at the Academy he formed warm and life-long friendships, and, more slowly, he drew about him a small circle of people outside, most of them considerably older than himself, who combined admiration for his art with an almost affectionate solicitude for his welfare and success. His relations with some of the latter will be touched upon later. Yet, devoted though he was to art, even a keen interest in it was not always a passport to his friendship. Other things being favourable, it was of course the best of introductions; but, in later life at least, he met everybody upon broadly human grounds, and esteemed them far more for sterling qualities of character than for intellectual or artistic gifts.

McTaggart seems to have passed at once into Lauder's own class, and to have been set to draw from the round. There were then only three months of that session to run, and at its close he went back to Glasgow, where he spent the summer vacation in portrait work. This was done, as before, chiefly for people connected with Campbeltown, but led to a commission which was to have a most important bearing upon his future. It solved indeed, in great measure, the problem of how he was to live during his studentship, which was to prove very much longer than the few months which he, in his boyish inexperience, had looked forward to when leaving home. While painting Captain Watt, the skipper of the "Vanguard," one of the Glasgow and Dublin steamers, his sitter, who had taken a fancy to the young artist, suggested that he would find Dublin an excellent field for portraiture, and proposed that he should begin by going over with him and doing a companion portrait of his, the Captain's, wife. McTaggart had, however, to return to his studies in Edinburgh, and his new friend and he agreed that Ireland should be tried the following summer.

During the next session (1852-3) he worked hard at the Academy, where he made good progress, and he secured a few commissions in Edinburgh for portraits to keep him going.¹ He had obtained com-

¹ In 1853, or a little later, he was offered, through a friend, a position as an art master in Liverpool at £300 a year. This was wealth to the youth, but he considered study more important, and declined.

fortable lodgings, though very cheap, at 9 New Street, a street to the north of the Canongate, in the old town, and his brother Duncan, who had now obtained a situation in Edinburgh, was again with him. At the end of the session, in July 1853, he accompanied Captain Watt to Dublin, as had been arranged. Mrs. Watt, who had heard of the artist from her husband, gave him a warm welcome, saying, "Well, Mr. McTaggart, you are not one of the Old Masters any way." But his work evidently gave satisfaction. One commission followed another, and for four years in succession he spent the summer months in Ireland. Some of the portraits then done were in oils, but most of them were drawings in black and red chalk, with touches of white. For these he was paid from one and a half to five guineas, and, at the end of a season, he would return to Edinburgh with thirty or forty pounds saved to carry him through the following winter at the Academy, and with perhaps a dozen commissions to be taken up when he went back to Dublin a year later. So he had ever afterwards the kindest recollections of Ireland and the Irish people, as he well might, for, although he occasionally and increasingly got portrait work in Edinburgh and elsewhere, the greater part of his resources during these years came from his visits to Dublin. There he made a good many friends, including the artists Bartholomew Watkins¹ and William Brunton, who were constantly on the outlook for commissions for him, and it was there that he made his first appearance as an exhibitor, when in 1854 he showed a portrait group, "Children of J. Morton, Esq." at the Royal Hibernian Academy.

III

For McTaggart the great event of the session, which began in October 1853, was his meeting with George Paul Chalmers, who at the age of twenty came from Montrose to Edinburgh to study art, after an even harder fight with adverse circumstances than his fellow-student had gone through. Very soon they were friends with a close intimacy of the greatest value to each. To McTaggart it brought sympathetic companionship of a kind—sealed with the similarity of their early struggles,

¹ B. C. Watkins, later a member and Secretary of the Royal Hibernian Academy, a popular landscape painter.

and of their kindling ambitions—which he could scarcely have found amongst the more experienced students who were at the Academy when he came. To Chalmers it brought even more, for his enthusiastic and impulsive, but somewhat vacillating and self-centred, nature required the stiffening and the stimulus which a lad of McTaggart's indomitable will and large-minded generosity of outlook could give. Into this friendship in 1855 there were welcomed upon almost equal terms by each, though probably more warmly by McTaggart, who was nearer them in age, two students who had recently joined the classes. At fifteen Tom Graham, the orphan son of the Crown Chamberlain of Orkney, must have been a very fine-looking boy, with singularly attractive manners and almost certainly hints of that conversational charm which was so engaging a characteristic of his later years. John Pettie, a year older, was cast in a different mould. Bold and purposeful, as well as purpose-like, he was the son of a prosperous country shopkeeper, and, like McTaggart, brought with him to the city, and kept there unsullied, the high principles of conduct and the fine sense of honour instilled by his upbringing in a religious home. Exceptionally gifted, and with diverse gifts, these two newcomers brought fresh elements into the friendship, which now as a foursome may be said to have become the vital centre of the Lauder group. Orchardson, MacWhirter, the Burrs, Lawson and Hutchison, Hay and Vallance, Mr. Hugh Cameron and Mr. Peter Graham were all friends of theirs, and of one another, but these more extended friendships tended to radiate from the quartette rather than to absorb it.

In a letter written late in 1859 to Chalmers, who had left the Academy in 1856, McTaggart seems to have given a very vivid and graphic account of their relationship during these years. Unfortunately that letter, like all he wrote to Chalmers, has disappeared; but Chalmers's reply probably suggests the atmosphere almost equally well.

“My dear Mac,” he wrote, “the compliments of the season to you, my Boy. I hope 1860 has found you happy. I sincerely hope you will continue so throughout that year and every following year of your life. . . . It is such a tremendous time since I had a letter from you that I was indeed very much gratified with your last. I was very much pleased with your retrospective sketch. I felt my nervous system quiver

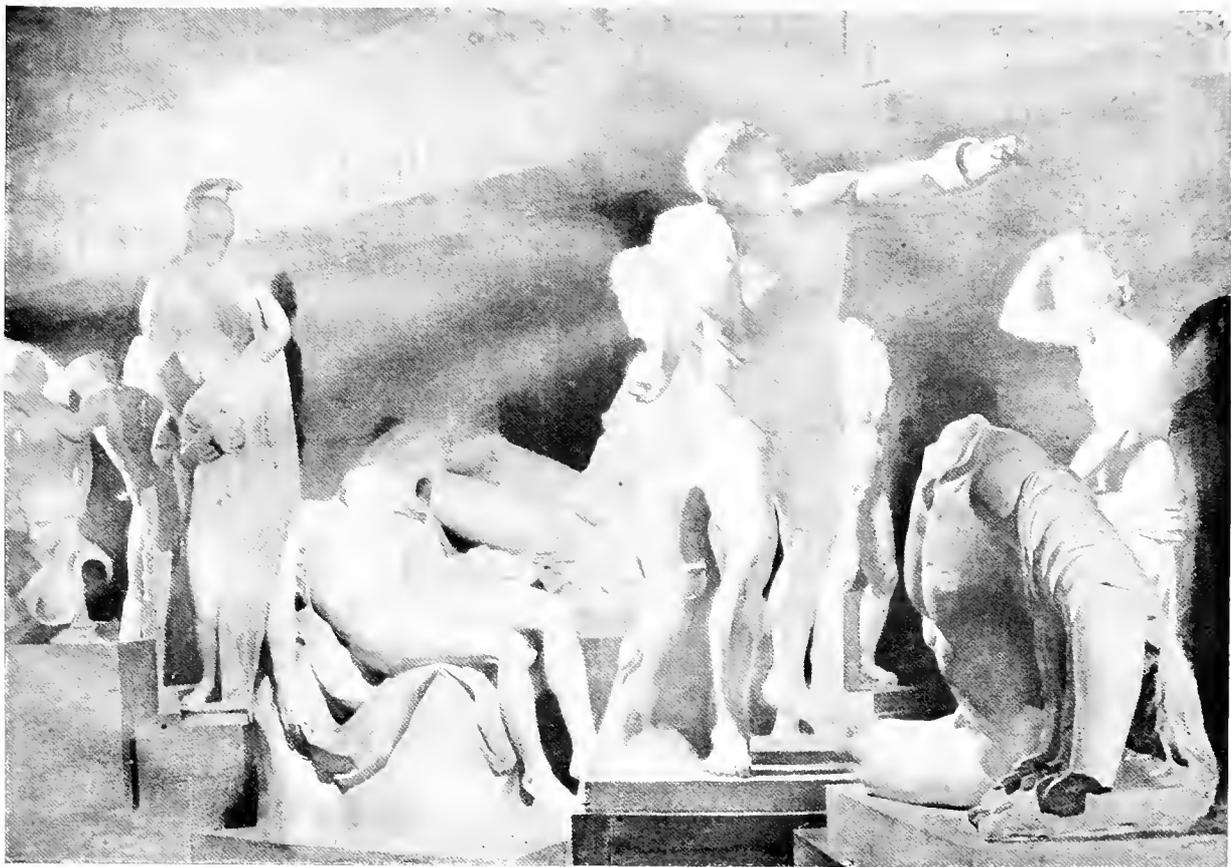
as you recounted some of the incidents, which to my memory are fresh as yesterday—our enthusiastic talk, our ‘quick march’ up to the Academy, our earnest work, our purpose to take the prizes (which we did), our hopes, our fears (I had many), our battling, our agreeing again, in fact our friendship (as you say) was complete. I am sorry there has been an interval. I hope, however, that the bond of union has not been broken, that the ‘electric wire’ has not been snapped asunder but only left, its power not exhausted. Come then, Mac, and let us be as ‘we were,’ regular *cronies*, and although we have not been ‘fou for weeks thegither,’ still let us be constant and true friends.”

Something of the same aroma exhales from Pettie’s letters, for his to Pettie have also been destroyed. Indeed, partly owing to the fact that McTaggart was a reluctant and by no means voluminous correspondent, and partly because so many of his intimate friends, both artists and laymen, predeceased him, it has been difficult to secure many characteristic letters by him. On the other hand, he kept nearly every letter he received, and these have often thrown much light upon his relationships and movements.

From Pettie’s one might select the following passages separated by twenty years, but, for that very reason, showing more clearly the persistence of their friendship. In 1859 he wrote, “Dear Mac, I have delayed writing till I had plenty of time to sit down and enjoy a chat with you. I have the opportunity now, and, sitting by my own fireside, I fancy opposite me your hearty face ready to break into the broadest of grins at the *worst of jokes*. When *did* you ever disappoint me? Truly, my dear fellow, I *depend* on you and you mustn’t.” And in 1879 he begins a letter, “Poor Chalmers has crossed my mind, and I feel that you are about the only tie I have to Edinburgh now.”

No such personal relics of the early friendship with Tom Graham seem to exist, but one could not see them together in later life without feeling that the bond between them was peculiarly intimate. To me it seemed touched with a special affection, kindred to that which occasionally links an older and a younger brother when they are drawn together through some special understanding or sympathy.

In 1855 the progress which McTaggart had been making in his studies begins to find definite record in the prize lists. He was then awarded



PRIZE STUDY—ANTIQUÉ CLASS, 1855

second prize for 'Drawing from the Round,' and in the Painting Life Academy his name came third. The next session saw Chalmers first, McTaggart second, and Peter Graham third for Drawing; and in the Life Class, McTaggart first, followed by John and Alexander Burr. In June 1857 he was placed first for painting from the Antique, and, having won the chief prize the previous year, was given an Honorary award for Painting from Life. After that, although remaining in the classes two or three years longer, he was not eligible for prizes.

These school studies were supplemented by lectures on Anatomy by Professor Miller, and by some practical dissection at the University under Professor Goodsir.

Composition, inseparable of course from even the most simple and direct work from the Antique or Life, was encouraged by a separate competition for designs illustrating a subject selected by the Master. That chosen in 1857 was Rizpah, and McTaggart's essay, an elaborate and highly finished oil-picture, was placed second.¹ In a green hollow on a desolate moor, backed by a low range of hills seen in late evening light, he showed her with outstretched arms trying to shield her dead sons from a gathering horde of croaking corbies. But while undeniably dramatic in conception, the impressiveness of this idea was discounted to a great extent by the completeness with which each separate part had been studied and painted. Yet as Rizpah was, as he himself thought, the most thoroughly detailed piece of work he ever did, one regrets that as late as 1898 he should have let the canvas out all round and worked upon the chief figure and the landscape.

IV

In addition to the portrait work done in Ireland during the summer, McTaggart frequently obtained commissions in Edinburgh, and between 1854 and 1856 he went on several occasions to Northumberland to execute portraits for Mr. Darling of Fowbery Tower and other people in the Wooler district. In Edinburgh, although commissions were not numerous and were taken at very small prices, the portraits he did seem

¹Mr. Peter Graham was awarded first prize. His design was rather a landscape with small figures than a figure composition.

to have pleased his sitters. From his papers, one finds clients recommending him to friends, or suggesting that he should exhibit the portrait he has done for them, as it is excellent and it might do him good to have it seen. As already noted, his first exhibition was the Royal Hibernian Academy in 1854, and a year later he showed for the first time at the Royal Scottish Academy. It was the inaugural exhibition of the new Galleries, and by a curious coincidence, the last exhibition held by the Academy there (1910) was to be his last also. His exhibits were two small water-colour portraits. The following year he was represented by an oil portrait 'Mr. R. Hunter,' a crayon of Miss Janet Guthrie, and a small picture, 'The Little Fortune-Teller,' which was purchased by Mr. W. R. McDiarmid, Dumfries, for £3 3s., and remained in the possession of his widow until 1912, when it was bequeathed to Mrs. J. Avon Clyde. These were followed in 1857 by a 'Portrait of a Clergyman' (probably the Rev. Dr. Caesar of Tranent) and 'Portraits,' evidently in water-colour or crayon, as it was shown amongst the drawings.

The portraits done at this time were done frankly as likenesses, and very largely for what could be earned by them. But they were excellent practice, and extended, as it were, the nine months Academic session into one of twelve. Involving verisimilitude, they demanded correct drawing and a regard for personal characteristics; they gave experience in handling different mediums, for they were carried out in water-colour and oils as well as in crayon; and, executed independently of a master's supervision and with regard to a sitter's convenience, they encouraged resource and brought facility in putting down what was before him. There are in the possession of a lady in Edinburgh two chalk portraits, which may be taken as typical of many. The man's is dated 1854, the lady's the following year. Each is drawn with much refinement and considerable knowledge and strength; the forms are delicately felt and subtly modelled; and the character is very fully rendered. One can quite understand how, before photography came in, there would be a demand for such portraits at a few guineas apiece—and one wonders, now that photography is fully developed, why there is not still a demand, for they possess in some measure that personal element which is art and which photography necessarily lacks. Probably three portraits, painted in Dublin but, for unknown reasons, remaining in the artist's possession,

are equally representative of his life-size work in oils about this time.¹ Carefully studied, they convey a sense of personality, and must have been like the sitters ; but, if well drawn and modelled in paint of pleasant quality, tone and colour, there is nothing distinctive or distinguished, or even clever, about them. They are good ordinary likeness-making, and, as far as I can see, show no obvious sign of exceptional power or promise. Dozens of men have done as well and come to nothing. On the other hand, several small heads of members of his own family, painted about the same time, touch a much higher level and reveal much delicacy of handling, fine tone and rich colour.

v

Having saved a little money from what he sometimes called his "pot-boiling portraiture," McTaggart decided to devote the summer and autumn of 1857 to picture painting. The longing to paint in the country was strong upon him, and for two or three years he declined portrait commissions to enable him to gratify it to the full. So shortly after the close of that session, instead of going to Dublin as usual, he went home to Campbeltown. Before leaving Edinburgh, however, he visited the "Art Treasures Exhibition" at Manchester with Chalmers, to whom it seemed that the Exhibition had happened for their especial benefit. Their previous knowledge of the 'Old Masters' had been confined to the small, if fine, collections of the Royal Institution and the Royal Scottish Academy, and the Torrie bequest, which then hung for part of each year in the Institution building, where the School was also located.² Now they saw not only more examples of Tintoretto, Veronese, Bassano, Tiepolo, Van Dyck, Ruysdael and Hobbema, but made acquaintance with many masterpieces by Titian and Rubens, Rembrandt and Hals, and other great artists of whom they had heard Lauder speak. Turner and Constable, from whose work so much modern landscape

¹One is the 'J. Morton, Esq.' painted about 1855 and exhibited at the Royal Scottish Academy in 1858.

²These pictures were transferred to the National Gallery of Scotland on its formation in 1859 ; and in 1910, a new College of Art having been built, the interior of the Institution was completely remodelled and transformed into a stately suite of galleries for the Royal Scottish Academy.

derives, would also swim into their ken for the first time. This experience was a splendid prelude to McTaggart's first picture-painting campaign; but it was probably more an inspiration than an influence, and its effects are not obviously traceable in the pictures he painted subsequently. These were, as was only natural and right, more in harmony with their own times and in tune with the keynote of the most vital work then being done—'Back to Nature.'

Some seven or eight years earlier the pre-Raphaelites had embarked upon their crusade in favour of truth in art, and, although their work had met with much opposition and ridicule, the principles for which they contended had gradually been making way. During the intervening years pictures by the leaders of the new movement had frequently been seen in Edinburgh, and Scott Lauder's pupils had been greatly attracted by their veracity of detail and brilliance of colour, and even more by the moral earnestness which underlay their attitude to both nature and art. Yet, while stimulated by these qualities, the young Scottish painters felt that somehow pre-Raphaelitism as practised by Millais, Holman Hunt, Madox Brown, and Rossetti was not for them. Little influenced by the morally improving mission which obsessed one branch of the English movement and untouched by the passion for poetic mysticism and mediaeval romance which underlay the other, they devoted themselves to rendering the more purely pictorial aspects of everyday things seen simply or of historical incident simply and dramatically conceived. Moreover, Lauder's enthusiasm for beauty and admiration for what had been greatly done in the past prevented a complete break with tradition, and his reiterated injunction to look for the greys in colour had led them to prefer a fused and harmonious colouration to one more strident if more brilliant. So with elaboration of detail and purity of colour they tried to combine unity of ensemble and truth of atmospheric effect and tone. This gave their early work a distinctive character, and, in McTaggart's case especially, eventually issued in an art which, in style at least, is in many ways the very antithesis of that of the original pre-Raphaelites.

McTaggart had sketched in the district before, and his recollections of these earlier impressions clung to him to the end and always coloured his outlook on nature; but this was his first serious and continuous spell of work out of doors. His chief energies were given to 'The Sleeper

and the Watcher,' an elaborately detailed picture of a collie sitting on guard over a girl, who having lost her way amongst the hills, has sunk down exhausted upon a moss-carpeted knowe, beneath some thin mountain trees, and fallen asleep. It is a tenderly sad picture, in which pathos is redeemed from tears by the faithfulness of the dog. An interior, with several figures absorbed in the reading of 'The First Newspaper,' 'The Dispute'¹—some children quarrelling, and two rustic studies, 'Jeanie' and 'Herd Lassie,' all of which also appeared at the Academy next year, were other results of this season's work.

Returning to Edinburgh about Christmas, he settled down with characteristic energy to complete his pictures for the exhibition. During the four or five weeks before 'sending-in day' he worked every day, except Sundays, from nine in the morning till two next morning, and, when, in the middle of February 1858, the Scottish Academy opened, he had his reward. Containing Millais's 'Autumn Leaves' and 'The Blind Girl,' the 'Burd Helen' of Windus, Dyce's 'Titian making his first essay in colouring' and Phillip's 'Charity,' as well as representative works by the leading resident artists, it was a fine exhibition, but McTaggart's pictures did not escape notice. So much is made of the failure of the critics to recognise new talent—surely one of the most difficult of all discoveries—that honour is due to the writer of the "First Notice" of this exhibition which appeared in the *Scotsman* on 13th February. Towards the close of his article he says: "A young student of the Academy, Mr. McTaggart, exhibits two pictures, which for earnestness and fidelity to nature show that he is on the right path, and holds forth abundant promise that he possesses qualifications which, if properly directed, will raise him to eminence." Chalmers, an exile at Montrose, saw this, and picking up his pen wrote at once—"Dear Mac, You are a lucky Dog. I have just finished the 1st article on the Exhibition in the *Daily Scotsman*, and I see you are mentioned *very favourably*. There are very few who are noticed so favourably. You therefore have good reason to be proud. I offer you my sincere congratulations." Two days later he writes again—"Hurrah!! Hurrah!! *Monstrous success* would need to be your *Placard*. I have just got the *Daily Scotsman*,

¹ Purchased by The Association for the Promotion of the Fine Arts for £15 15s. Sold at Messrs. McTear's, Glasgow, 1914, for £110 5s.

and I read therein that *all* (*all* did I say? Yes, I say it *again*) your pictures were sold on Saturday. This is really extraordinary success. . . . I have not felt so enthusiastic for a long time. Go on, my Dear Fellow, go on, let Excelsior be your Motto. This is the first streaks of the dawn of you. Three hearty cheers for you, My Boy!!” Away down in Campbeltown the news was received with heartfelt gratitude, if less articulately; but from a letter from a younger brother there flashes on the eye the picture of an elderly man, somewhat broken with toil and struggle, sitting quietly reading the same newspapers “always about the same place.” And a few weeks later that juvenile correspondent gives us a glimpse of what McTaggart’s old neighbours thought of his success. “They were saying at the Weigh House on the quay that you were the biggest man in Britain though you were not very rich.”

Going back to the Trustees’ Academy whenever his pictures were sent in, McTaggart studied with Scott Lauder until the Life Class was transferred very reluctantly by the Board of Trustees to the Scottish Academy, under the arrangements made by the Government when the new Galleries were built, and was present at the dinner which his admiring students organised in Lauder’s honour about the end of June. Ebsworth (1824-1908), who later gave up art for the Church, and eventually became a noted collector and editor of ballad poetry, occupied the chair, and Orchardson, whose speech about London as “An overfed Alderman, with a huge appetite, for whom an occasional Scotsman was a good tonic” was long remembered by those present, acted as croupier. The nights were short and they were young, so, when dinner was over and Lauder and Ballantyne, who was also a guest, had gone home to bed, a number of them climbed to the top of Arthur’s Seat, where Ebsworth declaimed with outstretched hand an oration to the rising sun. In the end of November that same year Pettie wrote to McTaggart, then painting at Campbeltown—“I’m the only student you know at the Academy. Lauder has persuaded me to commence a large painting of the skeleton. He is wild at the new system they (Drummond, Paton, Archer) are going to begin in the Life-class (open after New Year). He feels that their rigorous drawing, and inattention in the meantime to colour, implies that *his* system has been all wrong. Oh! he is wild.” Drummond! Paton!! Archer!!! just think of it. No wonder Lauder was wild.

VI

On his arrival in Campbeltown towards the end of July 1858 McTaggart at once began an elaborate study from nature. The view selected was on the Rocky Burn, near the point where a rough pathway over the lower shoulder of Ben Ghuilean crosses the burn, above the deep gorge through which the stream finds its way into the loch far below. It was a pre-Raphaelite study of the most extreme type, and nearly every day of three months was occupied in its making. By the time it was finished his money was pretty well exhausted, and to replenish the exchequer he executed four portraits—two oils and two crayons—for Mr. Forbes Mackay of Carskey. He then painted 'The Thorn in the Foot' and 'Going to Sea,' and commenced several other figure subjects. This kept him in Campbeltown until nearly the end of the year, and after his return, having decided to send the two pictures named to the Academy, he devoted a month's continuous labour to bringing them up to the standard of elaborate completion which he, at that time, demanded of himself. The subject of 'The Thorn in the Foot'¹ is very simple. At the side of a narrow roadway bright in sunshine a girl leans against a turf dyke as she holds one foot up to a dark-haired and barefooted boy who, on one knee beside her, is intently engaged in trying to remove a thorn. The expressions of the carefully modelled faces are admirably conceived, the attitudes and relationship of the delicately, rather than powerfully, drawn figures are justly observed and expressively rendered, the details of costume and of setting, down to the spray of bramble lying on the roadway and the striped school-bag and the copy-book and slate at the dyke-foot, are wonderful in their intensity and truth of realisation. Equally careful in finish, if broader in effect, 'Going to Sea' is very different in atmospheric envelope.² Here it is towards evening and the figures come in half tone against the shadowed hill which rises from the loch side, where, near a boat lying on the shore, a bearded sailor-man sits talking to two eager youths, who have come to see a companion

¹ Reproduced in Percy Bates's *The English Pre-Raphaelite Painters* (1901).

² This picture, almost the only one by McTaggart which shows traces of it, has suffered much from the use of bituminous pigment.

off to sea. But the would-be adventurer, now that the longed-for time has come, stands doubtfully aside, trouble upon his face and his back turned on the animated group beyond. Taken together these pictures in their contrasting ways show the beginnings of that absorption in the emotional significance of things and in the subtleties of atmospheric mood and effect which, expressed with ever-increasing power, was to dominate his art more and more. In them also there were implicit the democratic sentiment and the imaginative comprehension of the joys and sorrows of the humble, which many years later led a writer in the *Manchester Guardian* to remark with illuminative wit, that, while Orchardson never painted a man with less than a pound a week, McTaggart never painted a man with more.

While he was in the country, Charles Hargitt, a musician and a private dealer, who lived in Queen Street, Edinburgh, and later became a professional dealer in Liverpool, had written to him repeatedly asking him to send pictures on approval or to give him the first choice of his work when he came back to town. Hargitt had been the purchaser of 'The Sleeper and the Watcher' and one or two smaller pictures the previous year, but when McTaggart named the price of those he now wanted, he demurred, "But those I had from you a year ago were not half the price. These are not twice as good, are they? You can't expect people to give so much." The rejoinder was that that was the price, and if he could not get it, he could do without. Somewhat nettled, the other, who was well aware of the artist's financial position, sneered, "I didn't know that you had private means." "Neither I have," McTaggart replied, "but I'm hardy, I can do without. If I can't sell three or four pictures, I'll sell one and make that serve." Finally Mr. Hargitt agreed to give £30 for 'The Thorn in the Foot,' that price to include the sketch for it.

VII

At the Royal Scottish Academy of 1859 his work attracted much notice and was greatly admired. The newspaper criticisms were highly favourable, and the Association for the Promotion of the Fine Arts in Scotland, then in full vigour and eager to encourage rising talent, gave £45 for 'Going to Sea.' His third exhibit, however, the elaborate

'Study from Nature,' on which he had expended so much time and loving care, failed to find a purchaser. But then, as he discovered before very long, it was less a picture than a collection of carefully painted objects. Still he had learned much about burns and water-worn stones and other natural facts during its painting, and its effect in the exhibition suggested to him that elaboration alone could not make a picture. Subsequently he used this study a good deal when painting other pictures and lent it to other artists to help them with theirs, and ultimately, when he had half painted it out and made it a picture, he sold it.

The issue to him in April of a copying-ticket for the National Gallery of Scotland, then just opened, might seem to imply an intention of making copies from some of the old Masters: but, although he was a keen observer of other men's work, he never copied in the galleries. More probably it was connected in some way with the etching of Gainsborough's 'Hon. Mrs. Graham' which he made about this time for the first edition of the Gallery Catalogue.

Summer found him again in Kintyre working hard, though perhaps not quite so much to the exclusion of all else as during the preceding years. From a letter written by Pettie in August, it is evident that he had been devoting a good deal of time to sailing, and had asked his friend to come and share that most splendid and exhilarating of sports. "You seem to be enjoying yourself," Pettie wrote, "as well as working, for I have no doubt you *are* working. Well, the same here. I shall not be able to avail myself of your kind invitation *this summer* at least. I am sorry for this, for I would like to have seen Campbeltown and enjoyed a sail in your wherry." Boats and sailing were always a passion with McTaggart; but he found them too absorbing, and, afraid of anything that might interfere with his giving his best energies to his art, he resolutely curbed the inclination, and seldom indulged in more than some quiet rowing and sea fishing in wet weather or in the evenings when painting was over for the day. He was a keen bather and a fine swimmer also, but all his life his chief recreation was walking. On one occasion, however, probably at this time, he accepted a friend's offer to lend him a small yacht, and for four or five weeks he did not lift a brush. He was never out of the boat by day, and at night he would get out of bed to see how she was lying. Then he went to his friend and said

“Please take back your boat,” and resumed his painting. Pettie, who had a zest for soldiering, tells him in the letter already quoted that the Volunteer Artillery Corps, in which the artists were to form a company, has been fairly set a-going and urges him to join—“Will you join? You must!” One of the few letters he had from Orchardson deals with the same project. Coming from him, who, distinguished-looking and debonair, acted as model for trial of the new uniforms, the plea that “it has taken a uniform form” was not unnatural, but the other argument, “The Consolidated have joined,” was probably the deciding factor with McTaggart. For “The Consolidated” was the Sketch-Club, which had been formed by the senior amongst Lauder’s pupils during the previous winter, and McTaggart was an enthusiastic member. So when he returned to Edinburgh he enrolled somewhat reluctantly, I imagine, as a Volunteer. He did not care for shooting, and was not much of a shot; but he put in his drills, came up from the country to attend the Royal Review (7th August 1860),¹ of which Sam Bough painted a fine scenic picture (now in the National Gallery), and served for several years. Later McTaggart’s interest in volunteering found expression in the occasional gift of a drawing to the Fine Arts Competition which for a considerable period figured in the programmes of the Edinburgh Rifle Meeting at the old ranges on Blackford Hill.

His most important picture this year, at once larger and more complex than any he had yet attempted, represented four boys and a girl engaged in the ploy of building a house with bricks left by a mason in a burial-place beside the sea. It was painted in the old graveyard of Kilchousland, which, with its ruined chapel, mellowed to lovely colour by age, stands on a green knoll above Kilbrannan Sound, a mile or more north of the entrance to Campbeltown Loch. The figures, however, though studied there also, were painted, like those in other of his early pictures, principally in his father’s garden in the town, where his younger brother, his sisters, and their friends were more easily available as models. Although his attention was concentrated very largely upon this picture, he produced a number of others; and (his success at the two previous exhibitions having been, as has been indicated, distinct)

¹ As Mr. Martin Hardie relates in his biography of his uncle, Pettie and McTaggart assisted in firing the Royal Salute at the Castle during the forenoon.

he, while still in the country, sold several of them to collectors in Glasgow or Edinburgh, who wrote asking for something, and bought what he was painting, subject to approval when seen. In later years he would say with a smile, "I've never been in such an independent position since." The most enterprising of these admirers, Mr. Robert Craig, went down specially from Glasgow in September to see what he was doing, and secured an option over 'The Builders.' A month later McTaggart wrote to him—"I shall be here for some weeks yet I think : unless the weather should set in stormy or wet, as I have a good deal of out of door work yet to do. I will let you know what day I shall be in Edinburgh, and you can have the first refusal of my picture. I cannot fix upon a price yet, it is so far from being finished. I will perhaps have a smaller picture in progress when I leave, and I shall be very happy indeed if I have anything you should like. I am indebted to you for your hint about the house in the background, and may profit from it by giving more character to the tombstones (there are three of them), even if I should not alter the house, as it may not suit the arrangement of the figures."

McTaggart was still in Campbeltown when, on November 9th, 1859, he was elected an Associate of the Royal Scottish Academy. Although his work had attracted considerable attention, the honour was unexpected by either his friends or himself. He was just twenty-four, and was still an enrolled student in Lauder's Class. But no distinction of the kind was ever better bestowed. Election brought many congratulations from admirers and friends and, most gratifying of all, from fellow-students and artists. John Burr and some of the older students combined in a letter of good wishes, Pettie could not find words to express his gladness, Chalmers was wild with pleasure and excitement. To McTaggart himself, marking as it did his acceptance as an artist by the most, indeed at that time the only, outstanding art society in his native country, it was, of course, not only an important event, but a source of very natural satisfaction and pride. But his father, while much gratified by this recognition of his son's talent, was against acceptance. Somewhat taken aback, the youngster explained what election to the Academy meant and what it implied to an artist. "Yes, I understand," his father replied, "but you're not going to accept. Are you?" McTaggart again

explained. Still the old man counselled non-acceptance, for, said he, "You never get anything without having to pay for it in some other way. You are better to be free." McTaggart added, when he told me this, that, had he known then what he learned later, he would have declined.



THE PAST AND THE PRESENT