

CHAPTER VIII

LANDSCAPES

1889-1910

ONE of the most notable features of McTaggart's work is its extraordinary variety. No two pictures by him are alike. If some are related in look or subject to others, each even of these is informed by visual as well as by spiritual qualities, which differentiate it from the rest. Everything he painted possesses a character and is steeped in a mood of its own. Moreover, although he practically gave up portrait-painting when he left Edinburgh, this variety was never more marked than in the work done during the last twenty years of his life—the period covered by this and the preceding and succeeding chapters.

Occasional portraits, mostly of members of his own family, and a few interiors with figures of a genre character continued to lend a certain subjective variety; but they were exceptional phases of his art in its latest development, and may be grouped together as such. It is rather in the range of atmosphere and colour, and of pictorial effect and emotional mood shown in his treatment of sea-piece and landscape, with or without figure-incident, that the unabated, indeed the heightened, freshness, richness and vigour of his inspiration are revealed. Continuing to develop, his style became at once looser and more suggestive in handling and more closely knit and unified in conception; but it was nearing maturity by 1889, and the changes which ensued are in consequence, if no less significant, perhaps less marked in character than those we have traced throughout the preceding years. It was a prolific time also, for, always a keen observer and a hard worker, he had now behind him both intimate and wide knowledge of natural phenomena, and



THE WIND AMONG THE GRASS

unhesitating command of a technique grown to be extraordinarily swift and expressive. The pictures of these late years are thus at once more numerous and more varied than those painted in any earlier period of similar length. Many of them are also much larger than anything he had previously done. Some indication of the order of their production and of the characteristics of those painted in the successive years has already been given. Here, on the other hand, it is the intention to choose and group together some of the most typical to illustrate, not only his variety, but a few of the most clearly marked phases in his profound gift for the interpretation of life and nature.

IN THE COUNTRY

Devoting himself almost as much to landscapes as to pictures of the sea, the interest of McTaggart's latest work is divided almost equally between the two. Now that he lived in the country, the vital passion for nature's beauty, which had shone so brightly in his sea-pieces during the eighties, turned more to landscape than it had in the more recent past. So, painted with all the power and subtilty of his mature style, his sun-kissed and shadow-dappled Lothian landscapes are no less lovely than his shining and wind-caressed Western seas. Into them also he wove, with true poetic feeling and fine pictorial result, strands of human sentiment—country people at work, rustic lovers, children at play.

The whole round of the rural year is depicted in his later landscapes. The seasons pass across them : spring, with its reawakening stir and hopeful anticipation ; summer, with its full life reaching forward to maturity ; autumn, with its crowning harvest and its falling leaves ; winter, with its bare woodlands and its snow-shrouded fields. And of each season he caught the look and the feel—the incidence and varying intensity of the lighting, the prevailing tone and tint of the atmosphere, the keenness or warmth of the air, the motion or stillness of the clouds, the characteristic and seasonal colour of soil and crops, of grass and trees.

He was not, however, a painter of rural life and toil in the sense that Millet was. To both man and nature was a cosmic unity ; but while with Millet man, struggling, toiling and winning his bread by the sweat of his brow, pervades the ensemble in tragic intensity, with McTaggart

rural incident was only a factor, a significant and a beautiful one indeed but still only an element, in the emotional whole. His incidents of hay-making, harvesting or shepherding enrich and mingle with rather than dominate the poetry of earth. Most of all he loved to wreath the beauty of nature with the charm and innocence of childhood.¹ The essential quality of his landscape is its lyric rapture. His pictures join a melody akin to that of Corot and a freshness and sparkle greater than Constable's, to an ecstasy of pure joy unequalled, if not unique, in pictorial art. And joy, as Bergson has written, is a sign of triumph, of something new, created, won.

McTaggart painted reality not as a naturalist noting details and recording stages of development, but as an artist and a poet fascinated by nature's loveliness, and seeing in the changing seasons their broad and deep significance as processes of life. One sunny summer morning, as we sat talking after breakfast in the dining-room in Deanpark, he turned suddenly and, pointing through the open window towards the far end of his garden, where the silver-green of a birch-tree and the yellow-green of an ash rose against the sky, said "Green trees and blue and white sky—that's the very essence of summer." And that was the spirit in which he painted all the seasons of the circling year. From each he seemed to distil the elements which form its essence, and using them symbolically, as it were, rather than merely transcribing them, though the truth of his rendering of natural effect is one of the great charms of his art, revealed in his pictures in purely pictorial terms the very spirit which gives every time of the year its own peculiar significance and charm.

SPRING

"'Tis a touch of a fairy hand, that wakes the Spring of the Northern Land"

If spring comes slowly in the north, its very tardiness adds to its witchery. The whin may be in full golden bloom in March, and the yellow primroses may be peeping from under their leaves by the middle of April,

¹ An artist friend, writing to me in 1916, says: "Three years ago in Belgium I was trying to describe McTaggart's work to Emile Claus, who did not remember the name. As I went on with my verbal picture, he suddenly exclaimed, 'Ah! C'est lui qui peint les enfants comme des fleurs.'"

but it is often nearly May before the catkins burst into green, and it is almost always June ere the white hawthorn blossoms. Yet the very length of the winter increases the joys of anticipation, and the tiniest signs of spring are looked for and welcomed the more eagerly. Often in the drawings done in the dell at Carnoustie at the end of Aprils between 1872 and 1885, McTaggart had painted the thrill of budding life showing in sap-coloured leafless boughs or in the soft green gossamer thrown over them by slowly opening leaves, in the more vivid green of young grass spears piercing their way through the blanched blades of older growth, in the golden blaze of whins in bloom or in the rare touches of pale yellow which mark the blossoming of the primroses, sought for so joyfully by children, themselves the embodiment of all the charm of spring. Nothing he did later is fuller of the promise of that season, more glamoured with its fairy touch. Still in the softer and more richly wooded neighbourhood of Broomieknowe he painted other pictures of the spring which are no less exquisite. Probably the most important of these was 'The Uncertain Glory of an April day' (1897). Beneath a clump of trees, which, just breaking into vivid green, throw wavering shadows interspersed with sunny blinks upon them, a group of country children play in a sandy roadway which, bordering an unfenced field of bright green winter wheat, leads the eye towards the middle distance, where from amongst trees cottage roofs peep out. Farther off a rolling distance of cultivated hill-side lies under an uncertain but brilliant sky, whose soaring white clouds, gleaming bright against the clear rain-washed blue, shine through the thin leafage and the traceried boughs of the tall foreground trees. Delightful though it is, that is not, however, the most beautiful of his spring scenes. To name no more, 'The Blackbird's Nest' (1890) is more exquisite both in idea and execution, the 'Blythe May Day' (1900) more brilliant and beautiful in lighting, the 'Carrington Mill' (1894) more lovely and lustrous in colour. The first indeed imprisons more perhaps of the spirit of spring than anything he ever painted, except it be a little panel, 'The Hewan, Springtime,' which seems to have been a project for a larger picture never carried out. Standing upon the Hewan, where a lovely group of children recline in the pallid sunshine, the lower part of Hawthornden lies at one's feet. Past an old ash tree, whose jagged topmost boughs, beginning to bud green, occupy the right of the picture, the

silvery stream is seen running straight towards us. Still leafless trees, delicate purple and grey flushed with faint brown tints, divide its shining from the bright spring meadows and fields on either side ; and the whole landscape is pervaded by a clear yet soft radiance, which, falling from a slightly veiled sky, suggests very perfectly, with the tender but glittering colour of the whole, the awakening of the year. Painted on the hedge-fringed pathway by which the Hewan is approached from Polton, 'The Blackbird's Nest' (1890) is as restricted in prospect as the other is expansive. The children in the foreground, twittering like birds themselves over the nest they have found and carried to the centre of the mellow-coloured and half-shadowed sandy lane, are delightful in their fresh beauty and gleeful spontaneity, but quite as charming is the glimpse of landscape beyond. There the tender green of budding hawthorns rises against an ethereal sky of blue and white, which in its serenity and purity recalls the reverie-compelling calm of early Italian art. Time and again, however, pictures of his are so touched with a sense of the wonder as well as of the beauty of the world, that one feels in them a spirit kindred to that which lives in those of the great primitive masters. Even the quick glad note, as of a tripping melody, in the 'Blythe May Day' (1900) has something of this quiet witchery behind its radiant charm. Yet here it is rather the joyousness of the merry barefoot girls, who, out gathering primroses upon the green links, are crossing a wimpling golden brown burn in the morning sunshine, which fills the delicate blue sky and sparkles brightly upon the glimpse of distant blue sea, that one recalls. Without figures to enhance its significance, the 'Carrington Mill' (1894) is also steeped in the blithe spirit of May. The thin screen of trees, through which the old mill building shows, and the stream below, which passes right across the foreground, are quite ordinary, and the design possesses no special distinction. But, gliding from golden amber to ruddy brown and exquisitely transparent in its soft flowing, the shallow streamlet gurgles gently in its clean stony bed, and the trees raise their lustrous green leaves, fresh and quivering with life, against the heavenly blue of a translucent sky in which a few feathery white clouds float far away and motionless. It is chiefly this shining brightness of colour, in which wonderful luminosity and clarity are combined with subtle vibration and harmony, that evokes to the imagination by sympathetic suggestion the



THE BLACKBIRD'S NEST

very essence of those lovely sunny days in May, which, when they come, are perhaps the loveliest of the whole year in Scotland.

SUMMER

“Now Simmer blinks on flow’ry braes”

The combination of blue and white and green, which forms the livery of summer, supplied the keynote for McTaggart’s landscapes of that season. Preference for the active aspects of life as compared with the static, and love of clear ringing colour harmonised in a high luminous key led him, however, to paint the early summer rather than its prime, when growth seems to have reached its full, when the tints deepen in tone and lose their freshness and variety, when the air becomes hotter and more somnolent. Perhaps also early association with sparsely wooded country gave him a preference for thinly foliated trees. In any case, he seldom painted the full-leaved deep green woods of mid-summer, and when he did so his rendering was somewhat lacking in that umbrageous quality which is one of their chief charms. But of the early summer, with the freshness of spring still lingering on tree and hedgerow and grass, and with the burns still unshrunk and singing gaily along their bright pebbled courses, he painted many delightful pictures.

A few of the most beautiful are river landscapes. They are never great compositions in either the classic or the romantic manner, however. One might rather describe them as selected bits or passages of landscape with running water. For here, as elsewhere, McTaggart was content to take nature much as he found it, and the rivers he painted were only such minor streams as the Mid-Lothian Esks. Even in their courses, romantic in many parts as they are, he selected episodes, so to speak, rather than striking situations. Yet, by choosing the weather conditions which accentuated their everyday beauty, and through his great gift for the imaginative interpretation of the ordinary, he evoked, from the most simple elements of riverside scenery, pictures of rare beauty and delicate charm.

Such, for example, is ‘The Queen’s Cradle’ (1895-8). Painted at the time when spring merges imperceptibly into summer, it is a fuller-foliaged piece than ‘Carrington Mill.’ While brilliant sunshine, falling

across the valley, glitters brightly upon the trees on the farther bank, raising them to a golden green, which in turn is enhanced by the contrast of the cast shadows on the grass beneath, the stream in front glides in transparent shadow. Swaying and gurgling in its swift flowing, the water, brown shot with purple and golden hues and touched by lights from the sky, runs between grey and white pebbled shores, while, halfway over and half up to the knees, two boys with hands interlaced carry a small girl across. The attitudes of the bearers, carefully making sure of their footing, are admirably seized, and the expressions on their happy faces and that of their gleeful little burden, as their heads cluster together, are perfectly delightful. Moreover the flesh colour, glowing in reflected light, forms an essential passage in the pictorial ensemble to which these figures give not only a living touch but a greater beauty.

On the other hand, the subject of 'Hawthornden' (1890) is rather a river valley than a water-side with its bordering haughs and close fringing trees. It has now gone to Canada, but well I remember its sunny charm and vernal beauty, and how the feeling of delighted wonder was awakened by the upturned head of the child who, carried by one of the older girls in the foreground, listens, quite evidently, to a lark singing in the summer sky. Looking from the Hewan, as in the little spring picture already mentioned, past an ash whose now leafy boughs throw wavering purple shadows across the sun splashed tawny path in front, the deep narrow valley, with its glinting stream and its embosoming trees, green with blue shadows, stretches to a far distance of low blue hills under a sunny aerial sky. One of the most beautiful of the little panels gives a slightly different rendering of this theme, and the same landscape, seen in autumn, reappears in the lovely 'Holiday Weather—Hawthornden.'

Another aspect of early summer beauty vivifies those landscapes in which, to the blue and silver of gleaming skies and the many tinted greenness of burgeoning hedgerow and tree, the pure clear gold of the long yellow broom is added. This is the motive of that brilliant rhapsody in colour and light and movement, 'In June when Broom was seen' (c. 1901), in which nature herself, no less than the children who romp amongst the broom clad knowes, seems carried away by an ecstasy of joy. Less vivid in mood and more defined in form, but little less beautiful, one finds much the same combination of elements in the large upright 'Broom—A June

Day' (1901), shown for the first time in Mr. Alexander Reid's rooms in 1917.

The pictures of the ripening hay, which he painted with such consummate suggestion, belong rather to July. In such a picture as 'The Wind among the Grass' (c. 1894) the suggestion of the rhythmic nod and ripple of the long grasses, whose myriad heads bloom softly in green or russet, with here and there the flash of the red clover growing between, and the harmony of cool blended colour in landscape and sky are delightful. To use Ruskin's fine phrase "a music to the eyes," they slip into the heart and, blending with the gentle motion of the clouds and the almost imperceptible coming and going of the light, make inarticulate melody there. But, while he loved the beauty of the growing hay, swaying and rustling in the summer breeze, better perhaps than the crop lying in fresh cut green swathes or gathered in sun bleached ricks ready for lifting, he painted some charming pictures of hay-harvesting also. 'Mid-Summer Day' (1889) is one of the most delightful things he ever did. In the warm sunny weather, which half veils in delicate mystery the hilly distance and blends it with the dreamy sky, two children¹ recline upon the nearest coil in a field filled with little mound beyond little mound of sweet-smelling hay. Perfect abandon marks their attitudes as they lie there, dark head near fair head in lovely contrast, and the expressions on the charming faces and the relaxed grace of the delightfully rounded limbs and bodies alike convey a wonderful sense of that unpremeditated and naive enjoyment of happy moments which forms one of the great charms of childhood to us who have ourselves passed beyond its touch. Lovely in design, exquisite in colour and beautifully drawn, it is handled with a delightful combination of subtlety and strength, of suggestiveness and realisation, which makes it a peculiarly satisfying picture, and one which returns again and again to one's memory.

Although he painted the full-green landscape of the later summer more rarely, pictures like 'On the Esk' (1891) or 'A Spate on the Esk' (1895) and 'The Fruitseller—Melville Gates' (1890) or 'Summer in the Garden' (1892-05) are steeped in its joyous calm. Wooded river scenes, the former unite a soothing suggestion of the liquid murmur

¹The models were his daughters Jean and Mysie. The former is the dark-haired girl who appears in so many of his pictures.

of cool running water and of the soft whisper of green leaves, stirring gently in the faint airs which steal down the glens, to the quiet serenity which seems to fall upon the country when, in the hot windless days of August, growth is at its fullest and the birds have ceased to sing. Contrasting with such sequestered and stream cooled nooks, the 'Melville Gates' is an open roadside piece where, below a sky of lovely blue in which white clouds touched with warm light drift, a broad highway lies dusty, but exquisite in its blending of tawny and pink and golden greys, as it curves into the distance between, on one side, high grey walls overhung by trees and, on the other, fresh green braes crowned by dark foliaged trees, through which the blue slate roof and spindle spire of Lasswade Church peep out. The harmony and beauty of this simple landscape is greatly enhanced by the introduction of figures. A fruit-seller sits upon the shafts of her barrow, beside the green margin which separates road from footpath, and gathered round her are five delightful rustic children, delightedly absorbed in the important problem of what they would buy if they could. Attractive in itself, this group echoes in its silver whites, clear blues and tender greys, the colouring of the sky, and carrying cool tints through the warmer hues in the lower part of the picture, completes a harmony in which richness and delicacy are so happily united as to suggest the very essence of sunny summer weather. 'Tis summer too in that delightful big sketch, improvised at his studio door, which, quoting a favourite author, he used to speak of as 'The Wind on the Heath' (1905). A wide stretch of sandy and grassy lea, with a few small trees on its edge, spanned by a great sweep of exquisitely aerial silver and blue sky, it is steeped in more than all the glad freedom and gay spirit which blow, like a living breeze, across the pages of George Borrow.

The radiant and joyous 'Lilies' occupies a rather exceptional place among these landscapes. While McTaggart often painted the prospects seen from the wilder part of the Dean Park garden (sometimes with the actual foreground and sometimes with one adapted from it or invented), and occasionally made a picture of the shrubbery bordered lawn and the graceful birch tree, which rises beyond it, 'The Lilies' is a garden-picture pure and simple, perhaps the only one of the type he ever painted. Yet it is rather in social atmosphere, so to speak, that it differs from the bulk



THE LILIES

of his work. Nearly always he chose rustic or fisher children set in the midst of wild nature. Here, however, we have children of what is called the better class playing amongst trim lawns and cultivated flower-beds. On the broad gravelled walk right in front a circle of little girls in light coloured frocks and little boys in blue blazers and white shorts dance "Jing-a-Ring" merrily about two little mites, who stand demurely still in the middle of the whirling fluttering ring, while on the grass beyond the wide border, along which white Madonna lilies stretch in graceful swaying line, another group of rather older children are engrossed in the slower and more balanced, yet scarcely less gay, progressions which mark "See the Robbers passing by." Fringed with shrubs and trees, this sunny and sheltered pleasance seems cut off from the wide free world outside save for the billowy white clouds which, like messengers from afar, drift across the sheeny blue overhead. Yet, dancing in the sunlight with all the abandon of fairies under the midnight moon and in an ecstasy of happiness unknown in "fairy lands forlorn," these prettily dressed children are as much one with nature at heart as any ragged rustic he ever painted. Perhaps indeed to the eye which sees beneath the surface of things, their dainty attire adds to the significance which the artist seems to have had in mind when he selected the first three words of a well-known verse in the Gospel of St. Luke as a sub-title.¹ Still, it is for its simple beauty, rather than for its moral significance, that one admires this picture. A lovely vision of summer crowned with flowers and wreathed with the merriment and beauty of fresh young life, its exquisite colour, lovely clarity of lighting and graceful arabesque of design are a veritable sparkling fountain of delight.

Like several others of his large pictures, 'The Lilies' progressed by stages. A pretty big canvas (40" x 60" — 1895) and a smaller one (20" x 30" — 1896) were completed in the studio before the larger picture (52" x 80" — 1898) was painted right off, figures and all, out-of-doors. The models were his own children and some of their friends; but, though he got them to play now and then to help him visualise his conception, he never asked them to form up and pose specially for him. That, of course, would have been an impossible way of arriving at the vitality of impression which lives so vividly in this exquisite and spontaneous creation.

¹ The full title of the picture is 'The Lilies—"Consider the Lilies. . ."'

AUTUMN

“’Twas Autumn and Sunshine arose on the way”

Towards the middle of August a change comes over the landscape of Lowland Scotland. The corn-fields, gradually changing colour in July from a fresh to a duller green, and during the earlier weeks of August from that to yellow, become richly golden. The trees begin to merge their full leaved greenness in more sombre shades, and their rustle begins to take a sharper note. The sunshine loses something of its summer brightness, but glows with an enhanced mellowness touched with gold and falls in more slanting beams upon the landscape. Harvest time has come.

Of all the seasons this was the one that McTaggart loved best. It was at least that which stimulated him most as a landscape-painter. Quietly delightful at all times, the rich cultivated fields and the rolling distance, which he looked on every day from his own garden, are perhaps at their loveliest when the grain is nearly ripe and during the few weeks when it is being harvested. Then the yellow landscape glistens softly in the noonday sun, glows richly golden and russet in the warm afternoon light which throws the lengthening shadows of hedgerow trees across it, becomes glamoured in shining radiance when the light of sunset falls upon it and the harvest moon climbs up over the ridge of the Roman camp and floats a disc of tarnished silver in the still evening air. But memories of the harvest days of his youth in Kintyre influenced McTaggart's whole relationship to the ingathering of the crops. There, at that time, the fields were reaped chiefly by sturdy scythemen, swinging and swaying in rhythmic unison; the sheaves were bound and set up by the women; the children carried the meals to the workers in the fields. The whole countryside went to the reaping as to a great festival. If the busiest, it was also the blithest time of all the year. So when, in later life, he came to paint harvest in the Lothians, he, unconsciously perhaps, gave his renderings a sense of the old-time joyful commotion and of that general sharing by old and young alike in the hard glad labour associated with the "hairst," which the advent of the reaping machine, and more especially of the self-binder, has banished from the earth. So far as I

can recall, there is not a single reaping machine in any of his pictures, not even in those where the fields are shown pretty well cut.¹ As a rule, however, he painted the standing corn "white unto harvest" or with only the ways opened. These gave the living sense, which belongs to the growing grain or the rich contrast between movement and stillness, that he loved.

Of the cereals he liked best perhaps to paint the "bearded barley." To him it was "the monarch of them all." It is the crop in 'Dora' (1869) and other of his earlier pictures; but nowhere is it more charmingly rendered than in the big 'Barley-field, Broomieknowe,' painted almost at the close of his career. Very sketchy in treatment, it is difficult to say whether that picture was "finished" or not; but it is a wonderful thing. Fuller in detail and more closely knit in realisation of form, though no more complete in conception, 'Autumn Showers' (1889), having an exceptionally happy design, is more balanced and even more beautiful in a purely pictorial way.

An equally wonderful rendering of the delicate beauty of acres of golden oats shimmering in the sunlight appears in the 'Cornfields' of 1896. High in tone as it is, soft radiance rather than sparkling brightness is the keynote of this lovely picture. Beyond the unfenced farm road in the immediate foreground, where children are loitering, the fields, in which towards the middle distance harvesters are at work, spread golden and still to a corn-clad slope beneath a gentle sky of faint warm cloud. Softly gleaming, they lie smooth and unrippled as the unstirred sea on windless days, and yet here and there near at hand the consummate suggestion of a head, with its trembling pendants, gives that feeling of rich yet untroubled complexity which infolds the mind when one looks across the quiet autumn fields and hears their almost inaudible but never quite stilled rustle steal like a whisper through the sun-steeped air.

'September's Silver and Gold' (1905) again is an effect of forenoon sunlight veiled rather than sparkling or brilliant. The artist thought that there was a certain kind of cloudy day when the light, diffused by passing through thin clouds, seemed more widespread and even brighter than direct sunshine, and in this picture he has painted that effect triumphantly. Softness blends with brilliance and the sweet clear light falls serene and

¹ Except in the delightful water-colour which belongs to Mr. Robert Alexander, R.S.A.

unbroken by shadow. Wide, bare and open to the sky, this upland landscape of rough cart-track and open fields and rolling distance is suffused all over and in every corner of its being by a silvery radiance, which weaves cloudy sky and yellow corn and the children who clamber on the old grey wall beside the sandy road into a marvellous harmony of high pitched and delicately patterned silver and gold. McTaggart's great gifts as a colourist and a painter of light, and his wonderful power of evoking beauty from the simplest things, were never more magically successful.

Sandy Dean, where 'September's Silver and Gold' was painted, was always a favourite sketching place of his in autumn. There, amongst others, he painted those delightful middling-sized pictures 'A Wet Harvest-Day' and 'A Sunny Harvest-Day' (1894)—looking down the lane in one and up it in the other—with charming groups of children carrying the mid-day meal to the fields; the more important canvases 'Autumn Sunshine' (1890), one of the most sparkling and beautiful of his many vivid renderings of sunlight, and 'Showery Harvest-Day' (1899), in which a bouquet of thin trees separates the shadow-splashed foreground with its merry children from a distance, where sun-gleams alternate with drifting shadows; and, to name no more, the big and glowing 'Soldier's Return' (1898). While each of these has its own special atmosphere, the last differs from most of the others in being an afternoon and not a mid-day effect. Rich and mellow, the sunshine falls across the picture from the right, whence a long leafy bough throws wavering shadows of brown and purple on the bright roadway, from which the sunny corn sweeps to a middle distance, where dark woodlands nestle below the smooth swelling upland, which lies dreamlike under the quivering sheeny sky of wedded white and blue above it. Gazing across these happy fields, a big strong man, roughly dressed and somewhat wild of mien, half sits and half reclines upon the low stone wall which borders the lane in the middle of the foreground. Absorbed in his own thoughts, he is unconscious of the curiosity of the children coming up the road or gathered watching him from below the hedge at the other side of the old gateway near which he sits. He does not even notice that a little girl is timidly offering him a flower. Pathetic in its suggestion of unwelcomed homecoming and of the days that are no more, 'The Soldier's Return,'



THE HARVEST MOON

like his pictures of Emigration, is redeemed from unavailing sadness and regret, not only by touches of kindness, but by splendid colour, vigorous handling and beauty of design.

Another group of harvest pictures have evening effects for motive. He did not, however, paint the pomp of sundown so much as the effulgence of mellow light, which, on clear calm evenings, gilds the landscape opposite the setting sun with golden radiance. If indescribable in words, the rich and warm yet soft and clear shining of the autumn tinted countryside, suffused in this lambent light, lives and blooms in some of his pictures with a peculiar delicacy, at once vivid and exquisite. Rare in nature, but even rarer in art, this combination of vividness and exquisiteness is the essence of that lovely idyll 'Sunset Glamour' (1894). The sheeny sky, between delicate blue and more delicate green, but shot with hints of purple and orange and gold, in which the moon is rising, and the faint far distance which trembles beneath it; the nearer fields of shining gold, blended with rose and orange and warm grey; and the two children lying dreaming in the foreground, red poppies in their hands, are all alike transmuted into something rich and rare by its benign influence. Looking at it, one comes under the spell of a high spiritual beauty, expressed with a skill so subtle that one is not conscious of the means by which it has been evoked. If more potent in colour, more forcible in handling, and larger in design, as becomes its greater size, this also is the charm of 'The Harvest Moon' (c. 1899). Here a great corn-filled plain, shining in the sunset glow, lies under a pale sky of greenish gold in which the flushed and glistening moon floats at the full. Yet splendid though that big picture is in colour, and magnificently as it is painted, I have sometimes felt that there was in the principal group of figures—a rustic lad and lass, hand and hand—a touch of sentimentality which, delightful as it is, detracts somewhat from the wonderfully radiant beauty of the whole. Such a fault was rare with McTaggart, however. Nearly always the figure-action in his pictures is extraordinarily simple, direct, and spontaneous. In another evening picture, although the figures are of minor importance, one finds an admirable instance of this. As in the other, the effect in 'The Harvest Moon at Twilight' (1896) is of moonrise in daylight. Somewhat later in the evening, the moon has climbed higher and hangs a yellow disc amongst

clouds, which, slightly influenced by its shining, are as yet more illumined by the soft warm glow cast from the West. Beneath this lovely sky, full of changing colour and quiet movement, and on the nearer side of a little wood which crosses the middle distance, the trees casting mysterious luminous shadows upon one another and upon the ground, a patch of corn fringed with green grass gleams like low-toned gold in the slowly waning light. Seated beside a white-haired little lass, upon the foreground knowes, a boy tootles on a whistle with all the absorption and abandon of the "Wee Herd" in "Hamewith." Unnoticed at first in the vesper hush which enfolds earth and sky, these little figures, with their suggestion of life and music, add greatly to the ultimate appeal of a very beautiful picture.

So, from sunny forenoon to shimmering eve and golden moonrise, McTaggart painted the circling hours of the harvest days.

To say that the charm of execution equals the beauty of conception in these pictures is in a way superfluous, for the latter, while it might have existed in the mind of the artist without being expressed, could have no pictorial existence without the former, which thus becomes to some extent the measure of the other. In 'Corn-fields' or 'September's Silver and Gold,' for instance, we find that while the painting gives a very vital suggestion—not imitation—of nature's loveliness, of the colour and light and form and movement which express her life, the actual handling is, at the same time, a delight in itself. The power and brilliance of the brushwork, the subtle and expressive abstraction which gives every touch accent and significance, and the quality and texture of the pigment are not only inseparably associated with the exquisite concord of light and colour and design upon which the emotional impression depends, but arouse high admiration for the intellectual grasp, which informs their technical mastery, and makes it the responsive servant of the pervading idea.

The corn-fields cut and cleared, McTaggart turned next to the wooded roadways and watersides, where the trees, having gradually changed from the living green of summer to the bronze and yellow and scarlet of autumn, were beginning to shed their splendidly coloured but now dying leaves.

One or two of the pictures painted during this transition season are touched by that mingling of sobriety and splendour which forms one of



GOLDEN AUTUMN, IOTHIAN BURN

the most characteristic aspects of nature, when its forces, having again accomplished their annual travail of blossoming and attaining maturity, are gently slipping towards that semblance of decay which precludes the revivifying sleep of winter. Deeper in tone and colour than was usual in his work, this is the mood of 'Rosslyn Castle' (1895). The deep dell, above which the sombre castle walls rise in the middle distance, is brooded over by a richly toned and cloudy sky, and the still bushy trees, which fringe and almost hide the dark foam-flecked stream, flowing in the bottom, mingle touches of flaming yellow and hectic red with their green bronze and brown sobriety. But the presence of children, clustered about one of their number, who has just landed a trout from the burn, redeems the sentiment of the whole from this strain of melancholy, and indeed turns the picture into a pæan of life ever renewed.

Usually, however, the spirit of his autumn pictures is more frankly joyous. In things like 'The Linn, Rosslyn Glen' (1895) or 'Kevoch Mill' (1895) and 'Holiday Weather, Hawthornden' (1890) or 'Golden Autumn, Lothianburn' (1896) it is indeed almost wholly so. Extraordinarily vivid in effect, the first shows a stream, in which boys are fishing, racing, with gleeful gurgle and joyous leap, below a rough rocky bank towards the narrow jaws of the linn, where, seen through the gap, a pool lies deep and quiet in the shadow of autumn tinted trees. The 'Holiday Weather' has the same scene and, apart from the figures, much the same composition as the big 'Hawthornden' previously described. But now, instead of early summer, with its fresh greenery and soaring birds, autumn, with its opulent colour and gently falling leaves, dominates the pictorial motive. Even the clothes of the merry sun-browned country children romping in the foreground seem to have taken on richer hues. Flooded in mellow sunlight, glowing in colour through which a thread of gold is woven, and with a finely balanced and closely knit design, to which the action and colouring of the figures and the dance of the dying leaves, fluttering in the warm still air like great bronze butterflies on wing, give a clearly marked rhythmic motion, 'Holiday Weather' is a very beautiful and poetic conception very charmingly expressed. Simpler in design and less animated in action, the larger 'Blythe October' (1892) is more brilliant in lighting and no less lovely in colour. Silhouetted in yellow and orange against the warm cloud flecked blue,

the graceful form of a tall birch tree rises from a shrubbery beyond the foreground lawn, where a girl clad in white lies playing with two younger children. The swaying leaves, kissed by the sun and shimmering softly in the breeze, which drifts them earthwards like a rain of gold, are shot with glittering gleams, and through their filmy tresses, carrying blue through the yellow and enriching the already brilliant intensity of the colour harmony wrought by the big contrasting masses, the sun-suffused sky peeps here and there.

Painted at the very end of October, 'The Farm Yard' (1904) is perhaps the latest of his autumnal pieces; but, although less opulent in colour than those painted earlier in the season, it is as striking as any in the vividness with which the illusion of bright sunshine is produced. Bronze here rather than gold or crimson and coming dark against the light, the thinning foliage of the big plane trees, in whose shelter the steading nestles, casts sharp flickering shadows upon the sun-baked ground, where the fallen leaves lie in drifted wreaths. A harmony in clear ivory-toned light and mellow russets and brown, and a wonderful piece of imaginative impressionism, it may be said to symbolise those triumphing sunny hours, which, coming now and then in the late autumn, are so beautiful that one almost forgets that summer is over and winter nearly come.

WINTER

While McTaggart loved all seasons of the year and enjoyed all kinds of weather, he seldom painted out-of-doors in the winter. A fall of snow was a special joy, however, and often, when it was accompanied by a fine atmospheric effect, he had a canvas out and painted a picture in the garden or on the knowes near the studio door. Painting light and atmosphere and the inviolate sea as he did, it is not surprising that his rendering of the unsullied snow is also marked by peculiar vividness and beauty. Yet, characteristically, he never painted it as a weary waste or gave expression to that sense of dreary silence and baffling aloofness which a big snow-storm spreads over the open country. Nearly always there is in his pictures either the gaiety of laughing children sporting in the snow, or the feeling of cosiness which comes from the close touch of human habitations.



APRIL SNOW

Probably the only one without either of these qualifying elements is 'Winter Sunrise, the Garden' (c. 1894). Snow has fallen during the night, and the white shrouded lawn and the encrusted evergreens beside it lie in luminous semi-darkness under a sunrise sky, against whose saffrons and reds, glowing with a richness and depth unknown to summer dawns, the branches of a tall birch-tree etch themselves clearly in velvety purple and rich brown. Very suggestive of the stillness of a fine winter morning, and hinting its sharp chilliness, there is yet in this picture a curious sense of comfort and well-being which, while it may have originated in the fact that it was painted from the artist's dining-room window, must lie pictorially in the design and in the fullness of tone and richness of colour with which it is suffused. Contrasting with this garden dawn, in which the mood is that of nature, hushed and expectant, mutely awaiting the advent of a new day, the 'Winter Sunrise' (1894), which was first seen in the special 1901 exhibition, combines the merriment of warmly clad children, setting a bird trap, with the tingling shining beauty of morning sunshine over snow. Still low on the horizon, the broad sun glistens in a windless sky, streaked with filmy mists from which the sunrise radiance has not yet quite faded, and casts cheerful gleams across a wide snowy landscape in whose white mantle reflections of fleeting primrose and pink blend with tints of the most delicate blue caught from above.

In 'Christmas Day' (1898) the mood again changes. The sun is higher and shines more brightly; the air, touched with the sharpness of a keen frost, is clearer and more brilliant; the spirits of the sportive children are gayer and their actions more exultant and animated. To look at this picture is to experience a quickening of the pulse and a tingling in the blood. Its magical clarity of colour and sparkling radiance of lighting exhilarate like champagne. The light from the faintly haloed forenoon sun, falling athwart the scene, brings the church steeple and the houses of a village sharply against a gleaming sky of pale luminous gold shot with flickering touches of delicate turquoise, and, throwing glistening and transparent purple-blue shadows from the nearer belt of brown hedgerow and thin leafless trees, shines across the glittering foreground of snowy field and frozen pool. Echoing the sky and flashing in the sunshine, the snow is transmuted by subtly woven passages of gold and blue and rosy grey into a quivering melody of pale gleaming colour based

on white, and against this the roguish faces of the children, sliding on the ice or battling with one another amongst the crisp powdery snow, come delightfully as warmer notes in the colour scheme, and as chords of happy human sentiment in the emotional whole. One of McTaggart's most triumphant renderings of sunlight, 'Christmas Day' is also in colour one of his most exquisite works. Less radiant, though scarcely less bright, and silvern rather than golden in its scheme, 'Winter, Broomieknowe' is another exquisite record of the fairy-like loveliness of new fallen snow. Dark by its own excess of brightness (as happens when one looks straight at the sun itself for a moment), the flaming orb seems darker than the dazzling rays amid which it floats in a sky which, filmy white and fair clear blue high up, turns to a glistening ivory grey as it declines towards the snow-spattered cluster of tree sheltered cottages lying in the middle distance beyond the stretch of modulated white and silver grey which fills the foreground.

Perhaps, however, the most beautiful of all his snow-clad landscapes was one painted just when winter was again passing into spring. Unlike the majority of those already described, 'April Snow' (c. 1892) does not show the sun itself, but only its softly veiled shining. Canopied by a calm fair heaven of sheeny silver cloud, through whose silken texture the blue peeps delicately, the landscape lies quiet and still beneath the snowy coverlet, which enfolds and softens its forms and, mingling hints of silver and grey and blue with its unsullied whiteness, blends earth and sky in a high pitched harmony of tender colour and exquisite light. The strip of trees, which fringes the foreground pasture, coloured in twig and branch by the ascending sap of returning life, and the golden-brown thatch, which shows along the eaves and at the gables of the snow-clad cottages in the middle distance, bring in softly rippling notes of warmer tone, and these again pass into more strongly struck chords in the passages of pure colour which, enlivening the foreground figures, form a foil and an enrichment to their delicate surroundings. The children, however, serve another purpose also. Delightful in themselves and as notes in the ensemble, their interest in the lambs, shivering in the unwonted cold, emphasises the impression already wrought by the colour that here winter is seated for but a transient moment in the lap of spring.

Notable for the power with which the strangely vivid or wonderfully

tender beauty of sun-bright snow and sky is suggested, these pictures, although founded upon very intent observation, are much more poetic interpretations than factual representations of reality. If one notes with interest such niceties of observation as the darkened sun in 'Winter, Broomieknowe,' or the apparent cutting off by proximity to the blazing sun of the topmost boughs of a tree in 'Christmas Day,' or the varying qualities and colours of the reflected lights on the snow in any of the pictures, these are but elements in the dominating effect. It was through the combination, by thought and feeling and art, of the visual facts of natural phenomena in a balanced and co-ordinated pictorial whole that McTaggart gave such imaginative and infective expression to the emotion which he himself had experienced when face to face with nature.