

PAINTER IN A SCHOOL OF HIS OWN

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William McTaggart: A Scottish Impressionist

Towards the end of his career, in the last years of the 19th century, the Scottish painter William McTaggart was working like no one else of his time, his painting an odd mixture of a near-abstract-expressionism 50 years *avant la lettre*, laced with late Victorian symbolism and more than a touch of social narrative. If he was aware of his French Impressionist contemporaries, it was only after 1900 that he became so. Yet, as the concise retrospective now at the Fleming Collection clearly shows, from the 1850s until his death in 1910 at the age of 74, McTaggart's work followed a steady personal logic and development. Confronted in this exhibition by one of the very large late paintings – an acre of canvas vigorously smeared and scraped with paint just sufficient to suggest a rocky beach or hillside, lightly peopled by near-transparent hints of rosy-cheeked children – we come away not just persuaded but impressed.

Born in Kintyre in 1835, the son of a crofter, McTaggart remained attached to the landscape of that remote western coast, and its fishing and farming communities, all his life. As a boy he declared a precocious determination to become an artist, so in 1852 means were found to send him to the Trustees' Academy at Edinburgh, where he studied under a sympathetic director, Robert Scott Lauder, whose method was remarkably free for its time. Even as a student, McTaggart worked hard as a portrait painter to keep himself in funds, and he continued to do so long after leaving the Academy in 1858. But he was also showing regularly at the Royal Scottish Academy, often with genre subjects taken from everyday rural life – domestic interiors or groups set in the landscape – gentle, sentimental narratives.

In this he was clearly looking hard at David Wilkie, and to the more general Scottish genre tradition, but also quite as much to his exact contemporaries, the pre-Raphaelites and Millais in particular. His *Dora* in this exhibition (1869: after Tennyson's poem – "And Dora took the child, and went her way/ Across the wheat, and sat upon a mound...") is a clear echo of Millais' *Blind Girl* of 10 years before. Yet McTaggart's is a markedly different touch, and in its lightness and openness already hinting at the more freely gestural work to come.

Freshness and simplicity, and a feel for the landscape rather than its close description, characterise these subject paintings of the 1860s. Two pairs here are particularly charming in this respect – *A Day's Fishing – Morning/ Evening* (1865), with their happy rustic urchins, and the rather more wistful *Spring* and *Autumn* (1864), these last now seen together for the first time since the 18180s.

It is in the work of the 1870s that the more radical shift comes in, and with it a renewed preoccupation with the sea and the hard life of field and shore. The compositions grow simpler, while the figures become increasingly incidental to the larger pictorial scheme. McTaggart is sometimes called the Scottish Impressionist, and with a painting such as *Christmas Day* – a view along a hedge in the pale yellow light, the shadows Monet-like, blue grey upon the snow, we can see why; but expressionist is closer to the mark. Here with McTaggart in his 70s, around 1904 and 1905, still working on the full canvas out of doors, on the spot, a simple title – *The Wind on the Heath, Broom – a June Day*, or again, and most lovely of all, *Barley Field, Sandy Dean* – is indication and suggestion enough. Whatever they are, these huge late works are quite astonishing, and very beautiful.