From HHS Proceedings 1995

Artists in East Lothian 1859 to 1920

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The theme of this study is not simply a roll call of artists who have worked in East Lothian. Indeed, that exercise would be difficult to achieve within the space allotted such was and still is the popularity of East Lothian as a painting ground.

It is rather more interesting to examine the influential role played by some of the artists painting in East Lothian from the mid-nineteenth century.

It is, perhaps, not generally recognised that a tradition – a particularly Scottish tradition – which has its roots in the work of 18th and early 19th century Scottish painters, led directly to the advances made by the Glasgow School of Painters, largely through the influence of a number of artists who chose to work in East Lothian.

This thesis may seem rather contentious when one bears in mine that not one of the works dealing with the Glasgow School mentions the East Lothian painters but contemporary sources point to intriguing connections.

Although the recent regionalisation programme failed to merge East Lothian with Berwickshire, I hope it will be forgiven is, later on in this account, we hop over the country border by about a mile to Cockburnspath in Berwickshire where a number of Glasgow School painters were based for a couple of years.

An important artist who needs to be mentioned in the context of this study is William McTaggart, not specifically because he painted fairly regularly at Port Seton and Cockenzie, but because he provides an important link between the early 19th century artists and the East Lothian artists later in the century.

To examine McTaggart's influence on later generations of Scottish artists it is critical to remember the tradition from which he himself emerged and the elements of that tradition which he continued within his own work.

As mentioned earlier, the role of the 18th and early 19th century artists in the dawning of a rustic genre tradition had a profound effect over the work of a great many Scottish artists in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. If the exhibits at the Royal Scottish Academy during the 19th century are scrutinised, apart from the ubiquitous portrait painting, one is immediately struck by the preponderance of transcriptions of rural life. At a time when in France and England academic artists were producing large scale historic tableaux,

Scotland's mainstream was often concerned with depicting the rustic life of the fisherman or agricultural labourer.

It is not the purpose of this study to examine all the reasons for this but it must be said that Scotland's painting was akin to the painting in the Low Countries in this respect and Scottish artists, including McTaggart, W.D.McKay and many others, were directly influenced by contemporary Dutch artists such as Josef Israels, Constant Artz and the Maris brothers. By the 1850s rural imagery, if not thought of as High Art, had, at least, become an accepted and popular type of subject matter in Europe. As well as the Dutch artists if the Hague School, French painters such as Millet and others of the Barbizon School focused on the image of the farm worker in particular.

There was, however, a difference of approach between the Scottish artist and his European contemporary. Whereas the continental painters described the complex social structure of peasant existence, the Scottish artist was more often content to simply record rural life without any political overtone. Indeed, Carse, Geikie and other artists such as David Wilkie simply depicted the everyday lives of country people.

Another influence that should be mentioned is that of the Pre-Raphaelites with their decorative use of colour and line. McTaggart in the 1850s and 60s was obviously admiring of the work of John Everett Millais whose *Autumn Leaves* and *The Blind Girl* were exhibited in Edinburgh in 1857. *The Young Fishers*, in a style reminiscent of Millar, attempts to capture the feeling of childhood innocence of three young boys as they fish from a rowing boat. At this time many of McTaggart's contemporaries were following a similar path. Hugh Cameron, a friend and fellow student of McTaggart meticulously recorded two young female fieldworkers in *Going to the Hay.*

NATIONAL GALLERIES SCOTLAND

Going to the Hay, 1858, Hugh Cameron

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It is also important not to forget that, in Scotland, artists found a ready market for their paintings of landscape and rustic activity. Indeed, important works by French and Dutch artists of rural themes were exhibited in Edinburgh and Glasgow and enthusiastically purchased by Scottish collectors. This is rather remarkable for the time because it contrasted with the taste of the major English collectors who preferred to buy English paintings depicting historical, religious or neo-classical scenes. One such Scottish collector was John Forbes White whose first purchase had been a painting by the then little-known Dutch artist, Mullinger. White's home in Aberdeen became a "Mecca for Scottish painters" and many artists visited his picture gallery, where, alongside his collection of Dutch and French pictures, could be seen realist works by Sir

George Reid, Hugh Cameron, Orchardson, George Paul Chalmers and other Scottish artists.

From 1871 McTaggart intermittently acted as a visiting teacher at the Royal Scottish Academy Life School. His biographer, Sir James Caw, asserted that he was anxious to be of service to the rising generation of artists and was genuinely fond of teaching. His students read like a rollcall of realist painters and James Lawton Wingate, James Campbell Noble, John Robertson Reid, Robert Noble and Thomas Austen Brown all found inspiration in his class. However, one name that is conspicuously absent is that of William Darling McKay, who had passed through the Academy schools at an earlier date. Nevertheless, McKay's obituary in the Royal Scottish Academy records that the influence of the personalities and work of Hugh Cameron, George Paul Chalmers and William McTaggart were of the greatest importance in forming the young artist's outlook on nature and art.

Indeed with the work of McKay the rustic tradition associated with the early period of McTaggart can be seen to be fully exploited. McKay was not averse to using compositional and technical devices which were directly borrowed from McTaggart. In McKay's *Summer Afternoon* the line of houses in steep perspective echoes the cottages in *The Village, Whitehouse.* In both paintings children are the dominant feature with small figures in the background. The treatment of painting the foliage is very similar and the method of handling using flat brushes dragging the colour across the surface of the canvas was a technique borrowed by McKay from McTaggart and developed by him in later paintings.

The Village, Whitehouse. William McTaggart, The Fleming Collection.

If his origins were not quite as humble as those of McTaggart, McKay, whose father was not only parish schoolmaster but also Inspector of the Poor at Gifford, grew up experiencing all aspects of a rural community. By the age of 28 he had moved to St Ann's Place in Haddington and from the beginning his subject matter was the landscape of East Lothian. The farmworkers, riverbanks and woodlands were all part of a single-minded vision. Like McTaggart, McKay chose the pursuits of country children for his early subjects such as in *The Village Cowhorn* where there is no attempt at conventional academic composition but simply a matter of fact statement of something observed. Robert McGregor and Robert Gemmell Hutchison were to follow McKay's lead with similar subjects. However, the slightly sentimental content of such pictures was to disappear completely in McKay's work as his interest began to centre on the ever-changing work cycle of the countryside. Like McTaggart, he was less impressed by the awe-inspiring Highland scenes which Horatio McCulloch and earlier Scottish artists had painted and was to find his inspiration in depictions of the Lowland countryside they included the human aspect. McKay, Robert McGregor and James Lawton Wingate frequently used the farmworkers who inhabit heir paintings not just as illustrations of country labour but as a device to show how Man is wholly part of nature. This was fully understood at the time. A contemporary critic describing McKay's picture *Turnip Singlers – a Hard Taskmaster* in the Art Journal of 1883 wrote,

"…this is typical of his general practice; in which rustic figures and their landscape surroundings are treated with something like equal emphasis; the scene adhering …closely to homely nature and humanity"

Turnip Singlers – a Hard Taskmaster, William Darling McKay

And the Magazine of Art a year earlier had discerned the same qualities when both McKay's and Wingate's paintings were characterised as being,

"Most distinctly Scotch work in its human interest at least …Others there are who paint the highland glens and mountains but they alone seem capable of fully grasping the pastoral spirit of the country!"

Another critic observed, when reviewing the Royal Scottish Academy exhibitions, that a number of artists, including McKay, McGregor and James Campbell Noble, had been "*devoting themselves to rural scenes with figures and presenting something of the aspect of a school."*

And so a group of artists was beginning to emerge who, through the example of earlier Scottish painters and also that of the Dutch and French realist painters, were producing paintings of rural life which were to have a profound influence on Scottish paintings for at least half a century. This group included, as we have seen, McKay, Wingate, McGregor, Campbell Noble and also the young painters Robert Noble and Arthur Melville.

W.D.McKay, an intelligent and indeed erudite man, was invited to speak at the Glasgow Art Club in 1878 on the topic "The Advancement of Art in Scotland "and he took this opportunity to express his concern over the then prevailing situation of younger artists from Glasgow and Edinburgh having to travel to the south of England in search of success. In his lecture he made the following observation which, interestingly, may have been note by the artists who were to form the Glasgow School of Artists.

"When we think of the great continental schools of art, we find what the greatest masters of the respective schools are thoroughly national. Jules Breton, Millet, Edouard Frere and Daubigny in France; Israels, Maris and Mauve in Holland, whose work has been made familiar to us through the agency of the Glasgow Institute are instances of this truth."

It is not difficult, therefore, to imagine what an important role McKay saw himself and similarly-minded painters playing in Scottish art.

It has already been stated that no published work dealing with the Glasgow Boys has investigated the importance of this Scottish tradition of pastoral painting culminating with the painters working in East Lothian. And yet, without the example of McKay, McGregor, Wingate and others the Glasgow movement could so easily have been a mere pastiche of French painting and consequently died before making any real achievement. Sir James Caw, in his standard work on Scottish painting states that any trace of influence from McTaggart and Chalmers through to the younger painters is difficult to

trace but this is just not the case. McKay, Wingate and Charles Martin Hardie as well as many other painters relevant to this study all admitted their debt to McTaggart and were frequent visitors to, at least, Chalmers' and Hugh Cameron's studios. Wingate, who until meeting McKay while painting at Cadzow in 1872, was rather an academic painter, traced his conversion to a conversation with McTaggart's friend and fellow student, Hugh Cameron in 1873. McKay purchased McTaggart's picture *The Yarn* in 1880 because he said *"it has made a deep and lasting impression (on him) when first exhibited"* (in 1862). McKay also stated that for the younger artists of the time McTaggart's work *"Stood more clearly than that of any other artist for the most vital tendencies …and pointed the way to further developments".* R.A.M. Stevenson, cousin of Robert Louis Stevenson and himself an artist and influential writer on art, wrote.

"The man whose influence and reputation has lived longest – is unquestionably McTaggart. Indeed, his art and that of G.P. Chalmers may be said to have passed on into the new Scottish School and we may rather regard these two as precursors of the present men than chief among the old."

This theme, therefore, is not entirely new but rather one which has been dismissed by later historians who, in the main, have continued the line taken by Sir James Caw.

Burnmouth Harbour, Charles Martin Hardie

What Caw does admit is the influence on the Glasgow School of John Robertson Reid who was closely involved with James Campbell Noble and Robert McGregor. Reid, who claimed McTaggart especially as his master, frequently exhibited at the Glasgow Institute and made the acquaintance of several of the Glasgow Boys. Caw has pointed out that his paintings of the 1870 are technically and, in relation to subject, exceedingly like the early work of the Glasgow painters. However, with Reid's migration south in the 1870s it was left to the home-based and mainly East Lothian painters to prepare the way for the Glasgow School.

The importance of the French realist painters such as Bastien Lepage on the Glasgow School is well documented and should not be underestimated but this idea of a continuing Scottish tradition has somehow become lost owing to an over-emphasising of foreign influence and also the persistent idea of a Glasgow versus Edinburgh struggle. On this latter point there is no doubt that the Glasgow painters initially felt aggrieved by the lack of Glasgow-based artists represented at the Academy, but this was short-lived due to the early election of the more prominent members of their group as academicians and associates.

What is evident, if the subject is closely examined, is that there are very strong links between the Glasgow School and the East Lothian painters. East Lothian has always been a favourite painting ground with its fine coastal stretches and gentle undulating landscape stretching to the Lammermuirs in the south. Above all, it is fine farming land and many of the British agricultural pioneers were based on farms in the county.

By the mid 1870s many established artists were either living in East Lothian or taking the short train journey from Edinburgh to paint the everyday country life of the inhabitants.

There are two recognisable groupings of these artists. W.D.McKay can be seen as the pioneer of the movement, exhibiting East Lothian subjects from the mid 1860s onwards. Robert McGregor was also painting the field workers and fisherfolk of East Lothian from an early date. James Lawton Wingate is not as closely allied to East Lothian as McKay or McGregor but he is known to have been a friend and painting companion of McKay. Charles Martin Hardie, like McKay, was East Lothian born and bred, living at East Linton. He seems to have frequently painted alongside McKay as their Academy exhibits each year are often similar in subject and place. The other main figure of this group provides a direct link with the second grouping of artists. James Campbell Noble studied at the Royal Scottish Academy under Chalmers and McTaggart

and being a favourite pupil of the former was considerably influenced by him. He was also a close friend of John Robertson Reid until that artist's removal to London. Campbell Noble holds an important place in this study as teacher of both his cousin Robert Noble and also Arthur Melville, who was to become a member of the Glasgow School.

Robert Noble is the central figure in the later second grouping of East Lothian artists. By 1887 he was living in East Linton where he was to remain for the rest of his life. There were upwards of twenty artists working in East Linton by the early 1900s and along with Noble, Robert Hope, William Miller Frazer and Thomas Bromley Blacklock should be given special mention. Robert Gemmell Hutchison also worked in East Lothian at this time and was strongly influenced by McTaggart's paintings of children on seashores.

Preston Mill Robert Noble 1894

It is unreasonable to contend that the young Glasgow painters were not aware of the East Lothian artists of the earlier group and their realist representations of country life even if they had missed McKay's reported lecture at the Glasgow Art Club in 1878. They must have noticed works exhibited at the Royal Glasgow Institute and Royal Scottish Academy by

McKay, McGregor, Wingate, Noble and Melville which were significant for a rejection of sentiment and showed a preference for unpretentious rustic themes. Although the young Glasgow artists undoubtedly had the opportunity to see and examine works by Hague and Barbizon School artists at the major exhibition venues, salerooms or in private collections, paintings by the East Lothian artists must have signalled a new way forward by continuing Scottish genre and landscape traditions and developing these in a manner that reflected the growing appreciation of French and Dutch realist painting.

James Guthrie, often acknowledged as the leader of the Glasgow School, was an early visitor to Cove close to where James Campbell Noble had a studio at nearby Coldingham from the early 1880s. Although we do not know the date of his initial visit, it is self-evident that it was early in the artist's career. In a letter written in 1902 to Guthrie congratulating him on his attaining presidency of the Royal Scottish Academy, an old friend wrote to him,

"It does not seem a very far cry to that day at Cove when you submitted a specimen of your artistic skill to Faed and received from him such words of counsel and encouragement as served (I think I am right in saying) to launch you definitely on the career which has now reached its zenith in such distinguished success and recognition."

This letter is significant as it shows that early in his career Guthrie was in the area where so much of the new realist painting was being produced. His knowledge of the East Lothian painters could have been strengthened when he visited London in 1879 and called at the studio of John Pettie, who, incidentally, McTaggart described as his most cherished friend. In previous histories of the Glasgow School it has been pointed out that Guthrie could have been introduced to John Robertson Reid by Pettie who were both part of a circle of Scottish artists in the English capital. What, however, has not been generally recognised, are Pettie's close links with the East Lothian painters.

Pettie had grown up in East Linton where his father had a grocer's shop which faced another shop across the narrow High Street. The proprietors of that shop were the parents of Arthur Melville who was to become an important member of the Glasgow School. Indeed, Pettie's biographer, Martin Hardie (son of Charles Martin Hardie), asserts that it was his (Pettie's) *"inspiring influence"* that lay behind Melville embarking on a career in art. Furthermore, Pettie was closely acquainted with the aforementioned East Linton painter, Charles Martin Hardie, being related to his family by marriage. Hardie too was said to have aspired to art through the example of Pettie. James Campbell Noble was also a

close acquaintance of Pettie and during a visit to Noble's studio at Coldingham in 1889 he executed the well-known portrait of his friend.

James Campbell Noble, 1846 - 1913. Artist, 1889, John Pettie

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According to Caw, in the early summer of 1883 Guthrie and Edward Arthur Walton, in search of a stimulating painting environment, settled on Cockburnspath as the ideal place. It has been said in a recent work on the Glasgow Boys that this was not a district previously known as an artistic colony but this is entirely wrong. The coastal area of the East Lothian-Berwickshire boundary especially has a long tradition of visiting artists. If the Royal Scottish Academy catalogues prior to the It has Glasgow painters visit are consulted, one finds dozens of artists exhibiting paintings which take their subject from the seashore and countryside stretching from Eyemouth northwards to Dunbar. These artists include a few for whose work the Glasgow Boys may well have felt some sympathy; for instance, Sam Bough, Alexander Fraser, and James Campbell Noble, who had his studio at Coldingham. Another determining factor

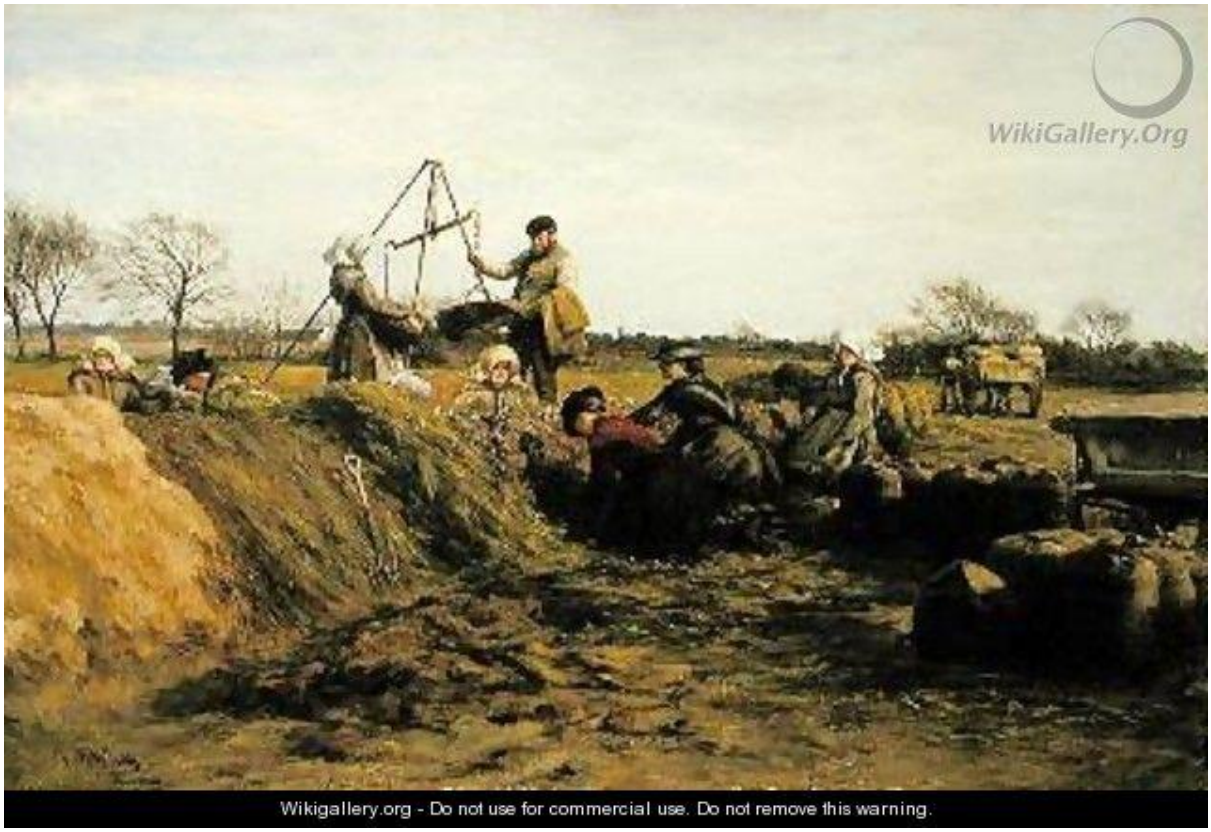
to the choice of the Glasgow School may have been the proximity of East Linton, only 12 miles away, home of one of their members, Arthur Melville, and also of Charles Martin Hardie and John Pettie, who was a regular visitor from his London base.

Although less bright in atmosphere, there is no doubt that East Lothian resembles the Barbizon countryside in France and especially the area around Grez with its rolling hills, wooden coverts and red pantiled cottages where many of the Glasgow School had painted a year or two before, Cockburnspath today remains little changed since Caw's rather over-romantic description of its charms. After Guthrie and Walton's arrival, they were soon joined by Joseph Crawhall and James Whitelaw Hamilton. Forbes White, collector of Hugh Cameron, Wingate and McKay, paid them a visit as did Caw and Wingate. By 1884 George Henry and Arthur Melville had arrived.

A Hind's Daughter, 1883, James Guthrie

It is clear from their paintings that the Glasgow painters immersed themselves in the life of the village like their French counterparts in Barbizon and Brittany and also the Scottish painters in East Lothian. All the visitors to Co'path (as it is known locally) seem to have been particularly impressed by the

work of Guthrie, who clearly shows his debt to McKay in his 1883 painting *Potato Pickers, Thorntonloch.* This painting, both compositionally and in subject appears almost as a reworking of McKay's *Fieldworking in the Spring: at the Potato Pits.* And this opinion is strengthened when it is discovered that the owner of McKay's painting was Edward Martin, a Glasgow collector who was known to Guthrie and who was to commission that artist to paint his children.



Fieldworking in Spring: at the Potato Pits, 1878 William Darling McKay

The Glasgow School produced some of their finest work at Cockburnspath and a feature of many of these paintings is the preponderance for using children as subjects, which is clearly in the tradition of McTaggart, McKay and the earlier East Lothian painters. The portrayal of children had become a major theme in painting from the Victorian era onwards, although the East Lothian painters retreated from the mawkish subjects depicted by many of their contemporaries. Instead, by technically treating the figure in a manner similar to the surrounding landscape, the children become a metaphor for human life as an inextricable part of the natural world. McTaggart was a master of this type of representation. It could be argued that children were chosen as

subjects because it was felt that they are innocent and unsullied by a material world and therefore closer to the creative aspect of nature.

McKay, in keeping with his realist outlook, preferred to depict children as part of the work-cycle of the farming community, clearly showing the tasks expected of the youngsters. So too did Guthrie, Walton, Henry and other Glasgow School painters. What sets the East Lothian and Glasgow painters apart from their continental schools is the lack of sentiment and social message. Their paintings are a dispassionate record of a moment observed of a way of life. That is not to say that these artists did not have a warm and personal feeling for beauty and atmosphere in their paintings. Indeed, having inherited the many qualities from an earlier tradition of Scottish painting they placed themselves in situations where they could depict the genuine everyday way of life of country people.

McTaggart, the earlier East Lothian painters and the Glasgow Boys directly influenced a number of artists working in East Lothian at the turn of the century with their depictions of children. But with a number of these artists, who include Robert Gemmel Hutchison and William Marshall Brown with their rather Hague School-style depictions, there is a lack of understanding of the earlier artists' intentions. Unlike their mentors, they tended to use children as vehicles for a rather shallow sentiment and one only enjoys looking at their paintings of children because they are children, no more, no less.

The reason for the reticence in recording the influence and role of the East Lothian group by later historians is twofold. The Glasgow School left much in the way of documentation behind them in the form of letters and written accounts. They also had their early champions and two full-scale books had been written about the movement by 1908. Conversely, to discover anything of the East Lothian painters as a group, one has to turn to accounts and reviews in contemporary journals. There has also been a romantic inclination by most writers to see the Glasgow movement having been exclusively influenced by continental painting in a total rebellion against the Scottish art establishment and as the East Lothian painters were certainly established, exhibiting painters by the time of the birth of the Glasgow School it is difficult to mention them without, at least, partly destroying a myth.

What is, perhaps, illuminating is that after the high point of Cockburnspath, and nothing must be said to belittle their extraordinary achievement in realist painting, the Glasgow School, with perhaps the exception of Walton, went into a decline as far as the depiction of realistic country life is concerned. Or they changed course, like Guthrie, who became an accomplished

portrait painter. Meanwhile McKay, Campbell Noble and McGregor continued on their chosen path although for the first two artists the human figure in their paintings increasingly played a smaller part.

A second phase of East Lothian painters carried on at East Linton. The willow-fringed river, meadowlands and sandstone and red-pantiled cottages proved a magnetic attraction to artists from all parts of the country. Robert Noble is perhaps the best known resident artist and he too provides a link with the Glasgow School. His work is perhaps closer in style to that of the later Glasgow painters than any other East Lothian artist. From the beginning, though the scenery of his choice was pastoral, there is a conscious leaning towards the effects of colour and harmony and in this respect his early work pre-figures that of George Henry and the more decorative artists of the Glasgow School. This is however, perhaps more than a coincidence as he was painting in Grez in France from 1882, alongside such Glasgow painters as William Kennedy and John Lavery. Alone amongst the artists working in the village, Noble seldom sought inspiration outside the haughs and fields around East Linton. However, most of the painters who worked at East Linton cannot be described as being part of any movement or school. Est Linton along with Kirkcudbright became an established Scottish painting ground where painters could be sure of artistic companionship alongside very paintable scenery. Most of these artists would take lodgings for a few weeks in the summer or else travel down from Edinburgh by train on a daily basis. The disparate styles and outlook of their paintings precludes any attempt to make of them a movement as such. Nor did the artis working in the village see themselves as any sort of school and not until two locally-organised exhibitions in East Linton in the 1970s and 1980s and also a historically-based exhibition in Edinburgh in 1983 were a number od these painters seen together as a group.

Nevertheless, among the artists painting at East Linton there were one or two who still retained the ideas first seen in Scotland in the work of William Darling McKay. These include the Glasgow Boys, James Paterson, Robert Hope and William Miller Frazer, the last named managing to combine the naturalism of McKay with the impressionistic qualities of McTaggart,

However, it is the early achievement of the East Lothian painters, such as William Darling McKay and Charles Martin Hardie that can be seen as pointing the way forward and they and the Glasgow Boys managed to achieve a uniting of the realism of continental painting with the established tradition of Scottish genre painting which had its roots in the work of Carse and Geikie and was developed by Cameron, Chalmers and McTaggart. This led to a flourishing of landscape painting which endured for about fifty years amongst painters

throughout Scotland, not least those who continued to be attracted by East Lothian’s not inconsiderable pastoral beauty.

Returning from Market, Charles Martin Hardie