

Review Copy

James McBey The Etchings & Dry-Points

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Introduction by Malcolm Salaman

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James McBey was born at Newburgh, a little fishing village on the Aberdeenshire coast, on December 23, 1883. Educated in the village school, he passed, at the age of fifteen, into the North of Scotland Bank, Aberdeen. He was seventeen when he first fell under the spell of what Samuel Palmer called the "teasing, temper-trying, yet fascinating art" of etching. The years 1902 to 1909 form the first phase of the artist's career. To that period—with a gap of two years (1906-7), when he gave all his spare time to painting—belong sixty prints. In July, 1910, McBey cut his cables, and embarked on his great adventure. With a few pounds in his pocket, he left the Bank, and sailed for Holland, to fling his hat to the windmills. "No man who is instinctively an etcher," Sir Frederick Wedmore once wrote, "can keep himself for ever absent from the great flat lands that inspired Rembrandt." No man was ever more instinctively an etcher than McBey, and the result of his visit to the land of low-lying distances, and big skies, of canals and mills, was a Dutch Set of twenty-one plates. The work of 1910 and 1911 forms a distinct second phase in McBey's career, culminating with the first exhibition of his work, held at the gallery of Goupil & Co., in November, 1911. Well-known critics—notably Mr. James Greig of the *Morning Post* and Mr. Malcolm Salaman—were quick to appreciate the newcomer, and wrote with enthusiasm of his work. In 1914, the inspiration of London's river—not Whistler's Thames, but a river of bustling activity and movement—caused a new revelation of the artist's power.

In January, 1916, McBey's war service began in France. There, though thwarted by rain, mud, and difficulties of transport, he found the material for five plates, etchings that will have lasting value as records of our Western Front and of all the grim tragedy of war. They show us the devastating activity of great howitzers; the pathos of the cemetery where crosses, row on row, marked the graves of unknown soldiers.

The War over, and his "First Palestine Set" issued, McBey enjoyed the study of portraiture and character in the peaceful surroundings of his new studio in Holland Park Avenue. The "Second Palestine Set," published in 1920, consists of eight plates giving a vivid, historic record of the march over Sinai in 1918, the crossing of the border, the Australian Camel Corps pushing on to the attack of Beersheba in an encircling cloud of dust, the first sight of Jerusalem, and that dramatic moment when the surrender of the Holy City was received by two sergeants of the London Division.

At last McBey was free from all official obligations of the War, and at liberty to make what etchings he chose. He promptly translated a drawing he had made seven years before into that pregnant dry-point, *A Flood*

in the Fens; then he etched *Macduff*, with a characteristically vivid view of the harbour and its shipping, and, at the second attempt, a bright and spacious impression of the ferry at *Brightlingsea* with children playing on the foreshore, and a few rowing-boats leading the eye over to the Thames barges on the opposite shore. McBey has etched many sunsets, though never a "foolish" one, in Whistler's phrase, and some have been significant in their beauty.

McBey then went to Venice, housed himself in an old palace on the Grand Canal, and, with his own expressive magic of brush and needle, sought to capture such secrets of beauty and romance as might entrance his vision on lagoon or canal, among the islands, the palaces, and churches. In the spacious and beautiful *Laguna Veneta* for example, he used his unerring faculty for composing the features of his picture in vital and harmonious relation. The "Third Venice Set" began characteristically with *Glass Blowers, Murano*, for these men, alert with naked arms, facing the white glare of the furnaces, the fat man seated in the centre being the doyen of the industry, recall, although with something of a difference in motive, that wonderful earlier plate, *France at her Furnaces*. McBey has used his dry-point with the same summary effect and struck a remarkable balance of sudden light and black shadow, in communicating his modern impression of this industry of many centuries.

In the years following 1930, he was liable to be in one of three places: the United States, particularly after his marriage to Miss Marguerite Loeb of Philadelphia and his friendships with notable collectors there; Tangier, which had fascinated him since his first visit to Morocco in 1912 and where he had made a home; and his Holland Park Avenue Studio in London.

His offer of service as a War Artist had been refused by the British authorities on grounds of age and he had taken up residence in the United States. His graphic response to the American scene once again found expression through the etching needle in 1940. Once again he found and met the challenge of the New York waterfront.

Other plates published during the war years provide a record of visits to Cuba and to the "Bad Lands" of the West where it would seem the climate and terrain reminded him of Morocco.

He possessed unique gifts which made him one of the great masters of 20th century etching: the economy of his vivid nervous line; his command, through line and space, of movement, light and atmosphere; his ability to make eloquent a pose or gesture and so to place figures in their settings that they are related both pictorially and psychologically to their surroundings.

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