

William Turner of Oxford (1789-1862)

By LUKE HERRMANN

THE working life of William Turner of Oxford was immediately preceded by the most vital period in the emergence of the English water-colour school, and coincided exactly with the most revolutionary years in the history of English landscape painting. But in these stirring movements William Turner played no part, and there was no great originality in his painting and drawing. He was one of many competent and skilful artists whose work provided the backcloth of tradition and solid achievement against which the more gifted artists could develop. Constable, De Wint, Girtin, J. M. W. Turner and John Varley were all between ten and twenty years older than William Turner, who was born in 1789. Other artists born in the 1780's include J. S. Cotman, David Cox, Copley Fielding and Samuel Prout. William Turner was considerably influenced by several of these men, but it is unlikely that he in his turn had any influence on them. He ranks as a pleasing minor artist, whose work in water-colours occasionally, especially in his early years, rose to considerable heights. Among the artists who lived and worked in Oxford, of whom there are relatively few, he is certainly the best-known; and, of course, the fact that he has always been known as Turner of Oxford, to distinguish him from his great contemporary, J. M. W. Turner, who was fourteen years his senior, has meant that his Oxford associations have never been forgotten. Thus it is fitting that the centenary of his death should be marked in this journal.

Very little is known concerning William Turner's origins and life.¹ He was born at Blackbourton (near Bampton) in Oxfordshire, on 12 November 1789. His parents died when he was still quite young and he was brought up by an uncle, who then lived at Burford, and who, in 1804, purchased the

¹ Most of the available information about William Turner of Oxford has been published in a number of different places. The following sources have been used for this article:

J. L. Roget, *A History of the 'Old Water-Colour' Society*, 2 vols. (1891).

The anonymous Introduction to the *Catalogue of the Loan Exhibition of the Work of William Turner of Oxford*, University Galleries, Oxford (1895).

A. L. Baldry, *William Turner of Oxford, Water-Colour Painter*, in *Walker's Quarterly* (April 1923).

Martin Hardie, *William Turner of Oxford*, in *The Old Water-Colour Society's Club*, vol. ix (1932).

Catalogues (originally belonging to William Turner) of the Old Water-Colour Society's Exhibitions, 1805-54 (Victoria and Albert Museum Library, 200B 370 A.)

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estate and manor-house of Shipton-on-Cherwell. It was probably in the same year that Turner went to London to become one of the earliest pupils of John Varley (1778-1842), living in his master's house as an apprentice. Varley, a leading figure among the water-colour artists of his day, was an excellent and kindly teacher, and William Turner proved to be a very rewarding pupil. On 27 January 1808, Joseph Farington wrote in his *Diary* 'Varley spoke violently of the merit of a young man who has been His pupil in learning to draw in water-colour and Reinagle said "He had never before seen drawings equal to them". His name Turner'.

Shortly after this was written William Turner was elected an associate member of the Old Water-Colour Society, of which John Varley was a founder member. In the exhibition of that year Turner showed five drawings, all of which were views in Oxfordshire. All five drawings were sold, among the buyers being the Marquess of Stafford and the Earl of Essex. In *The Review of Publications in Art* of that year (p. 288) John Landseer, the engraver and father of Sir Edwin Landseer, R.A., wrote of these exhibits that they showed 'the wide range of capacity and contrivance of a veteran landscape painter to whom nature has become familiar. By dint of his superior art he has rolled such clouds over these landscapes as has given to a flat country an equal grandeur with mountain scenery, while they fully account for the striking and natural effects of light and shade which he has introduced. His colouring is grave, subdued, and such as properly belongs to landscapes of a majestic character'. This was warm praise indeed for the work of an eighteen-year-old artist, and young Turner's debut in the London art world seems to have been outstandingly successful. It comes as no surprise to learn that he was elected a full Member of the Old Water-Colour Society later the same year, on November 30. Also in 1808, with Cornelius Varley (John's younger brother), Turner was one of those who formed the Sketching Society, which for some years was to play an influential role among the younger artists in London.

One work from these early years is reproduced (PL. xxxv), the large *Oxford from above Hinksey*, which is dated 1810. This is an effective and impressive water-colour, but it does not equal the best work of several of his contemporaries. Turner's early success is more easily understood when one has seen the Victoria and Albert Museum's superb *View in Wychwood Forest*, which was shown at the Old Water-Colour Society in 1809, but remained unsold. It is beautifully composed and brilliantly executed, and is a remarkable *tour de force* for an artist who was still in his teens.

But the achievement and the success were short-lived, and, as Martin Hardie has written, 'After this magnificent beginning William Turner left a great future behind him'. Why this was so is not at all clear. In 1810 or 1811

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Turner left London and returned to Oxfordshire, where he was to pass the remainder of his long life. In those two years he gave his address in the exhibition catalogues as 'at Woodstock', while from 1811 to 1815 he gives John Varley's London address as his place of business in town. Between 1812 and 1824 he has various addresses in Oxford, except that for 1816, which is 'At Mr. Delamotte's, near Oxford'. This was probably William Delamotte (1775-1863), a fellow-artist who was for a time a drawing master in Oxford. In 1824 Turner took a house in London Place, St. Clement's, and later in the same year he married Elizabeth Ilott at Shipton. They had no children. In 1833 Turner and his wife moved to 16 St. John Street, and this was to remain the artist's home until his death on 7 August, 1862. He is buried in the churchyard at Shipton-on-Cherwell.

It seems that Turner devoted much time to teaching, having 'numerous pupils at Oxford, both in and out of the University' (Roget). In his short monograph on William Turner, A. L. Baldry cites the personal memories of the architect Sir Thomas Jackson, R.A., who took lessons from Turner in 1857 and 1858. He described him as looking 'like a parson of the old school, dressed in black and wearing a white tie, living a very retired life . . . His method of teaching was characteristically practical and systematic: his custom was to take one of his studies and to paint a picture from it, working stage by stage to full completion and demonstrating the sequence of processes by which the final result was attained. Each of these successive stages constituted a lesson, and between the lessons the pupil took the painting home with him and copied what the master had done, bringing back the copy and the original at the next lesson. In this way a habit of orderly progression in the building up of a picture was developed and the value of a deliberate technical method was impressed upon his students'.

In his earliest years Oxfordshire and the adjoining counties provided Turner with the subjects of all his exhibited drawings. In the catalogue of 1815 we find the first evidence of a visit to the Lake District, and the next year he was in North Wales and the year after that in Derbyshire. Other sketching tours were made to the New Forest, Salisbury Plain, North Devon, the Isle of Wight and the Sussex Downs. It was apparently not until 1838 that he first went to Scotland, and during the remainder of his life that country, and especially the Highlands, provided him with the subjects of a large part of his exhibited work. Other favourite areas were the Lake District, Northumberland, West Sussex and, of course, Oxford and its surrounding country. Turner never travelled outside the British Isles, but he exhibited four drawings of scenes in Italy and Switzerland, all based on the sketches of others, presumably his pupils.

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The principal factor of William Turner's life was his membership of the Old Water-Colour Society, and from 1808 until the year of his death he was represented at every exhibition, showing a total of 455 works. In the Library of the Victoria and Albert Museum is a volume containing the complete series of Turner's own Water-Colour Society catalogues from 1805 until 1854. This was presented to the museum by Mr. G. H. Tite in 1931. All the catalogues contain some notes in Turner's hand, most of them marking his own exhibits and naming the buyers. There are a considerable number of unsold works beside which he has written 'destroyed', showing that he himself was a severe critic of his own paintings and drawings. From 1812 to 1820 oil paintings were included in the Society's exhibitions, and Turner's notes show that he exhibited at least eleven oils during these years. Many of his thirty-eight exhibits with other societies—the Royal Academy, the British Institution and the Society of British Artists—were presumably also oil paintings. At the R.A. he showed three works in 1807, two in 1826 and one each in 1837, 1839, 1840, 1846 and 1857. The number of his exhibits each year at the Old Water-Colour Society ranged from two in 1856 to fifteen in 1835, when he sold fourteen, among the buyers being the Rev. Dr. James Norris, President of Corpus Christi College.

It seems certain that most of the drawings which Turner showed in London were highly finished 'exhibition drawings', and as he was rarely represented on the screens where the smaller works were hung, most of them must have been of a large size, and thus executed in the studio. One such highly finished water-colour is the *Distant View of Snowdon* (PL. XXXVII B), notable for its fine drawing of detail. A larger version of the same composition, which is not as successful, is also in the Ashmolean. However, a good number of exhibits, including one or two oil paintings, are noted in the printed catalogues as being 'painted on the spot' or 'drawn from nature'. One of the drawings reproduced here was certainly 'drawn from nature'; and it is in such, often brilliantly free, open-air sketches that William Turner appeals most to present taste. *Landscape with approaching Storm* (PL. XXXVII A), which is a monochrome, is strongly reminiscent of some of the most vivid sketches of David Cox. Contrariwise, *Stonehenge—A stormy Day* (PL. XXXVI B), which was exhibited at the O.W.S. in 1846, is an outstanding example of Turner's skilful use of water-colours in achieving a convincing effect of tone and atmosphere on a large scale when working in the studio. (This beautiful water-colour was acquired by the Ashmolean at the sale of the H. C. Green Collection in 1961.) Both these drawings serve to remind us that Turner was very often intent on depicting the effects of weather and season, and that the sky plays a vital part in many of his drawings.

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The early pencil and wash drawing of *Cornmarket Street* (PL. XXXVI A), which is dated 1812, is a good example of Turner's high standard of draughtsmanship. This stood him in good stead in his purely topographical drawings, on which he tended to concentrate in his later years. That he was anxious to be accurate in the details of these drawings is shown by the fact that even in broad distant views he carefully gave the name of every village shown in the titles printed in the exhibition catalogues.

Another characteristic of some of Turner's later exhibits is that their titles were accompanied by a few lines of poetry, usually concerned with effects of weather or the characteristics of scenery. A rather sickly quotation from a poem by Mrs. Hemans was used on at least three occasions in connection with a water-colour of *Cherwell Water-Lilies*, one highly coloured version of which is in the Ashmolean, while another belongs to Worcester College.

In several of his Water-Colour Society catalogues Turner made notes concerning the exhibits of other artists. There are a large number of these comments in the catalogue of 1814. De Wint, Glover, William Hunt and Linnell are among the artists noticed, usually with complimentary remarks. In the 1816 catalogue there are nine pen sketches of unspecified exhibits on the cover, and in those for 1840 and 1841 he notes a number of prices, including, in the latter, that charged by J. F. Lewis for his large *Easter Day at Rome* (No. 141), which was 300 guineas. (This is now in the Northampton Art Gallery.) It is also interesting to discover that in the same year John Varley, who was then at the end of his career, and William Callow, who was still under thirty, were both asking 50 guineas for drawings. Unfortunately Turner does not record his own prices, though we learn from Mr. Martin Hardie that his average price between 1810 and 1812 was £27, and that the highest price in those early years was £42—for a drawing of *Oxford, from Botley Hill*, which apparently remained unsold when exhibited in 1811 (no. 84), and which may have been the water-colour reproduced as PL. XXXV. David Cox, Copley Fielding, Samuel Prout and G. F. Robson are among the artists whose work was noticed by Turner in later catalogues. From these catalogue comments we learn that William Turner took a keen interest in the work of his contemporaries, and that he was impressed and, as his own drawings show, influenced by the work of some of the greatest of them.

Turner's own exhibits appear to have sold quite steadily, but rarely as well as in 1808 and 1835. He himself is reported to have complained about the difficulties of selling his work, and he must have been all the more gratified that John Ruskin, in the 1851 edition of his *Modern Painters*, should have written as follows: 'I am sorry not to have before noticed the quiet

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and simple earnestness, and the tender feeling, of the mountain drawings of William Turner of Oxford.' In a footnote Ruskin adds: 'It is not without indignation that I see the drawings of this patient and unassuming master deliberately insulted every year by the Old Water-Colour Society, and placed in consistent degradation at the top of the room, while the commonest affectations and trickeries of vulgar draughtsmanship are constantly hung on the line. Except the works of Hunt, Prout, Cox, Fielding, and Finch, there are generally none in the room which deserve so honourable a place as those of William Turner.'² This complaint is borne out by the early numbers in the Water-Colour Society catalogues of very many of Turner's exhibits. On several occasions he provided no. 1, a drawing which must invariably have been overlooked by most visitors to the exhibition.

Ruskin again draws attention to Turner of Oxford's work in his *Notes on the Water-Colour Society Exhibitions of 1856, 1858 and 1859*. All the drawings to which he drew attention were Scottish scenes, and of one shown in 1859 (no. 48) he wrote that it included 'the truest clouds in the whole room'. Though lacking the genius of Constable's, William Turner's skies are often strikingly effective, and like his great contemporary he was obviously interested in the depiction of the sky, and many of his compositions feature a very low horizon.

William Turner's work has always been regarded with honour and respect in Oxford. In 1895 the large *Loan Exhibition of the Work of William Turner of Oxford* was held in the University Galleries, as the Ashmolean Museum was then called. There were 162 paintings, water-colours and drawings. It is interesting to see that one of these—no. 125, *Shipton-on-Cherwell Church*—confirmed (according to the anonymous author of the very informative Catalogue Introduction) the tradition that Turner supplied the design for the restoration of that church in 1832.

At the Ashmolean there are today some forty of William Turner's water-colours and drawings, as well as an album containing twenty-eight studies and sketches. All the drawings reproduced here are from the Ashmolean collection, which provides a representative survey of the artist's work. The Museum also has seven oil paintings by him, including a self-portrait, probably executed at the time of his marriage in 1824, which shows the artist with penetrating eyes, a rather weak mouth and luxuriant reddish hair. Apart from the beautiful small *Woodland Landscape*, on the back of which is a charming distant view of Oxford, these oil paintings are somewhat empty and dull, and do not bare comparison with the best of the water-colours. This applies especially to the largest of the oils, *The Wyndcliffe*,

² Cook and Wedderburn, *The Works of Ruskin*, vol. III (1903), p. 472.

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Chepstow, which is an unhappy attempt at a classical landscape on the grand scale.

A fine group of William Turner's work—twelve water-colours and three oils—is hung in the Memorial Room at Worcester College. These were bequeathed to the College by the Rev. R. H. Lightfoot. The most striking of the water-colours is the sensitive *Stanton Harcourt*, in which the figures and the cornfield in the foreground are particularly well conceived. There are also several Scottish mountain views in this collection. Appropriately thirteen works by Turner of Oxford, presented to the City in 1931 by Sir Michael Sadler, are to be seen in Oxford Town Hall. Among them are two impressive long and low distant views, both dated 1835—*The Mouth of the Medway* and *The Thames from Unwell Woods, Moulsoford*. There is also a moving water-colour of *Bamborough Castle*, which is very reminiscent of Cotman.³

Several of the drawings in the collections at the Ashmolean and at Worcester College, including the *Stanton Harcourt*, formed part of the notable group of William Turner's work assembled by the Rev. Dr. L. R. Phelps (1853-1936), Provost of Oriel from 1914 to 1929. This collection, which was then described as 'the best in existence', was dispersed by auction when Dr. Phelps resigned from Oriel.

³ I am most grateful to Mr. Michael Maclagan, Curator of the Town Hall, and to Dr. C. J. Danby, of Worcester College, for enabling me to study the collections of William Turner's work under their care.

pl: Ashmolean Museum



Oxford from above Hinksey, by William Turner. Signed and dated, 1810. Water-colours and some body-colour; 551 × 830 mm. (Ashmolean Museum)



A



B

- A. *Cornmarket Street*, by William Turner. Signed and dated, 1812. Pencil and some yellowish wash on pale brown paper; 248 × 363 mm. (Ashmolean Museum)
- B. *Stonehenge—A stormy Day*, by William Turner. Water-colours; 445 × 670 mm. (Ashmolean Museum)

phh: Ashmolean Museum



A



B

- A. *Landscape with approaching Storm*, by William Turner. Signed. Brush drawing in indian ink and body-colour on brownish-grey paper; 250 × 428 mm. (Ashmolean Museum)
- B. *Distant View of Snowdon*, by William Turner. Signed. Water-colours and body-colours over pencil; 261 × 374 mm. (Ashmolean Museum)

ph: Ashmolean Museum