

Nicol, Erskine

by Lawrence William White

Nicol, Erskine (1825–1904), painter, was born 25 July 1825 in South Leith, Edinburgh, Scotland, eldest child among five sons and one daughter of James Main Nicol, a cooper with a wine merchant, and Margaret Nicol (née Alexander). Apprenticed at an early age to a house painter, he was attracted to fine art by a precocious talent for sketching, and trained from age 13 at Trustees' Drawing Academy of Edinburgh (1838–43), after which he progressed to the recently established life school of the Royal Scottish Academy (RSA). He first exhibited in the RSA's annual show in 1841, with a still life of fruit, followed in 1843 with two landscapes and a chalk portrait. During his art studies he was appointed drawing master at Leith high school.

In 1846 he moved, rather unusually for a British artist of the period, to Dublin, where he earned an income painting portraits and giving art lessons privately. He attracted several patrons, including the St Lawrence family of Howth, and most importantly Andrew Armstrong, MRIA, of Rathmines, who adroitly and enthusiastically promoted his career for some years. From 1847 Nicol exhibited four times with the RHA, a total of twelve paintings, mostly portraits, and including a landscape of the Dublin Mountains as viewed from Templeogue (exhibited 1856).

Returning to Edinburgh (c.1850), Nicol quickly established a reputation as a painter of well-executed genre scenes of Irish rural life, drawing on source material accumulated during his five-year residence in the country and on regular visits thereafter. His work was purchased by prominent English and Scottish collectors, and made familiar to a large British audience through engraved reproduction and periodical illustration. Elected an RSA associate (1855) and member (1859), he exhibited regularly with the academy till the mid 1880s. Seeking to exploit further his growing success, he was increasingly active in London, renting a studio in St John's Wood from 1862, and moving residence in 1864 to Pembridge Square, Bayswater, naming his house Clonave Villa, after the lodge and studio he built in 1862 in Ireland at Clonave, on the shore of Lough Derravaragh, Co. Westmeath, where he summered annually, executing the Irish studies that he completed as finished canvases in his London studio. While the countryside and community round the lough provided the settings and subjects for much of his work, he also painted scenes in Dublin, Wicklow, Tipperary and Connemara. Made a Royal Academy associate (1866), he exhibited fifty-three paintings with the academy between 1851 and 1893 (annually from 1857 to 1879 with three exceptions). He also exhibited in other London venues, and in Cork, Glasgow, Liverpool and Philadelphia.

Described as the most prolific nineteenth-century painter of Irish figure subjects (Mark, 184), Nicol depicted the Irish peasantry in a range of activities, encompassing

work, recreation and domestic life. He was best known for cabinet-sized canvases portraying a single figure or small group in a confined interior or exterior setting. (Befitting an artist who worked from studies produced at a considerable remove from his main studio, he often recycled the same settings in different works.) Much of his subject matter was the rustic picturesque characteristic of genre painting. Most popular with contemporary audiences, however, were his comic portrayals of the impoverished Irish peasantry in treatments that posterity would regard as fatuous at best and derogatory, or even cruel, at worst, but that appealed to prevailing British stereotypes of the rural Irish, and to a broader vein of Victorian humour that assuaged middle-class insecurities by making fun of the presumed oddities of social, cultural and ethnic inferiors. In such works Nicol caricatures the Irish peasant as spontaneous, jovial, generous and sentimental, while also boisterous, verbose, pugnacious, quick-tempered, intemperate, slovenly, inefficient and illogical; above all, as an uncouth rustic, confounded by the simplest tasks, labouring to cope with modern technologies and mores, but blissfully content amid the frugal discomfort of his surroundings. A typical representation would be 'The day after the fair' (1860), Nicol's diploma work for the RSA, depicting a countryman, bruised and hung over, head bandaged after a spat, seated by an open fire in a cottage interior as the wife prepares the restorative cup of tea. Dialect titles often supply narrative context and accentuate the humour ('If thim wild ducks would wait till I'm riddy', 'Hould me, or I'll fight!!!'), while other titles ironically emphasise the dearth of sophistication ('Paddy's toilet', 'Paddy's love letter', 'Inconveniences of a single life' – the latter portraying a remarkably raggedy man in an unkempt interior struggling to thread a needle and mend anew an already multi-patched garment). Atypical (if not bizarre) in subject and setting is 'Paddy at Versailles' (1856), in which everything about the slouching, awestruck Irishman – posture, physiognomy, physique, dress – clashes with the surrounding classical statuary and rational splendour of continental sophistication.

While such works comprise the bulk of Nicol's production, his oeuvre encompasses a wider range of Victorian British attitudes toward Ireland and the Irish. A minority of his canvases engage with such sober realities as eviction, emigration, land tenure, and landlord-tenant relations in treatments that avoid depiction of physical suffering or extreme material deprivation, and are devoid of political or economic context. Such works as 'An ejected family' (1853; NGI) and 'The emigrants' (1864; Tate; aka 'Irish emigrants waiting for the train'), present staged tableaux enacted by recognisable types that sentimentally represent the fact of eviction or emigration, but not the reasons why such facts are occurring. The figures in these representations, while evidently poor in means, are healthy in body, sturdy in carriage, sound in mind, and dignified in manner, while also cleanly groomed and dressed (contrasting the latter to Nicol's comic subjects, the overall effect is to suggest that ragged attire and slovenly domiciles are more the result of personal eccentricity than impoverished circumstances). Such images, arousing pity but not concern, indulge a sentimentally minded audience wishing to be touched but not pained, the emotions moved but the conscience not stricken.

While contemporary critics praised Nicol's closely observed renditions of 'Irish manners', Emily Mark addresses the two chief veins of his oeuvre – the sentimentally sad and the comically stereotypical – with the term 'pathos and paddywhackery'. Certain of Nicol's pictures explicitly suggest emigration as a plausible solution to Irish rural poverty by its offering an opportunity for individual self-betterment. The companion pieces 'Outward bound' and 'Homeward bound' (1850s) both depict a man studying the shipping notices: in the former, a bearded, slouching bumpkin in ragged, patched clothes; in the latter, a prosperous, confident citizen, standing erect and clean-shaven in neat and fashionable attire. The most thematically representative of Nicol's images may be 'The lease refused' (1863), in which the estate agent's posture embodies the unmoveable nature of the refusal, while his visage conveys nothing of malice and perchance a trace of pity. This may be read as illustrating the fundamental ethic of laissez-faire political economy. One may pity the displaced Irish tenant, but the economic necessity that impels his displacement is ironbound and unquestionable: Irish rural society and agrarian economy must be modernised not indulged.

Rarely does overt political commentary intrude on Nicol's images, and then only obliquely. In 'Home rule', a single brutish figure, standing and facing downward in a fog-wrapped field, brandishes a shillelagh over his head to strike an unseen entity (human? beast? the inanimate earth?), suggesting the violence inherent in the eponymous movement and the realisation of its programme. In 'Making pills for the Saxons' (1868; Cheltenham Art Gallery and Museum), a man wearing a red, Phrygian-like hat sits at table in a cottage interior, casting bullets with rifle beside him.

Nicol executed several detailed exterior crowd scenes on large canvases, each portraying an assortment of Irish types of all ages and conditions, engaged in such activities as music making, dancing, storytelling, trysting, eating, drinking, bargaining, peddling. Each such canvas comprises a multitude of individual character studies and group vignettes of the sort that appeared as separate subjects in his smaller works. They include 'An Irish merrymaking' (1856), 'Donnybrook fair' (1859; Tate) and 'The 16th, 17th (St Patrick's Day) and 18th March, 1856' (1856; NGI); the latter, with its rendition of the holyday as an extended occasion of commerce and revelry (the church in the background is ignored by all the assembled), may be read as a moralising disapproval of Irish catholic religiosity for British non-conformist eyes.

From the mid 1870s declining health reduced Nicol's productivity. His visits to Ireland occurred less frequently before ceasing entirely. He secured an alternative rural retreat by converting a disused church in Pitlochry, Perthshire, into a studio, and thereafter concentrated on Scottish rural life as his chief subject. After a serious illness in 1885, he officially retired, but continued to paint, largely in watercolours (at which he had always been adept), and only rarely in oils. He moved residence to The Dell, Feltham, Middlesex, and had a second home near Edinburgh at Torduff

House, Colinton. Nicol married firstly (1851) Janet 'Jessie' Watson (d. 1863), with whom he had one daughter and one son, the painter John Watson Nicol (1856–1926). He married secondly (1865) Margaret Mary Ward (1831/2–1919); they had one daughter and two sons, the elder being the painter Erskine Edwin Nicol (1868–1926). Nicol died 8 March 1904 at his Middlesex home. Sixteen of his paintings were posthumously reproduced to illustrate *Tales of Irish life and character* (1909), a collection of eleven short stories by Anna Maria Hall (qv); selected on the basis of copyright issues, Nicol's images have no specific connection to Hall's stories, apart from portraying, as do the stories, an array of character types perceived as 'Irish' by a contemporary British readership.

DNB; Ann M. Stewart, *Royal Hibernian Academy of Arts: index of exhibitors, 1826–1979*, iii (1987), 13; Sighle Bhreathnach-Lynch, 'Framing the Irish: Victorian paintings of the Irish peasant', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, ii, no. 2 (1997), 245–63; *ODNB*; Emily D. Mark, 'Pathos and paddywhackery: Erskine Nicol and the painting of the Irish famine' in Shane Alcobia-Murphy, Johanna Archbold, John Gibney and Carole Jones (ed.), *Beyond the anchoring grounds: more cross-currents in Irish and Scottish studies* (2005), 184–96; Brendan Rooney, 'Nicol, Erskine' in Nicola Figgis (ed.), *Art and architecture of Ireland, ii: Painting 1600–1900* (2014), 388–91; Amélie Dochy, 'Representing Irishness in words and images: Erskine Nicol's illustrations of *Tales of Irish life and character*', *LISA e-journal (Littératures, histoire des Idées, Images et Sociétés du monde Anglophone)*, xii, no. 3 (2014) lisa.revues.org/5927; www.nationalgallery.ie; www.tate.org.uk; www.bbc.co.uk/arts/yourpaintings (internet material last accessed Dec. 2015)