

## OWEN MERTON, R.B.A.

*James Shelley*

IT is doubtless necessary for their development that the brightest spirits in the arts should seek the stimulus of the larger centres and the older cultural traditions of Europe; still, we cannot but lament, from our Dominion point of view, that so many of them find it also necessary to remain where there are sufficient numbers of discriminating people to justify the sacrifice they are called on to make for the sake of pure art. The growing pains of the Dominion are perhaps more acute æsthetically than commercially, but we must not be in too great a hurry to attain to full stature or we may become weedy and anæmic. Nevertheless it hurts to have taken from us men of the artistic sensitivity of Owen Merton, Raymond McIntyre, and Sydney Thompson—all of the same generation of Christchurch men.

Owen Merton is one of that rare type whose intuitive outlook upon the world is essentially æsthetic—he does not need to struggle through the bog of material representation and the slough of sentiment to win through to the clarity of true art experience as most of us do. He goes there direct, and sees the rhythm of creation in terms of colour as naturally as Shelley heard it in poetry and Schubert in song. This sensitive, spontaneous, ethereal character of his work is its outstanding quality. He seems in some of his later work to be scarcely conscious of the surface appearance of things—he seems rather to see the abstract essence of forms and colour conceived in the mind of the Creator, waiting for the accidents of matter to give them earthly reality. One English critic speaks of his work as Shelleyan, and truly his vision is well expressed in the lines:

Life, like a dome of many-coloured glass,  
Stains the white radiance of eternity.

From early childhood there seems to have been no doubt in Owen Merton's mind as to his artistic destiny, and he had no parental discouragement to overcome. Born in 1887, on May 14th., he is the son of the well-known Christchurch musician, Mr. Alfred Merton, who was then music master at Christ's College. At the age of five he was already pledged to the pictorial mode of expression, and drew with remarkable force original and memory sketches. He was entered at the Cathedral Grammar School (then

the preparatory division of Christ's College), and afterwards in the Upper School came under the tuition of Mr. Madden. He was an apt scholar in general school work, but his pencil, like that of Fra Lippo Lippi, in Browning's poem, was busy drawing "pictures of the world between the in's and out's of verb and noun." "Look at the way he wastes his time," laughed one of his teachers, displaying a grammar exercise,—to underline the passive verbs of certain sentences about the burning of a baker's shop and the grooming of a kicking horse; the exercise was translated into vigorous sketches of the pedantic sentences. It was a very active verb that insisted upon being construed by the mind of Owen Merton—"I draw."

He was not æsthetically one-sided, for in early youth he was extremely fond of music, and was facile in improvisation and composition, besides singing in a choir. At fifteen years of age he insisted on leaving school, and for a short period was in a business office and in the Bank of New Zealand. He was reprimanded for drawing sketches on the back of office letters he was given to stamp and post, much as Whistler was admonished for biting sketches on the margins of the etched plates of the coastal survey. He commenced at the Canterbury College School of Art, which was then directed by Mr. James Walsh, but his teacher's very unsympathetic criticism and her scribbling out of his first hour's work so wounded the very highly sensitive boy that he refused to attend another lesson. However, he drew continually, and was fortunate in the friendly encouragement and criticism of that true artist who is so affectionately spoken of by all who knew him—Jimmy Walsh.

At seventeen he was invited by a relative for a two-year stay in England. He was introduced to John Hassall, and was sent by him, upon the evidence of sketches done on the voyage, to a Flemish artist in London named Charles van Havermaet. Havermaet developed an affection for him and he accompanied his master on sketching tours to St. Ives and Holland. It was shortly after his arrival in England that he sent home the sketch of his aunt reproduced in Plate XV., "Lady Writing." In this sketch there is the same respect for the surface of the paper that he later develops into so unique a character of his work that the great English critic, P. G. Konody, says: "His water-colours. . . are impressions swiftly and delicately recorded in loose, summary washes of light colour, held together by the white paper ground, which assumes a very definite function in his work." There is the same feeling for an almost mathematical composition, which later develops like a Bach fugue, and the same sense of form below the externals which afterwards leads to his power of form-abstraction. While in England the youthful Merton went for a time to the Ealing Art School, which was then under the distinguished directorship of Mouat Loudon, but after

a short while the Director frankly confessed "We can teach this boy nothing."

Returning in 1906 to New Zealand, he submitted work to the Wellington Annual Exhibition and was promptly "discovered" by Miss Richmond. One of these pictures of this youth of nineteen was bought for the Permanent Gallery. Again he was fortunate in the friendship of Walsh, and during his two years in New Zealand painted and sold enough pictures to make him plan to return to England—especially as his old master, Havermaet, was pressing him to go back and live with him. This he did in 1908. He painted at St. Ives and Concarneau, and became friends with the illustrators Bateman and Harry Rowntree. For a time he contemplated joining the then lucrative ranks of the black and white men, but his intuition for colour prevented this. In the year of his return he exhibited at the Royal Society of British Arts and was made R.B.A. Two years later financial assistance from a relative permitted him to go to Paris, where he attended Colarossi's School, and afterwards entered Tudor Hart's studio as *massier*. In 1911 a one-man show of his work was organised in Christchurch by his mother, and was highly successful, both from an artistic and financial point of view. Mr. Bayertz wrote very laudatory notices of the pictures in the *Triad* and made several purchases himself. A good example of the work of this date is seen in Plate IV., "Victor Hugo's House." There is a Whistlerian touch in the treatment of colour and the figures, and an extraordinary sense of planes which later develops further under the influence of Cézanne.

The influence of Tudor Hart, with whom he went to summer schools in England at Northiam, in Sussex, and in the Cotswolds, seems to have been to lower the tone of his masses and make his colour rather heavy. Perhaps the discipline in tone was valuable, but the diversion of his attention from the use of high colour passages was of more doubtful value. Examples of his work at this period, all painted in 1912, are seen in Plates IX., XI., XII., XIII., XIV.

Plate IX., "Carpenter's Shop, Rye," well illustrates his experiments in the use of low-toned masses against a high-toned sky. There is an uncanny sense of atmosphere and an abstract idea seems to liberate itself from this particular example which makes us feel that the whole earth is a lumberyard. Plate XI., "Cotswolds," is full of poetry. Mrs. Merton, who evinces a most sensitive understanding of her son and his art, calls this a "fairy-tale picture"; and so it is. There is a splendid realisation of the light of the sky bathing the road, and of the sky lying over the landscape, achieved with the most slender means. In Plate XII., "Udimore Mill, Sussex," there is a feeling towards later methods. There is something very vital about the

mill itself—it looks as if it dominates the element which gives it its being, and the houses lie back watching it as if in awestruck admiration of a god. Plate XIII., "Rye," is another search for fairyland. The luminosity of the sky and the sense of expanse in so small a picture are wonderful. There is nothing tentative or fumbling in this picture. Every stroke has been carefully evolved and put down in masterly simplicity. It has a rich colour effect, and yet on close examination one sees it is mostly a matter of subtle suggestion. The composition is admirable and leads to easy concentration of mind and eye. Composition is so skilful in Mr. Merton's work that one takes it for granted. Plate XIV., "Sussex Barn, Northiam," illustrates well the experiments at this time to achieve luminosity by an opposition of low and high tones somewhat in the Dutch manner. Here again there is something of that mysterious fairyland atmosphere, and we feel that the human beings have all hidden away afraid of disturbing the sprites of air and earth.

One conjectures whether this mysterious charm that characterises the work of this period is due to the incursion of definitely human interests into his life and art, for in April of 1914 he married Miss Ruth Jenkins, an American art student and daughter of Mr. S. Jenkins, of Long Island, a pacifist of strong convictions. They lived in France, but their happy artistic *ménage* was soon disturbed by the outbreak of the Great War. Mr. Merton's desire was to join the Army, but the strong opinions of his wife's family made it impossible. The shock of the calamity that overtook Europe robbed him of his sense of colour and he felt artistically helpless. This interesting phenomenon seems to have affected other artists; Sydney Thompson speaks of his own aversion to colour during the war, and shows some superb pen drawings done during this period; in his case this aversion amounted almost to nausea. Under war conditions in France Mr. Merton failed to make a living, and in 1916 went with his wife to her home in America. There he worked as a gardener, and in a short time established himself as a horticultural designer. Luckily at Flushing, where he worked, there was a considerable colony of artists, and he was fortunate in meeting Mr. Burroughs, the Director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. But still the creative impulse to paint was lacking, and he produced almost nothing. Then misfortune challenged him again, for in 1922 his wife died. He took up the challenge and he returned vigorously to painting again. He exhibited at all the leading American shows and was spoken of by the critics as "one of our foremost American water-colourists." One writer, who says that "the painter's versatility was emphatically amplified by the catholicity of taste displayed in the pictures"—whatever that may mean—also says "his English landscapes are the work of a technician.

Splendidly he portrays the natural beauties of Brittany's quiet countryside. . . . But in his later Long Island paintings he has caught the spirit. . . . Here the painter has become a finished artist." It is curious to think that one must forsake England and Brittany in order to seek æsthetic sensitivity and spirit in New York!

The artist visited Bermuda and Cape Cod, but in 1924 he returned to Europe and painted in France and Algiers. In this year serious illness overtook him from some cause which was then obscure, but which was probably the same as at this moment of writing confines him to the Middlesex Hospital in London, where he has undergone operation after operation for the removal of a cerebral growth. He lies in a very serious condition.

After his first illness he settled in St. Antonin, near Toulouse, and hoped to build a house and make a home there, but he was advised for health reasons to go to England. In England he has developed his most personal style and has held one-man shows at the Leicester Galleries in London in 1925 and 1928, both of which were highly successful and well received by the most discriminating critics. Of the 1925 exhibition the *Manchester Guardian* writer speaks of "the cool selections of Mr. Owen Merton's fastidious and original work . . . a deft simplicity of effect with an extremely subtle apprehension of subject." Mr. P. G. Konody speaks of the artist being "in his present phase . . . completely under the spell of Cézanne," and continues: "He manages to carry the spectator's eye into the depths of space . . . not so much by his nervous and elegant brush strokes as by the admirable use of the untouched white paper ground . . . the economy of means is carried to the last pitch; yet the drawing is entirely satisfactory: one would not want another touch added to it. These instantaneous notes have an elusive charm." Another critic says: "Behind the Shelleyan delicacy there is wide knowledge and vibrant personality. Mr. Merton spins a fine thread in silken fingers deft with long tradition; and I don't believe that thread can be spun finer . . . and keep its strength."

The work from 1925 onwards is well illustrated by numerous plates in this number of *Art in New Zealand*. The pen and ink drawing "Souvenir de Chartres" (Plate VIII.) belongs to 1925 and is almost microscopically mathematical in its accurate drawing—the dark roofs and trees form a starting place for the eye to leap with the cathedral into the sky, where it comes to rest in the dark tower and spire. This work will convince anyone who doubts the existence of consummate drawing beneath the delicate abstractions of colour in later pictures. "Pillars and Houses, St. Antonin" (Plate XVI.) belongs to 1926, and is a masterly thing. Relations of delicate tints replace any attempt at imitative colour—a sort of spirit of colour rather than colour itself. Tone and colour are so intimately united that

after a moment or two one forgets they are there. This picture is full of the most skilful passages. The composition is admirable—the eye is always led into the picture, which is like a beautifully rounded poem. There is a sense of the light itself leading one away from the shadowed portico into the distance. There are no tricks—the effects are exquisitely modest. Note that the tone and colour of the left side of the central pillar are the same as those of the upper part of the distant house, and yet there is no confusion of planes. There is no forcing down of the tone of the roof at the top of the picture in order to oppose the cool sunlight—the sense of reflected light in the roof is excellent. “The Grey Pool” (Plate VII.), a water-colour of the River Aveyron, is painted in the same cool spiritual colour and shows a great mastery of drawing. The depth and stillness of the pool are rendered with such intenseness as to give the effect of symphonic music. The feeling of depth is skilfully emphasised by the subtle use of the line reflection of the top of the bridge. The “Convent in Snow, Murat” (Plate X.), also of 1926, shows admirably the tendency to work along the line of Cézanne’s technique, and then to dissolve it away until there is left only a spiritual essence of the three-dimensional. The underlying drawing is accurate and even mathematical, and the composition quite classical. The painting is like a subtle perfume pressed from the bruised leaves of reality. The snowy slush of the street is very true. The tower, with its sheltering wings of snowy roofs, seems to brood over the quiet, retired life of the inmates, and lie back from the harsh, naked world of cold blues and purples on the right of the picture.

During the same winter was painted the “Street in Snow, Murat” (Plate II). This gives one the same intellectual excitement as one gets from a beautiful solution to a mathematical problem. The artist seems to start out with certain symbols of colour washes in the same way as the mathematician starts with his *x*’s and *y*’s—it is not these symbols in themselves that mean anything much, but the relations established between them. This is as near pure æsthetic abstraction as the average man can comprehend. There is a luminosity and a quiet (or rather deadness of sound) that come from the snow. The picture is full of definite observation and a sense of desolate reality, and yet we seem to see the stark souls of things. The end of the house pushes out in blind impassivity like some secret-guarding sphinx; and down the sloping lane to the left one feels must be some hidden mystery. This is as fine as anything we have seen of Mr. Merton’s work.

The sepia drawings, “Marseilles” (Plate III.) and “Steamer in Port” (Plate VI.) belong to 1927, and show a further tendency towards the development of a sort of æsthetic shorthand reminding one somewhat of Dufy’s work. The lines all seem to be busily engaged in doing their work

and refuse to attract attention to themselves for their own sake. Mr. Merton has got a long way from the laboured canvasses of the nineteenth century artists, which were cumbered with multitudes of æsthetically undigested facts merely because space had to be filled. The "Farm on the Hill" (Plate I.), painted in recent years, after a shower of rain, shows that the progression of colour technique, after the researches of the impressionists had provided an alphabet to use, can be carried further into reality than surface effects. This oil-painting shows Mr. Merton as a subtle colourist when the medium demands strong colour no less than do his water-colours when the medium is a pale wash on white paper.

New Zealand may produce greater artists than Owen Merton, but we shall not produce a man who is more essentially artistic. Art is his very being. To a man like Merton, art is no soft mistress to be trifled with, but a tyrannizing goddess who exacts the last ounce of energy in worshipping service. "Art has no time for all this sentiment," said Mr. Merton to his mother; and of course he is right. But we surely may be forgiven for our feelings when we think that at this moment so sensitive a being as Owen Merton lies dangerously ill in a hospital at Home.