

JAMES MCBEY

THE FARMER'S SON FROM NEWBURGH

The tall, handsome, broad-shouldered farmer's son from Newburgh had come so far from the blacksmith's shop where he was born. Now he stood near one of his own oil paintings displayed in London's Royal Academy, watching a visitor, a small man who looked uncomfortable in a suit, studying it intently.

James McBey, who had been an official artist in the Great War, was now living in a sumptuous house in London once owned by the author, John Gallsworthy. Feeling he recognised the scruffy character before him, he approached the man and to McBey's surprise, it was the very subject of the painting, T.E. Lawrence, the hero of the Egyptian campaigns. Lawrence, who had inspired the Arabs and helped them win back their traditional lands, did not court celebrity, just as McBey hardly spoke of his art. Looking out of place in civilian clothes, Lawrence said sadly 'Yes, Mr McBey, our last meeting was in rather different circumstances.'

James McBey, born out of wedlock to Annie Gillespie and James McBey of Mains of Foveran, had experienced a terribly inhibited childhood. His mother, suffering the onset of blindness, seemed to resent him and did all she could to prevent him making friends. He loved his grandmother, the blacksmith's wife, the first of the family to see his fledging drawings, but Annie hated any show of affection leaving her son constantly disappointed. James' only joy at school had been geography, when he discovered a facility for drawing maps, from which came his ability to sketch landscapes and people. At fourteen he began work in the North of Scotland Bank, a career he did not relish, but living in Aberdeen allowed him access to the Central Library where James devoured every art book he could. He taught himself printmaking and was soon spending all his spare time making etchings. Indeed, his first attempt to be taken seriously by the art world was by sending two works to the Royal Scottish Academy, which accepted for exhibition a print of Old Torry, in 1905. Twelve years later, James McBey would be in the desert with General Allenby and the Egypt Expeditionary Force, recording the struggle against the Turks, Germany's allies in World War I.

McBey's war material was a return to those early days of sketching quickly, creating what later critics would call "a comprehensive and honest record" of the conflict. Prof. Mario Minichiello, former war artist in 21st century Afghanistan, believes the simplicity of the images 'renders the figures the subject of detailed scrutiny, and... I believe gives him his uniqueness as an artist.'