

SIX PICTURES BY JOHN CONSTABLE.

BY E. C. ALLEN.

THE HAY-WAIN 1821. SALISBURY CATHEDRAL 1823.
 THE CORN-FIELD 1826. TREES AT HAMPSTEAD.
 FLATFORD MILL 1817. THE VALLEY FARM 1835.

JOHN Constable sent the "Hay-Wain" to the Paris Salon in 1824. It received there a passionate acclaim as the work of a genius. Here was an artist who painted the wetness of water, the green-ness of trees, the sunshine itself in a field of corn. But the amazing thing was, that when he had done it, it was beautiful! But a beauty that held the heart! No classic nymphs nor curious fawns were necessary to give the landscape meaning. A barking dog, a shepherd's boy, a contemplative fisherman, an old horse,—just the things no one can help meeting in the country every day of the week,—took the place so long usurped by classic fancies or Court masqueraders. A landscape by Constable is like a poem by Wordsworth. There is no strain, no effort, just the subject itself. Poet and painter alike turned to nature for inspiration and spent their lives in praising God for His wonderful works by drawing them for men to see.

Wordsworth lived longer, and the nature of his craft made him more introspective, so that at times the melancholy of the poet's mind tinges the freshness of the scenes he paints. Constable's philosophy was more matter of fact. He does not seem to have had any particular desire to do more than paint the homely scenes of the land he loved, and let his faithful portrayal of their beauty teach what lesson it would to whom it would. He was convinced that grass was green and corn was yellow, and spent the years of his life painting pictures that should leave no doubt of that. There is nothing artificial in his style nor in his ideas. His finished pictures are more laboured and heavier than his sketches. But the fresh delight in colour in the "Valley Farm," painted two years before his death, is as great as it was when he sent the "Hay-Wain" to Paris.

We might begin our term's work with this picture.

Here is the very simplest scene; an empty hay waggon, driven by the boy down into the horse pond that the horses may cool their hot limbs and take a long drink before setting off again. It is the height of summer, and the middle of the day—note the round cumulus clouds and the elder in full bloom. It

is such a cosy little farm house and such beautiful trees sheltering it on the north; elm, oak, and at the edge of the pond, an alder, binding with its twisted roots the over-hanging bank. The distant meadow has been "carried," and there is a yellowness in its surface which shows the crop has been heavy.

How the horses' feet churn up the shallow water, and how the dog barks impotently, with that fussy garrulity of a young house-dog.

There is such a contented, English feeling about the whole moment—we know just how it is and how slowly the wain moves, and stand still to watch it all happen.

Constable was a Suffolk man and much of his early life was spent beside the Stour, in one of the most beautiful and well-wooded districts of the county.

We might take the "Cornfield" next, that wonderful study of mid-day heat. The picture is full of natural incident, like the Hay-Wain. Again it is a very hot day—the lane is deep and cool and shady; the tree-tops just stirred by a little breeze. The sheep plod on in the dust, and the panting, conscientious dog, waits for the boy. What a delicious thing, to dip one's hot face in that cool, dim, stream! What a luxury of contrast between the deep shade where the sheep are and the hot sun in the field! How peaceful and how faithful is the landscape beyond. The tiny squat-towered church and the suggestion of a village among the trees.

One does not want to go on, even down the winding lane with the sheep. But I think we had better, because a little further on we shall come to *Flatford Mill*, and anyone who has ever been on a wherry will find it hard to tear himself away from these. The nose of the old boat comes slowly across the water, answering to the pole; and the boy on the towing path waits as unhurried as the slow-moving river, till one shall give him his rope and cross-piece and he shall amble on round this bridge or lock head, to pick up his work further on. There's another wherry behind; empty, I think; moored to the bank perhaps. The children will ask endless questions about this picture. "Which is the Mill? What's the woman stooping down doing? Is that a stile and a brook or a path? Does the river go on? Which way?" etc. I am afraid I can't answer all of them. I don't know *which* the mill is! perhaps we are standing beside it so can't see it. Those are the lock gates in front of us and they are shut, so the wherry has come through, and is going on past these posts. Yes, I think that's a stile and a path below it; and I think the river goes on round the corner where more posts are, in a row. But don't answer all the questions; rivers go on

and the days are hot and long on these sluggish Suffolk streams—and the slower we are moving the more time we have to enjoy it all.

Then one day this painter of Nature does for us a picture of what he feels is the fitting expression of a house for Nature's God.

Salisbury Cathedral is also called elsewhere "Salisbury from the Bishop's Garden." The dark lopped elms make a beautiful frame for one of the most graceful spires in England. The long length of nave and chancel, unbroken save by the gable of the transept, seems almost to typify man's humility before the soaring aspirations of his soul. Again the whole picture throbs with sunlight. The white cathedral, built of clean Caen stone, dazzles one's eyes, and we feel that even the marbles of Italy's duomos are not more fair. What a scene of peaceful beauty it is! The good Bishop, pointing out architectural wonders to his visitor, may feel truly his Cathedral is a psalm of praise in itself. Pastoral is the word that comes to me as I look. The pond and the cows, their gentle meekness; the stretch of meadow, the well-worn path, the bishop, the noble trees, bending stately to meet one another and so form this perfect arch of nature for man's great achievement. Then what a triumph to a man of Constable's habit of work is the meticulous care and faithfulness with which these distant windows, buttresses, spirettes, etc., are drawn. Constable liked to get his effects with a palette knife and crude colour. In the patient detail of this work nothing is slurred or hurried, and there is no sloppiness of shadow nor invention of greenery to slur the difficulty. Again you can name the trees; the elm, the beech, the oak, the willow. Again it is mid-day, and July, and a hot day. One thinks perhaps the painter never had a winter—his memories of summer are so vivid.

It is said that William Blake, looking at Constable's Sketch for *Trees at Hampstead* cried, "But this is not drawing, this is inspiration." To which the painter replied, "I meant it for drawing." These trees truly are drawn by one who said at another time, "I thank God I have no imagination." But had he not what was a thousand times better, a seeing eye and a skillful and faithful hand?

What wonderful trunks these are! How we wish we had the colour of them! How gracefully they sway to the wind now in full summer, and how they will roar and thunder in their winter battles with the wild North Easter! Does not this picture make you feel what a big man Constable was? How grand were his conceptions, and how impossible anything petty would be to him? Here is the road running under the trees, and here are we, ordinary people, walking along it, talking and thinking of ordin-

ary things till the painter says "Stop! Here are giants in the land! And so they are, giant sentinels on the King's Highway. The composition is so satisfactory, too; and yet so bold. The diminishing line of monsters, ending in the sturdy oak; the back-ground of shrubs and under-wood, like courtiers whose humble charm sets off the stateliness they serve; the feathery detail of leaf and twig that but enhancing the grandeur of the whole, all are perfect parts welded into what the artist would call "an organ scheme," and which moves us like a page from Bach or a speech from Shakespeare. I should love to live near those trees. How could one be small with those towering lines before one?

I almost wish I had kept them till the last instead of the *Valley Farm*. But perhaps the children will prefer to end on the note of peaceful rural England with which we began. We are back again on the Stour and recognize the same type of red-tiled farmstead, and shallow slow-moving water. I think there is something of Turner's cunning in the red waistcoat of the man punting. The English labourer is not fond of bright colour. It is still hot and sunny and there is no hurry about any thing. It is very English, very ordinary; yet perhaps it holds for us a vision of things past, or an England that has slipped out of sight in these hurrying days. Yet I think if we stumbled on this farm on our holiday rambles, we should say, "What a typical Constable!" and our well-trained modern minds would immediately be filled with fears for sanitation, water supply, damp, transport, the danger of living so near trees, etc., etc.; really the poor things who live in such a place have hardly any right to live at all.

But the boat grounds on the shallows and the maid is not at all concerned for her basket of eggs, and the milk from the cows made those children the healthy yeomen of rustic England; and we owe a debt to the simple painter who was content to give us what he saw.

I have not said anything about the skies in the pictures. They are all different, but all real English skies, of light wind and fine weather.

Teachers will find the monograph on Constable in *Masterpieces in Colour* series very useful. The reproductions are good and contain all we have except the *Trees*. I have refrained from quoting from it, as I think many will like to use it themselves. I would also like to remind the children to re-read "Jan of the Windmill," by Juliana Ewing. It is a charming book, and Constable owed much of his habit of observing skies and the direction of the wind to his year spent in a windmill