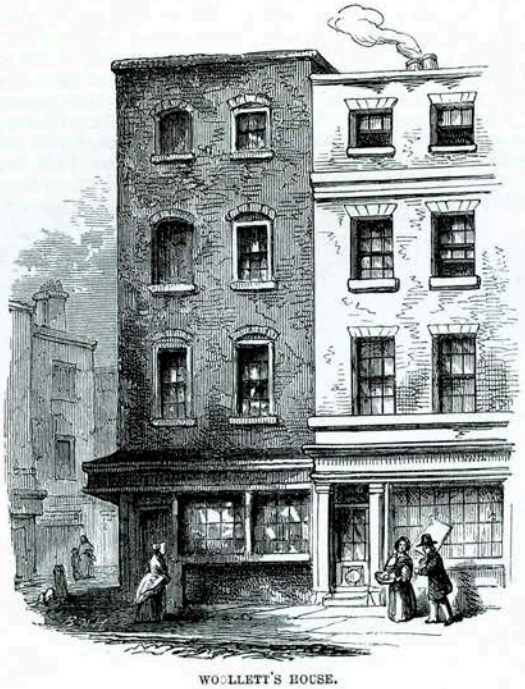
TOMBS OF ENGLISH ARTISTS.

No. 9.—WILLIAM WOOLLETT.

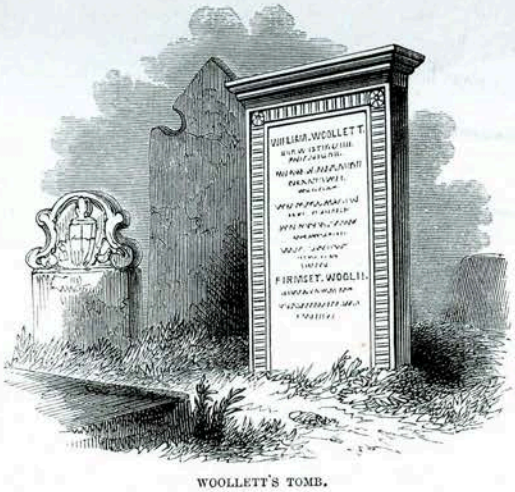
ENGLISH landscape has ever shone pre-eminent in Art. Some portion of the success may be due to our insular situation, and even our proverbially "foggy clime" may aid in the aerial perspective so charmingly rendered by our native artists. The golden hues and ethereal distances of Cuyp are our only rivals; and this may be legitimately understood when we remember how like the climate of Holland is to our own. But engravers of landscape may claim unrivalled honour in their branch of art: by no other than those of the English school have landscapes been so truthfully and gracefully rendered; nor can a more successful plate be shown than that noble example of British Art, the "Niobe" of Richard Wilson, engraved by William Woollett.

The history of this plate, the first great work of the kind executed by an English artist, may be best told in the words of Boydell, who was Woollett's employer.* Boydell was in the habit of trading for prints to France, the French printsellers obliging him to pay in cash, and taking none of the prints he published in return. "In the course of one year," says he, "I imported numerous impressions of Vernet's celebrated 'Storm,' so admirably engraved by Lerpiniére: upon Mr. Woollett's expressing himself highly delighted with it, I was induced, knowing his ability as an engraver, to ask him if he thought he could produce a print of the same size, which I could send over, so that in future I could avoid payment in money, and prove to the French nation that an Englishman could produce a print of equal merit: upon which he immediately declared that he should like much to try. At this time the principal conversation among artists was upon Mr. Wilson's grand picture of 'Niobe,' which had just arrived from Rome. I therefore immediately applied to his Royal Highness the Duke of Gloucester, and procured permission for Woollett to engrave it." At this time Boydell was anything but rich, and hired but half a shop for the sale of prints; he therefore had to deal prudently, and on inquiring from the engraver the probable cost of the plate, after some consideration he said he thought he could engrave it for 100 guineas. "This sum," says Boydell, "small as it may now appear, was to me an unheard-of price, being considerably more than I had given for any copper-plate." But on reflection he bade him set to work, and advanced him sums of money,—for at this time the great engraver was in serious difficulties, struggling for a living with a wife and family in an upper room in a small court in Castle Street, Leicester Fields. Nearly the whole sum contracted for was drawn and spent before the plate was half finished, and Boydell advanced another £25. He saw the engraver's ability, his earnest labour, his poor home; but he was also a struggling printseller, and he felt they were both getting beyond their depth. He therefore came to an understanding with Woollett for another final £25; the plate was finished, and the print published for five shillings. "It succeeded," Boydell said, "so much beyond my expectations, that I immediately employed Mr. Woollett upon another engraving from another picture by Wilson; and I am now thoroughly convinced that had I continued publishing subjects of this description, my fortune would have increased tenfold."

Woollett's fame was now well established, and so was the fortune of Boydell, who ultimately became Lord Mayor of London. The inscription on his tomb records—"As a printseller he caused such productions to become a source of commercial benefit to his country, and of such profit to himself as to enable him to afford unexampled encouragement to the English school of historic painting." Woollett afterwards engraved Wilson's "Phæton," "Celadon and Amelia," "Ceyx and Alcyone," and other fine works, which justify Smith's encomium, who says,—"The palm for landscape engraving must be given to Woollett, whose birth was humble, and his life most honourably enviable." And he elsewhere adds:—"Our three most eminent engravers have never been equalled in any part of the globe, though William Woollett's master, Tinney, was so insignificant an artist, that Strutt, in his Biographical Dictionary, has not thought proper to give the least account of him; Sir Robert Strange's tutor was Cooper, an obscure engraver in Scotland; and William Sharp was originally an engraver of the letters upon pewter-pots, dog-collars, door-plates, visiting-cards, &c.; and he assured me that the only difference he ever had with William Byrne, the landscape engraver, was respecting the quantity of door-plates they had engraved,—Sharp insisting upon his claim to the greatest number by some hundreds." What would a modern engraver say to this?



WOOLLETT'S HOUSE.



WOOLLETT'S TOMB.

Woollett resided for many years in the house No. 11, Green Street, Leicester Square. It is the first house from the corner one in Castle Street. Both have undergone alterations since our sketch was taken, and Woollett's house is now a curiosity shop. It is traditionally said that he was in the habit of firing a cannon from the roof of this house whenever he completed an important engraving. The last engraving he worked upon was "The Landing of King Charles the Second," after the picture by Benjamin West, P.R.A. His death prevented the completion of the plate, but his equally eminent successor, William Sharp, finished the work as we now see it. Woollett is described by Smith as "a little man;" he died at the somewhat early age of fifty. He was buried in the churchyard at Old St. Pancras, where a plain tombstone marks the spot, upon which is sculptured the following inscription.—"William Woollett, Engraver to His Majesty, was born at Maidstone, in Kent, upon the 16th of August, 1735. He died on the 23rd, and was interred in this place on the 28th day of May, 1785. Elizabeth Woollett, widow of the above, died December 15, 1819. Aged 73 years." In this crowded place of sepulture the tomb is not easy to find, without due direction. It stands beside the chancel, on the north side. The graveyard is thick with monuments, and has always been a favourite place of interment with Catholics, from the fact of its being one of the oldest religious foundations in Middlesex; as well as from the tradition that it was the last in which mass was celebrated in England. Woollett is not the only name connected with the Arts in this place. Ravenet, the engraver, Scheemakers, the sculptor, and Samuel Cooper, the celebrated miniature painter, are all buried here.

Some admirers of the eminent engraver, wishing to see a more important memorial to his memory than this at St. Pancras, subscribed for a public monument, and placed it rather strangely in the west cloisters of Westminster Abbey. It was executed by Banks, the Royal Academician, and is inscribed simply with the date of Woollett's birth and death, and the epithet "Incisor Excellentissimus" beneath the bust. A more ambitious labour is below: it is an attempt at allegory, fortunately explained in plain English, and represents "the genius of Engraving handing down to posterity the works of Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture, whilst Fame is distributing them to the four quarters of the globe." It is a glorious example of the "art of sinking in poetry." Woollett is at work engraving from a picture before him, but he is surrounded with so many nudities on all sides, that he is lost in the crowd of "allegoricals." The sculptor appears to have had his misgivings as to its being understood by the ordinary spectator, and has luckily left a key to the whole in our vernacular; the Latin term, which tells of his ability, would do as well for an eminent surgeon. The whole thing is a ludicrous mistake. The rude gravestone of St. Pancras is a more sensible work: the one is a simple record, the other a pretentious failure.

Woollett's earnest and laborious life passed quietly in his own workroom. Engravers have less of "incident" in their career than any other class of artists. Few persons know the continuous labour, sometimes of a most wearisome and monotonous kind, that must be unsparingly given for months together to a large copper-plate in its preliminary stages. Human patience, in its supreme perfection, is necessary for the task. The amateur who glories over the exquisite prints in his portfolio, scarcely thinks of the wearisome application of years necessary to complete his valued gems. Less healthy than prison-labour, the engraver prosecutes his art, "cabin'd, cribb'd, confin'd," in his studio, and pores over his plate, until health, and sometimes eyesight, is a total wreck. His crown is often one of martyrdom. The Arts exact their victims as well as other professions. Woollett lost one-third of the life allotted to man. If the connoisseur thought of the artist as well as of the artist's work, and gave one glance at the events of his career, he would discover the sunshine that delights him in the picture, was often produced amid the clouds and darkness of a chequered life.

The two plates by Woollett which have received the highest commendation of foreign amateurs, are "The Death of General Wolfe," and "The Battle of La Hogue," from the pictures by Benjamin West: these works have never been surpassed by any engraver. His best portraits are those of George III., after Ramsay, and of Rubens, after Van Dyck.

F. W. FAIRHOLT.

* The venerable alderman related the tale to J. T. Smith, who published it in the appendix to his Life of Nollekens.