

## TOMBS OF ENGLISH ARTISTS.

No. 13.—RICHARD WILSON, R.A.

THE late President of the Royal Academy, Sir Martin Archer Shee, has spoken of the career of Richard Wilson as "a reproach to the age in which he lived. With powers which ought to have raised him to the highest fame, and recommended him to the most prosperous fortune, Wilson was suffered to live embarrassed and to die poor;" and this at a time when £2000 a year could be realised by an inferior artist, Barret, although "Wilson's landscapes," to use Barry's words, "afford the happiest illustration of whatever there is fascinating, rich, precious, and harmonious in the Venetian colouring,"—a testimony which nothing but genuine merit could have extorted from such a critic. A more caustic writer, equally able to decide on true merit, Dr. Walcot (better known as Peter Pindar), despite of the neglect of the would-be *cognoscenti*, exclaimed, in his satiric "Odes to the Royal Academicians:"—

— "Old red-nosed Wilson's art  
Will hold its empire o'er my heart,  
By Britain left in poverty to pine,  
But, honest Wilson, never mind,  
Immortal praises thou shalt find,  
And for a dinner have no cause to fear.  
Thou start'st at my prophetic rhymes!  
Don't be impatient for these times—  
Wait till thou hast been dead a hundred year!"

The justness of Walcot's judgment has been abundantly testified since he wrote these lines; the pictures that Wilson could only sell for a few pounds each, and then only to charitable pawn-brokers, have since fetched as many hundreds.\* At one time the "English Claude" was so far reduced in circumstances as to be unable to execute a small commission when he was in great want of it, because he had not money enough to purchase canvas and colours.†

The great landscape painter was born in one of the finest districts of Wales, that most picturesque haunt of landscape painters. He was the third son of the Rev. John Wilson, Rector of Penegoes, in Montgomeryshire, where he was born in 1713. His mother was of the family of Wynne, of Leeswood, near Mold, Flintshire. He received a good classical education, and early showed a marked predilection for drawing. He was taken to London, at the age of fifteen, by his relative, Sir George Wynne, and placed under Wright, a portrait painter. He soon, however, commenced on his own account, and painted, among other notables, the Prince of Wales and the Duke of York. After some time he set off for Italy, where, unconscious of the bent of his genius, he continued to paint portraits. There he frequented good society, and was much respected. Zuccherelli and Vernet, having seen his sketches, prevailed upon him to relinquish portrait and apply himself to landscape painting. Raphael Mengs painted his portrait in exchange for a landscape. In 1755, after six years' residence in Italy, he returned, and took up his abode in London. He continued to paint fine pictures, but his art was too intellectual for the public taste of his day. His style was too broad, suggestive, and masterly; it savoured too much of "mind" and artistic feeling to meet with a just echo in the breath of the uninitiated. Still he persevered, without catering to the bad taste that was, and almost always is, fashionable. The style of this distinguished artist formed an epoch in English landscape painting. His claims to praise are, grandeur in the choice or invention of his scenes, felicity in the distribution of his lights and shadows, freshness and harmony in his tints. Fuseli says that, "Wilson's taste was so exquisite, and his eye so chaste, that whatever came from his easel bore the stamp of elegance and truth. His subjects were the selections of taste; and whether of the simple, the elegant, or the sublime, they were

treated with equal success. Indeed, he possessed that versatility of power as to be one minute an eagle sweeping the heavens, and the next a wren twittering a simple note on the humble thorn." The brilliancy and beauty of his skies and distances, supported by rich and reposeful masses of shade thrown over the woods, rocky hills, and buildings which usually constituted his middle distances, together with his well-handled, truthful, and admirably arranged foregrounds, displayed this great painter to every advantage in the recent Art-Treasures Exhibition at Manchester.

Wilson was one of the founders of the Royal Academy, and his portrait appears in the interesting pictures of its early members, by Zoffany; the Academy was ultimately of pecuniary use to him when he was appointed its secretary—it was all he then had to depend upon; and he shifted his London residences for the worse as he increased in matured ability, and declined in public patronage. He at one time resided where so many great painters had lived before him, in the north arcade of the Piazza, Covent Garden; then in Charlotte Street, Fitzroy Square; in Great Queen Street,

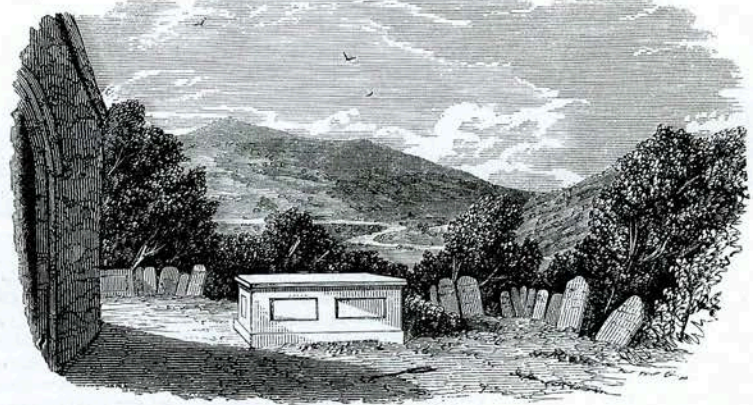


COLOMONDIE HOUSE.

Lincoln's-Inn-Fields; at the corner of Foley Place, Great Portland Street; and lastly, in a wretched lodging in Tottenham Street, Tottenham Court Road. From thence he made a sudden flight to Wales, and a happy and comfortable home. The death of his brother put him into possession of property in his native land, and a profitable lead mine was found upon his estate. He resided at Colomondie, the seat of his cousin, Miss Catherine Jones, to whose estates he would also have succeeded had he survived her. It is in the village of Llanverris, Denbighshire, in the midst of scenery

the artist loved, and where he would ramble daily with his faithful dog, who once returned howling alone to the house, and dragged a servant by the clothes to the spot where Wilson lay helplessly suffering the first stroke of a mortal malady of which he died soon afterwards.\*

His tomb, near the entrance to the parish church of St. Mary, at Mold, is a handsome and well-constructed sarcophagus, which, with the pretty bit of scenery it commands, forms the subject of the accompanying woodcut. On it is engraved—"The remains of Richard Wilson, Esq., Member of the



THE TOMB OF WILSON.

Royal Academy of Artists. Interred May 15, 1782, aged 69." And beneath this inscription is added a tribute to his memory in the Welsh language, which obtained the prize at the Eisteddfod of 1852, of which the following version is offered:—

"From life's first dawn his genius shed its rays,  
And Nature owned him in his earliest days,  
A willing suitor; skill'd her lines to impart,  
With all the lore and graces of his Art;  
His noble works are still admired, and claim  
The just reward of an enduring fame."

The Rev. Dr. Williams, Rector of Nannerch, near Mold, is collecting subscriptions for the erection of

a handsome monument *inside* the church to Wilson's memory; the Marquis of Westminster, Sir Charles Eastlake, P.R.A., and other distinguished persons, have come forward with liberal contributions, which, it is hoped, will induce many to follow their example.

F. W. FAIRHOLT.

\* Our sketch of the house was made some years ago by Mr. Harrison, an artist since deceased. That of Wilson's tomb was recently furnished by Mr. W. Linton, the well-known painter, together with notes descriptive and biographical—the only assistance of the kind that has hitherto been received by the writer of this series of papers.

\* Small pictures, which he used to place along the wash or skirting boards of his studio, and which in these days will bring from one hundred to two hundred guineas each, were bought from the artist by a well-known picture dealer (who told the anecdote to the writer) for sums of one, two, and sometimes three guineas.

† It was furnished by the young man who had recommended him to his patron, and who afterwards entered the church, and achieved some celebrity in his day as an amateur artist, the Rev. Mr. Peters, who had intended to become a painter, but was shocked at fearing Wilson's fate might be his own, as he felt he had not a tithe of his talent.