

# A picturesque tour

by

Ignacy Eker

THE aquatints, on show at the Hills Galleries, come from a publication entitled *A Picturesque Tour of the Island of Jamaica* — broken up for the sake of the plates, which reproduce the drawings executed in the years 1820-1821 by James Hakewill, an architect by profession and also a painter of some skill, best known for his *Picturesque Tour of Italy*, made in 1816.

In the aquatint process, the drawings are reproduced with the aid of plates — covered with minute specks of acid-resisting substance — to achieve effects of monochrome washes in finely grained, even tones. In the early days of the aquatints, the artist coloured by hand some of the prints, which subsequently served as models for the similar tinting of the rest of the prints by well trained assistants.

Among great artists, Goya used the aquatint process extensively in Spain, and Delacroix in France. Picasso used it recently for his illustrations to Buffon.

Toward the end of the 18th century, the convention of the picturesque was already firmly established — its three ultimate standards having been supplied by the paintings of Gaspard Poussin, Salvator Rosa and Claude. The Englishmen who made their customary Grand Tour of the chief

towns of Europe, were particularly excited by the Italianate pictures, and numerous publications of picturesque tours of their own country, as well as many remote and exotic places, found a voracious public. It is not surprising, therefore that the island of Jamaica did not escape a similar treatment, which glosses over realities and puts the varnish of deceptive charm on everything.

## 'Conventional'

AS an artist, James Hakewill seems very conventional indeed. His architectural training shows itself to advantage in the neat rendering of Great Houses, mansions and works, but his topographical and human record strikes one as inhibited and, even allowing for the various rules of the picturesque idiom, a very artificial one.

Somehow the motives are grouped and ordered too obviously, too neatly, lacking that element of surprise, which the genuine observation never fails to reveal; somehow the figures are merely staffage, and do not come to life. Hakewill's native sense of humour makes itself rarely felt, hardly hinting at some playfulness or at some intimacy. Too often, the calculated and respectable picturesqueness,

for the benefit of "The Noblemen and Gentlemen — Proprietors of the Estates" — to whom the publication was dedicated — gets the upper hand, turning the plates into back-cloths against which a very unconvincing play is performed.

Nevertheless among the 21 aquatints on show, a handful endears itself and engages one more intimately, at times because of the lucidity and the undeniable subtlety of the pale washes, or else because the architectural motives — not necessarily the graceful ones — evoke more than anything else the spirit of the age.

Two are reproduced on this page, but I should like also to mention *St. Thomas in the Vale*, in which the whole parish spreads before one's eyes, rising to the blue mountains in the distance; *Montego Bay*, seen from *Reading Hill*, overlooking the sea dotted with islands and ships, under the blue-grey sky with the cirrus clouds touched with warmth; and *Cardiff Hall* — *St. Ann's* with its barbecue seen through the pimento grove.

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