



## JOHN TRIVETT NETTLESHIP (1841-1902)

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Augustus John. *J.T. Nettleship*. Drawing, Sotheby's, Estate of Augustus John, Bridgeman Art Library.

John Trivett Nettleship was one of nineteenth-century Britain's leading animal illustrators. His sketches, pastels, and paintings in water colour and oil commanded great respect among critics, collectors, and the public from his first exhibition in 1871 until his death in 1902.

Born on 11 February 1841, in Kettering, Northamptonshire, Nettleship was the second of five sons of Henry John Nettleship, a solicitor, and Isabella Ann. When he was a boy, Nettleship was a chorister at New College, University of Oxford, following which he attended the Durham Cathedral school.

Although he worked for a few years in his father's office and then became a solicitor in London, Nettleship soon embarked on an artistic career. His formal training was undertaken at the Heatherley School of Fine Art and the Slade School of Fine Art, which opened in 1871 and was part of University College, London. The UCL *Calendar* for 1873-1874 indicates that Nettleship entered the Slade during the 1871-1872 academic session

(158), a date verified by Nettleship's student index card extant in the UCL archives. The fact that he is last listed in the 1873-1874 *Calendar* means that he left the Slade in 1872-1873. In 1876, Nettleship married Adaline Cort. Their eldest daughter, Ida, followed in her father's footsteps by studying at the Slade; she eventually married the painter Augustus John.

Nettleship's one and only contribution to *The Yellow Book* was a blurry pastel of King Minos's death mask in Volume 1. The artist was displeased with the quality of the reproduction of this illustration (Mix 86), which is, in both its subject matter and style, outside the usual scope of his subjects and artistic approach. For most of his career, Nettleship instead strove to create and was widely praised for naturalist depictions of wild animals. Lions, polar bears, tigers, pumas, leopards – these were the usual subjects of his best-known works, many of which were exhibited at the Royal Academy, the Grosvenor Gallery, Burlington House, the New Gallery, and other London venues. Nettleship's interest in wild animals in their natural (sometimes violent) states, rather than domesticated creatures such as cats and dogs, has been attributed to his admiration for vigorous physical activity. In addition to his artistic pursuits, Nettleship boxed, hiked long distances, and even trained barefoot before embarking on a mountaineering expedition in the Alps. A review of Nettleship's oeuvre published a few months after his death claimed for his works a "masculine strength of draughtsmanship" and a "robustness of execution" ("J. T. Nettleship: Animal Painter" 77).

Nettleship's aesthetic treatment of non-human animals was deeply informed by the visual information he recorded during his frequent sketching trips to London's Zoological Gardens. In 1880, Nettleship had an opportunity to observe exotic beasts in their native environment when he travelled to India on the invitation of the Gaekwar of Baroda. *The Last Leap but One*, an oil painting exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1881, is a depiction of a cheetah hunt he witnessed while in India.

Nettleship also created illustrations for several books: his friend Arthur W.E. O'Shaughnessy's *An Epic of Women* (1870), Alice Cholmondeley's *Emblems* (1875), and

Arthur Nicols' *Natural History Sketches among the Carnioura* (1895). His eight black-and-white, full-page illustrations (including frontispiece) in Aubyn Trevor-Battye's *Ice-bound on Kolguev* (an island in the Barents Sea) are uncluttered, unromantic depictions of reindeer, dogs, and Samoyed people that visually echo the scientific naturalism of the author's prose.

In addition to his visual art, Nettleship, who was one of the "permanent guests" of the Rhymers' Club (Nelson 168), wrote two books. The first, which appeared in 1868, was a series of essays on Robert Browning's poetry. This collection, which the *Times* characterized as "almost the first attempt at a serious and detailed study of the poet" ("Obituary: Mr. J. T. Nettleship"), prompted a friendship between the two men. Over the following decades, Nettleship added a great deal of new material; the enlarged second (1890) and third (1895) editions were issued under the title *Robert Browning: Essays and Thoughts*. In the dedication to the second edition, Nettleship characterized his effort as a "tribute of love" to the poet. James Nelson includes *Robert Browning* in a list of The Bodley Head's "most noteworthy critical works" (262).

In 1898, Nettleship published a biographical study of the eighteenth-century English painter George Morland. While their styles and subject matter diverged widely, some of Nettleship's comments reveal an admiration of and even a trace of inspiration from the earlier artist's treatment of animals: "In painting horses ... he seems to have had an intuitive knowledge of the beast, and so powerful is the impression of getting at the root of things when pigs or horses form his main subject, that the men in these pictures are apt to seem shadowy things, wisps of a half-seen vision" (51).

Nettleship passed away at 33 Beaumont Street, London, on 31 August 1902. On 3 September he was interred at Kensal Green Cemetery. The parish church at Kettering, his birthplace, has a bronze memorial tablet designed by the artists Sir George Frampton, Sir Alfred East, and Thomas Cooper Gotch (the latter two were likewise born in Kettering).

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### **Selected Artworks by Nettleship**

*The Last Leap but One* (1881)

*A Dirge in the Desert* (1882)

*The Destroyer* (1889)

*A Big Drink* (1893)

*Come if You Dare!* (1894)

*La Joie de Vivre (The Joy of Life)* (1896)

*The Forest Fire* (1899)

*Into the Silent Sea* (1900)

Eight illustrations in Trevor-Battye, Aubyn. *Ice-bound on Kolguev: A Chapter in the Exploration of Arctic Europe to Which is Added a Record of the Natural History of the Island*. Westminster: Archibald Constable, 1895. frontispiece, 142, 165, 167, 184, 212, 237, 275.

### **Selected publications by Nettleship**

*Essays on Robert Browning's Poetry*. London: Macmillan, 1868. (Note: The second edition [London: Elkin Mathews, 1890] and the third edition [London: John Lane, 1895] were expanded versions appearing under the title *Robert Browning: Essays and Thoughts*.)

*George Morland and the Evolution from Him of Some Later Painters*. London: Seeley, 1898.

### **Selected Publications about Nettleship**

Cotton, J.S. "Nettleship, John Trivett (1841-1902)." Rev. Mark Pottle. *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004. Retrieved 28 July 2010 from [www.oxforddnb.com.myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/view/article/35202](http://www.oxforddnb.com.myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/view/article/35202).

Graves, Algernon. "Nettleship, John Trivett." *The Royal Academy of Arts: A Complete Dictionary of Contributors and Their Work from Its Foundation in 1769 to 1904*. Vol. 5. London: Henry Graves and George Bell and Sons, 1906. 349.

"J.T. Nettleship: Animal Painter." *The Magazine of Art*. New Series, Vol. 1. (January 1903): 75-79. (Note: This article includes reproductions of Nettleship's water-colour sketch "Lion"; three pencil studies of a boar, a tiger, three lion cubs, and a lion; and the oil paintings *La Joie de Vivre [The Joy of Life]*, *Into the Silent Sea*, and *Come if You Dare!*).

Mallalieu, H.L. "Nettleship, John Trivett." *The Dictionary of British Watercolour Artists up to 1920*. Woodbridge, Suffolk: Antique Collectors' Club, 2002. 71.

Mix, K.L. *A Study in Yellow: The Yellow Book and its Contributors*. New York: Greenwood, 1960.

- Nelson, J.G. *The Early Nineties: A View from the Bodley Head*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1971.
- “Obituary: Mr. J.T. Nettleship.” *The Times* 2 September 1902. 4.
- University College, London. *Calendar. Session MDCCCLXXIII–LXXIV*. London: Taylor and Francis, 1873.
- Untitled. *The Art Journal* (August 1907): 250. (Note: page 251 includes a reproduction of Nettleship’s powerful canvas *A Dirge in the Desert*.)
- Wood, Christopher. “Nettleship, John Trivett.” *Dictionary of British Art Volume IV: Victorian Painters*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Woodbridge, Suffolk: Antique Collectors’ Club, 1995. 376.