

WILLIAM BELL SCOTT'S "AILSA CRAIG":  
A PROBLEM IN EPISTEMOLOGY

This coastal view in oil is conventionally referred to as "A View of Ailsa Craig and the Isle of Arran." There is no evidence that Scott gave this title to his little study. More than likely, the painting remained untitled until the time it was sold. The title is useful in that it situates the scene in Ayrshire (south-west corner of Scotland) as a northwest prospect and indicates that the two faintly perceived, rather nondescript land masses in the distance are Ailsa Craig (the smaller one, in the center) and the Isle of Arran. But it is clear that neither Ailsa Craig nor the Isle of Arran is the primary focus of this painting, unlike, say, Clarkson Stanfield's drawing of Ailsa Craig surrounded by sailboats, where, in the words of Black's Guide to Scotland (1889), "the face of the rock, flattened and abruptly precipitous...with its imposing grandeur" comes through vividly.

Scott's painting belongs to a series of easel studies done in and around Penkill Castle, which overlooks the Firth of Clyde (as seen in the painting). Scott began the series in the summer of 1860, when this painting was done, and continued it intermittently up to his death in 1890. According to James Holloway of the National Gallery of Scotland, there are several studies of Ailsa Craig in the series, as well as studies of Penkill, the glens that surround it, and the nearby Penwhapple Stream (apostrophized by Rossetti in "The Stream's Secret"). Few of the drawings, watercolours and oils in the series have been exhibited or reproduced; they have remained in Penkill. Holloway compares them to a private diary:<sup>1</sup> "the small fragmentary leftovers of private life, never intended for public exhibition."

Scott is uncharacteristically reticent about these works. They are associated with his close friendship with Miss Alice Boyd, whose family owned Penkill and to whose legatees they have fallen. Miss Boyd began as Scott's drawing pupil and seems to have ended as his muse. In his Autobiographical Notes (1892), Scott describes the communion of minds between them in the contemplation of nature:

Every summer for nearly ten years I painted there at Penkill. The "friendship at first sight" was confirmed. Time could not strengthen it, but the impression or instinct of sympathy was changed by experience into satisfied conviction and confident re-