



JOHN WILLIAM MACKAIL

JOHN WILLIAM MACKAIL, O.M.

1859-1945

BY the death of J. W. Mackail on 13 December 1945 the Academy lost a distinguished ex-President, a fine classical scholar with a wide knowledge of English and European literature. He wrote many volumes of criticism, chiefly on Greek and English poetry, which, while they witness to profound learning, are instinct with the love of literature and especially of poetry for its own sake. This love, based on an intimate understanding, it was his aim to stimulate in others, because he believed that poetry was not merely an enhancement of life, but an inspiration and a guide.

He left some notes on his family and early life, in which he records that the Mackails were a sept of the Clan Cameron, not numerous but widely distributed over Scotland. The only celebrated member of the family was Hugh Mackail, 'the martyr', executed for high treason in Edinburgh at the age of 25 after the Pentland Rising of 1666. He became a national hero of the Covenanters, and is described in a contemporary elegy as 'a child of the Muses and the Graces', a description admirably fitted for his descendant.

Mackail's father, John, was the eldest son of a tenant-farmer in Ayrshire. He proceeded from Coylton school to Glasgow University, where he took the M.A. degree and qualified for ordination. G. R. Gleig, Chaplain of Chelsea Hospital, engaged him as tutor to his two boys, and after he had become Chaplain-General to the Forces, nominated him to the chaplaincy of the 42nd Royal Highlanders, then quartered at Malta. In the Disruption of 1843 Mackail joined the Free Church and in 1846 resigned his chaplaincy and returned to Scotland. In June that year he married Louisa Irving Carson, youngest daughter of A. R. Carson, a good classical scholar, then Rector of Edinburgh High School, whose wife was a cousin of Edward Irving. Appointed Minister to the Free Church in Calcutta he made many friends there, but in 1852 lung trouble developed and he returned to Scotland permanently invalided. The Mackails settled first in Rothesay, then at Ascog, and afterwards moved to Ayr for the rest of their lives.

Their son, John William, was born at Ascog on 26 August 1859. He went to school at the Ayr Academy, the Rector being Dr. James Macdonald, father of (Sir) George Macdonald, the

antiquarian, whose academic career was very closely like Mackail's. In 1874 Mackail entered Edinburgh University and took the four years' Arts course. William Yorke Sellar was then the Professor of Humanity and his influence did much to determine the direction of his pupil's interests. He also formed an intimate friendship with the Professor and his wife, which lasted throughout their lives. In 1877 with Sellar's encouragement he sat for a Balliol scholarship, and was elected to the Warner Exhibition, open to candidates of Scottish birth, and given the rank of Honorary Scholar. Before going into residence he spent some months at the University of Göttingen.

At Balliol he proved himself undoubtedly the most distinguished undergraduate scholar of his year. Besides first classes in Moderations and Lit. Hum. he won the Hertford and Ireland scholarships and later the Derby and Craven scholarships. To these classical distinctions he added the Newdigate Prize in 1881 for a poem on 'Thermopylae', a virile and straightforward presentation of the story with some fine but never exaggerated pieces of description, which is a characteristic foretaste of his English style. His tutors at Balliol were Evelyn Abbott, Lewis Nettleship, and Strachan-Davidson, with the last of whom he had a close and lasting friendship. It was an unusually brilliant undergraduate period at the college at that time and among Mackail's contemporaries were Samuel Alexander, A. C. Clark, H. C. Beeching, George Curzon, Sidney Lee, and Bowyer Nichols. The love of English and of poetry was strong among them, and Mackail combined with Beeching and Nichols to produce a volume of verse called *Love in Idleness*. When years afterwards at a college dinner the scholar who proposed Mackail's health twitted him with waste of his time, he replied: 'In the course of his life my friend will learn that love is a very serious thing and idleness still more serious.' Many of the poems were afterwards (1891) included in a volume by the same three authors called *Love's Looking-Glass*. Mackail's contributions show a sensitive ear for language and rhythm and not a little poetic vision. In lighter vein he joined in the production of the *Masque of Balliol*, a series of epigrams on dons and undergraduates, which won much notice at the time and was reprinted by Blackwell in 1939, when Mackail wrote an article on it in *The Times*.

After taking his degree in 1882 Mackail was elected a Fellow and Lecturer of Balliol and his friends expected him to settle down into what would, no doubt, have been a distinguished

academic career. But two years later he accepted from Lord Carlingford, the President of the Privy Council, an appointment as an Examiner in the Education Department of the Council, which subsequently became the Board of Education. Here he spent his official life until his resignation in 1919, having become an Assistant-Secretary in 1903. A colleague in the office writes that in the earlier years he was concerned mainly with routine work in the administration of elementary education, but that after the passing of the Education Act of 1902 he took an active and important part under the Hon. W. N. Bruce in establishing a satisfactory system of secondary education in the country. Grants were extended to other subjects than natural science, a balanced curriculum introduced, and adequate standards of finance and teaching were secured. Most of the public schools in this period voluntarily applied for inspection by the Board—a significant proof of the acceptance of its authority in secondary education. For all this, especially for the soundness of policy and the full support of the Inspectorate, Mackkail was largely responsible; in fact 'he took a leading part in creating a real revolution'.

Though Mackkail's work at the Board was thorough and conscientious, and in the later years distinguished, it happily was not so pressing but that it left him leisure to pursue his innate love of literature and to begin the steady flow of production which lasted through his lifetime. It will be convenient to consider independently his strictly classical work and his more general writings on English and other literatures; the distinction is to some extent false, for not only do several of the volumes contain essays which fall under both of these categories, but he habitually regarded all literature as one. His first publication in 1889 was a prose translation of Virgil's *Eclogues* and *Georgics*; it is written in the traditional style of translations, but with a freshness and an occasional brilliance of phrasing which attracted attention to it at once. There are signs that he felt himself more at home in the *Georgics* than in the *Eclogues*, of which he was later to write that 'the execution is uncertain, hesitating, sometimes extraordinarily feeble'. Of much greater importance was the edition of *Select Epigrams from the Greek Anthology*, published in 1890, for it was largely pioneer work. Mackkail accepted with an occasional variation the text of Jacobs and made little comment on the traditional minutiae of scholarship; for to him all through his life the classics were not material for ingenious investigations of textual and linguistic problems, but the living

expressions of experience. Nevertheless there is ample erudition in the introduction and notes, both built upon careful and critical study. The translations are neat, crisp, and felicitous; and two features in the introduction foreshadow Mackail's future work, one the sensitive insight into the thought and feeling of Greek poets at different periods, the other the constant reference to modern and especially to English poets and to sculpture, painting, and music. For in the broader sense he regarded all art as one. The book is an extraordinary achievement for a man of thirty, busy with his professional life. Perhaps even more remarkable is the volume on *Latin Literature*, published in 1895. Many generations of students have been brought up on it, and though later publications may be more strictly scholarly and intensive, yet re-read to-day it still has its freshness; its brilliance is not dimmed and its insight seems as true. It covers the whole range of Latin poetry and prose from Andronicus and Naevius to the early Christian writers and at no point suggests second-hand knowledge. Its judgements are sometimes startling in their boldness. That on the *Eclogues* has already been quoted, and to it may be added the statement that Silius Italicus' *Punic War* 'may fairly contend for the distinction of being the worst epic ever written'. With these we may contrast the enthusiastic, yet sober, criticisms of Lucretius and of the *Aeneid*. As might be expected, the prose-writers do not receive quite such sympathetic treatment as the poets, though there is a fine appreciation of Cicero as a letter-writer, whom 'the letters to Atticus place at the head of all epistolary stylists', revealing as they do 'what the real man was, with his excitable Italian temperament, his swift power of phrase, his sensitive affections'. In the early years of the present century Mackail was engaged on a verse translation of the *Odyssey*, the three volumes being published respectively in 1903, 1905, and 1910. He chose for this purpose a quatrain stanza, rhyming in the first, second, and fourth lines. It is done in an easy, simple style, reminiscent occasionally of William Morris, which allows a certain looseness of structure and a frequent overlapping of sentences from one quatrain to the next. But most readers have probably felt that, though it is a remarkable *tour de force*, the limitations of form and rhyme prevent it from giving the full spaciousness of the original. In 1910 appeared a volume of *Lectures on Greek Poetry*, but as it is one of the three which resulted from his tenure of the Professorship of Poetry at Oxford, it will better be considered with its two companions. These lectures also caused a gap in

Mackail's strictly classical publications, which were resumed in 1923 by a small volume on Virgil in the American series 'Our Debt to Greece and Rome'. In this book he does not, as other writers in the series had done, attempt to trace the influence of Virgil through the centuries, but rather to show the significance of Virgil at the present time, and that, too, not so much directly as by a penetrating study of the poet's environment and of his aims at different periods of his life. It is a small but stimulating book. *Classical Studies* (1925) is a collection of detached papers and lectures written or delivered at various times. Some of them have a direct bearing on the educational value of Greek and Latin, such as the lecture entitled 'What is the Good of Greek?' given at Melbourne in 1923 and the Report of the Prime Minister's Committee on the Classics in Education, drafted by Mackail in 1921. Others are more definitely literary; outstanding among these are a paper on the 'Virgilian Underworld', in which he draws attention to the apparently Minoan element in Virgil's description of the palace of Dis, and a delightful study of 'Penelope in the Odyssey', in which her character becomes alive and substantial.

The largest undertaking among Mackail's classical works was certainly the edition of the *Aeneid* which was published in 1930. Professional scholars expressed themselves as disappointed with the book, for it lacked much to which they were accustomed. There was no attempt at a recension of the text and Hirtzel's 'vulgate' (Oxford Classical Texts) was taken as its basis. Critical notes were very brief and only recorded variants of the six 'primary' manuscripts. On many of the famous cruces there was no discussion of rival opinions, but merely a subjective and sometimes dogmatic statement of 'the right view'. But such criticism was based on a misconception of what Mackail had tried to do. He was not unaware of previous criticism and had himself digested most of it. Nor did he despise the minutiae of textual, linguistic, and metrical comment, but for him it was ancillary to the appreciation of poetry as poetry: 'a great part of my labour', he writes in the preface, 'has consisted in discarding accumulated material in order that the work of art may not be encumbered by masses of scaffolding.' In 'A Lesson on an Ode of Horace' given in a course for Teachers of the Classics in 1920 (*Studies in Humanism*, pp. 60 ff.), Mackail had given a fascinating example of his method; 'encumbrances' were 'discarded' and the structure and language of the Ode revealed as poetry. So in the *Aeneid* there is much in the introduction and

the prefaces to each of the Books on the structure and intention, with a subtle and delicate detection of unfinished or unadjusted passages. The notes, which often deal with points unnoticed in the 'professional' editions, elucidate and illustrate Virgil's meaning and frequently give the *mot juste* for translation. They are, as a sympathetic reviewer remarked, 'a treasure-house', and the edition as a whole is to be used 'as a valuable supplement to rather than as a substitute for the older ones'. Regarded as what its editor intended it to be, the *Aeneid* is an original commentary written from an angle of vision all too rarely taken up by commentators on the classics.

The election of Mackail to the Professorship of Poetry at Oxford in 1906 gave him the opportunity of using his store of literary knowledge in a wider field than hitherto. He lectured more frequently than most holders of the Chair and his lectures were well attended and highly appreciated. He published them in three substantial volumes: the *Springs of Helicon*, 1909, *Lectures on Greek Poetry*, 1910, and *Lectures on Poetry*, 1911. Though the bulk of the poetry on which he commented as Professor is either Greek or English, he included in the last of the three volumes lectures given elsewhere on Virgil and on the *Divine Comedy*—Mackail was a great Dante scholar—and two of the Oxford lectures were on Arabic poetry, which he knew only in translations. The range is wide and the subjects might at first sight seem miscellaneous. But through them all run two threads which bind them together. These are enunciated in the 'Definition of Poetry', which opens the third volume, and become more explicit in the concluding lecture on 'The Progress of Poetry'. The first is the conception of poetry as at once a function of life and therefore sharing life's quality of movement, the interpretation of life and therefore organic, and also a pattern of life, which, in words which Mackail quotes more than once from W. B. Yeats, 'condenses out of the flying vapours of the world an image of human perfection'. And the second thread is the belief in the continuous progress of poetry, at least in the western world. This he sees, as Gray did in the Ode, constantly referred to in these volumes, as passing from Greece to Rome and from them both to England, always moving, constantly changing, yet ever the same, like the movements of a flock of sheep, which, as Mackail quotes from Lucretius, seen from a distant hill looks like a still patch of white. He does not deny the occasional advent of other influences, such as that of Italian and even of Arabic poetry, which influenced the early

French epics and through them Chaucer. It is perhaps not remarkable that there is no reference to German poetry, which might seem to lie outside the general current, but it is odd in one to whom the language and thought of the Bible meant so much that there is but little recognition of Hebrew poetry as a formative influence on the English poets.

It is not possible within the limits of a short memoir to give any full account of these three notable volumes; all that can be done is to record a few salient points. The *Springs of Helicon* deals with three great English poets and contains studies of Chaucer, Spenser, and Milton. Each of the three is seen against his historical and cultural background, and the development from one to the other is clearly traced with passing estimates of intermediate writers and tendencies. Chaucer roughly represents medieval romance, influenced by French and Italian poets and specially by Boccaccio; Spenser comes at the Elizabethan turning-point between romance and classicism; and Milton with relics of romanticism in his earlier work passes to full classicism in *Paradise Lost*. In all three reviews the main features are clearly depicted and occasional criticisms on structure, language, and metre give a glimpse of the rich learning and careful study which lie behind the apparently easy manner of the discourse. The *Lectures on Greek Poetry* form the most substantial volume of the series and range from Homer to Apollonius Rhodius. The treatment conforms to that in the *Springs of Helicon*, Homer being regarded as 'medieval', the lyricists representing the entry of romance, Sophocles the completely classical, and the Alexandrians the embodiment of developed romance, largely in a period of decline, with the exception of Theocritus, who as the pioneer in pastoral poetry and in virtue of his outstanding gifts is to be reckoned among the classics. Perhaps the outstanding lectures in the volume are those on 'The Homeric Epic', which contains fine criticism of Hesiod and the *Odyssey*, and that on Theocritus, which brings out his characteristic qualities and compares him in detail, not without some strain, to Tennyson. The last volume of *Lectures on Poetry* is more miscellaneous in character and contains discourses on Virgil—the only Latin poet dealt with in the series—on the *Divine Comedy* with an interesting examination of the meaning of 'comedy' as used by Dante, two lectures on Shakespeare, and two on Arabic poetry as the inspiration of the French ballad-epics. It opens and concludes with the two lectures on the 'Definition of Poetry' and the 'Progress of Poetry', which have already been noticed as giving

the underlying theory on which all Mackail's criticism is based. The three volumes constitute a massive and impressive record of the five years of his Professorship.

Mackail's critical work after the Oxford period is contained in three volumes, *Studies of English Poets*, 1926, the *Approach to Shakespeare*, 1930, and *Studies in Humanism*, 1938. In these books he put together lectures and papers read at different times to learned societies and other audiences. In the first volume he treats of some of the less known English poets, Fanshawe, Thomson, Young, and Collins, and, though his heart was always with the great classics, he shows the same penetration and understanding of the lesser lights. The last three lectures are devoted to poets of his own day, William Morris, Swinburne, and Tennyson; for all he claims a place among the great English poets. *Studies in Humanism* has a still wider range and includes such practical subjects as 'What is the Good of Greek?' and the lesson given to a vacation teachers' course on 'An Ode of Horace', to which reference has already been made. Mackail here ranges abroad and treats of Dante, Ariosto, and Erasmus; there is also a charming lecture on the 'Pilgrim's Progress', in which he maintains that Bunyan's allegory has a vivid reality both in the story and in the characters, and an amusing discussion of Bentley's *Milton*, where he insists that the emendation of texts requires common sense above all else. The *Approach to Shakespeare* has greater unity, being a series of lectures delivered on the Lord Northcliffe foundation of University College, London. Mackail had dealt occasionally with Shakespeare in the earlier books, but here, speaking to students, he was able to give rein to his admiration and enthusiasm. There is a valuable lecture on 'The Shakespearian Canon' and successive chapters on the Comedies, the Tragedies, and the Romances. Each play is submitted to acute, but always sympathetic, analysis, and the burden which runs through the whole book is the simple exhortation: 'Read Shakespeare, read him and re-read him and absorb him.'

This large output of critical work is not easy to judge. If one attempts to read the volumes on end, it can hardly be denied that they produce a certain impression of monotony; for Mackail's faithfulness to his own principles and his insistence on poetry as at once the interpretation and the pattern of life result in a reiteration which is sometimes tedious. But the lectures—even those belonging to a series—should, of course, be read as individual wholes and judged, somewhat like a drama,

by the effect produced on the audience at the moment. And in all cases the result must have been to send them with renewed eagerness and a fresh insight to the reading of the poets of whom he spoke. Again the very precision and beauty of his style—marred perhaps here and there by a certain preciousness of epithet—may pall; but it is often relieved by a subtle and penetrating humour. In a sense, no doubt, Mackail was an amateur; he was not a Jebb or a Housman or a de Sélincourt. But two answers may be given to such criticism. In the first place it is impossible to read any one of his appreciations without becoming conscious of the learning on which it is based and the long study of technical details which was given to its preparation; the very facility of the finished work is deceptive. And this was intentional; learning was for Mackail an aid to criticism. Secondly—and far more important—he was an amateur in the fullest and best sense. What filled his own mind and what he strove to convey to others was the true love of poetry, which he sometimes felt was being lost in the mass of academic analysis. He loved poetry because he had experienced its supreme value as a guide to life, and he had the artist's sense of the beauty of words as the expression of thought. It was this love which he wanted to kindle, or to rekindle, in his own generation, and perhaps, if he had been asked for 'the conclusion of the whole matter', he would just have said 'Read poetry'.

Apart from his classical and general literary criticism there were two other fields which Mackail entered. In the early period he published two works of a religious character, the *Sayings of the Lord Jesus Christ*, in 1894, and *Biblia Innocentium*, the Old Testament in 1893 and the New in 1901. The former is a collection of our Lord's sayings culled from the four Gospels and arranged under headings, such as 'The new Law', 'The Mission of the Church', 'The Cost of Service', &c. The wording of the Authorized Version is not closely adhered to and the Greek often retranslated into more modern phraseology. It is a valuable anthology, putting together what is scattered in the Gospels. *Biblia Innocentium* are stories told for children in simple phrases, in the first volume from the Old Testament and the Apocrypha, in the second from the Gospels and the Acts with the addition of some of the legends of the early saints. The books are probably unknown to-day, but would be admirable for use in the primary schools—which is indeed most likely what they were intended for.

The second field which Mackail entered—and adorned—was

that of biography. Twice he was asked to write memoirs of old friends, those of George Wyndham (1925) and of J. L. Strachan-Davidson (1926), his tutor at Balliol and afterwards Master of the college. Their subjects form an interesting contrast, Wyndham the politician, poet, and lover of the arts, living a full life in the world, Strachan-Davidson academic, engrossed in the affairs of his college and university, leading a life without incident and writing in the comparatively narrow field of Roman Constitutional Law. But in both memoirs Mackail's interest lay in the personality and 'flavour' of the man, which he admirably brought out. Of the two Strachan-Davidson's is probably the more successful, since quotations could be made freely from his letters; Wyndham's letters are printed *in extenso* and form the greater part of the two large volumes. The *Life of William Morris* (1899) is written on a much larger scale; it is a book to which one can return again and again and always enjoy. Mackail's marriage in 1888 to Margaret, only daughter of Sir Edward and Lady Burne-Jones, brought him inside the circle of 'The Brotherhood', and Morris and his family were intimate friends. He makes judicious use of letters, sometimes in short quotations, sometimes in full reproduction. The incidents and background of the life are vividly drawn, and the complex character of the poet, artist, and socialist agitator is welded into a single picture, which is dominated by the individual 'Topsy', always himself at home and in public. Passages like the description of the 'Red House', life at Kelmscott, and the final comparison with Dr. Johnson dwell in the reader's mind. The book had no doubt a wider appeal than most of Mackail's works, but there would probably be general agreement that it is the best of them, and one of the best of English biographies.

Not content only to write on the subjects which he had at heart, Mackail worked hard for them. He was one of the founders of the Classical Association and delivered the address at the opening meeting at Oxford in 1905, and often read papers at the annual meetings or to one or other of the local branches. He was for many years Chairman of the Council and President of the Association in 1922. Late in life he was elected President of the newly founded Virgil Society. He gave a similar devotion to the English Association, of which he was President in 1929. He was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1914, became a member of the Council in 1921, and served with distinction as President from 1932 to 1936. Many honours fell to his lot. He was appointed Professor of Ancient Literature in the Royal

Academy in 1924 and liked to recall that he had Dr. Johnson as his predecessor. Balliol made him an Honorary Fellow in 1922. He was an Honorary LL.D. of Edinburgh, St. Andrews, Adelaide, and Belfast, a D.Lit. of London, a Litt.D. of Cambridge, and his own University conferred the D.Lit. upon him at Lord Halifax's inaugural Encaenia in 1934, when it gave him pleasure that the Public Orator presented him in a set of Latin Hexameters. In the following year His Majesty conferred on him the Order of Merit, a signal recognition of the position which he held in the world of letters.

Mackail was a handsome man, 'rather tall and stately', as the Balliol rhyme of his undergraduate days described him; in later years his white hair, hardly thinned by time, and his white moustache enhanced the natural beauty of his face. He had a beautiful speaking voice, and a scrupulous precision of enunciation with a slight Scottish intonation added to its charm. He was as a rule a reticent man, and though he talked well on subjects which interested him, few but his intimates knew much of his inner life. His manner was always suave and courteous and indicative of a consistent humanity of outlook. He was a loyal and devoted friend and many will remember the warmth of his greeting. He had in fact, to use the words of Gilbert Murray's *Religio Grammatici*, quoted by the President of the Classical Association after his death, 'the philosophic temper, the gentle judgement, the interest in knowledge and beauty for their own sake'. His house in Kensington was the resort of men of letters and of artists, and there Mackail's own charm was supplemented by the gracious hospitality of Mrs. Mackail. They had one son and two daughters; two of their children, Denis Mackail and Angela Thirkell, are well-known writers, though in a different sphere from that of their father.

CYRIL BAILEY