

MICKLE, WILLIAM JULIUS, (originally MEIKLE,) the translator of Camoens' *Lusiad*, and an original poet of considerable merit, was one of the sons of the Rev. Alexander Meikle, who in early life was a dissenting clergyman in London, and assistant to Dr Watt, but finally settled as minister of the parish of Langholm, in Dumfries-shire, where the subject of this memoir was born, in 1734. The mother of the poet was Julia Henderson, of a good family in Mid Lothian. The Rev. Mr Meikle, whose learning is testified by his having been employed in the translation of Bayle's Dictionary, was his son's first teacher. The young poet was afterwards, on the death of his father, sent to reside in Edinburgh, with his aunt, the wife of Mr Myrtle, an eminent brewer; there he attended the High School for some years. It is said, however, that, though his passion for poetry was early displayed, he was by no means attached to literature in general, till the age of thirteen, when, Spenser's *Fairy Queen* falling in his way, he became passionately fond of that author, and immediately began to imitate his manner. At sixteen, Mickle was called from school to keep the accounts of his aunt, who, having lost her husband, carried on the business on her own account. Not long after, he was admitted to a share in the business, and his prospects were, at the outset of life, extremely agreeable. For reasons, however, which have not been explained, he was unfortunate in trade; and about the year 1763, became bankrupt. Without staying to obtain a settlement with his creditors, he proceeded to London, tried to procure a commission in the marine service, but, the war being just then concluded, failed in his design. Before leaving the Scottish capital, he had devoted himself, only too much, perhaps, to poetry. At eighteen, he had composed two tragedies and half an epic poem, besides some minor and occasional pieces. Being now prompted to try what poetry could do for him, he introduced himself and several of his pieces to the notice of lord Lyttelton, who, it is understood, conceived a respectful opinion of his abilities, and recommended him to persevere in versification, but yielded him no more substantial proof of favour.

Mickle appears to have been rescued from these painful circumstances, by being appointed corrector to the Clarendon press, at Oxford. This was a situation by no means worthy of his abilities; but, while not altogether uncongenial to his taste, it had the advantage of leaving him a little leisure for literary pursuits, and thus seemed to secure to him what has always been found of the greatest consequence to friendless men of genius,—a fixed routine of duties, and a steady means of livelihood, while a portion of the mental energies are left salient for higher objects. Accordingly, from the year 1765, Mickle published a succession of short poems, some of which attracted considerable notice, and made him known respectfully to the world of letters. He also ventured into the walk of religious controversy, and wrote pamphlets against Voltaire and Mr Harewood, besides contributing frequently to the newspaper called the *Whitehall Evening Post*.

In his early youth, he had perused Castara's translation of the *Lusiad* of Camoens, and ever since had entertained the design of executing an English version. He now, for the first time, found leisure and encouragement to attempt so laborious a task. The first canto was published as a specimen in 1771, and met with so much approbation, as to induce him to abandon his duties at Oxford, and devote himself entirely to this more pleasing occupation. Having retired to a farm house at Forest-hill, he applied himself unremittingly to the labour, subsisting upon the money which he drew from time to time as subscriptions for his work. In 1775, the version was completed; and, that no means might be wanting for obtaining it a favourable reception, he published it, with a dedication to a nobleman of high influence, with whom his family had been connected. The work obtained a large measure of public approbation, which it has ever since retained; but its reception with the patron was not what the translator had been led to expect. A copy was bound in a most expensive manner, and sent to that high personage; but, months passing on without any notice even of its receipt, a friend of the poet, in high official situation, called upon his lordship, to learn, if possible, the cause of his silence. He found that some frivolous literary adversary of Mickle had prejudiced the noble lord against the work, and that the presentation copy was, till that moment, unopened. We have here, perhaps, one of the latest instances of that prostration of genius before the shrine of rank, which was

formerly supposed to be so indispensable to literary success, but was, in reality, even in the most favourable instances, only productive of paltry and proximate advantages. The whole system of dedication was an absurdity. Books were in reality written for the public, and to the public did their authors look for that honour which forms the best motive for literary exertion. To profess to devote their works more particularly to some single member of the community, was an impertinence to all the rest, that ought never to have been practised; and we might the more readily denounce the above instance of "patrician meanness," as Mickle's first biographer terms it, if we could see any rationality in the author expecting so much more from one individual, for his labours, than from another.

During the progress of his translation, Mickle composed a tragedy, under the title of the Siege of Marseilles, which was shown to Garrick, and rejected on account of its want of stage effect. It was then revised and altered by Mr Home, author of the tragedy of Douglas; and a proposal was made to the author to bring it forward in the Edinburgh theatre. This idea was afterwards abandoned, and the tragedy remained in abeyance till the conclusion of the *Lusiad*, when the author made another effort to bring it out on the London stage. It was shown to Mr Harris of Covent Garden, and again rejected. After this repulse, Mickle relinquished all expectations of advantage from the theatre, though he permitted the unfortunate play to be shown to Sheridan, from whom he never again received it.

The *Lusiad* was so well received, that a second edition was found necessary in 1779. In the same year, Mickle published a pamphlet on the India question, which was at one time expected to obtain for him some marks even of royal favour. In May, the most fortunate incident in his life took place. His friend, Mr Johnston, formerly governor of South Carolina, was then appointed to the command of the Romney man-of-war, and Mickle, being chosen by him as his secretary, went out to sea in his company, in order to partake of whatever good fortune he might encounter, during a cruise against the Spaniards. In November, he arrived at Lisbon, where he was received with very flattering marks of attention, and stayed six months, during which time he collected many traits of the Portuguese character and customs, with the intention, never fulfilled, of combining them in a book. During his residence in Portugal, he wrote his best poem, *Almada Hill*, which was published in 1781. The cruise had been highly successful, and Mickle, being appointed joint agent for the prizes, was sent home to superintend the legal proceedings connected with their condemnation. His own share of the results was very considerable, and, together with the fortune he acquired by his wife, whom he married in June, 1782, at once established his independence. The remainder of his life was spent in literary leisure, at Wheatley, in Oxfordshire, where he died, October 25, 1788, after a short illness, leaving one son. Mickle's poems are not voluminous, and have been eclipsed, like so much of the other verse of the last century, by the infinitely superior productions of the present or immediately by-past age. Many of them, however, show considerable energy of thought; others, great sweetness of versification; and his translation has obtained the rank of a classic. It is not to be overlooked, moreover, that the authorship of one exquisite song in his native dialect, *Colins' Welcome*, is ascribed to him, though not upon definite grounds.

After Mickle's death, his Scottish creditors revived their claims upon his executors. An Edinburgh agent, named Henderson, having got the debts vested in his own person, raised an action in England for their recovery. Not having furnished himself with the necessary vouchers, he lost his action, with costs, which the executors employed another Scottish agent to recover. This latter individual—to whom we are indebted for some of the information in the present memoir—being aware that the debts might have still been available in a Scottish court, succeeded in getting the business managed extra-judicially; so that the poet's representatives were no more troubled with his Scottish creditors.