

DANIEL MACLISE, R.A.

WE give a portrait of Mr. Maclise this week, as one of our gallery of large portraits (to which from time to time we add) of men who may fairly be regarded as "representative" in their respective departments of literature, science, and art. We do not propose, in this instance, to dwell largely on the aesthetic characteristics or Mr. Maclise's works—the careful consideration we have devoted to them for many years, as they have successively appeared, and the familiarity of the public with them, preclude the necessity of our undertaking so arduous a task; but, rather, simply to review the career of a painter whose life-labour furnishes an extraordinary abundance of matter for the chronicler.

Daniel Maclise was born in Cork, Jan. 25, 1811. His father (who was a descendant or a Scotch family, one of whose members fought for the Stuarts under Prince Charles, whilst another was wounded at Fontenoy) held a commission in the Elgin Fencibles, but retired, and, leaving Scotland, to settle in Ireland, established himself in business at Cork, where he married a lady of that city. The offspring of the marriage was three sons—the subject of this notice, a brother distinguished as a surgeon, and a third brother who attained rank in the army. While a child Maclise showed a great aptitude for drawing, and he was very desirous of becoming a painter; but his parents—after he had gained some honours at school and at Trinity College, Dublin—being unwilling to commit him to a profession then far more precarious than it is now, placed him in a banking house in Cork. Opposition, however, and uncongenial employment, as so often happens in the case of men who have risen to eminence, only tended, like the pruning of a vigorous young sapling, to strengthen the growth of the main stem of his nature in the direction of art; or, to modify the figure, the tree never inclined to the initiatory bend of the twig. Stories could be told of how he used to scribble in his father's ledgers his own legerdemain, and illuminate the L. S. D. with marginal commentaries; but suffice it to say that at the age of sixteen he finally exchanged the desk for the easel, managing to maintain himself by the sale of sketches and the taking of likenesses, his first money having been earned, it is said, by drawing portraits of all the officers of the 14th Light Dragoons, then stationed in the neighbourhood. He had some years previously become a student of the Cork "Society of Arts," where he received the first deep art - impression, which probably determined his future career, on seeing stand before him in a great saloon made by flooring over the pit of a theatre, and in the shape of fine casts admirably lighted, many of the glorious masterpieces of the antique. This noble collection of singularly perfect casts was presented by Pope Pius VII to George IV., and by the King presented to the late Lord Listowel, who founded the institution referred to. The collection forming the students' models of the Royal

Academy are but poor English recastings of these Cork plasters—not, like them, casts from the original statues, as always stated; and when young Maclise came to London and entered the antique school of the Royal Academy, then at Somerset House, he was so disappointed with the recastings of his old friends, and the dingy room., that his first impatient idea was to return to Cork. To the Cork days we ourselves must return in order to mention a memorable sketching tour through the Wicklow mountain district, in the course of which he was benighted, and had to sleep one night with stones for a bed and heather for a coverlet. He returned from this tour with a rich fund of pictorial material, comprising sketches of scenery and characteristic scenes of Irish peasant life. The ready versatility of his talents, the geniality of his humour, a handsome presence and powerful frame, nearly 6 ft. 2 in. in stature, gained him friends and respect in the wilds of Wicklow, as they afterwards won for him a welcome in the choicest London society. As a characteristic illustration of the artist at this period, it is related that upon one occasion, when a masquerade had been got up for a charitable society, he added considerably to the funds by personating an itinerant artist, throwing off grotesque sketches of the persons present, which were rapidly sold on the spot for the benefit of the institution. For several years he studied anatomy under Dr. Woodroffe, proceeding from drawings to dissection, and thus laid the foundation for that extraordinary power of drawing the human figure under every possible condition of foreshortening and without the aid of models; and these studies will, perhaps, explain the marked attention to form rather than colour in so many of his works. Settled resolution of character, courageous disregard of difficulties, and untiring industry equally distinguish Mr. Maclise's early and later life, and may very plainly be read throughout his works. In 1828 he came to London and entered the Royal Academy, where his progress was unusually rapid and successful. The year of his entry he won the medal in the antique; the medal for the best copy of a picture (by Guido) followed; and the series of his triumphs was crowned by his carrying off the gold medal for the best historical composition, the prescribed subject being "The Triumph of Hercules." The "travelling studentship" of the Academy—i.e., a pension for enabling the artist to study three years in Italy—was now at his command, but he preferred to remain in England. The summer of 1830 he had, however, spent in Paris, studying in the galleries of the Louvre and Luxembourg. During the three or four years between his entering the schools of the Academy and his winning the gold medal Mr. Maclise laboured hard in making designs and sketches for booksellers and others, and in painting portraits. His caricature sketches of literary and other celebrities which appeared about this time, in connection with a text by Dr. Maginn, in *Fraser's*

*Magazine*—to which also he was a poetical contributor—may be remembered by some of our readers. Henceforward the period of studentship is passed, and the artist launches into professional life. In 1832 Mr. Maclise revisited Cork, returned to London, and painted his elaborate and spirited illustration of "Allhallow Eve" as celebrated in an Irish farmstead, which, together with the "Love Adventure of Francis I. with Diana of Poitiers," were exhibited at the Royal Academy in the following year. His first exhibited picture was, however, we believe, the rather melodramatic but brilliantly handled and effectively-coloured "Mokanna unveiling to Zelia," from Moore's "Veiled Prophet of Khorassan," in "Lalla Rookh" which appeared at the British Institution in the same year. "The installation of Captain Rock," an Irish subject, exhibited in the following year, deepened the favourable impression produced by the preceding; and the "Vow before the Ladies and that curious chivalric emblem] the Peacock" (1835), established the position of the young artist as one of the most promising painters of the day, and secured his election as A.R.A. This picture, like many others down to the present time, revealed the strong bias of the artist's sympathies, fancy, and taste towards medieval chivalry, with all its sentimental and theatrical unreality, its fantastic romance, and profusion of splendid accessories—that is, more especially as conceived by the modern poet and rhetorician. Full scope was here found for the purely Celtic imagination of the painter—that source at once of his strength and weakness, his equally obvious merits and faults, his vigour and rich picturesqueness, his crowded, exuberant invention, and his extravagant emphasis. We must be content to enumerate the principal exhibited and public works (several very large and complex) of many succeeding years, but their mere titles will sufficiently indicate the artist's wonderful fertility and range of power. They are, in approximate chronological order, "The Ribbonmen," "Puck Disenchanted Bottom," "Henry VIII's Interview with Anne Boleyn at the Masque," "Interview (imaginary) between Charles I. and Cromwell," "Macbeth and the Witches;" "Bohemian Gipsies," handled with great vigour; "Myrrha and Sardanapalus;" "Robin Hood and Richard Coeur de Lion in the Greenwood," a colossal, important picture; "Christmas in the Baron's Hall," a large and most effective picture of the procession of the boar's head, exhibited in 1838, and for which he was elected R.A. in 1840; "Banquet Scene in Macbeth" (1840), one of his most remarkable works, painted for Lord Chesterfield, re-exhibited in the International Exhibition of '62; "Gil Blas and the Parasite" and "Scene from the Play of Midas," both painted for the Queen; "Gil Blas Dressed en Cavalier," "Salvator Rosa Painting Massaniello," "The Knight's Farewell to his Ladye," "The

Return of the Knight," "The Hypochondriac," "Malvolio Smiling on Olivia" and "The Play-Scene in Hamlet" (both in the National Gallery, South Kensington; the latter famous picture supplied the engraving for

the current year of the Art-Union of London), "Olivia and Sophia Dressing Moses for the Fair," "The Sleeping Beauty," "Hunt the Slipper," "Origin of the Harp," an illustration of Moore; "The Actors' Reception of the Author, in 'Gil Blas'" (1843), "Sabrina Releasing the Lady from the Enchanted Chair, 'Comus'" (1844), which he repeated in fresco in the summer house of Buckingham Palace; "Ordeal by Touch" (1846), "The Sacrifice of Noah" (1814), "Chivalry of the Reign of Henry VIII." (1848), and his celebrated design of Shakespeare's "Seven Ages," originally intended for the embellishment of a porcelain card-tray; "Spirit of Justice," painted in oil, and (for the House of Lords) in fresco; "The Gross of Green Spectacles,"

"Caxton in his Printing-office" (Almonry, Westminster) (1851),

"Alfred in the Tent of Gethrum the Dane" (1852), "The Marriage of Strongbow with the Princess Eva" (1854), "Scene from 'As You Like It'—Orlando about to Engage with the Wrestler" (1855), "Peter the Great Visited by William III. at Deptford" (1857), "Here Nelson fell" (1866)—oil study for the great picture in the Westminster Palace—"Scene from 'Othello,'" and "A Winter's Night's Tale" (1867), For Mr. Maclise's absence from the Academy for seven years, from 1859, we shall presently account. Besides these and many minor oil pictures, the artist has painted several portraits, including those of Lord Lytton, Dickens, Forster, and Macready. He has also produced innumerable designs for book, and art-manufactures; among the former, Moore's "Irish Melodies," Bulwer's "Pilgrims of the Rhine," "The Keepsake" and other annuals, &c. The most important of his pencil designs are the very extensive and elaborate series illustrative of the "Story of the Norman Conquest" (1857)—designs which the artist is said to have regarded merely as a relaxation for his leisure, during, we believe, twelve years, and which have been reproduced by the Art Union of London.

We have scarcely yet alluded to those great national wall paintings in the Westminster Palace, which, in all, cost even this giant in art about ten years of extremely arduous and conscientious toil, and the most important of which are, we trust, executed in a medium which will preserve the best fruits of his genius and keep alive his fame for many generations. Mr. Maclise was selected by the Fine-Art-Commissioners, in 1844, from among the exhibitors in the Westminster Hall competition of that year, to prepare a design for one of the subjects proposed for the decoration of the House of Lords; and the "Spirit of Chivalry," painted on the wall in 1847, was the result of the competition. The following year he was requested to execute the corresponding fresco of "Justice," which was not long after painted. Early in 1858 Mr. Maclise undertook, with considerable reluctance, and only, we believe, at the urgent request of the late Prince Consort, the herculean task of decorating the

whole of the eighteen compartments of the Royal gallery, the most spacious apartment of the Westminster Palace. Previously to commencing on the walls, Mr. Maclise made a journey to Berlin, by desire of the Commissioners, to investigate the claims to permanency of the new medium of water-glass adopted by Kaulbach for his great works in the new museum, in order to ascertain the desirability of employing it as a substitute for the methods of fresco, which had already proved so lamentably fleeting. His report (officially published) proving favourable, "stereochromy" was accepted, and, following Mr. Maclise's example, has been adopted by the other painters, with the exception of the late Mr. Dyce, engaged on the decoration of the palace. Seven years without intermission or holiday, early and late, were spent in executing, in the two great central compartments of the gallery (each measuring, 16 ft. by 12 ft.) the vast and complicated paintings. "The Meeting of Wellington and Blucher after Waterloo," and "The Death of Nelson," It would be idle to attempt either to describe or to criticise works so well known in the space at command. Popularly, no doubt, they are regarded as the noblest, as they are the most colossal, British works of our time. Their principal pictorial fault, though less serious in a decorative work of this character, is the artist's besetting fault of overcrowding. On the other hand, no competent critic can deny to them merits great and manifold. However, Mr. Maclise received no thanks from Parliament, no distinction from his Sovereign; his remuneration, even when augmented, was paltry and insufficient; and we must add that—less fortunate than one or two of his brother artists at Westminster—he received no word of justly due recognition or appreciation from the "leading journal." The empty official compliment offered him by the Commissioners was neutralised by the apparent slight of cancelling the unexecuted portion of his contract, with the intention ostensibly of revising the scale of future payment, at the same time that an augmentation of the inadequate payments to all the artists at Westminster was made, in consequence of the complaint of one, to which complaint Mr. Maclise had been no party. The Commission, however, ceased to exist, and no arrangement for prosecuting his task was made with Mr. Maclise, although he had prepared designs for three compartments, similar, we understand, to those executed by other painters at Westminster, and in consideration of which one had received large sums in advance. Of course, the distinguished artist cannot now be expected to resume the work, but is this worthy treatment by the great British nation of a national servant, himself the embodiment of that chivalric honour which he so loves to celebrate on canvas? We know not from what causes (though it is not hard to imagine what they may be), but we have to regret the fact that Mr. Maclise, though still in the prime of intellectual and physical vigour, has retired, like his old friend Turner, into seclusion.

Our Portrait of Mr. Maclise is engraved from a photograph by Mr. John Watkins, of Parliament-street, Westminster.

[Taken from *Illustrated London News*, Vol. LII, 1868, p.470]