William Mulready, Ennis-born Artist, 1786-1863

BRIAN FALLON*

1986 marks the bicentenary of the birth in Ennis of one of the leading artists of his time, "His Majesty King Mulready" as his friend the novelist and art critic William Makepiece Thackerary once described him. This article outlines his life and briefly assesses his relatively small but notable output.[1]

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William Mulready, born in Ennis 200 years ago this year, was one of the success stories of Irish emigration. The son of a penniless Irish worker who had moved to England, he became an Eminent Victorian and an example of what was considered the ornament of the age, the self-made man: Mulready was struggling from his teens, even if he was usually struggling upwards—socially and artistically.

There were 400,000 Irish emigrants in Britain in early Victorian times, mostly filling the slums and the lowest categories of work. The Scots were liked, or at least respected, as loyal, hardworking, thrifty and clean, but the Irish were regarded as lawless, dirty thriftless and above all lazy. Mulready made himself, by tough self-discipline and a streak of natural caution, into one of the most admired artists of his time. Irishmen played a remarkable part in early and middle Victorian art—witness Mulready himself, James Arthur O'Connor, Danby and Maclise, not to mention Foley in sculpture. Thackeray, who was a competent art critic, thought Mulready the leading painter of his day, which if Thackeray was correct would make him the best since Turner. That is understandable enough from the novelist Thackeray, a friend and companion, but it is hard to grasp just what other critics of the time meant by comparing him with Holbein and Dürer and Titian. Certainly Mulready himself never tried to climb such Himalayas of painting. He is a Little Master, but that in itself is a lot. The mid-century was not a golden age of English painting, but Mulready's reputation survived his death and lasted into this century; it was not a purely local one either: the French thought highly of him and awarded him the Legion of Honour.

Not only did Mulready have to cope with racial prejudice; he lived at a time when artists themselves were still barely respectable. Like actors, they had to establish their social position, and what Irving and other leading actors did for their own profession two generations later, the Royal Academy did for painters and sculptors. At the start of the 19th century, art as a profession had a dubious status, apart from a privileged few who had royal patrons, or who painted society portraits and full-dress 'history' pictures. It is easy to sneer at this now, easy to forget the lives of so many eighteenth-century artists as scene painters, coach painters, drunken wasters like Morland, depending on the whim of some aristocratic patron. The R.A. not only classed them as 'artists', but supplied them with a forum for showing and selling their work to the cultured public, insofar as one existed. By the time of Mulready's death, in 1863, it was a solid profession like a surgeon's or lawyer's—and sometimes as well paid (he left £3,900, a big sum for then).

*Chief Critic, *The Irish Times,* D'Olier Street, Dublin 2.

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[1]This article is compiled for the most part from the following shorter articles by the author, published in *The Irish Times*: "Clare's Colourist", 24/5/1980; "The Clare Champion", 6/8/1986; "William Mulready: The Successful Emigrant", 15/11/1986.

Most of us think of him—if we think of him at all, that is—as a superior sentimentalist, a genre artist who had more sensitivity and a better colour sense than his Victorian compeers. But he is more interesting than that, and even in his private life he was not the type of blandly respectable tradesman-artist who made up the bulk of the R.A.'s of the time.

Although his parents were poor, he managed to go through the Royal Academy Schools and to get a smattering of Classics and modern languages. He became the pupil of the watercolourist John Varley, only eight years older than himself but already a dominant figure who trained a whole generation of English painters. He made the great blunder of his career by marrying Varley's sister Elizabeth, when he was barely seventeen and she was a year-and-a-half older. They separated after seven years of marriage and the birth of four sons.

Mulready privately accused his wife of "Misconduct", *i.e.* adultery, which she overtly admitted but justified by claiming that he had a homosexual affair with the young artist John Linnell. Nobody seems to have taken the last charge seriously, but there is proof of Mulready forming a liaison with another woman, and he may have had an illegitimate daughter; remarkably, he seems to have succeeded in keeping it quiet. After their break-up Mulready took custody of the children and lived sedately, without any public entanglements of the kind which wrecked Francis Danby's career. He was, it seems, a cautious man, though fun-loving and fond of parties, and a noted raconteur in the style of the times. He was also a charmer—handsome in a very Irish way (his portraits make him look rather like the young Daniel O'Connell), tactful, accomplished, well able to hold his own in fashionable drawing-rooms. But he was also a man's man, fond of sport and an excellent boxer: he met his leading patron, John Sheepshanks, through thrashing two thugs who had waylaid Sheepshanks in a London street.

As a painter Mulready is reasonably well represented in our National Gallery, but probably the best cross-section of his smallish output is in the Sheepshanks Collection in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. His paintings are mostly genre pieces, serene and delicately coloured, stressing charm rather than power or drama. He was a fine craftsman, and his technique and colour had an influence on the Pre-Raphaelites, who admired him and knew him in his old age. In an age of slovenly draughtsmanship,

Life-Size portrait of William Mulready painted by Frederick Bacon Barwell (mosaic by Minton, Hollins & Co.). Mulready was the only contemporary artist to be so honoured—alongside Cimabue, Leonardo, Raphael, Michelangelo, Inigo Jones and Christopher Wren—in the Kensington Museum (now, since 1899, the Victoria and Albert Museum).

he insisted on the value of life drawing and his nudes, male and female, were much admired. The Victorian feeling for domesticity had not yet turned to sludge, and Mulready almost never overdoes the sentimental or goes in for vulgar moralising. But then, Mulready was not quintessentially a Victorian, even if he lived well into the era of the Pre-Raphaelites and of Ruskin. In his early years he was friendly with Blake and his followers, and he mixed in the same circles as the great Romantic poets (one of his own pupils was Lady Byron).

His nudes seem dreamy and idyllic to our eyes, virginal rather than provocative; yet they shocked influential people at the time. Ruskin, for instance, was drawn into comments of spectacular silliness, even for him; "more degraded and bestial than the worst grotesques of the Byzantine and Indian image-makers" and "most vulgar, and in the solemn sense of the word, most abominable". Victoria Regina herself, however, admired his nude studies and even bought one as a present for Albert—yet another proof that that underrated woman had more sense and less moral cant than many of her subjects.

The early landscapes are close to Linnell, and even to Constable and Crome; well painted, matter-of-fact, rather low in tone. The early genre pieces are close to Wilkie, anecdotal and broadly sentimental or humorous. 'Interior of an English Cottage', from 1828, shows that Mulready could at times capture the visionary homeliness of Samuel Palmer. But from about this time Mulready began to develop as a colourist, lightening his shadows and making his palette more luminous.

By the eighteen-thirties he was experimenting with working on white grounds, as the old Flemings had done—something which the Pre-Raphaelites, who greatly admired Mulready, were to do a few decades later. It is this limpid technique which gives his mature work its glowing almost jewelled quality. At least a generation before the Impressionists he discovered independently that transparent shadows give a picture an airy tone.

He was an inordinately slow worker—his technique demanded it to some extent, but temperamental flaws and timidity seem also to enter into this. Professor Heleniak[2] says shrewdly: "His experimentation with subject matter and painting technique, coupled with his very low productivity, suggest not an adventurous risk-taker but rather an insecure character, who forever tampered with his style, tinkering with compositions and colour before committing himself to a final painting, and then often showing reluctance to complete his works for fear of failure."

This hesitancy is not in the drawings, which often have an Old-Master sureness, but in the paintings it probably accounts largely for the static, arrested poses of the figures. This quality again appealed to the Pre-Raphaelites, who used it as a kind of deliberate neo-archaism to combat the theatricality of mid-Victorian genre and history painting.

Ireland has generally been fond of Mulready and his pictures have always been hung here. But he seems to have played down his Irishness and though he had a Catholic upbringing he was buried according to the Anglican rite at Kensal Green. He and his most faithful patron, Sheepshanks, died in the same year: 1863.

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[2]Kathryn Moore Heleniak, *William Mulready,* Paul Mellon Center/Yale University Press, London 1980, p. 179.