



Gillespie, S. (2024) Stephen MacKenna on translation. *Translation and Literature*, 33(1), pp. 18-28. (doi: [10.3366/tal.2024.0572](https://doi.org/10.3366/tal.2024.0572)).

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Deposited on 01 February 2024

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Stephen MacKenna on Translation

Stuart Gillespie

What follows is a compilation of the occasional statements on translation made by a remarkable, and too little known, translator. Stephen MacKenna (1872-1935) made it his life's work to translate into English the copious Annales of the Greek Neoplatonist philosopher Plotinus. An Irishman and an Irish nationalist with no university training, MacKenna first worked as a bank clerk and then journalist. As Paris correspondent of an English journal in 1896-7 he became friendly with J. M. Synge, the playwright, and his circle.¹ In 1897 he joined a company of volunteers supporting the Greek cause in the war with Turkey. Back in Paris he was appointed to a lucrative position as a Continental correspondent for Joseph Pulitzer, and witnessed the Russian Revolution at first hand in 1904-5, but he resigned in 1907, by which point he was contemplating the prospect of translating Plotinus, in full, into English for the first time.

MacKenna's interest in Plotinus might have come to nothing were it not for the financial assistance provided by a stranger, Sir Ernest Debenham, the founder of the British department store chain. In its time his translation (published 1917-1930) received the highest praise, the distinguished Irish classical scholar E. R. Dodds writing:

Whether in fact MacKenna's Plotinus is worth the enormous price that was paid for it not only in effort and suffering, but in the sacrifice of other potentialities that lay in his rich natural endowment – is a question which I will not attempt to answer. But two things are certain: it is a noble monument to an Irishman's courage, an Englishman's generosity, and the idealism of both; and it is one of the very few great translations of our day.²

As to what kind of translation it is, the classicist T. E. Page described it thus in a letter to Debenham: ‘You could possibly find half a dozen scholars who could translate Plotinus accurately; but to reproduce him, to make him live again, to catch something of that unearthly beauty which attaches to his words: this needs something more than accuracy or scholarship, and Mr. MacKenna possesses it.’³ With Page’s words may be compared the comments MacKenna made in response (letter to Debenham of April 1919, below).

A fuller appreciation of MacKenna’s translation is found in a little-known essay of 1943 by the English historian and translator E. S. Bates. An excerpt follows:

His own ways were those of one to whom style consisted of personal thought and emotion breaking out into beauty and new power, and to whom a certain strangeness, that perhaps must always play over good writing, is not obscurity: rather it makes for a clearer understanding; it calls for slow-going that there may be thought and enjoyment, but it does not bewilder so that even for a second there may be a doubt of the way; it makes for freshness that wings the meaning, not for murkiness that dulls and dims.⁴

*Whatever the distinctive features of the translation, the way MacKenna pursued his daunting undertaking, over a period not only of years but decades, seems distinctive in itself. Many of the classic English translations (Dryden’s *Virgil*, Pope’s *Homer*) arrive in the course of a career taking in many successful non-translated works. It is rare indeed for such translations to derive from an author known for nothing else. Even Fitzgerald, whose *Rubáiyát* is often thought of as entirely isolated, afterwards translated six plays by Calderón. Alternatively, amateur translators manage a notable, small-scale one-off: as a prose*

example, Isaiah Berlin is quoted as thinking his version of Turgenev's First Love the best thing he had done, an assessment supported by its long continuance in print. MacKenna's case fits none of the more common categories.

MacKenna's complete Plotinus was first published by Philip Lee Warner of the Medici Society in five volumes. An abridgement of 558 pages was issued by Penguin Classics in 1991.⁵ This is still in print, with an audiobook read by Peter Wickham also available. The editor of the abridgement, John Dillon, has recently discussed Dodds' connection with MacKenna in an essay titled 'Dodds, Plotinus, and Stephen MacKenna'.⁶

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From MacKenna's Journal

MacKenna's Journal was found among his papers after his death. It appears that he kept it in the years 1907-9 partly as a spiritual exercise, as an aid to self-understanding and also to mastery of expression; partly in the hope that the written word would preserve for his own later memory 'a secret warmth of the mood of which it is the dry Extract', as he writes at one point. The entries were made sometimes daily, sometimes at much longer intervals. The journal was composed without thought of publication at the time, but from some numerical calculations on the last page it can be inferred that MacKenna later considered publishing about one-third of the whole. Dodds used his own judgement to assemble and publish a selection of a similar length.

29 March 1907

There is something high fantastical in the thought that if every day of my life I had a good hot piece of gossip at play, to cable to New York, I should be well off and considered from New Year to Christmas; but if I put comely English about Plotinus and give him for the first time

and perhaps for all time entire and clear and pleasantly readable to America and Australia and England, I shall certainly go about in old clothes and shrink from facing a post-office clerk.

5 December 1907

Whenever I look again into Plotinus I feel always all the old trembling fevered longing: it seems to me that I must be born for him, and that somehow someday I must have nobly translated him: my heart, untravelled, still to Plotinus turns and drags at each remove a lengthening chain.⁷ It seems to me that him alone of authors I understand by inborn sight, I alone of possible translators though I am forced to see that Principal Caird is not far behind me.⁸ Would I had been born a leisurely Protestant parson, a scholar in an oak-raftered parsonage library.

11 December 1907

Found myself, surprised myself, with a prayer on my lips, a prayer to Plotinus that I might translate him: I am certain it would be as well to pray to him for any virtue as to pray to St. Augustine or St. Patrick, but I think Plotinus would not be pleased with this my prayer: it would seem to him a worldly thing, still. It is very strange to me as I write this to feel that perhaps very truly he looks down upon me writing: at least that is what the Catholic Church means with her 'Communion of the Saints and Intercession of the Saints': can they really believe that the Once Human, now ravished in the Beatific Vision, do look down upon the upper room of No. 1, Goldhurst Terrace, Finchley Road, where the Wax Lady waits at the door? Amazing the things one can believe when one is called homo.

From *Letters*

Letter 9 to E. R. Debenham, April 1919

... It is cordial to me, a tonic that a man at once so distinguished and personally so charming as Dr. Page should speak so delightfully of my work.⁹ I must show his letter to my poor old ghost at Kingstown¹⁰ who will be cheered towards life by it, and I wish I had the energy or perhaps the idleness to copy it as a sort of pedigree for my posterity (collateral). But his conception of translation is poles apart from mine: what he calls artistry etc., I call simple veracity, that is, on the assumption that veracity does not mean a kind of transliteration but means conveying the full of the author's meaning, emphasis, mood, Stimmung,¹¹ etc. Of course I know that some translators working on some books - Mackail's *Specimens from the Anthology*¹² is an almost perfect example - can produce at once truth to the spirit (with beauty) and nearly verbal exactitude; but this is quite beyond my art. I still itch to rebuild my first volume; but precisely in the contrary sense to Dr. Page's. After all, I have had for years all but the whole thing literally translated and wanting only a few touches to make it publishable by that ideal. But my labour, my agony, is precisely the contrary: to 'deliteralise' in the interests of the higher veracity, as I judge.

I take it that once a student has gripped Plots, as a whole, the system, and become habituated to Plots' queer uses of words and of sentence structure and paragraph structure, few authors are more easy to translate in that fashion called literal; but I think no author that I have ever touched is one-eighth so difficult to carry over into another language. All existing translations or fragments in translation seem to me pitifully unjust, except for Dr. Caird's occasional extracts; I don't think even the meaning is at any point conveyed (except to those that know the Greek) in any translation but Caird's and my own. (Mueller and Kiefer seem to me deficient as Bouillet, tho' in other ways. Yet they set out to be 'literal', and in the common acceptance are so).¹³

I so utterly differ (believe me, with very great diffidence and the greatest respect) from Dr. Page that even on a secondary point peculiarly however in his province I differ toto

coelo.¹⁴ As thus: If I personally read Greek translation I'm always uneasy lest I'm reading the translator's ideas, not his author's, getting the translator's palette effects, not those of the original: if I have the Greek text *en vis a vis* I am at ease; I can colour up or down as the Greek indicates to my temperament that the translator has over- or under-coloured, raised or lowered the tone. I think the Loeb people could give their translators a far wider liberty than Mr. Debenham ought to be allowed to allow me.

I read a good deal of Greek in Latin-Greek, French-Greek, German-Greek and English-Greek texts as a constant suggestion of tricks of the translation-craft, so I consider myself quite an authority on this point: my total testimony would be that nothing could serve the classics more than superbly free translations backed of course by the thoroughest knowledge accompanied by the strict text. The original supplies the corrective or the guarantee; the reader, I find, understands the depths of his Greek or Latin much better for the free rendering. Again, I think of a chaste freedom, a freedom based rigidly on a pre-servitude.

I constantly find myself unable to read, unable to understand, translations which would appear to satisfy the accepted ideas of 'literalness': give me a free translation by a man of first-rate knowledge, and I'm quite often amused to find that out of the freedom I can reconstruct the Greek original almost verbatim. In other words, a good free translation can I think be proven to be much nearer to the original than most literal translations: it is paradoxical, yet it is truer than people would think who have not tried it. I would add all this is from a long meditated and never written essay on translations from Greek,¹⁵ that I think it can be shown that the literal school

(1) necessarily by their principle exclude from the translator's use vast and important or even essential territories of the English language, idioms and words alike, and

(2) include hosts of words, idioms, and 'attack' generally, which are no longer English.

So that 'literal' English turns out to be (1) Liddell & Scott English or (2) a bastard English, a horrible mixture of Elizabethan, Jacobean, fairytale-ese, Biblicism and modern slang (not slang of word but, what is worse, of phrase or construction).

Letter 32 to E. R. Debenham, 24 January 1924

... To-morrow (Monday) I give one half of the IVth Ennd. to the typists and will send the clean script to you as soon as I have it checked ...

What I have read of the new stuff, nearly the entire half for the typists strikes me as very good, far and far better than I had in my sick soul imagined it. Once already I wept for the sheer beauty of a passage: the Greek no doubt, yet adequately enough carried over into your language. It's true the passage was one I remember citing to my wife ages and ages ago, as we rode between Magdeburg and Hanover on our route, Berlin-Amsterdam, on bicycles such ages ago, was it; in the good days gone. She loved the passage and we rode chanting it in an improvised translation, like the gay green fools we were. But, this memory apart, the thing is good, tender and large, like Casals on the 'cello.

All the stuff as far as I've gone strikes me as at least dignified and immaculately clear (to the willing and sufficiently instructed), and clearness is my Rachel, if that was the lady some Biblical gentleman toiled seventy years for and I think I remember didn't get in the end.¹⁶ It's a great gift of the gods, stupidity, if only time is added: a real bright fellow but unclear by swiftness of insight; I suffer so much by anything unclear that I delve and spin like Adam and Eve only to get clarity, the first jewel of literature to the likes of me.

I veritably believe this translation to be unique in its clarification of the most unclear writer that ever wrote. I'd be happy in death if they put on my tombstone: 'He toiled for clarity and by gum he got it.'

From Padraic Colum's Preface to Dodds' Memoir

He would speak of what his heart was set on doing, but in an impersonal way. Talking about Plotinus he would wonder how much of the obscurity in the *Enneads* was due to the subtlety of the thought and how much to the general human idiocy from which philosophers were not immune. What passage in his talk do I best remember? One, I think, that brought over to me something of the nobility that is in Pindar's odes. He was working on a Gaelic version of certain of these, hoping that with the help of some Gaelic speaker who had knowledge of traditional poetry he might recreate the Greek in Gaelic.¹⁷ He showed how the conventionalized passages that are nonsensical in English could go magnificently into such a conventionalized Gaelic as we find in the 'runs' in the longer folktales.¹⁸ 'The best of all things is water': how significant that might become in Gaelic! He went on to talk of contrasts in the genius of languages, and gave lists of place-names to illustrate them. I remember now only one contrasted pair, Verona and Enniskeny: both beautiful names, but one like a rich fabric and the other, he said, like a coloured rag caught on a hedge, for a coloured rag on a hedge is beautiful. Then he talked about the Greek and Gaelic words for the moon: both meant 'the Shiner' and could be contrasted with English or French names which are expressive of glamour and beaminess. He could speak memorably upon such themes.

From MacKenna's Notes to the *Enneads*¹⁹

Inevitably the present translator has sometimes differed from all his predecessors, as they have sometimes differed each from all the others: he hopes it will not be thought an insolence in him to remark that his rendering of any given passage is not to be tested finally by the authority of any of these scholars, still less by any preconceived idea of Plotinus' meaning or by any hasty memory of controversy and decisions as to the peculiar uses of words in Plato or Aristotle. The text of the *Enneads* may be taken to be very fairly well-established, but it

would be absurd to suppose that as yet Plotinus, so little cautious or consistent in verbal expression, yields his precise meaning, or full content, as Plato, for example, may be supposed now to do after the scholarly scrutiny of generations. It may, indeed, be said with a rough truth that Plotinus' terms, shifting at best and depending upon context and again upon the context of the context, are never to be more carefully examined than when they seem to be most true to the Platonic or Aristotelian uses: the confusion is a constant pitfall: Plotinus was pouring a quite new wine into very old bottles. Plotinus is often to be understood rather by swift and broad rushes of the mind - the mind trained to his methods - than by laborious word-racking investigation: we must know him through and through before we can be quite sure of his minuter meanings anywhere: there must be many a scholar at work yet, many an order of mind, before we can hope to have a perfectly true translation of the *Enneads* in any language. The present worker must have made mistakes, some perhaps that to himself will one day appear inexcusable: his one consolation is that the thing he will that day welcome from other hands has almost certainly passed through his own, and been deliberately rejected. Where he appears most surely to have sinned against the light, it is most sure that he has passed through an agony of hesitation.

People seem always anxious to know whether a work of translation is what they call literal; the important question is rather whether it is faithful: the present work pretends to be faithful - and, if we must be precise, literary rather than literal. This is not to say that it is a paraphrase.

Probably every translator from the classic tongues sets out gaily in the firm purpose of achieving the impossible, of making a crib that shall also be a piece of sound and flowing idiomatic writing; and certainly many critics demand the miracle. Some years ago, on the publication of a preliminary specimen of this present venture, one very highly accomplished scholar wrote complaining with utter seriousness of an English past tense which had dared to

translate a 'frequentative aorist' of the Greek original; he had apparently never asked himself whether an English past may not be as frequentative as any Greek aorist: in any case, readers who desire their translations to serve as an unfailing treasury of illustrations to 'X. on Greek Idioms' are not asked to like this version.

Again, various arbitrary principles, laid down by translators of a formally precise school, have been quite ignored here. For example, it has been decreed that 'one word must translate one word' and this in a double application:

1. That if, for example, the word Phusis is once translated Nature, Phusis must stand as Nature at every repetition, never Kind or Essence, or Being or any other word which happens, in a particular context, to be equally clear and precise or even imperative in English to the sense and connection of thought.²⁰

2. That Phusis, for example, may never be translated by such a double as 'Nature or Hypostasis,' Doxa, for example, never by such a double as 'Opinion or Seeming Knowledge,' still less, as several times here, by 'Ordinary Mentation,' with or without an alternative or an addition.

All such bans have been treated here as belonging to the childish pedantry of a game of skill, not to the serious task of conveying to the reader a grave body of foreign thought. Probably in every writer - certainly in Plotinus - such a word as Phusis, such a word as Theos, or again Theios, may carry in connotation not merely two but three or four or more notions, any one of which may at a given moment be the dominant, though not necessarily to the utter exclusion of the others. Plotinus has some score of words, technical terms, which he uses in very varying applications where no single fixed English word or even combination of words would always carry his meaning. The translator has in this whole matter adopted the principle of using such a variety of terms, single or double or upon occasion triple, as will exactly cover or carry the idea which appears in the original; he has arrogated to himself almost the

entire freedom of a philosophic writer in English who uses his words with an absolute loyalty, of course, to his thought, but with never a moment's scruple as to the terms in which he happened to convey or indicate a given notion five pages back. In other words the present translator has not thought of his probable readers as glossary-bound pedants but as possessed of the living vision which can follow a stream of thought by the light of its own vivid movement. Other theorists of translation desire that a version should represent the style of the original writer: this notion is tempting and may often be safely achieved but not, the present worker ventures to say, in the case of Plotinus, or perhaps in the case of any writer whose main preoccupation is less with artistic expression than with the enunciation of cardinal and very gravely important ideas. Longinus, as may be learned from Porphyry's Life-sketch of Plotinus, so little grasped Plotinus' manner of expression as to judge ruinously erroneous the most faithful transcripts that could be: a version which should reproduce such a style as disconcerted and misled the most widely read contemporary critic of Greek letters, would not be a translation in any useful sense of the word, or at least would not be English or would not be readable. The present translation, therefore, has been executed on the basic ideal of carrying Plotinus' thought - its strength and its weakness alike - to the mind of the reader of English: the first aim has been the utmost attainable clearness in the faithful, full and unalloyed expression of the meaning; the second aim, set a long way after the first, has been the reproduction of the splendid soaring passages with all their warmth and light. Nothing whatever has been, consciously, added or omitted with such absurd purpose as that of heightening either the force of the thought or the beauty of the expression - except in so far as force and beauty demand a clarity which sometimes must be, courageously, imposed upon the most negligent, probably, of the great authors of the world.

Coda: From MacKenna's Translation of Plotinus

MacKenna published his translation of Plotinus' treatise on Beauty (integral to the Annales) as an initial specimen in 1908. The first edition of 300 copies sold out and was twice reprinted, one of the purchasers being Ernest Debenham, whom it led to offer MacKenna financial support for work on the rest. This excerpt (the beginning)²¹ is provided here as a short sample of MacKenna's eventual whole.

Sixth Tractate

Beauty

I.

Beauty addresses itself chiefly to sight; but there is a beauty for the hearing too, as in certain combinations of words and in all kinds of music, for melodies and cadences are beautiful; and minds that lift themselves above the realm of sense to a higher order are aware of beauty in the conduct of life, in actions, in character, in the pursuits of the intellect; and there is the beauty of the virtues. What loftier beauty there may be, yet, our argument will bring to light.

What, then, is it that gives comeliness to material forms and draws the ear to the sweetness perceived in sounds, and what is the secret of the beauty there is in all that derives from Soul?

Is there some One Principle from which all take their grace, or is there a beauty peculiar to the embodied and another for the bodiless? Finally, one or many, what would such a Principle be?

Consider that some things, material shapes for instance, are gracious not by anything inherent but by something communicated, while others are lovely of themselves, as, for example, Virtue.

The same bodies appear sometimes beautiful, sometimes not; so that there is a good

deal between being body and being beautiful.

What, then, is this something that shows itself in certain material forms? This is the natural beginning of our enquiry.

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Thanks are due to Christopher Stray for answering queries, and to Donald Mackenzie for more substantive discussion, some of which is reflected in the editorial matter below.

¹ A memoir of Synge almost certainly by MacKenna surfaced in the 1980s, and is edited in Nicholas Grene and Ann Saddlemeier's 'Stephen MacKenna on Synge: A Lost Memoir', *Irish University Review*, 12 (1982), 141-51.

² E. R. Dodds, Memoir prefixed to *Journal and Letters of Stephen MacKenna*, edited by Dodds (London, 1936), pp. 1-89 (p. 81). This edition is the source of all excerpts appearing below other than the last two. They are referenced by date for the journal and by Dodds' numbering for the letters. Beyond the letters and journals, Dodds' Memoir and its Preface by the Irish writer Padraic Colum constitute the only available sources for MacKenna's life.

³ Dodds, p. 82. For Page, who on retirement from a life of teaching and scholarship became the first editor of the Loeb Classical Library, a series twice mentioned below, see *ODNB*.

⁴ E. S. Bates, 'Plotinus, Porphyry, and Propertius', in Bates, *Intertraffic: Studies in Translation* (London, 1943), pp. 137-61 (p. 140).

⁵ *The Enneads*, abridged and edited by John Dillon (London, 1991). Dillon includes, pp. xi-xxv, a 'biographical sketch' of MacKenna based closely on Dodds' Memoir.

⁶ In the volume *Rediscovering E. R. Dodds: Scholarship, Education, Poetry, and the Paranormal*, edited by Christopher Stray, Christopher Pelling, and Stephen Harrison (Oxford, 2019), pp. 137-61.

⁷ Goldsmith, *The Traveller*, line 10:

Where'er I roam, whatever realms to see,
 My heart untravell'd fondly turns to thee;
 Still to my brother turns, with ceaseless pain,
 And drags at each remove a lengthening chain.

⁸ Edward Caird, Master of Balliol College, Oxford, had published in 1904 his influential *The Evolution of Theology in the Greek Philosophers*, within which a chapter on 'The Philosophy of Plotinus' contains a number of passages translated from the *Annales*.

⁹ See above, p. 000.

¹⁰ Coastal suburb of Dublin now named Dún Laoghaire.

¹¹ 'Tone', 'atmosphere'.

¹² J. W. Mackail, one of the most respected academic classicists of the day, enjoyed much success with his translations, including his *Select Epigrams from the Greek Anthology*, first published in 1890 and soon adopted by the Loeb Classical Library.

¹³ MacKenna explains in the prefatory matter to his own translation that Marie Nicolas Bouillet's French one of 1875 is inaccurate, H. F. Mueller's German one of 1878-80 can be meaningless without the Greek, and Otto Kiefer's of 1905 is a Mueller with a mixture of improvement and deterioration.

¹⁴ *Toto coelo*: 'completely', 'utterly'.

¹⁵ It does not appear that MacKenna ever wrote this essay.

¹⁶ The narrative is in Genesis 29, with a slightly different timeframe. Forced to serve Rachel's father for seven years to win her, Jacob was afterwards tricked into marrying her sister Leah.

¹⁷ Nothing further is known of this translation, none of which saw the light of day.

¹⁸ In Gaelic folk tales, a run is 'a passage of rhythmic and alliterative prose, often formulaic in nature' (*OED*, *run*², II.27.b).

¹⁹ Plotinus: *The Ethical Treatises*, translated by Stephen MacKenna, Vol. 1 (London, 1917), pp. 114-16. This segment of MacKenna's explanatory matter is also printed in Dillon's edition (n. 5, above), pp. xxvii-xxviii.

²⁰ This principle was adopted by certain English translators of Plotinus before MacKenna, and 'consistent vocabulary' is also the aim of the only subsequent complete English translation: *The Annales*, translated by Lloyd P. Gerson *et al.* (Cambridge, 2017).

²¹ Plotinus tr. MacKenna (n. 19), pp. 77-8.