

Merle [later de Merle], William Henry [pseuds. A. B., A. Bird, the White Blackbird] (1791-1878), author, was born on 18 September 1791, and was baptized at St Bartholomew-the-Great, London, on 16 November 1791. He was the only son of William Merle (d. 1822), a London banker and JP of Collier's Wood, Mitcham, Surrey, and Elizabeth, daughter of John Halcrow. Merle entered Eton College on 15 September 1805, lodging in the same remove as the diarist Charles Fulke Greville.

A rich Regency bachelor, Merle visited the studio of George Cruikshank (1792-1878) in May 1814, in order to suggest a caricature lampooning Lord Cochrane, then accused of manipulating the stock exchange by spreading news that Napoleon had been killed. From that point on Merle bombarded the artist with ideas for prints and publishing projects-including an extraordinary send-up of the Horticultural Society (British Museum, Catalogue of Political and Personal Satires, 15155, 1 January 1826) and an unpublished variant of Mulready's 1840 design for a post-office envelope. Excessively fond of verbal/visual and multilingual puns (he also translated simple verses from Greek and Latin), Merle often signed with the initials A. B., or as A. Bird or the White Blackbird (merle, 'blackbird'), alluding to his French ancestors who had escaped to England after the revocation of the edict of Nantes.

Apparently Merle's father suffered severe financial reverses, for when he died in 1822, Merle became involved in protracted suits trying to recover property. During the next two decades, in straitened circumstances, Merle contributed verse and prose to numerous periodicals, including *The Times*, the *New Monthly Magazine*, the *Literary Gazette*, the *Morning Chronicle*, *Bentley's Miscellany*, and *George Cruikshank's Omnibus*.

In May 1829 Merle sketched the 'almost ... mediaeval festivity' celebrating the coming-of-age of his friend John George Pole of Shute House, Axminster, Devon, and arranged for Pole to commission Cruikshank to etch his sketch, anticipating wrongly that Pole's family and friends would buy many copies. (Only one print is known to exist.) However, a wood-engraving from that design was published to illustrate an account of the 'eventful birthday' in George P. R. Pulman's *Book of the Axe* (1875). Also in 1829 Merle married Mary, daughter of John Norman of Iwood, Congresbury, Somerset. Two years later Cruikshank took Merle's designs and redrew them for wood-engravings, supplying one original etching as well, all illustrating a collection of Merle's journalistic pieces, *Odds and Ends in Verse and Prose* (April 1831; 2nd edn, 1836). Merle also published *Costanca*, a Poem, in 1828, and two novels, *Glenlonely* (1837), and the quasi-autobiographical *Melton de Mowbray, or, The Banker's Son* (1838).

Some time in the 1840s Merle's finances stabilized. From that time forward he resided at a succession of West End addresses, in the west country, or in Europe, mixing with old Etonians and others of the upper middle classes, and frequented the Athenaeum, to which he was elected in February 1838. After the death of his first wife, who left him her estate in Somerset, on 16 June 1853, in Clifton, Merle married Ann, only daughter of Henry Norman, a surgeon, of Portbury, Kenn Court, and Bleadon, Somerset. Though this was a second very happy union for Merle, there were burdens: his 'wee wife' suffered much from ill health and her brother's family became dependent on Merle when an agent defalcated while her brother was fighting in the Crimea. Moreover, Merle's own sister became another dependent when her husband ran through his fortune and hers.

Merle cultivated Cruikshank, but also badgered him; he often braced the artist when a project failed, or lent him money, but he exacted repayment by repeatedly submitting manuscripts through Cruikshank for publication. One novel, Bathurst (1850), was finally placed with T. C. Newby after Merle and Cruikshank had tried for nearly a decade to interest other publishers. Cruikshank was willing to illustrate it but Newby rushed out the book without undertaking the dubious additional expense.

Cruikshank's perpetual indebtedness alternately mystified and infuriated Merle. 'You have no children crying out for-"bread!"' (Merle to G. Cruikshank, 21 April 1861, quoted in Patten, 2.391), he protested, uninformed about Cruikshank's mistress and ten children. None the less he assiduously collected his friend's books, prints, and drawings and contributed modestly to various testimonials and other fund-raisers. Their amity lasted more than sixty years, although ill health and family troubles kept Merle close to home in his last decades, when he served as lord of the manor of Kenn and one of the deputy lieutenants for Somerset.

Merle died of pneumonia at his home, Ward Hill, Rowledge, Frensham, Surrey, on 29 September 1878, only eight months after Cruikshank, and was buried in Congresbury church, where there is a memorial stained-glass window. His wife survived him by more than a decade.

Robert L. Patten

Sources Princeton University, George Cruikshank MSS, corresp. of W. H. Merle and George Cruikshank, c.1816-1878 + R. L. Patten, George Cruikshank's life, times, and art, 2 vols. (1992-6) + Walford, County families (1875-88) + Boase, Mod. Eng. biog. + The Times (2 Oct 1878) + d. cert. + IGI Archives Princeton University, New Jersey, George Cruikshank collection Wealth at death over £50,000-estate, presumed value: Cruikshank MSS, Princeton University