

**NAXOS**
AudioBooks

William McGonagall

Read by **Gregor Fisher**

THE
GREAT
POETS

POETRY



NA189312D

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William McGonagall

(1830–1902)

If you were a performer, writing a diary about a tour, would you start it with a reference to having peas thrown at you? It's possible – if you were going to make some self-deprecating remark about it, or perhaps develop some comic material. But not William McGonagall, poet and tragedian. In one of his several autobiographical memoirs (which are disarmingly contradictory) he describes in an utterly deadpan fashion how he had peas thrown at him by a publican. Nothing about this is as strange as one feels it should be. William McGonagall had many things thrown at him during his lifetime, and seems to have been completely immune to the criticisms he received – which is perhaps as well. He was laughed at, openly mocked, and even occasionally at risk from the mob for his performances; yet he never seems to have been at all upset by these receptions. He would no doubt be delighted to think that he has

achieved something close to immortality now, even if it is perhaps not quite for the reasons he might have liked.

McGonagall is now one of the most frequently quoted poets in English. Not, perhaps, directly (few people can accurately remember his lines) but indirectly – stylistically. In parody, satire, comic imitation of all sorts, it is McGonagall's manner that is perpetually being mimicked. From Spike Milligan (who made a film and co-wrote whole books in the McGonagall vernacular) to *Private Eye* (which regularly uses the poet's voice to commemorate events), McGonagall is immediately recognisable. And this is because he is seen as the worst poet in the language, a writer whose ambition and self-belief was only matched by his incompetence and his blind ignorance of his failings. McGonagall knew how to rhyme – just; but nothing else. He was a creator of verse that undermines its pretensions to gravitas

with striking banality; poetry whose high ambitions are brought to earth through astounding lack of rhythm or metre, or bathetic juxtapositions of high tragedy and absurd prosaism. He was a man whose muse could take the most terrible and tragic event and turn it – seemingly unconsciously – into a parody of the epic form, making something the audience should feel awed by, simply awful.

McGonagall's most famous poem is *The Tay Bridge Disaster*, marking the terrible events of December 1879, events that took place in his home town of Dundee. In so far as the Tay Bridge disaster is remembered at all, it is largely because of this poem and its champions who see it as a sublime example of how to be bad. And over the last century, McGonagall and his terrible poems have become a part of the national subconscious. His life itself seems to be one long tragic-comedy, involving hard work, sudden, divine inspiration, delusions of grandeur, absurd Quixotic quests, doomed attempts at public acceptance or Royal recognition, official injunctions and snobbish mockery; and also an element of mystery – some

of which he promoted himself, in those contradictory autobiographical sketches. But it seems likely he was born to Irish parents, Charles and Margaret, probably in 1825 and probably in Ireland. The family moved to Scotland in the 1830s, settling in Dundee, where William became apprenticed to follow in his father's trade of a hand-loom weaver. This was a skilled and reasonably well-paid job, but it was about to hit a steep decline as industrialisation took over the mills and weavers found themselves unable to earn a living. In places like Lancashire, they frequently ended up in the workhouse; and although for the first 45 years of his life McGonagall did well, the threat of unemployment and consequent loss of income may well have been one of the motives behind his decision to become a poet and tragedian. Another was his undoubted love of performing.

At 21 he married Jean King, and they had seven children, one of whom had an illegitimate child herself to add to the crowded house. But when not working or either fathering or bringing up his children, McGonagall indulged his passion

for reading, and in particular Shakespeare. His love of *Richard III*, *Hamlet*, *Othello* and *Macbeth* was such that he learnt all four leading roles. These he would perform with his work colleagues, who were so taken with his portrayals that they had a whip-round to enable him to perform *Macbeth* at the Theatre Royal in December 1858. Such was his popularity – or notoriety – that he was not allowed to leave the stage, nor even to be defeated in the final combat scene; he carried on fighting, as the audience cheered him to the rafters, until his opponent Macduff became so frustrated he walked off – thus completely altering the original play, and making a substantial change to Scottish history in the process. McGonagall was carried out of the theatre by an almost hysterically triumphant audience. This raises several interesting issues about the man and his performances, which have some bearing on his poetry, too. Did McGonagall know he was being mocked? Or was he deliberately playing up to the public's response? He must have been aware that he was rewriting Shakespeare; so was he doing it out of arrogant ignorance or was

he knowingly being ridiculous? In short – was he as bad as we tend to think?

Whatever seeds his love of Shakespeare and his performing had sown were to wait 20 years before being given the chance to blossom. Finding employment as a weaver almost impossible, in 1877 he followed the sudden arrival of his muse and turned to writing, trying to sell his poems on the streets. This was not in itself uncommon – balladeers were to be found in most cities, singing their songs, which were printed with the music on large sheets of paper. There was a great deal of the stylistic fashionings of these ballads that can be seen in McGonagall's work. The tunes would be based perhaps on variations of well-known folksongs, which offered an elasticity of rhythm that could accommodate the metrical imprecisions brought about by the need to get them written quickly, in order to catch the public interest in a particular event. These songs – being effectively rhyming, emotional editorials – made a point of mentioning dates, names and other specifics. To many modern readers of McGonagall, his use of such devices adds to the sense of the

poetry's strangeness, but he was following an established tradition – if in his own manner.

Deciding to become a street balladeer can't have been easy for McGonagall, and nor was it an easy time for him, aged over 50, with a large family (whom he never once mentions in his poems), a lifetime's work in weaving now essentially worthless, trying to make his way by selling songs and poetry. Clearly, if you were writing work whose popularity was dependent on immediacy and popular curiosity, then shipwrecks and fires were going to be an important currency. But despite his propensity for disaster – or at least writing about it – McGonagall covered many subjects. He excelled in descriptive works about Scotland, especially Dundee, but he would also write about worthies, famous locals, international events, military issues, the Royal Family, temperance (a significant matter for him), and historical events – especially the dramatic ones, which he would perform with tremendous gusto (on one occasion nearly knocking someone out during a recitation of *The Battle of Tel-el-Kebir*).

McGonagall's fame around his home city soon spread, as much through his performances – offered in pubs, private rooms, anywhere where he could earn something for his recitations – as his broadsheet ballads. It is important to remember just how much of his fame (and his style) was based on his performances, and he should perhaps be considered first of all as a performer. He became genuinely well-known throughout the city for his shows, and started referring to himself as the city's poet. The city's authorities, however, were not convinced that they wanted him as their poetical representative. He was engaged to perform in a circus, where he had a hard time being heard above the din of the vociferous crowd and their tendency to throw things like fruit at him. But the performances were so riotous that the city's magistrates essentially banned him from doing any more. So he determined to travel to prove he could make a living elsewhere. He failed.

During his life McGonagall made several significant journeys – to Glasgow, to London, to New York – all in what

turned out to be attempts to make a name for himself that came to absolutely nothing. But he would tell these tales to the papers irrespective of how foolish and ill-prepared they made him appear; and the one that became most celebrated involved an attempt to perform for Queen Victoria. He had written to Her Majesty sometime before, asking her to become his patron, and had received a brief, standard note of thanks from a steward. With this and an indomitable spirit, he set about walking 50 miles across Scotland in the rain to Balmoral. He arrived at the Lodge and was essentially told to go home; that the Queen already had a Poet Laureate; and what did he think he was doing just turning up asking for her patronage?

All this he reported faithfully, and became even more celebrated for it. This inability to be discouraged was a hallmark of his. He kept on performing, dressing in often outlandish (or at least, over-theatrical) costumes, and was completely deadpan throughout, whatever the response from his audience. It was as if he was unaware of their laughing at him. Or possibly their mocking laughter was

actually what he intended. Was he so sure of himself that he could be unaffected, or only mildly so, by the barrackings he received? Is there a chance that he was somewhere on the Asperger's Syndrome spectrum – very innocent or ignorant of the social conventions? There is something childish about the almost desperate repetition of his rhymes, as if he had suddenly discovered that he could make words sound the same, but had no idea what that meant or how to use the facility. He was also always very polite and generous; a gentle man. Was this again a form of innocence? There is another suggestion: did he know exactly what he was up to? Gord Bambrick has argued that McGonagall was not an incompetent – as his popular reputation insists – but a satirist. He suggests that McGonagall put on the personality of a rarefied literary type to satirise the upwardly mobile bourgeoisie of his time, and thereby give his fellow discontented workers a chance to vent their anger by laughing at him.

In 1894, needing to find a new audience, McGonagall left Dundee, settling first in Perth. While there, he was sent

a hoax letter offering him a knighthood from King Theebaw of Burmah, giving him the title of Grand Knight of the Holy Order of the White Elephant, and the honorary name Topaz. The poet, of course, accepted; and referred to himself thereafter as Sir William Topaz McGonagall, Knight of the White Elephant. He then – as befitted a knight – moved to Edinburgh, where he found his works received with much the same acclaim (if less fruit) as they had been in his former home. But he was by now an old man, and although he carried on writing he depended on gifts from his followers as well as the little income he received from his volumes of collected verses. But concerns about his own mortality seemed not to trouble him – or at least not to inspire him. And he could be inspired by many things – including the prospect of being paid to promote household goods, such as Sunlight Soap or Beecham's Pills.

Despite the wide range of his themes, disasters always brought out the best in him – and frequently in similar or even identical phrases. But then, consistency was one of McGonagall's hallmarks; and

his continuing status as the worst poet in English remains as consistent as it was throughout much of his life and almost immediately after it. He died in 1902, and despite being buried in an unmarked grave was soon being revived in performances. Even now, over a century after his death, there are new biographies, collections and websites devoted to him (in particular the comprehensive ones by Chris Hunt). Few of his imitators have suffered the same raucous response from their hearers or readers – indeed, they are often greeted with a rather particular warmth by the audiences. But then, they don't have his particular genius.

Notes by Roy McMillan



Gregor Fisher has appeared in eight series of *Rab C Nesbitt*, and dramas such as *Blood Red Roses* and *The Tales of Para Handy*. He played the role of 'Perks' in Carlton's 2000 production of *The Railway Children* and 'Mr Bumble' in BBC TV's adaptation of *Oliver Twist*. His theatre credits include *As You Like It* and *The Cherry Orchard*. He has also played 'Grandpa Potts' in *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* and 'The Cowardly Lion' in *The Wizard of Oz*. His film credits include *1984* and *Love Actually*.

Credits

Selected by Roy McMillan

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William McGonagall

Read by **Gregor Fisher**

For over a hundred years, William McGonagall (1830–1902) has been almost universally recognised as the worst poet in English. Utterly convinced of his genius, he remained untroubled by any worrisome self-doubt, despite the mockery of his audiences.

This collection brings together some of his best-known works (*The Tay Bridge Disaster*, *The Battle of Tel-el-Kebir*), some lesser-known gems (*Beecham's Pills*, *The Faithful Dog Fido*), and some autobiographical writings that tell of his ill-fated trip to Balmoral, of his much-fêted performance as *Macbeth* (in which he was so popular he decided not to die), and why publicans threw peas at him.



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