

McGonagall, 'Poute', and the Bad Poets of Victorian Dundee

By Kirstie Blair

In his essay on 'The Great McGonagall,' Hugh MacDiarmid commented that:

McGonagall is in a very special category, and has it all to himself. There are no other writings known to me that resemble his. So far as the whole tribe of poets is concerned, from the veritable lords of language to the worst doggerel-mongers, he stands alone.

And indeed, McGonagall does stand alone today. Of all the 'scores of utterly worthless rhymers' that were operating in Victorian Dundee and elsewhere, he is the only poet we remember.¹ Yet while MacDiarmid may not have known of any writings resembling McGonagall's, a substantial body of such writings did exist, and would unquestionably have been known to McGonagall's Dundee audiences and to the poet himself. For the enormously popular weekend newspapers of mid-late Victorian Dundee, the *People's Journal* and the *Weekly News*, home of McGonagall's first publications, both fostered a lively culture of bad poetry. This is a culture that has entirely disappeared from view, but it is well worth recovering, not simply because it presents McGonagall's work in a different light, but because he was arguably neither the worst nor the best bad poet of his times; he was simply the one most prepared to relinquish anonymity and pursue a career in performance as well as in print.

The 'To Correspondents' columns of these newspapers, one of their most popular features, had a unique function in publishing and critiquing rejected poems received by readers, and a strong tendency to publish the worst poems received for readers' amusement as well as their education. This, we might assume, is why the editor of the *Weekly News* thought it worth his while to publish McGonagall's early productions in his correspondence column in 1877. As readers from then until now have testified, they were not simply bad, but hilariously so. Yet in fostering McGonagall's career, it would be very surprising if the *Weekly News* had not one eye on its main rival, the *People's Journal*. For over fifteen years, the *Journal* had made great capital out of its support for 'Poute', a working-

class Fife poet whose high self-opinion and poetic ambition, combined with atrocious spelling, grammar and lofty disregard for the rules of verse, had been delighting readers of the *Journal* since his first appearance in 1861, and had inspired a number of imitators in the *Journal* and the *News*. In fact, in 1875, in a period when McGonagall was definitely reading the *Journal* (he wrote several letters to the editor during the millworkers' strike in August), Poute's volume, *A Book of Nettercaps*, published by the *Journal*'s sister-paper, the *Dundee Advertiser*, was being heavily advertised. To make it to a printed volume was a substantial achievement for an artisan poet, and required both patronage by a newspaper editor or other influential community member, and an existing readership who would subscribe in advance for the volume to offset printing costs. Even with these factors in place, it could be hard to shift copies. But according to an unpublished note by 'Poute', who in real life was Alexander ('Sandy') Burgess, a dancing-master and violinist in Fife, his first edition of 1000 sold out.² His works also reached a posthumous second edition in 1886. Anyone reading the *Journal* and *Weekly News* in the 1860s and 1870s would have known that bad poetry sold — if only it were good enough.

The two crucial points about Poute's writings are first, that they are deliberate and self-conscious satires on the kind of poetry that an uneducated Scottish poet might be expected to produce, and second, that this only became clear quite a while after the *Journal* first started publishing them. When William Latta, the editor, first printed an extract from Poute's 'lines addressed to a water Lily' (sic), he took it at face value:

It is such a gem in its way that we would have liked to have given it entire as it dropped from the author's hand ... We are obliged to curtail it, however, but here goes a 'blad' from the exordium: —

Inspire me, o Thou Heavenly Muse,
when I Do try my Own powers to use,
to sing the Praise of a sweet flower,
Which grew in a runing Streme, & not in a ladies Bower
But bloom'd in Modest Beauty bright,
its leaves were green but its Blades were splendid white³

The comedy is in the contrast of the high-toned language with the discordance of the metre, which goes horribly off-course in lines 4 and 6, and the misspellings and random capitalization. An address to a humble, modest flower, which in its

retirement served as a model for the labouring-class poet, was a very clichéd topic. Latta, who received a great deal of poorly written poetry from his enthusiastic working-class readership, had no particular reason to be suspicious. But as 'Poute' responded to his critique with indignant letters asserting his own genius, and with increasingly outrageous poems, Latta and his readers gradually realized that the joke was on them. They were delighted. Poute, like McGonagall after him, graduated from extracts published in the correspondence column to whole poems published separately, such as 'Apostriffe to the rainbow', published January 30, 1864:

And yet on the fase of this cloud Anyhow
is Foty graft A trully pretty and Admirable rainbow
To sing its praises is above my potek comprinshin
as It possessess Mor coulirs than I can ever mention
Blue red and green and gud kens how Many
You are ther im Told for A Sign when it Is rainy
Your the Best spesimen of your kind I evir Saw
One of your ends is at the bass and one right over largy law
To pent you by estimat . Lo what a money it would take
for pentirs: *Let them alone :* know what charges for to Make
Im pretty sure you would been beter had the cloud been white
Im sure some of the coullers would have come out mor bright
Them that use majeklantrns hing up a white shroud
But it mabey wudna be very easy to Make it White cloud
But I shal Drop the subjek For varios resins
if any wishes Mor he can go to tamsons seasons
*dont dot it⁴

Again, this selects a standard topic, praise of nature and God's hand in it, and then mangles it. Rather than meditating on the wonders of nature, Poute interprets the rainbow at a remove through the new visual apparatus of the period, photography and magic lantern shows, and then begins to speculate on how this natural beauty might be converted into hard cash by artists, and adapted — by making the black clouds white — into a more attractive subject. The intentional irony, of course, is that this is what Poute himself is doing. By directing the reader to James Thomson's poem *The Seasons* (1730) in the final line, a canonical work in this period, he highlights his (and his readers')

awareness of how clichéd the topic is. And moreover, he shows us that the working-class poet does not gaze on nature unmediated by art or worldly considerations. This directly contradicts the established view of patrons, as stated a few years later by Dundee's Reverend George Gilfillan, in his preface to Janet Hamilton's volume:

Having read fewer descriptions, [the self-taught] look at the thing described more exactly as it is. Many see not nature's thunderstorm, but Thomson's or Byron's; not Bruar-water itself, but Burns' picture of it; Scott's Trossachs, not the beautiful place itself ... The self-taught simply record the contact between their own genius and Nature's works.⁵

Poute's work has a strong tendency to expose such comments for what they are: middle-class fantasies. Formally, Poute's poems, as in the first lines cited above, play with rhymes that are deliberately off-kilter (anyhow/rainbow, many/rainy) and with rhythms that repeatedly slide into chatty, over-long lines, creating a sense of bathos in the comparison between the grandiosity of his topic and the colloquial handling of it. This is also true of his language, which makes very intelligent play with Scots colloquialisms ('wudna be very easy') juxtaposed with standard English, and uses phonetic spelling to raise tricky questions about how to represent dialect in print.

In his decades of association with the *People's Journal*, Poute never stepped out of character, and editor and readers kept up the pretence alongside him. The same was true of his imitators, Moses Dalite in the *People's Journal*, Job Sprott, Apollo B. Blode, Sawmule Slyde, and Admiral Dont in the *Weekly News*, and many others. There are enough similar poems (though few writers achieve Poute's excellence) that we can identify a craze for comic bad verse in the Dundee press of the mid-late Victorian period. Phonetic spelling in particular became a way of advertising that the writer was aiming for comic effect, with contemporaries seeing a comparison with the comic prose writings of American humorists Josh Billings and Artemus Ward.⁶ But not every published bad poem deployed this convention, and it is clear that Latto and the *Weekly News* editor were not always sure whether they were publishing parody or serious attempts at poetry. What are we to make, for example, of 'A Congratulatory Ode to "The Old Steeple" on its Restoration', by Loo, Dundee, published in the *Weekly News* without comment on 4 April 1874:

Stupendous pile of ancient architecture!
Rough, rude remembrancer of former days;
Thou art a theme well worthy of a lecture —
A subject suited for poetic praise.

It is to me a matter of conjecture
How men of old could such a structure raise.
And wiser men than this poor bard are baffled
To know how much it took to raise the scaffold.

£8000 have on thee been expended; —
But I have written more than I at first intended. (p.3)

The satiric impulse is only clear in the final lines, though it might have been clearer from the outset to Dundee readers outraged at the money spent on George Gilbert Scott's restorations. The abrupt ending comically signals the poet's inability to keep up the high standards of his or her chosen genre once he or she lets material concerns creep in. Still more pertinent to McGonagall, what of H. W.'s ode to the Tay Bridge, extracted in the 'Correspondence' column of the *Weekly News* on 17 August 1878:

It was on the first of June, Eighteen Hundred and Seventy-eight:
A splendid feat of engineering I am going to relate,
It is about the nobill Bridge that Spanes the river tay,
It was opened for passenger traffic just upon that very day (p.3)

The editor appears to take this at face value as poor-quality writing — but then this is the standard pose for editors faced with this genre of verse. H. W. probably has McGonagall's 'Ode to the Tay Bridge', extracted in the *Weekly News* a year earlier, August 1877, in mind. As in Loo's poem on the Old Steeple, McGonagall veers from celebrating the beauty of a local landmark into financial considerations:

Beautiful Railway Bridge of the Silvery Tay!
And prosperity to Provost Cox, who has given
Thirty thousand pounds and upwards away
In helping to erect the Bridge of the Tay,
Most handsome to be seen,
Near by Dundee and the Magdalen Green.⁷

The lines on Provost Cox are metrically discordant, and we might be suspicious of

'away': has Cox made a wise investment or not? It was common for poets, 'bad' or good, to celebrate local benefactors and worthies. Indeed, McGonagall's first published poem, 'Address to the Rev. George Gilfillan', placed itself firmly in a subset of such poems celebrating Gilfillan's relationship with the working-class poets of Dundee:

The first time I heard him speak,
 'Twas in the Kinnaird Hall,
Lecturing on the Garibaldi movement
 As loud as he could bawl.⁸

This is hardly complimentary. But is the deflation of Gilfillan's dedication to the cause of the Risorgimento — a cause dear to the hearts of Dundee's radical newspaper press — accidental, or deliberate? Newspaper poets were prone to comment on Gilfillan's activism and patronage in slyly disparaging ways. Poute, for instance, discusses his desire to dedicate his collection to Gilfillan, 'the friend & admirer of every true born poet', but then refrains because 'I was afraid he mightna tak the thing weel oot.'⁹ Moses Dalite of Kats Klos, Dundee, concludes his ode to the (unrestored) Old Steeple with a vision of it collapsing on the heads of the congregation of School Wynd Kirk, 'Whair grate Gilfillan lifts his voice on high':

But I do hope that time is far away
And that I won't be in the kirk on that disastrous day.¹⁰

This again deploys an over-long rhyming final line to comic deflationary effect. Gilfillan was devoted to helping artisan poets, but he had relatively conservative views about what kind of poetry they should be writing. The comic scenario in Dalite, Poute and McGonagall is that these admirers of Gilfillan are producing a kind of ignorant, poorly written, mock-admiring poetry that would fill him with dismay. And behind this, of course, lies a potential critique of middle-class patronage and a determination to do without it.

Reading through the newspaper poems of these years makes it evident that far from being 'in a special category', McGonagall was contributing to a pre-existing poetic culture that hovered between the satirical and the serious, and that caused difficulties for editors faced with deciding which was which. If we set McGonagall's poetry side by side with Poute and his contemporaries, it is of a

piece. Those features that have been identified as particularly characteristic of his work, such as his 'long rambling lines' and his 'extraordinary ability to puncture whatever pathos he may have been able to create by the addition of some extraneous fact or an inappropriate phrase' are in fact not at all uncommon in this particular genre of verse.¹¹ McGonagall experts, including Chris Hunt and Norman Watson, have recently re-engaged with the question of whether McGonagall was 'really that bad', with Hunt concluding that the 'satirist argument is difficult to sustain', while Watson considers that it was 'not beyond the bounds of possibility that [...] he was the master of unintentional mistakes and crafted buffoonery.'¹² The existence of a productive culture of similarly so-bad-it's-good poetry in the newspapers McGonagall read does not prove that he knew what he was doing, though it does potentially lend this argument further credibility. There are some stylistic differences between McGonagall and these newspaper poets, notably in their more frequent use of Scots and of deliberate misspelling, two aspects that work to signal satirical intent to readers. And, of course, McGonagall carried the joke, if joke it was, beyond the newspaper columns and into performance culture, operating under his own name and without any separation between his poetic persona and McGonagall the Dundee worker and amateur tragedian. What we can say with some confidence, however, is that local readers opening the *Weekly News* in 1877 would have seen McGonagall's initial efforts as striking examples of a kind of poetry they knew well, and that it was their pre-existing investment in the pleasures of bad verse, not delight in McGonagall's exceptionality, that led to his rapid rise to fame or infamy.

References & Further Information

¹ Hugh MacDiarmid, *Scottish Eccentrics*, ed Alan Riach (Carcanet, 1993), pp.57, 64.

² Alexander Burgess to James Law, 2 December 1884, unpublished letter pasted into Burgess, *'Poute!' Being Poutry, Poetry and Prose* (A. Westwood, n.d. [1893]) (author's copy, signed by Law, 1893).

³ First published 2 September 1861, p.2, reprinted in 'Poute!', pp.1-2.

⁴ *People's Journal*, 30 January 1864, p.2.

⁵ Janet Hamilton, *Poems and Ballads* (James Maclehose, 1868), p.xiii.

⁶ See D. H. Edwards, *One Hundred Modern Scottish Poets* (Brechin, 1880), p.271.

⁷ Chris Hunt, ed. *William McGonagall: Collected Poems* (Birlinn, 2006), p.47.

⁸ *Weekly News*, 7 July 1877, p.3.

⁹ 'Poute!', p.v.

¹⁰ *People's Journal*, 18 November 1865, p.2.

¹¹ Hunt, in *Collected Poems*, pp.xii-xiii.

¹² Hunt, in *Collected Poems*, p.xiii. Norman Watson, *Poet McGonagall: The Biography of William McGonagall* (Birlinn, 2010), pp.206-261. Gord Bambrick has argued that McGonagall knew what he was doing in an unpublished Masters dissertation, and in his online article ['The Real McGonagall'](#), (accessed 22.10.13). His argument about McGonagall's self-conscious relationship to Victorian music-hall and performance culture is important in this debate.

(c) *The Bottle Imp*