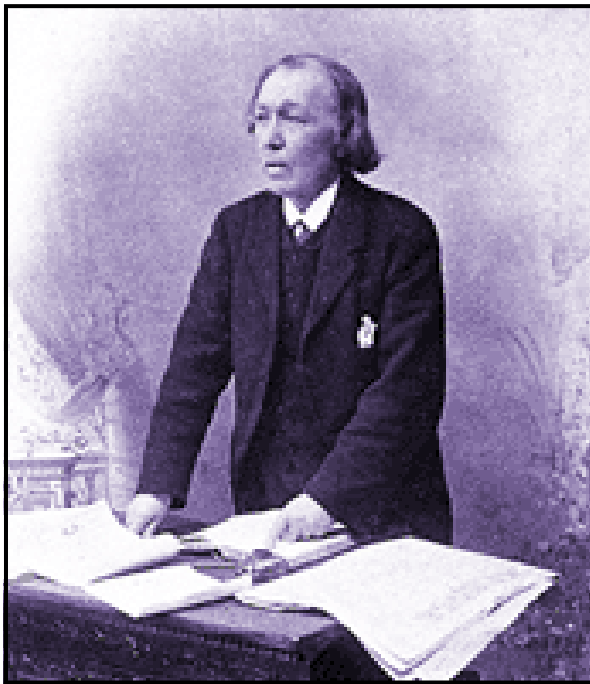




Scottish Poets and Poetry



William Topaz McGonagall, (1830-1902)

William McGonagall, a poet and tragedian, has been widely hailed as the writer of the worst poetry in the English language.

Born in Edinburgh, of Irish parents, he was a self-educated hand loom weaver from Dundee, he discovered his discordant muse in 1877 and embarked upon a 25 year career as a working poet, delighting and appalling audiences across Scotland and beyond.

The chief criticisms of his poetry are that he is deaf to poetic metaphor and unable to scan correctly. Yet whilst this might simply generate dull, uninspiring verse in the hands of lesser artists, McGonagall's fame resides in the humorous effects these shortcomings generate: the inappropriate rhythms, weak vocabulary and ill-advised imagery combine to make his work amongst the most spontaneously amusing (albeit unintentional) comic poetry in the English language. Of the 200 or so poems that he wrote, the most famous is probably *The Tay Bridge Disaster*,

which recounts the events of the evening of 28 December 1879, when, during a severe gale, the Tay Rail Bridge near Dundee collapsed as a train was passing over it.

One commentator remarked that "a lesser poet would have thought it was a good idea to write a poem about the Tay Bridge disaster. A lesser poet would have thought of conveying the shock of the people of Dundee. But only the true master could come up with a couplet like:

And the cry rang out all round the town,

Good heavens! The Tay Bridge has blown down."

McGonagall also campaigned vigorously against excessive drinking, appearing in pubs and bars to give edifying poems and speeches. These were very popular, the people of Dundee possibly recognising that McGonagall was "so giftedly bad he backed unwittingly into genius"

"Poet-baiting" became a popular pastime in Dundee, but McGonagall seemed oblivious to the general opinion of his poems, even when his audience were pelting him with eggs and vegetables.

McGonagall also considered himself an actor, although the theatre where he performed, Mr Giles' Theatre, would only let him perform the title role in *Macbeth* if he paid for the privilege in advance. Their caution proved ill-founded, as the theatre was filled with friends and fellow workers, anxious to see what they correctly predicted to be an amusing disaster. Although the play should have ended with *Macbeth's* death at the hands of *Macduff*, McGonagall believed that the actor playing *Macduff* was trying to upstage him, and so refused to die.

He is buried in Greyfriars Kirkyard in Edinburgh. A grave-slab installed to his memory in 1999 is inscribed: