

**“VERY BAD POETRY”:** edited by Kathryn & Ross Petras

When I was passing through La Guardia airport in New York a few days/weeks/months/years ago, I saw a little book at the bookstall there entitled (above). This was immediately attractive. As an insecure poet myself, was this ‘like’ speaking to ‘like’??? I had to get it - for a ‘friend’ naturally - and, of course, to compare with my own scribblings.

On examination, it contained such poetic gems as:

- \* James McIntyre’s *Ode on the Mammoth Cheese*
- \* Gorgia Bailey Parrington’s *An Elegy to a Dissected Puppy*
- \* When Bad Poems happen to Good Poets: *The Thorn* by William Wordsworth (and it really is bad)
- \* Rev. Samuel Wesley’s *A Pindaricque on the Grunting of a Hog*
- \* William B. Tappan’s *Song of Three Hundred Thousand Drunkards in the United States*
- \* The Worst Poem ever written in the English Language: *A Tragedy* by Theophile Marzials - and
- \* The Most Lurid Account of a Tragedy: *Calamity in London: Family of Ten Burned to Death* by William McGonagall.

Now, in the book’s Introduction it describes how William McGonagall, “probably one of the worst poets of the English language” was first inspired by the poetic Muse.

*“I seemed to feel as it were a strange kind of feeling stealing over me, and remained so for about five minutes. A flame, as Lord Byron has said, seemed to kindle up my entire frame, along with a strong desire to write poetry .... It was so strong I imagined that a pen was in my right hand, and a voice crying, “Write Write!” So I said to myself, ruminating, let me see; what shall I write? then all at once a bright idea struck me.”*

He seems able to write considerably better prose than poetry. However “a compulsion to write verse, and a happy delusion regarding talent” is, apparently” the beginning of a bad poet. But writing very bad poetry actually requires a form of “talent - inverse talent to be sure, but talent nonetheless. It also helps to have

- a wooden ear for words,
- a penchant for sinking into a mire of sentimentality,
- a bullheaded inclination to stuff many too many syllables or words into a single line or phrase,
- and an inenviable confidence that allows one to write despite absolutely appalling incompetence.”

William McGonagall had all of these. He was a native of Dundee in Scotland. He described himself as a poet and tragedian. *“The most startling incident in my life was when I discovered myself to be a poet.”* His compatriots often wished he had not. Once when he was reciting his poetry in a pub, a waiter threw a wet towel at him. His version of the events was that the publican was upset that everyone was listening to him and not drinking their beer and so had a waiter throw a towel at McGonagall to end the poetry reading. Another publican threw peas at him. Once again, McGonagall had a positive interpretation. *“The reason, I think for the publican throwing peas at me is because I say, ‘to the devil with your glass’ in my song ‘The Rattling Boy from Dublin’, and he, no doubt considered it had a teetotal tendency about it, and, for that reason, he had felt angry, and had thrown peas at me.”*

McGonagall was a naive poet. He had no ear for meter, a knack for choosing the most banal of subjects, and a tendency to stretch mightily for a rhyme. But the overall effect was uniformly entertaining. He drew great crowds to his readings, in spite of - or more accurately - because of his lack of talent. He is one of the few poets who actually made a living out of his poetry in his lifetime.

McGonagall lived in Dundee between 1830-1902, and the middle of the nineteenth century was the height of the railway building era. The broad estuary of the River Tay that separates Dundee, Angus and the rest of the east coast of Scotland from the rich and prosperous Central Belt was an irresistible challenge to industrious Victorian engineers. And the two-mile long new railway bridge that eventually spanned the “silvery Tay” produced, as a subject, an irresistible challenge to this native of Dundee; this very bad poet. So, at last, we get to MacGonagall’s poems - and what better way to illustrate **very bad poetry**. Here follows an extract from:

***“The Railway Bridge of the Silvery Tay”.***

**Beautiful Railway Bridge of the Silvery Tay !  
With your numerous arches and pillars in so grand array,  
And your central girders, which seem to the eye  
To be almost towering to the sky,  
The greatest wonder of the day,  
And a great beautification to the River Tay,  
Most beautiful to be seen,  
Near by Dundee and the Magdalen Green.**

**Beautiful Railway Bridge of the Silvery Tay !  
That has caused the Emperor of Brazil to leave  
His home far away, incognito in his dress,  
And view thee ere he passed along en route to Inverness .....**

*and so it goes on ... and on ...*

*The last stanza is worth reading only because of what followed*

**Beautiful Railway Bridge of the Silvery Tay !  
I hope that God will protect all passengers  
By night and by day,  
And that no accident will befall them while crossing  
The Bridge of the Silvery Tay,  
For that would be most awful to be seen  
Near by to Dundee and the Magdalen Green.**

William McGonagall was not only a very bad poet, he might also have had a detrimental effect on the subject of his poem. Not three months after the bridge was opened, during the night of a ferocious storm in mid-winter, it collapsed just in front of a laden passenger train. 90 people were killed. It was a disaster of the type, the necrophiliac Victorians revel in. And this, of course, produced another very bad poem from our hero, entitled:

*“The Tay Bridge Disaster”.*

**Beautiful Railway Bridge of the Silvery Tay !  
Alas ! I am very sorry to say  
That ninety lives have been taken away  
On the last Sabbath day of 1879  
Which will be remembered for a very long time.**

**‘Twas about seven o’clock at night  
And the wind it blew with all its might,  
And the rain came pouring down,  
And the dark clouds seem’d to frown,  
And the Demon of the air seem’d to say -  
“I’ll blow down the Bridge o’ Tay”. . . . .**

*and so it goes on ... and on ...*

*Again the last stanza is worth reading, but only because of other factors - to be revealed*

**It must have been an awful sight  
To witness in the dusky moonlight,  
While the Storm Fiend did laugh, and angry did bray,  
Along the Railway Bridge of the Silv’ry Tay.  
Oh ! ill-fated Bridge of the Silv’ry Tay,  
I must now conclude my lay  
By telling the world fearlessly without the least dismay,  
That your central girders would not have given way,  
At least many sensible men do say,  
Had they been supported on each side with buttresses,  
At least many sensible men confesses,  
For the stronger we our houses do build,  
The less chance we have of being killed.**

*It was actually as black as pitch*

William McGonagall was not only a very bad poet, but he knew little about engineering as well. The real cause of the disaster was that, in order to make some extra money on the construction, one of the sub-contractors has substituted rivets - for the “central girders” (rivets hold the steel girders together) - that were made from a type of putty, and not steel, and were then painted over to look like steel. The Bridge was doomed before it started. However, there was one consolation for our hero, besides his favoured buttresses that were in fact added to the new bridge, he was provided with the inspiration (?) for another poem, entitled (would you believe):

*“An Address to the New Tay Bridge”.*

**Beautiful new railway bridge of the Silvery Tay,  
With your strong brick piers and buttresses in so grand array,  
And your thirteen central girders, which seem to my eye  
Strong enough all windy storms to defy. . . . .**

*And so on ..... and on*

But here at last he was right, as the new bridge stands to this very day,  
Alongside the remains of the brick piers and pillars  
“All blown away,” ... of the first bridge,  
And together they span the Silvery Tay.

*Thank you and Goodnight*