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William McGonagall and the Poet Laureate

William McGonagall never actually met the Poet Laureate, of course; and indeed it is unlikely that Lord Tennyson ever recognised the existence of the Dundee hand-loom weaver and Shakespearean actor who became the self-appointed laureate of the silvery Tay. However, McGonagall was never the man to let polite manners stand in the way of personal advancement. It is not improbable that he had his eyes firmly fixed upon the laureateship of England even from that stupendous day in June, 1877 when the poetical frenzy descended upon him, a family man of 52, and transformed him overnight into Scotland’s scourge. The time was certainly propitious; after all, the Tennyson of 1877 was already a man almost in his dotage and ripe to drop. Confidently, therefore, the intrepid McGonagall tried his wings in some poetical panegyrics to Burns and Shakespeare—whom alone he admitted as his Scottish and English companions in the poetical hierarchy—and promptly despatched these proofs of his genius to that well-spring of all worldly honours, Queen Victoria herself. And lest bare merit alone might not win the day, he added a polite epistle drawing Her Majesty’s attention to his merits, and his needs. Somewhat surprisingly, his poem has never been printed; but the holograph manuscript rests in the McGonagall collection of the Dundee Public Library (from which all my quotations are drawn), and thus allows the present age to redress this injustice to neglected genius.

A Requisition to the Queen
Smiths Buildings No. 19
Patrons Lane,
Dundee.
Sept the 6th. 1877.

1. Most August! Empress of India, and of great Britain the Queen,
I must humbly beg your pardon, hoping you will not think it mean
That a poor poet that lives in Dundee,
Would be so presumptuous to write unto Thee

2. Most lovely Empress of India, and England’s generous Queen,
I send you an Address, I have written on Scotland’s Bard,
Hoping that you will accept it, and not be with me to hard,
Nor fly into a rage, but be as kind and Condescending
As to give me your Patronage

[ 21 ]
3. Beautiful Empress, of India, and Englands Gracious Queen,
   I send you a Shakespearian Address written by me.
   And I think if your Majesty reads it, right pleased you will be.
   And my heart it will leap with joy, if it is patronized by Thee.

4. Most Mighty Empress, of India, and Englands beloved Queen,
   Most Handsome to be Seen.
   I wish you every Success.
   And that heaven may you bless.
   For your Kindness to the poor while they are in distress.
   I hope the Lord will protect you while living
   And hereafter when your Majesty is . . . dead.
   I hope Thee Lord above will place an eternal Crown upon your Head.
   I am your Gracious Majesty ever faithful to Thee,
   William M'Gonagall, The Poor Poet,
   That lives in Dundee.  

Back from the palace came a manuscript of formal acknowledgement:

   General Sir Thomas W. Biddulph is commanded to thank W.
   M'Gonagall for sending the enclosed Lines which however The
   Queen regrets must be returned as it is not usual for Her Majesty
   to receive Manuscript Poetry.

   Buckingham Palace.
   October 16 1877.

   The envelope bears the royal seal, in black wax, and the signature
   "T. W. Biddulph" glued on from a separate sheet. Stimulated no doubt
   by such an obvious sign of regal recognition, yet disturbed that none-
   theless no financial backing followed to demonstrate Her Majesty's
   gracious favour, the energetic M'Gonagall set out to walk from Dundee
to Balmoral the very next time the Queen chanced to be taking the
summer air there. The day by day account of this celebrated journey
appeared in M'Gonagall's own Poetic gems (Dundee, 1890), and has
been reprinted many times. However, the publisher of this valuable
text has taken it upon himself to correct the grammar, spelling and
punctuation of our self-taught bard, and thus robbed the narrative of
much of its flavour. Justice to M'Gonagall's memory demands that we
read the climax of his exciting adventure just as he wrote it, in his
manuscript autobiography.

   When I arrived at the Castleton o' Braemar, it was near twelve
   o'Clock, noon, and from the Castleton, it is twelve Miles to
   Balmoral. And I arrived at the Lodge Gates of the palace of Bal-
   moral just as the tower Clock Chimed III, and when I Crossed

3 A Requision to the Queen, together with the extract from M'Gonagall's
   autobiography, his letter to Sir John Leng, and the reply from Sir Thomas
   Biddulph are reproduced by kind permission of the Corporation of Dundee,
   and are copyright.
the little bridge that spans the river Dee which has been erected by her Majesty, I walked boldly forward and knocked loudly at the porter lodge door, and it was immediately answered by the two Constables, that are there night and day and one of them asked me in a very authoritative tone what I wanted and of course I told him I wanted to see her Majesty, and he repeated, Where do you want to see, and I said rather surprised to think that he should ask me again after telling him distinctly that I wanted to see her Majesty, so he said you cannot see her Majesty without an introductory letter. Then I showed him Her Majestys Royal Letter, of patronage for my poetic abilities. And he read it, and he said it was not her Majesty's Letter, and I said Who's is it then. Do you take me for a forger then he said Sir Thomas Biddulph's Signature wasn't on the Letter, but I told him it was on the Envelope, and he looked and found it to be so as I told him. Then he said why didn't you tell me that before, then I said I forgot. Then he asked me what I wished him to do with the Letter and I requested him to show it to her Majesty, or Sir Thomas Biddulph. Then he left me pretending to go up to the palace with the Letter. Leaving me standing out in the Cold in front of the lodge wondering if he would go up to the palace as he pretended. However he that as it may I know not but he returned with an answer, as follows. Well I've been up at the Castle with your Letter, and the answer, I got for you is they cannot be bothered with you. Said with great vehemence. Well I replied it cannot be helped then he said I could not and began to question me when I left Dundee, and the way I had come from Dundee, and where I had lodged by the way. and I told him, and he noted it all down in his memorandum book and when he'd done so he told me I would have to go back home again the same way I came and then he asked me if I had brought any of my poetry with me and I said I had and showed him the 2d Edition of which I had several copies and he looked at the front of it which seemed to arrest his attention. And he said, you are not Poet, to her Majesty. Tennyson's the real Poet to Her Majesty. Then I said granted. But sir, you cannot deny that I have received Her Majesty's patronage. Then he... [told] me to go straight home and not to think of coming back again to Balmoral. So I bade him good bye, and retraced my steps in search of a lodging for the night, which I obtained at the first farmhouse I called at, and when I knocked at the door I was told to come in and warm my feet at the fire which I accordingly did and when I told the good wife and man who I was and about me being at the palace. They felt very much for me, and lodged me for the night and fed me likewise telling me to stay with them for a day or two and gauging to the road Side and watch her Majesty and speak to her and that I might be sure she would do something for me but I paid no heed to their advice.

Thus, disappointed but not dismayed, Poet M'Gonagall returned to Dundee.
And there, for some years, the matter rested. M’Gonagall scorned, however, to chafe in enforced idleness. On the contrary, he lost no opportunity to demonstrate to the world at large his unquestioned talent at commemorating in verse those great and public events which traditionally require the Poet Laureate of England to capture in some well-turned phrase an attitude the nation might charitably be supposed to share. Martial heroism did not pass unsung: stirring deeds at Lucknow, the Alma and Alexandria received their measure of praise, and his poem on "The Battle of Tel-el-Kebir," subtitled on its broadside publication "THE LATEST LAUREL OF THE BRITISH ARMY," was "Dedicated expressly to Sir GARNET WOLSELEY, and the British Army under his command." The broadside poems collected at Dundee glow with loyal fervour. What patriotic British heart could resist these lines from "The battle of Abu Klea":

For ten minutes a desperate struggle raged from left to rear,  
While Gunner Smith saved Lieutenant Guthrie’s life without  
dread or fear;  
When all the other gunners had been borne back,  
He took up a handsipe, and the Arabs he did whack.

The noble hero hard blows did strike,  
As he swung round his head the handsipe;  
He seemed like a destroying angel in the midst of the fight,  
The way he scattered the Arabs left and right.

Oh, it was an exciting and terrible sight,  
To see Colonel Burnaby engaged in the fight;  
With sword in hand, fighting with might and main,  
Untill killed by a spear thrust in the jugular vein.

or this stirring peroration to "The battle of El-Teb":

Oh, God of Heaven! it was a terrible sight  
To see and hear the Arabs shouting with all their might;  
A fearful oath when they got an inch of cold steel,  
Which forced them backwards again and made them reel.

By two o’clock they were fairly beat,  
And Osman Digna, the false prophet, was forced to retreat,  
After three hours of an incessant fight;  
But Heaven, ’tis said, defends the right.

And I think he ought to be ashamed of himself,  
For I consider he has acted the part of a silly elf,  
By thinking to conquer the armies of the Lord  
With his foolish and benighted rebel horde.

Nor did M’Gonagall neglect those more sombre events which call a laureate to tune a more elegiac strain. Could anything be more felicitous
than this delicately observed detail from "The funeral of the German Emperor":

The Authorities of Berlin in honour of the Emperor considered it no sin,
To decorate with crape the beautiful City of Berlin;
Therefore Berlin I declare was a City of crape,
Because few buildings crape decoration did escape.

And it is surely impossible to imagine the Queen's maternal bosom unmoved by this moral panegyric occasioned by "The death of Prince Leopold":

Alas! noble Prince Leopold, he is dead!
Who often has his lustre shed,
Especially by singing for the benefit of Esther School,
Which proves he was a wise Prince, and no conceited fool.

Methinks I see him on the platform singing the Sands o' Dee,
The generous hearted Leopold, the good and the free,
Who was manly in his actions, and beloved by his mother,
And in all the family she hasn't got such another.

He was of a delicate constitution all his life,
And he was his mother's favourite, and very kind to his wife,
And he had also a particular liking for his child,
And in his behaviour he was very mild.

But it was with "The attempted assassination of the Queen" that M'Gonagall reached the pinnacle of his performance as her Majesty's unofficial, and unpaid, laureate (admirers of the poem will note with particular pleasure the superior reading at line nine afforded by the broadside text used here):

God prosper long our noble Queen,
And long may she reign,
Maclean he tried to shoot her,
But it was all in vain.

For God he turned the Ball aside,
Maclean aimed at her head,
And he felt very angry,
Because he didn't shoot her dead:

Shakespeare says there's a divinity that hedgeheth a King,
And so it does seem,
And my opinion is it has hedged,
Our most Gracious Queen.

Maclean must be a madman,
Which is obvious to be seen,
Or else he wouldn't have tried to shoot,
Our most beloved Queen.
These extracts alone are enough to show how assiduously Poet M'Gonagall perfected his craft, against the day when the laureateship of England should once again be free. Small wonder, then, that when in the fullness of years Alfred, Lord Tennyson went finally to his last resting place, William M'Gonagall rose to greet the great occasion with a poem as lofty as the noble deathpiece to Lord and Lady Dalhousie upon which so much of his present fame and memory rest. As this lofty epicedium seems to have been wholly forgotten, it is a privilege to reprint it here, from the original broadside of 1892.

Death and burial of Lord Tennyson

Alas! England now mourns for her poet that's gone—
The late and the good Lord Tennyson.
I hope his soul has fled to heaven above,
Where there is everlasting joy and love.

He was a man that didn't care for company,
Because company interfered with his study,
And confused the bright ideas in his brain,
And for that reason from company he liked to abstain.

He has written some fine pieces of poetry in his time,
Especially the May Queen, which is really sublime;
Also the gallant charge of the Light Brigade—
A most heroic poem, and beautifully made.

He believed in the Bible, also in Shakspeare,
Which he advised young men to read without any fear;
And by following the advice of both works therein,
They would seldom or never commit any sin.

Lord Tennyson's works are all of the scenery of his boyhood,
And during his life all his actions were good;
And Lincolnshire was closely associated with his history,
And he has done what Wordsworth did for the Lake Country.

His remains now rest in Westminster Abbey,
And his funeral was very impressive to see;
It was a very touching sight, I must confess,
Every class, from the Queen, paying a tribute to the poet's greatness.

The pall-bearers on the right of the coffin were Mr W. E. H. Lecky,
And Professor Butler, Master of Trinity, and the Earl of Rosebery;
And on the left were Mr J. A. Froude and the Marquis of Salisbury,
Also Lord Selborne, which was an imposing sight to see.
WILLIAM M'GONAGALL AND THE POET LAUREATE

There were also on the left Professor Jowett,
Besides Mr Henry Whyte and Sir James Paget,
And the Marquis of Dufferin and the Duke of Argyll,
And Lord Salisbury, who seemed melancholy all the while.

The chief mourners were all of the Tennyson family,
Including the Hon. Mr and Mrs Hallam Tennyson, and Masters Lionel and Aubrey,
And Mr Arthur Tennyson, and Mr and Mrs Horatio Tennyson;
Also Sir Andrew Clark, who was looking woe begone.

The bottom of the grave was thickly strewn with white roses,
And for such a grave kings will sigh where the poet now repose;
And many of the wreaths were much observed and commented upon,
And conspicuous amongst them was one from Mrs Gladstone.

The Gordon boys were there looking solemn and serene,
Also Sir Henry Ponsonby to represent the Queen;
Likewise Henry Irving, the great tragedian,
With a solemn aspect, and driving his brougham.

And, in conclusion, I most earnestly pray,
That the people will erect a monument for him without delay,
To commemorate the good work he had done,
And his name in gold letters written thereon!

Only M'Gonagall could pen a tribute to Tennyson in these terms. Yet when he forwarded a copy of the poem to the Marquis of Lorne, he received in reply (if we may believe the Dundee Weekly News for 29 October, 1892), the following crushing acknowledgement:

Glamis Castle, N.B., Oct. 23, 1892.

Sir,

I thank you for your enclosure, and, as a friend, would advise you to keep strictly to prose for the future. Believe me, yours in faithful dealing,

LORNE.

The News was quick to remark, however, that Lord Lorne had "himself been recommended for the laureateship by no less eminent an authority than Mr William Morris." Thus shrewd Dundonians dismissed Lord Lorne's calumny with the contempt it deserved, and concentrated instead on reckoning the odds against M'Gonagall gaining at last the coveted reward for his poetic endeavours. He was not, of course, without serious rivals. What great master but has his imitators? In distant Edinburgh, the puny rhymster Osburn Blackburn had his supporters, and the great M'Gonagall was subjected to ignominious comparison with his Caledonian rival. The Edinburgh Despatch for 2 October 1894 went so far as to publish a Gilbertian parody entitled "IM-PATIENCE; OR, BLACKBURN'S PRIDE," in which Bunthorne-Blackburn, "Our too too
utterly darling Poet," was defeated in competition for the laureateship by Grosvenor M’Gonagall, "attired in the uniform of the Perth Lyric Club, which is a cross between the costume of Claudian and Adam." Months before this, however, poet M’Gonagall, exhausted no doubt by the strain of composition and the vicious attacks of those who, unable to discern his genius, preferred instead to abuse his credulity with innumerable hoaxes and to dismiss his public readings with showers of flour and soot, eggs and rotten vegetables, gave up the struggle, abandoned his hopes of the laureateship, lowered his sights, and wrote to Sir John Leng, M.P., to beg for a pension from the Civil List. This desperate letter remains one of the greatest treasures of the Dundee Public Library, and has long rested in a glass case at the entrance to the circulating department, as a terrible reminder to tyro poets of a more modern age that bounty too rarely extends where merit demands it.

48, Steeple Row. Dundee.
June. the 21. 1894.

Sir John Leng.

my dear Sir. I beg to be excused for writing to you again hoping you will be so kind as to try and get me a gift of money from the Civil List. As I am in very delicate health, at present, and likely to be so. I’ve been ill with Bronchitis, since the 3rd. of May. and is very much reduced in body. I was 3. weeks confined to bed. in May month but thank God I am a good deal better now and is going about at present. but nevertheless I feel very weakly and my Medical adviser tells me I will feel so for some time to Come. I get but very little sleep. that is owing to brain worry. which I will never get rid of. only by resting the brain and getting plenty of nourishing food and Change of air. therefore my dear Sir I will feel very much obliged to you to lay my Case, before the Premier Lord Rosebery. I dont think you need be afraid to approach him. hoping you will remember me.

believe me Yours faithfully
Wm. M’Gonagall
Poet.

Sir John Leng,
M.P.

M’Gonagall never received his pension. Broken in body and mind, he moved to the kinder climate of Perth, and finally to Edinburgh, where he died in poverty on 29 September 1902, still convinced that were genius respected his earthly remains should lie beside the other poets laureate in the sacred peace of Westminster Abbey.

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