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### **The Patriotic Muse of William McGonagall: Imperialism and the Great Scots Joke**

The significance of imperialism, and in particular, the question of whether or not it took hold of the popular imagination, is still the subject of debate. How widespread was imperial feeling in Britain before the Boer War? Was it largely an enthusiasm of the lower middle classes, fueled by jingo papers like *The Daily Mail*? Was it accepted by the working classes; did they too respond to the fervour of the imperial moment? The debate is still open: the material of propaganda is there in plenty, as John MacKenzie and other scholars have shown, and a strong case can be made that imperial ideology pervaded all levels of society.<sup>1</sup> But what form did it take: what was the extent and the nature of the discourse? What *was* the language of empire, and how was it used? In this article I offer a peculiar example of the construction of a text, both as a curiosity of social history, and more substantially, as material for a summary mapping of popular imperialism. My topic is the primitive verse of William McGonagall, written and printed towards the end of Victoria's reign. I intend to treat McGonagall's work not so much as some sub-literary aberration to be judged by literary critical standards, nor yet as a document to be valued solely for its historical or social content, but rather as an example in itself of popular consciousness. This was how ideology was given form; this was how a naive Scots poet of little education gave expression to the imperial mission.

William McGonagall (1830-1902) was a weaver in the city of Dundee, who took to reading books and improving his handwriting when he was freed at night from his loom. He developed a taste for Shakespeare's tragedies, and, learning the parts of Macbeth, Hamlet, Othello, and Richard III, began to entertain his workmates by dramatic recitations. He then tried his luck on the Dundee stage, with his fellow

weavers taking up a subscription to pay the canny stage manager's fee. His part was Macbeth, the weavers cheered him, and there were even "entire strangers in the audience."<sup>2</sup> Some years later—in the month of June, 1977—McGonagall felt "a strange kind of feeling stealing over" him, making him for a moment so happy he was inclined to dance. A voice was crying "Write! Write!"—and before he knew where he was, he found himself composing poetry. His *Poetic Gems* was printed in 1890.

McGonagall is notoriously the great bad poet, the favorite "anti-laureate" among scholars of the late-Victorian age.<sup>3</sup> In his own lifetime he was patronized by jokers of the educated classes, who, encouraging his high opinion of himself, helped create a market for his verse, turning it out in mock-serious titles such as *This is the Book of the Lamentations of the Poet McGonagall*.<sup>4</sup> He became known as "The Great McGonagall," and, for another joke, was dubbed Sir William Topaz, Knight of the White Elephant in the court of King Theebaw of Burmah and the Andaman Islands—a title which in his innocence he displayed with pride.

His work was re-printed occasionally, but in the 1950s he was re-discovered, when as much of his verse as could be turned up was published.<sup>5</sup> He was named in the blurbs which puffed these reprints as "the greatest Bad Verse Writer of his age"—"or any other age," his poems "the standard reading of generations of laughter-loving Scotsmen." His clunking rhymes and elastic metrics were deemed atrocious, his banal sentiments were said to be beyond compare, and his marriage of the trivial with the sublime was thought to take some beating. A critic for the *TLS* called him a "real genius" as "the only truly memorable bad poet in our language," Norman McCaig spoke of his "saving grace of eccentricity," and Stephen Potter, perhaps projecting the guilt of the educated reader who laughs at the naive writer, noted that with his unconscious humour was blended unconscious sadness. McGonagall, in fact, was an original, a versifier who, artless and unselfconscious, achieved with the soberest of intentions the effects of an Ogden Nash. He could not be paraphrased; he had to be quoted for his effect to be understood:

'Twas in the year of 1888, and on October the fourteenth  
 day,  
 That a fire broke out in a warehouse, and for hours blazed  
 away;  
 And the warehouse, now destroyed, was occupied by the  
 Messrs. R. Wylie, Hill & Co.,

Situated in Buchanan Street, in the City of Glasgow.

("The Miraculous Escape of Robert Allan, the Fireman," *PG* 200.)

McGonagall was a public poet, in the main, and his taste ran to the sensational. Though occasionally he tried his hand at ballads—as the kind of thing poets generally did—he was most frequently provoked into rhyme by disasters. He wrote of the sensational world that he read about in the newspapers ("Burning of the Exeter Theatre," "The Tay Bridge Disaster," "The Great Yellow River Inundation in China," "The Tragic Death of the Rev. A. H. Mackonochie"). He wrote temperance poems on "The Demon Drink" (he was against it), and verses on "Women's Suffrage" (he was for it). He was appreciative of natural beauty, in a guidebook sort of way ("Bonnie Callander," "Bonnie Montrose," "Beautiful North Berwick," and a dozen other beauty spots); he was fond of the memorial, writing lines in praise of Mr. Gladstone ("the great political hero"), Professor Blackie ("dearly beloved"), and the Late Ex-Provost Rough of Dundee. He was, too, an ardent royalist, and having trekked up to Balmoral, he dedicated several odes to the Queen, with a "requisition":

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 (*LPG* 9).

As an occasional poet McGonagall found much of his inspiration in the most considerable subject of the day, the continuing and often bloody story of the empire. He celebrated, first in submissions to the Dundee newspapers, and then in single sheet offprints, the likeliest news: if the papers reported a battle in the Sudan, that was his subject; if the death of General Gordon was on people's lips, then McGonagall was ready with his reflections. In these accounts of the victories and defeats of the soldiers of the Queen, he employs the basic vocabulary and codes of popular imperialism. By examining his verses my intention is to demonstrate the extent to which the language of patriotism was in common currency, and how the military incident in particular was transcribed for the public imagination. At the same time, I will attempt to come to terms with his contemporary and current incarnation as "the Great MacGonagall." Burdened as it is by the baggage of class and race, this great Scots joke deserves to be taken seriously once in a while.

## 1

In a popular sense, the discourse of imperialism in the late nineteenth-century was expressed as a celebration of national spirit, with the superiority of Britain over other nations made obvious by military successes, and the spread of the Empire seen as the proof of power. The history of the nation was read as a triumphant progress of accretion and conquest, conducted by a succession of heroes, who, in their characters, each demonstrated the appropriate national virtues of coolness, pluck, loyalty, self-sacrifice, and so on. In its various parts—the creation of a myth of national history, the worship of cult figures like Nelson and Gordon, the growing devotion to royalty, the formalization of a language of patriotism—popular imperialism became the dominant ideology of the age. The patriotic verse of Henley and Newbolt expressed these values for the middle classes, as did the historical romances of Gilbert Parker and Conan Doyle; Kipling, as we know, was heard both in the drawing rooms and the music halls. But these names represent just the literary tip of an enormous iceberg, composed, for the most part, of a vast ephemeral and sub-literary mass—and in the terms of social rather than literary history, it is what is below water that is most revealing.

McGonagall addressed himself to the standard patriotic subjects of the day. The military history of the nation had been woven into a seamless tapestry of resounding victories and heroic defeats, each marked by legends of heroic valour. This myth became, of course, an integral part of imperial propaganda, repeated in educational, popular, and juvenile texts and pictures. McGonagall turned to history, and following the usual agenda, wrote poems on the battles of Cressy, the Nile, Waterloo, the Punjab campaigns, and the Crimea. His treatment of Corunna is typical. He describes the occasion with economy:

'Twas in the year of 1808, and in the autumn of the year,  
 Napoleon resolved to crush Spain and Portugal without fear;  
 So with a mighty army three hundred thousand strong  
 Through the passes of the Pyrenees into Spain he passed along ...  
 (LPG 34)

and moves quickly into an account of the action. Then—and this is an ingredient in almost all of his patriotic poems—he inserts himself as a ghostly spectator of the battle. “Oh!” he cries, “it was a most gorgeous and inspiring sight” (“To see Sir John Moore in the thickest of the fight”); again, “Oh! that battlefield was a fearful sight to behold”

(" 'Twas enough to make one's blood run cold") and again, "But O Heaven! it was a heartrending sight," ("When Sir John Moore was shot dead in the thickest of the fight"). McGonagall keeps to the traditional story,<sup>6</sup> with Sir John's last words ("Let me see how the battle goes on"), his death ("he breathes his last with a gurgling sound"), and his burial in the citadel. He ends his poem, as was his practice, with an envoy praising the army, and inserting, as he did when he could, a mention of the Scots. He strikes a confident note, employing in his last line one of the favorite journalistic images of the day:

Success to the British army wherever they go,  
 For seldom they have failed to conquer the foe;  
 Long may the Highlanders be able to make the foe reel,  
 By giving them an inch or two of cold steel (*LPG* 36).

McGonagall's verses seem at first sight naive echoes of the conventional legends, but the frequent Scottish emphasis hints at something a little deeper. As Sir William Butler reminded his contemporaries in one of his radical essays, the Victorian army depended heavily on the Irish peasants and the Scottish Highlanders.<sup>7</sup> McGonagall empathizes with the young bare-kneed soldiers; he is proud of them, and so he mentions them when he can. It was the "kilties" that had stood in the thin red line: Sir Colin Campbell and the Highland Brigade at the battle of the Alma in 1854, as McGonagall says, put on in their "tartan array," "a most beautiful and magnificent display," until, "terror-stricken by this terrible advancing line," "The Russians broke down and began to whine..." ("The Battle of the Alma. Fought in 1854," *LPG* 46). So McGonagall, echoing Lady Butler's famous painting, let "Scotland for ever!" be the cry when he could ("The Battle of Waterloo," *MPG* 124). McGonagall's rhymes often had control of his diction, but his patriotic sentiments were firm. The British army was superior to any other, and of the army, the Highland regiments won the prize.

And yet McGonagall's patriotism accommodated easily to a standard British nationalism; he expressed no regrets at the union of the crowns. He did not mean to question history; it had happened, God had approved, and that was enough. Thus he was proud to recite the standard subjects of the Scottish canon—William Wallace, Robert the Bruce, Bannockburn, Flodden Field, Sheriffmuir—to concentrate on the bravery of the old Scots heroes. Once in a while an "it might have been" escaped his pen, but not, it is safe to say, with any treasonable intent:

Prince Charles Stuart, of fame and renown,  
 You might have worn Scotland's crown,  
 If the Macdonalds and Glengarry at Culloden had proved true;  
 But, being too ambitious for honour, that they didn't do,  
 Which I'm sorry to say, proved most disastrous to you...  
 (PG 121).

It is in the verses celebrating the battles of his own day that McGonagall's imperial voice can best be heard. According to the "Summary History" published with the *Last Poetic Gems*, his muse did not call upon him until 1877. He was nearly fifty, with the Crimea and the Indian Mutiny long a memory. The first campaigns that he can have commented upon poetically as a contemporary would be the Zulu War of 1879, the skirmishes on the North West Frontier of India a year later, and the Boer War of 1881. These would be followed by the Sudanese expedition to rescue General Gordon in 1884-85, and Kitchener's campaign of revenge on the Mahdi in 1897-98. McGonagall had verses on all these imperial moments, from the disaster of Maiwand, and the defeat of Majuba, to the triumph of Omdurman. He lived long enough to experience the excitement of the Boer War, and was able to celebrate the lifting of the siege of Mafeking and Lord Robert's entry into Pretoria. In his choice both of subject and of incident he reflected the popular contemporary treatment of the imperial event.

Before looking at the way he expressed his patriotism, it is worth placing McGonagall's imperialism in an appropriate context. The model for his verses is not so much the public poetry of say, Tennyson, or the more ordinary effusions of one of the laureates of Empire like Alfred Austin, but the mass of patriotic ephemera which appeared and disappeared in the media of the day. Perhaps the best comparison—and the best accessible distillation of this popular material—is to its subsequent appearance in juvenile literature, in the form of innumerable *Deeds of Glory—In Empire's Cause*—that were written in the thirty years before the First World War, and which appeared both in books for boys and in the middle-class boys' magazines.

An argument can be made that the military exploits of the day were both sensationalized in the media, and, by repetition and emphasis, were soon made to conform to the myth of a heroic and glorious history. Imperialist propaganda in this sense was prominent in many school readers of this period: restrained in the works of H. O. Arnold-Forster (*The Citizen Reader*), full-blown in the works of the Rev. W. H. Fitchett (*Deeds That Won the Empire*). Both in the readers, and reciters, and more generally, in the mass of stories, verse and prose, of

*Brave Deeds by Brave Men*,<sup>8</sup> the heroic episode became coded, first in its selection, then, in its detail, until this juvenile literature became quite formalized. Each brave deed exemplified one or more of the manly virtues; each heroic incident was reduced to one or two memorable details. Through a limited series of motifs—a Last Stand, a Life Sacrificed for Another, a Charge to the Death—a vocabulary of types was established and insisted upon. McGonagall was not in complete possession of this vocabulary, but again and again his verse refers to it, and indicates that the language of patriotism was in general circulation.

In writing, for instance, of the defeat in 1880 of the British army at Maiwand on the North West Frontier, McGonagall gives an account of the action that in its use of motif and reference to detail is identical to that used by the boys' books. The "Heroes of Maiwand" are the "Last Berkshire Eleven," the men who stood—as the usual caption of the illustrations to the juvenile magazines put it—"Back to Back at Maiwand."<sup>9</sup> These men were the remnant of a British force of two thousand, "massacred to the last man," which, as McGonagall is sorry to relate, "was a pitiful sight to see." The last eleven had with them—another detail which is present in all the popular accounts—the regimental pet dog:

And they broke from the enclosure, and followed by the  
 little dog,  
 And with excitement it was barking savagely, and leaping  
 like a frog,  
 And from the field the last eleven refused to retire,  
 And with fixed bayonets they charged on the enemy in that  
 sea of fire (*LPG* 82).

The heroic stand of the Last Berkshire Eleven was emblematic of British pluck in the face of death, and could be used to demonstrate the superiority of the Anglo-Saxon race. As one boys' book put it, "they stood with bayonets fixed and stern faces, without a tremor, whilst even the savage Ghazis marvelled at the courage of the white men."<sup>10</sup> "Oh!," McGonagall said,

the scene was most grand;  
 And the noble and heroic eleven fought on without dismay,  
 Until the last man in the arms of death stiff and stark lay  
 (*LPG* 83).

The way in which the "story" of Maiwand was created—encoded—from a frontier incident says much about the nature of popular imperialism; we are in the presence here of mythmaking. (As is the usual

case with Last Stands, there was no-one left alive at Maiwand to report what happened—"we have it on Afghan authority," some accounts mention. Eleven is a significant number for a nation, which, in a legendary sense, won battles on the playing field. "Back to Back at Maiwand" was how the British soldier—or at least the British officer—*should* die, a member of a team "playing the game.") McGonagall here is sharing in a patriotic and national story; significantly he accepts the values of the myth.

What is remarkable about McGonagall's work as a whole is the extent to which he covers the field: there are few heroic and glorious exploits in the imperial canon which escape his attention. In another Indian frontier incident, three British regiments in 1897—the Ghurkas, the Dorsetshires, and the Gordon Highlanders—attempted to dislodge a strong Afridi force from some high ground. After several reverses, the Gordons were successful. This action was quickly entered into the annals of patriotic history, and became emblematic of military courage and sacrifice: along with "Lord Charles Beresford's Gallant Fight on Board the 'Safieh,'" and "The Death of General Gordon" (both incidents in the Sudan campaign of 1884-85), Madame Tussaud's was still exhibiting a tableau of the Highlanders at Dargai at the end of the Boer War. Describing "The Storming of the Dargai Heights," McGonagall focuses on the pluck of the Gordon Highlanders, and the coolness of their commanding officer, Colonel Mathias. "In that famous charge," he says, dropping into his usual role as the ghostly observer,

it was a most beautiful sight  
To see the regimental pipers playing with all their might  
(LPG 133).

"But alas!" one of the pipers was shot "through both ankles," and, in the scene which demonstrated the motif of bravery in the face of fire, that piper carried on piping. Surprisingly, given his appetite for detail, however hard to fit into the line, McGonagall does not identify Piper Findlater, a hero who, as the boys' magazine *Chums* told its readers, displayed "true pluck" that day. "Britishers," *Chums* announced in reporting the battle, "Fear not Fire or Foe."<sup>11</sup>

McGonagall's method, in fact, is little different from that used by the boys' magazines. He begins his descriptive poems with the announcement that his theme is the bravery of the British army:

Ye sons of Mars, come join with me,  
And sing in praise of Sir Herbert Stewart's little army,



That made ten thousand Arabs flee  
At the charge of the bayonet at Abu Klea (*PG* 53).

He then describes the action, giving the significant detail, naming the heroes, and reciting their sacrifices:

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,  
Until killed by a spear-thrust in the jugular vein (*PG* 55).

He occasionally ends abruptly—"Then the square was re-formed, and the battle was o'er"—but more often, in the style of the boys' magazines, he draws the moral. The British army has been victorious, God approves, and though some soldiers have lost their lives, the barbarous natives must be kept in order. At the battle of El-Teb, for instance, McGonagall reflects on Osman Digna, "the false prophet."

And I think that 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 (*PG* 53).

It was God who sent Sir Garnet Wolseley "to crush and kill/ Arabi and his rebel army at Kebir hill" ("The battle of Tel-el-Kebir"), and though "'Tis lamentable to think of the horrors of war," "Whatsoever God wills must come to pass...." "Man," McGonagall concludes his verses on "The Rebel Surprise near Tamai,"

must fall at home by His command,  
Just equally the same as in a foreign land (*PG* 159).

His attitude is fatalistic. He regrets death—he frequently finds it pitiful—but he is thankful that Britain is defended by such brave men. He is not a jingo, in the strict sense of the word; he announces, he does not bluster. His patriotism is a matter of simple faith, and his imperialism is straightforward:

Long life and prosperity to the British army,  
May they always be able to conquer their enemies by land and  
by sea.  
May God enable them to put their enemies to flight,  
And to annihilate barbarity, and to establish what is  
right.

("The Battle of Atbara," *LPG* 140).

The world must be kept in order.

The case that McGonagall's verse echoes the legends of popular imperialism has perhaps its best evidence in his "General Gordon, the Hero of Khartoum." Gordon, of course, was the martyred saint of the Empire, held up to a whole generation as the perfect Christian soldier. In the numerous accounts of his life, and in the countless memorials to his death, the notable events in Gordon's life were arranged to form an imperial hagiography, a record of the man that Arthur Quiller-Couch called "the noblest Briton of our times,"<sup>12</sup> and who Dr. Gordon Stables, the dean of boys' writers, named "probably the truest Christian and bravest soldier that ever lived."<sup>13</sup> As a boy's book of imperial heroes put it, Gordon was "The Pasha Who Knew No Fear" (*Brave Deeds by Brave Men*). Thus Gordon's bravery in the Crimea, when he stood on the parapet under fire to set an example, his courage when fighting in China; his missionary work among the boys of Gravesend; his setting free the debtors in the prison of Khartoum; his campaign against slavery in the Sudan—all these became part of the exemplary life. His solitary death—the death of a martyr devoted to his Bible—served as a symbol of imperial self-sacrifice, the embodiment of the Victorian paradox, the man who was both Christian *and* soldier.

McGonagall's verses list the steps to Gordon's Calvary in the usual form, his language echoing the customary epithets of praise. Even the insistent demands of his rhyme hardly disguise the encoded life of the hero:

Alas! now o'er the civilized world there hangs a gloom  
For brave General Gordon, that was killed at Khartoum;  
He was a Christian hero, and a soldier of the Cross,  
And to England his death will be a very great loss (*PG* 167).

He manages to get in all the necessary details (though not always in the right chronological order): Gordon taking "the Bible for his guide/And he liked little boys to walk by his side"; Gordon denouncing "all pleasures he considered sinful and vain/ And in battle he carried no weapon but a small cane"—this last word not an accident of rhyme, but quite precise and accurate, for Gordon did lead his Chinese soldiers with that was often called his "magic" wand. McGonagall, himself a God-fearing man, approved of Gordon's humanity, of his sympathy with the poor, and of his dedication to God.

I hope the people will his memory revere,  
And take an example from him, and worship God in fear,

And never be too fond of worldly gear,  
 And walk in General Gordon's footsteps, while they are here (*PG* 169).  
 McGonagall's imperial verse, perhaps appropriately enough considering the course of history, ends with the Boer War. He was able to celebrate the success of the Gordons in the South African battle of Glencoe

Oh! it was a most gorgeous and thrilling sight,  
 To see them with their bagpipes playing, and one ringing  
 cheer,  
 And from Smith's Hill they soon did the Boers clear (*MPG* 117).

and the relief of Mafeking

Success to Colonel Baden-Powell and his praises loudly sing,  
 For being so brave in relieving Mafeking ... (*MPG* 113).

(McGonagall has this wrong, of course: Baden-Powell was besieged in Mafeking.) He was present in spirit with Lord Roberts as he entered Pretoria "in the afternoon" ("on the 5th of June").

His triumphal entry was magnificent to see,  
 The British Army marching behind him fearlessly (*LPG* 159).

His patriotic sentiments, given the opinion of the day, seem unexceptional. He was glad that God was there in South Africa to enable the soldiers to "beat all foreign foes from our shores."

Did McGonagall merely add yet one more voice to the imperial chorus, or did he express thoughts which relate to his own condition and perhaps class? There is evidence in some of his verses of convictions which seem to qualify unconsidered jingoism. He is alive, like Kipling, to the lot of the soldier, and though he will echo the catchphrase of the day—"an inch of cold steel"—he is sensitive to the horrors of warfare. Writing an answer to Kipling's popular "Absent-Minded Beggar"—and missing the point—he objects to the British soldier being slandered. Tommy Atkins, he says, is a brave man, and a useful man. To call a soldier a beggar, he says, "is a very degrading name." A soldier "doesn't need to beg, he lives by his trade." Here McGonagall, who spent most of his last years in poverty, and who, choosing poetry for a trade, was close enough to beggary himself, seems to be voicing the consciousness of his class and his nation: "a man's a man for a' that." And he speaks with some feeling of the soldier's lot, calling upon the Christian to remember and be charitable:

Oh, think of Tommy Atkins when from home far away,  
 Lying on the battlefield, earth's cold clay;  
 And a stone or his knapsack pillowing his head,  
 And his comrades lying near by him wounded and dead (*MPG* 112).

In his own way McGonagall makes his point.

Looked at in the context of their time, as part of those patriotic fictions which gave military episodes such as the Boer War a symbolic reality, and which served to depoliticize them or to make them "natural" and "innocent," the *Poetic Gems* reflect better than most texts the discourse of popular imperialism. The world belonged quite properly to Britain—"our shores" extended to the Indian Ocean and beyond—and all "foreign foes," imagined as alien, were there to be beaten. The British Army, faithful to old Queen or new King, existed to put the world in order. McGonagall, an ever-present chorus to the course of empire, was ready to echo these simple messages. Imperialism had entered popular consciousness.

## 2

The reception of McGonagall's verse in itself is an awkward problem, for almost from the start, his status as a joke has determined his audience, and that audience's probable reaction to his work. Naive material presents peculiar difficulties to the critic: can we measure its affect on the reader; does it have an equally naive audience? By the standards of prosody McGonagall's verse was atrocious: he had no notion of metre; his use of rhyme was facile. And his technical difficulties seem the least of his handicaps, compared to the banality of his language and the poverty of his descriptions—but having said so much, one begins to hear in those words the strictures of traditional criticism.<sup>14</sup> There may be other standards by which to judge McGonagall: the Scots critic Alan Bold, coming at his subject from what is presumably a political and a nationalist stance, argues that McGonagall belongs to the tradition of the reciter or ballad maker, with a style based entirely on the broadside ballad formula. He is, for Bold, an "absolutely outstanding primitive poet," whose work may be read like "metrical tabloid journalism." Bold deplores the cruelty of McGonagall's first "admirers," and notes that his posthumous treatment "has been more malicious than anything that happened to him in his immensely productive and emotionally eventful life."<sup>15</sup>

The modern reader may well approach McGonagall with some embarrassment. He was presented to what presumably was a largely

middle-class audience in the 1950s—and he has been re-printed since—as a Scots Joke, becoming part of that half-comic, half-romantic “tartanry” which defines the Scot as peripheral, or Other, to the dominant English identity.<sup>16</sup> In these recent editions his works have been dressed up in tartan, significantly enough, and decorated with a thistle. They have a title-page which proclaims McGonagall, in his own style, as “Poet and Tragedian,” and they come with a number of re-printed excerpts from original editions: a “Biographical Sketch and Reminiscences by the Author”; a “Tribute from three students at Glasgow University,” dated 1891, together with an “Ode to William McGonagall” by these young men; and a “Tribute from Zululand” signed by a private soldier in the Royal Scots. If the “seriousness” of the title-page was a “cod,” and the contribution by the young gentlemen of Glasgow a mockery—

Among the poets of the present day  
 There is no one on earth who can possibly be able for to  
     gainsay  
 But that William McGonagall, poet and tragedian,  
 Is truly the greatest poet that was ever found above or below the  
 meridian (*PG* 20)—

the letter from the soldier in Zululand reminds us that McGonagall may have had an audience that took him seriously: Fred Rollo evidently sincerely appreciated McGonagall’s “splendid work,” and thought that it surpassed “any of the writings of the so-called ‘poets’ of the present day.”

The publishing history of McGonagall’s verse in his own lifetime, accompanied as it was with the ironic introductions of “educated” editors, demonstrates quite dramatically a display of power by one class over another. We are presented in print with a legend called “the Great McGonagall,” a creature whose pathetic pretensions can be all so cruelly ridiculed:

the Order of the White Elephant was conferred on McGonagall in the University Hotel. After the ceremonial an illuminated address in latin was presented. Finally, a large drawing of the poet as ‘the Genius of Poetry’ was placed on the steps of the throne....

(This from an account in an Edinburgh newspaper of an entertainment of McGonagall by some gentlemen, who pretended to be nobility for the occasion.)<sup>17</sup> It was not enough that McGonagall was a fool: it is clear from the contemporary report that he was considered an uncouth

and indigent clown, with ideas beyond his station. Weavers should stick to their looms.

Yet the modern reader, aware that the text is no longer innocent, and that reading itself may be an act of complicity, should not therefore turn aside from such as McGonagall. While acknowledging the naive nature of the material, we can treat it with care and attention, for though his technique was faulty, the content of his verses is nevertheless significant. As I have shown, we have in the choice and treatment of his subjects significant evidence of the workings of an ideological discourse. McGonagall took himself seriously, and we might too, if only as an example of what popular imperialism meant to a weaver of Dundee. The question of his reception is equally interesting. McGonagall attempted to compete by the rules of high art; his failure was the joke—but the terms of that joke now tell us as much about the society he lived in, and the society he continues to be read in, as they do about his own very real shortcomings.

#### NOTES

1. The debate is summarized in John M. MacKenzie, *Propaganda and Empire* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1984), pp. 1-14. See also MacKenzie's introduction to *Imperialism and Popular Culture* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1986). For the argument that the working class was largely indifferent to imperial propaganda, see Richard Price, *An Imperial War and the British Working Class* (London: Routledge, 1972).
2. The details of McGonagall's life come from his autobiographical accounts in his three modern Dundee collections (see below).
3. See his two Jubilee odes re-printed in *Victorian Poetry*, 25, No. 3-4 (1987).
4. Dundee: John Durham, 1905. See also Lowden Macartney, editor, *Select Poems of McGonagall* (Glasgow, n. d.).
5. *Poetic Gems* was re-published in 1934, and again in 1954, and from that year McGonagall's verses have enjoyed a certain popularity, or notoriety. The edition used here is published by Winter, Dundee, 1973. This is accompanied by *More Poetic Gems* (Dundee: Winter, 1972), and *Last Poetic Gems* (Dundee: Winter, 1971).
6. Accounts of Corunna and the death of Sir John Moore are of course a standard item in juvenile and popular histories, school books, and reciters. In *Deeds of Glory: Stories of Our Empire* (1901) there is both a prose account ("The People of England Will Be Satisfied") and the poem by Charles Wolfe ("The Burial of Sir John Moore").
7. See Butler's "A Plea for the Peasant" in his *Far Out: Rovings Re-told* (London, 1880).
8. The following titles, drawn from an enormous mass, are typical of the period: *A Book of Heroes; The Boys' of Bravery; Brave Deeds by Brave Men; Fights for the Flag; For the Colours; Heroes of Britain in Peace and War; Men Who Have Made the Empire; Our Soldiers; Peril and Patriotism; The Roll Call of Honour; The School of Arms; The Sweep of the Sword; The Wonder Book of Soldiers for Boys and Girls*.
9. *Peril and Patriotism. True Tales of Heroic Deeds and Startling Adventures* (London: Cassell, 1901), frontispiece.
10. *Ibid.*, 2, 76.
11. *Chums*, 7 (1898-99), 134.
12. Arthur Quiller-Couch, *The Roll Call of Honour* (London: Nelson, [1911]), p. 273.

13. Gordon Stables, *For Honour Not Honours* (London: Shaw, [1896]), p. vii.
14. Kurt Wittig's opinion is typical. He calls McGonagall the "shabbiest of public-house rhymesters," and, noting that his works are still reprinted almost every year, considers that their "continuing popularity would indeed be an interesting problem for a psychiatrist to study." *The Scottish Tradition in Literature* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1958), p. 253.
15. *Modern Scottish Literature* (London: Longman, 1983), pp. 17-19. Bold is not the only Scot to find McGonagall a sympathetic figure: the playwright James Bridie (Osborne Henry Mavor) wrote his *Gog and Magog* (1948) around the poet. The central scene in the play is the mockery of Harry Magog (McGonagall) by the Englishman Brisket, at a banquet held to "honour" him. The mockery goes badly wrong; Magog shows dignity and simple honesty. Bridie here exploits with some heat the ambiguous claims of race and class involved in the creation of the Great McGonagall.
16. For a discussion of "tartanry," and the construction, in ideological terms, of Scotland as Other, see Colin McArthur, "The dialectic of national identity: The Glasgow Empire Exhibition of 1938," in Tony Bennett, Colin Mercer, and Janet Woollacott, eds., *Popular Culture and Social Relations* (Milton Keynes: Open University P, 1986), pp. 117-34. Further evidence of the Scots joke is in the titles of the Duckworth edition of 1980, in which the works are divided into seven parts: *Poetic Gems, Further Poetic Gems, Yet Further Poetic Gems, More Poetic Gems, Yet More Poetic Gems, Still More Poetic Gems, and Last Poetic Gems*. In the same year, Duckworth also printed *McGonagall: a Library Omnibus*.
17. Quoted by Lowden Macartney, in *Select Poems of McGonagall*, p. 26.