

## The Milligan McGonagall Thing

The admiration, some say obsession, Spike had with William McGonagall (c1825 -1902) is evident in Spike's McGonagall based creative output. A film, four books, and numerous references in his other writings. But who was William McGonagall and why such admiration?

McGonagall was a Dundee, Scotland, weaver with a wife and seven children who in 1877, at age 52, discovered his muse and gave up weaving to be a poet. McGonagall already had an interest in acting in local theatre and once had played the role of Macbeth. Apparently at the death scene McGonagall did a very Milliganesque thing by refusing to die because he thought he was being upstaged by the actor playing MacDuff.

McGonagall from 1877 performed his poetry both at home and abroad. He is often cited as Scottish weaver turned "Poet and Tragedian" and "the worst poet of all time" and his work "the worst poetry ever written, in any language, at any time." His output was prolific, over 200 poems published, and his poetry has been translated into over a dozen languages and has remained in print since his death.

Not that his creative life was an easy one. He was constantly ridiculed. Performances invariably resulted in him being pelted with rotten eggs and tomatoes and any other possible missile that came to hand. McGonagall kept going despite this constant derision and the obvious hardship for his family. His wife was moved to go out to work in a laundry to help support the family.

Humphrey Carpenter (Carpenter, 2003) quoted Spike talking of McGonagall "He was a poetic genius, like me ... I've been a fan since 1956 when Peter Sellers gave me a book of his poetry". Along with Peter Sellers, film director Joe McGrath and Spike's long time associate Jack Hobbs shared this love of McGonagall's poetry. The group loved to have sessions reciting McGonagall poems in funny voices. Spike wanted to organise public readings of McGonagall's works with Jack Hobbs which threatened to delay the writing of Spike's fourth war memoir (Farnes, 2003). Despite Norma Farnes protestations Jack Hobbs and Spike wrote and starred in a theatre production of McGonagall Readings.

Spike included McGonagall as a character in episodes of the Goons. Around 1973 Spike was part of making a film, *The Great McGonagall*. The idea of a film came from director Joe McGrath and he and Spike wrote the screen play. Despite its low key release the film has become something of a cult film. In two articles in the online magazine, *The Kettering* (Coniam), Matthew Coniam and Richard Larcombe give it even more significance. They describe it as Milligan's "lost masterpiece" and describe it as "one of the strangest and most genuinely unique and fascinating British films ever made".

They contend that Milligan was fascinated and moved by McGonagall's life and that McGrath confirmed that the film's interpretation of McGonagall's life was in large measure a Milligan self portrait. There are parallels to be drawn between McGonagall's doggedness and Milligan's battles and disappointments.

After the film was released Spike published his first McGonagall book *The Great McGonagall Scrap Book* in 1975. The book draws heavily from the film with stills and parts of the script featuring along with Victorian illustrations heavily annotated by Spike. 1976 saw the first of Spike's longer McGonagall novels, *William McGonagall: The Truth at Last* published.

The strong connection between Milligan and McGonagall was recognised by the Folio Society. In 1985 they published McGonagall's book *Poetic Gems*, first published in 1878.

This new edition included an Introduction by Spike Milligan. The Introduction is unique in that it is a poem written in the McGonagall style and contains 31 verses over 4<sup>1/2</sup> pages, quite probably the longest Poem and the longest Introduction Spike ever wrote.

Spike Milligan may have drawn from McGonagall in the naming of his book titles. McGonagall's first collection, *Poetic Gems*, published in 1878, and was followed by *More Poetic Gems*, *Still More Poetic Gems*, *Yet More Poetic Gems*, *Further Poetic Gems*, *Yet Further Poetic Gems* and *Last Poetic Gems*. Spike had three titles beginning with "More" another beginning with "Further".

Spike's championing of McGonagall was not the lone voice. He has a strong following across society. In Dundee in 2002 the city held the McGonagall Centenary Festival and amongst the publicity was this comment. "He has widely been branded the 'world's worst poet' but as we aim to point out he was, in fact the 'Bob Dylan' of his day - maybe even the world's first rapper - and his work is only now being appreciated for what it is" They could have included that he was also the Spike Milligan of his day.