

# Rediscovered, the writer whose verse rivals the works of McGonagall



by Jeremy Hodges

# AN ODE TO SCOTLAND'S CHEESIEST POET

**P**OETS down the centuries have been inspired by beautiful women, spectacular landscapes or great deeds of heroism – but the muse that prompted James McIntyre to pick up his pen was 7,300lb of Canadian cheese.

Moray-born McIntyre was 39, and old enough to know better, when in 1866 the Mammoth Cheese made at the factory of James Harris in Ingersoll, Ontario, was loaded onto a cart for transportation to Toronto and trade exhibitions as far away as France.

As the cart paused for a photo call, groaning under the weight of more than three tons of cheese with a group of schoolgirls perched atop in their Sunday best, the odd spectacle took McIntyre's breath away.

The resulting verses were so brilliantly dreadful that only his fellow Scot William McGonagall could hope to rival their awesome originality.

*We have seen thee, queen of cheese,  
Lying quietly at your ease,  
Gently fanned by evening breeze,  
Thy fair form no flies dare seize...*

Warming to his subject, McIntyre addressed the cheese in similar vein to Robbie Burns eulogising a haggis:

*We have heard that Mr Harris,  
Intends to send you off as far as,  
The great World's show at Paris.*

But it was the last verse that would seal McIntyre's reputation as a world-class bad poet, still celebrated today in his adopted Canada, as his excited imagination launched the enormous cheese into orbit:

*We'rt thou suspended  
from balloon,*

*You'd cast a shade, even  
at noon,*

*Folks would think it was  
the Moon,*

*About to fall and crush  
them soon.*

For a small nation such as Scotland to produce one bizarrely bad poet in McGonagall was a misfortune. To produce two might look like carelessness, even if he was exported to Canada.

Until the age of 14, James's horizons were bounded by the Moray town of Forres, where he was born in 1827, the son of Peter and Primrose McIntyre.

They were good, hard working Scots but many families were driven by economic necessity to seek a better life in a new land.

**S**ELLING what little they had in 1841, the McIntyres sailed for Canada. Young James became a farm labourer whose tasks included gathering maple syrup:

*Our first Canadian job when  
boy,*

*In the big woods we did  
enjoy,*

*Large maple bush we then  
did tap,*

*And to camp carried maple  
sap.*

This winter task was quite arduous for the teenage McIntyre, staggering under a neck-yoke, but he reflected:

*When boiling sap it is quite  
handy,*

*To pour some in snow to  
make candy.*

But McIntyre was ambitious and soon moved to the Ontario town of St Catharines, where he was apprenticed to his uncle, a furniture dealer and undertaker.

At the age of 27 he finally settled in Ingersoll, Oxford County, where he combined the laying out of the dead with cabinet-making, a far less macabre profession for a



young man in search of a wife. On marrying Euphemia Fraser in 1855, the industrious Scot diversified into making and selling pianos, pianolas and household furniture.

This required advertising, in which he developed a disturbing gift for inept rhyme:

*Will you please to let me go,  
Ma,*

*To McIntyre's, to buy a Sofa.*

By the 1860s, McIntyre had fathered a son, a daughter and a string of bad poems. He became a leading light in the town's literary society, where many encouraged him to write.

He was always keen to sing the praises of Ingersoll and in a rare outburst of prose describing it as 'one of the most pleasant towns in Canada to live in, with a fine system of water works, stone pavements and electric lights'.

He added: 'Perhaps no town with 5,000 inhabitants in Canada possesses finer dry goods, grocery, hardware or stove and furniture stores than this town, and its harness and shoe stores are of a high grade, and the jewellery stores are very attractive; but we will not attempt to describe the charms of the millinery and gents' clothing establishments.'

A member of the Oddfellows, Freemasons and Methodist church, McIntyre needed all their support when his wife died. In 1864 he remarried, to

**Bad verse: James McIntyre, left, was inspired to write poetry after an encounter with a giant piece of cheese**

Anna Williams, but more misfortune lay ahead. In the 1870s, his business partnership went bankrupt and his factory was menaced by a great fire:

*The bell it rang, citizens  
to warn,*

*For Lo! a fire appears in  
barn...*

*An ancient barn near  
hotel stood,*

*The joining buildings all  
were wood...*

McIntyre was soon back in business – and advertising in verse: 'His Furniture is cheap and good, in every style and kind of wood.'

Then, in 1876, his young son fell ill and died on the anniversary of his first wife's death. In a poem for once dignified and poignant, McIntyre imagined how the mother looked down on her dying child, 'And beckoned him to realms above, to share with her the heavenly love'.

He continued to chronicle every social event in the town on the river known as the Thames, from municipal trips on the railroad to a Dairy-maids' Social, with waitresses dressed as 'bewitching dairy-maids':

*Throughout the world they do  
extol,*

*The fame of our town Ingersoll,*

*The capital of dairyland,*

*To-night it seems like fairy  
land*

But McIntyre's greatness as a bad poet rests mainly on his poems about cheese and all aspects of cheesemaking – 'The quality is often vile, of cheese that is made in April'.

He even wrote about the feeding to pigs of the whey left over from cheese production:

*For there is money raising  
grease.*

*As well as in the making  
cheese.*

In 1884, he had his first poems published, seemingly attempting a record for the longest book title: 'Musings on the Banks of the Canadian Thames, including Poems on Local, Canadian and British Subjects, and Lines on the

Great Poets of England, Ireland, Scotland and America, with a Glance at the Wars in Victoria's Reign'.

The 1889 follow-up, *Poems of James McIntyre*, ran to 300 pages. He celebrated both publications with trips home to Scotland, 'Land of porridge and of brose, Of blue bonnets and of tartan hose'.

He wrote many poems about his native land and its patron Saint Andrew – 'He was of the Jewish nation, A fisherman by occupation' – and admired Robert Burns, while seeking to excuse his drinking habits:

*We do not think 'twas  
Burns's fault,*

*For there were no teetotallers  
than,*

*That Willie brewed a peck of  
malt...*

But success as a poet could not protect McIntyre against life's tragedies. He lost his second wife and, in 1891, a flood destroyed his warehouse.

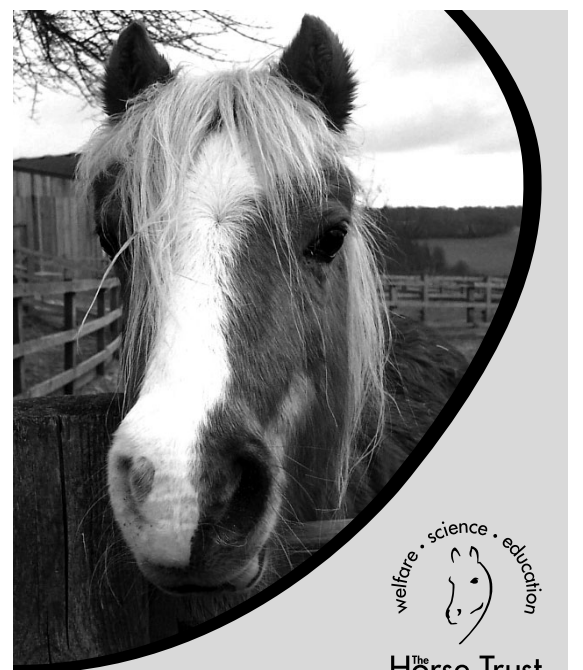
**U**NDETERRED, he married a third time, to a widow called Belinda Walker, gaining two stepsons who would inherit the business.

He died in 1906, aged 79. In Scotland, his work is largely neglected, but in Ingersoll he has been rediscovered, with plays written in his honour, his Ode on the Mammoth Cheese set to music and even an annual James McIntyre poetry contest.

Shirley Lovell, Ingersoll's Cheese Poet Laureate, says McIntyre is still remembered as his work is 'very much different from the rest of what was considered poetry at the time. Any criticism came from the literary faction – ordinary people found his poems very entertaining'.

Bad poetry aside, McIntyre was a Scot who made an impact when it mattered. His obituary stated: 'He was intimately known by all citizens and he commanded universal respect. He occupied a warm spot in every heart.'

• *Scottish entries for the James McIntyre Poetry Contest are welcome. For further details visit: [www.ocl.net/projects/poetrycontest](http://www.ocl.net/projects/poetrycontest)*



welfare • science • education  
The Horse Trust

## Give Ollie a stable future

Established in 1886, The Horse Trust is the oldest equine charity in the world. Its sanctuary, the Home of Rest for Horses, situated in the picturesque Chiltern Hills, provides loving care for a variety of privileged horses, ponies and donkeys.

These elderly beautiful animals receive all the care and attention that you would hope for in your retirement. Please give generously by means of a donation or a legacy in your will.

For more information

**01494 488464** quoting GT104

Or complete the coupon and return to  
The Horse Trust, Home of Rest for Horses  
Speen, Princes Risborough, HP27 0PP

e-mail: [info@horsetrust.org.uk](mailto:info@horsetrust.org.uk) • [www.horsetrust.org.uk](http://www.horsetrust.org.uk)

<input type="checkbox"/> I enclose my donation	<input type="checkbox"/> I would like to giftaid it
<input type="checkbox"/> I pledge to leave a gift in my will	<input type="checkbox"/> For more information
Name .....	
Address .....	
Postcode ..... Tel.....	