

From the Back Verandah

Ambrosius Theodosius Macrobius was an early fifth century African-born Roman author and philosopher, remembered (by those few scholars who have heard of him) for his dialogues entitled *Saturnaliorum Conviviorum Libri Septem*, among other works.

One 20th century scholar who is aware of him is Frank Muir (of *Take It from Here* and *My Word* fame), who credits him with what may be the oldest recorded joke in a European language — and a subtle one at that. Muir includes it in his *Oxford Book of Humorous Prose* (1990), along with over 200 other funny extracts spanning 500 years and several continents from such varied humorists as Robert Benchley, Jerome K. Jerome,

Lennie Lower, Spike Milligan, Tom Sharpe, Jonathan Swift, Mark Twain and P.G. Wodehouse.

Macrobius' joke runs:

"Dic mihi, adulescens, fuit aliquando mater tua Romae?"

Negavit ille nec contentus adjecit: "Sed pater meus saepe."

Muir quotes it in English from *The Schoolemaster or Teacher of Table Philosophie* of 1583 thus:

There came unto Rome a certain gentleman very like Augustus. The emperor noticed him and demanded of him if his mother had sometimes been to Rome.

"No," said the gentleman. "But my father hath often been."

— Fizzgig

Bikwil Addresses

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BIKWIL

The Newsletter of Quiet Enthusiasms

Editor: Tony Rogers

ISSN 1328-7842

No. 5

January 1998

Immolation Imminent

Brünnhilde's, that is. Not *Bikwil's*. As you may know, later this year the full *Ring Cycle* of Richard Wagner (an extremely rare event in Oz) will be staged in Adelaide. In celebration of this, with your help, we will devote our entire November issue to his Teutonic nibs.

Harlish Goop has already promised some word puzzles with a Wagnerian flavour, and other surprises await in the wings.

And just in case there are Wagner haters among *Bikwil's* readership, enough *Quintessential Quirky Quotes* have been assembled to keep even the most undevout of

you grinning derisively for weeks. More quotes, however, would be welcome — though you needn't bother with the Rossini one, since three people have already independently offered it. Anti-Wagnerians will otherwise maintain a discreet silence, won't you?

What we really need are personal experiences about discovering and enjoying Wagner's music. So, dig out those old diaries and souvenir programmes and write.

And if anyone wants to compose some Wagner doggerel or draw a suitable cartoon that'd be fine too.

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Inadvertent Doggerel

Ever since that suggestion on the front page of Issue 3, Bikwilians everywhere have rallied to the cause of de-closeting and dusting off the hopeless rhymes of their youth and at last getting them into print, even if (or, more like it, mainly because) they discharge this heavy duty anonymously. All well and good, but there is, you know, another type of doggerel already in print: the accidental sort.

Readers will need little introduction to the excruciating verse of Scottish handloom weaver William McGonagall (1830-1902). He used to sign himself “Wm. McGonagall, Poet and Tragedian”, but history knows him better as “the world’s worst poet”, or at least as *Punch* once put it, “the greatest Bad Verse writer of his age”. Here is what *Chambers Biographical Dictionary* (1990) has to say:

His poems are uniformly bad, but possess a disarming naiveté and a calypso-like disregard for metre which still never fail to entertain.

Spike Milligan, himself no stranger to the writing of doggerel, has over the years been more than happy to recite McGonagall at the drop of a manic hat, and indeed in 1974 co-wrote and starred as the

poet in a 95-minute TV special called *The Great McGonagall*. Also appearing were Julia Foster, Valentine Dyal, John Bluthal and Peter Sellers as Queen Victoria.

Of course, the essential difference between Spike’s nonsense verse and McGonagall’s is that the latter solemnly believed his work to be admirable poetry, created “under the divine inspiration”. Witness McGonagall’s childlike account of how at the age of 47 he was first seized by the muse:

. . . A flame, as Lord Byron has said, seemed to kindle up my entire frame, along with a strong desire to write poetry; and I felt so happy, so happy, that I was inclined to dance, then I began to pace backwards and forwards in the room, trying to shake off all thought of writing poetry; but the more I tried, the more strong the sensation became. 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 to write about my best friend, the late Reverend George Gilfillan; in my opinion I could not have chosen a better subject, therefore I immediately found paper, pen, and ink, and set myself down to immortalize the great preacher, poet, and orator.

See Example 1 (page 5) for that life-changing poem.

Orchestral Complaint

Once upon a time there were three little saxes
Who didn't write poems and they didn't send faxes
But they all annoyed the winds with their honkings and hootings
And tempted bassoons to suppress their heads in hessian sackses.

They all had strident friends who were trumpets and trombones
(It wouldn't have been so bad if they'd have been on their ownses)
But their volume and enthusiasm in blasting and blooting
Was often enough to perforate your eardrums to the boneses.

They were often very noisy even when not playing brasses
Like those who brag/bray, bleat and boast up at the back of classes
Though not as bad as "timpanists" who cannot play for nutses
Still adept at attention-seeking and perpetrating farces.

They all went shopping for to buy new muteses
But instead they decided just to irritate the fluteses
They were proud of playing out of tune and making ugly noises
And were fond of claiming witches had turned them into newtses.

That's all I know of the three little saxes
Who didn't write poems and didn't send faxes
But there ought to be a law against them getting out of handses
And I'm sure that they all should be paying higher taxes.

— Katisha

(Formerly of the “I’m-Sorry-I’ll-Play-That-Again” Orchestra)

Web Line

I have been asked to write something on Net access to libraries. Let me begin with this encouraging statement: the decades-old dream of access to the world's library catalogues from home is now surely, but slowly, coming true.

First the slowly part. Most on-line catalogues (namely those of well-established reference and academic libraries) contain only recent acquisitions, with older material being added retrospectively, as exiguous library budgets permit.

Now the surely bit, and here I suggest you start exploring using a search tool like *Yahoo*. *Yahoo* offers links to over 30 library-oriented subcategories, such as libraries by country, engineering libraries, music libraries, psychology libraries, serials, university libraries and so forth.

Another useful site is *Internets*, which provides a huge set of direct links, also by category, to on-line databases. Both this and the *Yahoo* list tend to an American slant, however, but that's the way of the Web for the foreseeable future.

Some relevant non-US English-speaking sites include those of the British Library, the National Library of Australia, the State Library of New South Wales and a general site of links called *Australian Libraries*. (Read the latter's Frequently Asked Questions page for good advice on Telnet software.)

As you'll have noticed, I've been referring to *catalogues*, not to the collections that catalogues describe and index. That was the other dream: to do away with books, and is quite a separate issue, the less said about which the better, Project Gutenberg notwithstanding.

— TR

Internet sites referred to above:

<http://www.yahoo.com/Reference/Libraries>

<http://www.internets.com>

<http://portico.bl.uk>

<http://www.slsw.gov.au/home/home.htm>

<http://www.nla.gov.au>

<http://sunsite.anu.edu.au/search/lib>



Well, as you know, McGonagall wrote dozens of rhymes in similar vein, none more ridiculous than the trio of poems on the Tay Bridge.

It all started with the completion of the bridge in May 1879, which called forth from McGonagall his ode *The Railway Bridge of the Silvery Tay*. For some reason, though, our poet must have also been inspired to a premonition of danger. (See Example 2, page 6, for the second and sixth stanzas.)

Sure enough, the bridge collapsed seven months later, killing 90 passengers on a train. This cried out for a new poem. The last stanza of *The Tay Bridge Disaster* (Example 3, page 6) has McGonagall in his finest fettle.

The bridge was eventually rebuilt, to a new design, which is more than you can say about the third ode to the wretched structure, *An Address to the New Tay Bridge*. Example 4, page 7 shows the second and third stanzas.

As all-conquering as he was at bad poetry, however, McGonagall was not exactly alone during his lifetime, for the Victorian era seems to have been peculiarly prone to fits of unconscious bad verse composition.

Occasionally even the most eminent literary pens wrote negli-

gent and therefore comical poetry. A suitable example is a stanza by Francis Thompson (1859-1907), whose profound visionary ode *The Hound of Heaven* rightly continues to be included in anthologies of great verse. The blunder in question is part of his 1897 poem on the occasion of the Diamond Jubilee of the now chubby Queen Victoria. (See Example 5, page 7.)

Perhaps the most inexplicable case of a highly placed inadvertent Victorian doggerel writer is that of Alfred Austin (1835-1913). I only wish I had more examples of his poetic vision to bring you, but anyway, here goes.

When Tennyson died in 1892, the position of Poet Laureate became vacant. He, its longest serving incumbent, had occupied the post since assuming the mantle from Wordsworth in 1850.

The Conservative Cabinet scratched its head: there were several conceivable contenders, none of them really suitable. Algernon Swinburne? No, he was a pagan, a libertine and an alcoholic. William Morris? No, no, he was a socialist.

Four years went by, but still no Poet Laureate. Then, in 1896, Prime Minister Lord Salisbury decided that Rudyard Kipling might be the appropriate choice. Kipling turned the offer down.

In fact the only versifier who seemed to want to be Poet Laureate was a self-admiring fool of a man called Alfred Austin, and regrettably Lord Salisbury recommended his name (perhaps in recognition of his services to Tory journalism) to Queen Victoria, who later that year so designated him.

For some relevant information on Austin and his appalling verse we now turn to another eccentric author — malicious, misogynous E.F. Benson, who was so prolific he wrote 93 books in 47 years. Edward Frederic Benson (1867-1940) is best remembered today for six comic novels about Mapp and Lucia, successfully adapted for TV in the mid 80s, starring Prunella Scales and Geraldine McEwan, plus Nigel Hawthorne, but what engages us here is his sparkling 1930 book of reminiscences *As We Were*.

A son of the Archbishop of Canterbury (his older brother A.C. Benson wrote the words to *Land of Hope and Glory*, incidentally), E.F. Benson took detailed notice of the upper strata of Victorian, Edwardian and Georgian society, and his memoirs thus afford an important commentary on that period, entertainingly surveying Queen V. herself, major and minor lords and ladies, and a certain Poet Laureate.

Here he describes a stay the diminutive Austin made at the Bensons, just before his P.L. appointment, where apparently he impressed no one. One night Austin came into the smoking room and

... laid himself down, all five feet of him on the sofa, and as feast-master directed a wondrous symposium entirely about himself.

Mr Austin began to tell us of 'It'. 'It' was the poetic inspiration. Sometimes It left him altogether, and when that first happened he was terribly upset, for he feared that he would be able to write no more poetry, since he never wrote a line except when It directed him. But he had learned since then that, though It might leave him for a while, It always returned, and so he waited without fretting or attempting to produce uninspired stuff, until It came back.

Does Austin's adolescent manner sound familiar? An English MacGonagall maybe, but a sixty-year-old Poet Laureate as well?

If you know anything of the life of Cecil Rhodes, you'll have heard of the "Jameson Raid", where in 1895 a foolish and unsuccessful attempt — instigated by Rhodes and led by his friend Dr. Jameson — was made to overthrow Boer rule in the Transvaal.

Here's E.F. Benson again, on the rhyme the event set aglow in Austin, and on a similar one from a quarter of a century earlier:

Firstly, after ten years of discussion the various state ministers for education together with their Austrian and Swiss counterparts agreed on a reform of the rules for the German language (punctuation, small and big letters, etc.). These changes have now infuriated some parents, teachers, politicians and busybodies of all persuasions. Some have applied to various state courts (which of course come to different conclusions) for injunctions to protect youth and society from changing rules and some simplifications.

It was early this century that the last changes had taken place. Kaiser Wilhelm proclaimed that he for one would not change from, say, "Thal" to "Tal". It is reassuring indeed that 90 years later some diehards vow to fight again.

Secondly, driving on the Autobahn I was surprised to see an enormous number of cars (about one in five) carrying between two and three bikes on their roofs. Apparently this is not to show off their possessions but rather an earnest attempt to be earth-friendly at one's destination by using a pushbike rather than driving by motor.

But the biggest changes are more visible ones, i.e. graffiti, dirt, less civic pride, less tolerance to-

wards foreigners (even by people who used to preach on the subject 20 years ago), much lesser voter participation in elections — a general mood of malaise. Privately little has changed: most friends and relatives are as comfortable as they were then, can afford and take for granted international holidays, all-round health care by the state, etc.

Finally, the law of probability. Whilst waiting in London for the Qantas plane I ran into my next door neighbour who for the first time in his life had visited his native Poland. We had an opportunity to sit next to each other until Bangkok and I learned a lot about his impressions about Poland which seems to be on the road to increased wealth.

My personal summary:

I am glad to be in Australia — so is my family — but we are also happy to have been able to maintain our contacts with family and friends in Germany. Sydney is our home and we will remain here for the rest of our lives.

— The Man from Abdera

(As your atlas will show, Abdera is hardly in Germany. It is a town the foibles of whose inhabitants were immortalised in one of the funniest books written in the 19th century. Hence the writer's trivia question to *Bikwil* readers: "Which author, and what book?")

Germany — Then and Now

Dr. Ekkart Arbeit's on and off appointment as Australia's head track and field coach opens up the old Pandora's box of German efficiency versus German ethics, i.e. "only did my duty, didn't know what was happening, or did know but powerless to stop or tried to prevent worse whilst working within the system".

As an Australian citizen of German birth who has just come back from a very enjoyable trip to my birthplace I cannot help feeling how lucky Australia in this century has been by having had continuous democratic government and largely intact traditions.

This century Germany had to live through Wilhelm II's Kaiserreich, then after the traumatic loss of the First World War the unloved Weimar Republic with its 1923 hyperinflation and the subsequent worldwide depression. The 12 years of Hitler which ended in complete defeat and destruction in 1945 are familiar to most. The generation of my parents, who were born before 1914 and were in large numbers supporters of Hitler,

experienced in either West or East Germany their fourth different form of government — in the West the quickly economically successful Federal Republic, in the East the Stalinist repressive dictatorship which crumbled within weeks of celebrating its 40th anniversary.

The euphoria of the unification in October '90 has long since evaporated due to the difficulties experienced by the Ossies in the East in coping with high unemployment, democratic structures, inflow of foreigners (both German and others), and the frustration of the Wessies in the West over being taxed to the eyeballs for supporting new infrastructure in the East and payouts to support their eastern brothers and sisters. It will take a few years more to have real unification where Germans can be confident of meeting each other with no hidden baggage. Just as the younger generation in the West asked its parents about their role in the Third Reich, nowadays Wessies ask what their compatriots did in the East during the last 40 years and I suspect the answers are similar to the opening paragraph.

We left Germany permanently in 1975. During the most recent visit (my first since March '93) two things struck me.

The Jameson Raid inspired a fugitive composition, and it was surely there when Mr Austin wrote:

They went across the veldt,
As hard as they could pelt.

To him, too, is ascribed, though with what certainty I know not, a wonderful couplet concerning the national suspense during the illness of the Prince of Wales in 1871: the internal evidence strongly supports the theory.

Across the wires the electric
message came,
He is no better, he is much the
same.

That sounds very like it: that sounds like Mr Austin at his very best.

Superbly, if spitefully put.

If anyone has access to more of Austin's rubbish (it's predictably hard to come by these days), please share it with us. Not all his poetry is as wretched as the above quotations, they say, but none ever really rises to the greatness implied by the office of Poet Laureate.

— TR

Example 1 (McGonagall's first poem)

Rev. George Gilfillan of Dundee,
There is none can you excel;
You have boldly rejected the Confession of Faith,
And defended your cause right well.

The first time I heard him speak,
'Twas in the Kinnaird Hall,
Lecturing on the Garibaldi movement,
As loud as he could bawl.

He is a liberal gentleman
To the poor while in distress,
And for his kindness unto them
The Lord will surely bless.

My blessing on his noble form,
And on his lofty head,
May all good angels guard him while living,
And hereafter when he's dead.

Example 2 (McGonagall's first Tay Bridge poem, stanzas 2 and 6)

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.

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 Dundee and the Magdalen Green.



Example 3 (McGonagall's second Tay Bridge poem, last stanza)

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.

. . . which is pronounced as a two-syllabled acronym by some, and a three-syllabled initialism by others.

"Ufology", of course, can be pronounced one way only.

All of which brings me to my second point about acronyms.

In a self-seeking effort to make their abbreviations sayable, many organisations, especially political pressure lobbies, have only succeeded in devising rather synthetic and sometimes meaningless or irrelevant letter combinations.

Here a few examples of what I mean to be going on with:

ASH (Action on Smoking and Health)

ASSERT (Australian Society of Sex Educators, Researchers and Therapists)

CRAG (Cyclists' Rights Action Group)

CRASH (Citizens Revolting Against Sound Harassment)

DOGS (Defence Of Government Schools)

HORACE (Human Organisation Resource Administrative Control Environment)

LIFE (Lay Insitute for Evangelism)

POOO (People Opposed to Ocean Outfalls)

SAPSAN (Special Assistance Program for South Africans and Namibians).

Somewhat forced, wouldn't you agree?

On the other hand (by way of the obligatory Bikwilian aside), the seventies and eighties did generate some imaginative and not so unreasonable attempts at sayable acronyms. Who will ever forget these precious gems?

- ◇ NIMBY (Not In My Backyard)
- ◇ WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant)
- ◇ WYSIWYG (What You See Is What You Get)
- ◇ YUPPIE (Young Urban Professional + p + ie)

My all-time favourite from that period has got to be LOMBARD (Lots Of Money, But A Real Dork).

Look, there's only one thing for it. As usual, *Bikwil* must take the linguistic lead. Not only will we risk the label of "pedantic" and call an initialism an initialism in future, we will redefine "acronym" into the bargain.

So here is our own self-referential definition (all rights reserved), henceforth to be taught worldwide as the only true and useful meaning of "acronym":

Any Contrived Row Of Nonsense-Yielding Mnemonics.

— Harlish Goop

A Word in Your Pink Shell-like

Who would have thought that little *Bikwil* would have helped persuade anyone to attend *The Language of the Media* (Style Council 97)? But there, at the State Library last November, yours truly ran into another Bikwilian word buff. For us, a stimulating weekend.

As promised, the ABC and SBS were well represented among the speakers, who managed to sneak a few four-letter words into the linguistic proceedings, and the occasional Spooneristic dirty joke. Perhaps a summary of papers (with or without jokes) will eventually find its way into *Bikwil's* pages. Certainly something on Spoonerisms!

Speaking of the latter, one suggestion made by a frustrated reader is that the name *Bikwil* is itself a Spoonerism (Wik Bill?). Not so, but I understand your frustration, because to date a big fat zilch has been offered by way of excathedral explanation as to the real meaning of the name. Other gropings include these: it's something in simplified spelling (bi-quill? bike will?), it's an acronym, it's a bird, no, it's a plane . . .

With the editor's permission, watch this space.

Actually my main point today is acronyms. I note firstly that the word has of late taken on an additional meaning. (Not that the word is old in any case; it originated only in the 1940s, in America.)

Let's start with the official meaning. In the *Oxford English Dictionary* "acronym" is defined as "a word formed out of the initial letters of other words". Its derivation is from the Greek words "acro" (= "topmost") + "onoma" (= "name"), by analogy with "homonym", "synonym", etc.

Now, in my wide-eared innocence I'd always thought that the resulting word had to be sayable, like "radar" or "Unesco". After all, surely all words must be able to be pronounced, don't they? How could I have been so misguided?

No, words don't have to be pronounceable these days, it would appear, at least when it comes to the unspeakableness of some acronyms. The *Cambridge Australian English Style Guide* informs us that there is now a looser meaning, whereby abbreviations like "GNP", "ABC" and "IBM" are also being called acronyms, though they should strictly be described using the word "initialism". It also draws attention to the interesting case of "UFO",

Example 4 (McGonagall's third Tay Bridge poem, second and third stanzas)

Beautiful new railway bridge of the Silvery Tay,
With thy beautiful side-screens along your railway,
Which will be a great protection on a windy day,
So as the railway carriages won't be blown away,
And ought to cheer the hearts of the passengers night and day
As they are conveyed along they beautiful railway,
And towering above the Silvery Tay,
Spanning the beautiful river shore to shore
Upwards of two miles and more,
Which is most wonderful to be seen
Near by Dundee and the bonnie Magdalen Green.

Thy structure to my eye seems strong and grand,
And the workmanship most skilfully planned;
And I hope the designers, Messrs Barlow & Arrol, will prosper for many a
day
For erecting thee across the beautiful Tay.
And I think nobody need have the least dismay
To cross o'er thee by night or by day,
Because thy strength is visible to be seen
Near by Dundee and the bonnie Magdalen Green.

Example 5 (Part of Thompson's Diamond Jubilee poem)

Come hither, proud and ancient East,
Gather ye to this Lady of the North,
And sit down with her at her solemn feast,
Upon this culminant day of all her days;
For ye have heard the thunder of her goings-forth,
And wonder of her large imperial ways.

The length of a film should be directly related to the endurance of the human bladder.
Alfred Hitchcock

It was good of God to let Carlyle and Mrs Carlyle marry one another and so make two people miserable instead of four.
Samuel Butler

Quintessential Quirky Quotes

Brevity is the soul of lingerie.
Dorothy Parker

Outside of a dog, a book is man's best friend. Inside of a dog it's too dark to read.
Groucho Marx

Cricket is a game invented by God to teach Englishmen the meaning of the word 'eternity'!
Anonymous

Falling Leaves

Where do brown leaves go
 when they fall from city's trees?
 Dry brittle wafers on the streets,
 waif-like, have nowhere to rest.
 Pavement cannot absorb them:
 unrelenting bitumen and brick
 inflict a ceaseless torment;
 winds sift and stir and drive
 crisp eddies into forlorn drifts,
 feet pestle them to dust.

Only in those unpaved edens:
 backyards flush with flowers,
 forgotten vacant lots
 like wilderness restored,
 green tranquillity of parks
 where city breathes, does soft earth
 bed them deep and warm
 in silent, safe, sustaining dark.
 Only the earth receives them,
 brings their brown ruin home.

— Bet Briggs