

# private prescription

## Pill poetry

In my quest for poetry relevant to pharmaceuticals and especially that mentioning pharmaceutical products, I recently hit upon a poet about whom I knew nothing but who, in his time, was lionised by the student fraternity, and is still held in high regard by modern day comedians such as Billy Connolly and Spike Milligan, both of whom have written about him [1,2]. The poet in question is William McGonagall.

### Poetic endorsement

McGonagall was born in Edinburgh, Scotland in March 1825, the son of an immigrant Irish weaver. After spending some of his childhood years on the island of South Ronaldsay in the Orkneys, he settled in Dundee and learned the trade of a handloom weaver. In the 1870s he took to acting and to writing poetry and for a considerable time he amused the people of Dundee and the surrounding area drawing large audiences with his particular style of poetry and dramatic entertainment. He published his first collection of poems in 1878. From then on he travelled in central Scotland before settling in Edinburgh where he died in September 1902. To call McGonagall a skilled poet would be a travesty as his poems are uniformly bad (he is regarded by some as Scotland's worst poet). He had a total disregard for metre but his poems possess a disarming naiveté and never fail to entertain, as proven by the fact that his works have remained in print long after many of his more skilled contemporaries have been consigned to history.

In 1894, McGonagall was desperate for funds having been banned by Dundee's city fathers from public performances due to the rowdy audiences they attracted and he

A thought-provoking tonic on the lighter side

Column by Raymond C. Rowe, AstraZeneca, UK



Please note that these are the personal opinions of the author and do not necessarily represent those of AstraZeneca.

turned to writing poems endorsing products. His first attempt praising 'Sunlight Soap' earned him the princely sum of two guineas and he went on to write a poem praising the then brand leader in proprietary medicines—Beecham's Pills invented in the 1840s by Thomas Beecham

What ho! sickly people of high and low degree  
I pray ye all be warned by me;  
No matter what may be your bodily ills  
The safest and quickest cure is Beecham's Pills.

They are admitted to be worth a guinea a box  
For bilious and nervous disorders, also smallpox,  
And dizziness and drowsiness, also cold chills,  
And for such diseases nothing else can equal Beecham's Pills.

They have been proved by thousands that have tried them  
So that the people cannot them condemn.  
Be advised by me one and all  
Is the advice of Poet McGonagall.

## Pharma-Discovery cd

# private prescription

Little is known about who commissioned this poem, indeed, that's if anyone did, and whether or not it was used by Beecham to promote his product. The poet certainly did not exaggerate his claims for the product, the company itself already claiming that the pills cured 'headache, dizziness or swimming in the head, wind, pain, and spasms of the stomach, pains in the back, restlessness, insomnia, indigestion, want of appetite, fullness after meals, vomiting, sickness of the stomach, bilious or liver complaints, sick headaches, cold chills, flushing of heat, lowliness of spirits, and all nervous affections, scurvy and scorbutic affections, pimples and blotches on the skin, bad legs, ulcers, wounds, maladies of indiscretion, kidney and urinary disorders, and menstrual derangements'- not bad for a product containing *inter alia* aloe, ginger and hard soap [3].

Another poem, this time anonymous, from 1890 unashamedly plays on parental fears concerning the health of their children [4]

A little child lay on her bed of pain,  
With deep blue eyes and wealth of golden hair,  
Longing that summer hours would come again  
With all their sunshine and their pleasure fair.

With ministry of quiet tender love  
The mother watched beside her as she lay.  
A message came – O joy, all joys above!  
It turned her sadness into brightest day.

It told of certain cure – what words of cheer  
For weary sickness and all mortal ills!  
Returning health soon blessed the child so dear,  
Who gladly took a box of Beecham's Pills.

## Advertising jingles and doggerels

What distinguished Thomas Beecham from his contemporaries were his absolute belief in, and his vast expenditure on, advertising. The slogan 'worth a guinea a box' had already been adopted early in the life of the product and was to remain with it for over a century. Records show that during the decade 1880-1891 expenditure on advertising rose from £22,000-120,000 – an enormous sum for those times [5]. By the time Thomas had retired and handed the business to his son, Joseph, in 1895, the company were advertising regularly

in some 14,000 newspapers worldwide [6].

Although it is doubtful whether the poems above were ever used as advertising jingles, others were, one in particular being:

Hark the herald angels sing,  
Beecham's Pills are just the thing,  
For easing pain and mothers mild,  
Two for adults one for a child.

The story behind this one resides in the folklore of the product [5]. It is said that a vicar of an impoverished church in northern England approached Thomas with a view to him supplying some replacement hymnbooks in exchange for the inclusion of a small discrete advertisement. Thomas agreed, but when the books arrived the vicar was unable to find any advertisement. However, the truth only became apparent when, at Christmas, the congregation found that they were singing unfamiliar words to a very familiar tune! Of course, Thomas hotly denied the story but continued encouraging his salesmen to hum the tune.

There are other references to similar jingles. Sir Neville Cardus in his biography [7] of Sir Thomas Beecham, the composer and Joseph's son, makes reference to the jingle:

Hark the herald angels sing!  
Beecham's Pills are just the thing,  
Two for a woman, one for a child....  
Peace on earth and mercy mild!

This is said to have been devised by Sir Thomas Beecham for his father but never used. It is not surprising that students, especially pharmacy students, have adopted and adapted the jingles. A good example is that reported by Hunt [8] said to have been sung by students from the School of Pharmacy (University of Brighton, UK) in the mid to late 1950s:

Hark the herald angels sing  
Beecham's Pills are just the thing  
Moves ye gently meek and mild  
Two for an adult, one for a child.  
Regular administration,  
Just the thing for constipation,  
How can man to art aspire,  
If his soul is not on fire?  
Hark the herald angels sing  
Beecham's Pills are just the thing.

An inevitable result of the success of the company in the period 1890-1910 was the upsurge in free publicity in the form of doggerels. A pantomime quatrain popular in the town of St Helens, Lancashire at that time was [5]

To the country I will go without question,  
Forgetting this world and its ills,  
And to relieve my great indigestion  
Will take some of Beecham's good pills.

A doggerel based on a well-known nursery rhyme provides a comic picture of a girl swallowing the product to induce purgation to remove a previously swallowed watch. The final line is a memorable play on words:

Mary had a little watch,  
And swallowed it, they say.  
So now she's taking Beecham's Pills  
To pass the time away.

## Product discontinued

On May 30 1998, Smith Kline Beecham announced that 'as part of an ongoing rationalisation process' Beecham's Pills would be discontinued after more than 150 years of manufacture [9]. Although the product is no longer with us, I wager that the jingles will continue to be sung. Maybe McGonagall's poem will even have a revival. In any case the product name will live on for many more years to come.

## References

- 1 Milligan, S. Hobbs, J. (1976) *William McGonagall: the Truth at Last*, M. Joseph, London
- 2 McGonagall, W. Connolly, B. (2002) *Poetic Gems*, Gerald Duckworth & Co. London
- 3 Anon. (1912) *Secret Remedies*, British Medical Association, London.
- 4 Lewis, D (2003) *Curious Cures of Old Yorkshire*, Countryside Books, Newbury
- 5 Francis, A (1968) *A Guinea a Box*, Hale, London
- 6 Holland, K. (1987) Beecham Group Plc, *Pharmaceutical Journal*, 238, 675
- 7 Cardus, N. (1961) *Sir Thomas Beecham. A memoir*, Collins, London.
- 8 Hunt, A. (2003) The Beecham's hymnbook story continues...., *Pharmaceutical Journal*, 270, 117
- 9 Anon (1998) End of an era: Beecham's Pills discontinued, *Pharmaceutical Journal*, 260, 774

## Raymond C. Rowe

*Pharmaceutical and Analytical R&D,  
AstraZeneca, Alderley Park,  
Macclesfield, Cheshire,  
UK, SK10 2NA*