
***The Rhyming Reasoner* (1956)**

A publication to be remembered

George Houston and Ronald Meek

introduction and annotations by Francis King

The year 1956 was notoriously traumatic for communists around the world. In the CPGB, most would have felt the ‘shock and horror’ recalled by Margot Heinemann on learning of Nikita Khrushchev’s revelations at the Twentieth CPSU Congress. Beyond that, as the memoir literature shows, there was a range of reactions as the crisis of that year unfolded.¹ Almost a third of the CPGB membership left the party between 1956 and 1958; two thirds chose to remain. But besides the disillusionment and disenchantment of some, and the defiance of others, there were other responses, including a kind of gallows humour from those able to appreciate the more ridiculous aspects of the situation. This last reaction is brilliantly expressed in *The Rhyming Reasoner* – a privately-circulated bulletin of verses lampooning the absurdities of the party crisis and 1950s communist culture more widely. Its irreverent humour clearly struck a chord with some comrades: the first issue, dated September 1956, was not printed at all, but directly typed on a manual typewriter in several copies using carbon paper, and presumably passed from hand to hand. By the time of the second (and final) issue, dated November 1956, word had evidently spread: it was produced on a duplicator in considerably greater numbers, and carried cryptic, but quite definite instructions about how to order copies or get them sent to friends and contacts.

Its immediate inspiration was the duplicated journal *The Reasoner*, produced by E. P. Thompson and John Saville, which appeared over three issues between July and November 1956.² The story of *The Reasoner* is well known: Thompson and Saville, CPGB members in Yorkshire, were dissatisfied with the limited opportunities offered by the official CPGB press for discussing the implications and political lessons of Nikita Khrushchev’s ‘secret’ speech to the CPSU 20th congress in February 1956, and the crises which erupted in Eastern Europe in the summer and autumn of that year. They therefore created their own publication as a forum for the discussion they believed was necessary. Since party rules forbade individual members to set up political journals to discuss party matters outside of the official party structures, Thompson and Saville were first instructed to desist and, once they had refused to comply, the party’s disciplinary procedures were invoked against them. Although the authors of *The Rhyming*

Reasoner, as CPGB members, were technically in breach of the same rules, there is no evidence of any party sanctions against them for circulating it.

The lampoon was produced by two lecturers in economics at Glasgow University, George Houston (1920-1996) and Ronald Meek (1917-1978). Although part of the joke was the claim that the bulletin had been dictated from the Elysian Fields by the late and great Scottish humorous poet William McGonagall, a line in one of the verses which referred to 'Two Glasgow Red economists' who had written in praise of J. V. Stalin's *Economic Problems of Socialism* (1951) made it clear that Houston and Meek were responsible – a few years earlier they had jointly published a glowing review of Stalin's pamphlet in *The Modern Quarterly*.³ Meek subsequently resigned from the CPGB in the aftermath of the crisis but continued to consider himself a Marxist; Houston remained a critical member of the CPGB almost to the end of his life. A further allusion to Meek's identity can be found in the cryptic jibes in the second issue about New Zealand, where Meek had been born, had joined the communist movement, and had studied before moving to Britain in 1946 to undertake doctoral research.

Some of the humour in *The Rhyming Reasoner* is timeless, while other verses refer to specific news items from 1956. The state visit to Britain of Soviet Premier Nikolay Bulganin and party leader Nikita Khrushchev from 18 to 27 April 1956, which included an audience at Windsor with the Queen, is referenced in 'Hat Trick', 'The Comrades' One-Day School' and 'Ode to Mr. Khrushchov'. The popular press routinely referred to the Soviet visitors as 'B. and K.'. The last item also refers to the (false) rumour that Lavrenti Beria had been directly executed by Khrushchev at the CPSU Plenum on 26 June 1953 where he was denounced and arrested.

'Hat Trick' refers to the arrest in London at the end of August 1956 of a Soviet Olympic discus thrower, Nina Ponomareva, on a charge of stealing five hats from the Oxford Street branch of C&A. This apparently trivial matter rapidly blew up into a significant – and absurd – diplomatic incident, as the Soviet side alleged provocation, cancelled a visit from their athletics team for the upcoming White City games, and threatened to pull a long-awaited four-week tour by the Bolshoi Ballet. On 1 September the *Daily Worker* published a mildly critical editorial comment regretting the Soviet decision to cancel their athletes' visit, which in turn led to a lively exchange in the letters column.⁴

'The Ballad O' The Reasoner' refers to the meeting of the CPGB Executive Committee in September 1956 which instructed Thompson and Saville to cease publication of their journal at a point where two issues had already appeared and the third and final one was already in production. Their refusal to comply set in train the process which led to their resignation from the party shortly thereafter. The 'Comments on our First Number' in the second issue of *The*

Rhyming Reasoner reference a comment attributed to Bert Ramelson, at that time Yorkshire CPGB District Secretary, at an earlier phase in the CPGB's attempt to discipline Saville and Thompson, as well as the rationale given by the *Daily Worker* for spiking some of Peter Fryer's dispatches from Hungary during the rising in October-November 1956.⁵

The songs referenced in *The Rhyming Reasoner* would all have been well known (to communists at least) at the time. The one song which readers today will find jarring – if not offensively inappropriate – is 'The Darkies' Sunday School' – an American folk song lampooning the sort of garbled Bible stories supposedly taught to the black population of the USA. In the early part of the twentieth century, this song was sometimes included in American radical song-books on account of its mockery of illiterate religious indoctrination, and as such would have been familiar to mid-century British communists. However, whatever its main *target*, the basic *premise* of that song is irremediably racist and by the mid-1930s it had been dropped from most anthologies.

The copies of *The Rhyming Reasoner* used for this feature were held at the Communist Party archive, and were 'republished' (photocopied) as a limited 'souvenir edition' for a conference in 1990 organised by the CP History Group, the predecessor of the SHS. The page layout of the originals has been preserved, apart from the type- and handwritten sheet appended to the archive copy of the four-page first issue, which reads: 'With compliments and thanks, Faithfully Yours, William McGonagall, poet and tragedian'. We have also preserved the original transliterations of Russian names and most of the punctuation, apart from some of the underlining.

Notes

1. See e.g. the essays by Margot Heinemann, Malcolm MacEwan and John Saville in *Socialist Register* 1976, as well as in Alison Macleod's indispensable *The Death of Uncle Joe*, London, 1997.
2. All three issues of *The Reasoner* can be accessed on <https://banmarchive.org.uk/the-reasoner/>
3. See Ronald L. Meek and George Houston, 'Some aspects of "Stalin's Economic Problems"', in *Modern Quarterly*, Vol. 8 No. 3, Summer 1953. That entire issue of *Modern Quarterly* was devoted to assessments of the life and times of the recently-deceased Stalin, and a fellow contributor to that issue, J. D. Bernal, was indeed awarded the Stalin prize later that year.
4. See 'Wrong step', *Daily Worker*, 1 September 1956, p.1, and letters, 4 and 7 September 1956, both p.2.
5. For Peter Fryer's letter of resignation from the *Daily Worker* and the paper's case for not publishing the dispatches Fryer sent from Hungary, see *Daily Worker*, 16 November 1956, pp.1 and 4.

THE
RHYMING REASONER

A Journal of Indiscretion

Edited by W. McGonagall

“The most effective antidote for the poison of self-alienation is self-laughter”.
– K. Marx

* * * * *

First Number

September, 1956

CONTENTS

Editorial Statement	. . . W. McGonagall
Hat Trick	. . . W. McGonagall
The Comrades' One Day School	. . . W. McGonagall
Tail-Piece	. . . W. McGonagall

* * * * *

EDITORIAL STATEMENT

We do not wish to write a line
That might be reckoned treason;
All we intend is to combine
A little rhyme with reason.

In case our title makes you all
Think Yorkshire is to blame,
We would point out McGonagall
Is not a Yorkshire name.

HAT TRICK

(Air: "Where Did You Get That Hat?")

I went one day to Gorki Park,
And saw some British models;
With joy I yelled when I beheld
The hats upon their noddles.
They looked so sweet, so chic and neat
My heart began to flutter,
And rising boldly from my seat
This question I did utter:

"Where did you get those hats?
Where did you get that style?
If into GUM a stock did come
The queue would stretch a mile!
I should like to have some
They'd go so well with plaits!
I cannot wait, so kindly state
Where did you get those hats?"

They said to me: "You'll find those hats,
Which seem to make you dizzy,
At C&A, where B. and K.
Bought twenty-five for Lizzie".
I had a try those hats to buy
When over for the discus,
But found myself accosted by
A gentleman with whiskers:

"Where did you get those hats?
Where did you get that pile?
As I'm alive, she's snaffled five!
Away with her to jile!"
For hours and hours they shouted,
Enough to drive me bats:
"Confess! Confess! You can't do less!
Where did you get those hats?"

When papers say: "We can't obstruct
The course of British justice";
When F.O. types, in suits with stripes
Declare they cannot trust us;
When people pout, and rave about
A "dirty provocation"-
I want to raise a mighty shout
Of fierce denunciation:

“You’re talking through your hats!
You’re talking out of bile!
Like King Farouk, you make us puke!
You ought to shut your dial!
Avaunt, ye petty Metternichs!
Avaunt, ye bureaucrats!
That such as we may brothers be!
You’re talking through your hats!”

* * * * *

THE COMRADES’ ONE DAY SCHOOL

(air: “The Darkies’ Sunday-School”)

Roll up, tumble up, everybody come,
Join the comrades’ one-day school, make yourselves at home.
Please leave your “Reasoners” and razors at the door,
And we’ll tell you Marxist stories that you’ve never heard before.

Stalin was a mighty man, a mighty man was he,
He started going to the dogs in 1933;
He planned his battles on a globe, the front he never saw -
Isn’t it a wonder that the Russians won the war?

Roll up, tumble up, everybody come,
Join the comrades’ one-day school, make yourselves at home.
Please leave your “Reasoners” and razors at the door,
And we’ll tell you Marxist stories that you’ve never heard before.

Lysenko was a scientist, so modest and discreet,
Who hatched a lovely plan for hybridising winter wheat;
But when he tried to plant his wheat along the Arctic shore,
The ice and snow all melted, and he perished in the thaw.

Roll up, tumble up, everybody come,
Join the comrades’ one-day school, make yourselves at home.
Please leave your “Reasoners” and razors at the door,
And we’ll tell you Marxist stories that you’ve never heard before.

B. and K. were travellers, the greatest ever seen;
They travelled up to Windsor for to see the Duke and Queen.
The Duke now sells the “Worker” every day along the Mall,
And the Queen is Party Organiser in the servants’ hall.

Roll up, tumble up, everybody come,
Join the comrades' one-day school, make yourselves at home.
Please leave your "Reasoners" and razors at the door,
And we'll tell you Marxist stories that you've never heard before.

Two Glasgow red economists, whose books would never sell,
Made plans to win a Stalin prize, with all the perks as well.
They wrote in praise of "E.P.S.", and of its author too -
Now Lenin's name is on the prize, what is a guy to do?

Roll up, tumble up, everybody come,
Join the comrades' one-day school, make yourselves at home.
Please leave your "Reasoners" and razors at the door,
And we'll tell you Marxist stories that you've never heard before.

* * * * *

TAIL-PIECE

We plan an issue once a quarter,
And hope you get yours as you oughter;
But if the Centre ever hears,
It won't appear again for years.

* * * * *

Published on behalf of W. McGonagall, Elysian Fields, N.

Note: As is known, communications with the Elysian Fields are difficult to maintain. Every effort will be made, however, to prevent the Bard's manuscripts from falling into the hands of the State Department, and we hope our readers will take similar precautions.

THE
RHYMING REASONER

A Journal of Indiscretion

Edited by W. McGonagall

“The most effective antidote for the poison of self-alienation is self-laughter”.
– K. Marx

* * * * *

Second Number

November, 1956

CONTENTS

Comments on our First number Various Authors
Twentieth Congress Blues W. McGonagall
The Marxist-Leninist's Song W. McGonagall
Ode to Mr. Khrushchov W. McGonagall
The Ballad o' <i>The Reasoner</i> W. McGonagall
Song of the Permanent Party Man W. McGonagall
Oil-less in Gaza W. McGonagall
On the 21st Congress W. McGonagall

* * * * *

COMMENTS ON OUR FIRST NUMBER

Comrade R. P. Dutt: “No, I am definitely not responsible for the *Rhyming Reasoner*. The only periodical run by me which is independent of control by any elected party committee is the *Labour Monthly*”.

Comrade Bert Ramelson: “Subjectively, Comrade McGonagall may be perfectly sincere, but objectively it is impossible not to see that there are sinister class interests standing behind him”.

Daily Worker: “Not an objective account of events”.

TWENTIETH CONGRESS BLUES

Joe and me were buddies;
We were pledged to love eternal;
I subscribed to *Soviet Studies*
And the *Anglo-Soviet Journal*.

I treasured all his pictures
From the date of his accession
Until I read the strictures
Of that horrid secret session.

So now - I've got those 20th Congress blues
 I hate the sight of *Soviet News*;
 For everyone keeps snarlin'
 At my darlin' Joey Stalin -
 I've got those 20th Congress blues.

Life so grim and harsh is
That I'm feeling suicidal;
I long for the moustaches
Of my cultured Georgian idol.

I don't want Vyacheslav now;
Lavrenti is *finito*;
Who is there left to love now?
Not even Comrade Tito!

So now - I've got those 20th Congress blues
 I hate the sight of *Soviet News*;
 For everyone keeps snarlin'
 At my darlin' Joey Stalin -
 I've got those 20th Congress blues.

* * * * *

THE MARXIST-LENINIST'S SONG (From "The Pirates of King Street")

M.-L. I am the very model of a modern Marxist-Leninist,
 I'm anti-war, and anti-God, and very anti-feminist;
 My thinking's dialectical, my wisdom's undebatable,
 When I negate negations they're undoubtedly negatable.
 And yet I'm no ascetic - I am always full of bonhomie
 When lecturing to classes on the primitive economy;
 And comrades all agree that they have never heard a smarter cuss
 Explain the basic reasons for the slave revolt of Spartacus.

Chor. Explain the basic reasons, etc.

- M.-L. I'm fierce and unrelenting when I'm extirpating heresies,
Yet patient and forgiving to the comrade who his error sees
In short, as propagandist, agitator and polemicist,
I am the very model of a modern Marxist-Leninist.
- Chor. In short, as propagandist, agitator and polemicist
He is the very model of a modern Marxist-Leninist.
- M.-L. My love of party history comes very close to mania,
I teem with information on the Bund in Lithuania;
My speech on the Decembrists is replete with fun and pleasantry,
I know the different stages in collectivising peasantry.
With Russian Social-Democrats I'm always glad to clench a fist
(While carefully distinguishing the Bolshevik and Menshevist);
But when I am confronted with a regular Bukharin
I get a rise in temperature (both centigrade and fahrenheit).
- Chor. He gets a rise in temperature etc.
- M.-L. I know what Lenin said about the concept of the deity;
And why it's very dangerous to worship spontaneity;
In short, as propagandist, agitator and polemicist,
I am the very model of a modern Marxist-Leninist.
- Chor. In short, as propagandist, agitator and polemicist,
He is the very model of a modern Marxist-Leninist.
- M.-L. In fact, when I begin to try to fight against bureaucracy,
To criticise myself a bit, and practise more democracy;
When bringing Marx's teachings up to date I'm much more wary at,
And when I've done with phrases like "impoverished proletariat";
When I have learned that workers think that nothing can be sillier
Than "monolithic unity" and biased Russophilia
Then people will exclaim: "Hurrah! He's not a stupid sap at all;
A better Marxist-Leninist has never studied *Capital*!"
- Chor. A better Marxist-Leninist, etc.
- M.-L. My policies and theories have an air of unreality
Because I am a victim of the cult of personality;
But still, as propagandist, agitator and polemicist,
I am the very model of a modern Marxist-Leninist.
- Chor. But still, as propagandist, agitator and polemicist,
He is the very model of a modern Marxist-Leninist.

* * * * *

ODE TO MR. KHRUSHCHOV

(Note: A number of readers of our first issue have written to us pointing out that McGonagall, when on earth, was the greatest writer of *bad* poetry the world has ever known, and asking how it is that his work has improved so remarkably since he took up residence in the Elysian Fields. The answer is simple; the Elysian Fields is a very improving place. But we suggested to McGonagall that he might be prepared to write us a poem in the old unimproved style of his well-known *Poetic Gems*, simply in order to provide evidence of the authenticity of his latest work. When the medium put this suggestion to him, laughing heartily as she did so, McGonagall became so annoyed that he hit her over the head with the trumpet. This incident in itself shows how greatly his character has altered since he changed his address – on earth, as is known, he was never one for striking a happy medium. But he apparently soon repented, since the next poem which he transmitted, the *Ode to Mr. Khrushchov* which follows, will be clearly recognised by Scots and other civilised readers as “the real McGonagall”).

Hurrah for Mr. Khrushchov, so intelligent and plump,
Who told us the truth about Mr. Stalin, all in a lump.
No one at Kremlin banquets is better than he at sinking vodkas,
And at walking round muddy building sites in his goshes.

The only sad thing about him is that his head isn't hairier,
And he was the one who disposed of the arch-criminal Beria;
Yes, his was the hand that fired the fatal bullet off -
An act warmly applauded by his famous colleague, Mr. Molotov.

But the best friend and colleague of Mr. Khrushchov is Mr. Bulganin
With a beard most worthy to be seen, which I'm sure there's no harm in;
And he has gathered so many other well-loved people around him;
That I'm sure lots of people in Russia must be wanting to crown him.

Mr. Khrushchov is a great favourite with the collective farmers,
And in the Far East he is prayed for every morning by the lamas.
When he was in India, he was well-received by Mr. Nehru,
But was rather rude to Mr. Gaitskell, to whom he is no hero.

Hurrah then for Mr. Khrushchov, who with most marvellous hilarity
Ruthlessly exposed the harmful cult of personality.
He said that Mr. Stalin had hysterics during the Nazi bomb raids,
And thus threw into confusion a large number of comrades.

Hurrah again for Mr. Khrushchov, whom naught can affright him,
And I hope that one day our dear Queen will be willing to knight him;
And then she will say: "Arise, my dear Sir Nikita!
Compared with you everyone else is but as a Mosquito!"

THE BALLAD O' "THE REASONER"

(Air: "The Ball o' Kirriemuir")

I'll tell you a' a story
O' a meetin' in the toon,
Whaur five-and-thirty comrades met
Tae pit *The Reasoner* doon.

Wha'll ban it this time?
Wha'll ban it noo?
The anes that banned it last time
They cannae ban it noo.

A copy o' *The Reasoner*
Wis passed aroond tae read;
The comrades disinfected it,
An' turned awa' the heid.
Harry Pollitt he wis there,
An' musin' in his min' :
"I wish I'd had a *Reasoner*
Way back in '39".

Geordie Matthews he wis there,
A mighty man wis he;
Tae a' the comrades' questions
He cried "Solidarity!"

They passed a resolution
Tae gie the rebels hell,
An' exorcised *The Reasoner*
Wi' candle, book an' bell.

Then up spake John an' Edward
Wi' a voice as bold as brass:
"We don't want your resolution -
You can throw it in the grass!"

Guid health tae John an' Edward
An' power tae their backs!
Lang life tae them - despite the fact
That baith are Sassenachs.

I'm glad tae see their effort
Wisnae sterile after a' -
Their wean, the *Rhyming Reasoner*,
Is guid enough for twa!

Wha'll ban it this time?
Wha'll ban it noo?
The anes that banned it last time
They cannae ban it noo.

SONG OF THE PERMANENT PARTY MAN

(Air: The Vicar of Bray)

In good King Joseph's golden days
When cults were still in fashion,
A zealous Stalinist was I,
Adoring him with passion.
I never mentioned Lenin's will,
Or how Joe ruled his nation,
And wove my way 'twixt right and left
In every deviation.

Chorus: The party's line I shall maintain
 Until my dying day, sir,
 And whatsoever king may reign
 I never will say "nay", sir.

When Joseph's era passed away
There came a new directive;
I gave my new allegiance to
The leadership collective;
Self-criticised all other folk
Except the N.E.C., sir,
And burnt the Soviet History of
The C.P.S.U.(b) , sir.

Chorus: The party's line, etc.

I'm all for solidarity,
Think liberty's a fiction;
From B. or K. or R.P.D.
I welcome each restriction.
For every shift in policy
I rationalise the reason,
And voices raised to criticise
I stigmatise as treason.

Chorus: The party's line, etc.

* * * * *

OIL-LESS IN GAZA

(Air: Old song)

Oh, the warlike desires of the Tories
Are greater than anyone thinks:
One day in a moment of passion
They attacked the canal of the Sphinx.

Now oil cannot pass through that passage,
Which is blocked by ships sunk in a pile;
Which accounts for the illness of Eden,
And the Sphinx's inscrutable smile.

* * * * *

ON THE 21ST CONGRESS

(Note: In the Elysian Fields, it is sometimes granted to the inhabitants that they should be given a glimpse into the future. Comrade McGonagall was recently granted this privilege, and had a vision of a time, not so far in the future, when his undoubted poetical merits would be fully recognised by the Executive Committee of the British Communist Party, and he would be commissioned to do Executive Committee resolutions into verse for publication in the *Daily Worker*. The following is his version of the Executive Committee resolution which will be promulgated after the 21st congress of the Soviet Communist Party.)

On behalf of the Executive Committee
We send fraternal greetings warm and hearty
To the Congress lately held in Moscow city
Of the Soviet workers' one and only Party.

Along with all progressive-minded nations
We rejoice that the decisions were unanimous;
We welcome the collective condemnations
Of comrades who were weak and pusillanimous.

We welcome Stalin's rehabilitation,
And the downfall of the Khrushchov-Kadar cliques
Which nearly caused the party's liquidation
(Especially in 1956).

It emerges from the Soviet discussions
That we must have solidarity or burst:
We're always glad to criticise the Russians
(Provided that the Russians do it first).

What though false information may mislead us?
Our discipline is based upon conviction!
What though the toiling masses never heed us?
We've solved the basic social contradiction!

Our efforts we shall double and redouble
In London, Cardiff, Aberdeen and Donegal
And pulverise the Tories into rubble.
I am, sir,

Yours fraternally,
McGonagall

* * * * *

Published on behalf of W. McGonagall, Elysian Fields, N.

Notes: Comrade McGonagall is at the moment haunting a certain address which may be known to the more psychic of the recipients of this incomparable journal. If any of these would like copies sent to their friends, requests to this effect directed to the aforesaid address will be handed on to comrade McGonagall for his consideration.

Publication costs of journals of this type are high, even in the Elysian Fields, and donations will be welcome, particularly from those readers who would like copies sent to their friends. Any surplus will be contributed to the McGonagall for Poet Laureate Fund which certain public-spirited citizens have set up in London and one or two of the other provinces.

We regret that a difference of policy has arisen on our editorial board of two. As it was found impossible to discover a majority to which the minority should submit, or a higher committee whose directives the lower committee should obey, the younger member has decided to resign at once. He is considering the publication of a rival journal to be known as *Labour Rhymes Monthly*, but wishes to make it clear that he has no intention of leaving the Elysian Fields and will start to fight for the deportation of all pseudo-Scots poets to some God-forsaken country like New Zealand.