

RANDOM HOUSE *e*BOOKS



The Nation's Favourite:
Comic Poems

Griff Rhys Jones

CONTENTS

— ◊ —

Cover

Also by Griff Rhys Jones

Title Page

Foreword

JOHN AGARD Coffee in Heaven

ALLAN AHLBERG Please Mrs Butler

ANON On Mary Ann

On a Tired Housewife

Spring in the Bronx

The Crimes of Lizzie Borden

I Have a Gentle Cock

She Was Poor but She Was Honest

If All the World Were Paper

Peas

The Pig

W. H. AUDEN Give Me a Doctor

Note on Intellectuals

PAM AYRES Sling Another Chair Leg on the Fire, Mother

Oh, I Wish I'd Looked After Me Teeth

PATRICK BARRINGTON I Had a Duck-billed Platypus

EDGAR BATEMAN It's a Great Big Shame

SIR MAX BEERBOHM from *Old Surrey Saws and Sayings*
(‘A red sky at night’)

HILAIRE BELLOC Matilda Who Told Lies, and Was Burned
to Death

Rebecca Who Slammed Doors for Fun and Perished
Miserably

Henry King Who Chewed Bits of String, and Was Early Cut
Off in Dreadful Agonies
Lord Finchley
The Frog
E.C. BENTLEY Clerihews
SIR JOHN BETJEMAN How to Get On in Society
A Subaltern's Love-song
Hunter Trials
CAPTAIN HAMISH BLAIR The Bloody Orkneys
GARY BOSWELL Ducks Don't Shop in Sainsburys
TOM BROWN Doctor Fell
GELETT BURGESS The Purple Cow
LEWIS CARROLL Father William
The Walrus and the Carpenter
Jabberwocky
Speak Roughly to Your Little Boy
from *The Hunting of the Snark* (Fit the First: *The Landing*)
WENDY COPE Bloody Men
Lonely Hearts
E.E. CUMMINGS nobody loses all the time
may i feel said he
ROALD DAHL St Ives
Hot and Cold
Little Red Riding Hood and the Wolf
A Hand in the Bird
PAUL DEHN Alternative Endings to an Unwritten Ballad
JOHN DONNE Song
PAUL DURCAN Tullynoe: Tête-à-Tête in the Parish Priest's
Parlour
MARRIOTT EDGAR The Lion and Albert
T.S. ELIOT Bustopher Jones: The Cat About Town
Macavity: The Mystery Cat
GAVIN EWART The Black Box
MICHAEL FLANDERS The Hippopotamus Song
W.S. GILBERT The Nightmare
HARRY GRAHAM L'Enfant Glacé

Opportunity

JOYCE GRENFELL Stately as a Galleon

JOHN HEGLEY Malcolm

In the Arms of My Glasses

A Comparison of Logs and Dogs

STANLEY HOLLOWAY Old Sam

A.E. HOUSMAN The Shades of Night

LEIGH HUNT To a Fish

A Fish Answers

CHRISTOPHER ISHERWOOD The Common Cormorant

CLIVE JAMES The Book of My Enemy Has Been
Remaindered

JENNY JOSEPH Warning

JOHN KEATS All These Are Vile

X.J. KENNEDY To Someone Who Insisted I Look Up
Someone

EDWARD LEAR The Owl and the Pussy-cat

The Courtship of the Yonghy-Bonghy-Bò

Limericks

The Pobble Who Has No Toes

The Akond of Swat

ROGER McGOUGH Cake

Stink

Survivor

LOUIS MACNEICE Bagpipe Music

SPIKE MILLIGAN On the Ning Nang Nong

Father Thames

Bump!

A.A. MILNE The King's Breakfast

ADRIAN MITCHELL Celia Celia

CHARLOTTE MITCHELL Just in Case

THOMAS MOORE On Taking a Wife

OGDEN NASH Song of the Open Road

Curl Up and Diet

DOROTHY PARKER One Perfect Rose

BRIAN PATTEN Hair Today, No Her Tomorrow

ALEXANDER POPE Epigram
SIR WALTER RALEIGH Wishes of an Elderly Man, Wished
at a Garden Party, June 1914
MICHAEL ROSEN Chocolate Cake
ROBERT W. SERVICE The Cremation of Sam McGee
WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE My Mistress' Eyes are Nothing
Like the Sun
A Sea Song (from *The Tempest*)
THOMAS SHERIDAN A True and Faithful Inventory of the
Goods *Belonging* to Dr. Swift, Vicar of Lara Cor: *upon*
lending his House to the Bishop of Meath, until his own was
built
SYDNEY SMITH Recipe for a Salad
ERNEST LAWRENCE THAYER Casey at the Bat
E.J. THIRIBB Lines on the Death of Chairman Mao
In Memoriam Uffa Fox
JOHN WILMOT, EARL OF ROCHESTER King Charles II
HUMBERT WOLFE 'You cannot hope ...'
VICTORIA WOOD Saturday Night
KIT WRIGHT Sergeant Brown's Parrot
BENJAMIN ZEPHANIAH Talking Turkeys!!

[Index of Poets' Names](#)
[Index of First Lines](#)
[Acknowledgements](#)
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Also by Griff Rhys Jones

The Nation's Favourite Poems

The Nation's Favourite Poems of Celebration

The Nation's Favourite Poems of Childhood

The Nation's Favourite Poems of Desire

The Nation's Favourite Poems of Journeys

The Nation's Favourite Love Poems

The Nation's Favourite Poems of Remembrance

The Nation's Favourite Shakespeare

The Nation's Favourite Twentieth Century Poems

The following are available from BBC Radio Collection:

The Nation's Favourite Poems (CD)

The Nation's Favourite Poems of Celebration (CD)

The Nation's Favourite Children's Poems
(audiocassette/CD)

The Nation's Favourite Comic Poems (CD)

THE NATION'S
FAVOURITE
COMIC POEMS

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FOREWORD BY
GRIFF RHYS JONES

BBC
BOOKS

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WHAT IS A comic poem? How do you decide? What criteria could you possibly employ? Well, soon the nation will decide and, to help you in your choice, I have made up my own selection of likely candidates. It wasn't easy because, alas, not all comic poems are funny, particularly those that try to be. But, as you wander through this collection, I hope you'll be tickled. You will also find that poets high and low, famous, great even, have managed to write some pretty funny stuff on the side, even if our leading contributor is, nonetheless, Anon.

Happily, there is a type of writer who, if often shown the door in other anthologies, has the run of the house here. These are the masters of their craft, the wizards of the unexpected rhyme: the Comic Poets. Perhaps it was the freedom to write nonsense, inflicted so successfully on children by Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll, that opened the way to the gloriously silly stuff. (Although I suspect that *Punch* had a lot to do with it.) Anyway, it is good to see those old nags Hilaire Belloc and Harry Graham coming round the track again. The nursery mood may not be very elevating, but it can be pretty funny.

One of my personal favourites is this little verse by the American wit Gelett Burgess, which was first published in the 1890s.

I never saw a Purple Cow,
I never hope to see one;
But I can tell you, anyhow,
I'd rather see than be one.

Some years later he wrote again:

Ah yes! I wrote the 'Purple Cow'-
I'm Sorry, now, I Wrote it!
But I can Tell you, Anyhow,
I'll Kill you if you Quote it!

Poor man. For all I know he designed lunatic asylums or walked backwards to the North Pole. Today all that survives of his verse is this piece of doggerel. I suppose he would have been mortified to find it still doing the rounds.

Mind you, all good jokes are a sort of poetry, aren't they? Gagsmiths know the value of the *mot juste*, the necessity of rhythm and, er, of course, that timing thing. It should come as no surprise that poetry returns the compliment. Puns, wordplay, hidden meanings and the wrong-footing of cherished notions: it's the very stuff of verse. But jokes eventually die off. Funny poems go on. (On and on, some of them. Lewis Carroll could prolong the hilarity through many a now-forgotten stanza.)

I once recited Robert Service's stirring 'The Cremation of Sam McGee' (not short, but sublime) at a fund-raising event and a woman came up to me afterwards. She voluntarily 'did' half of 'The Shooting of Dan McGrew' while I queued for my coat, and continued while I walked down a flight of steps and got into my car. She may be doing it still, for all I know. People *will* carry around rhyming saws and useful epithets for the purpose of bringing them up at appropriate moments. Some of them are here. If you lack these essentials to good conversation, feel free to pinch a few.

Mind you, if you are going to plagiarize, it is as well to remember that brevity is the soul of other people's wit. For my own purposes, I find Sir Walter Raleigh very useful. He wrote a series of verse observations to an artist friend, on

postcards. (This is a later Walter Raleigh, by the way. Not the one with the inflatable short trousers and the potatoes.)

I wish I loved the Human Race;
I wished I loved its silly face; ...
And when I'm introduced to one
I wish I thought *What Jolly Fun!*

Cynics often join me in cackling at this. 'It sums it all up, eh?' Though to be fair, it was written about some sorry-looking old trout at a garden party and was meant as criticism. Anyway, my point is I always edit the middle couplet out for efficiency. You can find the full version [here](#).

It is a challenge to try to be profound and laugh-out-loud funny at the same time. This is why poets of wit, invention and style, like John Donne and Alexander Pope, at whom professors may chortle and teachers hoot, are minimally represented in this anthology.

It is also a pity that certain poets so deeply profound as to be utterly asinine are not here either. Is there anything in the whole of literature more amusing than William Wordsworth struggling to elevate the commonplace:

Spade! With which Wilkinson hath tilled his lands.
'To the Spade of a Friend'

Or how about this, from one Lillian Curtis, who wrote, in all seriousness:

I loved the gentle girl,
But oh, I heaved a sigh,
When first she told me she could see
Out of only one eye.

A victim of the measles, apparently. But these are bad poems which are unintentionally funny, and they need their

own collection. (*The Nation's Favourite Terrible Poems* perhaps?)

There is also a lot of recent writing here. After all, the nation's favourite modern poem was a funny one. 'Warning' by Jenny Joseph is naturally in the running again. But so are poems by Wendy Cope, Pam Ayres, Roger McGough and Roald Dahl. So are ones by John Hegley and E.J. Thribb, the mythical contributor to *Private Eye*.

Poets these days have all become sit-down comedians. Almost everybody from Allen Ginsberg to Brian Patten seems to get off on the 'wry look at the way we live now'.

But the funniest poem? Well, we shall have to wait until the votes are counted. As old television schedulers say: 'There's no accounting for public taste.' And there are some rum doings here.

Altogether, however, this is a testament to the power of poetry to move us in the chest-heaving sort of way. (Laughter and tears, they're never far apart, are they, governor? Is there a more moving love poem in the English language than 'The Courtship of the Yonghy-Bonghy-Bò'?) Comic poems, I vow, are a great popular means of expression. You only have to sit in the lavatories at King's Cross station to understand that. It will be fascinating to see what gets the popular vote on the night.

Remembered, half-remembered, beloved, cherished or written on tea towels, here are some of my favourite comic poems.

JOHN AGARD
COFFEE IN HEAVEN

You'll be greeted
by a nice cup of coffee
when you get to heaven
and strains of angelic harmony.

But wouldn't you be devastated
if they only serve decaffeinated
while from the percolators of hell
your soul was assaulted
by Satan's fresh espresso smell?

ALLAN AHLBERG 1938-
PLEASE MRS BUTLER

Please Mrs Butler
This boy Derek Drew
Keeps copying my work, Miss.
What shall I do?

Go and sit in the hall, dear.
Go and sit in the sink.
Take your books on the roof, my lamb.
Do whatever you think.

Please Mrs Butler
This boy Derek Drew
Keeps taking my rubber, Miss.
What shall I do?

Keep it in your hand, dear.
Hide it up your vest.
Swallow it if you like, my love.
Do what you think best.

Please Mrs Butler
This boy Derek Drew
Keeps calling me rude names, Miss.
What shall I do?

Lock yourself in the cupboard, dear.
Run away to sea.
Do whatever you can, my flower.
But *don't ask me!*

ANON
ON MARY ANN

Mary Ann has gone to rest,
Safe at last on Abraham's breast,
Which may be nuts for Mary Ann,
But is certainly rough on Abraham.

ANON
ON A TIRED HOUSEWIFE

Here lies a poor woman who was always tired,
She lived in a house where help wasn't hired:
Her last words on earth were: 'Dear friends, I am going
To where there's no cooking, or washing, or sewing,
For everything there is exact to my wishes,
For where they don't eat there's no washing of dishes.
I'll be where loud anthems will always be ringing,
But having no voice I'll be quit of the singing.
Don't mourn for me now, don't mourn for me never,
I am going to do nothing for ever and ever.'

ANON
SPRING IN THE BRONX

Spring is sprung,
Duh grass is riz
I wonder where dem boidies is.

Duh little boids is on duh wing -
But dat's absoid:
Duh little wing is on duh boid.

ANON
THE CRIMES OF LIZZIE BORDEN

Lizzie Borden with an axe,
Hit her father forty whacks,
When she saw what she had done,
She hit her mother forty-one.

ANON
I HAVE A GENTLE COCK

I have a gentle cock,
Croweth me day:
He doth me risen erly
My matins for to say.

I have a gentle cock,
Comen he is of gret:
His comb is of red coral,
His tail is of jet.

I have a gentle cock,
Comen he is of kinde:
His comb is of red coral,
His tail is of inde.

His legges ben of asor,
So gentle and so smale;
His spores arn of silver whit
Into the wortewale.

His eynen arn of cristal,
Loken all in aumber:
And every night he percheth him
In mine ladye's chaumber.

ANON

SHE WAS POOR BUT SHE WAS HONEST

She was poor, but she was honest,
 Victim of the squire's whim:
First he loved her, then he left her,
 And she lost her honest name.

Then she ran away to London,
 For to hide her grief and shame;
There she met another squire,
 And she lost her name again.

See her riding in her carriage,
 In the Park and all so gay:
All the nibs and nobby persons
 Come to pass the time of day.

See the little old-world village
 Where her aged parents live,
Drinking the champagne she sends them;
 But they never can forgive.

In the rich man's arms she flutters,
 Like a bird with broken wing:
First he loved her, then he left her,
 And she hasn't got a ring.

See him in the splendid mansion,
 Entertaining with the best,
While the girl that he has ruined,
 Entertains a sordid guest.

See him in the House of Commons,
 Making laws to put down crime,