



The Real McConnachie

Proverbs & Provocations



James McGonigal

Painted, spoken | number 39



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1.

Born poor, you need to choose
a stick that will flex and
bend

before it snaps in two—

McConnachie says,
and he would know.

2.

You can praise yourself
if you want to,
and watch other folk take

one step back
as if they think:
Wow, breath-stink.

3.

Moorland
on the longest day
and your pockets empty

keep a keen eye
for bilberry sprays
or a hive of the heather-bee.

4.

Just a flamelings,
one meekly flickering
candle flame and yet

hot enough to heat
some thingummyjig or other,
says McConnachie.

5.

Learning bad habits
is easy as pie

as easy as licking
honey off a thorn.

Who said that?

6.

Which dream is true
and best not forgotten?
It must be the one
you still see when you wake
in the morning

and later at noon—
and still when night falls.

7.

I fall asleep most nights
below a ceiling with just a few cracks,
under a blanket with only one rip,

inside a skin with barely a single cut,
McConnachie says. Most nights.

8.

It's as tricky to take a grain
of barley from a goose's beak
or to measure the gap
between sapwood and bark

as to draw a smiley face
on a grieving heart.

9.

McConnachie says there's time enough
to spread your bed just before lying down.

And the best time to scream out loud
is just when the axe blade falls.

10.

Year after year
life drifts down like a feather
from your wing.

Seven long years, maybe nine.
Then watch what happens
in one bold blue hour.

11.

Everyone says it,
so it must be true.
Everyone says it
so it must be true?
McConnachie says it . . .
So what should you do?

12.

Before it can walk
or even toddle from chair to chair,
kindness
 crawls along happily
 on hands and knees—

Did you ever notice?

13.

You can throw your cap up
as high as you like in thin air,
says McConnachie. It won't
catch a bird in its rim.

Feathers carry the prize away.

14.

From time to time you reach down
a thick old volume from its shelf,
The Bumper Book of Maybes.

Not a great title.
No need to flick through it again.
Shove it back where it came from.

15.

An old cat tiptoes up and down
the river bank,
watching and wanting fish,
hating the feel
of wet fur.

16.

And this year's award for
Shortest Animal With Longest Toes
goes to . . .
Tommy MacPuddock!

There are prize categories
for just about anyone, McConnachie says.
Which do you really want
to find yourself winning?

17.

The longest waltz
must come to an end
when the music stops.

But the next time you get up to dance
take a careful look
at just who is holding your hand.

18.

Here's a tale of two drinks.
The death of his first wife
left such a gaping hole in his heart
that all of the others
slipped easily through.

19.

Eat up every last bit on your plate.
Remember to lick
your spoon and fingers clean.
And don't run straight outside
to share on the street
what you heard at the kitchen table,
no matter how juicy.

20.

Have you noticed how often
it takes two to heave up the ladder
and set it against a wall

but only one man climbs it?
The other holds it steady,
watching his mate rising
towards the roof.

21.

Did you hear what that cloud said?
McConnachie heard it first.
We have more room up here
stretched out in the blue
than down in the dust.
And see further too.

22.

Ducks seldom guddle
in a single ditch.
It takes two hands to wash
the mud off one finger.

Never fail to remember
the worthiness of towels,
McConnachie says, and who
wove, washed and dried them.

23.

Is one scone enough
baking for today?
Does our dog Major
need a tighter leash?

A fool may keep asking
question after question
that a doctor can't answer.

24.

Which weapon is better:
A quick tongue
or a sharp pair of heels?
A plucky heart or a lucky one?

Distance maybe,
McConnachie says. Often
the best weapon of all
does not lie close to hand.

25.

An old woman remembers
weighing the warmth
of a gansey, soup and coal
in one hand. Six shillings
and eight pence ha'penny.

Her heart grew heavy
as her purse grew light.

26.

This world is a see-saw,
McConnachie says.
Look how the single nod
of an honest head
leaves the protestations of two dozen liars

hanging in mid-air.

27.

Sometimes it's better
to tie up a sack
before it is full
to overflowing.
Sometimes that is also true
for the heart.

And for other things too,
says McConnachie.

28.

You think that you're too short?
Remember how often the lankiest trees
are felled by a gale.

Not always, of course,
but often enough
for you to grow clear of their shade.

29.

What is that single
silky thread stitching
a happy heart to life?
Did you not find it yet?

It is stronger than the rope
that knots a liar to each post
he hammered into the dirt.

30.

Babies cry for all the world to hear
and we do whatever we can
to comfort them.

Far harder to attend to the cries
of an old man in second childhood

even when his mind howls
like the wind on a winter's night.

31.

Better an empty house than a bad tenant,
so they say. But think
of your own head with vacant windows
and a mouth swung back on its hinges.

Where has that tearaway tenant gone
who had the time of his life here
for a month or so (though it felt longer)?—
Oh, a good while ago now it was.

32.

You lost it and looked everywhere
for hours, for days.

Realising many years later
that what you mislaid was your watch-face.

33.

Here are some questions for you,
says McConnachie.

Is it better for toddlers to cry than parents?
Better to be idle than badly employed?
Better to be the lucky man or his son?

Often but not always, might be one answer.
But if you sit on two stools that way—
everyone sees your backside hanging down.

34.

You look like a good runner,
said the Tempter to the lobster.
And the lobster believed him.

Would you?

35.

I used to think, his mind's off chasing mice.
I used to say, he'll never fill his father's cap.
I used to listen, but his breeze shook no barley.

Nowadays I wonder, was it
my own face I glimpsed there,
hanging in the mirror on his wall?

36.

McConnachie says the look on your face
tells everyone you have tied a knot
with your tongue
that even your canine teeth
can't gnaw free.

37.

We have a single egg left in the bowl
and not one of the family
is a wonderful cook.

Then do without dinner
and share it for supper. It will taste
better with a plateful of shadows.

38.

Keep learning as long as you live. Good lessons
might come late in the day.

That you can drink from a burn, for instance,
but not take a bite from the braes it runs through.

That before those two hilltops touch noses,
you will have met your childhood friends again.

39.

When a child is born, you choose a name
to call him back, to bring her home.
When the child is grown, the name
remains—swaying like the branch

from which a bird has flown.

40.

The world has broad shoulders.
Look at the grace of them
stretching from east to west.

But don't ask your own back
to lift more than it can bear.
Or your heart to break twice.

McConnachie says that the world
signed no contract. Has it even room enough
to spell out its first name?

Afterword

McConnachie emerged from different places. His purpose and tone (to some extent) derive from Arvind Krishna Mehrotra's fine collection, *Book of Rahim* (Shearsman Books, 2023). Rahim was Abd-al-Rahim Khan-i-Khanan (1556–1627), a Mughal general, poet and translator whose pithy *dohas* or rhyming couplets still appear in Hindi textbooks to be memorised by school children. His advice, sage or ironic, has passed into their language, rather as everyday proverbs or even lines from Shakespeare or Burns have become part of ours. Old Scottish proverbs were then added to the mix, from Allan Ramsay's *A Collection of Scots Proverbs* (1750, reprinted by Paul Harris Publishing, 1979). I have translated about fifty or so from his Collection of more than two thousand into English mainly, and provided some imagined context for them. Since proverbs deal with the basic bones of human life, Scottish attitudes merge with Mughal ones, although judging by these proverbs the Scottish outlook is more acerbic.

The voice appears to be male, but the real McConnachie was my grandmother, Helen, born in 1887. A bright woman, she was for some time a pupil-teacher in her local junior school, before leaving the classroom at age 14 to labour in the local brickworks. Her father, Henry McConnachie, was an Ulster quarryman, working yellow sandstone for Glasgow's tenements. Proverbs of working

life in rural Lanarkshire added to her hearth-language of Ulster Scots and Hiberno-English, and these might be deployed in later life at appropriate moments: 'It's money maks the mare gang', for instance, or (eating an ice-cream cone) 'I s'll be fat as a fool directly!' A pit accident left her widowed with eight children in the early 1930s, and she remained a matriarchal figure through my childhood: witty, indomitable, and a powerful teacher.



A NOTE ON THE TYPES

This edition is set in Clifford Pro,
a contemporary serif designed by Akira Kobayashi
and available in three weights and six fonts.
Clifford Pro performs excellently in digital environments
and is a sturdy, versatile and beautiful typeface
suited to a large variety of text work, including poetry.
It received a Certificate of Excellence in Type Design in 2000.

Titling and copyright matter is set in Matthew Carter's rugged,
slightly sculptural sans serif Carter Sans, which makes
a useful companion face for the calm robustness of the serif.



James McGonigal's publications include biography, criticism, co-edited anthologies, several collections of poetry, and professional writing on learning and literacy. His most recent collection is *Life Sentences* (Red Squirrel Press, 2023).



There's that voice in your head telling you to speed up. And there's another voice telling you to slow down. Which to believe? Either/or.

Here's a different voice altogether, gnomic and cool. Far-travelled, it seems to have picked up ancient dialectal forms of proverb and parable. They sound familiar though you've never heard them.

That's McConnachie speaking. Just think about it, he's telling us. Wise up.

