

## The Seeing Detective

### The Quern-Dust Calendar: Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

IN MY last article I promised to focus this time on the gift of prophecy, which many of the great evangelical laymen (the ‘Men’) of the north shared on one side with some of the ministers, and on the other side with holy fools and secular seers like Coinneach Odhar, the Brahan Seer. The Brahan Seer is particularly well known nowadays, thanks to a popular book about him by Alexander Mackenzie, and has become a case of living (or perhaps I should say creative) folklore. For example, a front-page ad in the “Ross-shire Journal” of 9 June this year quoted him as saying: “When men in horseless carriages go under the sea to France, then shall Scotia shine a new glory in her freedom from all oppression.” It did Winnie Ewing no harm at all in her bid for re-election to the European Parliament.

We all know that prophecies can be manufactured, and some of us suspect that Winnie is better at it than most. In an academic work published during the Thatcher years, “The Seer in Celtic and other Traditions”, edited by H. E. Davidson, Dr John MacInnes wrote: “Clearly new prophecies are still being constructed. Quite recently I was told that Coinneach Odhar had predicted that when two women rule this land the kingdom is approaching its end.”

Dr MacInnes went on to remark that some of Coinneach’s older prophecies, about the Clearances for instance, are ascribed in variant form to other seers also, and that is certainly true of the seer I want to concentrate on in this article. The Rev. John Morrison, “the Petty Seer”, lived from 1701 to 1774, and was minister of Petty, a Gaelic-speaking parish east of Inverness, from 1749 to his death. Although born in Perthshire, he was (like Coinneach Odhar) of Lewis origin. His father was John Morrison, latterly minister of Urray, and his grandfather was John Morrison of Bragar, who wrote “A Descriptione of the Lews” and uttered many memorable sayings, one of which even found its way into Dwelly’s dictionary (under *fudaidh*). They were published by William Matheson in “The Blind Harper”.

The minister of Petty’s own sayings and doings were gathered together by A. B. MacLennan in a little book called “The Petty Seer”, which went through three editions between 1894 and 1906. Some of them also found their way into Donald Morrison’s “Traditions of the Western Isles”.

To a much greater extent than Coinneach Odhar, the Rev. John Morrison is a historical figure. And he was no crank. He preached the gospel in all its evangelical purity, and was punctilious in visiting his parishioners. Like his grandfather he was also a fiddler and a poet. MacLennan says he composed *Mo nighean dubh tha bòidheach dubh* and *Ho mo Mhàiri laghach* and *Deoch slàinte an Iarla chliùitich*, but there seems to be some doubt about that. At any rate it helps establish his credentials as a seer, since prophecy and poetry often went together.

Evangelicals like Morrison never laid claim to the gift of prophecy, but preferred instead to point to Psalms xxv. 14: “The secret of the Lord is with them that fear Him, and He will show them His covenant.” A parishioner once put the matter to him directly. “I believe, Mr Morrison, that you have the spirit of prophecy.”

“I am not a prophet, nor the son of a prophet,” he replied, “but you will admit, I think, that he is a poor servant indeed to whom his master will reveal nothing of his mind.”

The revelation of the Lord’s mind evidently came through four things: discourse in prayer, visions, a keen forensic intelligence, and reliable information on the ground. With regard to visions we have the following anecdote. Morrison was walking once on the beach at Petty, thinking about the commentary on the Book of Revelations which he meant to write, when he saw (or thought he saw) a stranger digging a huge hole in the sand. “Why are you digging a hole in the sand?” he said.



“To let the ocean flow in,” said the stranger.

“What a foolish man you are,” said Morrison. “God’s ocean is too great to allow it to be contained in a hole in the sand.”

“In that case,” said the man, “why are you so foolish as to believe that God’s word in Revelation can be made more clear than it is already?”

Morrison dropped the idea, and decided to concentrate on his preaching instead.

To determine exactly what it is that gives a man the reputation of a seer, I have done a quick analysis of the contents of MacLennan’s book. It contains 34 anecdotes. Of these, eight are unconnected with prophecy, leaving 26. Three of these can be called miscellaneous — the two I have told already, plus one where the prophet is not Morrison but a ‘holy fool’, Jamie Petty. This I will tell another time, but it contains some revealing information. One, Morrison was an early riser. Two, from his study window he could see the smoke rising from every chimney in Petty. Three, he had a servant who, as the minister’s man, could go pretty much where he pleased. It occurs to me that it would be surprising if he did not also have a spyglass.

That leaves 23 anecdotes. These break down as follows: crime detection 8, knowledge of faraway event 6 ; prophecy of an imminent death or conversion 3 ; prophecy of other event 5. The reason for the halves is that one anecdote contains two of these elements in equal measure: a herdboy has a supernatural experience and Morrison knows what it is without being told; he predicts that the boy will die within eight days, and he does.

Let’s give a sentence to each anecdote in each of the four categories. The largest, crime detection, would make the sort of series that STV would jump at. The main ingredient is sex. Morrison dramatically declares at a baptism that a certain young girl is no virgin, and a few months later he turns out to be right. He tells a good woman that she will come to shun a certain man like a viper, and sure enough he turns out to be an adulterer. He finds the father of a new-born child that has been left on his doorstep. He is accused of being the father of the illegitimate child being carried by an orphan girl who lives in his manse, but vindicates himself by revealing the true culprit.

Now add murder. He goes knowingly to a place where he finds a woman on the point of murdering her newborn child. He goes knowingly to where a man and a woman are secretly digging a hole, prevents them burying their illegitimate baby alive, and marries them on the spot.

Finally in the 'crime detection' category, comic relief. A 'cripple' is being obligingly fed and looked after by his parishioners, and pushed in a sort of wooden carriage from house to house; Morrison orders that the carriage be dropped while being carried across a river, and the 'cripple' finds his feet like magic and is the first to reach the bank. He chucks a bucketful of dirty water over a candidate for the eldership, and the resulting torrent of abuse confirms the man's inadequacy for holy office.

So far I think I have shown that the largest category of prophecies is what would now be called detective work. 'Knowledge of faraway event' is trickier. This involves knowing that something is happening at the moment of its occurrence. I will try to list these in order of distance from the seer. Walking along a road, he knows what people in the middle of a field are saying to each other. He goes knowingly to his stackyard on a winter's night and finds a homeless man; he knows that a certain elder has refused him shelter in his house, and takes him back there. (A double whammy!) He knows his servant has fallen into an open grave in the churchyard. He tells a poor beggar that the Devil is preparing something for him; eventually an illegitimate child is born in the parish and the fine for fornication is given to the beggar. He knows of the death of an ungodly fisherman on his way home from market in Inverness. He knows his herdboy is lying when he tells him his cattle are all well: the dun stot, he says, "is lying at this moment on his back in a watercourse, with two of his legs broken".

These could all be explained by a combination of foresight, sharp hearing, intelligence-gathering and a spyglass. What then of 'prophecy of an imminent death or conversion'? He prophesies the death of a drunkard, and it happens. He plays the fiddle for a drunken fisherwoman to dance to, then prophesies her death, and it happens. He plays the fiddle for a drunken postwoman to dance to, then prophesies her conversion, and it happens. As we have seen, he also accurately prophesies the death of a boy who has had a supernatural experience. These cases could be said to indicate the terrible power wielded by the minister over minds weaker than his own.

Finally, then, 'prophecy of other event'. He says that a certain man will be put out of his house and that a ditch called the Feith Diach will run through it, and both things happen. He predicts the Petty evictions. He predicts the future stages of agriculture at a place called *Cnoc a' Bhealaidh*, Broom Hill. He predicts the nature of his successor: *Gheibh sibh blobar Galld' de mhinisteir, aig nach bi aon chuid Beurla no Gàidhlig*. "You'll get a Lowland stammerer of a minister, who'll have neither English nor Gaelic." And he predicts that a certain huge rock will move without human help, and it happens.

Let's look at these. The first four can be taken together. These were the bad old days of patronage in the church. Morrison was appointed to his charge by the local landowner, the Earl of Moray, and so was his successor. Remember that song, *Deoch slàinte an Iarla chliùitich*, 'A toast to the famous Earl'? All four predictions might have been made by anyone familiar with modern trends in agricultural science, and inside knowledge of estate policy. And sure enough, Morrison's successor was a man from Rafford in Moray whose Gaelic was bad and whose English was said to be even worse.

That leaves the rock. The story here is that one Sabbath in 1772 or 1773, Morrison declared from the pulpit, "You sinful and stiff-necked people, unless you turn from your evil ways God will sweep you into the place of torment; and as a sign of the truth of what I say, *Clach Dhubh an Abain*, large though it be, will be carried soon, without human agency, a considerable distance seawards." Nothing could have seemed more unlikely, and in a sense Morrison was wrong, because the rock stayed put until 25 years after his death. And yet, it happened. According to MacLennan, the event was described like this in "Anderson's Guide to the Highlands", page 104. "On the south side of the bay [of Petty] an immense stone, weighing at least eight tons, which marked the boundaries between the estates of Lord Moray and Culloden, was, on the night of Saturday, the 20th February, 1799, removed and carried forward into the sea about 260 yards."

It goes on: "Some believe that nothing short of an earthquake could have removed such a mass, but the more probable opinion is that a large sheet of ice, which had collected to the thickness of 18 inches round the stone, had been raised by the tide, lifting the stone with it, and that their motion forward was aided and increased by a tremendous hurricane which blew from the land."

Finally, then, we have brought 23 prophecies down to just one which can only be dismissed by saying, "We are not being told the truth." Curiously, if the story of the stone seems familiar it is probably because Mackenzie included it in "The Prophecies of the Brahan Seer", the first edition of which came out five years later than the first edition of "The Petty Seer". Mackenzie tells us that it was pretty generally believed at the time that the Devil had a finger in the work, but insists that "there is no doubt whatever" that the Brahan Seer predicted the moving of the stone.

All I can say is, isn't it a pity we only ever seem to hear that an event was predicted after the event has happened.

— WHFP 30.9.94