

The Prophecies of Calum Cille

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

IN A couple of ‘Quern-Dust Calendars’ in autumn 1994, I analysed the prophecies of two Highland seers, the Rev. John Morrison (‘The Petty Seer’, 1701-74) and Norman MacDonald (‘Tormad Sona’, 1853-1945).

I found that out of 26 anecdotes about prophecy in A B MacLennan’s book ‘The Petty Seer’, eight were about crime detection, six-and-a-half displayed knowledge of a faraway event, three-and-a-half concerned prophecy of an imminent death or conversion, five concerned prophecy of some other event, and there were three miscellaneous prophecies. Morrison appeared to obtain prophetic revelation through four things: discourse in prayer, visions, a keen forensic intelligence, and reliable information on the ground. However, closer analysis suggested that his prophetic powers were a skill and not a gift — all his prophecies can ultimately be put down to some combination of observation, common sense, keen forensic intelligence, and reliable information on the ground. He utilised to the full the grip that a well-educated eighteenth-century parish minister could have over the minds of a small east-coast community.

Tormad Sona is a different kettle of fish. I found that his biography ‘Am Measg nan Lili’ contained 18 instances of prophecy, 6 of the gifts of God, and 8 of God working through Tormad. As his nickname suggests, he was a totally unworldly man, and his prophecies were gentle and undramatic, involving simple day-to-day matters with no attempt whatever at social control. His seems to have been a genuine psychic gift, activated by signs, visions and revelations through prayer, for which Tormod, belonging as he did to the age of wireless, used the English expression ‘listening in’.

So the Petty Seer and Tormad Sona stand at the two extremes of a prophetic spectrum which was well described by the Rev. Dr John MacInnes in his book ‘The Evangelical Movement in the Highlands of Scotland’. He wrote: “We are convinced that a few men, Thomas Hog and Lachlan MacKenzie for instance, did possess a prophetic insight which was over and beyond the prescience born of a shrewd appreciation of events. Lesser men, desirous of the popular reverence which the gift evoked, assumed a mantle which was not theirs by right.”

Now I know little or nothing of the prophecies of the Rev. Thomas Hog of Kiltearn or the Rev. Lachlan MacKenzie of Lochcarron. All I can tell you is that, like the Petty Seer and Tormad Sona, they were evangelical presbyterians, and that when MacKenzie was asked how he had been able to foretell an event that had just taken place, he said, “I said it. The Lord did it. And there’s an end to it.”

More comparators are needed from somewhere, however. One obvious one is the Coinneach Odhar or the Brahan Seer, a secular prophet who seems to have lived in the sixteenth century. And another is Columba or Calum Cille, a saint who lived one thousand years earlier.

Perhaps some day I will attempt to analyse the prophecies ascribed to the Brahan Seer. But this article, and my next two as well, belong to Calum Cille, if only because 9 June (four Sundays ago) was his feast-day, the day he died in Iona in A.D. 597, and 9 June 597 was also a Sunday, as Adomnán makes clear in his life of the saint. “This day in the Holy Scriptures is called the Sabbath, which means rest,” says Columba. “And this day is indeed a Sabbath to me, for it is the last day of my present laborious life, and on it I rest after the fatigues of my labours; and this night at midnight, which commences the solemn Lord’s Day, I will, according to the sayings of Scripture, go the way of our fathers.”

And so he did. When the bell tolled at midnight, says Adomnán, Columba went into the church ahead of the other monks; for a moment as he entered it it filled with light, but then his attendant Diarmaid had to feel his way in the darkness to where he lay before the altar. The other monks came in with their lights, and burst into lamentations at the sight of their dying abbot. He opened his eyes and looked around, seemingly full of joy at the coming of angels. Diarmaid helped the saint raise his right hand to make the sign of blessing upon his monks, after which his breathing ceased.

That then is no. 97 of the 99 prophecies of Calum Cille described by St Adomnán in his ‘Vita Columbae’ or ‘Life of Columba’, which he wrote in Latin about the year 690. The ‘Life’ is a frustrating work for historians, but a goldmine for the student of prophecy, for it is not a chronological account of the great man’s life at all, but a collection of his prophecies and miracles, and indeed many of his miracles include prophecies as well.

Why did Adomnán adopt this method? Well, it may be that he had something to hide. Columba, like Paul, had been a worldly man and a sinner. He was of noble birth, and could have been king of his own people, the Uí Néill of Ulster. The bringing of Christianity to the Picts, the consolidation of the young Gaelic kingdom of Dalriada, the creation of a great new family of monasteries across Ireland and Scotland — these mighty achievements of his were work not for some Christlike monk but for a statesman.

Recent tradition remembers him as a healer, a protector of cattle, a battler, a curser. Bede, a careful English historian who was a later contemporary of Adomnán (673-735), wrote intriguingly of him, “Whatsoever he was himself, this we know for certain, that he left successors renowned for their continency, their love of God, and observance of monastic rules.” Bede would have been thinking here of such things as Adomnán’s biblical scholarship and of the scriptorium whose crowning achievement, a little after Bede’s time, seems to have been the great Book of Kells, or ‘Leabhar Í Chaluim Chille’ as we may call it in Gaelic.

So Adomnán set out to write a work which would demonstrate his founder’s sanctity by concentrating on prophecies and miracles. That is his method; mine is to take everything he says at face value and deal with it as it stands, no matter how far-fetched. And having counted and categorised the prophecies, I must say that compared with the Petty Seer and Tormad Sona they offer a wonderfully large and varied sample. Of the 99 prophecies, I find that 55 cannot be explained rationally; that is, like Tormad Sona’s, they seem to provide evidence of genuine psychic power. Of the other 44, either (a) they can be explained rationally, like the Petty Seer’s prophecies, or (b)

they lack corroboration and thus consist of an unsubstantiated claim to prophetic power. Either way, it is these 44 prophecies that are more likely to point towards historical truth.

The 55 I will deal with next month; the 44 break down like this. In twenty cases, the saint could have obtained information which allowed him to make a confident prediction — for example, a lookout or spy telling him of some imminent arrival at Iona. Good eyesight would have helped too. I hesitate to suggest that he used a spyglass, although the miniaturist marvels of ‘Leabhar Ì Chaluim Chille’ suggest a knowledge of optics.

In six cases the saint could himself have secured the fulfilment of the prophecy. In five cases the saint’s knowledge of an individual’s prospects could be gleaned from medical diagnosis, perhaps with the help of the confessional. In three cases the so-called prophecies are really just political speeches, and in one case what Adomnán calls a prophecy is in fact a command to do something in seven years’ time, which is duly obeyed.

In nine cases the prophecy — or the seeing of some faraway event, which counts for our purposes as prophecy — is uncorroborated, and thus cannot be allowed to stand. Mostly this is because Adomnán simply fails to state whether the thing prophesied, or seen from afar, has actually happened or not. One case is more complicated: Columba sees a monk called Lugbe reading a book and says, “Take care, my son, take care, for I think the book you are reading is about to fall into a vessel full of water.” Adomnán omits to say whether this is because there is a vessel of water nearby, or because the saint has had a premonition of a freak accident. What he does say is that the young man gets up soon after to perform some duty, forgets the word of the blessed man, and the book, which he is holding carelessly under his arm, suddenly falls into the water-pot.

I will finish this article by citing one or two examples of how rationalism can solve the mystery of 35 of the 44 prophecies, provided we are willing to believe that, like the Petty Seer and many much greater men, Calum Cille was a ruthless manipulator of minds. My next article will attempt to deal with the six cases in which the saint could himself have secured the fulfilment of the prophecy, and the five cases in which his knowledge of an individual’s prospects could be gleaned from medical diagnosis or the confessional.

But first, two in the ‘information’ category. One day Baithene (his successor as Abbot of Iona) came to him and said, “I want one of the brothers to look over the psalter I have written and correct it with me.”

“Why give us this trouble without any cause?” said Calum Cille. “In that psalter of yours there is not one superfluous letter, and nothing missing except the one vowel I.” When the whole psalter was read over, says Adomnán, what the saint said was found to be true; what he does not say is that the Abbot’s confidential secretary, or the Abbot himself, may have been quietly proofreading Baithene’s work in the long vigils of the night.

Now a different sort of example. The saint is travelling with some of his monks ‘beyond the dorsal ridge of Britain’, possibly in what we would now call Perthshire. They come to a small village among deserted fields, on the banks of a river where it flows into a loch (Killin perhaps, or some such place). There they stop for the night, but just as they are falling asleep he calls out, “Go right away and quickly bring here the boat you left on the other side of the river, and put it in a house near us.”

Little need for prophetic foresight here — clearly the saint is spooked by the deserted fields, and has been lying awake worrying. The monks do as they are told, but as soon as they fall asleep again Calum Cille rouses Diarmaid and says, “Go outside and see what has happened to the village where you had left your boat.”

Diarmaid sees the whole village on fire, and when he comes in with the bad news, Calum Cille tells the monks the name of the ‘rancorous foe’ who has burned the houses. Prophetic knowledge? Hardly. Just good leadership, a seasoned traveller who can read the signs, and who keeps himself sensibly informed when in hostile territory but sees no need to worry his men. Perhaps he has native scouts, and speaks Pictish better than his monks, who may be fresh recruits from Ireland.

Three of the so-called prophecies are political speeches. In one, he predicts the discord that will arise amongst the Irish churches concerning the date of Easter; anyone who knew that Rome used a different calculation could have seen that one coming, and it would have been more impressive had he predicted the year (663-4) and the place (Whitby) in which it would come to a head. In another, after consecrating Aidan king of Dalriada, he tells him to tell his children to tell their children, their grandchildren and their posterity that if they ever turn against Calum Cille and his Irish relatives they will be disgraced in the sight of God and ‘their foes will be greatly strengthened against them’; this, says Adomnán, has been fulfilled in the battle of Magh Rath (637), in which Aidan’s Dál Riada attacked Columba’s Uí Néill ‘without the slightest provocation’, and since then ‘they have been trodden down by strangers’ — but then, it was always more of a threat than a prophecy.

Finally for this week, Columba’s speech about Iona. “Small and mean though this place is,” he said, “it will be held in great and unusual honour, not only by Irish kings and people, but also by the rulers of foreign and barbarous nations, and by their subjects. Even the saints of other churches will regard it with no common reverence.” This prediction, which is still true, was a risk he could afford to take. If Iona was not revered, who would remember Columba, and if no-one remembered Columba, who would remember his prophecies?

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