

The Rhymer Reconstructed

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

A FEW weeks ago, under the title ‘The Tara of Scotland’, I introduced the enigmatic Eildon Hills, which lie here in the Borders where I live. Now I want to concentrate on the most famous son of the Eildons district, Thomas the Rhymer.

For centuries, until Alexander Mackenzie told the world of the Brahan Seer, Thomas was Scotland’s most celebrated prophet. His sayings were on every Lowlander’s lips, chapbooks of them sold like hot cakes, and his impact on Gaelic consciousness appears to have been greater than Malcolm Canmore, Wallace, Bruce, or any other medieval figure from south of the Highland Line.

To recap, the conclusions of my Eildons article were roughly as follows.

(1) Thomas is said to have met ‘the Queen of the Fairies’ and to have been brought by her under the Eildons to a place that was “not in heaven, paradise, hell, purgatory, or on middle earth [i.e. this world], but another country”. In other words he was in the Celtic otherworld.

(2) All our Gaelic traditions about the otherworld, and all the Irish literature about it, demonstrate that it is a place in which time does not exist. So Hallowe’en, the Celtic New Year, when this ‘middle earth’ of ours mingles with the otherworld, offers a crack in time during which one can successfully peer into the future. That is why a mortal being who had lived in the otherworld was expected to have knowledge of the future.

(3) Thomas’s high status as a prophet was gained from his reputed visit to the otherworld; he could not have gained that high status in the first place if the Eildons had not had a reputation for magic second to none, a reputation as powerful to all of Scotland, perhaps, as Tara was to Ireland.

(4) The evidence of archaeology, folklore and tradition suggests that Eildon Hill North was a major ritual site for the Cumbric (Welsh-speaking) tribes of the district between the two Roman walls. It points to periodic inter-tribal gatherings having taken place there under druidic authority at what we now call *Lùnastal*, the time around 1 August named after the god Lugh. (Mr Alex Woolf tells me that it is now thought that Lugh gave his name to Lothian, which in those days included the district now called the Borders.)

Thomas the Rhymer was a real person who was born at Erceldoune in western Berwickshire (now Earlston, a few miles north of the Eildons) about 1225. So what I have to do here is to bridge the gap between the end of paganism and Thomas’s lifetime, and to try to guess at the linguistic milieu of the Erceldoune area in his day.

The gap is of six hundred years. The Romans’ Scottish capital was Trimontium at the foot of the Eildons, halfway along the road which they had built (Dere Street) between their two great walls. Their empire was nominally Christian, but when they finally abandoned Britain about 410 AD, there was a reversion to paganism (or primalism, as we prefer to call it nowadays).

From that point on the Cumbrian tribes were beset by Gaels from the west, encroaching from Ireland, and Anglians from the east, encroaching from Germany. After the battle of Degsastan in 602 the line could no longer be held. Angles poured across the Tweed and settled all the low-lying lands of Lothian east of Dere Street, leaving only the hills and valleys to the Cumbrians, and turning the area into the northern province of their Northumbrian kingdom.

That put the Eildons and Erceldoune right on the border between speakers of Anglian and Cumbric (English and Welsh, if you like). But the Gaels were not long in coming. We can safely put the beginning of the end of pagan practices on Eildon Hill North at 635 AD, when Aidan of Iona established a monastery at Old Melrose, hard by Trimontium at the foot of the hill. The Iona monks had been invited by the Northumbrian king to place Christianity and Latin learning on a proper footing in his territory, and Aidan did it by setting up monasteries at Lindisfarne (which he called *Inis Medcoit*) with daughter houses at Melrose, Hexham, Whitby and Coldingham.

The first prior at Old Melrose was Eata, to be followed by Boisil and Cuthbert. The Gaelic-speaking Boisil was, I suspect, the man who extinguished the last druidic flame on Eildon Hill North, since his name is attached to a *Lùnastal*-time fair at St Boswells to this very day. He died in 661 or 664.

In a crumbly sort of way, like the much later Highland line, Dere Street seems to have remained the linguistic border between Cumbric and Anglian down to about 1200. That, at least, seems to be true of the northern Borders; in the hills to the south the Anglians seem to have pushed west at an early stage to the earthwork known as the Catrail. Until 1018 Cumbric had had the political prop behind it of the Cumbric-speaking kingdom of Strathclyde, although by then Strathclyde was infested with Gaelic-speaking settlers advancing from the west, bursting with all the self-righteous confidence that their spiritual leader, the ayatollah-like Calum Cille, had bequeathed them.

In 843 the Gaels overran the Picts and entered Fife. In 1018 they overran Strathclyde. In the same year they smashed the Northumbrians at Carham and captured Lothian. Gaelic warriors, wild men unconnected with the church, appeared in the Border hills and took for themselves the kind of grazing land that they liked.

The evidence for the situation in the Borders consists of names in charters and on the map. A list of men in the area of Peebles (where I live) in 1200 includes Gaelic names like Gille Crìost, Gille Moire, Crìstein, and Gille Caluim the smith; Cumbric names in Gwas (*gille*, servant) like Qeschutbrit (St Cuthbert’s Servant), Cospatricius, and Cosmungho; and Anglian names like Adam son of Edolf, Randulf of Meggett and Mihhyn Brunberd. Between 1100 and 1189 the village I know as Eddleston (I pass through it every day on my way to work) went from having a Welsh name, Penteiacob (‘Headland of James’s House’), to a partly Gaelic one, Gillemorestun, to an Anglian one, Edulfston.

Further east, Gaelic supplanted not Cumbric but Anglian. At Jedburgh the Gaels coined the name *Bun Jedward* (Bonjedward, ‘the Foot of Jedward’, misunderstanding the River Jed as the Jedward). Where the Gala meets the Tweed they called the place *Inbhir Wedale* ‘the Confluence of Wedale’. And finally, the hills west of Earlston have Gaelic names in them like *Gleann Dearg* (Glendearg) and *Garbh Allt* (Garvald).

I will try to make a plausible picture out of scraps like these. In Thomas's youth we can guess that Erceldoune is full of Gaelic speakers every market day. Their language is colourful and full of life. Now they are among the poorest of the poor, and becoming despised. As for Cumbric, it has been dying since 1018. Neither in Erceldoune nor even in Strathclyde itself has Thomas ever met a Cumbric-speaker younger than 50 years old. But they speak it quietly between themselves in a dignified way, and still tell stories of when the entrance to the otherworld lay in Eildon Hill North.

Who, then, if not the Gael or the Cumbrians, are the masters these days, in the 1230s and 40s as Thomas grows up? Not the Anglian peasants who trudge from the fields with mud caked on their feet. No, when the Gaelic warriors took Edinburgh and all that came with it they had fatally overstretched themselves. They had gained a united Scotland but without the means to hold it together. So since Maol-Caluim Ceanmhor's time French-speaking Normans — technocrats and thugs alike, two things that the Gael are not — have been 'helping' the kings develop the New Territories in the Lowlands and Borders. Castles, towns, burgesses, trades, guilds. Voluminous sea-trade. Exports, imports. Everything in writing. No property rights recognised unless you have a bit of sheepskin as proof. Never mind who your relations are. De-so-and-so is boss now. And to back it all up, cheap organised labour in the form of huge new monasteries on the Continental model, like that of the Cistercians at Melrose, begun in 1136. Jobs for all (at a price).

Erceldoune is a major focus of this activity. A maelstrom. Anglian, Gaelic, French, Flemish, Latin and even the odd snatch of Cumbric can all be heard in the streets, though (as I have said) the Gaelic-speakers are getting poorer, and the Cumbric-speakers older.

Into this, then, is born Thomas the Rhymer. Actually Rhymer seems to be his surname. There are other Rhymeres in Berwickshire (as there are still ten Rimmers in the Lothian and Borders phone-books). While still a relatively young man he witnesses a charter like this: "Testibus domino Oliuero Abbate de Driburgh, domino Willelmo de Burudim, milite Hugone de Perisby tunc vicecomite de Rokysburgh, Willelmo de Hatteley, Thome Rymor de Ercildune & aliis." (The charter says that Peter de Haga or Haig of Bemersyde had promised to give ten salmon each year to the Chapel of St Cuthbert at Old Melrose, and is having it changed to half a stone of beeswax instead.) And late in life, on 2 November 1294 he (or his father) is called Thomas Rymour again, this time when he (or his son) conveys his lands in Erceldoune to the Trinitarian monks of Soutra: "Omnibus has literas visuris vel audituris Thomas de Ercildoun filius et heres Thome Rymour de Ercildoun, Salutem in domino."

There is no suspicion that the name Rymour is other than it seems. We may conclude that not only is Thomas a rhymer in his own right, but that he comes from a family of hereditary rhymeres, people whose job it is to put things into rhyme to make them memorable. He is literate and well respected, and his father may well have been Thomas of Erceldoune before him. It is a pedigree which could spring equally from any or all of the four cultural traditions of the area, Cumbric, Anglian, Gaelic, Norman. The name Thomas is linguistically neutral, and so is Rhymer (French *rimeur*, English *rhymer*, Welsh *rhimwr*), with the slight qualification that in Gaelic he is *Tòmas Reumhair*, and that this word *reumhair* comes to mean an idle wanderer rather than a rhymer — but then, that development is probably thanks to Thomas's own reputation.

I suspect that Thomas is of mixed parentage — Anglian father, Gaelic mother, let's say. Whatever his own background, as an educated man he must know French and Latin, for commerce he has to know Anglian, and to speak to the servants he also needs a smattering of at least one of the two Celtic languages, probably Gaelic. My own mother and her brother are like that, for they were brought up in Alexandria in Egypt, and in their case for French, Latin, Anglian and Gaelic you can read French, Italian, English and Arabic, with a little Greek on the side. (My mother once translated in Glasgow Sheriff Court for a Greek sailor accused of rape, and made heavy weather of it because as a well-brought-up girl she didn't *know* the Greek for rape. "Never again," she said. And she meant it.)

I have been reading and thinking a great deal about Thomas the Rhymer lately, and I see him as a scholar who had the curiosity to seek out the last speakers of Cumbric, to listen to their stories of Eildon Hill and the otherworld, and to put them into rhyme in his own languages. Within a few years of his death his world was changed utterly. In response to Edward's attacks the Wars of Independence forged Scotland into a united nation of Gaels and Anglians under firm Norman leadership, in which awkward and potentially divisive forces like the Norse, Pictish and Cumbric languages were rapidly consigned to oblivion.

I believe it is that connection with Cumbric, combined with sudden national crisis, that made Thomas a famous seer. He may have had the second sight in any case, thanks for example to a Gaelic-speaking mother. I don't imagine he ever pretended to have entered the otherworld himself. That was a fame that posterity seems to have thrust upon him, in the form of 'The Romance of Thomas the Rhymer', of which it has been said, "The work cannot be of earlier date than 1400, and even if founded on an old Scottish romance, the story itself is of much earlier date than the time of Thomas of Ercildoune." I agree with that.

People of Thomas's day had some justification for imagining that he had spent seven years in Fairyland. He kept disappearing! But then, that was in the nature of his calling. Next time I will investigate precisely how that Gaelic name of his, *Tòmas Reumhair*, came to mean 'Thomas the Idle Wanderer'.

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