

## How did Thomas become the messiah?

### The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

IN my last article I showed how it used to be believed in the Highlands that Thomas the Rhymer, *Tòmas Reumhair*, would one day sally forth with his cavalry from where he sleeps in Dumbuck, or in Tomnahurich, to save the Gael in a great battle, and that that battle would take place on the River Clyde.

Now, it is difficult to see why that should be if he were not regarded as a Gael himself.

In her edition of Alexander Mackenzie's 'The Prophecies of the Brahan Seer', Elizabeth Sutherland offers an explanation. She claims: "The 'Prophecies of True Thomas', published in 1615 by Andro Mart of Edinburgh, was sold all over the Highlands and so taken to heart by the people of Inverness that they began to associate him with the fairies of Tomnahurich."

This statement requires a big leap of the imagination and does not sound right to me. Admittedly, though, the book she refers to had quite an impact. It was actually first printed in 1603, with this title-page: "The Whole Prophecie of Scotland, England and Some part of France and Denmark. Prophesied by Mervellous Merling, Beid, Berthlingtoun, Thomas Rymour, Waldhauē, Eltraīne, Banester, and Sibbilla, all according in one, containing many strange and mervellous things. Printed at Edinburgh by Robert Waldegrave, Printer to the King's Most Excellent Majesty."

It was reprinted in 1610 by Andro Hart (not Mart!), this being the edition known to Sir Walter Scott. Eventually, rather like Old Moore's Almanac, it began to reappear in cheap 'chapbook' editions, hawked by peddlars from farm to farm, village to village and town to town, in the Highlands as well as the Lowlands no doubt.

I have a typical one in front of me at the moment. On the title page, the name of Thomas Rhymer has been extracted from the others (and put in a splendid large black-letter font), like this: "The **WHOLE Prophecies OF Scotland, England, France, Ireland, and Denmark**; Prophesied by **Thomas Rymer**, Marvellous **MERLING, BEID, BERLINGTON, WALDHAVE, ELTRAINE, BANESTER, and SYBILLA**. *All agreeing in one; both in Latin Verse, and in Scottish Meeter*. **Containing many Strange and Marvellous Matters, not of before read or heard**. COMPARED WITH THE BEST EDITIONS. **EDINBURGH**: Printed by JAMES WATSON, One of the King's Printers. 1718."

Now there is nothing in these books to suggest that Thomas is a Gael or a warrior, or that he would emerge from a hill to save the Gael or anyone else. His prophecies are about battles, certainly, and contain much obscure heraldry, but they are about Scottish and not Gaelic nationhood, and the only locations given are "Pinkin Cleugh" and "the water men calls Tyne".

*Beside a loch upon a lee,  
They shal assemble upon a day,  
And many doughty men shal die,  
Few in quiet shal be found away.  
Our Scottish king shal come full keen,  
The red Lyon beareth he:  
A feddered arrow sharp I ween,  
Shal make him wink, and warre to see,  
Out of the field he shal be led,  
When he is bloody and wo for blood;  
Yet to his men then shal he say,  
For Gods love turn you again,  
And give yon Southern folk a fray:  
Why should I lose: the right is mine,  
My date is not to die this day.*

The text ends with a compliment to Queen Mary's son James VI, who succeeded to the English throne in its year of first publication, 1603:

*Then to the beirn [warrior] could I say,  
Where dwells thou; Or in what country:  
Or who shal rule the Isle Britain,  
From the North to the South sea?  
The French wife shal bear the Son,  
Shal rule all Britain to the sea:  
That of the Bruces blood shal come,  
As near as the ninth degree.  
I framed fast, what was his name?  
Whence that he came? from what Country?  
In Erslingtown, I dwell at hame,  
Thomas Rymer men call me.*

There was clearly something special about Thomas. His identity as warrior messiah, as Gael, and as wandering horse-dealer was a unique combination. Yet there is none of this in the published 'Whole Prophecies' except for the description of Thomas as *beirn*. It's my belief that, far from the people of Inverness being induced by the book to 'associate Thomas with the fairies of Tomnahurich', the matter was if anything the other way round: by 1603 the people of Scotland had developed quite a clear picture of Thomas based upon the historical figure who had died 300 years before and upon stories circulating about him in Scots and Gaelic; the idea of Scotland being saved in battle by a Gaelic warrior messiah was anathema to James VI, and his printer, Waldegrave, duly obliged by turning out a piece of counter-propaganda that showed the 'French wife's son' firmly in control.

Is it possible, then, that the idea of the Gaelic messiah originates in the fifteenth-century ballad known as 'The Romance and Prophecies of Thomas of Erceldoune'? It exists in several manuscript versions, brought together under that title by James A. H. Murray in 1875 (and now again in print thanks to Llanerch Publishers of Wales). If I rattle off Murray's page-headings to the poem, it will give a pretty good idea of its contents. Here they are.

"Thomas, lying on Huntley Banks, sees the lady riding by. Her palfrey, harness, and attire, shine with gold and gems. Thomas takes her for the Queen of Heaven, and runs to meet her. He does her reverence, she tells him she is of 'another country'. He proffers her love, from which she tries to dissuade him. Through compliance with his desire all her beauty is marred. Thomas is appalled at the transformation, and knows not what to do.

"She bids him take leave of sun and moon, and go from earth with her. They enter under Eildon Hill, and travel three days in darkness. Thomas is faint with hunger, and would fain eat forbidden fruit. He is shown the ways to paradise, purgatory, hell, and to her own country. How he must behave, on reaching her country, and speak to none but the lady. The lady is restored to her former beauty, and they enter the castle. Here Thomas dwells 3 years amid revel, game, and minstrelsy.

"Thomas is suddenly bidden to return to earth, to escape seizure by a fiend. The lady brings him again to Eildon Tree, and bids him farewell. Thomas asks a token as a parting gift. He asks to hear some ferly [prophecy]; she predicts the ruin of the Baliols. She predicts the Battle of Halidon Hill. The Battle of Falkirk. Her greyhounds are impatient, and she again wishes to go.

"Entreated to stay, she predicts the Battle of Bannockburn. The death of Bruce, and usurpation of Edward Baliol. The Battle of Duplin and seizure of Perth. Coronation of David Bruce, and his invasion of England. David Bruce taken at Nevill's Cross, near Durham. David Bruce a prisoner in London. David Bruce ransomed with 'a certaine paye'. Robert Stewart King of Scotland; the Battle of Otterbourne. Douglas slain, and Hotspur taken prisoner. Thomas again detains the lady to tell him more ferly.

"She predicts the invasion of Scotland under Henry IV. The English go to war in France. A battle 'between Seton and the sea'. A battle at Gladsmoor. The lords who should come to that battle. How a bastard should come out of the west and become leader of all Britain. The last battle should be at Sandyford. The bastard should die in the Holy Land. The lady weeps for the woe that is to be.

"Thomas asks the fate of Black Agnes of Dunbar. The lady promises to meet Thomas again at Huntley Banks. She goes her way, leaving Thomas under the tree."

So the 'Romance' speaks of a bastard who comes out of the west (or 'forest' as some manuscripts have it), becomes leader of Britain, fights a last battle at a place called Sandyford, and dies in the Holy Land. It is clear that Thomas is not the bastard in question, but popular tradition may have placed him in the role. This is how the relevant section goes in the Lansdowne Manuscript:

*A basterd shall come out of the west,  
And there he shall wyne the gre;  
He shall bothe Est and west,  
And all the lond breton shall be.  
He shall in to Englund Ryde,  
Est and west in hys tyme;  
And holde A parlament of moche pryde,  
That never no parlament byfore was seyne.*

The battle at Sandyford has been identified by one scholar with Flodden, but it may well be that this is the battle placed by Highland tradition on the fords of Clyde at Glasgow. Here is how the Sloane Manuscript describes it.

*Thomas! Trowe that I the tell,  
That it be so, eueriche worde,  
Of a battell I shall the spell,  
That shalbe done at Sandyford:  
Ney the forde ther is a braye,  
And ney the braye ther is a well;  
A stone ther is, a lytell fraye,  
And so ther is, the sothe to tell.  
Thowe may trowe this, euery worde —  
Growand ther be okes three;  
That is called the Sandyford,  
Ther the laste battell done shalbe.*

That, then, could help explain (a) the warrior messiah and (b) his battle on the Clyde. The *third* part of Thomas's identity, as horse-dealer, is the part that may have its basis in historical fact, and can at least be traced to the sixteenth century. In London in 1584 one Reginald Scot published a book called 'The Discouerie of Witchcraft' in which he told the tale of Thomas Rhymer as the wandering horse-dealer whose knights slept beneath the hill. He set it in a place called Farran, clearly Foveran in Buchan, Gaelic *Fobharan* or *Fabharan* meaning 'little well', which lies at the heart of Thomas's 'cult' area in the north-east. Buchan was entirely Gaelic-speaking in Thomas's day.

Such things took a long time to get into print in Gaelic, however. The earliest full telling of the story in Gaelic that I can find dates from 1876. It was published by 'Diarmad' (Donald C. Macpherson from Bohuntin in Lochaber) in 'An Gaidheal', and sounds as if it dates from 1715. As for Gaelic verse, the earliest mention of Thomas that I can find is in a song by Iain Lom from 1646, but, as John MacInnes has remarked, "The prophecy of Thomas the Rhymer, cited by a number of poets from the seventeenth century onwards, and still current in oral tradition, [is] that one day the Gaels of Scotland will come into their own again. This formulation of the messianic hope of Gaelic nationalism, here firmly identified with Jacobitism, must have been already well-known before the Montrose wars gave it a new dynamic — Iain Lom refers to it casually as an established tradition."

It is to this use of Thomas in Jacobite propaganda that I will turn next time.

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