

A century of coded messages

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

FOR a hundred years and more, an alleged prophecy of Thomas the Rhymer was appealed to again and again by Gaelic poets on behalf of deposed Stuart kings and hopeful Stuart pretenders. What the prophecy appeared to say was that Scotland would be freed, and/or Britain united under Scottish kings, by a last great battle fought by the Gaels on the River Clyde.

The earliest such mention that I can find is in ‘Soraidh don Ghràmach’ by the great Lochaber poet Iain Lom. After fighting a brilliant campaign around the Highlands in 1644-5, the Marquis of Montrose and the MacDonald general Alastair mac Colla part company and Montrose is defeated at Philiphaugh on 13 September 1645. Montrose retreats to the Continent on 3 September 1646, and on 8 June 1647 Alastair mac Colla retreats to Ireland and is killed at Knocknass on 13 November. Alastair is still alive at this point, so the song can be dated to the period between June and November 1647.

*Nan tigeadh Montròs
Ann ar còmh dhail a dh'Éirinn
Le trì fichead long sgòdach
'S buill chòrcaich mar shréin orr',
Le 'm brataichibh sròil
Agus ordugh Rìgh Seurlas,
Thug an fhaistinn ud beò sinn
Mar dh'ordaich Tom Reumhair.*

(“If Montrose were to come / To join us in Ireland / With sixty rigged ships / And hemp ropes to bridle them, / With their banners of silk / And King Charles’s command, / That prophecy would revive us / As Tom Rhymer ordained.”) As the editor of Iain Lom’s poems (the late Annie Mackenzie) commented, considering that Charles I had just been surrendered to the English army and Royalist hopes were at a very low ebb, the poem strikes quite a note of optimism. But then, this is propaganda.

There is a very similar stanza in Iain Lom’s ‘Cumha Mhorair Hunnaidh’ of 1649, and given that these songs passed through oral tradition for over a century before being written down, it is impossible to know for sure if that is what the poet intended. Things had got steadily worse for the Royalists, culminating in King Charles’s execution at Whitehall on 13 January 1649. The Marquis of Huntly was executed in turn on 22 March, and in lamenting him, Iain Lom rebukes Charles II for his slowness in coming to claim his kingdom.

*Ach nan tigeadh Montròsa
Air chòrsa na h-Èireann,
Trì fichead sgùd lòdail
'S buill chòrcaich 'nan sréin riu,
Le 'n ceannbheartaibh òrbhuidh
Agus ordugh Rìgh Seurlas,
Thigeadh fàistinneachd beò oirnn
Mar thuirt Tòmas an Reumair.*

(“But if Montrose were to come / To the coast of Ireland, / Bringing sixty proud ships / With hemp ropes as their bridles, / With yellow gilt upperworks / And King Charles’s command, / A prophecy would come alive on us / As said Thomas the Rhymer.”) Montrose did come, on 12 April 1650, but not to Ireland, and not to fight a victorious battle on Clyde — he landed at Orkney, fought at Carbisdale, lost, was betrayed by MacLeod of Assynt, and was executed on 21 May.

When an old man, Iain Lom once again referred to Thomas. This was about 1692, in his ‘Òran air Rìgh Uilleam agus Banrigh Màiri’, and once again it appears to have been thoughts of the Gordons of Huntly, who probably brought Thomas north with them in the thirteenth century, that reminded him of the Rhymer. To the Duke of Gordon he says:

*Ma tha thu cruaidh air an raipeir
Seall air slacan a' ghleusaidh
Leis 'n do spìosadh mo sgròban
Mas fìor Tòmas an Reumair.*

(“If you’re fierce with the rapier / Look at the practice strokes / With which my scribbles are spiced / If Thomas Rhymer speaks true.”) It is a *dubhfhacal*, a dark word, and he ends the song with it, leaving the Duke to make of it what he can. But what he is doing, it seems to me, is reminding the Duke of the references to Thomas in his earlier works. If I have correctly interpreted *sgròban* as ‘scribbles’, the implication is that Iain Lom was writing his poems down — perhaps for the express purpose of sending them to the Duke.

It was not until 1715, however, that Jacobite hopes crystallised again. William and Mary had come and gone, Queen Anne too, the Scots parliament was lost, and a German was on the throne. Iain Lom was dead,

but a Clanranald poet, Iain Dubh mac Iain mhic Ailein, began his great rallying cry to the clans, ‘Òran nam Fineachan Gaidhealach’,

*Seo an aimsir an dearbhar
An tairgeanachd dhuinn.*

(“This is the time when the prophecy / Will be proven to us.”) It seemed to come true. Thousands flocked to the Jacobite Standard — emblazoned with the thistle, the arms of Scotland, and ‘No Union’ — on the Braes of Mar on 6 September, and in another version of the same song the prophecy was declared true.

*Seo an aimsir ’n do dhearbhadh
An targainteachd dhuinn.*

(“This is the time when the prophecy / Has been proven to us.”) Sileas na Ceapaich, meanwhile, encouraged the troops like this.

*Nuair a ruigeas sibh Lunnainn nan cleòc
’S a bheir sibh an fhàistinneachd beò,
 Bidh tomhas an t-sìoda
 Le ur boghannan rìomhach
Air an drochaid, ’s miltean fo ’r sgòd.*

(“When you reach London where people wear cloaks / And bring the prophecy to life, / The silk will be measured / By your fine bows on the bridge / With thousands under your garment.”) Whether she means thousands of people or thousands of pounds is left unclear. What she and Iain Dubh meant by ‘the prophecy’ is clear, however, for in one of her songs on the subsequent indecisive battle of Sheriffmuir, 13 November 1715, she sets it out unambiguously (I will quote the original next time): “Thomas says in his prophecy / That it’s the Gaels who will win the victory; / Every brow will be sweating blood / Fighting the fight at the river Clyde; / England will yield, though big be their strategy, / Seeking peace from the king who’s not with us just now.”

An rìgh tha uainn, the king who’s not with us just now. It was the Jacobite lament before and after Sheriffmuir, it was still the Jacobite lament in 1745. It must have given extra credibility to the Rhymer’s prophecy that that last great battle would be fought on Clyde, not by the king himself, but by ‘a bastard from out of the west’. Of course the story had grown up that the hero would be Thomas himself in the flesh, and in 1745 that allowed Allan Stewart, the tacksman-poet of Innerhadden in Rannoch, to promise the Highland warriors a form of life after death, rather like a Palestinian sheikh of today might incite the Hezbollah to a suicide mission.

*Mosglaihb uile, gach treunlaoch,
’S bithibh gleusta mar a b’ àbhaist,
Mar thràillean na dèanaibh géilleadh
Fhads bhios fuil ’nur féithean blàth;
Chuala mi a bhith leughadh
Bharr air Reumair iomadh fàidh
Gu bheil curaidhnean aig Seumas
Nì treubhantas an déidh bhith marbh.*

(“Awaken all, every warrior, / And be as quick as once you were, / Never yield like slaves / As long as blood’s warm in your veins; / I’ve heard that it’s been read / Of many seers as well as Rhymer / That James possesses champions / Who’ll do great deeds after death.”)

1745 was late, very late, for the Jacobites, which is I think why it was considered the last hope of the prophecy being fulfilled. Alastair mac Mhaighstir Alastair said:

*Si seo an aon bhliadhna chorr
Tha Tòmas ag innse gu beachd
Gum faigh sinn coinne gu leòr —
Biomaid beò an dòchas rag.*

(“This is the one remaining year / Of which Thomas tells with precision / That we’ll get battle aplenty — / Let’s live in earnest hope.”) The one truly awkward thing about the prophecy as it applied to Prince Charles was the ‘bastard’ tag, which is why, in response to a satire on the Prince by a Campbell woman who kept an inn in Oban, Alastair had to resort to some special pleading — after all, Charles could hardly be both ‘the bastard from out of the west’ and the heir to the throne.

*Tighinn chùramach Prionns’ Tearlach,
Ciallach bairlinn còmaid
Gun robh urra mhòr gun fhàillinn
Teachd gun dàil gu ’r còrsa;
S iomadh facal seadhail tàbhachdach*

*An cruaidh fhàistinn Thòmais
Bhon fhidriche nach cuspair àiridh
Do bhan-bhard taigh-òst' e.*

(“Of the secret coming of Prince Charles, / Meaningful’s the comet’s warning / That some unblemished aristocrat / Was fast approaching our shore; / There’s many a valid word of weight / In Thomas’s precise prophecy / From which it’s seen to be no deserved subject / For a poetess from a hostelry.”)

It is a measure of Thomas Rhymer’s messianic importance to the Gael that practically all of the quotations in this article form the beginning or the end of a song. The end of a praise-poem was traditionally reserved for prayer, and Thomas was clearly being evoked instead of Christ. This is true of the final stanza of John MacCodrum’s ‘Moladh Chloinn Domhnaill’, which dates from about 1760, when Jacobite hopes were all but dead. He praises Clan Donald and then their allies, and mention of the Frasers brings him at last to Tomnahurich in Fraser territory, where Thomas sleeps with his cavalry.

*Buidheann fhuilteach ghlan nan geurlann,
Thigeadh réisimeid nan Leòdach,
Thigeadh réisimeid nan Niallach
Le loingeis lionmhor ’s le seòltaibh;
Foirbeisich ’s Frisealaich dh’éireadh
'S thigeadh Clann Reubhair an ordugh —
An uair a dhùisgeadh fir na h-Iubhraich,
Cò thigeadh air tùs ach Tòmas?*

(“The fierce noble warband of the sharp blades, / The MacLeod regiment, would come, / There would come the MacNeil regiment / With numerous fleet bedecked in sails; / Forbeses and Frasers would arise / And the Rhymer’s Children would form in ranks — / When Tomnahurich’s men awoke, / Who’d be at their head but Thomas?”)

It is the last of a century and more of coded messages. It means of course: “There is one more battle to come. It will be fought on Clyde. The Gael will come into his own. Guma fada buan Clann Domhnaill.”

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