

Thomas's prophecies (1)

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

THIS column is about concepts of time — how it was looked at, named, measured — and perhaps the ultimate time-concept is prophecy.

The prophecies attached to the name of Thomas the Rhymer provide a good example. There is no document written and signed by Thomas during his lifetime and saying “I prophesy such-and-such”, although there *is* a story dating to 1286 which has the ring of truth about it. Elaborate verse prophecies exist in manuscript and printed versions, none of them dating as far back as Thomas's time. In addition, about a hundred short scraps of verse have been rescued from folklore, preserved in written sources at various times over several centuries; most of these are in Scots, a few in Gaelic. Some of these prophecies have clearly been fulfilled, the more circumstantial of them having no doubt been made up after the event had taken place! Others have not, to my knowledge, been fulfilled. So all of them represent voices speaking through time in one direction or another.

In this article and the next I will present a chronological series of Thomas's ‘prophetic events’ selected from the traditional rather than the literary record, beginning with the incident of 19 March 1286 that brought him to fame.

*Woe to the morrow,
A day of dule and sorrow.*

According to medieval historians such as Bellenden, the Earl of March asks Thomas what the weather will be like next day. Thomas replies, “On the morrow, afore noun, sall blow the gretest wynd that ever was heard afore in Scotland.” Next day it is calm, so the Earl sends for Thomas and rebukes him. Thomas says little except, “Noun is not yet gane.” At that moment a man comes to the gate with dreadful news. King Alexander has fallen over a cliff near Kinghorn and is dead, leaving as sole heir his three-year-old granddaughter in Norway — the event that is to lead to decades of war with England. Says Thomas: “Yone is the wynd that sall blaw to the gret calamity and truble of Scotland.”

Of Bannockburn in 1314 (a few years after his death) he is said to have said:

*The burn o' breid
Sall rin fu' reid.*

The record of a sixteenth-century witch trial in Aberdeen suggests that Thomas declared that he would

*Seik his meit
Afore he deit.*

‘Meit’ is for ‘meet’, I think, referring to his being reunited with the queen of the otherworld. The trial was of a certain Andro Mann, accused of deriving his power to cure all sorts of sickness ‘except stane deid’ from the ‘Queen of Elphin’. Mann confessed that among the company he had met in Fairyland, and would meet again, were ‘the King that deit at Flowdown and Thomas Rymour’.

Now to three sayings ascribed to Thomas by the Rev. James Fraser of Kirkhill near Inverness in the seventeenth century.

*Betuixt Arr, Both, and the See
Manny a corp shall burried be.*

This ‘ambiguous prophesy’, he says, was ‘fulfilled and discovered’ by the Battle of Auldearn, 9 May 1645. It was fought over two miles of ground between Arr to the south and Boath to the north; from there, the victorious Highland troops under the Marquis of Montrose and Alastair mac Colla pursued General Hurry's covenanting army west to Nairn and the sea. Within three years, however, the position was reversed.

*Two headless Lords in Forth shall meet —
The one cannot the other greet.*

King Charles I was beheaded at Whitehall on 30 January 1649. Others, including the Duke of Hamilton, followed him to the scaffold. “That Scotland might not come short of Westminster trophies,” says Fraser caustically, “they set up their shembles in Edinburgh.” The principal victim was George Gordon, Marquis of Huntly, head of the family served by Thomas 400 years before. “He is carried out to the scaffold in his sick cloathes, and execut in the open streets, to the galling greefe of all Christians concernd; yet dyed a resolut royalist. His corps were coffind and carried over the Firth of Forth to be interr'd at Huntlye. Meantime, Duke Hamiltons corpes being transported out of England to his interment in Scotland, the two berges or barks met closse in the Firth; here was a providence to fulfill Thomas Rithmer his prophesie now discovered and applied.”

*Visa la fin
On an ouler tree green
Shall by many be seen.*

This, says Fraser, foretold the arrival of the Marquis of Montrose in Edinburgh in May 1650 after his betrayal by Neil Macleod of Assynt. By order of the covenanting parliament he was bound in a high seat on the back of a cart driven

by the hangman, and thus brought up through a 'vast croud' from the Netherbow to the Tolbooth. "*Visa la fin*, look to the end, is Montross or Grahm's motto; and this cart was made of green owler, alder timber which hapened to be brought in, newly cut, to the marcat place, and there sold."

There are many prophecies on specific families and their estates, particularly from Thomas's principal 'cult' areas, the Borders and the north-east.

*Betide, betide, whate'er betide,
Haig shall be Haig of Bemersyde.*

In his 'Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border', Sir Walter Scott writes of Zerubbabel Haig, 22nd laird of Bemersyde. "The grandfather of the present proprietor of Bemersyde (1804) had twelve daughters before his lady brought him a male heir. The common people trembled for the credit of their favourite soothsayer. The late Mr Haig was at length born and their belief in the prophecy confirmed beyond the shadow of doubt."

*When there's an eagle in Pennan
There will be a Baird in Auchmeddan.*

In the 1840s, the writer of the 'New Statistical Account' for the parish of Aberdour has this to say: "At one time there was a pair of eagles that regularly nested and brought forth their young in the rocks of Pennan; but according to the tradition of the country, when the late Earl of Aberdeen purchased the estate from the Bairds, the former proprietors, the eagles disappeared, in fulfilment of a prophecy by Thomas the Rymour. But the most remarkable circumstance, and what certainly appears incredible, is that when Lord Haddo, eldest son of the third Earl of Aberdeen, married Miss Christian Baird of New Byth, the eagles returned to the rocks, and remained until the estate passed into the hands of the Hon. William Gordon, when they again fled, and have not since been seen in the country."

*Of Kelso Kirk true is't:
It will fa' when it is fu'est.*

This brings us to about 1774. Scott, writing in 1804, says: "At a very crowded sermon about thirty years ago, a piece of lime fell from the roof of the church. The alarm, for the fulfilment of the words of the seer, became universal; and happy were they who were nearest the door of the predestined edifice. The church was in consequence deserted, and has never since had an opportunity of falling on a full congregation."

*When the Heron leaves the tree
The Laird o' Gight shall landless be.*

Back to the Gordons. The Bog of Gight in Aberdeenshire was known to Iain Lom as *Bog na Gaoithe*. Around the 1770s a number of herons had their nests in a wood there on the banks of a loch called the Hagberry Pot. Eventually the herons flew over to the neighbouring estate of Haddo. When Lord Haddo was informed of it he said: "Let the birds come and do them no harm, for the lands will soon follow!" And so they did. The estate of the Gordons of Gight was sold about 1780.

*At Gight three men a violent death shall dee,
And after that the lands shall lie in lea.*

Lord Haddo met his death in 1791 on the Green of Gight by being thrown from his horse. Then a servant from his home farm was killed in a similar way. Soon after this a labourer began the work of pulling down the old walls at Gight so that the land could be turned into lea (pasture). "Thomas the Rymour made a mistak' for aince," he said. Then the wall fell and crushed him to death.

*Brig o' Balgownie, black's your wa' —
Wi' a wife's ae son and a mare's ae foal
Down ye shall fa'.*

The poet George Gordon, Lord Byron (1788-1824), paused a moment for reflection before crossing the bridge, being himself the only son of the last heiress of these same Gordons of Gight. Given the sort of man he was — wit, man of action, rebel against convention who encouraged a legend of wildness, evil, and debauchery to grow up about his name, even to the extent of madness and incest — he probably hoped that it would fall down there and then.

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