

Thomas's prophecies (2)

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

As I showed last time, Thomas Rhymer became a famous prophet when the world around him began to collapse very quickly. That particular period of national insecurity lasted from 1286 to 1314. But prophets of all kinds have always been needed to analyse change and cope with uncertainty. It is no surprise that government propagandists set to work manufacturing prophecies in Thomas's name from the time of his death (about 1297) to 1314, and again at the Union of the Crowns in 1603.

It is also no surprise that most of the traditional prophecies that exist in Thomas's name have to do with specific landed families, their castles, their houses, their estates; with battles; and with the more extreme kinds of natural phenomena, such as floods. Such things formed the parameters of existence in times when social and cultural change was so slow as to be imperceptible from generation to generation, and few people ever stepped beyond the bounds of their native parish. To this older world, albeit marginally, belongs:

*A horse sall gang on Carolside brae
Till the red girth gaw his sides in twae.*

Carolside or Crawhillside is near Lauder in Berwickshire, Thomas's own country, but the prophecy is of famine.

From about the time of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars the prophecies seem to serve as an index of social change. Suddenly the world is bigger than Crawhillside or the Brig o' Balgownie, and stays that way; from now on most of the prophecies that people recall to each other are of the kind that apply pretty equally over a huge area. Chronologically then, we can start with:

*Atween Craigcross and Eildon Tree
Is a' the safety that shall be.*

It sounds as if it refers to medieval 'girth' or sanctuary of the Abbey of Melrose, but Sir Walter Scott tells us that it was often repeated in the Border counties during the early years of the French revolutionary war, when invasion was regarded as imminent and rumours of the cruelty of the French began to circulate. "In the south of Scotland," says Robert Chambers in his 'Popular Rhymes of Scotland', "this prophecy then obtained universal credence; and the tract of country alluded to was well surveyed, and considered by many wealthy persons, anxious to save their goods and lives, as the place to which they would probably fly for refuge 'in case of the French coming!'" There were variations: Craighouse for Craigcross, for example (not that it altered the geography much), or in Galloway:

*A' the safety there shall be
Shall be atween Criffel and the sea.*

Also from Thomas's heartland, and also with wide implications in its day, was:

*There sall a stane doun Leader come
Will mak a rich father but a poor son.*

The stone in question was limestone. In the heyday of agricultural improvement around 1800, carts without number came over Soutra with bags of crushed lime from the quarries and kilns of the Lothians, but the effect of the milkwhite miracle was to boost the soil for a generation and impoverish it thereafter. Limestone areas all over Scotland benefited for a while; Lismore, for example, which I visited for the first time the other week, became known as *eilean uaine an aoil*, the green isle of lime, and I was shown some of the disused limekilns which lie scattered around the island. For thirty years to 1832 there was even a Catholic seminary there, attracted by those selfsame economic opportunities presented by lime-burning.

'Improvement' brings us to the Clearances. To Thomas, at least on the mainland, are ascribed the words, *Cuiridh claigeann na caorach an crann á feum*. "The sheep's skull will put the plough out of use." There is a variation, *Cuiridh claigeann na caorach an crann-àraidh air an fhàradh*. "The sheep's skull will put the plough on the ladder (shelf)." Without giving the original Gaelic, Chambers quotes a farther variation: "The teeth of the sheep shall lay the plough on the shelf." In the Western Isles such prophecies were ascribed to the Brahan Seer. Thomas is also supposed to have said:

*Bidh Albainn 'na criosan geala
'S meall òir ann am bun gach glinne.*

('Scotland will be in white bands / With a heap of gold at the bottom of every glen.') By which he is thought to have meant the spread of roads, towns and villages and the depopulation of the countryside. To him, too, is ascribed: *Thig a' mhuir deas air a' mhuir tuath*. "The south sea will come upon the north sea." The Caledonian Canal?

The Canal was begun in 1803 and opened to traffic in 1822, but not completed until 1847, so I have got a little ahead of my next prediction, which is completely local and is mainly of interest because it marks the most northerly outpost of Thomas's cult. In his 'Scenes and Legends of the North of Scotland' Hugh Miller tells of a prophecy of Thomas's which focuses on the old castle of Cromarty, built by a Norman called William de Monte Alto (later Mowat) when he became first Sheriff of Cromarty around 1264, very much in Thomas's time. (Some time ago on this page I mentioned 'St Norman's Market', apparently named after this William and held under the old castle walls in the gorge of a deep wooded ravine.) Says Miller: "It is not much more than twenty years since a series of violent storms from the hostile north-east, which came on at almost regular intervals for five successive winters [c. 1810-15], seemed to threaten the modern town of Cromarty with the fate of the ancient."

He goes on: "The tides rose higher than tides had ever been known to rise before; and as the soil exposed to the action of the waves was gradually disappearing, instead of the gentle slope with which the land formerly merged into the beach, its boundaries were marked out by a dark abrupt line resembling a turf wall. Some of the people whose houses bordered on the sea looked exceedingly grave, and affirmed there was no danger whatever; those who lived higher up thought differently, and pitied their poor neighbours from the bottom of their hearts. The consternation was heightened too by a prophecy of Thomas the Rhymer, handed down for centuries, but little thought of before. It was predicted, it is said, by the old wizard, that Cromarty should be twice destroyed by the sea, and that fish should be caught in abundance on the Castle-hill — a rounded projection of the escarpment which rises behind the houses, and forms the ancient coast line."

Next we have:

*A windy winter and a wet spring
Brings a bloody summer and a dead king.*

According to John Geddie's 'Thomas the Rymour and his Rhymes', this was remembered in 1819 when a windy winter and a wet spring were followed in August by the 'Peterloo Massacre'. A large but peaceful rally in Manchester in support of universal male suffrage and the repeal of the Corn Laws was attacked by soldiers, killing 11 and wounding 400, including 113 women. So everyone expected the old, mad king, George III, to die; he kept them waiting till after the New Year, but eventually, on 29 January, he obliged.

I know of one instance of a prophecy of Thomas Rhymer being applied in the twentieth century. This is:

*The Order Pot and Lossie grey
Will sweep the Chanry Kirk away.*

According to Geddie, the Order Pot in Elgin is in reality the Ordeal Pot, where witches were tried. It was supposed to be 'bottomless', and to be joined to the Lossie by an underground stream below the ruins of Elgin Cathedral, known locally as the 'Chanonry Kirk'. Whenever the Lossie was in spate the water also rose in the Pot, and Thomas's saying was recalled in September 1915 when the Pot, despite having been filled up with rubbish, boiled over yet again with river water. Equally dramatic is this one about Perth:

*Says Shochie to Ordie, 'Whaur will we meet?'
'At the Cross o' St Johnstoun, when a' men are asleep.'*

Perth has suffered floods with monotonous regularity over the centuries, but this is a wonderfully tangential way of putting it. The Shochie and the Ordie normally meet at Luncarty, five miles north of the burgh, before flowing together into the Tay, but in time of flood the whole valley turns rapidly into a lake which the two burns enter separately.

I will finish with some examples of a different kind of prophecy.

*A hoard shall be in Pentland found,
On an auld house's eastern bound,
Beside the Water of Newgirthburn,
And the finder shall come to speedy harm.*

Voices that speak to us in such terms from the past are those of ordinary people allowing themselves to dream of untold wealth. Nowadays the dream is of winning the lottery, then it was of hidden treasure.

*From the Fort of Ardoch to the Grinan Well o' Keir
Are nine kings' rent for nine hundred year.*

In days before banks the likelihood of finding hidden treasure was genuinely greater than now — witness, for example, Chambers's remark that for fear of the French, and 'holding bank-notes as the dust of the earth', many a prosperous Scot of the 1790s 'busied himself in collecting and concealing well-marked crown and half-crown pieces'.

*Atween the weet ground and the dry
Tamleuchar's gowden hoard doth lie.*

Tamleuchar, despite being Gaelic — *Tom Luachair*, Hill of Rushes — is in Selkirkshire. Perhaps it is no coincidence that these Thomas Rhymer prophecies of hidden treasure often involve genuinely ancient names.

*Atween the kirk and the kirk-ford —
There lies St Nauchlan's hoard.*

That was what the fisher-folk of Findon in Kincardineshire recalled of the Auld Kirk of Cowie and its Gaelic patron Nathalan or Neachdan.

*A mither's ae son wi' ae e'e
Sall find the Keys o' Bennachie
Aneath a rash buss
I' the backward o' Tollus.*

There is an echo in such rhymes of Thomas as guardian of whatever lies inside our hills. He it was, after all, who found eternal life inside the Eildons, and gathers his army to this day in Dumbuck, or perhaps in Tomnahurich.

*In the Dryburn Well, beneath a stane,
You'll find the Key o' Cairn-a-vain
That'll mak a' Scotland rich, ane by ane.*

“When the horn is blown,” went an Inverness proverb, “True Thomas will come forth.” That then must be why it was said at Largo in Fife,

*Gin Auchindounie's cock disna craw
An' Balmain's horn disna blaw,
I'll tell you where the gowd lies in Tammy Norrie's Law.*

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