

Fleeing the moss-troopers

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

ALEXANDER Peden once said to his friend James Cubison: “James, ye and I will never meet again in time.”

That phrase of his is pure ‘Quern-Dust Calendar’ territory, because this column, in origin at least, is about traditional concepts of time — how it was named, measured, distributed.

On every other occasion on which they had met, Peden had taken his leave of Cubison by saying that they would meet again. But now, being a prophet and in knowledge of God’s mind, he knew that they would never see each other again this side of heaven.

In the Celtic otherworld men and women did not age — they could dance, drink, eat, sing and make love and none of it made any difference to their bodies, indeed they had no need of internal organs at all; but they might find themselves cast out and returned to this earth, in which case they themselves were suddenly old, grey and wrinkled, and their homes and loved ones mere dust in the moor. Christian heaven and hell were different in nature, and could only be entered after death, but they were likewise eternal. That is why, to Peden, this world of ours here is the only one in which time exists.

Over the years I have put various prophets under the microscope on this page. Calum Cille. The Petty Seer. Tormod Sona. Thomas Rhymer. In the case of the first three, I was able to analyse their prophecies to try to determine whether or not they stemmed from a genuine psychic gift. My conclusion, in a nutshell, was that the Petty Seer’s so-called prophecies represented the cynical manipulation of power in the interests of social control; that Tormod Sona’s came from a genuine psychic gift, call it the second sight if you will; and that Calum Cille’s were of both types, in approximately equal measure. In Thomas Rhymer’s case, the prophecies are too detached from the man for any judgment to be reached.

What then of Peden, that archetypal Presbyterian seer? I have been examining Patrick Walker’s classic ‘Six Saints of the Covenant’, in which Peden stands first (Walker’s earliest version of his life was published in 1724, and was put together from oral sources). Preliminary analysis suggests that it contains 109 prophecies attributed to him, which is a large number, greater even than the number of prophecies attributed to Calum Cille; in fact, if we are measuring by numbers, it probably makes him Scotland’s leading prophet. I think I’ll leave the detailed breakdown till next time however, and restrict myself here to presenting the flavour, the atmosphere of the work.

Peden was born about 1626 and died in 1686. He came from Sorn in Ayrshire. He spent three years as minister of Glenluce in Galloway, but everything that matters about his life has to do with a quarter-century of heroic Presbyterian resistance in south-west Scotland to an oppressive Episcopalian regime. It began with the restoration of Charles II to the throne in 1660, which was of course the point at which Peden lost his parish.

The Covenanters’ resistance expressed itself in field preaching, which was put down with such ineptitude and callous violence that it erupted twice in armed rebellion. The Pentland Rising ended with the battle of Rullion Green in 1666; the Covenanters gave Claverhouse, ‘Bonnie Dundee’, a beating at Drumclog on 1 June 1679, but went down to the King’s illegitimate son, the Duke of Monmouth, at Bothwell Brig on the 22nd of the same month.

In between the two risings, from 1673 to 1678, Peden was held prisoner, but other than that he roved around, preaching here and praying there, knowing no parish but the homes of the poor Covenanting people of the far south-west and their first cousins in the newly-colonised north-east of Ireland.

Culturally the area was a little like the mainland Highlands of today. A century before, large parts of it had been Gaelic-speaking, and a great deal of the sound and spirit of the language remained even where it had ceased to be the vernacular of the community. The Ulster connection made some knowledge of the language a necessity, and yet more varieties of it were to be heard among the fishermen and smugglers who came across so regularly from Kintyre, Arran and Man. But the most dominant cultural force was the majestic English of King James’s Bible. It had arrived on the scene at the critical moment when Gaelic and Catholicism were faltering together, and was in the process of sweeping all before it. Linguistically and spiritually.

Peden was no Gaelic-speaker, but he had brought the Bible and gone native. Patrick Walker’s narrative is full of language so extraordinary that it influenced Robert Louis Stevenson. “When I was a child, and indeed until I was nearly a man,” Stevenson wrote once, “I consistently read Covenanting books. Now that I am a grey-beard — or would be, if I could raise the beard — I have returned, and for weeks back have read little else but Wodrow, Walker, Shields, etc. Of course, this is with an idea of a novel, but in the course of it I made a very curious discovery.”

He goes on: “I have been accustomed to hear refined and intelligent critics — those who know so much better what we are than we do ourselves — trace down my literary descent from all sorts of people, including Addison, of whom I could never read a word. Well, laigh i’ your lug, sir — the clue was found. My style is from the Covenanting writers. Take a particular case — the fondness for rhymes. I don’t know of any English prose-writer who rhymes except by accident, and then a stone had better be tied around his neck and himself cast into the sea. But my Covenanting buckies rhyme all the time.”

Too true. Lecturing one night on the seventh chapter of Amos, Peden breaks into a rapture on the Covenanting martyrs. “They are going off the stage with fresh gales and full sails,” he exclaims. “And now they are all glancing in glory. O if you saw them! They would fley you out of your wits.” This instinct for rhyme in sermon and prose may be part of the Gaelic legacy.

Here is another case of notable language. Peden is in a house at Pendarroch in Carrick. His hostess has gossiped to a woman, who has informed on him and then come back to the house so that her treachery will not

be suspected. Says Peden to his hostess, coming hastily in from the fields to her door: "Ye've play'd a bonny sport to your self by being so loose-tongu'd; the enemy is informed that I was to drop a word this night in this house, and the person who has done it is in the house just now; you'll repent it; tomorrow morning the enemy will be here, and ye'll have an ill rid-up house. Farewel, I'll stay no longer in this place."

Premonition, prophecy, second-sight? That isn't our concern for the moment, though I've listed that one as prophecy no. 56. Here's another one, no. 40, which expresses well the drama and tension of the times. On the hill with his companions, Peden senses that there is danger in the house that they are making for, two miles further on, so he sends a lad ahead for food and news. Soldiers fire at the lad and a bullet whizzes by his head at the very moment that Peden is praying, saying, "Direct the bullets by his head, however near, let them not touch him; Good Lord, spare the lap of thy cloak and cover the poor lad." And sure enough a mist comes down which allows the boy to escape.

No. 50 is similar. Staying one night in the house of James Nisbet in Ayrshire, Peden says to Nisbet, "I wish thy head may be preserved, for it will be in danger for me." He is angry about informers who have told the enemy that he has come from Ireland, and tells Nisbet that by 9 a.m. he will know the reason why. Then he makes himself scarce.

At 8 a.m., Nisbet, by then out harrowing his fields, is pursued into a bog by mounted soldiers, and a bullet takes away one of the two knots into which he has tied his hair, one on each side of his head. Nisbet finds Peden, who says, "Oh Jamie, Jamie, I am glad your head's safe, for I knew it would be in danger."

Nisbet takes his knife and cuts away the other knot.

Not all the best stories are of visions and prophecies, though most of them are. On one occasion Peden is fleeing the enemy on horseback. He plunges into a swollen river and his horse only just gets him across. Turning, he shouts back to the soldiers: "Lads, follow not me; for I assure you, ye want my boat, and so will certainly drown; consider where your landing will be; ye are fighting for hell, and running post to it."

Given Peden's reputation for sanctity, the soldiers are quite willing to believe that they lack his spiritual 'boat', and they are afraid to enter the water.

By contrast, prophecy no. 73 shows Peden riding in 1666 in the parish of Ballantrae with the Rev. John Welsh of Kirkpatrick Irongray and the Laird of Glor-over, when they meet a party of enemy horse; the laird faints in terror, but Peden says, "Keep up your courage and confidence, for God hath laid an arrest upon these men that they shall not harm us."

He is right. The soldiers courteously ask for directions, and Peden even goes out of his way to show them the ford of the Water of Titt.

When Peden comes back the Laird demands to know why he didn't send the lad instead. Peden points out that the lad might have accidentally given them away, and adds: "For myself, I knew they would be like Egyptian dogs, they would not move a tongue against me, for my hour of falling into their hands, and day of trial, is not yet come."

WHFP 17.7.98