

“See how they run, how long will they run?”

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

IN my last article I introduced the Rev. Alexander Peden. Now I would like to attempt an initial analysis of the 109 prophecies attributed to him in Patrick Walker’s ‘Six Saints of the Covenant’. My approach is one I have applied to other prophets on this page — basically it involves accepting that the great man said what we are told he said, and asking: how could he have known that?

Peden’s prophecies seem to break down into four basic types, which we may call Politics, Persecution, People and Personal. (The fact that all of these begin with P is coincidental but, like the man himself, a little weird.) In this article I will introduce the first of these, ‘Politics’. It consists of 30 items which break down further as follows: ‘Individuals’, ‘Particular Events’, ‘General Events and Judgments’.

The ‘individuals’ are mostly kings — Charles II and his Catholic brother and successor James VII. Peden knew when Charles’ death was imminent, saw it in a vision as it happened, and declared: “I hear a dead shot at the throne of Britain.” The King had been poisoned, he claimed. “That unhappy, treacherous, lecherous man, who has made the Lord’s people in Scotland tremble these years bygone, has got his last glut in a lordly dish from his brother; and he’s lying with his tongue cold in his mouth.” The fact of the death was not confirmed for another ten days, we are told; as for the allegation of fratricide, it was much put about at the time by the new king’s enemies, of whom of course Peden was one.

Peden repeatedly foretold the end of the Stuart line. Preaching in a barn in Carrick in 1685, he stooped down, picked up a handful of chaff and declared that “as ye see me throw away that chaff,” so would God’s vengeance blow the Duke of York off the throne. On another occasion he was still more specific: the King, he said, would be banished. And so he was, although not until several years after Peden’s own death — which lends strength to the prophecy.

On 4 February 1685, we are told, Peden said, “Before this day seven years the strongest of them all shall fall.” This sounds like an attempt to predict the exact length of James VII’s reign. In fact James was deposed in 1689 and defeated at the Boyne on 1 July 1690 (the event still celebrated on 12 July, due to the dropping of eleven days from the calendar in 1752). So the prophecy seems correct in the letter but certainly not in the spirit. On the other hand, it is curious to note that the last and most courageous of James’s commanders, Sarsfield, held out until obliged to sign the Treaty of Limerick on 3 October 1691, which fulfils all but four months of the seven years allowed by Peden. The strongest of them all?

Two of the political prophecies concern the capture of the Marquis of Argyll, which Peden knew of as it happened, ‘though he was many miles distant’. Of even greater interest, perhaps, is what Peden foretold of two men who were bringing to Dublin a statement of the Irish presbyterian ministers’ disavowal of the Bothwell Rising of 1679. He was in Ireland at the time, and of course disapproved thoroughly of the document. “God will arrest them at the gate,” he said. And sure enough, one was struck down by sickness, while the other fell from his horse and broke his leg.

So far we have a mixture — of hope, of gossip, of military intelligence, of possible plotting (the Dublin incident), of genuine-sounding psychic power (Charles’ death). The fact that Peden seems to have underestimated the speed of one political event (James’ exile) suggests that it was a safe prediction.

Of ‘Particular Events’ there are just two. Firstly, when a band of Ulster Scots sets out for Carolina, Peden foretells that many will lose their lives, and that the rest will come home in distress. One ship sinks, the other is driven back disabled to Ireland. Secondly, when the Irish Presbyterians are worrying about the arrival from Scotland of some potentially dangerous books, Peden has a vision. “Be not discouraged, for these books will do no hurt in this country, for I saw the sale of them spoilt this last night.” So it comes to pass, we are told, and most of them are returned to Scotland.

Set side by side like this, these two prophecies convey an eerie sense of *déjà vu*. On the one hand, the life and death of pilgrims on the high seas; on the other, the simple power of the written word. It is astonishingly evocative of the prophecies of Calum Cille as recorded by Adomnán a thousand years before, the main difference being that while books figure prominently in the utterances of the ancient Irish saint, this is the only time that they are mentioned by the Covenanting one.

‘General Events and Judgments’, with 18 prophecies, form the largest political category. Peden forecast that the bishops would reign for nearly 28 years, which is about right (they lasted from 1660 to 1688-9), and that “our deliverance will never come by the sword”, which, given the Boyne, seems highly debatable.

Of course if we are being told that Peden sometimes said things which did not come true, it lends all the more credibility to the alleged prophecies that did come true. And he went seriously awry in some of his grandest predictions, getting the religious affairs right, and the politics wrong.

The present ‘Killing Time’ would not last long, he said, and he was right. He repeatedly foretold the arrival of Moderatism. The testimony of those who recorded the deeds of the martyrs would be shunned, he said. “Ye will not ken who has been the persecutor, complier or sufferer.” In fact he plucked the bonnet from his head once and threw it down saying, “See ye how my bonnet lies? The sworn-to and sealed testament of the Church of Scotland will fall from among the hands of all parties, and will lie as close upon the ground as ye see my bonnet lie.”

In all this he was quite right — the Glorious Revolution of 1688-9 led to the triumph of Moderate rather than of Covenanting Presbyterianism. There would be good preaching, he said, but no good resulting from it till judgments had been poured out to lay the land desolate. By way of explanation, he added that there would be no great day of the gospel till the swords of the ‘Frenches’ had made a dreadful slaughter. England and

Scotland would be scourged by foreigners — a more severe chastisement than any before or since. “Oh the Monzies, the French Monzies, see how they run, how long will they run? Lord, cut their houghs, and stay their running.” By ‘Monzies’ he meant ‘monsieurs’.

A set of wicked men would take part with the French, he said, and the west of Scotland would pay dear for it. “They’ll run thicker in the water of Ayr and Clyde than ever the Highland men did.” He saw the French slaying men, women and children at their own firesides; then it would ease off, but “their sharpest showers will be last”.

Scotland would then be a desolation, and those who were left would live in caves. When they came out they would stumble over corpses; a stone cut out of a mountain would come down, God would be avenged. “And then the Church will come forth with a bonny bairn-time at her back, of young ones.”

That is a summary of Peden’s long-term political forecast. It is of course a little bit complacent simply to say that he was wrong. After all, that last paragraph paints a picture akin to nuclear holocaust as portrayed in twentieth-century cinema. And the previous one reflects a terror of the French which became a reality in Europe a hundred years later, after the Revolution of 1789. But what Peden was really predicting here was a French invasion in support of the Stuarts, which would be more fiercely resisted, and more cruelly put down, in the Covenanted south-west than anywhere else in the land.

We are more accustomed to hearing this from the other side. The ‘set of wicked men’ duly materialised as the gallant leaders of the ’15 and the ’45. What they desperately *lacked*, however, was French military support. In Skye, for example, the reason why MacDonald and MacLeod did not join Prince Charles was precisely because he had no “Monzies” with him.

Conversely, it was an article of Jacobite faith in 1745-6 that nothing resembling the scenario painted by people like Peden should be allowed to happen. Freedom of worship was allowed, discipline in the Prince’s army was tight, looting was forbidden, and all goods requisitioned (notably in Glasgow in December 1745) were paid for in full. It was left to Butcher Cumberland — of whom Peden, who had been dead for sixty years, would presumably have approved — to perpetrate the only large-scale slaughter of innocents in the UK since the Union.

What we have here, then, is a set of prophecies whose accuracy can, for once, be tested. We know that they were first published by Patrick Walker in 1724, and reprinted in 1725 (twice), 1728, 1751, and many other years. They circulated as chapbooks, brought from place to place by pedlars. There is a report of some women being very frightened by them in Greenock in 1744. Unlike the prophecies of the Brahan Seer, therefore, we have them in print from *before* some of the events referred to. And what we find is that they were not very accurate, but that a great deal of attention was paid to them, and that they may well have become an element in shaping the course of events, through the need to prevent them coming true.

So, no evidence here for divinely-inspired second sight, but plenty for a political brain. Of course, if it turns out on closer examination that Peden had a genuine psychic gift for what we may call day-to-day matters, it will be easier to understand why people placed great faith in his awesome political forecasts. Why should he have known God’s mind on the one and not on the other?

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