

Just as Peden prophesied

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

VISUALISE, if you will, a cold Sabbath morning in 1685 in the parish of Connor near Ballymena in Ireland. There is snow on the ground, and a plume of smoke drifts lazily up from John Slowan's chimney. Alexander Peden is there. This week he has baptised the new-born child of a girl from Scotland, Mrs Janet Paton, the same who eventually tells this story to Patrick Walker when she has become 'an old Christian woman living at the Water of Leith' — and, of course, Walker puts it into his biography of Peden.

Peden comes into Slowan's kitchen calling for water for his hands. Whom does he find sitting patiently around the fireside but Janet Paton with a man called John Muirhead and a number of others. As it is Sunday and he is an ordained minister, albeit a Scottish Covenanting rebel without a parish, they have come in hopes of a sermon. Peden must be cautious, since what they are asking is illegal. "For what do ye come here without ye had been advertised?" he demands. "For I have nothing prepared for you."

"O sir," they say, "you must not send us away empty, for we are in a starving condition."

"I cannot promise ye," he replies. "But if I can get anything, ye shall not want it." And he goes back into his bedchamber to pray.

After a while he calls through to Slowan. "Let not these people away, for I'll come to them shortly."

And so he does. He preaches on the text, 'The day being far spent, they constrained him to tarry all night.' But he breaks out in astonishing raptures, uttering what I call 'political' prophecies about England, Ireland and Scotland.

The Lord, he says, will abandon England because of its superstition (he means Anglicanism) and profanity.

"In Ireland," he says, "great shall thy stroke be, that in a few years ye may travel forty miles, and not get a light to your pipe." Which, says Walker, comes true four years later, in the rebellion that leads to the Siege of Derry (1689), the Battle of the Boyne (1690) and the Siege of Limerick (1691).

But it is the plight of Scotland, the land of all his hearers' ancestors, that arouses his greatest and his strangest passion, as he goes on to speak of 'taigling' God — delaying Him, getting in His way to prevent Him leaving. "O Scotland, many, long and great shall thy judgments be of all kinds, especially the west and south, for loth and contempt of the gospel, covenant-breaking, burning, and burying, shedding of innocent, precious, dear blood. O, all ye that can pray, tell all the Lord's people to try by mourning and prayer, if ye can taigle Him. O see if ye can taigle Him, taigle Him, especially in Scotland — for we fear He will depart from it."

When the performance is over, he casually remarks, "Take ye that among you, and make a good use of it, for I have gotten it new and fresh out of heaven. And I had nothing of it this morning."

This is a good description of the prophet's method. He is an oracle. He receives knowledge from the otherworld through prayer, and frequently communicates it through preaching.

There are numerous other occasions when Peden prophesies Irish events. For example he foretells a 'black day' in Ireland, when people will travel forty miles and not see a reeking house nor hear a cock crow. Or a 'dreadful day' in Ireland, when there will be many miles without a chimney smoking, hunger in Derry, and an unnamed town burnt to ashes. It was all accomplished in four years, Walker tells us, the Siege of Derry lasting from April to July 1689. The Irish will rise, says Peden, and it will come in a moonlit night that will frighten all Ireland; 'the massacre by the Papists', Walker assures us, was on a moonlit night. And finally, we are told that on 2 August 1684 Peden is in the house of a Christian Scotswoman called Margaret Lumbernor when there is a shower of huge hailstones. "What can be the meaning of this extraordinary hail?" says Margaret.

"Within a few years there will be an extraordinary storm and shower of judgments poured out upon Ireland," says Peden, "but, Meg, you shall not live to see it." And so it happened, says Walker — the judgments were Derry and the Boyne, but Margaret died before the rebellion began.

As I pointed out last time, Peden's remarkable total of 109 prophecies (as recorded in Walker's 'Six Saints of the Covenant') can be classified as 'Politics', 'Persecution', 'People' and 'Personal'. Having dealt with the thirty political prophecies, it is time to move on to 'Persecution', which can be sub-divided into 'Battles' (5), 'General' (12), 'John Brown' (3) and 'Captivity' (7).

Of course that is a classification by subject-matter, simply to break the material into presentable units. Another classification, one which tells us something about the mechanics of (alleged) prophecy, is into 'present' and 'future'. In other words, prophets mostly declared what was going to happen in the future, but sometimes they communicated visions of an event taking place far away at the same moment. Rather like live television.

Calum Cille did this frequently, and on one occasion his biographer, Adomnán, is careful to tell us that one of his monks noted down the time; sure enough it transpired that the event thus seen from afar by the saint was taking place at that very moment. Walker does not offer any instance of this, but makes up for it on occasion by providing a more than usually circumstantial account. The third 'John Brown' prophecy, which I will give an account of next time, is a case in point.

All in all nine of Peden's 109 prophecies are visions of the present, and I mention this here because three of them were among the political prophecies which I presented last time, while four more come under 'Battles' or "John Brown".

Battles then. Peden foretells the battle of Pentland Hills — Rullion Green, 28 November 1666, at which the Covenanters are defeated by Sir Tam Dalyell. He has 'a melancholly view of their end'. He knows when the battle is being fought although he is 60 miles away in Carrick; the news does not come for another 48 hours.

At the time of another Covenanting defeat, Bothwell Brig, Peden is 40 miles away in the Borders. The battle is fought on a Sunday morning, 22 June 1679. He goes to the fields on Saturday night, and comes in at sunrise weeping and wringing his hands. A man called John Simson asks what is the matter. "I have been wrestling all night with God," says Peden, "for our friends that are in arms in the west, but cannot prevail."

By midday, just as in Connor, a group of people are sitting quietly waiting for a sermon. This time Peden says, "Let the people go to their prayers, for I can preach none. Our friends are fled and fallen before the enemy, and they are haggling and hashing them down, and their blood is running like water." He goes on to prophesy of the prisoners taken at Bothwell Brig that they 'have done somewhat to save their lives' but that 'the sea-billows shall be many of their winding-sheets, and the few of them that escape shall be useful for God in their generation'. All of this comes true: they take the 'Black Bond' never to rise in rebellion again, but 255 of them are banished nevertheless to the government's penal colony in Orkney, and 203 of these are drowned at sea.

The 'general prosecution' prophecies give us the flavour of the 'Killing Times'. Peden and his companion hide under cast-by-foul fodder in a byre while soldiers ransack the house but miss them. "They shall not touch us," he says, and he is right. Once when in Ireland he tells a man to commandeer a boat, reassuring him that 'not one of them will move their tongue against you'. Again he is right. At a preaching one time he prays again and again 'for that man that was to lose his life'; the man is shot dead later that day.

To me, the picture painted by such stories is of a world astonishingly similar to that of Calum Cille 1,100 years before — a tense and often violent society in which tribalism is breaking up into changed and often divided loyalties as people grapple with the excessive demands of a new and powerful religion. Human life is cheap, spies are everywhere, and the man with the best intelligence network is king, provided he is ruthless, totally devoted to his cause, and blessed with a gang of devoted followers. Such a man was Calum Cille. I see him as blessed with a genuine prophetic gift, but willing to misuse it in the interests of power. When he prophesies that a man is going to die, that man dies. Could Peden have been the same?

Bearing that thought in mind, here are a few more 'general persecution' prophecies. Peden baptises a man's child, and knows that the penalty that the man will suffer for it will be the loss of his cattle but not of his horses. One evening in the house of a man called Sandy, Peden suddenly leaps to his feet, knowing that a certain army officer is coming to arrest Sandy within the hour. Once when a guest of James Slowan's he predicts that a very careful search of the house will be made that night: and so it happens, due to a breakout at the local prison.

Finally, there is a particularly good story about a time when Peden is lying sick in a house in Cumnock, in his native Ayrshire. His host does not want him to stay in the house, because a troop of soldiers is expected to pass through the village next day. "Ye need not fear to let me stay in your house," says Peden, "for some of these soldiers shall keep sentry at this door, but shall not come in."

Appalled, Peden's host goes to dig stones at the end of the village to make sure of having a word with the soldiers as they arrive. He tells the officers that he is afraid that their men will plunder his house. "Poor man," they say, "you deserve encouragement for your virtue. Be not afraid for your house, we whall order two soldiers to stand at your door, that none may enter to wrong you."

And so it happens. Just as Peden prophesied.