

The Fixer with Friends in High Places?

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

THE Covenanting prophet, Alexander Peden, was inclined to prophesy at weddings.

It was a discomfiting habit, not least to the happy couple. But then, he was an ordained minister, albeit one whom episcopacy had driven from his parish, so it was part of his life's task to join people together; and, as we noticed last time, the act of prayer for him was a dual carriageway on which messages about the future were as likely to be received as given.

Once as the couple stand holding hands before him, he says, "Indeed, man, you have a bonny bride by the hand; I see a covetous devil in her, she is both a thief and a whore. Let her go, let her go, you will be ashamed of her."

In the face of this tirade the man grips her hand all the firmly, and Peden says, "You will not take my advice, but it will tend to thy disgrace." He marries them anyway, and in this case we are not told whether he is right or wrong.

In a similar case, still more specific, he refuses to marry the couple. When afterwards the outraged groom demands to know the reason why, he explains it is because the woman is pregnant to a married man — 'as time,' his biographer Patrick Walker tells us, 'afterwards discovered'.

Then there is an occasion when a woman, Janet Lindsay, is marrying her second husband, John Kirkland. Her first, Thomas Weir, died of wounds received at the Battle of Drumclog. "First one husband killed, and then another," sighs Peden, "and must have a third; if it must be so, let her say, 'Good is the will of the Lord.'"

Sure enough, Ensign Kirkland is killed in Flanders, and she marries a baillie in Coulter called William Spence. Walker is at pains to stress the authenticity of this story — Lindsay, Kirkland and Spence, he says, were his dear and intimate acquaintances.

If those three wedding prophecies are black comedy, the fourth and last is just plain black. In 1682, at Priesthall in Kyle, Peden marries John Brown to Isabel Weir. When it is done he draws the bride aside and says to her, "Isabel, you have got a good man to be your husband, but you will not enjoy him long. Prize his company, and keep linen by you to be his winding-sheet, for you will need it when ye are not looking for it, and it will be a bloody one."

John Brown, described as 'that singular Christian', is the subject of two of Peden's greatest prophecies — great if only perhaps for the power with which Walker tells the story in his 'Six Saints of the Covenant'. In May 1685 Peden stays a night in the Browns' house at Priesthall. In the morning he goes out through the door, saying, "Poor woman, a fearful morning," and again, "Poor woman, a fearful morning, a dark misty morning."

A day and a night later, with Peden long gone, after family worship between 5 and 6 a.m. John Brown picks up a spade and goes off to prepare some peat-ground. In the darkness of a heavy mist he is surrounded by three troops of Claverhouse's cavalry. They bring him back to Priesthall where Claverhouse interrogates him. Though he has a stammer, he answers with clarity and confidence. This makes Claverhouse wonder if he is a preacher, and Claverhouse turns to those who are acting as his guides through the moors, his 'Indian scouts' as it were. "Have you ever heard him preach?"

"No, no, he was never a preacher."

"If he has never preached," says Claverhouse, "meikle has he prayed in his time." Turning back to Brown he says (according to Walker), "Go to your prayers, for you shall immediately die."

While Brown is praying, Claverhouse interrupts him three times. On one of these occasions Brown's words are exactly those often uttered by Peden in 'political' mode: he pleads 'that the Lord would spare a remnant' of the Covenanting faction, 'and not make a full end in the day of His anger'.

"I gave you time to pray," snaps Claverhouse, "and ye're begun to preach."

Brown shifts around on his knees. "Sir," he says, "you know neither the nature of preaching nor praying, that calls this preaching." And he calmly continues.

When finished, Brown takes leave of his wife and children. Claverhouse orders six soldiers to shoot him. Most of the bullets hit him in the head, scattering his brains. Says Claverhouse, allegedly, to Isabel Weir, "What thinkest thou of thy husband now, woman?"

"I thought ever much good of him, and as much now as ever."

"It were but justice to lay thee beside him."

"If ye were permitted, I doubt not but your cruelty would go that length."

Claverhouse mounts his horse, says Walker, and marches, and leaves Isabel with the corpse of her husband lying there; and she sets the bairn upon the ground, and gathers his brains, and ties up his head, and straightens his body, and covers him with her plaid, and sits down and weeps. Isabel later tells Walker, sitting upon her husband's gravestone at the end of the house, that previously she could see no blood without being in danger of fainting, yet she had witnessed the whole ghastly scene without fainting or confusion except that when the shots went off her eyes were dazzled.

Now we come to Peden's other John Brown prophecy, which is of the type known as telegnosis, that is, he sees from a distance what is actually happening at that moment. The murder is committed between 6 and 7 a.m. At that point Peden is ten or eleven miles away. He has been in the fields all night. He comes to John Muirhead's house between 7 and 8 a.m., and asks that the family be summoned so that he can pray amongst them. "Lord," he prays, "when wilt thou avenge Brown's blood? Oh, let Brown's blood be precious in thy sight, and hasten the day when thou'lt avenge it." And he speaks of the martyrs of the Covenant.

When the prayer is over Muirhead asks him what he meant by Brown's blood. "What do I mean? What do I mean? Claverhouse has been at the Preshill this morning, and has cruelly murdered John Brown; his corps are lying at the end of his house, and his poor wife sitting weeping by his corps, and not a soul to speak comfortably to her. This morning after the sun-rising, I saw a strange apparition in the firmament, the appearance of a very bright clear-shining star fall from heaven to the earth; and indeed there is a clear-shining light fallen this day, the greatest Christian that ever I conversed with."

Once again we are forced to say in bewilderment, what is going on? Was this telegnosis, a vision from God? Did he use a telescope, as I suggested once on this page of John Morrison, the Petty Seer? Did he have a runner, some young lad who witnessed the scene and ran the ten miles in an hour to tell him? That seems distinctly possible. But then our mind goes back to Peden's genuine cases of telegnosis, such as his vision of the battle of Bothwell Brig from 40 miles away — genuine, that is, if we are being told the whole truth.

We may think also of how Peden had begun to see the death of Brown taking shape from the day of his marriage three years before, and of how he had made a seemingly inaccurate prediction of it 24 hours previously. "Poor woman, a fearful morning," he had said, and again, "Poor woman, a fearful morning, a dark misty morning." Yet it was not that morning but the following one that turned out to be so fearful.

I have been working my way fairly systematically through Peden's prophecies in recent articles. The 'Marriage' prophecies form a sub-division of the section which I call 'People'. The 'John Brown' prophecies belong to the previous section, 'Persecution'. I want to finish this article by giving a brief account of the final sub-division of the 'Persecution' section. It is called 'Captivity', and contains seven prophecies. Here they are.

On one occasion in 1673 Hugh Fergusson of Knockdow in Carrick persuades Peden to stay the night. Peden says: "It will be a dear night's quarters to us both." They are arrested there by a Major Cockburn, Fergusson is fined 1,000 merks for 'rest, harbour and converse' with Peden, and Peden himself is imprisoned on the Bass Rock and at Edinburgh until 1678.

Along with other Covenanting prisoners, Peden is sentenced in December 1678 to be transported to Virginia. "The ship is not yet built," says Peden several times, "that will take me or these prisoners to America." First however they will be shipped to London. When still at Leith they hear thumbkins will be used on them 'to keep them from rebelling'. This charming little piece of high tech, 'a new invention and ingyne called the thumbekins which will be very effectually', was not formally authorised by Government for use for another five years, and the 'bootes' remained firmly in place. Says Peden: "There will neither thumbikin nor bootikin come here; lift up your hearts and heads, for the day of your redemption draweth near; if we were once at London we will all be set at liberty." All this ultimately comes true.

On the way to London, Peden advises against an attempt to capture the ship, because he knows that the Lord will free them in a way that is better for His glory and their safety.

While praying on the voyage he says, "Lord, we bless thy name, that will cut short our voyage, and frustrate thy wicked enemies of their wicked designs, and will not let them get us where thy intend, and some of us shall go richer home than when we came." All this proves true. As Walker tells us, "Friends at London, and in their way homeward through England, shewed much kindness to them." Which explains how they could have become richer.

Peden knows that the skipper will be 'as glad to be quit of us as ever he was to get us'. That proves only too true, as they have turned out to be expensive to maintain.

On arrival in London the Leith skipper wants rid of them. But the skipper who is to take them to Virginia refuses to do so when he finds they are good Christian people. They are set free without any imposition of bonds or oaths. Walker suggests that both skippers may have got what are euphemistically called 'compliments' from the Covenanters' friends at London. Lord Shaftesbury, in particular, is known to historians to have been sympathetic.

And finally, Peden has told one of the prisoners, James Law, that he will be returned to his wife 'sooner than either he or she is looking for'; he is among the men set free in London, and reaches the Water of Leith in exactly one month.

Is this Peden the Prophet? Or Peden the Fixer with Friends in High Places? Who *is* this man? Will we ever know?