

“That woman with the pirlie plaid”

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

THE Rev. Alexander Peden, whose prophecies I’ve been trying to put under the microscope, had the doubtful distinction of spending five years, 1673-8, as a prisoner in Scotland’s Alcatraz, the Bass Rock. It’s a volcanic plug (very like Ailsa Craig) lying a mile off North Berwick in the mouth of the Firth of Forth. For a deeply religious man I have no doubt that life on the Bass had compensations — after all, at one time islands like this were chosen by monks for a life close to God, and one such, Inchcolm, named after that other great prophet Calum Cille, lies further up the Firth. Simon Taylor’s remarkable novel ‘Mortimer’s Deep’ depicts the life of the monks there in the thirteenth century.

Whether for monks or for prisoners, hell on earth is always other people. One day a guard on the Bass says of Peden, “The Devil take him.”

Peden retorts, not without kindness, “Thou wilt repent that.” The guard is assailed by guilt, refuses to stay in arms against the Lord’s people, spiritedly defies the Governor, and becomes a great Christian.

That is one of the 38 prophecies made by Peden which form the category I call ‘people’. There are altogether 109 recorded prophecies, and the other categories are ‘politics’, ‘persecution’, and ‘personal’.

On examining the prophecies in the ‘people’ category I find they break down conveniently into groups. That one comes into the first group, ‘prophesies salvation’. He didn’t exactly prophesy salvation in that particular case, of course: what I am trying to do is identify a core topic for each group, and note how related prophecies like this one cluster around it. The truth in this case appears to be that Peden made a prophetic remark which led to the man’s salvation.

The other two ‘salvation’ prophecies are these. While preaching in a house, Peden hears what a man outside the door says; he points to the door, and reassures the man that he has it ‘out of Heaven, as with an audible voice’, that his spiritual riches will be given to him. And when in Ireland, he tells a woman who intends going back to Scotland with her baby that she should stay in Ireland. “You will see a remarkable providence,” he says, “in your being stopt.” Sure enough, the ship she would have been on is wrecked, and seventeen corpses are washed up.

It makes one think of modern disasters. The other week the tennis star Marc Rosset cancelled his journey home on Swissair Flight 111 after being invited to dinner by friends in New York. That night someone told him the plane had crashed with no survivors. “I switched on the television,” he said, “and from then on I just could not stop myself shaking.”

The next group is ‘prophesies death’. There are three here. Peden prophesies that a man’s death will be sudden and surprising; he drops dead while standing at a fire smoking his pipe. And Peden tells his fellow-Covenanter John Wilson: “You’ll win up yonder shortly, and get on all your bra’s.” It’s the Gaelic word *brèagha*, and eleven months later Wilson is martyred in Edinburgh’s Grassmarket.

Finally, when praying at Craigmyne in Galloway, Peden cries out: “There’s a bloody sacrifice put up this day at Wigtoun: these are the lads of Kirkelly.” This is the type of prophecy called *telegnosis*, knowing from afar. In describing the event, Peden’s biographer Patrick Walker offers this as proof: “These who lived near knew not of it till it was past. I had this account from William McDougal, an old man in Ferrytoun, near Wigtoun, worthy of credit, who was present.”

Next, six items in a section which I call ‘prophesies evil, with or without death’. The first of these is the earliest of all Peden’s prophecies. A woman has named him as the father of her child, and he declares that she ‘will pay dear for it in her life, and will make a dismal end’. She marries the real father, we are told; they are reduced to poverty, and she commits suicide.

Peden himself never marries, and is no special friend of women. Once among the planters in Ireland he says that a certain girl is with child and will murder it, and will be punished for it: all of which proves true, and she is burnt at Carrickfergus. More on witches later, but back now to the Bass, where a girl of 13-14 laughs at his public worship: “Ere long,” he says, “God shall write such a sudden, surprising judgment on thee, that shall stay thy laughing, and thou shalt not escape it.” Soon afterwards she is swept off the rock by a blast of wind and drowned.

The other three are about men. “No, no,” he says at breakfast once, “I will eat no more bread in this place; our landlord is an unhappy man, the devil will get him shortly, for he will hang himself.” And so he does. On another occasion he looks in the face of a man in Galloway and prophesies that he will not long keep the name of an honest man. Soon the man is made to flee for stealing sheep. Finally, he foretells that a man who does not join an appointed fast will have dreadful sins in his family and be contemptible. He ‘falls in adultery’ and his mother murders the child.

I call my next section ‘prophesies affliction, with or without death’. There are five here, and I will give them roughly in order of awfulness. Firstly, a woman scolds him, and he says it will not be long before she has a sore tongue or mouth. Her tongue and gums swell up so that she cannot eat.

Secondly, he says of Hugh Pinaneve, the Earl of Loudoun’s factor, who is in drink, that by midnight God will punish his blasphemous mouth and tongue in a frightening manner. By midnight he is dead, struck by sickness and pain with his mouth wide and his tongue hanging out.

The third one is set in Ireland. A man called Joseph Mitchelson has a commission to arrest Peden and bring him back to Scotland to face trial on charges of unlawful preaching, in other words he is what would be reckoned in Western movies a ‘bounty hunter’ of a more than usually despicable kind. In prayer one night Peden declares: “The Lord rebuke thee, Joseph Mitchelson, that thirsts and hunts for my life and blood, as a scent-dog does for birds; but God shall stop thee of thy designs, and smite thee at such a time and way, when thou art not aware, and make a miserable end.” Note that Peden is not praying for this to happen, he is stating that it *will* happen. Mitchelson falls over a brae and dies covered in vermin.

There were no police in those days, but the military made up for it. Still in Ireland, a certain colonel is hot on the trail, and Peden foretells his death by disease in a few days. "Which came to pass," says Walker, "for he died in great misery, vermine flowing from all the parts of his body, with such a noisom stink that few could enter the room."

Finally, a man refuses to let Peden sleep in his loft. "You will not let me have the shelter of your roof, but that house shall be your judgment and ruin." The gable falls and kills the man and his son, their bodies being frightfully crushed 'as some of them who were present told me', says Walker. There is a very strong appeal in all this to the widespread fear of one's body being physically unfit for resurrection on the Day of Judgement.

I call the next section 'consciousness of a presence, good or evil'. Most of these seven items are neither true vaticination (prophecy) nor telegnosis but simple gnosis. I will rattle through them. Peden knows that a man who was supposed to have set off for America is still in the country, and is proved right. He knows that there is an evil presence in a house although he cannot see the man in question, who is behind a partition. He warns against going to a particular house 'for the devil and his bairns are there'; the house proves to be full of enemies, and a woman commits suicide in it.

Then there are four in which the word 'witch' is used. The first may be an alternative telling of the previous one: Peden knows on approaching a house that there is a devil in it, and a woman comes out who is known as a witch. Then, once when about to preach in Gavin Wilson's house he says, "Cause your servants put out that woman with the pirnie plaid; I will not begin while she is here, for she is a witch."

Similarly, at a field preaching a woman at the front looks him in the face and he says, "How have you the confidence to look up? Look down to hell, whither you are going; the devil has a fast grip of you, and will not lose it." That woman, Walker tells us, lived and died under the *mala fama* of a witch. By contrast, on a very similar occasion he promises such a woman salvation, laying his hands on every side of her head, rocking her from side to side and saying, "Thou witch-wife, thou witch-wife, thou witch-wife, I offer Christ to thee."

It is a short step from this to my next section, 'knows the thoughts of those present'. There are four here. "We'll go to such an house; I have an errand there," he says one day. The goodwife turns out to be dying of doubts and fears. "Hewie, this is the errand I had here."

In a similar way, the other three involve his knowing the secret thoughts of women in his congregation. One is thinking for example of her sick son back home at the fireside, another of a calf that has been drowned. An attentive pastor will know such things, you may say, and so said people at the time; in fact, the woman of the drowned calf chides the lady of the house where Peden is staying for having told him about it. She replies: "I could not tell him that which I knew not." Walker adds, "And as little did he." In other words, Walker is at pains to demonstrate that Peden's knowledge is obtained by spiritual means.

We may call the final section, for lack of a better expression, 'prophesies political behaviour'. A minister rails against Peden in his meeting-house; Peden says by Saturday he will be as free of a meeting-house as he (Peden) is; by Saturday the authorities order him not to enter his meeting-house on pain of death. Peden tells a man that there will be a black account heard of him before long; he goes to Edinburgh and takes 'that black test', a reference to the oath of the loathed Test Act of 1681, which demanded acceptance of royal supremacy and adherence to protestantism as defined by the Confession of Faith of 1560, rather than the Covenants and the Westminster Confession.

Peden says of a communicant: "There comes the devil's rattle-bag, we do not want him here." And the man becomes an informer. Similarly, he foretells that a man called John Dick will defect and 'wound the testimony ere Lambass', and so he does. He prophesies twice that another man, Alexander Gordon of Kinstuir, will wound the Covenanting interest by shameful behaviour, but this is shameful behaviour of another kind. "The foresaid Mr Gordon, being in drink, went out to a combat and lost much blood, and going up stairs he lost his feet, and brained himself, where he died, in Edinburgh." Hardly appropriate behaviour for a warrior of the Covenant, and indeed perhaps Peden has simply noticed, as others did, that "Mr Gordon, and these with him, had always more of a fighting and contending spirit, by swords, guns, and tongues, than ever they had of a spirit of prayers and tears, which are the saints' chief weapons".

Finally there is the exemplary tale of two Kennedy lairds at Ballantrae. Kennedy of Glenour refuses to allow Peden's preaching tent on his land, presumably for fear of the 500-merk fine imposed on those who allow field conventicles on their property. "The tent," presumably a wooden structure like the Highland communion tents of the nineteenth century, "was lifted over a water, and set upon Kennedy laird of Kirkhill's ground, who hindered them not."

Peden wastes no time. In his preface to the first psalm he declares that Glenour's inheritance will vomit out his name, that his home will stand desolate, and that his offspring will come to poverty. "And the laird upon whose ground I now stand, he and his shall increase in riches and honour."

It comes to pass. Says Walker: "There is one Fergusson that possesses Glenour's lairdship, and his house standing without roof, and many know his children are come to very great poverty; and Kirkhill's grandson is now a baron, and his rent a year is about 10,000 merks, which was then about 2,000."