

## The death and resurrection of Alexander Peden

### The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

Not for nothing were the 1680s known to the Covenanters as ‘the Killing Time’. A resolution of the Privy Council, dated 22 November 1684, gave to officers of the Crown the power to execute anyone who refused to swear an oath acknowledging King Charles’ authority, provided two witnesses were present. This was the legislation under which James Claverhouse, ‘Bonnie Dundee’, carried out the judicial murder of John Brown of Priesthill in the parish of Muirkirk in Ayrshire on 1 May 1685.

It is the murder said to have been ‘seen’ from afar by the Rev. Alexander Peden, as I showed a few weeks ago. Brown was in fact the first man that Claverhouse ever executed without trial.

As Magnus Linklater and Christian Hesketh say in their book ‘For King and Conscience’, Claverhouse was sticking closely to the rules. A royal proclamation of May 1684 had listed Brown as wanted for his part in the battle of Bothwell Brig in 1679. Following the accession of Charles’ brother to the throne as James VII on 6 February 1685, an Act of Indemnity had wiped the slate clean, but Brown was excluded. “John Brown, an old man, in the fugitive roll, refuses the allegiance, and so ought not to have the benefit of the indemnity.”

By far the earliest account of Brown’s murder is the report written two days later by Claverhouse himself. It does not disagree in essentials with Covenanting tradition. “On Friday last, amongst the hills betwixt Douglas and the Plellands, we pursued two fellows a great way through the mosses, and in end seized them. They had no arms about them and denied they had any, but being asked if they would take the abjuration, the eldest of the two, called John Brown, refused it, nor would he swear not to rise in arms against the King, but said he knew no King; upon which, and there being found bullet and match in his house and treasonable papers, I caused shoot him dead, which he suffered very unconcernedly.”

Claverhouse does not tell us, as tradition does, that Brown was shot in front of his wife and children. But the fact that his house was searched after the arrest suggests that the allegation is true.

My reason for going over this ground a second time is to emphasise that Peden’s prophecies emerged from a climate of violence, repression and fear. As an illegal preacher he lived on the edge of society, moving about in secret from parish to parish, sleeping in caves, ‘safe’ houses or out on the hills. One is reminded a little of the Prince in the heather, except that every so often Peden emerged to preach, marry and baptise before a congregation in a house or in the fields, with all the risks which that entailed. His world was full of spies and whispering, his timing had to be right, his means of escape guaranteed.

The tension of leading a life like this clearly sharpened Peden’s perception of the worlds both of man and of the supernatural, nor is there any knowing how his mind might have been affected by his experiences. He comes across to us as weird. In fact he deliberately cultivated an aura of ambiguity. For a quick getaway, his colleague James Renwick relied on a swift horse which stood by him as he preached; Peden, by contrast, chose to wear a mask.

The mask survives, and can be seen in the National Museum in Edinburgh. It is an extraordinary affair of leather with horsehair left on at one end to simulate a very realistic beard and moustache, a rounded cover for the nose, holes for the eyes with bushy strips of leather for the eyebrows, and a flowing black wig attached by a canvas headband. Linklater and Hesketh say that it was used by Peden’s ‘disciples’ to suggest that sometimes its owner was in two places at once. “When worn by a follower at night and seen only through a window by candlelight, it could deceive people into reporting his presence in one part of the country while he was preaching in another.”

Whether this means that the mask was meant to resemble Peden’s actual appearance is unclear; perhaps it is a question not worth asking. What *are* worth pointing to I think are the supernatural associations of masks of this kind in Scotland. They were worn at Hallowe’en, the pre-Christian festival of the otherworld and of the dead, which was as much kept by the Covenanting people of Galloway and Carrick as by anyone else. Also connected very strongly with Hallowe’en is the tradition of prophecy, Hallowe’en offering the principal crack in time through which the future could be perceived. Did Peden ever use the mask to lend weight to his prophecies? Or did his coincidental use of the mask for other purposes lend authority to his predictions in the minds of the people? I don’t know the answers to those questions, but I am sure that a religious man who regularly hid from his enemies behind a mask was likely to have a particularly intense prayer life.

In my last few articles I attempted to classify the 109 prophecies by Peden which appear in Patrick Walker’s ‘Six Saints of the Covenant’. There remains only one final category, which I call ‘personal’. Into it I put six prophecies which have mainly to do with Peden’s day-to-day relationship with the supernatural, and eight which have to do with his death and burial. I will take the latter first, then finish off with the former, which shed some light on the man’s spirit-life and thus on the nature of his prophetic gift.

Peden’s death is well flagged up. “James, ye and I will never meet again in time,” he says to James Cubison. On 2 February 1685, speaking to John Kilpatrick, he declares that both of them will shortly be in heaven — his own soul first, because although his enemies will take his body, he will be first in heaven; John’s body first, because he will be allowed to rest in peace in his grave. “But I am very indifferent, John, for I know my body shall be among the dust of the martyrs; and though they should take my old bones and make whistles of them, they will all be gathered together in the morning of the resurrection.”

As his death from illness approaches, the prophecies come thick and fast. If he is buried once, he says to his followers, they may doubt all that he has foretold, but if he is buried more than once, they may be sure that what he has said will come to pass. He tells them that they should bury him beside his old friend Richard Cameron but that he knows they will not do it. They will be angry at where he is buried, he adds, but he

orders them not to lift his corpse. No matter where he is buried he will be lifted again, and he says what will happen to the man who raises his corpse. "1. He should get a great fall from a house. 2. He should fall in adultery. 3. In theft, and for these he should leave the land. 4. Make a melancholly end abroad for murder." All this, says Walker, duly comes to pass.

On 26 January 1686 Peden, now living in a cave which has been dug for him close to his brother's house in the Ayrshire parish of Sorn, says: "Within 48 hours I will be beyond the reach of all the devil's temptations, and his instruments in hell and on earth, and they shall trouble me no more." It is true. He dies on 28 January, and is buried beside other martyrs in the tomb of David Boswell of Auchinleck. "The enemies got notice of his death and burial," says Walker, "sent a troop of dragoons, and lifted his corps, and carried them two miles to Cumnock gallows-foot, and buried him there, after 40 days being in the grave."

It represents a clear attempt by tradition to sanctify Peden, since according to Acts 1: 3 there were 40 days between the Resurrection and the Ascension. Walker also tells a familiar-sounding tale of two of the dragoons who fetched the body. Quartered in the house of Walker's friend James Gray in Cambusnethan, they were "frighted in their sleep", and "started up, and clapped their hands, crying, 'Peden, Peden.'"

The same dragoons told Gray that they had opened Peden's coffin out of curiosity, "and yet they had no smell, though he had been 40 days dead". A different account tells us that the dragoons, under a Lt Murray, came to the tomb, broke open the coffin, tore the winding-sheet and compelled the people of Sorn to declare on oath if they knew it was Peden's body. The body was 'mortified', that is, perished. Murray intended to subject the corpse to judicial hanging by suspending it from the gibbet on chains, but was dissuaded by the Countess of Dumfries and Lady Auchinleck; he is, I take it, the barbarian whose 'melancholly end' Peden foretold.

It is easy to see that, in a jumbled way, many of the motifs of Christ's death and resurrection are present here, and it is interesting that the historian Robert Wodrow (1679-1734) is at pains to confirm that Peden had prophesied these things. "This raising him after he was buried, Mr Peden, before his death, did very positively foretell before several witnesses, some of whom are yet alive who were present, from whom I have it, else I should not have noticed this here."

It seems that in Peden we have been dealing with a man who said many things in life that were strange but true, who prayed much, could read human hearts, manipulated people, learnt to survive, and triumphed over his enemies by dying in a bed of sorts. Let me finish then as promised by listing some examples of his day-to-day relationship with the supernatural. On one occasion he was stopped from going to preach, or so he claimed, by 'a darkning damping cloud' overwhelming him. On another he appears to have spent a night physically wrestling with the devil in a way which is more familiar nowadays in anecdotes told in Gaelic than in English. He and John Clark, 'Little John', are starving in a cave in Galloway, and he says: "John, better be thrust through with the sword than pine away with hunger — the earth and the fulness thereof belongs to my Master, and I have a right to as much of it as will keep me from fainting in his service."

John is unwilling at first to go for food. "Sir, I am not willing to leave you in this place your alone" (reflecting Gaelic *'ad aonar* no doubt), "for some have been frightened by the devil in this cave."

Sure enough, when John comes back Peden says, "John, it is very hard living in this world, incarnate devils above the earth, and devils beneath the earth; the devil has been here since ye went away; I have sent him off in haste, we'll be no more troubled with him this night."

One day Peden comes back to where his companions have been asleep in a sheep-house, singing the 32nd Psalm from verse 7, "Thou art my hiding place, thou shalt from trouble keep me free, thou with songs of deliverance about shalt compass me." He finishes with the same verse. "These," he says, "are sweet lines, which I got at the burn-side this morning, and we'll get mo" (Gaelic *mó*, more) "tomorrow, and so we'll get daily provision." The coming of scripture to the mind can be regarded as a message from heaven; all the more is this the case when no Bible is to hand, more still when no Bible exists in the language — as was the case if the language was Gaelic, which it might have been.

On two separate occasions Peden speaks to women of the nature of prophetic inspiration. One woman's husband has been sentenced to transportation along with Peden and others; Peden assures her that the sentence will not be carried out. "Tis no wonder you be troubled with your husband's going to the Plantations, but if any of us go there at this time the Lord never spake by me."

The other, Mrs Mary Maxwell, has brought her child to Peden for baptism. In his preliminary discourse he prophesies a black day upon Ireland, sad days upon Scotland, then good days. Mrs Maxwell is wondering how Peden can know such things when Peden shakes his hand at her and cries out: "Woman, thou art thinking and wondring within thy self, whether I be speaking those things out of the visions of mine own head, or if I be taught by the Spirit of God; but I tell thee, woman, thou shalt live and see that I am not mistaken."

Being still weak from childbirth (as she later told Walker), she nearly falls off her chair in fright.