

On the sneck of the door

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

“THE Lord thought it. I said it. And it was done.” That, if I remember correctly (I have forgotten the source), was the succinct explanation of prophetic inspiration supplied by the Rev. Lachlan Mackenzie of Lochcarron (1754-1819), one of the most celebrated of Highland seers.

It has long made me feel that I would like to know more of Maighstir Lachlann’s prophecies. Unlike Alexander Peden, Mgr Lachlann’s memory has not enjoyed the luxury of a biographer who lovingly interviewed everyone he could find who had known him or who had experienced the strength of his gaze or the strivings of his extraordinary soul.

It is necessary therefore to search for the prophecies here and there amongst the religious writings of the Highlands, and put them together. In one such source, the Rev. Norman C Macfarlane’s ‘Apostles of the North’, which was reprinted recently by the Stornoway Religious Bookshop, I found the following: “Mister Lachlan and Alexander Peden, the great Covenanter, were born under the same star. They were prophets of the saintliest order, Enochs who walked in step with God.”

Macfarlane goes on: “In the Highlands, ‘Second Sight’ was more or less an unrare gift. Some thought the devil was its father. Others thought it came from God. There are always counterfeits of the highest things, but no one would for a moment suppose it was the counterfeit that fell like a mantle on Lachlan Mackenzie.”

It seems right, then, for me to make a start with the little I have got so far, and make Mackenzie follow Peden directly. And you know, they did have things clearly in common. It was not that Mackenzie lived in turbulent times, in fact he led the most peaceful of lives. He was probably the only parish minister in Scotland who, in responding to Sir John Sinclair’s request for a description of his parish to include in the famous ‘Statistical Account’, put some of it in verse; one stanza went like this:

*The Parson has no horse nor farm,
Nor goat, nor watch, nor wife;
Without an augmentation, too,
He leads a happy life.*

No, it was his soul that was troubled, in some very obvious ways. He was, as Macfarlane explains, a bunch of nerves. Where Peden was weird, Mackenzie was eccentric. They both relied so utterly on the Holy Spirit for the matter of their preaching that sometimes, when the Holy Spirit chose, they had nothing to say. Once Mackenzie was overheard pacing his garden restlessly on a Saturday saying, “I have nothing, I have nothing.” The man who heard him called helpfully over the wall, “The cask-filler carries the smell of the oil!” Meaning, presumably, that Mgr Lachlann had filled so many souls with heavenly treasure in the past that on this occasion a few stray remarks would be more than adequate.

Mgr Lachlann was certainly a new kind of Highland hero. It was said of him that he was afraid to enter a boat for fear it would be swamped, and would not ride a pony unless his servant held the reins and walked in front. He bathed in the sea several times a day in summer, and once a day in winter, and would enter the pulpit wearing his entire wardrobe — ‘three vests over which were two coats, a greatcoat and a cloak’ — even on a hot summer’s day.

Some late-twentieth-century ideas about keeping fit are obviously present here, but I think it also has something to do with ensuring a flow of ideas through his brain when he stood most in need of them. I think we can regard it as the vertical, public and godly equivalent of what we are told the poets used to do, namely, lie in a darkened room with a stone on their chests and plaids about their heads, ‘pumping their brains for rhetorical encomium or panegyric’ as Martin Martin put it.

And of course, Mgr Lachlann was a poet. In the Highlands at least, poetry and prophecy went hand in hand. This is a very ancient thing. Roman writers tell us that the druids uttered their prophecies in verse. Medieval Irish writers tell us that in the beginning the highest and most important function of poetry was prophecy. Christianity broke the link, but only up to a point. There is a poem ascribed to Calum Cille which goes, if I remember right,

*Mise Colum Cille cáidh,
Atá im fhile ’s im phríomhfháidh.*

(‘I am splendid Calum Cille, / I’m a chief poet and top prophet’). Among the terms regularly used to describe the learned poets of Gaelic Scotland down to the seventeenth century were *draoidh* (‘druid’) and *fáidh* (‘prophet’). Both poetry and prophecy required a heightened spiritual awareness. Peden was not a poet, yet his utterances were poetic, the rhythms of his speech and his tendency to rhyme being caught by Stevenson and put to use in his novels. The Rev. John Morrison, the Petty Seer (1701-74), whose prophecies I outlined on this page a long time ago, was a fiddler and maker of songs, as was his grandfather, John Morrison of Bragar, who wrote ‘A Descriptione of the Lews’ and uttered memorable sayings in verse, many of which have been printed, one even finding its way into Dwelly’s dictionary under *fidaidh*.

One of the most recent of all Highland prophets, Hector Mackinnon from Berneray, Harris (1886-1954), was very much a poet; his collected hymns, 98 in number, were published as recently as 1990 by the Stornoway Religious Bookshop under the title ‘An Neamhnaid Luachmhor’, and as the Rev. Angus

Macfarlane points out in his introduction to that book, *Se duine a bha air leth spioradail 'na inntinn a bha ann, agus a bha air fhaighinn tric ann an comann an Tighearna gu h-uaigheach agus gu follaiseach. Mar thoradh air a-sin bha an Tighearna a' foillseachadh dha ro-làimh nithean a bha gu àite a ghabhail.* "He was a person who was very spiritual in his mind, and who was often found in the Lord's company both in private and in public. As a result of that the Lord revealed to him beforehand things that were to take place."

Mgr Lachlann's English poetry can be found in books like his 'Redemption and other Poems' and 'Sermons and Verses'; he was a poet in Gaelic too, as one anecdote makes clear. But it's his prophecies that concern us here. I have found five so far, in a memoir by his sister Ann, published in James Campbell's 'The Rev. Mr Lachlan of Lochcarron' (1928), which I had not known about until I came across it in Stornoway Public Library, and in 'Apostles of the North'. Here they are. I will arrange them as I did Peden's, moving from affairs of state to the daily worries of ordinary people.

Firstly, Mgr Lachlann preaches against clearances, and foretells that 'the system will be altered, or the sheep will be destroyed in a way not expected in Scotland'. He does not explain the nature of the alteration, but when a man tells him that thousands of sheep have been lost in a snowstorm, and that his prediction is thus being fulfilled, Mgr Lachlann replies that this is not the sort of change he anticipates. "I am not looking to present appearances — it is neither the snow of winter, nor such heat as will dry the tongue of the raven, that will bring deliverance from the system of oppression, and grinding the face of the poor. But if the people of God be earnest and faithful in prayer, the deliverance will come sooner than it arrived to the children of Israel in Babylon."

This is surely an unfulfilled prophecy, and it is interesting that the prophet himself refuses to accept that it is being fulfilled. By the way the raven which makes it so poetic is that of the well-known saying, *Am fitheach a' cur a-mach a theanga leis an teas.* "The raven putting out his tongue for heat."

Secondly, once on the Kessock ferry there is a discussion about the current vacancy in the parish of Redcastle. One man, a minister, declares that the matter is decided, and that a certain person is to get the presentation. To his surprise, another man says, "That is impossible."

"How do you know?"

"Because Mr Lachlan said that the gospel would come to Redcastle," says the man, meaning of course that the new minister will be an evangelical and not a moderate.

The minister on the boat, obviously a moderate himself, casts scorn on this. "What did Mr Lachlan know?" he says. But his man does not get the presentation after all, and Redcastle is eventually graced by one of the greatest evangelicals of his day, the Rev. John Kennedy.

Thirdly, one Sabbath Mgr Lachlann says from the pulpit: "Lochcarron young men, go to your knees this evening, and be earnest at the throne of grace. Great is your need to be so. A great breach is to be made upon you. There are five young men present here today that shall be in eternity before this day six weeks, and none of them above 28 years of age." That is his sister Ann's version; according to Norman Macfarlane's Mgr Lachlann says that five young men present in church will be in Eternity before next Sabbath. According to Macfarlane, five young members of the congregation are drowned within the week; Ann's informant, a road contractor, says that three young men working for himself on the high road died suddenly, while the other two died in other parts of the parish, all within five weeks. "They were all present that day in the church — none of them above 28 years of age."

Fourthly, one morning Mgr Lachlann gets out of bed and calls his servant to harness the pony. They set off, the servant holding the bridle as usual. After travelling for miles across the moor they come to a house. They knock and are called in in the usual way. They find a sick man in the bed while his wife paces the earthen floor. "Give me what you have in your breast," says Mgr Lachlann.

"How do you know I have anything in my breast?" she replies.

"I know well, for I have suffered deeply over what you are hiding."

After a few more exchanges she reluctantly produces a razor with which she has been planning to dispatch her husband.

Finally, we meet an example of a kind of telegnosis so much practised by Peden. A woman in Inverness is at home labouring under great temptations. On a Saturday she hears that Mgr Lachlann is to preach the following day at Kiltarlity. Full of anguish and indecision, her hand somehow falls on the sneck of the door. That is it — off she goes, walks the twelve miles, and settles down for the sermon. "There is a poor soul here," says Mgr Lachlann, "whose temptations are very peculiar. You did three things . . ."

He describes the three things; we are not told what they are, only that the woman is amazed to hear what no fellow-creature could know. Then he says, "At last you desperately put your hand on the sneck of the door." And he gives directions for consolation which provide the very soul-healing that she needs.