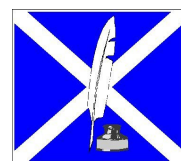


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*Beneath the rule of men entirely great
The pen is mightier than the sword*



Coinneach Odhar

Without a doubt the true Highland Gael speaks of Coinneach Odhar with a reverence that is bettered only by a reference to God himself. It matters little to the Gael whether authenticated evidence exists, or not, as he or she quotes the seer's prophecies, past or yet to be fulfilled, with conviction that is hard to deny and leaves listeners very intrigued indeed.

Although Coinneach's birth place has never been established beyond doubt, it is generally accepted by early writers, to be on the Isle of Skye at a place called Bailena-Cille in the Parish of Uig. His mother was a cattle herder and tended her kine on land overlooking the local burial ground. One evening as she drove her charges homeward she was astonished to see numerous graves open up and apparitions, young and old, rise up and depart in all directions. Years before, her maternal grandmother had told her that if a person laid a clef stick across a grave entrance, the spirit of the dead was barred from re-entry. Mairi recalled this advice and laid her distaff lengthwise over the nearest grave, vowing to return before dawn next day.

Next morning as Mairi made her way to the sacred acre, and the sea haar swirled inland she became aware of a distant wailing. Her blood ran cold as an apparition appeared out of the mist, yet Mairi was struck dumb by its Nordic beauty. Bedecked in court finery and with a gold clasp gathering fair locks over her left shoulder, the apparition begged Mairi to remove the offending timber from her tomb, as she had to enter the land of the dead before sunrise.

In return for the favour she offered Coinneach's mother a magic stone, round, smooth and white, the stone had a hole in its center. A deal was struck and the offending staff was removed then the Princess disappeared without further communication. When Mairi recovered from her trance she picked up the talisman then clutching it tightly, hurried home. Years passed at the Uig croft while the magic stone lay a top of the door lintel, gathering dust. On his seventh birthday Coinneach was driven by an urge to examine the object, he raised to his left eye and looked at the world through the aperture. Immediately that optic was struck blind for normal vision, although Coinneach could see the future clearly enough when he looked with it through the magic stone's aperture. One of the first recorded predictions the boy made was to tell of a whale that would be stranded in a cave on the west coast of Skye. When this prediction proved to be correct Coinneach's parents were amazed. Soon however he was able to astound the whole population of the island, with his accurate foretelling of future events.

Kenneth Mackenzie, the Third Earl of Seaforth, living in the County of Ross also held lands on the Island of Skye, and when he heard of Coinneach's prowess took him to work at Brahan Castle, near Dingwall. The young seer was quick witted and often bettered his superiors with his humour and repartee, never-the-less invitations to the castle were common place and he often delighted guests with his glimpses of the future.

On the last occasion he had to visit the castle was when the Earl was visiting Paris on business. The Earl extended his sojourn there by several weeks and his wife Isabella became anxious then called for the Brahan Seer, as he was now known, to seek news of her husband. What Coinneach saw in his vision of Paris he did not want to relate other than to say the earl was well and merry. Isabella however insisted and at last was told the Earl, her husband was flirting with the ladies of the court. The Countess flew into a rage and called the seer a liar and said that his remarks defamed her husband's good name. There and then she vowed the direst punishment on Coinneach. Her sentence was that he should be burnt in a barrel of tar.

Coinneach's pleading for his life fell on deaf ears but before the estate's vassals could lay hands on him he predicted yet again. Then he threw his magic stone into the Loch of Ussie and said that it would lie there until a person with two navels, or one with twelve fingers and twelve toes, would come along and find it. In his last prediction Coinneach foretold of the fall of the House of Seaforth, in the following manner;- In the future I see the doom of the House of Seaforth, when their line will end in extinction and at a time when a deaf and dumb Lord will sit at Brahan Castle. He will sire four sons, all of whom shall precede him to the grave, leaving him to die mourning and his line to end forever. All his possessions will pass to a white hood(ed) lassie from the East, who will kill her sister.

As a sign, four great Highland Lairds will be known to Seaforth, one of which will be buck-toothed, one hare lipped, one half-witted and the other a stammerer. When these things come to pass Seaforth will know his sons are condemned to the grave and his lands will pass to a stranger. Notwithstanding and under the direct orders of Lady Isabella, Countess of Seaforth, Coinneach was bound and transported to the Ness of Chanory on the Black Isle, where he was murdered. The foul deed was witnessed by Lady Isabella's retainers and members of the local clergy. The execution was particularly brutal as the barrel of tar was sluggish to burn. Just before the seer was plunged headlong into the flames the demented Countess had one last go at him by saying, "One thing sure, you will never go heaven."

Coinneach replied that if she looked up to the sky while he was being incinerated she would see a raven and a dove passing overhead. "If the raven lands first then I will be in Hell but if the dove alights first then I am in Heaven." As the remains of Coinneach's funeral pyre cooled, as predicted two birds passed overhead, a black raven and a snow white dove. The dove peeled off and landed on the still warm embers, while the raven carried on its way.

Eventually the erring Earl returned from Paris and lived in the castle until in 1678 when he was 'gathered unto his fathers'. His heir the fourth Earl married the daughter of the Marquis of Powis. Years later when their first born inherited the title and then he took part in the 1715 rebellion, the estate was forfeit. However in 1726 the crown restored the

estate to the Mackenzie and from then on he and his family lived in a style befitting Highland gentlefolk.

A courtesy title, the Lord of Fortrose was bestowed on the 'son of the castle' who became a representative in Parliament for his native County of Ross, until in 1771 the peerage was restored, but by 1783 the Earl was dead. The title passed to a cousin who was a grandson of the Third Earl and his Countess, Lady Isabella. Unfortunately the poor man only held on to the title for two years before being killed at sea. He was succeeded by a younger brother, Francis Humberston Mackenzie and it was during the lifetime of this Earl of Seaforth that Coinneach's prophecy became factual.

Until about the age of twelve Francis had all his faculties but after contracting Scarlet Fever he was left stone deaf. Despite this handicap the Earl went on to have a distinguished career, becoming Baron Seaforth of Kintail and in 1797 and the Governor of Barbados in 1800. He married a clergyman's daughter, Mary Proby, the marriage produced ten of a family, six daughters and four sons. At the beginning all appeared to be well but as one son after another succumbed the Earl gave up the gift of speech entirely, thus becoming both deaf and dumb as foretold all these years before, by the Brahan Seer. At this time, as predicted by Coinneach, four great Lairds were known to Seaforth, and each one had a peculiarity. When the last of the Caberfeidh died on January 11th 1815 many people thought that at time the Brahan Seer's prophecies had been fulfilled, but not quite.

The Hon Mary Frederica Mackenzie, eldest surviving daughter of the Earl of Seaforth, had married Sir Samuel Hood Bt. KB. The admiral passed away in the service of his country while in Indian waters, leaving his widow to return to Brahan Castle and her inheritance. So a white hood(ed) lassie from the East claimed the title as predicted. Later the widow, the Hon Mary, was to wed a Mr. J. A. Stewart, grandson of the Sixth Earl of Galloway. The bridegroom adopted the name of Mackenzie and was to lord over the Seaforth Estates, a stranger indeed. Then an even a stranger occurrence took place sometime after the wedding. When out driving her sister around the estate, Mrs. Stewart lost control of the pony and trap then it capsized and threw both ladies to the ground. Mary's sister, the Hon Caroline, died from the injuries she sustained, thus making the dun haired Kenneth's prediction right to the letter.

Even today there still abounds in the Highlands of Scotland umpteen predictions, mostly attributed to Coinneach Odhar waiting to be fulfilled, while over the aeons of time, many other recorded instances can be read. So it may be wrong for any writer to claim that his/her version is the only true recording. That is why the legend of Coinneach Odhar still lives on in the hearts and minds of the true Highland Gael.

Coinneach Odhar, or the Brahan Seer, retains an everlasting fascination for Highland folk after so many of his predictions have come true and many more yet to be proved. Euillean Ross, Editor of the Independent Highlander takes a short and close look at the extraordinary Highland Prophet's life. ©

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