

Scotland's Nostradamus

The man associated with the legend of the Brahan Seer, Coinneach Odhar, probably lived from around 1530 until about 1577: or, by some accounts, from around 1650 to around 1675. This may seem a little odd, but then much associated with this story is a little odd.

The man often referred to as *Scotland's Nostradamus* is first mentioned in print in 1769. Thomas Pennant says, in his book *A Tour in Scotland: "Every country has its prophets... and the Highlands their Kenneth Odhar."* But the phrase "*Brahan Seer*" was first used in print only in Alexander Mackenzie's 1877 bestselling book, *The Prophecies of the Brahan Seer*. Here the Seer is also known as Coinneach Odhar Fiosaiche or as Kenneth Mackenzie. Most of what is "known" today about the Brahan Seer and his prophecies has no written basis earlier than Alexander Mackenzie's book, in which he said he had collected together oral stories told in Gaelic about the Seer across the Highlands over the previous two hundred years, translated them, and recorded them for posterity.

According to this version of history, Coinneach Odhar was born in Uig on the Isle of Lewis. He later moved to Easter Ross and lived near Loch Ussie between Strathpeffer and Dingwall, working as a laborer on the estates around Brahan Castle (which was demolished in 1953), seat of Earls of Seaforth. While working there, Coinneach Odhar was presumably spending his spare time making predictions to those around him, that were then passed by word of mouth over the following two centuries or so, until gathered together in 1877.

He certainly seems to have achieved a considerable reputation for his *Second Sight*. The story goes that in about 1675, Lady Isabella Seaforth, the wife of Kenneth Mor Mackenzie, 3rd Earl of Seaforth, summoned Coinneach Odhar and asked him to tell her news about her husband, who was in Paris at the time. He told her that her husband was well, but Lady Isabella proceeded to question him more closely about who her husband was with and what he was doing. When Coinneach Odhar eventually told her that he had seen her husband dallying in Paris with a lady who was more attractive than Lady Isabella herself, Lady Isabella flew into a fury and chose to blame the messenger for news she believed to be true. She accused Coinneach Odhar of defaming her husband, and had him taken to Chanonry Point near Fortrose and burned alive in a barrel of tar. A plaque and a stone mark the spot where this is said to have taken place.

There are a number of problems with this story. The first is that no-one at the time saw fit to record what had happened, and it is especially significant that no mention, of what would have been a major talking point in the wider area, is made in the diaries of the Brodie family of Brodie Castle, a family that had little reason to like Lady Isabella Seaforth. The minister of a nearby parish also kept a diary during this period, and, again, made no mention of an event he would certainly have known about and would have had strong views about.

So who was Coinneach Odhar? Take things back a century further, to the 1560s. Catherine Ross of Balnagowan married Robert Mor Munro of Foulis. Robert had six children by his first wife, and Catherine gave him six more. Catherine was keen that her sons should inherit her husband's wealth and titles rather than their older step-brothers. She therefore allegedly recruited 26 witches to do away with the opposition. When that didn't work, she obtained the poison she needed to do the job from Coinneach Odhar or *Keanoch Ower* or *Kennoch Owir*, who seems to have been some sort of local mystic or healer. Catherine apparently achieved some of her aims, but failed to cover her tracks. In October 1577 a warrant was issued in Edinburgh for the arrest of 26 women and 6 men for "*diabolical practices of magic, enchantment, murder, homicide and other offences*". A trial followed in January 1578, and following that at least two of the women involved were burned as witches at Chanonry Point. It is not certain what became of Coinneach Odhar, but he may have been executed at the same time.

Pulling these rather contradictory strands together suggests that when Alexander Mackenzie was gathering material for his 1877 book, *The Prophecies of the Brahan Seer* he uncovered a garbled version of the story involving Catherine Ross of Balnagowan and Coinneach Odhar, displaced it forwards in time by a century, and introduced Lady Isabella Seaforth as the anti-heroine. Having constructed a credible biography for his *Brahan Seer*, Alexander Mackenzie then attributed to him every prophecy he had come across during his research into oral folk-tales: though, in fairness to Mackenzie, most had already become attached to Coinneach Odhar.

And what of the prophecies of the Brahan Seer? There have to be question marks raised because these prophecies were, at best, kept alive by word of mouth for at least two hundred years before being committed to paper: and some simply seem to fall within the category of what today would be called "urban myth". In particular, at the time of his execution by Lady Isabella Seaforth, the Seer was said to have made a number of prophecies about her family and about Brahan Castle, which many believe have since come true. If Coinneach Odhar had actually lived in the 1500s, then he had no reason to make this group of prophecies: indeed, Brahan Castle was only built in the early 1600s.

On the other hand, however, even if you take the most cynical view, that you can't absolutely rely on any particular prophecy having existed before 1877, there are a number which many believe to have come true since. Here, as with Nostradamus, it comes down to personal belief about whether any particular set of word applies to a particular modern event... or not. On balance, we are struck by the fact that "predictions" said to be made about events before the late 1800s (such as the Battle of Culloden and Strathpeffer becoming a health spa) are expressed in a much more specific way than those which are said to relate to events since then. At very best, it seems to us that in writing his bestselling book in 1877, Alexander Mackenzie tightened up some of the prophecies he had uncovered in the oral tradition using the benefit of hindsight: at worst he simply spiced-up his book to make it sell better by adding in some invented "predictions" obviously relating to events that took place after Coinneach Odhar's death but before 1877.

