THE SEER · Davidson

Hilda Ellis Davidson, Introduction to The Seer in Celtic and Other Traditions, John Donald, Edinburgh, 1989.

John MacInnes, The Seer in Gaelic Tradition.

Eilidh Watt, Some Personal Experiences of the Second Sight.

West Highland Free Press article on the Sight by Ronald Black. For my own writing on the matter, see Poacher's Pilgrimage (Birlinn 2016) and its theological spinoff, Island Spirituality (Islands Book Trust, 2013, there's a free pdf online).

[Dr John MacInnes was born in the Isle of Lewis and raised in the Isle of Raasay off Skye. Eilidh Watt was a native Gaelic speaker from the Isle of Skye.]

The Seer in Celtic and Other Traditions

Edited by

Hilda Ellis Davidson

THE SEER
Studies in the Celtic Tradition of the Second Sight

Beginning with Scotland, this collection of essays examines various manifestations of the power to see what is normally hidden, in different periods and societies. It ranges from the seers of ancient Israel to the personal experiences of a gifted woman from Skye, and from the powers attributed to St Columba in the 6th century to a flourishing new cult in Japan which aims at healing psychosomatic illness attributed to the attacks of infant ghosts who were victims of abortion. The volume presents the results of scholarly investigation without demanding specialised knowledge from the reader.

ISBN 0 85976 259 9

Jacket design by David Lang

JOHN DONALD PUBLISHERS LTD
138 St Stephen Street
Edinburgh EH3 5AA

U.K. Price £20.00

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Introduction

Hilda Ellis Davidson

A simple definition of Second Sight is given by Samuel Johnson in his account of the journey he made with James Boswell to the Hebrides in 1773:[1]

> An impression made either by the mind upon the eye, or by the eye upon the mind, by which things distant or future are perceived, and seen as if they were present.

This appears to be based on an earlier account, supported by many examples, by Martin Martin, a gentleman of Skye, published in 1703.[2] Martin travelled in the Western Isles and recorded what he observed of the life of the inhabitants and the features of the landscape. He gave a short paper on strange phenomena there to the Royal Society in 1697,[3] but here makes no mention of the Second Sight. The book produced a few years later, however, dedicated to Prince George of Denmark, contains a long section entitled 'An account of the Second Sight in Irish called Taish', some of which is quoted on p.13f. below. This aroused considerable interest among learned men of the time. Johnson's father gave him a copy in his boyhood, and Boswell borrowed one from the Advocates' Library in Edinburgh to take on their journey; although Johnson thought poorly of Martin as a writer, he had evidently studied him with great thoroughness.[4]

Martin's definition of Second Sight was vaguer than Johnson's, but he goes on to tell much that Johnson does not. Johnson knew no Gaelic, and indeed despised it as 'the rude speech of a barbarous people who had few thoughts to express', so that he was unable to receive information at first hand. 'There is one living in Skye with whom we would have gladly conversed', he informs us, 'but he was very gross and ignorant, and knew no English.' Martin, on the other hand, though in his Royal Society paper he shows himself somewhat naive,[5] was clearly familiar with the phenomenon and witnessed many examples of it.

Johnson wished to find out for himself how far the claims made by Martin and other writers from Scotland were capable of proof, and he satisfied himself that a belief in Second Sight was indeed shared by 'Islanders of all degrees, whether of rank or understanding, except the Ministers, who universally deny it, in consequence of a system against

conviction'. He used some of Martin's arguments in refuting their objections. However, he was left with a feeling of uncertainty regarding the Second Sight, since he became increasingly doubtful of the reliability of his informants when their information on other subjects proved inaccurate. He was also rendered uneasy because 'this faculty of seeing things out of sight is local and common useless . . . without any visible reason or perceptible benefit', and because it was mainly 'the mean and ignorant who seemed to possess it'. So he came away in the end without any firm conviction, though 'willing to believe'.

The testimony of Dr Johnson, sensible, downright and honest as it is, shows the difficulties confronting a learned man from a predominantly literary background who sets out to explore evidence which his education and scale of values prevent him from fully appreciating. The kind of proof he and his contemporaries sought was simply not available, and many others since Johnson have been similarly frustrated. Yet he admitted that the firm belief in the powers of the seers was established among educated men in Scotland as well as the simple, and although he met few men of education with such powers, he admitted that 'on such men it has sometimes fallen'.[6] In more civilised parts of Scotland he was assured that the Second Sight 'is wearing away with other superstitions, and that its reality is no longer supposed but by the grossest people', but he could not vouch for this after his journey to the islands.

In this collection of papers, an attempt has been made to consider various manifestations of this strange and irrational power which Johnson calls 'a mode of seeing superadded to that which nature generally bestows'. We begin appropriately with the Scottish Highlands, where records of Second Sight aroused such interest in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and the material presented comes both from recent experience and the remote past. John MacInnes, who has worked on oral literature and popular beliefs in Scotland for many years, and himself comes from a family in which many have possessed the gift, discusses Gaelic traditions concerning seers. His paper contains valuable new material, and he stresses one important factor, the seer's function as a creative artist and 'the products of his visions as art-forms . . . shaped by the expectations of society and its aesthetic needs'. This was a view utterly beyond the comprehension of Johnson in the eighteenth century. Several points in this paper are further illustrated by the evidence of Eilidh Watt, who has herself experienced this 'mode of seeing' since girlhood. Unlike the seers in Skye with whom Johnson failed to communicate, she is both articulate and objective, and one feels that such an honest account of personal experience would have been greatly valued by him. Other papers range from naive examples of Second Sight such as were related to Johnson and

Boswell to claims of more elaborate revelations and impressive powers in various periods and societies.

Scholars of Johnson's time seem to have regarded the Second Sight as something separate from divination and prophecy, in spite of their familiarity with the Bible and the classics. Robert Kirk in *The Secret Commonwealth*, written about 1691, was well aware of Biblical parallels, but his book was not published until 1815, although there were copies in circulation.[7] A distinction may be made between seer and diviner when the seer's visions come suddenly and unsought, as in Martin's account, and no special technique is used to inspire them. Therefore the Scottish seers made no profit from their revelations, and their gift was not considered a valuable one. Johnson shrewdly takes up this point: 'They have no temptation to feign, and their hearers no motive to encourage the imposture'. But this may not always have been the case, since it is natural for people to seek out those thought to possess special knowledge to solve their problems for them, and in many cultures natural seers strive to gain control over their power to see what is hidden, so that they can summon it at will. While it is evident that Eilidh Watt has felt no such urge, Venetia Newall's paper on professional seers among Punjabi immigrants in Britain shows how profitable a business can be built up today by genuine or pretended gifts of this kind. This is backed by advertisements in newspapers, and vast numbers of clients are prepared to pay large sums of money in return for hope of help. An even more surprising manifestation of the possibilities of divination used for healing is that described by Carmen Blacker in her account of the new cult of child embryos in Japan. This has reached enormous proportions in the last few years; she was able to visit one of the new temples where an experienced seer, his powers enhanced by long and arduous training, sees the embryo ghost of a child killed through abortion or miscarriage, who is causing pain and suffering to the parent who denied it life. Women who have had one or more abortions, and are now showing physical or psychosomatic symptoms which doctors cannot cure, throng to the temples to discover how to appease these angry infant ghosts. Many indeed are cured, and such therapy forms part of a larger movement in which resentful ghosts causing suffering to the living in order to draw attention to their plight are identified and appeased. Evidently a sophisticated technical education is not necessarily a hindrance to the acceptance of a belief that certain individuals 'form a bridge of vital importance between our own world and the invisible world'.

Such an approach may be found in widely different cultures. The Celtic saint Columba, whose *Life* was written in the seventh century by Adomnan, is presented in the paper by John MacQueen from this point

of view, since Adomnan sees Columba essentially as a seer rather than as a missionary saint, as he appears in Bede's writings. Columba's abilities 'reached across time and space', and he was 'capable of perceiving spiritual as well as physical entities'. When Columba describes where a thief is to be found, crouching under an upturned boat covered with grass among sandhills, there is a preciseness and vividness in the description which may be compared with those claimed to be given by seers in recent times, when for instance they state where a dead body may be found.[8] In Columba we have a seer who, unlike those to whom Johnson refers, was by no means restricted to 'local' visions, and who could also sometimes accurately forecast the time of a coming event. As a saint of God, and one accustomed to move among the leaders of the people, he could foresee such happenings as battles and the fate of royal houses, as well as the futures of individuals. It is noteworthy also that prophecies might be interwoven with accounts of his visions. Sometimes there were limits to his powers of perception, as when the identity of someone seen was not revealed to him, but he was evidently held to possess remarkable powers. These were not felt to be unique to him, however, since a man of God was expected to demonstrate such powers as part of his holiness.

Besides perceiving happenings in the future and at a distance, he could also see invisible beneficent powers, here called angels, and mischievous and destructive ones, here called demons, whose mainly physical activities might be held in check by the potency of his blessing. One of John Aubrey's correspondents claimed that Second Sight in Scotland related only to the future: 'Past Events I learn nothing of it'.[9] Columba, however, was able through the power of the Holy Spirit to behold 'many of the secret things that have been hidden since the world began'. This is said to have happened when he stayed in a darkened house for three days and nights, allowing access to no one. Here is something of a different order from the brief visions vouchsafed to the later Highland seers, and we have within a Christian setting something comparable to the seeking after hidden knowledge in darkness and solitude associated with Celtic and Scandinavian seers in the pre-Christian period.

The special powers possessed by the man of God, putting him in touch with the Other World, are again emphasised in J. R. Porter's study of the seer in Ancient Israel. He discusses the distinction between seer and prophet, although clearly one man might carry out both functions. Samuel, Elijah and Elisha were primarily seers, whereas figures like Amos, Isaiah and Micah are remembered as prophets; in the first case, tales of the seer's actions and achievement are told, while in the second we are given long prophetic utterances in elaborate and often obscure poetic language. The early seers are represented as dealing both with everyday matters and

also with affairs of state. Unlike the simple folk known to Martin, these are trained professionals, and as such accept payment for their services. In distinguishing between seer and prophet, the use of different words for seeing may be significant.

The prophet in early Celtic tradition was also a poet, although John MacInnes finds little evidence of this in recent Gaelic oral tradition. The topic is discussed by Juliette Wood in her paper on the prophecies of Merlin and Taliesin in medieval Wales. Here, as with the seers of Israel, folklore is of considerable importance in shaping the tradition. She points out how simple folk beliefs, including the readiness to see omens in nature, can support the growth of prophecy, and how this may be further strengthened by an increase in national consciousness. Prophecy may be a call to action and a political weapon, and again we are far from the naive spontaneous predictions of the Scottish seers, yet the origins are surely the same.

In Ancient China, development from the unskilled amateur to the highly professional prophet and diviner employed as government official seems to have progressed to lengths unequalled elsewhere. This is indicated in Michael Loewe's paper on Chinese prophecy, dealing mostly with evidence before 200 AD. While there are references to 'masters of the Way', who seem to be self-trained seers, these were outnumbered by officials, Government officers responsible for deciding whether a proposed course of action would prove successful. Under such a system, which offered those in power a convenient way to avoid taking the blame for mistakes, various types of divination and oracles developed. This led to increased dependence on standardised methods of consultation rather than individual inspiration and direct vision.

There is little indication in Martin's account of natural seers being taught to develop their gifts, although there are some slight suggestions of this (p.15 below). In Ancient Israel the seer could be installed by his teacher, as in the case of Elisha inheriting the mantle and staff of Elijah. Cloak and staff were a frequent part of the ritual of prophecy, and used by both Celtic and Germanic seers in early times. There must have been many rituals used in the endeavour to learn control of visionary powers and to use them at will. My paper on the Seer's thumb is an attempt to discover whether one simple ritual, the putting of the thumb into the mouth, was once deliberately employed as a method of gaining inspiration. The gesture is emphasised in the literature, art and folklore of both Ireland and the Scandinavian colonies in England, as well as in Scandinavia itself. There certainly seems no doubt that use of parts of the body formed an important part in the seer's training, and that the power to see might be transmitted by touch.

The vision of a funeral passing down a road or entering the churchyard, sometimes by an unfamiliar route, was widely held to be a reliable portent that a real funeral would shortly pass that way. Such premonitions of death are reported from the seventeenth century in Scotland, and Johnson comments in his characteristic way: 'That they should often see death is to be expected, because death is an event frequent and important'. Another well-established sign of approaching death was the appearance of a shroud or winding-sheet enveloping a living person. Robert Kirk describes this gradually creeping up to the head:[10]

> . . . till it came to the knee, and afterwards it came up to the middle, then to the shoulders, and at last over the head, which was visible to no other person . . . when it approached his head, he told that such a person was ripe for the grave.

This tradition continued in Skye, for Eilidh Watt heard her father announce that he had seen the death veil shrouding his sister, and knew that she had only a short while to live. Such a knowledge of approaching death, often to a relative or friend, may be one reason why we are continually told that the Second Sight was a burden to those possessing it, and many longed to be delivered from it. 'It's commonly talk'd by all I spoke with, That it is troublesome and they would gladly be freed from it, but cannot', wrote one of Aubrey's correspondents.[11] Another possible reason is suggested by Eilidh Watt's account of the terrifying sensation of overwhelming evil which she once endured, since a seer is vulnerable to destructive spiritual influences as well as beneficent ones. Even with disciplined control, the power of Second Sight could evidently be painful, and to make the considerable effort needed to obtain a revelation on demand is generally represented as both hard and dangerous.

A particular development of the phantom funeral found over a large part of England and Wales was the custom of sitting up in the church porch or outside the church, particularly on St Mark's Eve but also on certain other nights, to watch for the procession of those doomed to die in the next twelve months. Sam Menefee in his paper gives an astonishing number of references to this practice, which continued from the seventeenth century until almost the end of Victoria's reign. Occasionally the happier sight of couples walking arm in arm was seen, indicating marriages within the year, but these were in the minority. Those who watched are sometimes called 'fortune-tellers'. There are many cautionary tales of bold young people watching out of a spirit of adventure, and of how such rash individuals paid dearly for their audacity. So widespread a practice must have been prevalent earlier in England, and may have developed out of the belief in the phantom funeral and taken this particular form after the Reformation. Sam Menefee points out significant links with folklore which strengthened the tradition and kept it alive.

The involuntary seeing of what is invisible to normal sight has clearly continued over the centuries, developing in different ways according, as John MacInnes points out, to the expectations and needs of society. Much depended on how far the gift was recognised and supported by the established religious organisation. Johnson found obstinate disbelief among ministers of the Scottish church whom he met, who were determined to deny any claims to Second Sight as due to superstition and deceit. This, however, was by no means the case everywhere in the Highlands, since we have the sympathetic picture given by Robert Kirk and Frazer of Tiree, among others. In Adomnan's time the church evidently found nothing to condemn in the gift of foreknowledge, since this formed part of the powers expected to be possessed by a saint. The testimony of Ancient Israel is similar, and provides Biblical precedent; while it was forbidden to consult the Witch of Endor, who was seeking unlawful knowledge from the lower world, it was praiseworthy to listen to seers such as Samuel or Elijah, chosen by the Lord to reveal his will to men. Today there are ministers in the islands who themselves possess the Second Sight; some apparently take it for granted, 'of no more consequence than having a talent for music or handicraft' (p.26 below), and they may make use of it to help those in their care. On the other hand, those who find the gift an intolerable burden may turn to the church to be freed from it, as was the case in Aubrey's time (p.25 below). Eilidh Watt tells us that the modern practice of doing this by turning over the pages of a Bible while a minister prays is a means of evoking the power of God represented by his Word when it is felt that the gift is something undesirable.

In this small group of papers, it is only possible to touch on a few aspects of a wide and complex subject, and to trace some lines of development from the simple recognition of the ability of certain people to see what is normally hidden, prevalent in the Highlands of Scotland in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The deliberate fostering of such an ability is clearly difficult to achieve unless recognised methods of training are available, as in Japan. Even without such training, the interest in such powers continues, and among the influences fostering this, folklore plays an important part. One aspect which has not been discussed here is the ability to 'dream true', which has long been recognised in Iceland and continues to be taken seriously there.[12] Johnson saw a link between dreams and the Second Sight, pointing out with his usual perspicacity: 'It involves no more difficulty than dreams, or perhaps the regular exercise of the cogitative faculty'; he also realised that the tradition of Second Sight in the Highlands 'implies only the local frequency of a power which is nowhere totally unknown'. Something at least of the richness and

variety of the manifestations of this power has been conveyed in the studies which are presented here.

NOTES

1. Samuel Johnson, *Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland (1775)*, ed. J. D. Fleeman (Oxford, 1985), 89. Subsequent quotations from Johnson are taken from this section of his book.
2. Martin Martin, *Description of the Western Islands of Scotland* (1703), ed. D. J. Macleod (Stirling, 1934).
3. *Trans.Roy.Soc.*, 19: Oct., 1697 (New York 1963), 727.
4. Fleeman's Commentary (note 1), 151, note 1. For Johnson's use of Martin, see T. Jemielty, 'Samuel Johnson, the Second Sight, and his Sources', *Stud.Eng.Lit.* (Rice Univ., Houston), 14 (1974), 403–20.
5. His observations vary from bird behaviour and folk medicine to a reference to a boy on Skye who could 'erect his ears at will'.
6. Johnson alluded to one gentleman with the gift who complained of its effects, but does not seem to have met him (Fleeman, note 1 above, 212, note 2).
7. Robert Kirk, *The Secret Commonwealth*, ed. S. Sanderson (Mistletoe Books 5, Folklore Society, 1976), 64ff.
8. E.g. N. Macrae, *Highland Second Sight* (Dingwall, n.d.? 1908), quoting from *Rowan Tree Annual*, 1907–8, gives an account of Rachel Macgregor in the Rannoch Hills revealing where the body of a drowned man could be found (103ff.).
9. J. Aubrey, *Miscellanies* (*Three Prose Works*, ed. J. Buchanan-Brown, Fontwell, 1972), 113, from first letter of Aubrey's 'learned friend'.
10. R. Kirk (note 7), 60.
11. J. Aubrey (note 9), 115.
12. H. E. Davidson, 'The Germanic World', *Divination and Oracles*', ed. M. Loewe and C. Blacker (1981), 115.

I. THE CELTIC SEER

Among the early Celtic peoples the inculcation of poetic inspiration and the entire mantic art were developed and elaborated to a degree for which we know no parallel.

N. K. Chadwick, *Poetry nd Prophecy* (1941)

1

The Seer in Gaelic Tradition

John MacInnes

One of the words for 'poet' in Gaelic is *fili*.[1] According to accepted opinion, it is connected with the root of a verb 'to see': the *fili* was originally a seer. From this one might be led to suppose that poetry and prophecy, or divination in general, are closely linked in Gaelic tradition; the more so as romantic notions still persist in some quarters, of the Gaelic bard with his 'eye in a fine frenzy rolling.' In actual fact, the figure of the 'seer-poet' has very little place either in the historical record or in the oral tradition of Gaelic. In Scots Gaelic, to which this short account is restricted, there is indeed a very important prophecy which is ascribed to a particular poet and alluded to by other poets and I shall deal with it at the end of the chapter. There are also occasional stray verses, some of which can be regarded as a sub-class of the lore of names, that presage death or disaster at a certain place, as in the following stanza from the Isle of Skye, which I give in translation. *Tobar Tà* is a well in the parish of Strath:

> Tobar Tà, that well Tobar Tà
> A well at which a battle will be fought
> Lachlan of the three Lachlans will be slain
> Early, early at Tobar Tà.

Lachlan is a common personal name among the MacKinnons in whose traditional territory the well of Tobar Tà lies. But there is a variant which substitutes the personal name Torcall, traditionally a MacLeod name and in particular the eponym of *Siol Torcaill*, the Seed of Torcall, who are the MacLeods of Lewis and their derivative kindreds. It has been suggested that this variant refers to the death of Torcall who was the third Torcall of the Lewis line; his sister married Lachlan MacKinnon of Strath and Torcall MacLeod may have met his death in MacKinnon territory through having come to Skye for refuge or aid.[2] Such prophecies are on this analysis all *ex post facto*. But even to the present day they are not so regarded in Gaelic tradition. Like most prophecies they are ambiguous with a fine protean quality — a third version declares that *torc nan trì lochan*, 'the

boar of the three lochs', will be killed at Tobar Tà — and their fulfilment is still awaited by some people.

It may be that such rhymes are vestiges of a tradition of poetic prophecy, but to go beyond that would be most unsafe in the light of the evidence at our disposal. It would also be inappropriate, in my opinion, in the present context, to enquire whether any of these predictions, so-called, are the expression of anything that might be described as genuine precognition. We do better to accept them here as cultural items which have their place in the social construction of reality. Traditional Gaelic culture in Scotland presents us with a strong sense of territory in which place-names are charged with historical and legendary associations in a timeless order in which geography and history are merged. On such a plane, our modern divisions of time into past, present and future may not, for the makers of these 'prophetic' rhymes, have had the relevance that we are so much inclined to take for granted. However that may be, the prophecies themselves have survived in Gaelic into the modern age where such temporal divisions do obtain. And in modern Gaelic there exist other beliefs also that clearly are tied to the notion of linear time, the most conspicuous being the concept of Second Sight. In fact it is not too much to say that in contemporary Gaelic society, the very idea of divination is centred on the belief in Second Sight.

In earlier times there was a greater range of techniques at people's disposal both for revealing future events and for describing present events happening at a distance. We can still hear in tradition about some of the mechanisms of these arts just as we can hear, more immediately, of isolated visions, waking or dreaming, that fall in our own day and involve precognition and detection. These latter experiences may not always be classed as instances of Second Sight but in so far as people actually give them credence, it is because they relate them to this pivotal phenomenon of Second Sight. Gaelic society accepts, if one may put it that way, that certain individuals exist who have peculiar clairvoyant powers which are not subject to the control of the will. It is accepted too that any of us may have premonitions or similar experiences — perhaps only once in a lifetime — and, equally, that any of us may be misled as to the nature of such experiences. It is in fact not unusual to hear it said that So-and-So, who claimed to have had a precognitive vision, was more likely to have been day-dreaming or had succumbed to some form of self-indulgent fantasy. But that is very different from denying the existence of Second Sight itself. Second Sight is not a form of self-indulgence; more often than not it is regarded as an affliction; and, moreover, it is a faculty whose existence is endorsed by the two great forces of authority that validate experience in a traditional society: the powers of the non-mortal world and the

testimony of the ancestors. And so, if we do accept someone's claim regarding an isolated vision or premonition, it is because at the centre of this cosmology, the idea of Second Sight is so firmly established.

Within the same frame of reference, we explain other phenomena. For instance, I have on several occasions heard discussions on belief in the existence of fairies summed up by the observation that the capacity to see the fairies must have been a form of Second Sight now lost to us.

With regard to all these matters there are of course sceptics or at least those who profess scepticism. But overall I think one might say that such sceptics are no more than agnostic. At the same time we must not assume we can measure degree of belief by the popularity of stories about Second Sight. Many of these stories survive simply because they are vivid narratives and those who keep them in circulation may well be the most sceptical, while those who are held to have Second Sight themselves are often the most reticent. But there is evidence that that was not always so.

The English term 'Second Sight' is on record from the seventeenth century, all the early references being in Highland contexts. Nevertheless, 'Second Sight' is not a direct translation from Gaelic: the Gaelic term is *An Dà Shealladh*, literally 'the two sights'; or, much less commonly, *An Dà Fhradharc*, 'the two visions'. (The first is the object of sight; the second is the power of sight.) By the beginning of the eighteenth century the term 'Second Sight' is well established in English usage in ethnographic writings about the Highlands and Islands. These accounts provide a remarkable range of data which makes it plain that the seers of the past were much less inhibited in describing their experiences than their modern counterparts. It would at all events be impossible, in my estimation, to record such astonishing abundance of first-hand reports nowadays. One can think of several reasons for this. In the period to which these testimonies belong, and perhaps in most places until the early years of the twentieth century, the modern sceptical intellect had scarcely begun to impinge on traditional Gaelic society. Even if certain of the writers who took down the evidence profess their own scepticism — few in fact do — their attitudes would not in themselves have had much effect on their informants. The reticence of contemporary seers, on the other hand, is in some degree at any rate due to a fear of being regarded as 'primitive' or 'superstitious'. But it may also be true that the contemporary second-sighted individual actually has less to tell. If we allow that an element of creative imagination is an essential component of divination, we might suggest that certain of the functions of the seer in older, traditional society have been taken over by the creative writers of modern society. I am implying, then, that the seer is an artist and that

the products of his vision are art-forms (whatever else they may or may not be) shaped by the expectations of society and its aesthetic needs. Even some of the eighteenth-century writers declare that the visionary faculty is already in decay. Similar statements are, it is true, made about the decay of the traditional arts of Gaelic society in general in the same period, but we cannot use the one set of judgments to invalidate the others.

A parallel can be drawn with the history of Gaelic song. On the verge of extinction in the eighteenth century, according to certain writers of the time, it is still, as modern collectors point out, enjoying an apparently undiminished vigour. But, in fact, the range has diminished; certain metrical and melodic categories have disappeared, displaced in popularity by other forms, and even within the last fifty years individual repertoires have shrunk drastically. The true oral song-maker has virtually gone while the song-writer and the literate poet have taken his place. And much the same could be said of Gaelic story-telling. These are processes of decay but they are also processes of substitution and adaptation. In all of these fields we can reconstruct the main lines of the tradition from our contemporary evidence and in some cases even supplement the data from the past. What we cannot do is readily assemble a comparably rich and varied body of material or recover the authoritative tone of these informants of long ago. But so far as accounts of Second Sight are concerned, I know of nothing from one period that absolutely contradicts our information from the other.

As in contemporary Gaelic society, occasional experiences were fitted into a frame of reference organised by the concepts of Second Sight and the uniquely endowed Seer. Both in past and present accounts there is some uncertainty as to whether the faculty is hereditary or may be learned. Before I comment on that and other points, let me quote from a celebrated description written by Martin Martin (c.1660–1719), a native of the Isle of Skye. A number of the observations he makes can be compared with the testimony of modern tradition. Martin, a graduate in medicine of Edinburgh and Leyden, was a keen and intelligent observer of his Gaelic community and no sceptic in regard to the existence of Second Sight:

> THE Second Sight is a singular faculty of seeing an otherwise invisible object, without any previous means used by the person that sees it for that end; the vision makes such a lively impression upon the Seers, that they neither see nor think of any thing else, except the vision, as long as it continues: and then they appear pensive or jovial, according to the object which was represented to them.
>
> At the sight of a vision, the eye-lids of the person are erected, and the eyes continue staring until the object vanish. This is obvious to others who are by, when the persons happen to see a vision, and occurred more than once to my own observation, and to others that were with me.

> There is one in Sky, of whom his acquaintance observed, that when he sees a vision, the inner part of his eyelids turn so far upwards, that after the object disappears, he must draw them down with his fingers, and sometimes employs others to draw them down, which he finds to be the much easier way.
>
> This faculty of the Second Sight does not lineally descend in a family, as some imagine, for I know several parents who are endowed with it, but their children not, *et vice versa:* neither is it acquired by any previous compact. And after a strict inquiry, I could never learn from any among them, that this faculty was communicable any way whatsoever.
>
> The Seer knows neither the object, time, nor place of a vision, before it appears. . . .
>
> One instance was lately foretold by a Seer that was a novice, concerning the death of one of my acquaintance; this was communicated to a few only, and with great confidence : I being one of the number, did not in the least regard it, until the death of the person about the time foretold, did confirm me of the certainty of the prediction. The novice mentioned above, is now a skilful Seer. . . .
>
> Children, horses, and cows, see the Second Sight, as well as men and women advanced in years. . . .
>
> That horses see it, is likewise plain from their violent and sudden starting, when the rider or Seer in company with him sees a vision of any kind, night or day. It is observable of the horse, that he will not go forward that way, until he be led about at some distance from the common road, and then he is in a sweat.[3]

Some of the detail in that account finds corroboration in modern tradition, some does not. I have heard references to the staring eyes of the seer but nothing about the turning inwards of the eyelids. There is no longer a belief that children *qua* children 'see the Second Sight', as Martin puts it; nor are cows regarded as being especially sensitive. It is perhaps curious that Martin does not mention dogs: in modern Gaelic society, as in some other cultures, dogs are held to be particularly quick to react to atmosphere, and especially to psychic phenomena. But the horse is unique. Only certain humans are second-sighted; all horses have the faculty. The horse is the Seer of the animal kingdom. Moreover, a horse sees living people in a unique perspective: seven times their real size. If they were not constrained by this peculiar vision, it is said, they would not submit to human domination.

Martin has several references to novice seers, and to one 'that was a novice . . . and . . . is now a skilful Seer'. This implies that the skill develops, though it is not explained what the process of development entails. He provides no information about, for example, initiation or tuition of novices by master seers, for the faculty itself, so far as he could discover, is not 'communicable any way whatsoever'. Nor is it (necessarily) hereditary.

But other witnesses differ somewhat on certain of these points. For instance, in a letter to John Aubrey, dated 1694, the writer declares that 'I am informed, that in the Isle of Sky . . . several families had it by succession, descending from parents to children, and as yet there be many there that have it that way. . . .' And in the same letter Aubrey's correspondent tells of a meeting between his own father and one John MacGrigor, a seer, 'My father . . . being very intimate with the man, told him he would fain learn it [i.e. Second Sight]: to which he answered, that indeed he could in three days time teach him if he pleased; but yet he would not advise him nor any man to learn it; for had he once learned, he would never be a minute of his life but he would see innumerable men and women night and day round about him; which perhaps he would think wearisome and unpleasant, for which reason my father would not have it . . . I am also informed by one who came last summer from the Isle of Sky, that any person that pleases will get it taught him for a pound or two of tobacco.'[4]

Modern tradition has something to say about both points of view. First, the faculty of foreseeing is on the whole hereditary but does not necessarily manifest itself in every individual in a family nor even in every generation. Secondly, it is communicable, temporarily or permanently. The essential element in communication is physical contact.[5] We hear of a seer in the act of seeing, inadvertently or deliberately touching, or being touched by, another person who then shares in the experience. When the contact is broken, participation in the vision ceases immediately. A more elaborate device requires the would-be participant to hold the seer's hand while placing a foot on his foot and looking over his shoulder. There are variants of this stance but in most of the descriptions the left hand or foot or shoulder is involved. In that sense alone, it is a 'sinister' ritual. In some instances this ritual confers only a temporary power, more or less brief; in other instances the faculty remains, although apparently only for the lifetime of the initiated person. In other words, from an evolutionary point of view, it is only an acquired characteristic.

The emphasis on heredity is exceedingly strong in Gaelic society and is used to explain personal qualities, artistic abilities, mannerisms and the like. The possession of Second Sight is fitted into this framework and validated by the concept of hereditary transmission just as the concept of Second Sight itself validates other phenomena. When Martin Martin says: 'several parents are endowed with it, but their children not, *et vice versa* . . .' this would only mean to us that the talent does not manifest itself in every generation. Martin's ideas of heredity are in fact more rigorous than those to which modern Gaelic society subscribes.

There is an anecdote which makes an interesting comment on the relevance of hereditary powers. There were two men working together, the older of whom was a seer. For a long time the younger man pestered his companion to make him a seer too but the older man refused. Eventually, however, he agreed and the younger man became a seer himself. But

because Second Sight was not hereditary in his family, he was unable to cope with his experiences and in the end lost his reason.

This suggests that the seer's visions are normally of a tragic nature. In modern tradition this is certainly the case, although one hears of visions that were taken to presage disaster but in the event (which was interpreted as the fulfilment of the vision) produced a happier outcome. None the less, the typical modern vision is the funeral procession. As for times past, our commentators are not unanimous. John Aubrey's informant declares that 'the objects of this knowledge, are not only sad and dismal; but also joyful and prosperous: thus they foretell of happy marriages, good children, what kind of life men shall live, and in what condition they shall die: and riches, honour, preferment, peace, plenty and good weather'.[6]

On premonitions in general, Martin observes that 'Things also are foretold by smelling, sometimes as follows. Fish or flesh is frequently smelled in a fire. . . . This smell several people have, who are not endowed with the Second Sight, and it is always accomplished soon after'.[7]

There is nothing sinister here: merely a foretoken of a certain kind of food. Such prognostications are still believed in and have their own terminology: *manadh, meanmhain, sgrìob*, etc. They may involve any of the senses (smell, curiously enough, least of all, so far as my information goes) and have specific interpretations: an itchy palm signifies one is to get money; the sensation of wispy material in the mouth means drink, and so on. *Manadh* is a more serious portent, generally speaking, and its commonest form is some kind of light. Second-sighted people are held to experience these more frequently than others; and although the seer by definition *sees*, habitual experiences of a non-visual kind may set a person apart from the rest of society. There is perhaps one exception to this in the case of *seinn-bàis*, the 'death-music', a high-pitched humming which portends the death of someone known personally or connected with the family or local community or sometimes even an individual of national standing but who is not an acquaintance. Apparently one can hear the *seinn-bàis* very frequently without acquiring the reputation of a seer.

Dreams are an important vehicle of divination as they are in other cultures. I shall only touch on one aspect of dream interpretation here: the significance of animals in dreams. There was apparently a system in which certain animals represented clans or clan names. Thus a dog represented a MacDonald, a bull a Maclean and a deer a MacKenzie. Sometimes the animal is the same as the animal represented in the clan crest: for instance, the boar for the Campbells. But at least as often, the emblematic animal is different from the dream animal: the crest of the MacLeods shows a bull's

head; in dream lore the MacLeods are represented by a horse. It is of great interest that in some Gaelic songs (the examples are seventeenth-century MacDonald compositions and hostile to the MacLeods) the MacLeods are referred to as the 'Seed of the Mare'. These references to the equine ancestry of the MacLeods were taken by themselves as highly insulting, and the choice of another animal, the bull, as their emblem was no doubt deliberate. Behind all this may lie an ancient totemic system.

Stories of dreamers being able to locate a missing person, more often than not a dead person, are well known. Sometimes the dreamer hears a voice, perhaps the voice of the missing person, with or without the appearance of the person, directing the searchers to a particular location. This form of divination, in which events not of the future but of the present, and happening at a distance, could be described, was practised through formal rituals. In the Hebrides the term for this — the word is still known — is *frìth; a' deanamh frìth*': 'making a *frìth*'. Alexander Carmichael has the following note: 'The 'frith', augury, was a species of divination enabling the 'frithir', augurer, to see into the unseen. This divination was made to ascertain the position and condition of the absent and the lost, and was applied to man and beast. The augury was made on the first Monday of the quarter and immediately before sunrise. The augurer, fasting, and with bare feet, bare head, and closed eyes, went to the doorstep and placed a hand on each jamb. Mentally beseeching the God of the unseen to show him his quest and to grant him his augury, the augurer opened his eyes and looked steadfastly straight in front of him. From the nature and position of the objects within his sight, he drew his conclusions'.[8]

To this I would add, from my own knowledge, that *frìth* normally involved bird augury, *a' leughadh nan eun*: 'reading/interpreting the birds'. In some Hebridean dialects, *ealta* 'bird flock', with an interesting semantic shift, seems to be involved in a phrase such as *Tha droch coltas air an ealtainn:* 'The sky looks ominous'. In fact, *ealtainn* can be used in these dialects, without any particular connotation, simply for 'sky'. If my etymology is valid, the link would seem to be provided by the practice of taking auguries from the flight of birds. Another tradition, which I cannot explore here, involves learning of future events from the speech of birds. This happens usually not be design but by chance or good fortune.

Divination by means of the shoulder-blade, the scapula, was widespread throughout the whole Gaelic area and known, of course, in other parts of the world also. There are numerous references to it in our ethnographic literature. Alexander Carmichael again: 'It required highly specialised gifts on the part of the diviner'. In the eighteenth century, John Ramsay of Ochtertyre tells us that 'The scapula or shoulder-blade of a black

one-year old sheep is commonly preferred. . . . The moon must not change between the death of the creature and the making this use of its shoulder-blade. . . . In later [*sic*] times a certain proportion of the shoulder-blade was appropriated to every clan'.[9]

This last observation reminds us of the representation of clan names in dreams; while in connection with the scapula again another writer talks of the 'death of some remarkable person in a particular tribe or family'. The ritual was used both for prognosticating the future and for detecting events at a distance. Used for foretelling, it could apparently be fraught with danger for the diviner. At any rate I have heard it said myself that divination from the scapula could put a soul in mortal peril: at a certain point the diviner had to 'go very near the Devil's tooth': *glé fhaisg air fiacaill an Diabhail*.

There is another and rather obscure tradition about locating missing persons. My information can be summarised as follows. Long ago, if a ship failed to return, a certain ritual was carried out. A specially selected woman, who was a virgin, went to sleep and while she slept her spirit left her body and searched for the ship. The woman had to be of strong mind. If the wind changed while her spirit was absent from her body, she was in peril of losing her reason: hence the necessity of having a woman of strong mind. When her spirit returned to her body she woke up and reported where the ship, or its wreckage, was to be found and what had happened to the people aboard. (The changing of the wind may be compared with the detail about divination from the scapula during one phase of the moon.) The description of the search for the ship by the sleeping woman's spirit is suggestive of shamanic trance.

There are several accounts of the progress of a battle being seen in the sky. One of these tells how some women, standing on the Bridge of Inveraray, witnessed the Battle of Ticonderoga, on 10th May 1773, during the American War of Independence, and were able to tell who had been killed or wounded of the soldiers from Argyll, long before the news came by a more conventional route.

The term *An Dà Shealladh* does not nowadays in the North-West Highlands and in the Isles embrace the idea of detection of things at a physical distance. But in the central Highlands, at least from Lochaber to Perthshire, *An Dà Shealladh* includes both precognition and telecognition. Returning to Martin Martin in the Isle of Skye, however, it would appear that the connotation of Second Sight was not so restricted there at the end of the seventeenth century as it is now. At all events, Martin says: 'I have been seen thus myself by Seers of both sexes at some hundred miles distance; some that saw me in this manner, had never seen me personally, and it happened according to their visions,

without any previous design of mine to go to those places, my coming there being purely accidental'.

Such manifestations are explained rather differently by modern exponents of the matter. There is a widely distributed belief (which is known also in the Gaelic community of Cape Breton in Canada) that holds that anyone, seer or not, may see the fetch or 'resemblance' of a living person, especially, though not necessarily, if that person feels or expresses an intense desire to visit a particular place or company. What may be an extension or refinement of this is the belief in the existence of a 'co-walker', a *doppelgänger*. If there is a difference between the two notions, it centres on the belief that the 'co-walker' is apt at any given time to be roaming around unknown to its 'owner', creeping up on people in order to frighten them, and generally behaving in a disorderly manner. To that degree, the 'co-walker' is not so much an exact replica of a person as an alternative personality of a much more anarchic nature. Just as a seer may see himself or herself (normally a presage of the seer's death), so anyone may see his or her own 'co-walker', who is recognisable even at a distance because it moves as a mirror-image of the watcher. But there are further variations on this theme. Martin tells of a Lewisman who 'is much haunted by a spirit, appearing in all points like to himself; and he asks many impertinent questions of the man when in the fields, but speaks not a word to him at home, though he seldom misses to appear to him every night in the house, but to no other person. He told this to one of his neighbours, who advised him to cast a live coal at the face of the vision the next time he appeared: the man did so next night, and all the family saw the action; but the following day the same spirit appeared to him in the fields, and beat him severely, so as to oblige him to keep his bed for the space of fourteen days after'.[10]

Before I comment on that, I must look very briefly at some Gaelic terms. The basic word for a 'phantasm' is *taidhbhse*: it is used also for the faculty of seeing phantasms. Etymologically it means something revealed, an appearance or vision. A person with Second Sight is a *taidhbhsear* or, in some dialects, *taidhbhseadar; taidhbhsearachd* is the activity and craft of a seer. In the older English-language accounts of Second Sight, these are the terms that are used should there be any reference to Gaelic terminology.

A fetch or double in the sense of 'astral body' is *samhla*, 'likeness, resemblance'; the *doppelgänger* is *co-choisiche*, literally 'co-walker'. In some areas *samhla* not *taidhbhse* is the word in common use for what might in English be called a ghost, while in others the word *co-choisiche* does not appear to be known at all. 'Ghost' in the sense of 'revenant' does not have much part — certainly not a central part — in the cosmology

of Second Sight. Yet there is an adage that both living and dead have a *taidhbhse*. This, however, exists side by side with an adage that only the living has a *taidhbhse*.

In some instances my evidence may be rather fragmentary but my impression is that we are dealing not with one static system of belief but with several dynamic systems. There is certainly no reason to doubt the possibility that change and adaptation have been, and still are, occurring. I am myself inclined to think that the terms *An Dà Shealladh* and *An Dà Fhradharc* are both relatively modern coinages although their exact linguistic relationship with 'Second Sight' presents a difficult problem. *Co-choisiche* has all the appearance of a calque and, indeed, translates '*doppelgänger*'. Yet the essential idea of *doppelgänger* is already present in our specific sense of *samhla*, unequivocally a native term. As I have said earlier, the *co-choisiche* is not so much a replica as an anarchic alternative personality. This is taken a step further (though not chronologically) in the seventeenth century story of the Lewisman who was confronted with his own hostile alter ego. In these connections, one cannot but think of Jekyll and Hyde or of Gilmartin[11] in Hogg's *Confessions of a Justified Sinner*.

Looking at the problem from another angle, it is noteworthy that although Irish and Scots Gaelic culture are fundamentally so similar, neither the terminology of the 'Two Sights' and the 'co-walker' nor the idea of the alternative personality are to be found, so far as I have been able to discover, in genuine Irish Gaelic tradition. It would seem that we are dealing here with a distinctively Scottish concept.

The Lewisman's 'double', you will remember, asked him 'impertinent questions'. Dialogue between a seer and a *taidhbhse* is not unknown although it must be said that modern *taidhbhsean* seem to be notably taciturn. Yet one informant told me of a famous seer in the Hebrides who died around the turn of the century and who was so well acquainted with his *taidhbhsean*, and they with him, that they habitually came into whatever house he happened to be visiting after dark and plucked at his sleeve. He would thereupon rise and go outside to talk to them. (Again, one may compare the Lewisman's spirit who spoke to him 'in the fields'.) But this Hebridean seer always spoke to his ghostly visitants lying prone on the ground: without that contact with the earth he would be in danger.

In the majority of cases, the seer's visions simply fade from perception. I have heard, however, of one seer in Skye, in the late nineteenth century who maintained that the figures disappeared from the ends. Perhaps a variant of the latter mode of seeing is implicit in the account of the death of Donald MacCrimmon the piper during the Jacobite Rising of 1745, when a seer reported 'that, after the said Donald, a goodly person, six

feet high, parted with him . . . he saw him all at once contracted to the bigness of a boy of five or six years old, and immediately with the next look, resume his former size'.

Assuming that there has been continuity as well as innovation in what we call Second Sight, it would seem reasonable to suggest that the influence of Christianity would have caused structural changes in the system of belief. During some periods the clergy were fairly lax in their attitudes towards these matters. Still, any system of divination is bound to attract the attention of theologians; in Gaelic society there has clearly been an ambivalent relationship between the Church, in all its branches, and the second-sighted. Some of the early accounts stress the piety of certain seers; others tell of those 'that have a sense of God and religion, and may be presumed to be godly, [who] are known to have this faculty. This evidently appears, in that they are troubled for having it, judging it a sin, that it came from the devil, and not from God; earnestly desiring and wishing to be rid of it, if possible; and to that effect, have made application to their minister, to pray to God for them that they might be exonered from that burden. They have supplicated the presbytery, who judicially appointed public prayers to be made in several churches, and a sermon preached to that purpose, in their own parish church, by their minister; and they have compeared before the pulpit, after sermon, making confession openly of that sin, with deep sense on their knees; renounced any such gift or faculty which they had to God's dishonour, and earnestly desired the minister to pray for them; and this their recantation recorded; and after this, they were never troubled with such a sight any more'.[12]

Modern tradition corroborates this to some extent, telling of the loss of the faculty due to religious conversion, or how seers will only go out at night if they carry a Bible, or how the act of seeing can be terminated by the 'wind of the Bible' (*gaoth a' Bhìobaill*): the draught of air caused by snapping a Bible shut behind the seer's head. At the same time, there is a sanctified precognition: the Rev. John Morrison (1701–1774), the 'Seer of Petty' (a parish near Inverness), and the Rev. Lachlan MacKenzie of Lochcarron (1754–1819) were two of the most celebrated clergymen-seers.

Gaelic oral tradition has also preserved the names of several seers who are not second-sighted men and women gifted or burdened with that particular faculty, but are represented as individuals who deliberately sought to possess occult powers or had them conferred upon them in a special set of circumstances. Certain sinister rituals, like raising the Devil in the form of a monstrous cat, are also alluded to, both in written and oral accounts; although not, so far as I am aware, in genuine oral tradition,

in connection with any of these notable people. A seer in this category is not so much a *taidhbhsear* as a *fiosaiche*; his or her occult knowledge is *fiosachd*; (*fios* 'knowledge': the two terms have the appropriate agental and abstract endings). Two of the most celebrated of them were the Lady of Lawers in Perthshire and the *Fiosaiche Ileach* (the Islay Seer).

But the archetypal seer of Gaelic tradition is Coinneach Odhar (Sallow Kenneth), known in English since 1896, when a book of his 'Prophecies' was published, as the 'Brahan Seer', after Brahan Castle, a MacKenzie stronghold in Ross-shire. According to the legend, his mother was given a diviner's stone for him, when he was a baby, by the ghost of a Norse princess in Lewis. In an outstanding piece of historical detective work,[13] the Rev. William Matheson has shown that Coinneach Odhar was a historical character, though not, as had hitherto been supposed, a MacKenzie, who flourished in the 1570s and was probably put to death for sorcery. The legend of Coinneach Odhar was brought from Ross-shire to Lewis, where his birthplace became fixed: carried to the Hebrides, Matheson thinks, through the MacKenzies' conquest of Lewis in the early seventeenth century; and round his name has gathered almost every species of prophecy in Gaelic tradition. Among these are variants of the widespread Signs of the Last Days: women will lose their modesty and ministers will be without Grace.

There is still a lively interest in interpreting the prophecies ascribed to him; his prediction of the coming of the 'black rain', for example, is taken to mean either North Sea oil or alternatively acid rain. And clearly, new prophecies are still being constructed. Quite recently I was told that Coinneach Odhar had predicted that when two women rule this land the kingdom is approaching its end. Some of his older prophecies, about the Clearances, for instance, are ascribed in variant form to other seers also, among them Thomas the Rhymer.

Tómas Reumair, as he is known in Gaelic, has a unique status as prophet of the messianic hope of the Gaels: one day we will regain our rightful place in Scotland. By the mid-seventeenth century it was already well known, judging from allusions to it in Gaelic poetry; in the songs of the Jacobite campaign of 1715 it had a prominent place: one of them begins with the words: 'This is the time when the Prophecy shall be fulfilled'. This messianic theme has always appeared to me to be an important element in the cultural life of Gaelic Scotland and psychologically important in the Jacobitism of the eighteenth century. Conventional historians disregard it.

Within the scope of this chapter I could only touch on a number of the more prominent aspects of Divination and the Seer. My bias overall would be to emphasise the aesthetic interest of stories and verses that are claimed

to be the vehicles of divination. There are alternative ways of analysing the data, of course; but in this field, it seems to me, it is possible to see the creative imagination as strongly and as subtly at work as in other areas of what we call imaginative literature. Does this 'literature', however, have any other social function? Native ethnographers of the past have been at pains to point out that Gaelic 'Second Sight' is only a local variety of a global phenomenon. Nowadays, we tend more to stress our prerogative right to the 'gift'. That is to say, we use it positively in defining ourselves as Gaels over against the dominant cultures of Lowland Scotland and England. There is even a belief, presumably connected with the retreat of Gaelic into the North and West, that no one who is born far from the sea can possess Second Sight.

Finally, there is an interesting contrast between present and past accounts in what they imply is the relationship of precognition with the nature of fate. It is generally believed now that it is pointless for a seer to warn those who have been seen and recognised in a vision of disaster. (Portents and premonitions give room for manoeuvre.) The event has been preordained and fate cannot be averted. But it was not always so. Seers of the past had a duty to warn of approaching danger; evasive action was possible; fate was not fixed to that degree. A social anthropologist might see in this a reflection of the Gaelic sense of history. For many centuries Gaelic society has been subjected to a process of ethnocide. We once had some command over our destiny; now we have none. But whether this is what Gaelic seers, unconsciously it may be, have to tell us, I must leave to others to judge.

NOTES

1. This is the oldest form: Scots Gaelic *filidh*.
2. W. Matheson, 'The MacLeods of Lewis', *Trans.Gael.Soc.Inverness* 51 (19), 320–37, esp. 336.
3. *Miscellanea Scotica*: A Collection of Tracts relating to the History, Antiquities, Topography, and Literature of Scotland, III (Glasgow, 1820), 177–82.
4. *Ibid.*, 222–23.
5. Martin, like some other writers, is aware of this but does not consider that it 'communicates' the ability except for that occasion.
6. *Misc.Scot.* (note 3), 221.
7. *Ibid.*, 181–82.
8. *Carmina Gadelica* II, 158.
9. For this and other references to the use of the scapula, see *Trans.Gael.Soc.Glasgow* 5, 92–3.
10. *Misc.Scot.*, 190. In the same place he tells of a twelve-year-old girl haunted by her double.

11. *Gille-Martainn*, interestingly, is a bye-name in Gaelic for the fox, conventionally a trickster.

12. *Misc.Scot.* (note 3), 216–17. But another correspondent claims that only the 'vicious' have the sight: 'some say they get it by compact with the devil; some say by converse with these demons we call fairies'.

13. W. Matheson, 'The historical Coinneach Odhar and some prophecies attributed to him', *Trans.Gael.Soc.Inverness* 46 (19), 66–88. Cf. Alex. MacKenzie, *The Prophecies of the Brahan Seer* (Stirling, 1896).

2

Some Personal Experiences of the Second Sight

Eilidh Watt

'You know', said my niece, 'I was quite grown up before I realised that not everyone has a Presence with them to help and direct them. How do the others live?' Her observation, although at the time unexpected, did not really surprise me, for the spasmodic and involuntary ability to see events in the womb of time, generally those of a melancholy nature, has for generations been a characteristic of my father's family. The nature of this ability varies from person to person, but in whatever form it manifests itself, it is not in general considered a desirable faculty. It may indeed prove so harrowing that those who possess it may seek to have it removed. The recognised method is to have the leaves of the Bible riffled before the eyes of the sufferer while a minister prays for deliverance. I knew of a mother and son who were able both to see and hear. The mother was totally freed from these special powers, but the son was only partially freed and was still forced to hear. Were two 'forces' then involved, one in control of the seeing and one of the hearing? Since in general the possession of 'the two sights' is not considered to have a benign origin, the Power which the Bible symbolises was invoked. Here I may say that the Presence to which my niece referred was benign, making her aware of itself in time of need. To her mind, it was male, whilst I have 'female' visitors, who at times seem to be seeking information about me and depart when their curiosity is satisfied; I do not find them helpful.

Occasionally some who do not possess this faculty have sought to gain it. The generally accepted method is by placing the feet of the postulant on the feet of the seer when he is actually having a vision. The gift may also be transferred by hand-clasping, but it is essential that the seer wills the transfer. My father may have acquired his ability from his uncle, who once put his hand on him and drew him off the road to allow a phantom funeral procession to pass. They both watched the procession, recognised the mourners, heard women 'keening' for a drowned child. On the other hand my father may well have inherited the ability irrespective of this. What my father saw was never referred to in the presence of the

children for obvious reasons, and on one occasion only did I hear him make a prediction. He had been at a nephew's wedding on the mainland, and on his return we sat down to a meal and listened to his account of it. My mother was delighted that the groom's mother hoped to come and stay with us for a time when her son and his wife returned from their honeymoon, for she was my father's much loved sister. While my sister and I cleared the table, my parents still sat talking matters over, and I was returning for something when I was halted by my father lowering his voice and saying in a tone heavy with grief: 'You can make your plans, but Annie and I have met and parted for the last time on this side. She will die shortly. I saw the death veil shrouding her.' She died suddenly within three weeks.

Possibly from previous experience, he realised the significance of what he saw. The general belief is that if the veil is down at the knees, death is not imminent, but the nearer to the face it is, the nearer the person is to death. The person seen is not himself aware of any change in his appearance. In the Highlands a seeing such as this was not uncommon, and was interpreted as a sign of death. Naturally the seer made no reference to what he saw, but onlookers claimed that there was a kind of rigidity in his eyes at such moments.

The Church has no instruction regarding seeing, and one minister, a cousin who has experiences such as mine, regards it as of no more consequence than having a talent for music or handicraft. She makes no attempt to develop it or suppress it.

Recently with a friend I had occasion to go to a DIY shop run by a husband and wife. While the woman and my friend transacted some business in the office, I talked to the man, whom I had met briefly on previous occasions. I asked him how he had come to start a business in this rather remote part of the kingdom, for from his accent I concluded that he was not a native of the Island. He explained that although he was born in the Borders, his father was an Island man, and his mother, whose surname he gave, was also from the Highlands. I forget the surname, but it must have triggered some memory, for I said to him: 'So you must have the second sight'. For a moment he lidded his eyes and then looked up and admitted that he did. 'Can you detail a recent seeing for me?' I asked. He thought for a moment, and as if choosing a particular incident, said: 'One day I went into the office where the girl there was preparing to go for her lunch. I said to her: "When you are at a certain street junction be extra careful, for a green car will come round the corner travelling at excessive speed and will cause an accident". Amused, she went off, but when she neared the junction I had mentioned she slackened her pace, and observed the green car come as I had predicted. She was the main

witness in the court case which followed.' Before I could question him further, we were joined by my friend, and I left.

The incident in itself is not important, but neither he nor I live in the world of important happenings. But the fact that he could see any happening in future time is of importance to our understanding of the universe and of our place in it. If we can see an event even minutes ahead of it taking place, then we can presume that events may be foreseen which will take place years and even centuries after the seeing. But since the world changes so rapidly, can we always understand what we see? From evidence given in law courts, it is not safe to assume that we can give an accurate description of what we saw. I think that reason sometimes tends to intervene and distort the 'seeing' in the light of our experience and to interpret it in that light.

That I myself should inherit this ability is not surprising, and I have seen the dead, spoken to them, and on occasion delivered messages to strangers who, unknown to me, had prayed for guidance or enlightenment. These incidents were sometimes amusing, sometimes embarrassing, and individually insignificant. However, I had one experience, to be described later, which so alarmed me that for years it was impossible to refer to it, and it affected my conception of the world. But the form of telepathy which I experience can have its lighter moments. For example, I had on one occasion on a chilly but sunny Sunday afternoon gone into the lower garden and searched in vain for signs of spring. Cold and disappointed, I returned to the warmth where my husband was reading the Sunday papers. Ignoring my complaints, he said: 'Well, I saw the Prattises going off in the car. Where do you think they were going?' Nettled by the question, I gave the most absurd answer which occurred to me: 'They have gone to the seaside to collect seaweed for your roses'. The absurdity lay in the fact that we were some distance from the sea, and that Mr Prattis was not exactly *persona grata* with my husband, since he was not above lopping off branches which shaded his garden seat. We read the Sunday papers.

On Monday, however, my husband came in from the garden and over tea asked what was clearly a momentous question: 'When were you last speaking to the Prattises?' 'Round about Christmas', I replied. 'I met them in town and they were very amusing about a disastrous autumn holiday in Mull.' 'Not since then?' 'No.' 'Well, there are two large plastic bags full of seaweed inside the side gate.' I could not account for them.

There were other incidents possibly of greater importance, although not necessarily so, when I acted in answer to other people's prayers; not infrequently these people were complete strangers to me. The recollection of one such incident is still vivid. A chain of events

led me rather reluctantly to attend a union meeting one evening in a neighbouring town. I went in the company of a young male member of the staff and found the room filled almost to capacity, with only two vacant seats left after we had settled ourselves, one beside my companion and the other near the front. Just before the meeting started, two nuns appeared at the door scanning the room for vacant chairs. I am not a Roman Catholic and few in the preponderantly male audience were, but I asked my companion to move forward to the vacant chair and beckoned the nuns to the two seats next to me. There was no conversation between us, and the chairman opened the meeting at once. It was a lively one if not actually stormy, and I made more than one contribution. Finally the chairman indicated that there would be an interval to allow the wording of a motion and a chance for tempers to cool. At this juncture the nun nearer me spoke for the first time: 'Can you tell us how to teach drama in the infant room?'

It must by then have been clear to her that wherever my skills lay, they were not likely to be used in an infant room, and her voice was heavy with despair. Somewhat stung, I promptly answered: 'Yes, of course', and immediately embarked on a full and detailed account of method. I was only allowed a few sentences when she interrupted me and said to her companion: 'Write it down. This is the answer'. Without question the nun wrote at my rapid dictation. As happens on such occasions, the normal me stands aside and listens, sometimes with surprise or levity, or, as on this occasion, with a kind of impersonal admiration. This time all these feelings were fairly evenly balanced, for I had not entered an infant room from the time when I moved from it to a more senior class, and the teaching of drama in schools was still a new concept. The meeting resumed before I had finished and she had no time to thank me. I might well have forgotten the incident had she not turned to me as at the conclusion of the meeting and said: 'We have long prayed for guidance in this matter, and were were directed to come here tonight to have our prayers answered'. With that she turned and left.

Her attitude made such an impression on me that I wondered if I had read up the subject and forgotten about it. I went to the well-stocked library, generously financed by funds from the Carnegie Trust, to see if I could find anything, but there was nothing. On consideration, I thought that the ideas I had put forward were extremely practical, full of possibilities and full of fun. My own conclusions may be open to question, but the fact that the nuns had a deep conviction that their prayers had been answered is not. We can only believe what we ourselves experience, and may not necessarily draw the right conclusions, but for us they are right.

I may be directed to answer prayers at some inconvenience to myself. I may miss a bus and have to make a detour to meet the person involved. A chain of trivial events may lead me to a particular person. On occasion I become very restless and feel that there is somebody whom I must visit, even if I have not visited this person previously, and on the way make up what seem to me the feeblest of excuses for doing so. Rarely have the excuses been used, for I am greeted with the words: 'I thought you were never coming', or 'I have been asking God to send you'. When I arrive, my convenience is taken for granted, and I am there to nurse, fill in forms, or dissuade from suicide. I am left with the feeling that I am expendable. On the other hand I by nature am prepared to be expended in the interest of my fellows.

Sometimes I find myself speaking with a strange authority, as when a psychiatrist from an internationally known hospital, a stranger to me, ran up and asked permission to send a certain woman patient to a psychiatric hospital. I knew the woman and had visited her in hospital but was not related to her. I refused my consent, and explained that the mental confusion he claimed she was suffering from was temporary and would pass in a couple of days. I suggested that he consult the anaesthetist, for I knew she had undergone surgery, and find out if a drug had been administered which might cause hallucinations, and that he must see the patient again and assess her condition. He rang later to say that he had seen her and felt that she would soon be able to go home. A trivial incident, but I felt that I had spoken out of character in that I had no knowledge of the effects of drugs and do not usually question the findings of experts in their own field. I knew the woman had close, caring relatives who should have been consulted.

One may not always realise that a person one sees is dead. I recollect picking up the milk bottles from the doorstep one morning and remarking to my husband as I passed the open door of his sitting-room that our neighbours, a recently married couple, had returned from holiday. 'When did they get back?' he asked conversationally, and I replied: 'I don't know, but I saw Ronald walking down the drive as I picked up the milk.' Later in the forenoon my husband called me to the door where I found him with Ronald's works manager. They wanted to know when I had seen Ronald and I was reasonably sure of the exact time. 'Are you sure it was Ronald?' 'Yes, quite sure.' 'It is just that I have had a message', said the works manager, 'and I have to go down to Harrogate where Ronald died this morning. They were hoping to be back later today. You must have been mistaken.' 'Yes, I must', I admitted, for how could I explain that although Ronald's body remained at Harrogate, Ronald's other self had continued the journey and I had seen him quite unmistakably. In

the light of other occasions when I saw dead people, I was interested to note that he wore the nylon shirt tucked into this flannels which was his normal wear; I judged that he had been formally dressed at Harrogate. The clothes which ghosts wear are of interest to me.

One forenoon about eighteen months after my husband had died after a prolonged fight against emphysema, I left the CAB office where I did voluntary work twice a week. It had been quite a busy session and I was glad to get into the spring sunshine. I decided to cross the Abbey churchyard and so avoid the town centre with its narrow crowded streets. I had just passed the Abbey when directly opposite at the futher end of the path I saw my husband approaching smoothly and rapidly. But he was visible only from the armpits down, as if I could see only what he could see of himself as he looked down. Although he was some little distance from me, I could see each detail clearly as if he were but a yard away. Whilst he appeared to walk, I had the impression that his feet did not actually touch the ground. He was dressed in a double-breasted suit long out of fashion, and was wearing equally unfashionable shoes in the style of about forty years ago. He seemed supremely happy, and I felt that he was reliving a period of his life when he had been very happy. I may add that I had never seen him in this area of the town, and his body, at his own wish, had been cremated.

As he seemed to approach me, I felt he would collide with me if I remained on the path. I stood aside, and at the same moment looked behind me in the hope that there might be someone else there whom I could question, but there was on one. When I looked back on the path there was no one, nothing. Though he seemed to be within a couple of yards from me, I felt that he was unaware of my presence. I experienced no fear, no chill, only a faint surprise as if I had seen a rose in bloom in winter. In life he was convinced that there was no existence after death.

On several earlier occasions I had the feeling that I looked briefly through the eyes of others, seeing what they saw; sometimes experienced pleasure, sometimes indignation, or sometimes a deep grief. On one such occasion I was crossing the street when the houses and people were briefly replaced by a very different scene. I saw a soaring headland, its black base washed by a restless sea but all lit by a cold sunshine. I felt that I was looking through the eyes of someone who knew that the familiar and loved scene would soon be hidden from him by death. I sensed that I had looked through the eyes of my uncle, a deeply religious man and a lay preacher of considerable standing. Since I believe there is a purpose in things, I wrote to him saying that I felt that the whole community valued his work. In reply I had a rather frigid note from his daughter,

who thanked me and added that her father was in good health and had recently ventured out on a sunny day. A few days after this I had news of his death. By the time I had crossed the street on this occasion I realised that I could well have been killed had 'seeing' been more prolonged, and that in the modern world seers may be in physical danger.

But there are no words in any language I know which can give a realistic impression of the sense of evil which I once felt rayed its destructive force directly at me. The effect was so devastating that I can believe that if others experienced something similar they might not refer to it for fear of being considered mentally deranged, so not-of-the-earth was it. Only once have I heard anyone refer to such an experience. Henry James senior, the father of the novelist and of William James the philosopher, describes a personal happening in his book *Society: the Redeemed Form of Man*, published in Boston in 1879. It came to him at a time when he was sitting at home and at ease:

> One day towards the close of May, having eaten a comfortable dinner, I remained sitting at the table after the family had dispersed, idly gazing at the embers in the grate, thinking of nothing, and feeling only the exhilaration incident to a good digestion, when suddenly — in a lightning flash as it were — 'fear came upon me, and trembling, which made all my bones to shake'. To all appearance it was a perfectly insane and abject terror, without ostensible cause, and only to be accounted for, to my perplexed imagination, by some damnèd shape squatting invisible to me within the precincts of the room, and raying out from his fetid personality influences fatal to life. The thing had not lasted ten seconds before I felt myself a wreck, that is, reduced from a state of firm, vigorous, joyful manhood to one of almost helpless infancy. (pp. 44–5)

I went through an experience similar to this when I was an undergraduate in Glasgow. I had spent a pleasant time with friends, and in the early evening was returning to my lodgings by subway, a familiar journey. Travel conditions were easy and normal, and the compartment I travelled in had only two other occupants, a middle-aged, bowler-hatted man in the corner diagonally opposite me, and in the corner on my side a girl of about my own age. Suddenly I became aware of an invisible evil presence from which destructive rays seemed to emanate; although I could not locate its position it did not seem to be at ground level. I glanced at my travelling companions, who seemed undisturbed. I myself did not feel physically threatened, but my mind, or that other part of me which I have often been distinctly aware of as being other than my physical body, was being viciously attacked. I decided to leave the subway and walk the rest of the way. The sense of evil, of being under attack, diminished, but though I may have appeared normal, for days I felt as if a direct and murderous attack had been made on the essence of my being by a force completely alien, indescribably evil. It was a relief

some ten years after the event to think that it was the same evil force that was dictating the extermination of the Jews to receptive ears. It seemed to me that for ten years or more all sources of Evil had been combining to overwhelm Good.

Does an outside force communicate with us? In the constitution of some of us is there a sort of 'receiver' which receives these messages, which may then be rejected or accepted according to the light of our own experience? Can there be free will if some of us are genetically conditioned to receive such messages? Many thinking people reject the idea that it is possible to see events yet to be enacted, on the grounds that it would destroy the belief in free will. That we may wish to think of ourselves as masters of our destinies may merely be a case of the wish being father to the thought. But seeing future events does not in itself deny us free will. Seers may see a man fall over a cliff, and fall over a cliff he will. We can see the act, but not the thinking which led him to the top of the cliff. Before the act he had the choice. Shakespeare had to resort to soliloquies to solve a similar problem of presentation.

I believe that I have a co-walker, and am sometimes of the opinion that there may be more than one, each possibly with different functions. One at least may have a brief existence apart from me. On one occasion, failing to fall asleep immediately on going to bed, I decided that in sleep I would visit my brother. In actual life the journey is somewhat involved and tedious. I fell asleep as soon as I had made the decision and slept dreamlessly until morning.

The following evening my brother's wife rang and asked after my health. On being reassured that I and immediate relatives were well, she said with more than a hint of exasperation in her voice: 'Well, your brother is very agitated and would not phone himself. He was convinced that you must have died. In the afternoon he returned from walking the dog and sat down to rest for a moment or two. Then you walked in. For a short time you talked, all quite normal even when you said you must go, bade him goodbye and went. I had been sitting outside in the sunshine, and when he joined me he asked if I had seen you. So real and normal it had been that it was difficult to convince him that it would have been impossible for anyone to enter the house without my seeing them. When I did convince him, he was sure you had died. I do wish that you would stop your ploys'. I accepted the rebuke, but found the time-lag of some sixteen hours interesting. I myself had no knowledge of the visit and gained no information. I had behaved completely in character.

I had another interesting experience when as a young adult I lived in my parents' home in a somewhat isolated part of the Island. There were few entertainments, and when the family doctor paid a visit the young man and I spent a pleasant afternoon together. Later in the day my mother suggested that I should go to enquire after an old man who had come to live with a married daughter and was believed to be in failing health. Dutifully, I went. I was welcomed by the middle-aged daughter, whom I knew slightly, and presently she said: 'I must take you to see father. He does love to have visitors, and the more so since he has been confined to bed'.

When we went into the bedroom, the daughter said cheerfully: 'Here's a visitor for you, father, but you don't know her'. 'Of course I know her', he retorted, 'she's the woman who was here with that young doctor.' From his exasperated tone it was clear that he did not like the young woman, and the daughter said apologetically: 'Father is somewhat confused today'. The old man said: 'Father is not confused today or any other day. I told you she kept coming between the doctor and the light and distracting him.' I sidled out. There was only one point clear to me, and that was that the old man could not possibly have known where the doctor had spent the couple of hours before his visit. What is still not clear is who it was that the old man saw. So widespread is the belief that we have a double that it is not uncommon for people to say: 'It must have been my double you saw' without examining what lies behind the saying.

Man's kinship with and power over animals is a difficult but interesting field of study. There are many incidents in this field which have baffled me. On one occasion a friend of my father visited our home. Both men were interested in cattle breeding in a small way and often compared results. Various bodies tried to foster interest in this subject by patronage at various cattle shows. Their overheard comments gave me food for thought, so I often followed them about the yard, never calling attention to myself. On this occasion they were discussing the visitor's exhibits at a local show, and one animal in particular. After a meditative silence, the man cast a wary eye in my direction before he made the riveting observation: 'Someone has put the evil eye on it'. My father expressed surprise, but not disbelief. He questioned the man about the symptoms and how he had treated the animal. 'I countered power with power', was the reply.

Later I understood that the method used was the common one: the silver coin in water fed by three burns, the midnight hour, the spoken charm. 'What words did you use?' my father asked. The answer was dramatic: 'Words which I will never again utter, though there should be neither horn nor hoof in my byre. In no conceivable circumstance would I repeat that operation. Oh yes, it was effective, but the cost was too high, too high'. Later I was to hear people wonder what had made him a changed man whom misfortune seemed to dog. It was not entirely

that he had convinced himself he was *devotus*, doomed to destruction, and must pay the price and keep his side of the bargain. True, the animal might have recovered had it been left to itself. His own death was sudden and untimely. The Bible story of the Fall may support the belief that the price paid for knowledge and resulting brief power is too often a heavy one.

Animals are credited with the ability to see what the normal person does not. When I was a child we lived for a time beside an undertaker in a tiny village. I recollect standing at the door with my parents one day watching a horseman ride past. When he reached the undertaker's work place the horse refused to go on, in spite of the rider's efforts. My mother said in answer to a question from me: 'The horse is afraid, for he is seeing a spirit'. My father made no remark, but walked towards the horse and rider. I judge that he asked the rider to dismount, for this he did, and then my father took charge of the animal, putting an arm over its head and covering the horse's eyes with his hands. He then walked the horse, now quite sedate, beyond the workshop and duly delivered it to its rider. My father was said to be 'good with horses'. But of greater interest is the question of the horse's fear. Why should a horse find it unnatural to see a ghost?

Some years later we lived beside an old man long retired from work but with an excellent memory for incidents in an eventful life. As a shepherd he often drove flocks of sheep to the markets in Carlisle, involving him in a trek of many days. Man and animals required rest on the way, and there were farms which provided food and shelter. Even in old age he was a personable man and naturally made friends along the route. On one occasion he met a young man who had previously proved friendly and helpful, and now pointed out that instead of going to the usual farm and paying the dues, he would save money if he went to a spot which he would show him. It seemed eminently suitable, and the shepherd was grateful. By early evening the flock was resting; the shepherd had eaten and prepared for sleep by taking off his boots and putting his stockinged feet on the body of his old dog while he took the young bitch under his plaid where they would both be warm.

The tired flock showed no inclination to wander, and soon shepherd and dogs were asleep. However, the shepherd was awakened by the two dogs trembling violently and whimpering in low key as they strove to cower more closely to him. The man then heard the smack of blows, grunts and curses and occasionally women's cries. It was clear to him that the dogs saw something which terrified them, for their eyes were focused on the area from which the sounds came. He put on his boots, gathered the dogs to him and waited. After a time the sound of thudding

blows ceased and there was a terrible silence. The sheep seemed unmoved throughout. By early morning he had his flock on the move. It was still early when he met the farmer whose fields he usually rented, and who was surprised to find him on his way so soon. The shepherd explained, and the farmer gave a brief and unflattering character sketch of the young man who had directed him to that spot. He knew, as everyone in that area knew, that the spot was haunted. Tinkers used to camp there, but no longer do, from the time that two tinkers fought to the death there.

There are a number of interesting points to be noted. The dogs were aware of the fight before the man, and were in a state of terror when he awoke. We can understand man's fear of the unnatural and unexplained, but did the dogs regard the incident in the same light? The sheep seemed unconcerned and were possibly unaware of what was going on. In the Highlands it is believed that certain animals only have the second sight. There is also the question of how often the incident was rehearsed? Clearly it is not a continuous performance, or man and dogs would have been aware of it when they reached the spot. It seems unlikely to be caused by energy from one of the participants, nor can one imagine all those involved being induced to re-enact the scene. And to what purpose? It is rather as if a 'recording' of the incident had taken place and that a disc jockey played it at unpredictable times. Are all sounds and actions recorded? Are they all played back?

I remember that a friend, the wife of a doctor, stayed once in a house where a woman had been murdered. The couple were incomers to the area and had been allocated the house in the hope of proving that it was not really haunted. The doctor and his wife and friends who visited them all heard a commotion in an upstairs bedroom, but the times of day when this occurred and the frequency were unpredictable and the pattern erratic. Another friend, a minister of the church, and his wife, who were home on leave from Africa, were walking across a stretch of moorland near the manse which they were occupying at the time when suddenly they heard what they took to be a clash of arms. The noise continued for some minutes, but they saw nothing out of the ordinary. When they mentioned the incident in the village in north-east Scotland near to the place, they were told that long ago a battle had been fought between rival clans, and that the sounds persist over the centuries and are heard periodically. The local people were only mildly interested.

Once when I was motoring in Fife with a friend we decided to stop and drink from our flasks of tea at the first attractive spot we found. There was one with groups of trees, two streams converging and an air of tranquillity which seemed admirably suited to our purpose, and leaving the car we made for the clearing. My friend was unpacking the basket

when I cried out in a panic: 'I can't stay here! There have been blood sacrifices here!' and fled. In the car I asked her what the place was called. 'Shank of Navitie', ws the answer. From the name it may have had early Christian associations, but I am unable to account for my panic and for my declaration. I have been affected by other places but never to such a degree.

In the Highlands people are particularly interested in inherited characteristics, but one point has baffled us. Why are members of the same family so different? It seems that certain factors are dormant in some cases and very much in evidence in others. If it is believed that God the Creator is deliberately affecting changes, then there are no random happenings, but the purpose may not necessarily be seen by human beings. Perhaps the real point at issue is the nature of man. I have never been able to decide with what part of ourselves we feel emotions. Great grief, love, anger — any such emotion can affect the physical body but they do not have their seat in it. How and at what part is this other 'body' connected with the physical one? I tend to think of it as the flame at the candle wick, the burning coal.

3

The Saint as Seer: Adomnan's Account of Columba

John MacQueen

The image of Columba (c.521–597) as primarily a missionary saint is the creation of the Venerable Bede, who completed his *Historia Ecclesiastica* in 731, almost a hundred and fifty years after Columba's death. In Book III, chapter 4 he presents him as the apostle of the Northern Picts and the man who created in Iona a centre of missionary enterprise which eventually contributed a great deal to the Christianisation, not only of Scotland, but of much of northern and midland England as well. The earlier biography, written in or about 796 by Adomnan,[1] Columba's relative and eighth successor as abbot of Iona, gives a picture different in emphasis as well as historical detail, which in many ways also comes closer to the interests of the student of folklore. Chronological sequence is deliberately treated as of secondary importance; instead the biography is divided thematically into three books, the first of which deals with prophetic revelations granted by and to the saint, the second with miracles of power, 'often accompanied by prophetic foreknowledge'; the third is concerned with angelic apparitions 'that were revealed to others in relation to the blessed man, or to him in relation to others, and concerning those that were made visible to both, though in unequal measure (that is, to him directly and more fully, and to others indirectly and only in part, that is to say, from without and by stealth), but in the same visions, either of angels, or of heavenly light'.[2] Columba, in other words, is treated primarily as a seer, whose abilities reached across time and space, and were capable of perceiving spiritual as well as physical entities.

Columba was able to see things concealed from others in a number of ways, several among them illustrated by chapter 3 of Book I, which deals with events during a visit which he made to the famous Irish monastery of Clonmacnoise in Co. Offaly. He perceived first of all that a boy, Ernene, Crasen's son, was standing behind his back touching the hem of his cloak. Secondly he foresaw that although the boy was despised in the monastery, he was destined to become a man particularly distinguished in the church for his eloquence. He also foresaw the dispute about the

Power, faith and second sight

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Raghnall MacilleDhuibh

This is the last of my three articles on the prophecies of Calum Cille (St Columba), who lived from 521 to 597. Adomnán, the ninth abbot of Iona, tells us of 99 such prophecies in his Latin biography of the saint, the 'Vita Columbae'. In my previous piece, I concentrated entirely on certain prophecies which seemed capable of rational explanation. My analysis resulted in a curiously sinister picture of Calum Cille as a gangland leader, a sort of Saddam Hussein who brooked no opposition and must always be proved right.

There are a number of facts that would justify such a view. Calum Cille was a rural gangland leader, that is, warband leader, who got a Latin education and took holy orders. Coincidentally, he was born in a place which is IRA territory today, Gartan in east Donegal. He made many enemies and was once excommunicated.

Adomnán casts a veil over the entire first half of his hero's life, however, and begins with his arrival in Scotland in 563. His description of Calum Cille as a 'simple and innocent man' is deliberate propaganda, as is recognised even by one of the most respectful of recent commentators, John Marsden in his 'Illustrated life of Columba', who calls the saint 'as much a man of power as of faith'.

Now the earliest Irish monasteries were little more than a mirror image of secular society. They plundered, went to war, stole each other's cattle. Adomnán himself tried to put a stop to this. He drew up a 'Law of the Innocents' which declared that women and clerics should no longer bear arms.

It is his provisions regarding women which catch the eye, but of course it is his provisions regarding clerics which reflect his distaste for some of the activities of his own founder, and it is interesting that his Law was promulgated in 697, the centenary of Calum Cille's death. It was vital to Adomnán to display that a man known to have been powerful and successful could also be simple and innocent — hence the 'Vita Columbae'.

Out of the 99 prophecies, I have counted 44 which can be explained rationally, or which lack corroboration, and 55 which seem to provide evidence of genuine psychic power (that is, if taken as literal truth). Of these 55, fortune-telling (predicting the course of people's lives) accounts for 29, seeing a faraway event (which is conveniently counted as prophecy) accounts for 12, foretelling nature (wind, weather, tides, game, fish, disease) accounts for 11, and foretelling a human event (such as a battle) accounts for three.

I will give one or two examples of each of these four categories in turn.

Colca, son of Aid Draignich, was visiting Iona from Ireland and asked how his life would end. The saint said: "In your own beloved country you will be head of a church for many years, and if you happen to see your cellarer carousing with a group of his friends at supper, twirling the winejug round and round by its neck, you will know that you will soon die." So, Adomnán tells us, it happened; and I would not claim that this is anything other than the second sight, black humour though it may be.

Conversely, Calum Cille sometimes prophesied life where death was more likely. On a journey 'beyond the spine of Britain', that is, in what is now Inverness-shire or Perthshire, a young monk called Finten fell seriously ill, and his companions asked Calum Cille to pray for him. The saint prayed, then blessed Finten and said, "This young man will enjoy a long life. He will survive everyone here, and die at a good old age." He was proved right, and it is not enough to say that he had simply diagnosed the illness as non-fatal, for terminal illness or violent death could have struck Finten down at any other time. This, again, is true second sight.

Sometimes it is the highly detailed nature of the prophecy which precludes chicanery. A rich man called Uigene, who disliked Calum Cille, once refused him hospitality, and the saint declared: "The riches of that stingy man, who has despised Christ in the form of the strangers who expected to be his guests, will gradually decrease from today until they are reduced to nothing. He himself will be a beggar, and his son will go about from house to house with a half-empty bag. He will be killed by one of his enemies with an axe in the pit of a threshing-floor."

And so it happened. It is a curse, of course, and a self-fulfilling prophecy to some extent; but it seems to me that there was a distinct possibility that he might die before any zealot could drag him on to a threshing-floor, so really the saint was asking a lot. I prefer to put it down to second sight.

The next category is 'seeing a faraway event': typically, something happening to a friend in or around Ireland, be it a battle, a birth, a death, a domestic accident, or the events of a voyage. In one case the roles are neatly reversed — it is Calum Cille himself who is in danger at sea with his monks, but he calls telepathically ('by the inner ear of his heart') on St Cainneach to pray for them, and they are saved.

In all such cases we are dependent on Adomnán's assurance that the event was actually taking place at the time the saint saw it, and he cites one instance of deliberate verification. Calum Cille turns to Colga son of Cellach, who is sitting reading by his side, and says: "Just now demons are dragging one of the chiefs of your district, a miserly person, down with them to hell." Colga notes the day and time on his wax tablet, and a few months later when he is at home in Ireland, he is told that Gallan son of Fachtna had died at the very moment that Calum Cille made the prophecy.

Foretelling nature next, and curiously, I find that John Marsden is more inclined than I am to find rational explanations for this category.

The saint once prophesied that a certain field of corn sown in Iona in mid-June would be ripe in August, and Marsden points out that there are records of crops sown on the island as late as July and harvested in early September. On another occasion two monks, Baithene and Colmán Ela, had to set out from Iona on the same day in opposite directions, Baithene for Tiree and Colmán for Ireland. Calum Cille prophesied that if Baithene set off first he would get the south wind he wanted, then once he got to Tiree 'at the third hour of the day' the wind would wheel round to the north as Colmán required — which is exactly what happened.

Marsden notes: "It might not be disrespectful to point out that an offshore wind at dawn is often succeeded by a returning wind when the morning sun grows warmer on the western coastline. Such weather-lore would have been well-known to so experienced an islander as the abbot of Iona." And he quotes from the poem called the 'Amra Choluim Chille':

"Storms and seasons he perceived.
He used to understand when calm
and storm would come.
He was skilful in the course of the
sea."

What troubles me is that the marginally predictable shades into the marginally unpredictable. A cloud which has not yet appeared over the horizon will grow into a storm which will drown a particular man; a leather container which the tide has carried off will be returned by the next tide to the same place, an exhausted crane will arrive on the western shore of Iona after 9 am three days hence, and when the monks have cared for it for three days and nights it will fly away again. How could the saint be so sure?

Finally, the small category of 'foretelling a human event'. One day when the saint was sitting in his little wooden cell he heard a shout from the other side of the Sound of Iona and said, "The man who is shouting across the sound is not very smart, because when he is here today he will upset my inkhorn and spill the ink." Adomnán goes on to tell us that Diarmaid, the saint's attendant, went to the trouble of standing in front of the door and awaiting the arrival of the troublesome guest, in order to save the inkhorn. But for some reason or other he had to leave his post. While he was away the guest arrived, rushed forward to kiss the saint, upset the inkhorn with the hem of his cloak, and spilled the ink.

It is worth noting that in this particular case Diarmaid tried to prove the prediction wrong, whereas in my last article I showed how efforts were made by the great man's followers to show that he was always right. Another person who tried to prove Calum Cille wrong, but much more desperately, was a rich man called Feradach who lived in Islay. Feradach had incurred the saint's wrath by killing a high-born Pict called Tarain, a political hostage no doubt, who had been entrusted to his care. Calum Cille prophesied: "We are speaking these words now in the middle of summer, but in autumn, before he eats swine's flesh that has been fattened on the fruits of the trees, he will be seized by sudden death and carried off to hell."

Feradach was scornful. He had a particular sow that was being fattened on the kernels of nuts, and at the beginning of autumn he had it slaughtered before any of his other pigs, its entrails taken out, and a piece of its meat roasted for him so that he could eat it right away and falsify the prediction. As soon as it was roasted he asked for a little bit to taste, but before the hand which he stretched out to take it had reached his mouth, he expired and fell down as a corpse. "And all who saw or heard it were greatly astonished and terrified," says Adomnán, "and they honoured and glorified Christ in his holy prophet."

Sometimes the truth had to be stretched a little, however, to prove Calum Cille right. One such case is that of a man called Goire son of Aidan in Corkaree in Ireland who asked how he would die. "Not in the battlefield," said the saint, "nor at sea. The travelling companion of whom you have no suspicion will cause your death."

Who exactly, Goire wanted to know. One of his friends? His wife, for love of some younger man? But the saint refused to say. One day a few years later Goire was lying under his boat scraping the bark off a spear-handle when he heard the noise of fighting nearby. As he jumped up to go and stop the squabble, his knife slipped to the ground and made a very deep wound in his knee. "By such a companion," says Adomnán, "was his death caused, and he himself at once remembered with surprise the holy man's prophecy."

Despite some small quibbles like this, these 55 of the 99 prophecies are full of solid evidence that Calum Cille had the second sight; the other 44 suggest that he and his supporters were willing to misuse the gift in the interests of gaining and retaining power. If we believe in second sight at all, then we must believe that this man had it, and we may wish to believe that second sight alone accounts for all 99 prophecies; if we do not believe in it, then we have seen some excellent examples of how cleverness can lead to chicanery and chicanery to folklore.

So finally, how was it done? Adomnán has a good deal to say about this. Through prayer and visions, Calum Cille conversed much with angels and with the Holy Ghost, indeed a later account claims that he visited heaven every Thursday throughout his life. Time and again Adomnán says that the Holy Ghost is using Calum Cille as its mouthpiece; that also was to be replicated in a much later prophet, the Lewisman Tormad Sona (1853-

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This photograph, thought to have been taken in Sleat in Skye around the early 1930s, was sent to us by a reader interested in finding out more about the picture and the people in it. The photograph was unearthed recently by a cousin of the late Peggy MacDonald, whose family originally came from Breanish, in Uig in Lewis, and whose father was a missionary in Isle Ornsay. Peggy is seen third from the left of the front row — do any of our readers know any of the others, or where the photograph was taken?

Moulinex Microwave, £35. Telephone 01471 844246 after 3.00pm.

Conway Colt TRAILER TENT, sleeps four. Telephone 01470 582284.

Two very large pairs of VELVET CURTAINS, mid-blue. Telephone 01471 866239 or 866252.

MISCELLANY

Power, faith and second sight

continued from page 27

1945), who deliberately drifted through life letting God work through him.

Adomnán says that Calum Cille was highly favoured from his early years by the spirit of prophecy, and goes on: "When a few of the monks sometimes inquired into the matter, Calum Cille did not deny but that by some divine intuition, and through a wonderful expansion of his inner soul, he saw the whole universe drawn together and laid open to his sight, as in one ray of the sun."

One ray of the sun? It is uncannily like TV, film or the Internet, which reminds us of how Tormad Sona (who similarly obtained prophetic insight from signs, visions and revelations through prayer) described his gift using a term from the era of wireless — 'listening in'.

Adomnán was here referring to the words of Calum Cille elsewhere in the 'Life'. When Lugbe mocu Blai asked him how he obtained prophetic revelation, 'whether by sight or hearing, or other means unknown to man', the saint swore him to secrecy until after his death, then replied: "There are some, though very few, who are enabled by divine grace to see most clearly and distinctly the whole compass of the world, and to embrace within their own wondrously enlarged mental capacity the utmost limits of the heavens and the earth at the same moment, as if all were lit by a single ray of the sun."

The saint's reticence with regard to his gift, his swearing of Lugbe to secrecy, is a consistent feature. To us it may seem like the canny exercise of power through the manipulation of information, but Adomnán points out that he had two good reasons: one, to avoid vainglory, and two, to prevent huge crowds flocking to have their fortune told.

So I will let Adomnán have the last word. "I have recorded only a few facts about this venerable person, for no doubt there were many more which could not come to men's knowledge, from being hidden under a kind of sacramental character, while those mentioned were like a few little drops which oozed out, as it were, like newly fermented wine through the chinks of a full vessel. For holy and apostolic men, in general, in order to avoid vainglory, try as hard as they can to conceal the wonders of God's secret working within them. Yet God sometimes," he concludes, "brings some of these into view, wishing as He does to honour those saints who honour Him, the Lord Himself, to whom be glory for ever and ever."

18-12-15 WEEP

A Benbecula seer

SYC

December 20th, 1955

Mr R. Macdonald Robertson has been collecting Folklore of the Highlands and Islands for well over a quarter of a century, and is to publish the research in book form.

One strange tale Mr Robertson heard, came from a friend who was on a fishing holiday in Benbecula. The friend was staying at Creagorry and was fishing in a loch called Langavate.

His ghillie pointed out to him the church at one end of the loch and told him the son of the minister there had been drowned in the loch years before.

The boy had been playing on the banks of the loch along with some playmates and had fallen in the water. The other children ran to the manse and told his father, who rushed down to help, but by this time the boy had disappeared, and they were unable to find the body.

A member of the father's congregation was digging kelp on neighbouring South Uist, when he suddenly stopped, saying: "The minister's son has been drowned on Loch Langavate and they cannot find him; but I 'see' the body."

He arrived at the loch and with the instrument he used for digging kelp, he at once went and got hold of the boy's body and drew it out.

All the man said was that he did not know why he went, but he felt compelled to go.