Lo! He Comes in Clouds Descending.
John Fletcher

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Apocalypse When? Roger Sandell

Posted on 29/12/2008 by johnr

From Magonia 18, January 1985

It might be thought that after the noticeable non-appearance of the end of the world and the 'Great King of Terror' in 1999, Nostradamus's stock would be at an all-time low as the new millennium took off fairly uneventfully. Not so. Already various prophesies have been manipulated and invented to show that Nostradamus 'prophesied' the World Trade Center attacks in September 2001. This article/review from 1985, in which Roger Sandell looks at the way Nostradamus's words have been used by many writers for many different purposes, now seems to be more relevant than ever!

The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were the heyday of prophecy. Popular chapbooks told of the amazing abilities of figures like Mother Shipton, and quoted after the event verses which appeared to foretell events such as the Spanish Armada and the Civil War. Real historical figures like Roger Bacon might be invoked, and prophecies allegedly discovered hundreds of years after their death would turn out to be relevant to the news of the day.

The writings of Nostradamus are the only survivors of this literature that continue to be republished and evoke a response in public consciousness. To some extent it is easy to see why. Alone among the alleged authors of the prophecies of his era, Nostradamus was a real person rather than a legendary figure, who published the prophecies himself. However, the reputation of Nostradamus remains a semi-underground one, with many who have never read a single book on the subject vaguely believing "there must be something in it", or aware that Nostradamus is credited with seeing World War II or future nuclear devastation.

The reception of Jean Charles de Fontbrune's book Nostradamus [1] has been the most remarkable recent manifestation of belief in Nostradamus. Its first appearance in France in 1980 was the subject of major news stories in the popular press of several European countries, and even inspired cover stories in journals such as Der Spiegel and Die Ziet. An opinion poll in France shortly after its publication revealed astonishingly that 75% of the French population were aware of this book, and 25% believed its forecasts of the future.

To a large extent this book has now discredited itself. It is now 1985 and there is no sign of the Soviet-Arab invasion of Europe, which should already have taken place, according to de Fontbrune's readings. And while sudden surprises do occur in the political world, there...
seems little reason to expect the restoration of the French monarchy by 1986, his final date for these events. These facts however did not prevent Hutchinson bringing out the British edition in 1983, when some predictions had already been falsified, and Corgi from reprinting it last year. An eloquent testimony to the scant regard publishers have for their own books on occultism and their low opinion of the intelligence of potential readers. However, since this is unlikely to be the last Nostradamus book, it is worth examining de Fontbrune’s methods in some detail.

To vindicate the prophet’s previous record, the author translates Nostradamus’s sixteenth century verses into modern English (or French, in the books original edition) and compares them with later events from the sixteenth century to the present. A wide variety of events are claimed as fulfilling Nostradamus’s predictions, including the careers of Louis XIV and Napoleon, the Russian revolution and the World Wars. To a casual reader the results may seem impressive. However it does not take very detailed examination to arouse great doubts, not only about Nostradamus, but also about de Fontbrune. First there are some cases in which the prophecy manifestly bears no relation to the event de Fontbrune claims fulfilled it. Take for example the prophecy

L’an ne Royal sur coursier voligeant  
Piqeu viendra si rudiment courir,  
Gueule lipée pied dans l’estrein pleignant  
Traine tire, horriblement mourir.

The king's eldest son, on a runaway horse, will suddenly fall headfirst in its rush, the horse's mouth being injured in the lip, with the rider's foot caught, groaning, dragged and pulled, he will die horribly." [All translations are de Fontbrune's]

This specifically describes a riding accident in which a rider falls with his foot rapped in the stirrup and is dragged by the horse. De Fontbrune is obviously unable to find any royal heir who has died in this manner, so he claims this relates to the death in 1842 of the eldest son of Louis Phillipe of France who died, as the book itself makes clear, by being thrown out of a coach pulled by a bolting horse. A very different matter.

Other prophecies bear more relation to their alleged fulfillment, but are too vague to be taken seriously. For example, de Fontbrune solemnly claims the failure of East-West disarmament talks is indicated by the prophecy:

Plusieurs viendrant et parleront de paix  
Entre monarques et seigneurs bien puissant  
Mais ne sera accordé de si pres  
Que ne se rendent plus qu’autres obeissant

There will be talk of peace between powerful heads of state but peace will not be agreed for the heads of state will be no wiser than any other.

Surely it would be tedious to list the number of failed peace conferences since the sixteenth century that could be claimed to fulfill this prophecy.

The game of finding alternative interpretations of Nostradamus can be carried on indefinitely. Thus de Fontbrune claims that the Jewish settlement of Palestine is foretold by:

Nouveux venus lieu basty sans défence  
Occuper la place par lors inhabitable  
Pres, maison, champs, villes, prendre a plaisance  
Faim, peste, guerre, arpen long labourable

Newcomers will build town without defence and occupy hitherto uninhabitable places. They will take with pleasure fields, houses lands and towns. Then famine sickness and war shall be on the land tilled for a long time.

In fact these words could equally apply to the opening of the American west, followed by the civil War and the Indian Wars, or to the British settlement of the Falkland Islands and the war with Argentina.

Even when specific placenames are given, plenty of ambiguity remains. De Fontbrune relates the lines:

Par vie et mort changé regne d’Ongrie  
La loy sera plus aspre que service …

Power will be changed by life and death in Hungary. The law will be more pitiless than customs.

to the Hungarian uprising of 1956 but they fit equally the Communist revolt of 1919 or the nationalist rising of 1848. Indeed, it would be hard to think of a country that, since the time of Nostradamus, has not had some kind of revolution to which these words apply.

There are other serious objections to Fontbrune. The most serious is that like most modern commentators, he makes no attempt to put Nostradamus in the context of his own time, and analyze what his language and references meant to his original audience. As anyone who has ever read any commentaries to Shakespeare will know, this is a job which, as with any writer of the past, calles for a great deal
De Fontbrune refers to this problem in his introduction, and at times makes great play of deciphering Nostradamus’s obscure classical references. However at other times he chooses to ignore the plain meaning that the prophecies would have conveyed to their original audiences. Thus he takes references to les rouges as meaning ‘Reds’ in the modern sense, whereas in the sixteenth century it would have been understood as referring to Roman Catholic cardinals. One particular blatant example is his interpretation of the verse that states:

Du Lac leman les sermons fascheront  
Des jours seront reduits par les semaines  
Puis mois, puis an puis tous defaileront  
Les magistrats damneront leurs lois vaines

The speeches at the Lake of Geneva will cause ferment; days will be followed by weeks then months, then years, then everything will collapse and legislators will curse their vain laws.

This is taken to refer to Geneva’s modern role as a centre for international conferences, and the neglect of the Geneva Convention in modern warfare. But it would have been obvious to any reader of Nostradamus’s time that this was simply a prediction of the fall of Calvinist Geneva, which was known throughout Europe for its long sermons and harsh laws.

When one attempts to look at Nostradamus in this light, many apparently impressive hits start to fade away. Like many writers, de Fontbrune is impressed by one verse that contains the names of two twentieth-century Spanish leaders: Rivera and Franco (in Castelfranco). However, Rivera and Castelfranco are both towns in northern Italy, where many wars were fought in the sixteenth century. There is a similar explanation for the repeated claim (not however to be found in de Fontbrune’s book) that Nostradamus’s mentions of ‘Hister’ are prophecies of the life of Hitler. Although this is perhaps the best known of Nostradamus’s ‘hits’ in fact Hister is simply the Latin name for the Danube, and it is clear from the contexts in which this name appears that that he is writing of a river, not a person.

Worse is to come. There are places where de Fontbrune’s translations into modern language are gravely misleading. For some reason he seems to be determined to conceal from his readers that astrology is central to the prophet’s writings. In one instance he translates the line Satur au boef, Iove en l’eau, Mars an fleiche, as “When the time comes for violence and revolution, wars will spread”. It clearly means nothing of the kind, and is an astrological reference to Saturn in Taurus, Jupiter in Aquarius and Mars in Sagittarius. On other occasions he misrepresents the original to make it appear that a prophecy has been fulfilled. When we are told that Nostradamus wrote:

The leader who will have lead the immortal people far from its own sky will end his life in the middle of the sea on a rocky island with a population of five thousand whose language and customs are different.

It seems a convincing of Napoleon’s exile on St Helena, but on turning to the original one finds:

Le chef qu’aura conduict people infiny  
Loing de son cil, de meurs et langue estrange  
Cinq mil en Crete et tessalie finy.

Crete and Thessaly have become “a rocky island”. There are many similar examples. Le saint empire viendra en Germanie becomes “The Russians will come into Afghanistan”. We are told that Russia is le saint empire because of its traditional name of Holy Russia, but there is little explanation of how Germanie has become ‘Afghanistan’.

Can misrepresentation go further? Indeed it can. The whole context of the prophecies is misrepresented. The majority of them come from the Centuries, Nostradamus’s main collection of prophetic verses, but some of them are reprinted from another of his works, the Presages. However, the reader is not informed that the Presages were a sort of almanac with predictions attached, very unsuccessfully, to specific months in the near future. De Fontbrune ignores this and links verses from the Presages to events centuries after Nostradamus.

He also suppresses the introduction Nostradamus wrote to his original Centuries in which he gives a prose outline of his predictions for the future of Europe, which bear no resemblance to anything that has really happened. For example, he predicts a revival of the venetian Empire so that by the end of the eighteenth century it would be as powerful as Rome. The compiler quotes merely half a sentence from this introduction, and does it in a way that makes his deliberate misrepresentation clear. Nostradamus foretells that the eighteenth century will see a major persecution of the Church which will last to 1792. De Fontbrune takes only the second half of this sentence and quotes it as “It [the French monarchy] will last until 1792”. De Fontbrune moves on to depict an immediate future (when the book was written) in which Europe is invaded by Soviet and Arab armies, liberated by Anglo-American forces. A restored French monarch, King Henry, completes the rout of the invaders. Apart from the presence of Russians and Americans, all these themes do in fact correspond to
important elements in the prophecies of Nostradamus, but her again they must be taken within the context of their times.

Most of the prophecies relate to what Nostradamus expected for his near-future. He states in his introduction that he cloaks his prophecies in obscure language to protect himself from the authorities, a procedure that would be pointless if he really thought they related to events centuries hence which would be meaningless to his contemporaries. There are certainly many verses that indicate he expected a major war between Christendom and Islam in the future, but this would hardly be surprising in an era when the Turks still threatened Vienna and Arab pirates raided all over the Mediterranean.

Similarly, the lines de Fontbrune interprets as referring to an Anglo-American landing in France against the invaders do indicate that Nostradamus expected to see another era when the English occupied much of France as they did in the Middle Ages. Once again, with the English expelled from Calais only in 1555, the year he published his Centuries, and English kings still formally claiming the French throne, this would not have seemed surprising to his contemporaries. As for the all-conquering Henry, all the evidence is that Nostradamus expected his contemporary, King Henry II of France to fulfill this role, in accordance with the conventions of the prophetic literature of the period. This frequently proclaimed that some contemporary ruler would prove to be a messianic figure who would unite Europe, reconcile the churches and regain Jerusalem. Oliver Cromwell, Edward VI of England and Gustavus Adolphus of Sweden were all candidates in different writings. [2]

Much interesting background to Nostradamus is to be found in the book by David Pitt Francis [3], who unlike de Fontbrune, makes a serious attempt to present Nostradamus in the context of his times and as a result comes to largely sceptical conclusions. However in the process he does resort to some dubious arguments. His attempt to compile a statistical analysis of Nostradamus does not seem convincing to me, in view of the difficulty of properly quantifying much of the data. Neither does there seem to be much real evidence for his suggestion that some later rulers may have deliberately undertaken certain acts to make it look as if Nostradamus predicted their actions.

It is not clear until the final section that the author is an evangelical Christian who believes that some of Nostradamus’s successes may have come from his knowledge of the prophetic books of the Bible. I find this suggestion neither necessary nor convincing, although like most other authors of the prophetic literature of the period, Nostradamus was probably influenced by the apocalyptic sections of the Bible.

The revival of interest in Nostradamus at the present time is an interesting phenomenon. De Fontbrune was probably fortunate in that his book, which touched much of the interest off, first appeared in 1980 at a time when international tension was growing and fears of a nuclear war were reaching public consciousness. Although there is no real reason to believe that Nostradamus foresaw any of this, the revival of interest in centuries-old apocalyptic works is a very real sign of the times.

References

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