

Alexander Peden¹

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IT has been truly said that “of all the Covenanters who figure in the history of the last persecution, which, with increasing bitterness, extended over the long period of twenty-eight years, from 1660 to 1688, no one had a more remarkable career, or is better or more lovingly remembered in death, than Alexander Peden.” He was no ordinary man. No doubt his hair-breadth escapes from his persecutors and his remarkable utterances gave him a place among the people that none of his contemporaries enjoyed.

After his death a little book - *Peden's Prophecies* - was published in 1725 and reprinted by Patrick Walker with editions in 1726, and this had much to do in keeping green the supposed prophetic utterances of Peden. The book is supposed to have been compiled by Patrick Walker, a pedlar, gifted with a remarkable nervous English style as is evidenced by his *Biographia Presbyteriana*². Walker had little judgment and was very credulous. He did not possess the gift of separating the false from the true with the result that not a few stories in the book are recognised now by competent authorities as imaginary.

Yet it must be admitted that after a careful pruning there are utterances by Peden and Cameron which cannot be lightly set aside as the deliverances of mere visionaries.

These were men who spent days and nights with their God in lonely solitudes and should it be thought a thing incredible that the Holy Spirit would at times give them a sight into the future denied to their contemporaries?

Alexander Peden was born in Auchineloich, in the Northern part of the parish of Sorn in 1626. He was educated at Glasgow University. He may have been a student when Robert Baillie and David Dickson were teaching there. He was licensed to preach the gospel in 1659 and in the Diary of Andrew Hay of Craignethan (Scottish History Society) there is an account given of his “trial”

¹ The fullest biography of Peden is that of Rev. Kirkwood Hewat, published at Ayr in 1911.

² This work was re-issued with notes by Dr. Hay Fleming in 1901 under the title, *Six Saints of the Covenant*, (2 vols.), with the exception of the life of Renwick by Shields.

discourse. Hay gives the following leading ideas in the discourse preached from Acts v. 23, which were strangely prophetic of Peden's checkered career:

- “1. That sometimes the Lord makes His enemies errand-bearers of His people's delivery.
2. That wicked men leave no means unessayed to embitter the lot of the righteous.
3. That ordinarily the Lord disappoints the enemies when they think themselves sikker (sure).
4. That it's a hard thing to bear home the conviction of a disappointment on the wicked.
5. That the wicked are so blind as they cannot see most palpable progress of God's power.
6. That God whiles trysts [meets] His people's deliverance with impossibilities.”

For some time Peden was schoolmaster, session-clerk, and precentor at Tarbolton, about miles to the west of his native place. The minister of the parish at this date was the Rev. John Guthrie, brother of the better-known William Guthrie, of Fenwick (pronounced Finnick), and cousin of James Guthrie, Stirling, the martyr. It was probably before his licensure that Peden held the above offices. It was while at Tarbolton, Peden passed through a fiery trial. A young woman made a cruel charge against him. Peden asserted his innocence and said the Lord would vindicate him. The out-gate from his trouble is thus stated by John Howie in his Scots Worthies: “The woman, after suffering many calamities, put an end to her own life, in the very same place where Peden had spent twenty-four hours seeking the divine direction, while he was embarrassed with that affair.”

In 1660 Peden was ordained minister of New Luce, in Galloway, sometimes called the Muir Kirk of Glenluce. New Luce did not long enjoy his ministrations for he was evicted in 1663 with the great majority of faithful Presbyterian ministers by a decree of the Privy Council passed at Glasgow on 1st October, 1662, when according to Bishop Burnet the Councillors were “so drunk that they were not capable of considering anything.” Episcopacy was now set up and established in Scotland and began that odious career of persecution the memory of which has lingered in the memory of Scotsmen to this very day.

The day he bade farewell to his people he preached in the forenoon from the Acts of the Apostles xx. 7, to the end, stressing the words: “Therefore watch and

remember, that by the space of three years I ceased not to warn," etc. In the afternoon he preached from: "And now brethren, I commend you to God, and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up, and to give you an inheritance among all them that are sanctified" (Acts, xx. 32). The congregation were so overcome that they fell to weeping and it was with difficulty they were persuaded to leave the Church. As Peden closed the pulpit door behind him, he knocked upon it three times with the Bible, solemnly saying: "In my Master's name I arrest thee! that none ever enter thee, but such as enter as I have done, by the door." And remarkable to relate no curate or indulged minister entered that pulpit during the ascendancy of Episcopacy in Scotland.

From the date of his eviction Peden became a wanderer, hunted, searched for by dragoons, but never falling into his enemies' hands. His life onwards was full of incident with hairbreadth escapes and filled with marvellous providences. As time went on the fires of persecution began to burn more fiercely and on being summoned to appear before the Privy Council and refusing to attend, he was "put to the horn" and later his life and fortune were forfeited.

In one of the government proclamations issued at the beginning of 1666 Peden is described "riding up and down the country with sword and pistols, in grey clothes." After the rising of the Covenanters which ended so disastrously for them at Rullion Green, Peden, with others, is described as the worst of traitors and when captured he and they are to be handed over to the Lords of the Privy Council. In 1667 in a proclamation granting a general pardon, Peden is expressly excepted.

We now enter on an interesting period of Peden's life when as a wanderer he figured in those extraordinary escapes which have covered his name with a romantic interest. On one occasion he was hotly pursued by the dragoons and on reaching a swollen stream he urged his horse into the waters and got safely to the other side. On turning round, he saw the leader of the dragoons urging his horse into the waters when he arrested him with the words: "Stop man! you have not *my* Ferryman to take you across. Consider where your landing would be. Ye are fighting for the devil, and riding post to him. Oh! think of it."

On another occasion when it looked like that, he would fall into the hands of his enemies he prayed pathetically to his Lord: "Twine them about the hill, O Lord,

and cast the lap of thy cloak over puir auld Sandy.” His prayer was immediately answered by the mist coming down and shrouding him from his enemies. He had an uncanny sight into character”

There comes the devil's rattlebag” he said on one occasion as he saw a voluble religious professor approach. The man afterwards became a turncoat and Peden's characterisation stuck to him and to his family. After the Revolution the man complained to his minister but all the comfort he got was: “You well deserve it; he was an honest man that gave it to you; you and yours must enjoy the title, there's no help for it.”

At length Peden was captured in 1673 at Knockdow, in the parish of Colmonell, in South Ayrshire. He had been holding a conventicle in the neighbourhood and after preaching he retired to the house of Hugh Ferguson, who constrained him to stay for the night. Peden warned his host that it would be a dear night's lodgings to both and so it turned out. Both were apprehended and taken to Edinburgh where Ferguson was fined a thousand merks. Peden was sentenced to imprisonment for several years.

After his release we find him performing the marriage of John Brown (the Christian Carrier) and Isobel (or Marion) Weir in a quiet moorland farmhouse where the hunted minister and the godly couple met for the ceremony which was to make John and Isobel one. When the wedding ceremony was over the young wife listened to ominous prophetic words from Peden, which must have filled her heart with strange forebodings: “You have got a good husband,” he said, “value him highly, and keep linen for a winding sheet beside you, for in a day when you least expect it the Master will take him away from Your head.” Three years afterwards the young wife saw her husband shot before her eyes by Claverhouse. Something must now be said about Peden's preaching.

His friend, Sergeant Nisbet, gives us a pen picture of him as a preacher: “Such was the weighty and convincing majesty that accompanied what he spoke, that it obliged the hearers both to love and fear him. I observed that between every sentence he paused a little, as if he had been hearkening to what the Lord would say unto him, or listening to some secret whisper. And sometimes he would start, as if he had seen some surprising sight.”

Two sermons of considerable length have come down to us. They were preached at New Luce in 1682 when he was a fugitive. Who first reported these sermons is unknown but they were lovingly transcribed by John Flowie of Lochgoin and were published by him in 1779. The text of the first is: "But when the husbandmen saw the son, they said among themselves, This is the heir; come let us kill him, and let us seize the inheritance "(Matt. xxi. 38). Here is a quotation: "Now, people of God in Scotland, what are ye doing when such dreadful wrath of God is at the door of Scotland? He is not worth his room in Scotland the day that prayeth not the half of his time, to see if he can prevent the dreadful wrath that is at your door, coming to your poor motherland. Oh, sirs! no must pray ploughing, harrowing, and shearing, ay, and at all your labour, ay, when ye are eating and drinking, going out and coming in, and at all your employments; there never was more need than now. Oh, that noble life we might have of communion with God! Oh, sirs! it is He that makes heaven pleasant; it's communion with God that makes heaven pleasant. Will ye long to be there, O people of God? From the words of the text, He would have fruit from you in this countryside, und from thee, O Glenluce. He sent thee first a crumb, and then He sent thee many a faithful turn of His servants while they were on the mountains, and now He hath sent me to thee this day, to bid thee pay Him his fruit; and little hath He gotten from thee, O Glenluce; for which He shall make many places waste in thee, O Scotland, ere long. But I'll tell you what is for you persecuted sufferers: crowns, crowns of glory ye shall wear ere long and a remnant of you shall be preserved in all the sad days that are coming on Britain and Ireland."

The second sermon is on the words: "But we trusted that it had been He which should have redeemed Israel" (Luke xxiv. 21). "Where is the Kirk of God in Scotland today?" he asks. "It is not among the great clergy folk, Sirs, I'll tell you where the Kirk of God is—wherever there is a praying lad or lass at a dyke-side in Scotland. A praying party will ruin them. Yet, sirs, a praying party shall go through the storm. But many of you in this countryside ye ken [know] not these things. The weight of the broken Kirk of Scotland never troubles you. The loss of a cow, or two or three of your beasts, or an ill market-day, goes nearer your hearts nor all the troubles of the Kirk of God in Scotland. Well then, thou poor body, that will resolve to follow Him, pray fast; if there were but one of you, He will be the second; if there be but two of you, our Lord will be the third. You need not fear that ye shall want company; our Lord will be your company Himself.

He will condescend as low as you like to you that will resolve to follow Him in this stormy blast that is blowing upon His poor Kirk in Scotland the day. But there is some of you that is come here the day, the next day, when ye cannot get a meeting of this kind, ye will run away to your hirelings again. Take heed, sirs, do not mock God; these indulgencies will lead you away from Christ as well as the curates. Oh, the base drag the Kirk is getting from many of the ministers in Scotland in our day.

About thirty-six years ago, our Lord had a great thick backing of ministers and professors in Scotland; but one blast blew six hundred of our ministers from Him at once, and they never came back to Him again. Yea, many lords and lairds and ladies followed Him then, but the wind of the storm blew the ladies' gallantries in their eyes and their ears both, which put them both blind and deaf, that they never saw to follow Christ since nor to hear His pleasant voice."

We now came to the period in Peden's life when he was a prisoner on the Bass. This Rock had many eminent witnesses for the truth as prisoners during the times of persecution. Among these may be mentioned: James Praser of Brea; Thomas Hog, Kiltearn; John Blackadder who died on the Rock and Alexandar Shields, the author of the Hind Let Loose. Peden spent four years and three months on the island. Most of the time he was kept a prisoner within the prison walls. The cells were damp and cold; the food was scanty and the jailors were brutal in their conduct. At length he appealed to the Privy Council intimating to them that "through sickness and great infirmity of body and want of maintenance he had been reduced to great extremity, so that his present lot is exceeding sad and lamentable."

In October, 1677, he was released from the Bass Rock but he had to lie another fifteen months in the Edinburgh Tolbooth. From the Tolbooth he was sentenced to banishment with sixty others. Peden cheered his companions with the words: "The ship is not built that will take us over the sea to the Plantations;" and his words proved true. They were taken to London but the master of the vessel which was to take them to America when he learned that they were decent Christian men who were being banished for their religion refused to take them in his ship. When Peden returned to Scotland is not known but from traditions handed down it seems he spent some time in different places in England.

We come now to two incidents in Peden's life in which Richard Cameron and James Renwick figure that must not be passed over. Peden though a Covenanter of the Covenanters was not a follower of Richard Cameron. But the bond of true Christian love bound them together. One day, when hard pressed, weary and worn, he lay down on the moor near to Cameron's grave, and wishing to die, he said with tears: "Oh, to be wi' Ritchie. [Richard]." When some years later he felt death drawing near he was heard saying: "Carry me to Airmoss, and bury me beside Ritchie, that I may have quiet in my grave; for I have had little in my life."

The Society People or Cameronians were suspicious of Peden and he, on his part, was suspicious of them, so that the youthful James Renwick and he did not pull together.

In anticipation of the near approach of death Peden sent a message to Renwick and the interview between the two is recorded in the *Biographia Presbyteriana*. "Sit down, sir," said Peden to the brave but youthful standard-bearer, "and give me an account of your conversion, and of your call to the ministry; of your principles, and of your taking such singular courses in withdrawing from all other ministers." Mr. Renwick did so. The aged Peden having heard what the young witness had to say for himself said: "Ye have answered me to my soul's satisfaction, and I am very sorry that I should have believed any such ill reports of you, which have not only quenched my love to you, but made me express myself so bitterly against you; for which I have sadly smarted. But, sir, ere you go, you must pray for me for I am old and going to leave the world." Renwick offered prayer for the aged Covenanter and enjoyed great liberty in his pleading for him. When he had finished Peden took him by the hand, drew him to himself and kissed him, saying: "Sir, I find you a faithful servant to your Master; go on in a single dependence upon the Lord, and ye will win [get] honestly through, and cleanly off the stage, when many others that hold their head high will fall, and lie in the mire, and make foul hands and garments." Peden then prayed for Renwick and the two parted - Peden soon to die a natural death and Renwick to enter heaven by the scaffold.

Peden died on the 26th January, 1686, and he was interred in Auchinleck churchyard but six weeks afterwards a troop of dragoons came and took up the coffin. It was broken open and the shroud torn from the body. The wind blew it to an adjacent tree. The soldiers took the body to the place of public execution at Cumnock to hang it in chains there but in this they were prevented by the Earl of

Dumfries. He told the leader of the dragoons that “the gibbet was erected for malefactors and murderers, and not for such men as Peden.” So, they buried him at the gallows' foot. After the Revolution the gallows' hill ceased to be the place of execution and the people began to bury their dead there. A small monument was erected to his memory but later in 1891, a handsome monument of Aberdeen granite was erected beside it.