

Imperfect Apocalypse: Thomas of Erceldoune's Reply to the Countess of Dunbar in MS Harley 2253

Victoria Flood
University of Swansea

La countesse de Donbar demanda a Thomas de Essedoune quant la guere descoce prendreit fyn e yl la respoundy e dyt:

When man as mad a kyng of a capped man;
 When mon is levere othermones thyng then is owen;
 When Londyon ys forest, ant forest ys felde:
 When hares kendles o the herston;
 When wyt and wille werres togedere
 When mon makes stables of kyrkes, and steles castles wyth styes;
 When Rokesbourh nys no burgh ant market is at Forweleye;
 When the alde is gan ant the newe is come that don notht;
 When Bambourne is donged wyth dede men;
 When men ledes men in ropes to buyen and to sellen;
 When a quarter of whaty whete is chaunged for a colt of ten markes;
 When prude pikes and pees is leyd in prisoun;
 When a Scot ne may hym hude ase hare in forme that the Englysshe
 ne shal hym fynde;
 When rytht ant wrong ascenteth to-gedere;
 When laddes weddeth lovedis;
 When Scottes flen so faste that for faute of ship hy drouneth hem-
 selve: -
 Whenne shal this be? Nouthter in thine tyme ne in myne.
 Ah comen and gon with-inne twenty wynter ant on.¹

The reply of 'Thomas de Essedoune' to the Countess of Dunbar in Harley 2253 is the earliest recorded prophecy ascribed to the Scottish prophet Thomas of Erceldoune, known elsewhere as Thomas the Rhymer.² Although, as far as I am aware, the total series of formulations found here do not recur in any later

¹The text of the prophecy is taken from the transcription in *Medieval Political Writings* ed. by James M. Dean (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1996), p. 11.

²See *The Romance and Prophecies of Thomas of Erceldoune*, ed. by James A. H. Murray, EETS OS 61 (London: N. Trübner & Co, 1875); Harry Leigh Douglas Ward, *Catalogue of Romances in the Department of Manuscripts in the British Museum*, 3 vols. (London: British Museum, 1883-1910), I (1883), 328-9; Helen Cooper, 'Thomas of Erceldoune: Romance as Prophecy', in *Cultural Encounters in the Romance of Medieval England*, ed. by Corinne Saunders (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2005), pp. 171-187.

prophecies attributed to Thomas, the political pessimism and apocalyptic leanings of the Harley prophecy are echoed in later texts bearing his name.³

Studies of medieval prophecy frequently gloss over this crucial early phase of material attributed to Thomas; the Harley reply is often felt to be too obscure to sustain any sizeable attempt at interpretation.⁴ This assumed obscurity largely stems from the absence of a positive political centre to the prophecy, yet once we accept the historical context of such pessimism it becomes more intelligible. Contrary to the arguments of earlier scholars it is unlikely that the prophecy functioned as overtly anti-Scottish propaganda, for it is decidedly lacking in the characteristic jingoism of factional political prophecy.⁵ Rather it has elements which we can conceive as being universally applicable, rooted in the use of quasi-apocalyptic imagery and sense of universal decline.⁶ In this article I argue that as an English product looking back on (rather than forward to) a protracted period of Anglo-Scottish conflict, the prophecy alludes to an apocalyptic pattern of events in order to give definition to an otherwise uncertain period in Anglo-Scottish relations.

I

Thomas of Erceldoune's Reply to the Countess of Dunbar begins on the lower half of fol. 127r in Harley 2253, a West Midlands manuscript with a period of compilation now estimated between c.1326 and c.1340. The original provenance of the manuscript has been associated with great names of the age, linked by scholars alternatively to Adam Orleton, the Bishop of Hereford, and the Mortimer family or those within their purview.⁷ Often regarded as a space-filler, the

³ As Alois Brandl noted, some of the Harley prophecy's figures are echoed in the prophecy attributed to Thomas in MS Arundel 57: see Alois Brandl, ed., *Thomas of Erceldoune* (Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1880), pp. 16, 38-9. For identification of the 'tokens' of the Harley prophecy in later prophecies of battle and disaster see: E.B. Lyle, 'Thomas of Erceldoune: the Prophet and the Prophesied', *Folklore*, 79 (Summer 1968), 111-21, (pp. 111-13).

⁴ This earliest example of Thomas's prophecies is briefly and inconclusively discussed in the two most comprehensive studies of English medieval prophecy, Rupert Taylor, *The Political Prophecy in England* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1911), p. 65; and Lesley A. Coote, *Prophecy and Public Affairs in Later Medieval England* (York: York Medieval Press, 2000), pp. 92-3, 99-100. Sharon L. Jansen's detailed work on the transmission of Thomas's prophecies focuses on a later period, see *Political Protest and Prophecy under Henry VIII* (Suffolk: Boydell Press, 1991).

⁵ For the nineteenth-century case for anti-Scottish propaganda see Murray, pp. xix.

⁶ It is possible that in these universal elements we might find some trace of a borrowed Scottish Thomas tradition with which the Harley prophecy is working. Only a closer study of later extant Scottish materials would allow us to posit the nature of any such missing Scottish original.

⁷ *Facsimile of BM MS Harley 2253*, ed. by N. R. Ker, EETS 225 (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), pp. ix-xxiii; *Historical Poems of the 14th and 15th Centuries*, ed. by R. H. Robbins (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), pp. xxxiii-xxxiv; C. Revard, 'Scribe and Provenance', in *Studies in the Harley Manuscript: the scribes, contents, and social contexts of British Library MS Harley 2253* (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2000), pp. 21-110; Coote, p. 93.

prophecy is commonly attributed a lesser status than other political materials in the manuscript.⁸ However, the motivation behind the prophecy's inclusion would appear to be more than idle curiosity and the need to fill space. On the basis of vestigial northern language-forms, Frances McSparran regards the prophecy as a 'partial translation' from a northern exemplum into a south Midlands dialect, whilst retaining some original northern linguistic features.⁹ This act of dialectical translation indicates a certain level of engagement, and indeed the concerns it treats – the alleged misrule of Edward II, and the wars in Scotland during the reign of Edward III – were by no means limited to the northern border counties. Noble households across England, including the earls of Herefordshire, had landed interests in Scotland, and the impact of the Scottish wars was felt across the English counties through the requisition of men and resources.¹⁰ John Scattergood places the prophecy (in terms of both composition and compilation) in a period of weary disillusionment with the wars, holding it roughly contemporary with the other political verses in the manuscript, in the mid-1330s.¹¹ Whilst the prophecy is undoubtedly a product of these times, it is not simply a complaint poem depicting the evils of the age; it is a prophecy and this form has an undeniable impact on the presentation and shaping of its subject. Prophecy itself entails a certain view of history, a certain re-focusing.

On the basis of internal evidence, its inclusion in the manuscript, and composition in the form we find it here, appears to have taken place in the period following the English victory at the Battle of Halidon Hill in 1333. Halidon Hill by no means provided a definitive resolution to the Anglo-Scottish conflict and the hostilities dragged on.¹² Thomas's Reply is above all a retrospective prophecy, composed in the immediate wake of the events it purports to foretell, in a period of future uncertainty. The series of conditions it gives for the cessation of the Scottish war are really a disconnected, de-centred account of certain key events of, and associations with, the war, from the misrule of Edward II, to English defeat at Bannockburn, to eventual victory at Halidon Hill. Such a prophecy is a way of giving shape to recent history – it is a partial re-fashioning of the past through the guise of the future. It marks an attempt to integrate re-

⁸ For a very short overview of the prophecy see John Scattergood, 'Authority and Resistance', in *Studies in the Harley Manuscript* ed. by Fein, pp. 163-202 (pp. 177-8); Revard does not mention it in his overview of the political contents: Revard, pp. 74-5.

⁹ Frances McSparran, 'The Language of the English Poems' in *Studies in the Harley Manuscript* ed. by Fein, pp. 391-426 (p. 398).

¹⁰ Bruce Webster, 'Scotland without a King, 1329-1341' in *Crown, Lordship & Community*, ed. by Alexander Grant and Keith J. Stringer (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993), p. 234; Ranald Nicholson, *Edward III and the Scots* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 150.

¹¹ Scattergood, p. 178.

¹² Nicholson, p. 236.

cent events into what the philosopher Slavoj Žižek terms the 'texture of the historical memory', the grounds for the (re)writing of a definitive version of the past. In *The Sublime Ideology* Žižek writes:

The past exists as it is included, as it enters [into] the synchronous net of the signifier - that is, as it is symbolized in the texture of the historical memory - and that is why we are all the time 'rewriting history', retroactively giving the elements their symbolic weight by including them in new textures - it is this elaboration which decides retroactively what they 'will have been'.¹³

An attempt to remember the events of the past in line with a particular signifying framework is in some sense an act of reconstruction. It can never give us history as directly experienced, only as understood retrospectively. Žižek writes that 'only through [...] intervention does the scene from the past become what it always was'.¹⁴ The composition (or copying) of a historical narrative is an intervention - a re-writing necessary for comprehending the past. Through such a process history becomes at once something fixed and yet also malleable: a product of re-writing and revision, of renegotiations not only of terms and meanings but of content itself. Thomas's Reply is a prime example of this process at work: history, as it is comprehended from the vantage point of such a prophecy, assumes an inevitable and predetermined form, it is 'as it always will have been'. Yet such writings are also an interpretation of their social and historical matrix; a type of gloss on the times, they must leave out more than they incorporate and give primacy to details which are schematically appropriate to the new and definitive 'texture'. The essential symbolic concordance cannot be arbitrary; it needs to possess some pre-existing thematic or associative bond with the events themselves, some level of appropriateness. In terms of the Harley prophecy the selected 'texture' is provided by a series of apocalyptic allusions, the apocalypse being the natural nodal point for a work of prophetic pessimism. The incorporation into the 'new texture' of the situations to which the prophecy appears to refer, however, can never be regarded as absolute, for the attempt itself is a response to an essential gap in understanding, and the act of recollection which the prophecy embodies remains haunted by the traumatic incomprehensibility of actual experience. For this reason, as we shall see, the apocalyptic resonances of Thomas's Reply evade perfect realisation.

¹³ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989; 2nd edn. 2008), p. 59.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 60.

II

Pessimistic prophets and prophecies are undoubtedly products of crisis years and periods of discontent. Lesley A. Coote locates the late medieval appearance of prophecies attributed to Thomas, and thematically related prophetic strands such as 'Cock in the North', in two key periods: during the Anglo-Scottish wars and from Jack Cade's rebellion through the 1450s.¹⁵ These were years of sustained internecine conflict; and in the case of the Anglo-Scottish wars, immense environmental and human devastation across Scotland and northern England. The Erceldoune prophecies appear to have emerged in relation to historical trauma, and events in need of suitably pessimistic symbolic re-ordering.

In his account of the events of the year 1335, the Scottish chronicler Andrew of Wyntoun (c.1350-1423) refers to the Battle of Culblean in light of an undisclosed prophecy ascribed to 'Thomas off Ersyldowne':

Off this fycht qwhilum spak Thomas
Of Ersyldowne, that sayd in derne,
Thare suld mete stalwartly stark and sterne¹⁶

Although Wyntoun does not repeat a particular prophecy the implication appears to be a reputed accurate pessimism - for although the battle was commonly regarded as a turn in Scottish fortunes for the better, the prophet's words are 'derne' [dark], and the battle 'stark and sterne' [fierce]. On both sides of the Anglo-Scottish border Thomas was a prophet of Anglo-Scottish conflict, associated with individual battles of the fourteenth century, such as Culblean, and the conflicts of later centuries. We know, for example, that prophecies of Thomas were applied to the 1547 Battle of Pinkie Cleugh.¹⁷ The attributed prophecies are not in each case entirely novel, but for the most part build on familiar material and a recognisable tradition of prophetic pessimism.¹⁸ The universalising effect of Thomas's pessimism, which defies clear national-political orientation, gave him a recognisable prophetic status and utility on both sides of the border. Pessimistically obscure - in Wyntoun's terms 'derne' - the Ercledoune tradition was open to cross- or transnational interpretations. Thomas's are not predictions of a coming golden age of Scottish independence, but visions of chaos across national boundaries.

¹⁵ Coote, p. 100.

¹⁶ Wyntoun, II, pp. 423-7.

¹⁷ Ward, I, p. 336 [MS Sloane 1802, ff. 22v-28].

¹⁸ See Murray, 'Introduction'.

In the entry for 1286 in the *Scottichronicon* (compiled during the 1440s) Thomas's prophetic ability is traced back to the very beginning of the crisis of Scottish kingship. On the eve of the death of Alexander III, Thomas expounds to the earl of Dunbar a prophecy of great disorder in Scotland: 'a strong wind' will be heard 'which has not been known since times long ago', a blast which will 'dumbfound the nations'.¹⁹ The incipit to the Harley prophecy, relating not to the earl but his wife, the countess of Dunbar, is potentially an allusion to an earlier version of this tradition. Although in Anglo-Norman rather than the English of the prophecy itself the shift in language could betray the incipit as a gloss, it does not appear to be a late addition to the item. Here then we potentially have a reference to the legendary 1286 prophecy at least as early as c.1335-40. In a similar historical vein to the *Scottichronicon*, the Harley prophecy is conceivably referring back to a point of origin for the tokens of calamity it discloses: the death of Alexander III.

The framing of the prophecy as a reply to the countess potentially marks a nod to, or at least a potential confusion with, another countess of Dunbar: Black Agnes, who stalwartly defended Dunbar Castle during the siege of 1338. During this period Dunbar became an infamous Bruce-faction centre of resistance.²⁰ By the incipit, Thomas is potentially constructed not only as a voice from the more distant past but at the heart of more recent events. The incipit could potentially be a new addition to the hypothesised northern exemplum modified (it is uncertain to what extent) in Harley 2253. Potentially inclusion of the prophecy in the manuscript dates to post-1338, so the possibility of this historical allusion can by no means be readily excluded, particularly given the specificity of naming not the Earl of Dunbar but the Countess. In the Harley prophecy we see the adoption of a Scottish prophet across the border – and potentially the movement of a northern exemplum further south. We also perhaps see a temporal translation at work in the prophecy. At whatever stage the Dunbar connection arose, the locating of Thomas at Dunbar in a prophecy of this period potentially collapses the original 1286 connection and locates his voice on the fringes of the contentious Anglo-Scottish border of 1338.

We can conclude that Thomas of Erceldoune is a pessimistic authority on Scottish affairs. Yet this secular pessimism is not without religious analogues. Even within the brief prophecy given in the *Scottichronicon* Thomas's reputed

¹⁹ Walter Bower, *Scottichronicon* in *A History Book for Scots: Selections from the Scottichronicon* ed. by D. E. R. Watt (Edinburgh: Mercat Press, 1998), pp. 171-2; see also Wyntoun, II, 266, for death of Alexander III in conjunction with ill omens.

²⁰ For Dunbar as the key problematic on the map, threatening English power in southern Scotland during the campaigns in 1335 see Nicholson, p. 225.

words carry such a resonance. We might remember the stars which fall from heaven in Revelation 6.13, like figs shaken from the trees by a great wind; or the breath of God in Isaiah, 'His breath as a torrent... to destroy the nations unto nothing' (Isaiah 30.28); or indeed the 'violent wind' from the desert which destroyed the house and the children of Job (Job 1.19). Thomas's short prophecy here potentially carries with it Biblical precedence for the destruction of nation and family, and earthly existence itself. A strong current of apocalypticism is of course something we find in Old Testament prophecy concerned with the decadence and decline of the Israelites. The application of such Biblical material to the decline of various peoples in the British Isles was a long-established practice prior to this period, found in both sermons and prophecies from at least the sixth century such as Gildas's *De Excidio et Conquestu Britanniae*, and early Welsh political prophecies.²¹ We might wonder if the prophesied strong wind of the *Scottichronicon*, last heard in 'times long ago', is a reference to such antique sources. However commonplace, the apocalyptic or quasi-apocalyptic divine curse is a framework which maps well onto memories of the Anglo-Scottish wars, an age defined by the English chronicles in terms of war, pestilence, and the deaths of many men.²²

III

I will now undertake a dissection of the information in the prophecy and its ordering, through each figure's relationship to contemporary events and its apocalyptic and cataclysmic connotations.

Following the incipit is the condition: 'When man as mad a kyng of a capped man'. This first figure is of course open to competing interpretations. I think that we must, however, privilege the interpretation compatible with the most likely date of the prophecy's inclusion in the manuscript - which, with Scattergood, I posit as post-dating the Battle of Halidon Hill in 1333.²³ Based on the assumption that the prophecy takes the Battle of Bannockburn as its central and only significantly datable allusion, Alois Brandl argues that it is a product of the reign of Edward II, spanning the period from the king's coronation to the Battle of Bannockburn (with the exception of the incipit which, he holds, we must date back twenty-one years from the battle), and so he takes the 'capped

²¹ See *The Works of Gildas*, in *Six Old English Chronicles* ed. by J. A. Giles (London: George Bell & Sons, 1901); *Armes Prydein*, ed. by Ifor Williams, trans. Rachel Bromwich (Dublin: DIAS, 1972; 2nd edn. 1982).

²² Cf. *The Brut or Chronicles of England edited from MS. Rawl. B.172, Bodleian Library*, EETS OS 131, 136 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1906, 1908), 2 vols, I, 72-3.

²³ See p. 4.

man' as a reference to the youth and early years of the reign of Edward II.²⁴ However, the prophecy's interests seem to lie more closely in the reign of Edward III and retrospective attributions of blame to Edward II. In this case, the 'capped man' is not a child, but a king wearing a fool's cap. This first token of calamity is more consistent with the tone of the prophecy if it is taken as a reference to the alleged misrule of Edward II. Direct attributing of blame to Edward II for subsequent national calamities became a familiar trope in English histories. In the English *Brut* he is identified as the third king of the six prophesied by Merlin: 'the gote out of a car', from whose nostrils drop 'miche harme, hungre, and dep of the peple, and gret losse of his lande'.²⁵ The rule of the 'gote' brings famine and defeat – these are the concerns of the Harley prophecy.

Paradoxically, if we accept the first line as an allusion to Edward II's infamous misrule, this suggests the prophecy was written at some remove from the reign of Edward II, for in his own time he was by no means necessarily such a locus of prophetic disdain.²⁶ It is only with hindsight, and arguably some level of retrospective distortion, that the long-view of history forms. The prophetic demonisation of Edward II is not commonly found until the end of his son's minority, and the subsequent fostering of new prophetic expectations in Edward III.²⁷ It is arguably this prophetic re-focusing, and the optimism which attended expectations of Edward III, which births the pessimism of Thomas's Reply, rooted in an imagined extension of the reign of Edward II, casting the Anglo-Scottish wars in a quasi-apocalyptic scope extended to the battle of Halidon Hill.

Therefore, although it appears to progress to events from the reign of Edward III, the prophecy firmly grounds its cataclysmic momentum in the reign of Edward II.²⁸ It stands in sharp contrast to prophecies found in the same scribal hand in Royal MS 12.C.XII, 'Lilium Regnans' and 'The Holy Oil of St Thomas'. Both of the Royal prophecies affix positive expectations to the monarch and prophesy a coming golden age.²⁹ They are affirmative products of the crisis affirmative years 1320-40, a period which also birthed its flipside in the pessimism

²⁴ Brandl, pp. 16-17.

²⁵ *Brut*, I, 243.

²⁶ For Edward II as the intended recipient of 'Adam Davy's Dream', a prophecy anticipating an English Holy Roman Emperor, see Taylor, pp. 92-96.

²⁷ See Coote, p. 107.

²⁸ It is interesting to note that the households with which the MS was originally most strongly associated were themselves instrumental in the downfall of Edward II: the Mortimers and Orleton, see Revard, pp. 26-7.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

of Thomas. Although it lacks the optimism of the Royal prophecies, the Harley prophecy is equally very much a product of the majority of Edward III.

If the prophecy spans the years from the Battle of Bannockburn to the Battle of Halidon Hill we have some sense of the long-view of an historical era. In *post facto* accounts of the Anglo-Scottish war it appears to have become common practice to inscribe Bannockburn in Halidon and vice versa: English loss at Bannockburn is tempered by English victory at Halidon Hill.³⁰ Yet the prophecy does not entertain this sense of setting to right, rather it incorporates the events of Halidon Hill into the same pessimistic landscape as Bannockburn and the reign of Edward II, as cast in its retrospective colours. Thomas of Erceldoune, after all, is not a prophet of the glory years of the British monarchy, but one pertinent to recollections of unrest.

IV

After the figure of the 'capped man' the prophecy continues with a series figuring physical and human disorder:

When mon is levere othermones thyng then is owen;
 When Londyon ys forest, ant forest ys felde:
 When hares kendles o the herston;
 When wyt and wille werres togedere;
 When mon makes stables of kyrkes, and steles castles wyth styes;
 When Rokesbourh nys no burgh ant market is at Forweleye;
 When the alde is gan ant the newe is come that don notht
 (2-8)

Scattergood identifies such conditionals as 'cultural and moral *impossibilia*'.³¹ Although the prophecy's succession of marvellous transformations echoes the type of physical impossibilities found in the *mirabilia* of the British histories, the cultural pertinence of the prophecy does not lie in the impossibility of such disarray but in a sense of perceived historical reality.³² The *impossibilia* are not shadowy obscurities but recognisable references to contemporary events and places. Disruption of the natural world and the social order are the inevita-

³⁰ Cf. Wyntoun, *De Orygynale Chronykle of Scotland*, ed. by David Macpherson (Edinburgh: Edmonston & Douglas, 1872, 1879, 1891), 3 vols., II, 403; Minot, *The Poems of Laurence Minot*, ed. by Joseph Hall, (London: Clarendon Press, 1914, 3rd edn; 1st edn, 1866), pp. 1-6.

³¹ Scattergood, pp. 177-8.

³² Cf. *Nennius's History of the Britons*, in Giles, p. 403; Geoffrey of Monmouth, *History of the Kings of Britain*, ed. and trans. by Lewis Thorpe (London: Penguin, 1966), pp. 170-85, 200, 237. Although extraordinary, such marvels are generally intended as metaphorical or metonymic, such being for the most part intelligible.

ble by-products of war - the physical devastation of this period was not limited to Scotland but was also severe in the northern counties of England, and again we must bear in mind the likely northern provenance of the Harley scribe's exemplum.³³ The status of border territories as English or Scottish was repeatedly subject to redefinition during the protracted course of the conflict. The seventh line of the prophecy refers to the tactical border territory Roxburgh, ceded to the English alongside Berwick and Edinburgh by Edward Balliol in the Roxburgh Convention of 1332. A focal point of disruption in a disrupted landscape, its castle was burnt to the ground by Scottish forces on at least two occasions, and its fortifications re-built by the English upon annexation.³⁴ Its place in the prophecy potentially carries a number of multi-layered temporal resonances: the occasions of its razing, and its later English occupation, when it ceased to be a Scottish 'burgh' and became an English outpost. 'When the alde is gan ant the newe is come that don noht' seems to recall the movement of places, the desolation of old ground, and the failure to adequately rebuild what was lost.³⁵

I think we can view this marvellous desolation of the landscape, however, as something other than strict historical representation. The effects of the war in Scotland were not limited to the border territories alone; they were much larger in their scope - a scope which the prophecy extends to the point of hyperbole through the fostering of apocalyptic correspondences. In her discussion of the 'formula of tokens' found in the Harley prophecy, E.B. Lyle suggests a comparison with the 'tokens of cataclysm' found in medieval Welsh prophecies treating the fifteen signs preceding the Day of Judgement, extant also in English.³⁶ There is certainly a correspondence of form between the Harley prophecy and the signs: both are formulaic progressions of calamities. However, the features of Thomas's Reply cannot be exactly matched with any ver-

³³ See *The Chronicles of Lanercost, 1272-1346*, trans. Herbert Maxwell (Glasgow: James Maclehose & Sons, 1913), p. 211. The entry for 1311 describes a Scottish raid on Northumberland: 'trampling down crops by themselves and their beasts as much as they could; and so, passing by the priory of Lanercost, they entered Scotland, having many men prisoners from whom they might extort ransom money at will.' The passage goes on to detail the burning of the settlements at Brough, Appleby and Kirkoswald. Such appears to have been a continuous feature on both sides of the border during the first half of the fourteenth century. For an overview of the effect on the north and an increase in border raids following English defeat at Bannockburn see May McKisack, *The Fourteenth Century, 1307-1399* (London: Clarendon, 1959; 2nd edn. 1963), pp. 40-41.

³⁴ *Lanercost* refers to two instances, in 1297 and 1311, in which a Scots force burnt the town and its castle, in the first instance using the means of the sixth line of the prophecy, by placing ladders against the walls by night: 'steles castles with styes [ladders]'. See pp. 165, 204, 286, 288. On the English policy of devastation to the ceded territories in 1334, see Barrow, pp. 122, 125.

³⁵ The governments of Edward II, and later Isabella and Mortimer, both largely did 'noht' in defence of the north of England. See McKisack, pp. 32-3.

³⁶ Lyle, p. 111; see also M. E. Griffiths, *Early Vaticination in Welsh with English Parallels* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1937), pp. 44-47.

sions of the fifteen signs. The changing nature and desolation of the land is more directly an apocalyptic pre-condition found in sibylline and Biblical material. The series of natural upheavals prophesied in the eighth book of the *Oracula Sibyllina*, quoted by Augustine and attributed to the Erythraean Sibyl in *De Civitate Dei* 18.23, is a useful point of comparison.³⁷ Here, the coming of the Messiah is preceded by total reversals in the landscape: 'uplifted shall the valleys be, the hills shall be laid low'.³⁸ This appears to be an echo of Isaiah 40.4, where this change is similarly a sign of the coming Messianic age.³⁹ We find similar in the changing landscape of Revelation 6.14, 'And the heaven departed as a book folded up: and every mountain, and the islands were moved out of their places'. The latter appears to have been a point of illustrative exemplification in apocalypses such as the Trinity Apocalypse (Trinity College MS R.16.2), an illumination which also portrays a castle sinking into the ground.⁴⁰ Whether or not the 'Londyon' turned to forest in the prophecy is the border area Lothian, or is intended to refer to London (which I think is not so far-fetched, given the proximity of this figure to the English king, the 'capped man'), these disruptions to the physical landscape could well be included with a mind to such familiar apocalyptic reversals of place and the changing nature of land.⁴¹ In keeping with apocalyptic currents, the environmental chaos of the Harley prophecy is coupled with evidence of human disorder, covetousness: 'When mon is levere othermones thyng then is owen'. This is interesting in light of the prophecy's concern with dishonest commerce; indeed the reference to the changing status of Roxburgh accompanies the re-location of a market.⁴² This, as we shall presently see, also carries apocalyptic pertinence.

³⁷ Ward, I, 190.

³⁸ Augustine, *City of God*, ed. by G. R. Evans, trans. by Henry Bettenson (London: Penguin, 2009), pp. 789-90.

³⁹ I am indebted to Aisling Byrne for pointing out this correspondence.

⁴⁰ Second illumination on fol. 19v of *The Trinity College Apocalypse: A Reproduction in Facsimile of the Manuscript R.16.2 in the Library of Trinity College, Cambridge*, with a preface and introduction by M. R. James (London: The Roxburghe Club, 1909).

⁴¹ See Dean, p. 20. 'Londyon' as either Lothian or London could well be an intended ambiguity, a figure which decentres even while it seems to give a geographical location. Disruptions in London, as well as Lothian, are intelligible – not least in the widespread effects of the famine of 1315, see below p. 16. The restructuring of the landscape could also possibly be a reference to the re-location of royal administration from London to York in 1327 and 1333, see Nicholson, pp. 42, 109.

⁴² I am unable to locate 'Forweleye'. The implication, however, is perhaps the movement of the market away from Roxburgh, which was adversely affected by the repeated interruptions to Anglo-Scottish trade. See G. W. S. Barrow, 'The Aftermath of War', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 5th series 28 (1978), 103-125, (p. 108).

V

One of the chief features of the next section of the prophecy is the subversion and abuse of commerce: from the relocation of markets, to the sale of men, and the rising price of wheat. It reads:

When Bambourne is donged wyth dede men;
When men ledes men in ropes to buyen and to sellen;
When a quarter of whaty whete is chaunged for a colt of ten markes;
When prude pikes and pees is leyd in prisoun

(9-12)

English defeat at the Battle of Bannockburn ('Bambourne') appears to have been regarded as part of a complex of English misfortune. Following heavy rains across Europe in 1315 was a famine so severe that the English peasantry are said to have eaten their own children, and the cost of wheat increased to six or even eight times its normal price.⁴³ The rising price of wheat in the tenth line, following the Battle of Bannockburn and, it seems, the ransoming of hostages, appears to be reminiscent of a particularly desperate chapter in recent English history. It is plausible that within allusions to events in Scotland, affairs in England are also referenced. For the most part the prophecy contains Scottish locales but the temporal-frame it evokes is by no means necessarily limited to Scotland; the prophecy is an Anglo-centric production. The references appear de-centred precisely *because* they are recognisable, understandable as pessimistic and traumatic associations stemming from the first figure of the prophecy, the 'capped man' crowned as king. The view that the reign of Edward II was the prophetically-ratified cause and circumstance of subsequent national hardships, the sentiment we find echoed in the *Brut* above, is a long-view of history crucial to any understanding of the prophecy.

Tracing a complex of disasters back to misgovernment is of course a familiar feature of prophetic condemnation of Old Testament Israel, a people are punished for their sins, a consequence of misguidance from spiritual and earthly leaders, which desolates the landscape. Lamenting the declining British nation, Gildas draws on Jeremiah 5.30-31: 'Astonishment and wonders have

⁴³ See McKisack, pp. 49-50. The *Brut* describes the English loss of Berwick, famine, resort to cannibalism, plague, and intermittent Scottish raids upon Northumberland as a total complex of misfortune during this period - *Brut*, I, 209-10.

been wrought in this land. Prophets did preach lying, and priests did applaud with their hands, and my people have loved such matters'.⁴⁴ We can see this at work in the Harley Erceldoune prophecy: through the realisation of *impossibilia* the land is marvellously, desolately, changed. Famine is of course one such instrument of divine scourging, and here we also find an Old Testament analogue associated by Gildas with the decline of the Britons. Along the same theme entertained in his glosses on Jeremiah, Gildas paraphrases Ezekiel 5.16: 'I will stretch forth my hand upon her, and break in pieces her foundation of bread, and send upon her famine'.⁴⁵ The passage in Ezekiel itself prophesies the sending of the 'arrows of famine' (5.16) as 'a reproach among the nations' (5.14). In the Harley prophecy famine will be (has been) sent upon the English nation, a divine retribution resulting from monarchic misrule.

Ezekiel 5.16 employs a common reference to famine which we find later in the high price of wheat in the third seal of Revelation 6. We can potentially read the progress of the first four seals at work in the lines of the prophecy quoted above. In Revelation 6: the opening of the first seal which unleashes 'a conqueror' wearing a crown (6.2);⁴⁶ the second a rider with the power to 'take peace from the earth, and that they [men] should kill one another' (6.4); the third a rider bearing a pair of scales, while four voices demand 'two pounds of wheat for a penny, and thrice two pounds of barley for a penny' (6.6); and the fourth Death, who kills 'with sword, with famine, and with death, and with the beasts of the earth' (6.8).⁴⁷ The Harley prophecy gives us not only the high price of wheat (the third seal, in which the famine of the fourth is implicit), but the imprisoning of 'pees' (the second seal), and allusions to what appear to be two major battles (the second and fourth seals). The prophecy takes us to the brink of the fifth seal, but it cannot progress to the apocalyptically definitive conditions of the final three: the resurrection of the martyrs, earthquakes, the blackening of the sun, the moon as 'blood', the appearance of the Lamb (Revelation 6.9-17), and the trumpets of the seven angels heralding even greater destruction (Revelation 8.1-13). Even within the heightened realm of apocalyptic refashion-

⁴⁴ Gildas, p. 357. We might wonder how available a copy of *De Excidio* was to the original redactors of the prophecy, and might further conjecture that the hypothesised northern MS originated in a religious house – the apocalypticism of the prophecy could well have appealed to ecclesiastical minds. For the possible religious provenance of the scribe see Revard, pp. 68-9; and David L. Jeffrey, 'Authors, Anthologists, and Franciscan Spirituality', in Fein, pp. 261-70.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 340.

⁴⁶ Whilst the implications of the first seal, the conqueror given a crown are potentially interesting in relation to the Edwardian period, this is too lengthy and inconclusive a grounds for speculation for my current purpose.

⁴⁷ On animal imagery in the prophecy see below, pp. 19-21.

ing, such phenomena still lay well outside the scope of the Anglo-Scottish wars.⁴⁸

VI

The final events detailed by the prophecy are:

When a Scot ne may hym hude ase hare in forme that the Englysshe
ne shal hym fynde;
When ryttht ant wrong ascenteth to-gedere;
When laddes weddeth lovedis;
When Scottes flen so faste that for faute of ship hy drouneth hem-
selve

(13-16)

The Scottish retreat at Halidon Hill is a matter which poetry and chronicle accounts of the Anglo-Scottish wars hold as an inevitable check to Scottish pride. Pride is of course the condition which line twelve of the prophecy presents as antithetical to peace. In both retrospective English and Scottish accounts it is a failing associated with the Bruce faction following victory at Bannockburn, of which the Battle of Halidon Hill is taken to be the divinely ratified check.⁴⁹ In the *Brut* the Halidon chastisement is formulated in anthropomorphic terms: 'And þus hit bifelle, as God wolde, þat þe Scottis hade þat day no more foisun ne myght aþeynes þe Englysshe-men, þan xx shepe shulde haue aþeyns v wolves'.⁵⁰ This simile is a commonplace of histories and prophecies of decline, for example Gildas's description of the Saxons on British soil 'like wolves into the sheep-fold'.⁵¹ Such figures appear to be intentionally reminiscent of the animal references and transformations of Daniel, Ezekiel, Jeremiah, and Revelation - the foundation of one of the most distinctive features of Galfridian prophecy.⁵² Yet whilst the Harley prophecy does include animal imagery, it does not give us wolves, but hares.

Given the date of Harley 2253, the relentless persecution of the Scots, hiding like hares, is an obvious allusion to the Battle of Halidon Hill. It fits not only in terms of the date of the manuscript but in the details of the battle, where the Scots were chased into the sea.⁵³ The reference to the Scots as

⁴⁸ On 'business as usual' during the 'vicissitudes of war and its aftermath' see Barrow, pp. 111-12.

⁴⁹ Wyntoun, II, 420; Minot, p. 5; Lanercost, pp. 279-81.

⁵⁰ *Brut*, I, 285.

⁵¹ Gildas, p. 310.

⁵² Cf. Geoffrey of Monmouth, pp. 170-85; *Brut*, I, 72-76.

⁵³ *The Romance of the Battle of Halidon Hill* reads: 'þe Englysche men pursuyed hem so,/ Pille þe fflode was alle a-Goo', *Brut*, I, 287 (Appendix A). See also Nicholson, p. 136.

hares is one which we find also in the English *Brut*, and appears to have been commonplace.⁵⁴ However, in apocalyptic, and indeed, we might expect, valedictory terms, this construction is unusual not only in its absence of the wolverine, but of any visible agency other than the Scots themselves. Rather than the English army, the agency of persecution is the historical momentum of the prophecy itself, to which the Scots can only react with a fearful self-destruction: for lack of a ship they 'drouneth hem-selve'. There seems to be the ghost of an apocalyptic structure here: the unfolding of historical events in correspondence with a divinely predetermined framework. The drowning of the Scots perhaps recalls the fate of the estates of men in Revelation, who throw themselves on the bitter mercy of the rocks:

And the kings of the earth, and the princes, and tribunes, and the rich, and the strong, and every bondman, and every freeman, hid themselves in the dens and in the rocks of mountains: And they say to the mountains and the rocks: Fall upon us, and hide us from the face of him that sitteth upon the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb.

(Revelation 6.15-16)

Yet there is no overt trace of a divine order in the prophecy, and the assumption of the hare form, which appears to have been an object of medieval superstition, retains the quality of a ghoulish marvel.⁵⁵ No messianic figure enters the frame to establish order, and all remains decidedly disordered.

The final formulation of the prophecy presents an image of further disarray: moral, in the ascendance of right alongside wrong; hierarchical, in the wedding of 'laddes' to 'lovedis'; and human, in the drowned Scots, a presentation seemingly devoid of English jubilation - this is after all a work of pessimism.⁵⁶ In the inter-related matrix of the material effects of war, the apocalyptic seals - conquest, battle, extortionate commerce, famine, and the 'wild beasts of the earth' - cannot be separated into a neat progression of mutually exclusive and temporally antecedent effects. Rather they form an overwhelming totality evading such clear delineations. The prophecy entertains a symbolic order which cannot be closed off. Whilst the continuation of corrupt, profiteering, and ulti-

⁵⁴ We find hares used metaphorically for the Scots in the prophecy of the last six kings in the *Brut*, see I, 72-3, and its direct application in I, pp. 204-5, although the hares are here substituted with a greyhound for John Balliol and a fox for Robert Bruce.

⁵⁵ Cf. Gerald of Wales, *Topography of Ireland*, 2.19; 'Names of a Hare' in MS Digby 86, a curse in a late thirteenth-century hand.

⁵⁶ Compare, for example, to the jingoism of Minot, pp. 1-4. Minot's verses are roughly contemporary with the prophecy.

mately chaotic humanity finds potential correspondence in the over-living of the unrepentant sinners of Revelation 9.20 who 'did not penance from the work of their hands', no sanctified utopia follows the devastation; there is no definitive casting of the sinful into Hell, and no establishment of the New Jerusalem. The pessimistic form of the prophecy fundamentally negates such an outcome. By 1340 Anglo-Scottish relations could by no stretch of the imagination be configured as possessing so absolute a conclusion.

VII

The prophecy concludes, in answer to the countess's question:

Whenne shal this be? Nouthur in thine tyme ne in myne.
Ah comen and gon with-inne twenty wynter ant on.

(17-18)

The twenty-one year period given here is a source of much speculation. The prophecy can potentially be taken as that retrospectively associated with the death of Alexander III in 1286, the tradition found in the *Scottichronicon*. This takes us roughly to the period of the Battle of Bannockburn (i.e. within half a decade). This is a key argument of nineteenth-century scholarship which regards the prophecy as propaganda intended to inspire the English and dispirit the Scots on the eve of the Battle of Bannockburn.⁵⁷ This is founded upon the misdating of the entire contents of the manuscript to c.1320, which originally refuted line sixteen of the prophecy ('When Scottes flen') as a reference to Halidon Hill.⁵⁸ However, in light of more recent scholarship, the figure of the drowning Scots can be more accurately regarded as a reference to the actual outcome at Halidon Hill, rather than wishful-thinking on the eve of Bannockburn.

Given the loose chronology common to political prophecies, more concerned with certain key events and the possibility of pattern-forming than strict historical record, the most plausible conclusion is that the prophecy's resolution is formulaic. The twenty-one years are feasibly intended to be read as *over a generation*: the scope of the conflict is such that it endures long after the 'capped man' of line one. The conclusion is perhaps an echo of Matthew 24.34, asserting the validity and immediate historical pertinence of the prophecy, 'Amen I say unto you, that this generation shall not pass, till all these things be done'. The generational limit in Matthew appears to refer to the first stages of apocalyptic

⁵⁷ Murray, p. xix; Brandl, p. 16.

⁵⁸ Ker, pp. xxi-xiii; Robbins, p. xxxii.

desolation rather than to conclusive eschatological fulfilment, and if we view the Harley prophecy in terms of apocalyptic progression, the Scottish wars can be regarded as a symptom of this preliminary decline, although by no means its culmination. It is itself perhaps testament to the protracted nature of the apocalyptic worldview, as we find it in the Little Apocalypse of Matthew:

And ye shall hear of wars and rumours of wars. See that ye be not troubled. For all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet.

For nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; and there shall be pestilences, and famines, and earthquakes in places:

Now all these are the beginnings of sorrows.

(Matthew 24.6-8)

Within the quasi-apocalyptic terms of Thomas's Reply the Scottish wars are only the 'beginnings of sorrows', a series of apocalyptic symptoms rather than a definitive conclusion.

Whilst the events of this period deny full apocalyptic realization, the Harley prophecy still invokes a distinct sense of cataclysm. Coote has argued that the prophecy 'tells us what the people who read and wrote it feared the most'.⁵⁹ Yet its vision of a disordered universe is not a disturbing future possibility as much as a hyperbolic version of a reconstructed past. It does not necessarily give us history as it was, but history as it was written from the vantage point of the end of the crisis period. The prophecy is not an expression of fear, rather it is an attempt to come to terms with a disordered past through integration into an intelligible structure, the Žižekian 'new texture' of the apocalyptic order. Although perfect integration is inevitably denied, a certain new and subsidiary level of understanding is achieved through such an engagement. Apocalyptic echoes cast a heightened level of meaning across the details of the prophecy: the sufferings of the period are significant and historically ratified, for the resonance, if not the realisation, is ultimate.

⁵⁹ Coote, p. 99.