

spiritualism

NOSTRADAMUS: His Prophecies--Randi

The same pattern of RELIGIOUS THINKING, starting from the conclusion and then proceeding to an editing of the evidence, has been used in the translations of Nostradamus' "Centuries". Randi does not believe this world to be so strange, thus an accurate rendering of "Centuries".

NOSTRADAMUS: LIFE AND PROPHECIES

Nostradamus (1503-1566) One of the most renowned and still-popular champions of disaster was Michel de Notredame, the sixteenth-century physician of Provence who took the Latinized name by which he is more commonly known: Nostradamus. His major opus was Centuries, a series of almost a thousand quatrains which purported to be prophecies, and along with a great number of almanacs, letters, and various other writings, he managed to produce more than any other prophet in history. His reputation, however, is due to the ardent horde of his disciples who continue to this day to hyperbolize, bowdlerize, and invent in order to perpetuate his fame.

Under the patronage and protection of Catherine de Medicis, queen of France and the power behind three French kings, Nostradamus lived comfortably from 1503 to 1566, celebrated all over Europe and a thorn in the side of Elizabeth I of England, for whom he continually predicted, through his almanacs, a doom which never came.

Upon close examination, it can be seen that many of the quatrains penned by the seer of Provence were actually political commentaries and justifiable critiques of the activities of the Catholic church, which was then busily tossing heretics onto bonfires wherever the Holy Inquisition could reach.

Nostradamus himself was in great danger of mounting the faggots himself. He was already under suspicion because only two generations earlier the Notredames had been the Gassonets, a Jewish family that had converted to Catholicism under pressure. Worse, letters recently discovered in the Bibliotheque Nationale in Paris prove that he was also a secret heretic Lutheran, surprisingly enough, in view of that sect's strong anti-Semitic bias.

A good look at just one of the Nostradamus quatrains, one of the Top Ten often presented as positive evidence of his prophetic ability, serves to illustrate how far believers will go to stretch the facts in order to serve their needs. Quatrain 51 of Century II is said by the faithful to refer to the Great Fire of London in 1666. Here is the evidence for this belief.

First, quoting from the earliest available (1558) edition of the verse, it reads:

**Le sang du iuste a Londres fera faulte,
Brusles par fouldres de vint trois les six:
La dame antique cherra de place haute,
De mesme secte plusieurs seront occis.**

(the reader should know that in modern French, iuste would be juste, Brusles would be Brules, vint would be vingt, and mesme would be meme.)

In modern English:

**The blood of the just shall be wanting in London,
Burnt by thunderbolts of twenty three the Six(es),
The ancient dame shall fall from then high place,
Of the same sect many shall he killed.**

The word feu (fire) is now substituted by many copyists for the original fonidres (thunderbolts) in the second line, so that it will better fit the Great Fire of London interpretation. Also, some editions print vingt & trois rather than de vint trois, thus making an appreciable variation in the text and in the meaning.

Nostradamians believe that the seer was writing about an event that was 111 years in his future: In 1666, London was devastated by a fire that destroyed four-fifths of the city. It is said by one of the interpreters that the last half of line two refers to the number of houses and buildings that were burned, rather than the more popular interpretation by almost everyone else that it means 66, therefore, 1666. How that date was obtained is difficult to see.

The Nostradamians explain that La dame antique refers to St. Pauls Cathedral, known as the Old Lady, which was lost in the fire along with many other churches, thus the claimed validation of the line, Of the same sect many shall be killed. St. Pauls Cathedral was never called the Old

Lady, as claimed. Also, the word antique in Old French meant eccentric; the derivation is similar to that of the English word antic. Though the old St. Pauls Cathedral was the highest church then known, there is no high place from which it could have fallen. Some fans, recognizing this discrepancy, claim that a statue of the Virgin Mary stood atop the cathedral, and that was the Old Lady Nostradamus was referring to. Not so. An early edition of the Encyclopaedia Britannica provides a clear, detailed illustration of the old prefire cathedral that shows it was Gothic in style, with a square roof area and no external statues at all.

This quatrain actually refers to an event which was taking place as Nostradamus was penning his opus in 1555, but a very different event, and certainly not the Great Fire of London. Here are the historical facts:

1. Announcing a purge of her kingdom in 1554, the Catholic queen Bloody Mary I of England began executing Protestant heretics in London, beginning, in January 1555. Many were prominent churchmen, intellectuals, and statesmen. One Bishop Ridley had an especially horrid exit from life. His brother-in-law, wishing to lessen his relatives suffering by hastening his death, had piled the faggots so high about him that the flames could not reach him, and the poor man cried out that he could not burn. His benefactor thereupon opened up the pile of wood, which more quickly brought an end to the bishop.

2. The trial, sentencing, and burning of these unfortunates began January 22, 1555, in groups of six. When they eventually expired at the stake, it was with an explosion like a thunderbolt, since they were burned with the merciful addition of bags of gunpowder tied between their legs or around their necks to hasten their passage.

3. Mary, haggard, totally obsessed with religion, disappointed in love, ill with dropsy and other assorted diseases, repeatedly imagined that she was pregnant by her husband Philip of Spain. The consort was seldom at home and in 1555 left England and Mary for good. She wandered about her palace half naked while the atrocities were being committed in her name. She died three years later, incoherent and considered quite insane. It was strongly suspected that her exit was hastened.

4. Over three hundred Protestants were executed in this way at that time.

When one considers these historical facts and compares them line for line and number for number with the four lines of the Nostradamus quatrain as seen in this much more accurate translation, a different view might be taken of the quatrain:

1. The blood of the innocent will be an error at London,
2. Burned by thunderbolts, o twenty-three, the six(es),
3. The senile lady will lose her high position,
4. Many more of the same sect will be slain.

An important question arises here: Did Nostradamus have time to get this historical event into his publication? The first edition of the Centuries, in which this quatrain is printed, is dated May 4, 1555 more than three months after the first group of heretics were executed in London. Though some authorities date the 1555 edition of the Centuries as March 1, 1555, it is imprinted at the end:

Ce present fibre a este acheve dimprimer le IIII. iour de may M. DLV.

(This book was finished printing the fourth day of May 1555.)

The sentences of the inevitable executions would have been passed some time before the events, since the condemned often spent many months in prison while their wealth was located and acquired by the crown; carefully applied and controlled torture effectively extracted information about concealed assets from the condemned. Nostradamus was part of a network of scholars who were in frequent communication and would have heard of thi event. Thus, either publication date is adequate for the described scenario.

By James Randi, An Encyclopedia of Claims, Frauds, and Hoaxes of the Occult and Supernatural, St. Martins Press, NY 1995.

NOSTRADAMUS: EXPOSED BY RANDI

James (The Amazing) Randi has again produced something well worth the readers consideration: a serious study of the sixteenth-century prophet whose Latinized name was Nostradamus. The subject is a fit one for Randis no-nonsense style, which is concise and logical and impatient with foggy notions and far-reaching speculations masquerading as some sort of science of foreseeing future events. Such impatience may apply

(and is applied by Randi) even more to Nostradamus later interpreters than to the original figure. Randi makes a good case for taking hostile views of prophet and offers explanations of what they do and how they produce material convincing to some.

But the book is not a simple attack. Randi has approached the subject in a serious way. He has enlisted the aid of historians and historical documents and he visited the places in France frequented by Nostradamus. Such care on his part has resulted in revealing insights into the meaning of some of the seers writings.

In our age, believers have attempted to show that some of Nostradamus quatrains predict the career of Adolf Hitler, and even the Japanese aggression in 1941. See, for instance, Randi's comments on the quatrain No. 4-68 (his chosen Specimen #9, p. 215). Here, followers of Nostradamus have taken allusions to the two greatest of Asia & Africa to mean Japan and Mussolini (Randi citing James Lagers interpretation). And Hitler enters through the name "Hister" for the "Lower Danube." (It is true that the Danube was in ancient times called the Ister.) According to Randi, the quatrain predicts trouble for perhaps Venice and Genoa, as well as for Malta. (Here, I should like to say that the literate men of the time of Nostradamus read the rediscovered classics of the Greeks and Romans. In the works they read, Asia is to be taken to be Asia Minor or: and the greatest of Asia Minor at that time was obviously Turkey, which had already captured Constantinople and marched on Europe. The greatest of Africa we might take, to be Egypt, where the Mamlukes were once part of the Ottoman Empire; The Turks were the real menace during the time of Nostradamus. Randi noted that danger elsewhere in his book, but I think it might bear upon Specimen No. 9, which he chose for analysis. Turkey might menace parts of Europe as well as such islands as Malta.)

In any event, those with any fascination for the works of Nostradamus as well as those suspicious of them will find this volume well worth their time. As a matter of interest, I would add to Randi's opinion that physician Nostradamus's use of remedies from roses was fallacious, to note that such usage was traditional: see Moses Maimonides' recipes, for instance. That twelfth-century physician/philosopher/author mentioned the medical use of rose products extensively in his "The Preservation of Youth"; he had begun in Spain but ended his days in Cairo, an older man at the time of Richard the Lionheart's crusade. The use of the rose shows that medieval views and ancient knowledge were still being taught at the time of the Renaissance in northern Europe. Randi's translation from the French text are straightforward and seem reasonable. The quatrain we have mentioned in this review (Randi's #9), is translated by

him thusly (p. 215):

In the year very near, not far from Venus,

The two greatest of Asia & Africa

From the Rhine & Lower Danube, which will be said to have come,

Cries, tears at Malta & the Ligurian coast.

Finally, I should like to remark that if one finds the writings of Nostradamus to be difficult, they are yet considerable clearer than the so-called prophecies of Merlin, which are marvels of obscurity. The interested reader can find these latter in Geoffrey of Monmouths The History of the Kings of Britain (pp. 170-185 of the Penguin paperback edition).

HUGH H. TROTTI, REVIEWER: in the Skeptical Inquire of 1994.

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