



The Skeptics SA guide to Nostradamus

Michel de Nostredame was born Dec 14 1503 at St Remy-de-Provence to an intellectual Jewish family who had earlier converted to Catholicism. He was taught Hebrew, Latin, Greek, Medicine, Mathematics, Astronomy, Astrology Biblical Prophecy and the Jewish Cabbala by his grandparents while still a child. In university he changed his surname to the Latin form Nostradamus to demonstrate his allegiance to Catholicism. He studied Philosophy at Avignon and in 1522 commenced medical studies at the Montpellier University. An unconventional freethinker, when plague struck Southern France he refused to use normal bleeding practices, and despite opposition, he had considerable success in treating victims by recommending fresh air, cleanliness and his own secret remedies.

About 1534 he established a practice in Agen, married, had two children, and came in contact with Julius Cesar Scalinger, a philosopher and Astrologer. A few years later the plague returned and he was devastated when, despite his efforts, his wife and children died. At about that time he came to the attention of the Inquisition, and was questioned regarding the activities of a friend of Scalinger. Although no action resulted, the events left a deep and lasting impression.

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He left Agen and traveled around Europe for about six years, and in 1547 finally settled in Salon-en Craux de Provence and married a wealthy widow, who bore him six children. It was here in 1550 that he first recorded his visions. He used a divination process called scrying, or hydromancy, in which the oracle looks into a reflective material: water, ink, or oil. The practice is mentioned in the Bible, where a cup containing liquid was used: Genesis 44:5 and 15; Deuteronomy 18:9 – 12 and Jeremiah 14:14.

Nostradamus used a bowl of water, mounted on a brass tripod. After a magic ritual he touched the tripod with a wand, dipped the wand in the water, and then touched the hem of his robe. He would then concentrate his gaze on the water in the bowl, looking deep into the water, seeing reflections of light and colours. The technique suggests a form of self-hypnosis, wherein one can succumb to suggestion, basically seeing what one wants to see.

In 1555 he published *Les Prophecies de M. Nostradamus*, (which became known as the Centuries), containing 100 quatrains (four-line predictions) for the coming year. The first edition was a great success. He gained wide publicity and the favour of the queen, Catherine de Medici. He planned a further nine books

with prophecies from his own time through to the end of the world, the year 3797. He died in 1566 at Salon.

People who have his 'predictions' claim that he predicted many things: air travel, rockets, even the atomic bomb, Napoleonic Wars, the American Civil War, and the killings of Lincoln and the Kennedys. They claim he predicted three antichrists who would bring widespread war. Two are said to be Napoleon and Hitler. The third, due to appear in the early 1990s would, between 1994 and 1999 join with Russia to launch a nuclear attack on New York, starting a 27 year war. Then, after he was destroyed, Christ would usher in a millennium of peace. Of course such claims rely a great deal on the individual interpretations of the text. When language experts look at these texts they fail to see any such references.

Despite the claims of their accuracy, close examination of the quatrains reveals that the 'predictions' are really very loose interpretations. Century II, verse 51 is often quoted as 'proof' of his prophetic ability. It concerns the alleged death of Henry II of France:

The young lion shall overcome the old
On the field of battle in single combat,
In a cage of gold he shall pierce his eyes
Two knells, (then) one, then a cruel death.

Although Henry was killed jousting with a captain of the Royal Guard, his helmet was iron, not gold, the two men were of similar age, and neither used the lion as a heraldic symbol. Furthermore, Henry was wounded when a piece of a broken lance entered his skull, not his eye, and died later from infection associated with the wound.

One must ask why, if Nostradamus intended this quatrain to predict the death of Henry, why was it that in two other verses, VI: 7 and IX: 41, the seer predicted great future deeds for the king. The fact is that this quatrain had nothing to do with Henry, and in addition it has been shown that this quatrain was altered at a later date.

Another frequently quoted is Century I, verse 35:

The blood of the just shall be wanting at
London.
Burned by the thunders, at twenty-three the
sixes.
The foolish woman shall fall from high-
place,
Of the same sect a greater number shall be
killed.

There are divided opinions on this. Some say this refers to the Great Fire of London in 1666, while others claim it refers to Queen Mary's attempt in 1555 to eradicate Protestantism when Skeptics SA

she had a number of Protestants burned at the stake. If this latter is correct, then instead of a prediction it is merely a recording of an actual event, possibly no more than a diary entry.

This is the great problem with all of the quatrains: the manner in which they are interpreted depends upon the individual translating the text. The words themselves are unimportant: what is important is the 'twist' that interpreters place on the words. In fact the quatrains are almost impossible to translate. Extremely cautious, he recorded his predictions in such a way that they were difficult to interpret. There was a reason for this. His previous encounter with the Inquisition would have left no doubt in his mind that he was on very dangerous ground. He was dabbling in a very dubious area of the occult, one that placed him at risk of being accused of dabbling in diabolical arts. Predicting the future was an attribute only God possessed. Any human with such powers was assumed to be trafficking with the devil. If charged by the Inquisition for such a 'crime' there was only one sentence: to be burned alive. To place himself above suspicion he openly praised the church, publicly denounced the practice of magical arts, declaring that books on magic were dangerous, and even burning his own library books to set an example.

To further protect himself the quatrains were recorded out of chronological order, the text was in medieval Provençal French, a relatively obscure language, and it was interspersed with ordinary French, Latin and Greek words, with

numerous abbreviations, anagrams, and symbols. He even deliberately misspelled many of the words. As a result the quatrains were so ambiguous that they could mean anything. In this way, if he was ever accused, he could always argue that an accuser had misinterpreted the words. Of course that makes his material ideal for modern translators, who can interpret them as they like, and make them fit any conceivable condition. Possibly the best example of this relates to the claims made about Hitler.

Nostradamus had been almost completely forgotten until World War II. A Swiss astronomer, Ernst Krafft, claimed that Nostradamus had predicted the rise of Hitler. Krafft had found an obscure reference in the Centuries to the word Hister. He modified the word to 'Hitler' in order to gain a degree of publicity for himself. Hitler and many top Nazis were fervent believers in Astrology and other pseudo-sciences and Joseph Goebbels, the Nazi Propaganda Minister, used this claim to great effect, making a major propaganda issue of this, claiming that this reference foretold a great victory for Germany. To counter these claims the British employed Louis de Wohl to create 50 new quatrains which predicted the defeat of Hitler and Germany. As it turned out the word Hister was a name widely used in the Middle Ages to refer to the lower reaches of the River Rhine.

Just as the Nazis twisted the words of the quatrains to say what they wanted, so too have most modern translators. To simply publish

books of the actual wording of the quatrains would be a waste of time, since they have no meanings to modern readers. So modern interpreters deliberately change the words, or the interpretation, to create a new meaning. In this way a river becomes a man, unremarkable events become assassinations or wars, or nuclear attacks on New York.

The need to believe that Nostradamus was a prophet has much to do with the fears we all hold concerning the unseen future: our need to be reassured ensures that anyone who claims to be able to illuminate that dark landscape is always eagerly sought after.

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