

THE
LIVES AND PORTRAITS

OF
Remarkable Characters,

DRAWN
FROM THE MOST AUTHENTIC SOURCES.

A NEW EDITION.

*"Virtuous or vicious every man must be,
Few in the extremes, but all in the degree."*

POPE.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

London :

PRINTED AND PUBLISHED BY W. LEWIS,
21, FINCH-LANE, CORNHILL;
AND SOLD BY ALL BOOKSELLERS.

1819.



R. NIXON,

The Cheshire Prophet.

ROBERT NIXON,

THE CHESHIRE PROPHET.

ROBERT NIXON, the subject of this memoir, was born in the year 1467, at Over, in the county of Cheshire, in the seventh of Edward IV. He was short of stature, with a remarkable large head, and piercing eyes: his face bespoke a vast deal of innocence, blended with great conception and fore-thought. His father held a farm at the above place, known by the name of Bark, or Bridge-house: at a very early age he sent his son Robert to the plough, and afterwards into the service of Mr. Crowton, of Swanlow; it was in this employ that they perceived that singular turn in the manner of Robert, which afterwards rendered his name so famous.

It is said he was of a malicious turn of mind, particularly towards children; drivelled as he spoke, and was very surly; but of this part of

his history we have no authentic evidence; certain it is, he was distinguished for his great simplicity of manners, and was uncommonly reserved; when he spoke it seemed to hurt him much; he was remarkably satirical, and what he said had generally some prophetic meaning.

His parents, at their decease, left their farm and Robert to the care of his elder brother, and it was about this time that the monk of Vale-royal, having displeased him, he said, in an angry tone,

When you the harrow come on high
Soon a raven's nest will be;

which is well known to have come to pass in the person of the last abbot of that place, whose name was Harrow. Being called before Sir Thomas Holcroft, he was put to death for denying the supremacy of King Henry VIII. who, according to his commission, having suppressed the abbey, the king gave the domain to this knight and his heirs, who bore a raven for their crest.

As he was one day driving the team, whilst his brother's man guided the plough, he pricked an ox so very cruelly with his goad, that the plough-holder threatened to acquaint his master; on which Nixon said, the ox should not be his brother's three days hence; which accordingly happened, for a life dropping in the estate, the lord of the manor took the same ox for a heriot.

At another time he foretold that Norton and Vale-royal abbies should meet on Acton-bridge, a circumstance which appeared not only improbable but absolutely impossible; yet, strange to say, this prophecy was literally fulfilled;—the whole of those ancient piles having been demolished, the stones were used for the purpose of repairing the bridge, an event which, at that time, was perfectly unexpected:—he further prophesied, that a small thorn, which was growing in the abbey-yard, would become the door. Though at that period superstition was at its zenith, there were but few who were so credulous as to place any reliance in its accomplishment, and more especially as it was well known that the thorn never arrived at so extensive a

growth as to admit the practicability of its becoming the door of so stately an edifice. This, however, was understood as being literally the purport of the prediction, an idea which ultimately proved to be erroneous, as the meaning was quite different. At the time of the reformation, when plunder and rapine were carried on under the sanction of religion, and with the pretence of banishing superstition and pulling down idolatry, they spared not the most revered lineaments of antiquity. The most valuable paintings, and figures of the best workmanship, were irrecoverably lost in one common fit of destructive zeal. Vale-royal became subject to these devastations, and this thorn, amongst the rest, being cut down, was cast into the door-way, to prevent sheep, which grazed in the court, from going in; thus was fulfilled another prophecy, which considerably augmented the celebrity of our Prophet.

But the reformation he declares in still plainer terms; for he says,

“ A time shall come when priests and monks
Shall have no churches nor houses,

And places where images stood,
Lined letters shall be good,
English books through churches are spread,
There shall be no holy bread."

Though it is not our intention to recite every particular he is said to have foretold, it may not be amiss to mention what is fresh in the memory of every one who lives near De-la-mere Forest, and what has been attested by several of the oldest inhabitants :

" Though Weever-hall shall be alone,
Ridley-pool shall be sown and mown,
And Darnel-park shall be hacked and hewn."

The two wings of Weever's-hall are now standing, and between them is a cart-road ; Ridley-pool is filled up, and made good meadow land ; and in Darnel-park the trees are cut down, and it is made into pasture ground.

He also foretold the use of broad-wheels, &c. and that the town of Norwich, (now a considerable place of trade for salt,) will be destroyed by water, which is confidently expected to come to pass, by the natives of Cheshire ; and some

urge, that the navigable cuts lately made is the water meant, but whether a prejudice against those useful improvements may not have given rise to this notion, time only can determine.

But what brought Nixon most into public notice was, at the time when the battle of Bosworth-field was fought between Richard III. and Henry VII., he stopped his team on a sudden, and, pointing with his whip from one hand to the other, cried, "Now Richard! Now Henry!" several times; till, at last, he said, "Now Harry, get over that ditch, and you gain the day." The plough-holder, amazed, related what had passed when he came home, and the truth of the prediction was verified by special messengers, sent to announce the proclamation of King Henry of England on the field of battle.

The messenger who went this circuit related, on his return, the predictions of Nixon concerning the king's success. Henry, somewhat surprised at this information, though he by no means doubted the dispensation of Providence, however contrary to human expectations, sent the same messenger back to find Nixon, and bring him

before him; at the moment the king gave his orders, our prophet was in the town of Over, running about like a madman, declaring the king had sent for him, and that he must go to court and there be *clammed*.^{*} Such a declaration occasioned much laughter in the town, to think that a king, so noted for his wisdom, should send for a dirty driveling clown to court, and more so at the ridiculous conjectures of the prophet as to the consequences; but, how great was the surprise, in a few days after, when the messenger, passing through the town, demanded a guide to find Nixon, who, at this very juncture, exclaimed, as he was turning the spit at his brothers, "He is coming, he is now on the road for me;" but the astonishment of this family can scarce be imagined, when on the messenger's arrival he demanded Nixon in the king's name: the people who before scoffed at his simple appearance and odd saying, and had pointed to the very children to make him their sport, were now confounded to find the so apparently ridiculous assertion confirmed. Whilst passing through the country,

* *Clammed* signifies starved.

Nixon still loudly lamented that he was going to be starved at court !

He had no sooner arrived here, than the cautious king, willing to make trial of his fore-knowledge, devised the following scheme to prove it. Having hid a valuable diamond ring, which he commonly wore, after the most seemingly strict inquiry, made throughout the palace, whether any one had seen it, he sent for Nixon, telling him what a loss he had sustained, and that if he could not help him to find it, he had no hopes left. But how much surprised was the king when he was answered by that old proverb,

“ He who hides can find.”

On which he declared, with a smile, that he had done this only to try the prophet ; but ever after ordered, that what he said should be carefully put in writing.

To prevent Nixon's being starved, his majesty gave orders for him to have full liberty to range throughout the whole palace, and the kitchen was selected as his constant dwelling. Besides which, an officer was appointed to take care

that he was neither misused nor affronted by the servants, and that every necessary of life should be at his command. Thus situated, one would have thought want could never have reached him; yet, one day, as the king was going to his hunting seat, Nixon ran to him crying, begging, in the most moving terms, that he might not be left, for that if he were, his majesty would never see him again alive; that he should be starved; that now was the time, and if he was left he must die.

The king, whose thoughts were doubtless fixed on the diversion in which he was about to participate, and supposing the matter so very unlikely to come to pass, only said that it was impossible, and recommended him strongly to the officer's care; but scarcely was the king gone from the palace gate, when the servants mocked and teased Nixon to such a degree, that the officer, to prevent these insults, locked him up in a closet, and suffered no one but himself to attend on him, thinking that he should prevent this part of his prophecy from coming true. But a message of great importance coming from the king to this very officer; he, in his readiness to

obey his royal command, forgot to set poor Nixon at liberty, and though he was but three days absent, before he recollected his prisoner, he found him, at his return, dead for want of food: thereby confirming, in his death, the veracity of his prophetic mission.

Thus stands his prophecy in every mouth in Cheshire; yet a greater affront cannot be given, than to ask a copy from the families said to be possessed of it. Every possible means, it is well known, has been used to smother the truth, perplex the curious, and even to abolish the very remembrance that such an one ever existed, but from what reason cannot be ascertained, except that it is foretold that the heir of O— is to meet with some ignominious death, at his own gate, with other family events, which, though no person or time is directly pointed out, may perhaps occasion this secrecy.

It must also be observed, that the cross on De-la-mere Forest, (that is, three steps and the socket in which the cross formerly stood,) are now sunk within a few inches of the ground, though many living remember to have seen it

nearly six feet above, the cross itself having been destroyed long since. It is also remarkable, that Headless-cross is spoken of by Merlin de Rymer, and several other English and Scotch prophets, as the last place in England on which a decisive action will happen; but as to the period, when these things will come to pass, is very uncertain, no specific time having ever been mentioned.

One day as Nixon was returning from ploughing, he laid down the agricultural implements which he had in his hands, and, after remaining a little while without speaking, exclaimed, with a coarse voice, "Now I will prophecy:"—and proceeded as follows:—

"When a raven shall build in a stone-lion's mouth, on the top of a church in Cheshire, then a king of England shall be driven out of his kingdom, and never more return."

"When an eagle shall sit on the top of an house, then an heir shall be born to the Cholmondeley's family; and this heir shall live to see England invaded by foreigners, who shall

proceed so far as a town in Cheshire; but a Miller, named Peter, shall be born with two heels on one foot, and at that time living in a mill of Cholmondeley's, he shall be instrumental in delivering the nation. The person who governs the nation will be in trouble, and sculk about; the invading king shall be killed, laid across a horse's back like a calf, and led in triumph. The miller having been instrumental in it, shall bring forth the person that then governs the kingdom, and be knighted for what he has done, and after that England shall see happy days. A young new set of men, of virtuous manners, shall come, who shall prosper and make a flourishing church for two hundred years."

"As a token of the truth of all this, a wall of Mr. Cholmondeley's shall fall; if it falls downwards, the church shall be oppressed, and rise no more; but if upwards, next the rising hill on the side of it, then it shall flourish again. Under this wall shall be found the bones of a British king."

"A pond shall run with blood three days, and the cross stone pillar in the forest sink so low

into the ground, that a crow from the top of it shall drink of the best blood in England."

"A boy shall be born with three thumbs, and shall hold three kings' horses, while England shall three times be won and lost in one day."

The original may be seen in several families in that county, and in the hand of Mr. Egerton, of Olton, are many other remarkable predictions: as, that "Pecforton-windmill should be moved to Luditon-hill; that there should be so great a slaughter of men, that horses saddled should run about till their girths rotted away."

I know your prophets are generally for raw-head and bloody-bones, and therefore do not mind it; or I might add, that Olton-mill shall be driven with blood instead of water. But these soothsayers are great butchers, and every hall is with them a slaughter-house.

Now as for authorities to prove this prophecy to be genuine, and how it has been hitherto accomplished, we might refer to the whole county of Cheshire, where it is in every one's mouth,

and has been so for upwards of forty years. The greater part of the MS. from which this account is drawn, was communicated by a person of sense and veracity.

The family of the Cholmondeleys is very ancient in this country, and takes its name from a place so called near Nantwich; there are also Cholmton, and Cholmondestone; but the seat of that branch of the family, which kept our prophet Nixon, is at Vale-royal, on the river Weever, in De-la-mere Forest. It was formerly an abbey, founded by Edward I., and came to the Cholmondeleys from the family of Holcrofts. When Nixon prophesied, this family was likely to become extinct, the heir having married Sir Walter St. John's daughter, a lady not very young, consequently all issue from that line was considered at an end. This lady, nevertheless, proved to be pregnant, and had a very protracted labour.*

A raven is also known to have built in a stone lion's mouth, in the church of Over, in the forest

* During which time, it is said, an eagle sat upon the house top, and flew away when she was delivered, which proved to be of a son.

of De-la-mere. Not long before the abdication of King James, the wall spoken of tumbled down, and fell towards the rising hill on the side of it; and, in removing the rubbish, the bones of a man of more than ordinary size were found. A pond at the same time ran with water of a reddish colour, and was never known to have done so before or after.

Headless-cross, in the forest, which was several feet high, is now sunk within a foot of the ground.

In the parish of Budworth, a boy was born, about twenty years ago, with three thumbs; the youth is still living there, and the miller Peter lives in Nagginshire Mill, in expectation of fulfilling his prophecy on the person of Perkin; he hath also two heels on one foot, but I find he does not intend to make use of them, for he is a bold Briton, and a loyal subject to king George, zealous for Protestant succession in the illustrious house of Hanover, has a vote for the knights of the shire, and never fails to give it on the right side; in a word, Peter will prate or box for the good cause to which Nixon has raised

him; and if he does not do the business, it must be admitted that no man bids fairer for it; which the Lady Egerton was so apprehensive of, that wishing well to another restoration, she often endeavoured to persuade her husband to turn him out of the mill; but he looked upon it as mere caprice; so Peter continues there, in hopes of being as good a knight as Sir Philip, his landlord, was.

Of this Peter I have been told that the Lady Narcliff, of Chelsea, and the Lady St. John, of Battersea, have often been heard to talk, and that they both asserted the truth of this prophecy and its accomplishment, with particulars that are more extraordinary than any I have yet mentioned.

This account, as whimsical and romantic as it is, was told to the Lady Cowper, in the year 1670, by Dr. Patric, late Bishop of Ely, then chaplain to Sir Walter St. John; and that lady had the following particulars relative to this prophecy, and the fulfilling of many parts of it from Mrs. Chute, sister of Mrs. Cholmondeley, of Vale-royal, who affirmed—That a multitude of people gathering together to see the eagle before-mentioned, the bird was frightened from her

young; that she herself was one of them, and the cry among the people was, "Nixon's prophecy is fulfilled, and we shall have a foreign king." She declared, that she had read over all the prophecy many times, when her sister was with child of the heir who now enjoys the estate. She particularly remembered that James II. was particularly pointed at, and that it was foretold that he should endeavour to subvert the laws and religion of this kingdom, for which reason they would rise and turn him out; that the eagle of which Nixon prophesied, perched in one of the windows all the time her sister was in labour. She said it was the biggest bird she ever saw; that it was in a deep snow, and that it perched on the edge of a great bow-window, which had a large border on the outside, and that she and many others opened the window to try to frighten it away, but it would not stir till Mrs. Cholmondeley was delivered, after which it took a flight to a great tree, opposite the room her sister lay in, where, having stayed about three days, it flew away in the night.

She affirmed further to the Lady Cowper, that the falling of the garden-wall was a thing not to be questioned, it being in so many people's me-

mory. That it was foretold that the heir of Vale-royal should live to see England invaded by foreigners, and that he would fight bravely for his king and country: That the miller mentioned is now alive, and expects to be knighted, and is in the very mill foretold: That he should kill two invaders, who shall come in, the one from the west, and the other from the north: that he from the north, should bring with him of all nations, Swedes, Danes, Germans, and Dutch, and that in the folds of his garments he should bring fire and famine, plague and murder: that many great battles should be fought in England, one upon London-bridge, which should be so bloody, that people will ride in London streets up to their horse's bellies in blood; that several other battles should be fought up and down most parts of Cheshire; and the last that ever would be fought in England should be on De-la-mere Forest; that the heir of Olton, whose name is E——n, and has married Earl Cholmondeley's sister, should be hanged up at his own gate.

Lastly, he foretells great glory and prosperity to those who stand up in defence of their laws

and liberties, and ruin and misery to those who should betray them. He says, the year before this would happen, bread-corn would be very dear, and that the year following more trouble should begin, which would last three years; that the first would be moderate, the second bloody, and the third intolerable; that unless they were shortened no mortal could bear them; and that there were no mischiefs but what poor England would feel at that time. But George, the son of George, should put an end to all. That afterwards the church should flourish, and England be the most glorious nation upon earth.

The same Lady Cowper was not content to take these particulars from Mrs. Chute, but she enquired of Sir Thomas Aston of the truth of this prophecy; and he attested it was in great reputation in Cheshire, and that the facts were known to have happened as Nixon said they would; adding, that the morning before the garden-wall fell, his neighbour, Mr. Cholmondeley, going on a hunting excursion, said, as he passed by it, "Nixon seldom fails, but now I think he will, for he foretold this day my garden-wall would fall, and I think it looks as if it

would stand these forty years: that he had not been gone a quarter of an hour before the wall split, and fell upwards against the rising of the hill, which, as Nixon would have it, was the pre-sage of a flourishing church.