

The Modern Revival of 'Nostradamitis'

Testing a phenomenal book's interpretations

Piet Hein Hoebens

Nostradamus: Historien et Prophète. By Jean Charles de Fontbrune. Editions du Rocher, Monaco, 1980. 576 pp., illustrated.

Fontbrune's *Nostradamus* is an extraordinary phenomenon. At the time of this writing over 700,000 copies of the expensive original French edition have been sold, and translations into several languages have either been published or are being prepared. The book has been given front-page treatment by the European pop media from Oslo to Lisbon, but it has also been featured as the subject of cover stories in weeklies as respectable as *Der Spiegel*, *Die Zeit*, and *Nouvelles Littéraires*. An opinion poll ordered by the French illustrated *Paris Match* revealed that three-quarters of the French public are aware of the book's existence, while a quarter (some 17 million inhabitants of an advanced Western state) believe its horrifying message. Headline writers coined the word "Nostradamitis." Recent reports indicate that the virus is about to cross the Atlantic.

What is all the fuss about? Jean Charles de Fontbrune (pseudonym for M. Pigeard de Gurbert) claims to have discovered the hidden key to the enigmatic "prophecies" of the sixteenth-century French seer Michel de Nostredame, better known as Nostradamus. A careful analysis of these prophecies, he says, has revealed that Nostradamus foresaw in gruesome detail that no less than two major wars would take place before the end of this century. World War III, instigated by Khadaffi and to break out in the eighties, will see Paris and Istanbul utterly destroyed, the Pope assassinated, and Europe occupied by Russians and Muslims. After three years of ferocious fighting, the aggressors will be soundly defeated by Henry (the Happy) V, King of France, and his allies.

A period of relative peace and prosperity will follow. Paris having been reduced to radioactive ashes, Avignon will become the capital of France. This happy interlude will end around 1999, when the final war breaks out. The Chinese and (again) the Muslims will overrun the Occident; Rome will be destroyed. The last of the popes will be captured. The papacy and the French monarchy will disappear. After 27 years of unmitigated disaster, the Millennium will have arrived.

In order to understand how this somewhat silly horror story could have caught the imagination of millions of Europeans, it is obviously necessary to consider the socio-political conditions prevailing in modern Europe. The Old World was ready for Nostradamus/Fontbrune's apocalyptic message. In a society disturbed by

Piet Hein Hoebens is an investigative journalist with the Amsterdam daily De Telegraaf.



economic insecurity and political unrest, scared by crime and terrorism, and threatened by nuclear holocaust, prophets of doom and hope are assured a large audience. However, predictions of imminent Armageddon are a dime a dozen. There must be something special about Fontbrune's book to have persuaded 17 million Frenchmen to accept it as a prospectus of future history.

This special factor, I suggest, may well have been the carefully fostered impression that *Nostradamus: Historien et Prophète* is not a wildly speculative work but rather the result of dispassionate, sober, and scientific analysis. A blurb, echoed in many reviews, interviews, feature articles, and broadcasts, emphasizes Fontbrune's claims to serious scholarship: "... une méthode rigoureuse ... le rationnel always prevailing over personal judgment and imagination ... scrupulously respecting the prophetic texts ... unequalled precision ... unquestionable intellectual integrity ...". It is the purpose of the present review to examine these claims critically.

De Kerdéland (quoted in Gauquelin 1979) has characterized the prophecies of Nostradamus as "an inexhaustible magic hat from which modern prestidigitators can pull innumerable rabbits." The prophet himself has referred to his "cloudy manner, with abstruse and twisted sentences." According to L. LeVert (1979), "he pushed the techniques of multivalence to an extreme not paralleled until the twentieth century."

Blissfully unaware of the pitfalls of subjective validation, occultists ever since the sixteenth century have attempted to "decode" the garbled and confused presages. Their efforts have demonstrated—at least to the satisfaction of their authors—that Nostradamus had accurately foretold the death of Henry II, the Thirty Years War, the French Revolution, Napoleon, the rise and fall of Hitler, the deaths of John and Robert Kennedy, and even the fact that in March 1982 an exhibition of Flemish tapestry would open in the New Church on Dam Square in Amsterdam. The interpretations often reflected the political predilections of the interpreters. Fascist Nostradamologists had the prophet predict Axis victory; the anti-fascists discovered portents of Axis defeat.

Decoding the prophecies is a game without rules. The freedom to indulge in metaphorical and cryptogrammatical interpretation virtually assures a rich harvest of striking hits. Skeptical authors, such as J. C. Adelung (1789), P. F. Buget (1860-63), R. Baerwald (1926), C. von Klinckowstroem (1927), E. Leoni (1961), M. Gauquelin (1979), and L. LeVert have pointed to the Rorshach-like quality of the prognostications. They have also demonstrated that many Nostradamologists are well versed in the ancient art of cooking the books. Undeterred, the aficionados have continued to exhibit their prize rabbits.

Fontbrune is critical of many of his fellow interpreters. He pokes fun at an astrologer who in 1938 predicted, on the basis of the prophecies, that 1940 would be a year of French *grandeur*. He solemnly warns against charlatans and sensation mongers who lack intellectual integrity and *la méthode rigoureuse*. His own method is explained in the first chapter of the book. At least that is what the title, "*De la Méthode!*" seems to promise. Unfortunately, one searches in vain for anything even remotely resembling a clear statement of the methodological principles underlying the claim that Fontbrune has cracked the Nostradamus code and restored the "real" chronology of the verses.

We are not even told why the author accepts not only the famous "centuries" of quatrains, the "presages," and the two prophetic letters but also the 58 sixains as authentic Nostradamus. The sixains are generally assumed to be spurious and their inclusion would have required at least some explanation.

What it all boils down to is that Fontbrune simply *asserts* that the prophecies contain a "real meaning" and that he, Fontbrune, has finally succeeded in matching the verses with the historical and future events actually foreseen by Nostradamus. His "method" does not basically differ from that of the other Nostradamus believers: *cherchez la correspondance*—keep searching for similarities until a match has been made.

Fontbrune repeats the classic argument that the prophet was forced to resort to apparent multivalence (requiring apparently far-fetched interpretations) because the dreaded Inquisition would have accused him of sorcery had he been more specific. What is wrong with this argument is that sixteenth-century inquisitors could not possibly have known the difference between a "veiled" and a "specific" presage if it was concerned with an event sufficiently far in the future. If Nostradamus had written a quatrain containing the names "Thatcher," "Galtieri," "Haig," "Pym," and "Falkland Islands," this would have meant nothing to his contemporaries. To us, the message would have been clear. Why did Nostradamus write no such quatrains? Fontbrune does not provide an answer. Apparently he is not even aware of the problem. Instead, he invites us to be amazed by the fact that, in Century IX: 2, Nostradamus mentions "D'Arimin Prato," which, because Mussolini was born in a village equidistant from Prato and Rimini, must refer to the fascist dictator. Would the Inquisition in France really have had reason to become suspicious if Nostradamus had written "Benito Mussolini" instead of "D'Arimin Prato"?

Although Fontbrune's *méthode rigoureuse* is not made explicit, the quality of his scholarship can be inferred from the arguments he advances to support individual "matches."* Before I analyze some of his prize examples, however, I

*Some press reports have fostered the impression that Fontbrune employed a sophisticated computer program to crack the code. This is misleading. A computer was used only for counting, indexing, and cross-indexing words and names mentioned in Nostradamus' work.

wish to commend Fontbrune for having avoided at least a few of the more outrageous bloopers found in the writings of other believers.

Unlike Erika Cheetham (1973), he has resisted the temptation to translate "Hister," a name mentioned in several quatrains, as "Hitler." ("Hister" is simply Latin for "Danube." There is not the slightest doubt that Nostradamus was referring to a river, not a dictator. In Century V: 29, there is even a bridge over "Hister"!)

Unlike Brian Inglis (1977), Fontbrune does not claim that the quatrain containing an anagram of the name of Mazarin and a number of strikingly accurate statements on the latter's career "defied rational explanation." (Rational explanation, for the benefit of Mr. Inglis: the two Mazarin quatrains are found in a counterfeit edition of 1649, backdated to 1568. It was a celebrated hoax perpetrated by the enemies of the Cardinal.) It is also praiseworthy that, on the basis of his interpretations of the verses he believes refer to future events, Fontbrune makes a number of quite specific predictions. So some of his claims at least have the merit of being falsifiable.

The central theme of the book is stated on page 13: "Nostradamus' message was intended for the twentieth century: therefore the texts dealing with earlier centuries are included only to testify to the validity and the authenticity of the prophecies."

For Fontbrune's hypothesis it is essential that the prophecies extend no farther than the end of the present century, which will see the end of pre-Millennium history. Here, however, he is faced with a problem: in a letter to his son César the oracle himself clearly states that his prophecies extend to the year 3797. The manner in which Fontbrune turns this apparent refutation into a resounding confirmation of his hypothesis certainly deserves a place of honor in the annals of crackpot arithmetic. His "proof" starts with the traditional biblical chronology: 4757 years from Adam through Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David to Jesus Christ. Next he notices that there is a difference of 2242 years between 1555 (the year the letter to César was written) and 3797. He then adds 4757 and 2242, which gives 6999. Corrected for the Christian chronology, Fontbrune triumphantly explains, this yields the year 1999.

On a similar level of scholarship is Fontbrune's demonstration that Nostradamus foresaw a French King Henry, nicknamed "the Happy," appearing after the fall of the Fifth Republic. Many readers will be familiar with Century I: 35, one of the most celebrated of all Nostradamus' quatrains:

The young lion will overcome the old one
on the field of battle in single combat
He will put out his eyes in a cage of gold
Two fleets one (or: in one of two combats), then die a cruel death.

Several authors (virtually ignored by Fontbrune) have demonstrated that the interpretation favored by the believers (the quatrain accurately predicts the death of Henry II of France, who died in 1559 after having been injured in the eye at a tournament) is based on a distorted version of the historical facts (Klinckowstroem 1927; Leoni 1961; Gauquelin 1979).

However, the most compelling argument against this interpretation is found in Nostradamus' own work. His introductory letter of June 27, 1558, is dedicated to Henry II, whom he calls, of all things, "invincible." Fontbrune is aware of this

obstacle, but instead of concluding that Century I: 35 cannot possibly refer to Henry II, he concludes that Henry II cannot possibly be the king to whom the 1558 letter was addressed! He explains that “second” is a gallicized form of the Latin “secundus,” which can, among other things, mean “prosperous” or “happy.” Ergo: the letter is actually addressed to a future king. This notwithstanding the fact that, in the letter, Nostradamus reminds His Majesty of a previous meeting.

At about the time the new monarchy replaces the French Republic, Pope John Paul II will be assassinated in Lyons. Here is how Fontbrune demonstrates that Nostradamus predicted the Polish-born pontiff. In several quatrains, mention is made of “*Pol mensolée*,” “*Mansol*” or “*saint Pol de Manseole*.” *Pol*, says Fontbrune, has a double meaning. It refers both to the name of the present pope and to his land of birth. *Mansol* is a word concocted by Nostradamus from two Latin words, *manus* (work) and *sol* (sun). Together they mean “the work of the sun.” Now another famous prophet, Malachias, had predicted that the chosen device of the present pope would be “*de labore solis*,” which also means “work of the sun.”

This is tripe. Given the context in which “*Mansol*,” etc., are mentioned, there is precious little doubt that Nostradamus was referring to a geographical location near the Rhone in southern France. There is such a place: Saint Paul de Mausole, just outside Nostradamus’ birthplace, St. Remy, a few miles from the Rhone. Saint Paul de Mausole was a well-known monastery that later became a lunatic asylum. Its most famous inmate was Vincent Van Gogh. Fontbrune ignores this obvious explanation. However, because Nostradamus insists that “*Mansol*” is near the Rhone, his interpreter is forced to have the pope die near the river.

It will be clear by now that Fontbrune’s predictions are based on a very silly sort of logic. However, they might in principle become true, thereby retroactively justifying to some extent Fontbrune’s reasoning. The fairest way to assess his “method” is therefore to examine the way Fontbrune seeks to demonstrate that some of Nostradamus’ prophecies have already been validated by history. I will analyze two instances that are presented in the book as particularly striking hits.

On page 107, Fontbrune quotes from the letter to Henry II (or V, as he prefers): “. . . *et durera ceste cy jusqu’à l’an sept mil cens nonante deux que l’on cuidra estre une rénovation de siècle . . .*” This quote is followed by Fontbrune’s translation into modern French, which is here translated into English: “And this [the monarchy] will last till the year 1792, which will be believed to be a renovation of the age.”

This seems an impressive hit, for the French monarchy was in fact abolished in 1792. However, the “translation” is utterly misleading, and this cannot possibly be the result of an honest mistake. By placing “monarchy” in brackets Fontbrune unambiguously states that, in the sentence preceding the short quote, Nostradamus was referring to the French monarchy. However, the full text of the letter to King Henry is not included in the book and the reader who does not have access to other sources cannot look up the literal context.

Here is what Nostradamus really wrote in 1558: “This year [a year identified only by astrological configurations] will see the beginning of a worse persecution of the Christian Church than ever took place in Africa, and this will continue till the year 1792, which will be taken for a renovation of the age.”

Nostradamus had *not* been referring to the French monarchy, but to the end of a period of religious persecution. No known historical event can be matched to this

prediction, as was remarked as early as May 1792 by an anonymous contributor to *Berlinischen Monatschrift*.

Also, Fontbrune conveniently ignores what follows the "1792" quote. There, in one of his few specific predictions, Nostradamus states that "sometime" after 1792 Venice will rise to the status of a superpower comparable to ancient Rome. The prophet was as wrong as he possibly could have been. In 1796, after a long decline, the Venetian Republic was abolished by Napoleon Bonaparte, never again to play an important role in world events.

Both in the introductory chapter and in the Epilogue Fontbrune names Century VIII: 12 as one of the most impressive examples of accurate prediction to be found in all of Nostradamus' verses.

He will appear near Buffalora
the highly born and prominent one who entered Milan
the abbot of Foix with those of Saint Morre
will commit roguery, dressed up as villagers.

According to Fontbrune, this quatrain applies, with startling precision, to Napoleon III, who in 1859 entered Milan, which is not very far from the village of Buffalora. Soon after, the French emperor cheated on his Italian friends by engaging in peace talks with the Austrians.

Now the naive reader will object that, whatever else Napoleon III may have been, he most certainly was not the abbot of Foix, whom Nostradamus casts as the villain of the piece.

This problem, however, is taken care of by Fontbrune's rigorous method. He first explains that "*Morre*" is somewhat like "*mos*," which is Latin for "law" or "rule." Alliances being concerned with laws and rules, "*Saint Morre*" refers to the "Holy Alliance" to which Austria had been a party in 1815. Next, Fontbrune reminds us that "abbot" is derived from the Syriac "*abba*" which means "father." From this it is only a short step to "owner." As it happens, there once lived a Count of Foix, Gaston III, who was nicknamed "Phoebus."

This is the clue Nostradamus had cleverly hidden in his quatrain; for, believe it or not, Napoleon III owned a horse also named Phoebus! So "the abbot of Foix with those of Saint Morre" means: "the owner of Phoebus" and the Austrians. *Quod erat demonstrandum!*

References

- Adelung, J. C. 1789. *Geschichte der menschlichen Narrheit*, quoted in Klinckowstroem (1927).
- Baerwald, R. 1926. "Urteilsplendung durch psychische Osmose in der Prophetie and Psychoanalyse," *Zeitschrift für kritischen Okkultismus*, vol. 1, pp. 277-88.
- Buget, P. F. (1860-63) "Etudes sur Nostradamus." Series of articles in *Bulletin du Bibliophile*.
- Cheetham, E. 1973. *The Prophecies of Nostradamus*. U.K.: Spearman.
- Gauquelin, M. 1979. *Dreams and Illusions of Astrology*. Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Books.
- Inglis, B. 1977. *Natural and Supernatural*. U.K.: Hodder & Stoughton.
- Klinckowstroem, C. von. 1927. "Rund un Nostrdamus." *Zeitschrift für kritischen Okkultismus*, vol. 2, pp. 89-104.
- Leoni, E. 1961. *Nostradamus, Life and Literature*, New York: Nosbooks.
- LeVert, L. (E. F. Bleiler). 1979. *The Prophecies and Enigmas of Nostradamus*. Glen Rock, N.J.: Firebell Books. ●