



From the Annals of the World History

Nostradamus

December 14, 1503 - July 1, 1566



Michel de Nostredame, is one of the world's most famous authors of prophecies. He is most famous for his book *Les Propheties*, which consists of rhymed quatrains (4-line poems) grouped into sets of 100, called Centuries.

Nostradamus enthusiasts have credited him with predicting a copious number of events in world history, including the French Revolution, the atom bomb, the rise of Adolf Hitler and the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center. Detractors, however, see such predictions as examples of vaticinium ex eventu, retroactive clairvoyance and selective thinking, which find non-existent patterns in ambiguous statements. Because of this, it has been claimed that Nostradamus is "100% accurate at predicting events after they happen".

Born in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence in the south of France in December 1503, Michel de Nostredame was the son of a grain dealer who was also a prosperous home-grown notary. His family was originally Jewish, but had converted to Catholicism during the previous century. Nothing is known about his childhood, but at the age of fifteen he entered the University of Avignon to study for his baccalaureate. After little more than a year he was forced by the Plague to leave again. In 1529, after some years as an apothecary, he entered the University of Montpellier to study for a doctorate in medicine, but was promptly expelled again when it was discovered that he had been an apothecary, which was a 'manual' trade expressly banned by the university statutes. He then continued work as an apothecary, and created a "rose pill" that was widely believed to protect against the plague.

In 1531 he was invited by Jules-César Scaliger, a leading Renaissance man, to come to Agen. There Nostradamus married a woman whose name is still in dispute (possibly Henriette d'Encausse), but who bore him two children. In 1534, however, his wife and children died, presumably from the plague. After their death he continued to travel, passing through France and possibly Italy. He settled down in 1547 in Salon-de-Provence, where he married a rich widow named Anne Ponsarde Gemelle and eventually had six children - three daughters and three sons. After a further visit to Italy, he began to move away from medicine and towards the occult.

He wrote an almanac for 1550, for the first time Latinising his name to 'Nostradamus', and was so encouraged by its success that he decided to write one or more annually. Taken together, they are known to have contained at least 6338 prophecies, as well as at least 11 annual calendars, all of them starting on 1st January and not, as is sometimes supposed, in March. He then began his project of writing 1,000 quatrains, which form the supposed prophecies for which he is famous today. Feeling vulnerable to religious fanatics, however, he devised a method of obscuring his meaning by using "Virgilianised" syntax, word games and a mixture of languages such as Provençal, Greek, Latin and Italian. For technical reasons connected with their publication in three installments, the last 58 quatrains of the seventh 'Century', or book of 100 verses, were never published.

The quatrains, written in a book titled "*Les Propheties*", received a mixed reaction when they were published. Some people thought Nostradamus was a servant of evil, a fake, or insane, while many of the elite thought his quatrains were spiritually inspired prophecies. Soon nobility came from all over to receive horoscopes and advice from him, though he normally expected them to supply the birthcharts on which they were based. Catherine de Médicis, the queen consort of King Henry II of France, was one of Nostradamus' admirers. After reading his almanacs for 1555, which hinted at unnamed threats to the royal family, she summoned him to Paris to explain them, as well as to draw up horoscopes for her royal children. At the time he feared that he would be beheaded, but by the time of his death in 1566, she had made him Counselor and Physician in Ordinary to the King.

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By 1566 Nostradamus's gout, which had painfully plagued him for many years and made movement very difficult, finally turned into dropsy. At the beginning of July, after making an extended will and a much shorter codicil, he is alleged to have told his secretary Jean de Chavigny, "You will not find me alive by sunrise." The next morning he was reportedly found dead, lying on the floor between his bed and a makeshift bench.

Some biographical accounts of Nostradamus' life state that he was afraid of being persecuted for heresy by the Inquisition, but neither prophecy nor astrology fell under this bracket, and he would have been in danger only if he had practiced magic to support them. In fact, his relations with the Church as a prophet and healer were always excellent. His brief imprisonment at Marignane in late 1561 came about purely because he had published his 1562 almanac without the prior permission of a bishop, contrary to a recent royal decree.

Preparation and methods of prophecy

While Nostradamus was clearly familiar with recent Latin printed editions of a range of esoteric writings, as well as having a passing acquaintance with astrology, recent research has shown that most of his prophetic work was based on paraphrasing collections of ancient end-of-the-world prophecies (mainly Bible-based) and supplementing their insights by projecting known historical events and identifiable anthologies of omen-reports into the future. It is thanks to this that his work contains so many predictions involving ancient figures such as Sulla, Marius, Nero, Hannibal and so on, as well as descriptions of "battles in the clouds" and "frogs falling from the sky". The end of the world, after all, was confidently expected at the time to occur in either 1800 or 1887, or possibly in 2242, depending on the system adopted.

His historical sources include easily identifiable passages from Livy, Suetonius, Plutarch and a range of other classical historians, as well as from the chronicles of medieval authors such as Villehardouin and Froissart. Many of his astrological references, by contrast, are taken almost word-for-word from the *Livre de l'estat et mutations des temps* of 1549/50 by Richard Roussat. Even the planetary tables on which he based such birth charts as he was unable to avoid preparing himself are easily identifiable by their detailed figures, even where he gets some of them wrong.

His major prophetic source was evidently the *Mirabilis liber* of 1522, which contained a range of prophecies by Pseudo-Methodius, the Tiburtine Sibyl, Joachim of Fiore, Savonarola and others. Further material was gleaned from Petrus Crinitus's *De honesta disciplina* of 1504, which included extracts from Psellus's *De daemonibus* and the *De Mysteriis Aegyptiorum...*", a book on Chaldean and Assyrian magic by Iamblichus, a 4th century neo-Platonist.

While it is true that Nostradamus claimed in 1555 to have burned all the occult works in his library, no one can say exactly what books were destroyed in this fire. The fact that they reportedly burned with an unnaturally brilliant flame suggests, however, that some of them were manuscripts on vellum, which was routinely treated with saltpetre.

Given that his methodology, clearly, was mainly literary, it is doubtful whether Nostradamus used any particular methods for entering a trance state, other than contemplation, meditation and incubation. His sole description of this process is contained in letter 41 of his collected Latin correspondence, as republished by Jean Dupèbe. The popular legend that he attempted the ancient methods of flame gazing, water gazing or both simultaneously is based on an uninformed reading of his first two verses, which merely liken his own efforts to those of the Delphic and Branchidic oracles. In his dedication to King Henri II Nostradamus describes "emptying my soul, mind and heart of all care, worry and unease through mental calm and tranquility", but his frequent references to the "bronze tripod" of the Delphic rite are usually preceded by the words "as though".

His works

The Prophecies - In this book he collected his major, long-term divinations. The first edition was published in 1555. The second, with 289 further prophetic verses, was printed in 1557. The third edition, with three hundred new quatrains, was reportedly printed in 1558, but nowadays only survives as part of the omnibus edition that was published after his death in 1568.

The Almanacs - By far the most popular of his works, these were published annually from 1550 until his death. Often he published two or even three in a single year, entitled Almanacs (detailed predictions), Prognostications or Presages (more generalized predictions).

Nostradamus was not only a diviner, but a professional healer, too. We know that he wrote at least two books on medical science. One contained an alleged "translation" of Galen, and in his so-called *Traité des fardemens* he included a description of the methods he used to treat the plague - none of which apparently worked. The same book also describes the preparation of cosmetics.

Skepticism

Skeptics of Nostradamus state that his reputation as a prophet is largely manufactured by modern-day supporters who shoehorn his words into events that have either already occurred or are so imminent as to be inevitable, a process known as "retroactive clairvoyance". No Nostradamus quatrain has been interpreted before a specific event occurs, beyond a very general level. Some scholars believe that Nostradamus wrote not to be a prophet, but to comment on events that were happening in his own time, writing in his elusive way - using highly metaphorical and cryptic language - in order to avoid persecution.

The well-known prophecy that "a great and terrifying leader would come out of the sky" in 1999 and 7 months "to resuscitate the great King from Angoumois" has been much over-stated. The phrase *d'effraieur* (of terror) in fact occurs nowhere in the original printing, which merely uses the word *deffraieur* (defraying, hosting). On the basis of Nostradamus's by-now well known technique of projecting past events into the future, it therefore evidently refers back to the restoration to health of the captive Francis I of France (who was Duke of Angoulême) following a surprise visit to his cell by his host, the then Holy Roman Emperor Charles V in 1525. No less than five of the planets were in the same signs on both occasions.

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The bulk of the quatrain deals with disasters of various sorts. The disasters include plagues, earthquakes, wars, floods, invasions, murders, droughts, battles and many other themes. Some quatrains cover these in over-all terms; others concern a single person or small group of persons. Some cover a single town, others several towns in several countries. All of them are presented in the context of the supposedly imminent end of the world - a conviction that sparked numerous collections of end-time prophecies at the time, not least an unpublished collection by Christopher Columbus.