

The Secret of William Lilly's Prediction of the Fire of London By Maurice McCann

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One of the most intriguing mysteries connected with the Great Fire of London has, at last, been solved.

On Friday, October 25, 1666, the famous English astrologer William Lilly was ordered to appear in the Speaker's Chamber of the House of Commons to give testimony before the special Committee set up to examine the cause of the great fire which had devastated the city of London in September.

Lilly, it was claimed, had successfully predicted the outbreak of the fire fourteen years before when he had published 'Monarchy or No Monarchy in England' a book containing nineteen hieroglyphic drawings giving carefully disguised predictions. As a consequence of one of these, featuring a large fire (see figure 1), Lilly was seriously suspected of causing the fire. It was also thought that he wished to obtain credit for forecasting the event. Being fearful of what might happen to him, Lilly persuaded the committee that his prediction had not been precise and he was allowed to go.

For over three hundred years Lilly's hieroglyphic prediction of the Fire of London has been dismissed, even by astrologers unable to work out his code, and no one has attempted to interpret it. Now, however, the code has been deciphered and the hieroglyphics shown to be a disguised horoscope for the moment of the outbreak of the great fire on Sunday, September 2, 1666.

The fire was the biggest single calamity in the history of the city. It had destroyed 13,200 houses, 87 parish churches, 6 chapels, 44 Company Halls, the Royal Exchange, the Custom House, St Paul's Cathedral, the Guildhall, the Bridewell and other City prisons, the Session House, four bridges across the Thames and Fleet rivers, three city gates and made homeless 100,000 people, one sixth of the inhabitants.

Within days the angry citizens wanted someone to blame for the destruction - the Dutch, perhaps, with whom England was at war? Catholic agitators or someone else? Before the authorities settled for a scapegoat in the person of a 26 year old French silversmith, Robert Hubert, who was executed at Tyburn for setting London ablaze, numerous suspects were brought before a special Committee.

There had been a lot of prophecies of the destruction of London by fire. Samuel Pepys, in his diary, noted that Prince Rupert, when told of the fire, recalled Mother Shipton's prophecy of 1641. Nostradamus was believed to have written about the event.

But some recalled the trial of Colonel John Rathbone in April of the same year. Rathbone and a group of former Parliamentary officers had been arrested and tried for conspiring to overthrow the King and Government and restore the Commonwealth. The London Gazette, reporting the trial, revealed that the plan involved setting fire to London on September 3. The date had been selected by the conspirators as auspicious when they consulted the almanac of William Lilly for that year. It was claimed that this was a horoscope which was interpreted to show the fall of the monarchy. It was also a date close to the hearts of the

English republicans, being the anniversaries of two of Cromwell's victories at Dunbar and Worcester. Rathbone and eight fellow officers were found guilty and executed.

Now people recalled the plot, the date, and William Lilly's horoscope. Suspicion fell on him. Had he been involved in the fire simply in order to enhance his reputation as an astrologer? Lilly needed little enhancement to his reputation. This was an age when astrology was a respected science and Lilly was a man of substance and political influence. His portrait was the most widely circulated, through his almanacs, in England, after the picture of Charles I himself.

Lilly was born in Diseworth. in the year 1602 the son of a poor yeoman farmer. At the age of 11 his father took him to be educated at the grammar school in Ashby-de-la-Zouch where the headmaster John Brinsley was among the finest school teachers of his time. Here he learnt Latin which later proved essential for the study of astrology as almost all textbooks were written in Latin.

Upon arriving in London in 1619, having walked for a week all the way from Leicestershire, he worked as a servant in the service of Gilbert Wright who lived in the Strand. Lilly married Wright's widow in 1627 and became owner of his master's house when after six years of marriage he inherited the property upon her death.

At the age of 30 his studies in astrology began with lessons from the Welshman John Evans and within three years he was teaching and practising professionally. His first almanac appeared in 1644 and was a great success. Soon his astrological almanacs were appearing in Swedish and German translations.

He enjoyed a good deal of political influence and numbered among his clients some of England's leading figures, such as Lady Jane Whorewood, a childhood friend of Charles I who consulted Lilly about the King's attempted escape from the Parliamentarians. Also Bulstrode Whitelock, to whom he dedicated his masterpiece 'Christian Astrology' and who was appointed ambassador to Sweden through Lilly's influence. Others were Richard Overton, Sir Thomas Myddleton of Chirk and James, Lord Galloway, The Earl of Macclesfield. Among his supporters were Denzil Holles, Sir Arthur Hazelrig, Walter Strickland, Richard Salway, Hugh Peter and Oliver Cromwell.

Though a staunch parliamentarian, he was consulted by people of various political views and could rightly claim to have one or two friends on the Royalist side, the most famous being Elias Ashmole, a fellow astrologer and founder of the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford. Lilly later studied medicine and Ashmole used his influence with the Archbishop of Canterbury to obtain a licence for him to practice. The two men remained firm friends until Lilly's death in 1681.

Realising he was suspected of setting the fire, Lilly admitted in his autobiography to being extremely nervous of the Committee. "I was timorous of Committees being ever by some of them calumniated, upbraided, scorned and derided". He obtained Ashmole's help, realising that several of the Committeemen were acquainted with his friend. He hoped that Ashmole could use his influence.

Sir Robert Brook, the chairman, questioned him about the hieroglyphics in 'Monarchy or No Monarchy'. The astrologer was careful not to offend the committee in any way and pointed out that following the beheading of the King he had used his art to gain some insights into England's future. "Having found, Sir, that the City of London should be sadly afflicted with a great plague, and not long after with an exhorbitant fire, I framed these two hieroglyphics as represented in the book, which in effect have proved very true". When asked if he had foreseen in which year the fire would breakout, Lilly said, "I did not, or was desirous. Of that I made no scrutiny". The Committee appeared to have been satisfied with his explanation and much to his relief, was thanked for his evidence, then dismissed.

But had Lilly been completely honest with them? A close inspection of the hieroglyphic in question (reproduced below) reveals that he was not. The exact date of the worst disaster that had ever befallen London and the time, within a few hours, were secreted within the drawing... and he knew it!

He also knew that he could not publish nineteen drawings without some form of explanation, nor could he resist teasing his public and especially his fellow astrologers with his secret knowledge.

"Had the curtesie of the present times deserved it at my hands, thou hadst seene an Explanation of the sixteen Pages following, which in Aenigmaticall Types, Formes, Figures, Shapes, doth perfectly represent the future condition of the ENGLISH Nation and Commonwealth for many hundreds of years yet to come. I have borrowed so much time from my morning sleepe, as hath brought forth these Conceptions. You that read these Lines must know I doe no new thing, I doe herein but imitate the ANTIENTS, who so often as they resolved to concele their intentions from prophane hands, used HEIROGLIPHICKS, IMAGES, &C. The AEGYPTIAN PRIESTS were herein excellant, and their judgement commendable; our Saviour also himself commandeth; NE DETUR SACRUM CANIBUS. If Providence shall hereafter assigne me a quiet life, and prolong my years, I may then perhaps leave unto the Sons of Art the several Changes of every Kingdome and Commonwealth in EUROPE, in such CHARACTERS as

these which now follow".

The reference to the "Sons of Art" meant astrologers, in as much as astrology was often called "art" by its practitioners in the 17th century. To date, those Sons of art have been unable to decipher Lilly's mysterious illustration. But now the secret has been unravelled and his prediction is made clear.

The first clue to the riddle is the square on the left hand side of the sketch which contains a smaller square in the centre, with a number of triangles around it. This is a blank horoscope commonly used by 17th century astrologers but now out of fashion. Lilly had placed it there to tell his readers that this particular hieroglyphic was a horoscope in disguise.



There are seven people in the drawing, one for each known planet, the Sun, Moon, Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn. The two babies suspended upside down above the fire represent the sign Gemini, believed to be the traditional ruler of London. Opposite to the children at the bottom of the page are five logs burning in the fire, if turned sideways the roman letters IXV appear. As this is not a Roman numeral in this form it must be re-interpreted. It could either stand for IX.V meaning the numerals 9 and 5, the 9th month and 5th day, Lilly's predicted date for when the fire would burn itself out, or it may more likely be an anagram for XIV, Latin for 14, for, according to Lilly, London was ruled by the 14th degree of Gemini. Finally, by suspending the two babies upside down Lilly showed that the drawing, or rightly the horoscope, should be inverted, which would time it for the early hours of the morning.

Besides the children, the most striking image to catch an astrologer's eye is located at the extreme left side of the sketch. Here a man is pouring a vessel of water over the flames. On his right side he carries a dagger, symbolised by the planet Mars, the god of war and the weapons of war. Next, it would appear that he is pouring water into the fire, but his left hand which seems to be holding the jar could instead be holding his penis as he urinates. This is very descriptive of the sign of Scorpio which has rulership over the sexual organs. Therefore these two clues lead one to conclude that Lilly was describing Mars in the sign of Scorpio.

Next to Mars is a figure of a man who can only be symbolic of the Sun, though there are no obvious indications which would tell an astrologer that this was so. The legs of the martian man and the legs of the solar man are intertwined and look like the symbols used in astrological shorthand to represent Virgo and Scorpio:



In the chart of the fire of London the Sun was at 21 degrees Virgo approaching a sextile to Mars at 22 degrees Scorpio, within one degree of a perfect angle. Maybe the similar height and postures of the two men were purposely so, in order to describe the near perfect sextile. Six buttons on Mars' tunic may have been Lilly's way of telling us that there was a sextile separating that planet from the Sun. The artist had a limited number of tricks with which to describe the technical terms of a horoscope yet the results are impressive.

Opposite to the figure representing the Sun, on the other side of the fire, is the tall upright figure of another man wearing a hat with a curved crown. He is the only one looking backwards. One reason why he was portrayed looking backwards was perhaps to show that the planet was retrograde, or appearing to go backwards in the heavens at the time. The water from his container and the water from the container held by the solar man, meet in the middle of the flames. Here is a good description of

an opposition aspect, an angle of 180 degrees, that connects the two together. It so happens that in the horoscope for the fire Jupiter was in Pisces, the opposite sign to Virgo.

Immediately standing behind Jupiter is a tall elongated man pouring water above his head. This is the Moon, since it was also in Pisces at the time of the Fire and therefore close to Jupiter. Another clue to the Moon's position can be gained by looking at his feet which have been drawn pointing in the opposite direction. Pisces has long been regarded as ruling the feet, and the reason why this man is so tall or at his greatest height could be the astrologer's way of telling us that the Moon was full.

The crooked ugly man crouched beneath Jupiter must then be Saturn. He is wearing a turban which seems to be a rather graphic way of describing the Englishman's dislike of foreigners. This figure is also reminiscent of Lilly's unflattering description of Saturn in his book 'Christian Astrology'; "He is leane, crooked, or beetle-browed, a thin whay Beard, great lips, like the black-Moores; he looks to the ground, is slow in motion, either is bow-legged, or hits one leg or knee against another."

Dominating the hieroglyphic are the two young children precariously suspended upside down above the bonfire. The remaining two planets, Mercury and Venus, which are in Libra in the horoscope, can be designated to them. The child on the left is obviously male and since Venus is a feminine planet, she must therefore be the child on the right. Mercury as ruler of Gemini, the sign of duality, is drawn with two eyes and two arms while Venus has only one eye and one arm visible. The male child has his left hand placed on Venus' neck, the area of the body associated with Taurus which is ruled by Venus.

Finally, by suspending the two babies upside down Lilly showed that the drawing, or rightly the horoscope, should be inverted, which would time it for the early hours of the morning. By inverting the horoscope the 14th degree of Gemini appears at the all important midheaven. We may therefore infer that Lilly predicted that the time of the blaze would be about 5.26 am on the 2nd September 1666.

Therefore, in an interpretation of Lilly's hieroglyphic, his horoscope prediction of the event, date and time are correct. How had he arrived at this method of deduction?

Dr. Bernard, the astrologer and physician to James II, had written to Lilly at one time declaring that he had discovered a method for forecasting fires of great cities. Fortunately he had not published his thoughts and so avoided facing the Committee enquiring into the cause of the fire. He had collected all the data available to him at that time concerning fires of cities, and believed that if he examined the horoscope for each fire he would find correspondences that would enable him to predict future fires with a reasonable amount of accuracy. The one great difficulty, he said, was discovering the birth date and time of each town in order to draw the horoscope correctly. Perhaps Lilly used Dr. Bernard's method or, indeed, had found a similar method that had helped him to confidently predict the

1666 fire.

William Lilly was one of the most enigmatic and influential astrologers, whose prediction of the Great Fire of London nearly brought him to an untimely end. Only the fact that the prediction was made in a code which, for three centuries, has remained unbroken, kept him from finishing his career on the gallows tree at Tyburn, like young Robert Hubert, as a victim to London's hysterical cry for vengeance over what was, by all the evidence, a tragic accident which turned into a catastrophe of major proportions.

Further reading

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Biography

Maurice McCann has been an astrologer for 25 years of which the last 20 years have been spent as a professional working astrologer. He has a Diploma in Higher Education on the history of astrology during the English Civil War period as well as a BA (Hons) degree in the same subject. He was at various times, chairman of the Astrological Lodge of London and its treasurer; he was a co-director of the Meonen School of Horary Astrology for many years and is currently editor of *Réalta*, the journal of the Irish Astrological Association. He was co-author of *Eclipses* published by Aquarian Press (1989) with Derek Appleby, and is the author of *The Void of Course Moon* published by Tara Astrological Publications (1997). He is also creator of Tara - horary astrology, a computer software program for horary astrology. He has also researched and written widely on astrology. He is a regular contributor to a wide variety of international astrological journals and his essays have appeared in several anthologies on the subject. He has also lectured in many countries, from Russia to Canada and the USA and from Australia, Norway and Denmark to Belgium and Italy as well as in his native Ireland and the UK.