

Letter from Scotland



Time... like an ever rolling
stream

I came across a slip of paper in an old book, the other day, which simply said: “Books, which Miss AP Thomas will collect tonight.” It was written in beautiful, old-fashioned handwriting and probably refers to my mother who was born in 1915. It made me wonder about her early world. People then thought the war was about to end – it was only supposed to last till Christmas after all. They little imagined what the year ahead would bring.

I don't suppose 2015 will be cataclysmic, though, of course, I can't be sure. The old year has certainly ended under dark clouds – the Glasgow bin-lorry crash, an airliner lost in the Java Sea, a Greek ferryboat on fire. But it has also been one of those “historic” years, a year we will remember for its Referendum, its Commonwealth Games and its long dry summer. Looking forward, it's hard to imagine 2015 will be as significant.

Let's start with the certainties. I predict that the weather will be less predictable than ever, as climate change creeps inexorably across the planet. The winter storms will be more violent, more rain will fall, the average temperature will rise, as it has done, almost without exception, for the last decade. Of course, we will do little or nothing to stop it, especially as the price of oil has halved in the last year.

The United Nations will try its best to warn us of our folly but I don't expect any great news from the Climate Talks in Paris towards the end of 2015. Instead the UN will be celebrating its 70th anniversary and holding conferences on the International Year of Light and the International Year of

Soils.

It will also be reporting back on the eight Millennium Development Goals. Remember that by 2015, we were supposed to have halved the number of people living in extreme poverty, given every child a primary education, halted the spread of AIDS and malaria, halved the number of people without clean drinking water and reversed the destruction of natural resources such as forests and rare animal habitats. Less than half of these targets have been met.

Nor has the UN done well on stopping wars in Syria and Iraq and solving the eternal knot of Palestine. And, tragically, I just don't see any progress being made in the coming year.

As to the economic outlook, the IMF is predicting a 3.3 per cent growth rate for the world economy. Here in Britain, the government is hoping for 2.7 per cent. Both forecasts I think are what civil servants might term "courageous", since the Eurozone, Russian and Japanese economies are in dire straits and the Chinese forecasts are dropping with every new report. No one really has yet recovered from the bankers' Great Recession of 2008. In Britain, we have been rebuilding on the sands of part-time, low-paid work and, with more austerity cuts coming from the Chancellor, I don't see any streets paved with gold for many years ahead.

Of course, those on the left of British politics are hoping for a change in direction on 7 May. This interesting General Election is one of the certainties in 2015, thanks to the new system of fixed term parliaments. If the opinion polls are anything to go by, the Conservatives will lose votes to UKIP, but Labour will not win a majority either and our old friend Alex Salmond will be coming storming down to Westminster with a substantial contingent of SNP MPs who will be able to put Labour into power, at a price. And that price is likely to be "Smith Plus" even more powers for the Scottish Parliament.

Here in Scotland, I expect Nicola Sturgeon's government to finally get around to addressing the equality gap – with more taxes on the rich in form of a mansion tax and more targeted measures in deprived areas of Glasgow and Dundee. I expect too that she will quietly drop unworkable ideas like a local income tax and the abolition of corroboration.

During 2015, we will all have to come to terms with our sordid past as official inquiries are held in England, Wales and Scotland into child abuse. We will be forced to become a much more aware society and taboos over privacy and confidentiality will have to be broken.

On the environmental front, I predict that the Scottish government will come out against fracking, will hint at a new national park somewhere along the west coast, and will approve the re-introduction of beavers. That in turn will provoke a national debate over the re-introduction of the lynx and even the wolf.

As for the arts and culture, I guess Glasgow will continue to flourish – perhaps with plans for a long-awaited film studio. The Edinburgh Festival will continue to grow like Topsy and thereby lose some of its charm.

And in sport, we will see professional football clubs finally learning to balance their books, as Hearts, Hibernian and Aberdeen have been doing in recent weeks. I predict that Scotland will do better than expected in the Rugby World Cup but fail to qualify for the Cricket World Cup. The first European Games, in Bakur Azerbaijan in June will be a flop....because no one will believe Azerbaijan is in Europe !

I wonder if even half my predictions will come true, like the Millennium Goals, or whether, at the end of the year, I will laugh at my stupidity. The glorious thing is that other events will happen, totally unpredictable events. Some of them will be horrific, others uplifting. Looking into the future is like

looking into a fast flowing river, it's fascinating, hypnotic even, and dangerous. And we are about to fall in.