

The Only Scotsman in Hell

Auld Michael: the Emperor's Sorcerer

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*Quell' altro, che ne' fianchi è così poco,
Michele Scotto fu, che veramente
delle magiche frode seppe 'l gioco.*

(Dante Alighieri, Inferno Canto XX)



Michael Scott, second right, with other medieval Scottish scholars: Richard of St Victor, Adam of Dryburgh, John Duns Scotus and Clement of Dunblane.

Stained glass window in Pontifical Scots College, Rome.

Photo: Rev. Daniel Fitzpatrick.

I first met him in Hell!

In the *Divine Comedy* Dante, describing his imaginary journey through the world of the dead, writes of “Michele Scotto ... who indeed knew the game of magic frauds”.

As a student reading Dante for the first time, and making the acquaintance of his vast and fascinating array of characters – from the Bible, from classical Greece and Rome, and above all from his own medieval Italy – I was intrigued to meet this single mysterious fellow-countryman, Michele Scotto – Michael Scott, or Michael the Scot.

Dante consigns him to Hell as a dabbler in the black arts, and vividly describes his punishment. For Dante, the punishment of sinners always fits their crime. The magicians, therefore, who on earth tried to look ahead into the future, are condemned to go into eternity looking behind them, with their heads twisted painfully round on their shoulders, so that they must walk backwards in order

to see where they are going. Dante tells how he watched this grotesque procession shuffle slowly past, poor Michael among them, his tears running down his back!

In the years since my first acquaintance with Michael I have come across him again often, as “Auld Michael the wizard”, hero of many Border folk tales – the man who with the help of a demon split a single mountain above Melrose into the three Eildon Hills; who rode his demon horse to Italy so fast that the Scottish snow was still on his bonnet when he delivered his message to the Pope.

It came as something of a surprise, therefore, to see him enshrined in stained glass in the Pontifical Scots College outside Rome! There he stands, (with his tongue in his cheek, perhaps!) in a window commemorating five eminent medieval Scottish scholars who distinguished themselves on the Continent.

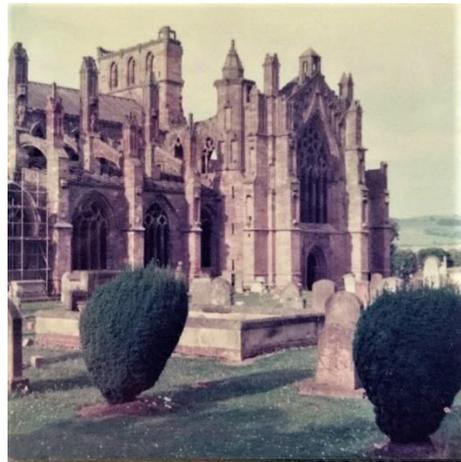
So what is the truth about this strange and gifted man?

His is a fascinating story set in the brilliance of the high Middle Ages, when there was a great international fellowship of scholars, who moved freely across Europe in the quest of learning. Scotland too sent her quota of able young men to the famous schools of the Continent.

At a distance of more than eight centuries, the details of Michael's life are obscure, but he seems to have been born around 1175. The best known tradition associates him with Balwearie, near Kirkcaldy; but there is another school of thought which makes him a Borderer. After all, it is in the Border country that the old legends cluster most thickly about his name.

It is pleasant to think of the young schoolboy laying the foundations of his fine education at one of the great Border abbeys, perhaps at Melrose, where, according to tradition, he found his last resting place.

The period when Michael was growing up was a perilous time for Scotland. The line of the Border was still in dispute, and there was constant friction with England. In 1174 the Scots army was scattered at Alnwick, and the King, William the Lion, taken prisoner. He regained his freedom only by acknowledging Henry II of England as his overlord. There followed fifteen humiliating years for Scotland as a vassal kingdom.



*The ruins of Melrose Abbey Church
where, according to tradition,
Michael is buried.
Photo: FMD*

When Richard the Lionheart succeeded to the English throne, he sold Scotland back her freedom in 1189, for a substantial cash payment, he being more interested in financing a Crusade than in trying to control the unruly Scots.

By this time Michael was in his mid-teens, and possibly already a student at Oxford, where he would now be able to hold up his head as a citizen of a free and independent country, but one which, sadly, was still not at peace with her closest neighbour. More than a century later, Dante remarks on

*... the pride which drives the Scot and the Englishman mad
so that they cannot be content within their own bounds.*

*(Li` si vedrà la superbia ch'asseta,
che fa lo Scotto e l'Inghilese folle,
sì che non può soffrir dentro a sua meta.*

Paradiso XIX)

Dante was composing the *Commedia* in the early years of the thirteenth century, round about the time of the Wars of Independence and the Battle of Bannockburn.

Throughout his life, Michael had an insatiable thirst for new knowledge. After completing his studies at Oxford, he moved on to Paris, and then into Italy, where he entered the venerable “mother of universities” at Bologna.

All branches of learning interested him, but he distinguished himself particularly in philosophy, mathematics and astronomy. He seems also to have acquired considerable medical knowledge.

His brilliance and originality of thought were becoming well known. In his twenties, and not long in Holy Orders, he was already building a formidable international reputation as a scholar.

From Bologna he turned his steps southwards, to Sicily. Perhaps due to some contact made at university, he obtained a clerk’s position at the Court of Palermo, which revolved around the small person of the orphan prince, Frederick.

For Michael this was an excellent move. Nowhere else in Europe could he have found conditions which gave full scope to his peculiar genius. When the precocious Frederick grew up – ambitious, brilliant, and passionately interested in science – he proved an excellent patron. He shared Michael’s enthusiasms and was generous with help. More importantly, the free-thinking Frederick (labelled Anti-Christ by his enemies) was the last man to find fault with any unorthodoxy in Michael’s theories or methods, so that the scholar had a completely free hand.

This was to come later, however.



*Palermo Cathedral, begun 1185,
but not completed till the 18th century.
Photo: Joseph McGeer*

When Michael first arrived in Sicily he found it quite different from anything he had known before. Under that blazing sun, did Michael know moments of longing for the grey skies and green wooded hills of his homeland? What did he think of the mighty Cathedral of Palermo, comparing it with the abbey church of Melrose? Would he have traded Etna for Eildon?

What a stimulus to his imagination Sicily must have been – the meeting place of western European culture with the Greek and Arab civilisations.

To understand the situation in Sicily at the beginning of the thirteenth century, we should look back quite a long way in history.

There were Greek colonies here from about 700 BC, and right through the period of Roman domination Sicily remained in effect the most westerly of the Greek islands.

Then, in their great surge westwards, culminating in the eighth century AD, the Arabs gained control of the island, and held it till the eleventh century, when Sicily, like England, experienced a Norman conquest.

The kings of the Hauteville dynasty ruled sternly, sometimes harshly, but on the whole they brought prosperity to the island.

Then came a time of crisis, when it seemed that the line of Norman kings would die out, the only heiress, Constance, having become a nun. Accordingly, she was taken from her convent, "against her will and contrary to decent behaviour", says Dante, and a dynastically suitable marriage was arranged for her. The bridegroom was chosen from the German House of Hohenstaufen. He was Henry, eldest son of the great Emperor, Frederick Barbarossa. At twenty, he was eleven years younger than his bride.

When he became Emperor, and had put his affairs in Germany in order, Henry claimed the throne of Sicily in right of his wife. He had a stiff struggle to impose his rule on the Sicilians, who did not relish the idea of a German king. There were scenes of dreadful bloodshed as the Hohenstaufen dynasty was established.

Dante has a great deal of sympathy for Constance, plunged from the peace of her convent into the savage tumult of medieval politics. It must have been an added trial to her that it was only after nine years of marriage that she produced the required son, Frederick, named after his illustrious grandfather.

Three years later, Henry was dead.

Constance carried on the government, appointing native Sicilian ministers in place of the unpopular Germans favoured by Henry. She found a powerful friend and protector in the new Pope, Innocent III, whom in her will she named guardian of her child.

At the age of three and a half Frederick was crowned King of Sicily at Palermo. Before he reached his fourth birthday his mother died.

This was the setting into which Michael Scott stepped about the year 1200, when Frederick was six years old.

He found plenty to keep him busy besides his clerical duties at the Court.

In Sicily Christians and Muslims mixed with a freedom undreamt of elsewhere. To suit the mixed population official decrees were issued in Latin, Greek and Arabic. As Michael's quick brain mastered the two latter which were unfamiliar to him, he was enthralled to discover the work of Muslim scholars in translating and commenting on the Greek philosophers, particularly Aristotle, whose works were at that time virtually unknown in the West. But by the thirteenth century the study of Aristotle had become very popular among the Arabs, who were concerned with interpreting his writings in line with the teaching of the Koran.

In studying the works of the Muslim philosophers Michael was treading on dangerous ground, for after all, these men were infidels, against whom three crusades had already been fought, and any dealings with them were regarded with the utmost suspicion by orthodox Christians.

This was probably the beginning of Michael's more sinister reputation, which was increased by his keen interest in astronomy and chemistry – in his day perilously close to the forbidden arts of astrology and alchemy. It is possible that Michael did dabble in the occult to some extent; but in any case his scientific curiosity was so far ahead of his time that it was enough to earn him the reputation of being a wizard.

One of his colleagues at Palermo was the boy-king's tutor, Cardinal Cencio Savelli. It seems that Michael assisted him; and how delighted he must have been to recognise in Frederick a brilliance of mind and an intellectual curiosity the equal of his own.

However, the imperious and self-willed boy must have been an exceedingly difficult pupil at times. A contemporary account (translated by Georgina Masson in *Frederick II of Hohenstaufen*) describes him at the age of thirteen: "intolerant of admonitions, and judges himself capable of acting according to his own free will, and considers it shameful for himself to be subject to a guardian and to be considered a boy".



*Frederick II, Holy Roman Emperor.
From his book De arte venendi cum
avibus. (The art of hunting with birds.)
Picture: Public domain.*

A year after this description, in 1208, Frederick was officially of age. He lost no time in asserting himself as ruler of Sicily and southern Italy in fact as well as in name, and embarked on the ruthless struggle for power which culminated in his coronation as Frederick II, Holy Roman Emperor, in 1220.

At some time during these years Michael left Palermo for Toledo, the greatest centre of Arab learning in Spain. He spent some years studying there, and produced several treatises on Aristotle and his Saracen commentators. Here too he embarked on the task which was to occupy him for years – a version of Aristotle for use in the universities of Europe.

After this Spanish interlude he returned to Sicily, possibly summoned by the Emperor, his former pupil.

It was perhaps at this point that Frederick, with typical cunning, devised his famous test for Michael. The story goes that he tasked his "mathematicus" with measuring the distance from the top of a certain tower to the heavens. Later, after the tower had secretly been lowered by a few feet, he suggested that Michael should check his previous calculations. He did so, and found that the second measurement was greater than the first. Frederick was delighted, and kept Michael with him as his astrologer and scientific adviser.

The thirteenth century saw the zenith of medieval civilisation in Italy, with such giant figures as St Francis, St Thomas Aquinas and Dante, whose *Divina Commedia* is a magnificent summing up of the age. But at the Court of Palermo the seeds of Renaissance were already germinating.

Although his commitments elsewhere and his increasingly bitter quarrels with the Papacy left him little time for leisure, Frederick loved to return to Sicily whenever

possible. He lived there in half-oriental splendour, surrounded by scholars, poets and musicians whom he delighted to patronise.

But there was a darker side to Frederick's nature. A lack of religious convictions combined with a streak of fiendish cruelty led him into scientific experiments of the most revolting nature, for instance his investigation of the human digestion by vivisection.

I am reluctant to believe that Michael Scott lent himself to anything like this. It seems that Frederick's excesses became wilder as he grew older, and he survived Michael by at least sixteen years. (Dante placed him in Hell too!) So let us hope that when Michael was with him he managed to restrain his royal master from going to such extremes.

There is evidence that Michael kept his integrity, refusing advancement for conscientious reasons. His old friend Cencio Savelli succeeded Innocent III as Pope, taking the name of Honorius III. From him Michael accepted benefices in Italy; but when Honorius offered to make him Archbishop of Cashel Michael refused, saying that he was unable to speak the Irish language. The Pope also wrote to Stephen Langton, the Archbishop of Canterbury, asking if a benefice could be found for Michael in that diocese, but nothing came of this, I think probably because once again Michael was unwilling to draw the revenues from a distant region which he would be unlikely to visit.

Having at last completed his work on Aristotle, he went, with Frederick's backing, on a "lecture tour" of the European universities, and in 1230 visited Oxford.

Here Michael Scott drops out of history, and legend and conjecture take over.

When he was at Oxford did he take the opportunity of revisiting Scotland? Did he even settle here for a time in retirement? He may have fallen from the Emperor's favour, or tired of his service, for Frederick was a hard and capricious master, and those who served him were notoriously short-lived. By his own standards Frederick probably thought he was being quite lenient with the poor secretary who had his thumb cut off (thus making him unemployable) for mis-spelling the Emperor's name!

Even a short visit by Michael to the Border country would doubtless have been enough to give rise to the host of legends associated with his name, for his reputation made him figure of awe and dread.

In *From the Border Hills* Molly Clavering speculates that "his own mind must have caused him torment enough. New and strange knowledge, gained from non-Christian sources, engendered doubt, and Michael Scott came home to Scotland to die, a most unhappy man". Maybe.

It could very well be that in his latter years he settled in the Borders, living the life of a recluse, and occupying himself with strange experiments in alchemy and astronomy.

This would enhance his reputation as a sorcerer, and the stories multiplied; though it is noteworthy that none of the tales show him in a bad light. There seems in fact to be quite a bit of local pride in the great scholar. As Sir Walter Scott notes, in the Borders "any work of great labour and antiquity is ascribed either to the agency of Auld Michael, of Sir William Wallace, or of the devil"!



*The Eildon Hills,
split into three by Michael's demon servant?
Photo: FMD*

He is often pictured as making good use of his supposed supernatural powers, as when he saved Scotland from the plague by shutting it up in a sack! Or when he commanded a demon (the same one as split the Eildon Hills) to make a much-needed dam at an awkward place on the Tweed.

If this demon was not kept occupied, he would get up to all kinds of mischief. Michael finally got rid of him by setting him to weave ropes out of sand on the shore. He is still there, trying to complete this impossible task, and that is why the water is so agitated where Tweed meets the sea.

Michael died about the year 1234. According to the Italian legend, he foresaw that he would be killed by the blow of a stone weighing only two ounces. He therefore made a special steel-lined hat which he always wore, until one day he removed it to enter a church (Melrose?), and was fatally injured by a small piece of falling masonry, dislodged by the vibrations caused by the bell.

About two years after Michael's death a young student called Thomas, from Aquino in southern Italy, entered the University founded at Naples by the Emperor Frederick II. Here Thomas assimilated the Aristotelian philosophy which was to influence deeply his later theological writings.

So that although Michael Scott himself may perhaps have stepped beyond the bounds of orthodoxy, we still owe him a great debt, for if he had not popularised the philosophy of Aristotle among the scholars of Europe, we might never have had in their present form the *Summa Theologica* and other works of St Thomas Aquinas, which had such a profound effect on the thought of Western Christendom for a thousand years.

We began with the picture one great poet gives of Michael in Hell. We end with the kinder judgment of our own Sir Walter Scott. In *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* he imagines the opening of Michael's supposed tomb in Melrose Abbey:

*Before their eyes the Wizard lay,
As if he had not been dead a day ...
High and majestic was his look,
At which the fellest fiend had shook,
And all unruffled was his face:
They trusted his soul had gotten grace.*

Let us hope so too. Perhaps, after all, there are no Scots in Hell!