

Robert Leighton: 1611-1684 Life & Legacy

by Dr Bill Inglis



Robert Leighton was born in 1611. We know virtually nothing about his early life until he went to study at Edinburgh University in 1627, aged 16. He was considerably older than many of the students who at that time started their studies at Universities in their early teens. It may have been partly his age but also because of his undoubted ability that he quickly became fluent in Latin. That was a very great advantage because at that time all the lectures at the University were delivered in Latin which must have made study at the University very difficult for many students.

But not all of Leighton's time at the University was spent studying. On one occasion he published a scurrilous poem describing the Lord Provost of Edinburgh's nose, for which he was suspended from the University for a short time. So, he had a sense of humour.

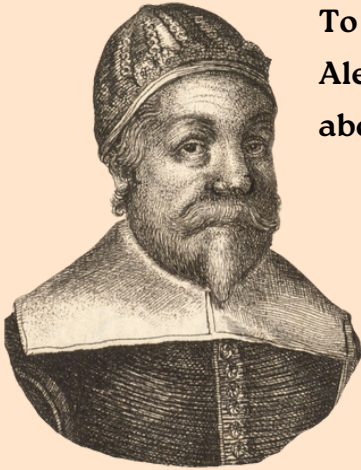
After leaving the University, Leighton spent approximately 20 years travelling in Europe, mainly in France. This experience had a great impact on him. It was a period of warfare and conflict between Christians of all types. In Germany, for example, there was a Religious War between Catholics and Protestants that lasted for 30 years 1618-48.

Then, most important for him, there was a Civil War in Britain from 1641 to 1649 between King Charles I and Parliament mainly focussed on furious arguments between those who believed that Churches should be led by Bishops (Episcopalians) and those who hated the rule of Bishops (Presbyterians).

The War ended with the King being publicly executed in London in 1649.



King Charles I



Dr Alexander Leighton

To make matters worse, Robert Leighton's father, Dr Alexander Leighton, was heavily involved in the quarrel about the role of Bishops in the Church.

He published a number of inflammatory pamphlets attacking the Bishops, in one of which he described the Catholic Queen Henrietta Maria, the wife of King Charles I as "a daughter of Heth" whoever Heth was!



Queen Henrietta Maria

Alexander Leighton was arrested, imprisoned and publicly branded. The branding was especially horrific, even for that time. He had his ears cut off, his nose split on both sides and he was branded with the letters "S S" on his cheeks standing for the words "Sower of Sedition."

The treatment of his father must have made Robert Leighton hate all religious quarrels even more and persuaded him that reconciliation was the only path forward.



Oliver Cromwell

Robert Leighton's first job and first religious appointment was as Minister of Newbattle near Edinburgh from 1641 to 1652 where he gained a reputation as a very effective preacher. It may be that his hostility to religious conflict was also widely known because Oliver Cromwell, who was ruling Britain at the time, decided that Leighton would make a very good Principal of Edinburgh University.

Like today students could be a source of trouble, and the religious differences of the time could well lead to a lot of unrest among them, so the Principal was an important appointment.



Frieze in Scottish National Portrait Gallery shows Robert Leighton to the right of King Charles II

Robert Leighton maintained the peace at the University of Edinburgh, and was therefore a significant Scottish figure when King Charles II became King in 1660.

The King was very keen on maintaining religious peace in England and especially in Scotland where the Presbyterians were very strong and likely to be rebellious.

He therefore was looking for somebody who could keep the peace in Scotland and when he met Robert Leighton, he was impressed by his belief that, despite the Civil War, churches could be reconciled.

So, the King persuaded Robert Leighton to accept a Scottish Bishopric, to which Leighton reluctantly agreed on condition that it was the poorest available in Scotland, which was Dunblane.

Leighton recognised that Bishops were not very popular in Scotland, so he concentrated on making simple changes. He insisted that the congregation were quiet during the services and did not chat to their neighbours. He also adopted a totally different approach to preaching. Most ministers preached sermons that lasted up to an hour which they read from a text. In complete contrast Leighton's sermons only lasted 10 minutes and were focussed on one issue drawn from the Bible during which he had eye contact with all the congregation.

But his main mission was to bring about reconciliation between the Scots who liked Bishops (Episcopalians) and those who wanted the church to be run without Bishops (Presbyterians). Leighton wanted to keep Bishops but reduce their power very considerably.

Needless to say, none of the other Bishops were prepared to support this policy. So, the King decided to bypass them by appointing Leighton to the Archbishopric of Glasgow hoping with that he would be able to bring about reconciliation from that prestigious position.

Leighton nearly succeeded. Between 1671 and 1675 he had two periods where he negotiated with the Presbyterians trying to get them to accept Bishops but with very much reduced power. He ultimately failed but it was a close call. Deeply disappointed Leighton therefore retired in 1675 to England to spend his remaining life with his sister in Sussex.

But King Charles II did not give up that easily.

In 1678 there was a serious rebellion by the Presbyterians of the West of Scotland which ended in their defeat at the Battle of Bothwell Brig.

The King begged Robert Leighton to come out of retirement and have one more attempt to bring about reconciliation in Scotland. Leighton refused and died six years later in 1684.



Battle of Bothwell Brig

But, despite his retirement and failure to bring about reconciliation, Robert Leighton did not give up his mission.

Robert Leighton felt that the key to reconciliation between the two parties was for the clergy to read widely about Christianity and so become much more tolerant of each other.

So, he founded the Leighton Library in Dunblane - his last effort to bring about reconciliation amongst the clergy.

In effect, he never gave up!!!

