

Robert Leighton, by Gordon Willis

Robert Leighton (1611-1684) was an eminent Scottish churchman and university principal. A courageous advocate of compromise and conciliation, he is remembered for his ultimately unsuccessful efforts to unite Episcopalians and Presbyterians in a single Church of Scotland.



1: L. Schuneman, 'Robert Leighton', oil painting, © The University of Edinburgh.

Biography

1611-1627 Early life with his family in London. Robert's mother, possibly of French descent, died when he was an infant. His Scottish father, Alexander Leighton, who soon remarried, had an MA from St Andrews and a medical degree from Leiden. Alexander was a preacher, doctor and controversial writer with extreme Puritan views. The family home was in the same street as Shakespeare's London house, but as Alexander vehemently opposed stage plays, they would not have been friends.

1627-1631 MA Edinburgh University. Robert was an excellent student, the only blot on his record being a brief suspension for writing a poem lampooning the Provost of Edinburgh's red nose. Meanwhile in London his father offended the authorities by publishing *Sion's Plea*, a colourful attack on the Anglican bishops and Charles I's

Catholic Queen. Found guilty of sedition, Alexander was sentenced to mutilation and imprisoned indefinitely, before being freed by Parliament in 1640.

1631-1641 Study and travel on the continent. Few details are known about this period, but Leighton remained grateful for the opportunity to engage with different schools of thought, revisited the continent many times, and advised his students to travel.

1641-1653 Minister of Newbattle near Edinburgh in the (Presbyterian) Church of Scotland.

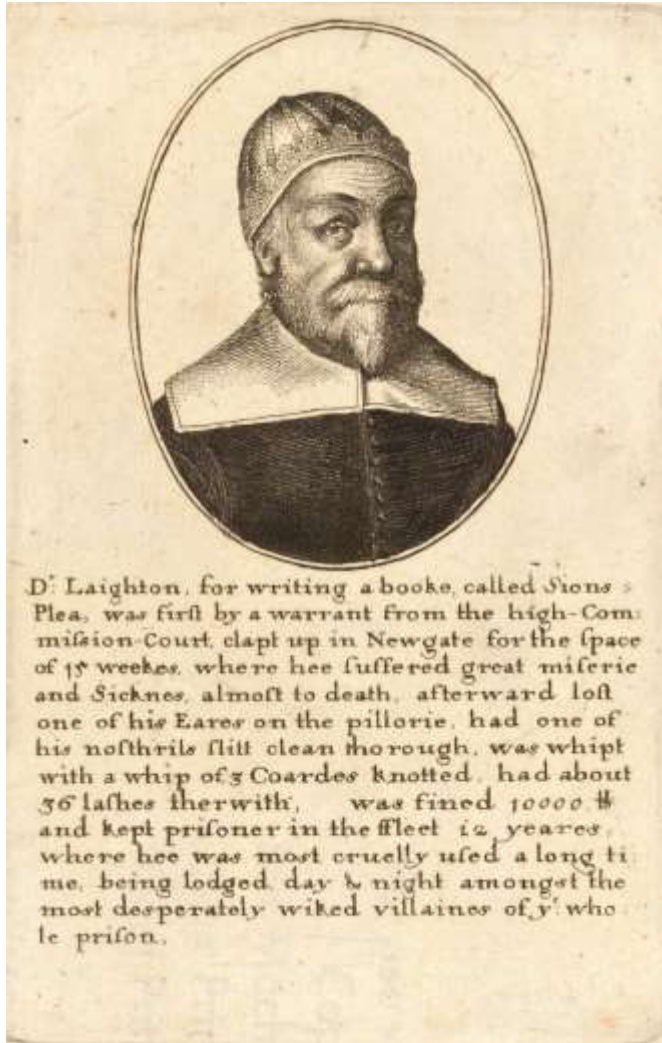
1653-1661 Principal and Professor of Divinity at Edinburgh University. Leighton was appointed at the insistence of Cromwell, whom he had met to negotiate the release of Scottish prisoners after the Battle of Worcester (1650).

1661-1671 Following the Restoration of Charles II, consecrated Bishop of Dunblane in the (now Episcopalian) Church of Scotland. He took this controversial step because he saw an opportunity to heal divisions by creating a moderate Episcopal Church that could also "accommodate" Presbyterians. Frequently in conflict with his fellow bishops, especially the Primate, Archbishop James Sharp of St Andrews. Protested at ill-treatment of Covenanters.

1671-1674 Reluctantly accepted elevation to Archbishop of Glasgow, because he was promised government backing to promote his "Accommodation" scheme. On failing to persuade enough Presbyterians to sign up to the scheme, he was allowed to resign.

1674-1684 Retired to Broadhurst Manor, Horsted Keynes, in Sussex, home of his half-sister, Sapphira Lightmaker, the widow of a successful London brewer. Robert and his nephew, Edward, became close friends and together planned how to set up the Leighton Library in Dunblane.

1684 Robert died in the Bell Inn, London, where he was meeting with the Earl of Perth, Chancellor of Scotland. Becoming ill with pleurisy, he was attended by his Scottish friend, Gilbert Burnet, later Bishop of Salisbury.



2: Leighton's father, Alexander Leighton (c. 1570-1649). Wenceslaus Hollar, 'Alexander Leighton', engraving, © The Wenceslaus Hollar Collection.

Character

Known for his modesty and humility

- As Bishop, he asked not to be addressed as "My Lord". Archbishop Sharp, on the other hand, insisted on being addressed as "My Lord, Your Grace", and was offended that Leighton never added "Your Grace". When challenged, Leighton replied that "My Lord" was more than either of them merited.
- Believing that nothing he wrote was worth preserving, he published nothing in his lifetime, and ordered his executors to destroy his papers (though they disobeyed this command)
- When his sister, concerned for his health, tried to tempt him with nutritious dishes, he would reply, "Shall I eat of this delicacy while a poor man wants his dinner?"
- He scorned several opportunities to become a very rich man, and gave most of his income to charity

Beliefs and teachings

- He signed the Solemn League and Covenant (1643), as was required of all ministers. This attracted criticism of Leighton when he became a bishop, as Scots understood the signatories to promise to support Presbyterian, not Episcopal, church government
- He came to emphasise the importance of piety – having a personal relationship with God, and imitating Christ – above forms of religion. Addressing himself to the least able students, he advised them to take courage, for "what hinders you, pray, from being as pious, as modest, as meek and humble, as holy and pure in heart, as any other person whatever?"
- He believed that through meditation he could in a real sense enter the presence of God. He would regularly shut himself in his study to meditate for days at a time.
- Of his preaching : "Never did I get so much good by any that stood in a pulpit" – William Kerr, 3rd Earl of Lothian, Leighton's patron at Newbattle.
- "The Principal of the College during the five years I studied was Mr Robert Leighton ... [whose] excellent discourses to us in the Common Hall ... gave me strong inclinations to a serious and good life ... [and] charity for all good men of any persuasion." – Sir Robert Sibbald, Royal Physician, founder of the Royal Botanic Garden, Edinburgh.



3: Broadhurst Manor, Sussex. Ian Strang, 'Broadhurst Manor', etching, 1926, © The British Museum.

Learning and scholarship

- "He was a perfect master of Greek and Hebrew [and] had the greatest command of the purest Latin, the whole compass of theological learning" – Gilbert Burnet, Bishop of Salisbury
- His greatest work was a Commentary on the First Epistle of Peter, which recommends cheerful acceptance of persecution

Personal life

- He never married, though he had at least one offer. The young widow of a Dunblane minister informed Leighton that she'd had a revelation that they were to be married. The Bishop replied that when he received the same revelation he'd get back to her.