

The Turbulent Seventeenth Century, by Kelsey Jackson Williams



Earliest known, still surviving, image of Dunblane from *Theatrum Scotiae* by John Slezer, published 1693

Bishop Leighton's life coincided with a period of intense political, religious, and economic instability in Europe. Its backdrop was the Little Ice Age, a period of global cooling which lasted from the fourteenth to the nineteenth centuries, reaching a particularly intense low in the seventeenth. Snow fell more often and more heavily, lying on the ground for many months, rivers froze - "frost fairs" were held on the Thames - and marginal agricultural land, like most of Scotland, was at increased risk for crop failure. The grim reality of this was famine. Throughout Leighton's childhood in the 1620s and again towards the end of his life, Scotland suffered multiple years of hunger after a series of cold, wet growing seasons devastated harvests.

Environmental extremes led, subtly but inevitably, to political instability. Aggravated by food shortage, religious difference, and political manoeuvring, 1618 - when Leighton was still a child - saw the outbreak of the Thirty Years' War, an immensely destructive conflict which ranged across most of central Europe, pitting the Catholic Holy Roman Empire and its dependents against a Protestant anti-imperial alliance. By the time the Peace of Westphalia was signed in 1648, eight million people had died as a result of the war, more than 50% of the population in some parts of Germany.

The British theatre of this destructive conflict is now more often known as the British Civil Wars or the Wars of the Three Kingdoms (1639-1653). Leighton was born in the latter years of the reign of James VI and I, a wily monarch who held together the ethnically and religiously

fragmented multiple monarchy of Scotland, England, and Ireland. His son and successor, Charles I, lacked his father's talent for governing, attempted to rule autocratically without the use of parliaments, enacted far-reaching and often unpopular religious reforms, and was eventually met with rebellion, a rebellion which would see him executed in 1649.

For Scotland, this meant the signing of the National Covenant in 1638, a document establishing the acceptable parameters of Scottish religion, and led to the Bishops' Wars of 1639-1640 and the temporary abolition of episcopacy in favour of Presbyterian church government. Scots, especially Scottish officers who had served as mercenaries on the continent during the Thirty Years' War, played a key role in the wider British conflict, and Scotland and England once again found themselves pitted against each other in the Anglo-Scottish War of 1650-52, an abortive attempt to restore Charles II to his father's throne.

In some ways the final restoration of the multiple monarchy in 1660 and the restoration of episcopacy in Scotland the following year marked the beginning of a more settled period. Conflict remained endemic, however, with hard-line Presbyterians refusing to accept the new social order and engaging in increasingly violent terrorism against the state, culminating in the murder of Archbishop Sharp in 1679. This led to brutal reprisals on the part of the government and an increasingly divided political and religious landscape in Scottish life, presided over by the more or less incompetent commissioners sent by Charles II to govern his northern kingdom.

In Leighton's last winter (1683-84) the Thames froze again between December and February, with "a great street . . . built with Shops" erected on its surface. Fortunately for the bishop, perhaps, he did not live to see the new era of political and religious strife which began when Charles II died, a year after Leighton, and his Catholic brother James VII and II ascended the throne. This would in time lead to the Revolution of 1688 and the 1690 Act of Settlement which, once and for all, established presbyterianism, rather than episcopacy, in the Church of Scotland.