

John Murray and Margaret Leslie



On the north wall of Dunfermline Abbey are several monuments to the great and good of the town. This little stone lies on the floor in the gloom in the south-west corner of the old church, among a collection of stone objects that were probably moved in one of the nineteenth century ‘beautifications’ of the interior of the church. It commemorates Mistress Margaret Leslie, wife of the minister Mr John Murray, who was buried on 15 June 1620.

Not much is known about Margaret Leslie apart from her name and parentage, but she shared a difficult and sometimes tragic life with her husband. John Murray was one of the ministers who opposed the imposition of bishops on the Scottish church by James VI/I. A later biographer said of him ‘Mr Murray was a witness and sufferer for the reformed principles of the Church of Scotland against the usurpations of bishops’.

Like many ministers he was a son of the minor aristocracy, in his case a branch of the Murrays of Abercairney Perthshire, and the shield on the stone bears the three stars of the Murray coat of arms. His wife, Margaret Leslie, was even better connected, being the daughter of James Leslie Master of Rothes. Her mother was Margaret Lindsay, daughter of Patrick Lindsay, 6th Lord Lindsay of Byres and her stepbrother, John, became the 6th Earl of Rothes on the death of his grandfather Andrew Leslie in 1611. Her family were staunch Presbyterians, the 6th Earl becoming one of the leaders of the Covenanter of the 1640s, and her faith was probably a great support to her in her later sufferings with her husband.

From 1606 to 1608 John Murray was second minister at Leith with Mr David Lindsay the later bishop of Ross. Murray himself opposed the appointment of bishops, making his position clear in a sermon preached to the Edinburgh Synod in 1608. Without his knowledge the sermon was printed in London and inevitably came to the notice of the King who ordered the Privy Council to question Murray. However, he was defended by the Earl of Dunfermline and allowed to return to his charge but the King insisted that he be punished and had him imprisoned in Edinburgh Castle.

In 1609 Murray and his family were moved to the village of New Abbey, five miles from Dumfries. According to Row’s history of the Kirk he was imprisoned there ‘with great

scant of fire'. His family suffered with him and both his children died from the cold and lack of food. It was probably desperation that caused him in 1610 to leave New Abbey without permission and move to Dysart and in 1611 to Prestonpans. He was allowed to remain free, however, and preached every Sunday at Prestonpans.

At this time things were going badly for the Kirk at Dunfermline and its minister, Andrew Forrester. Forrester's shortcomings were described in the *Character of Andro Foster* by the Rev Dr M'Crie, who wrote that he was:

...a person destitute both of gifts and grace. Having been visited by Providence with sickness, he was, after his recovery, seized with great distress of mind. He confessed that at the Assembly of Glasgow, in 1610, he had sold Christ, for a paltry sum of money (viz., fifty merks Scots), received from the Earl of Dunbar, the king's Commissioner, as did some other ministers in that Assembly, to induce them to vote in favour of the King's project for the establishment of prelacy. He also confessed that, having a numerous family¹, and being very poor, he had, by means of a false key, at different times abstracted money from the Kirk box. One Sabbath, the subject in his ordinary course of lecture being John xii. 6², he was seized with such horror when about to begin, that he ran out of the pulpit, expressing, among other things, an apprehension that the magistrates were coming to take him out to execution. Being in this situation, he silenced himself, and requested Mr. Murray, for Christ's sake, to take the charge of the congregation. And yet, some time after this, having been reduced to beggary, Archbishop Spottiswood intruded him, in spite of the people, into the parish church of Collace, near Perth, where he died covered with debt and infamy.

Mr Forrester added to his offences in 1612 by allowing the Earl of Dunfermline, Chancellor of Scotland (and a closet Catholic), to have a crucifix painted on the front of his loft in the Dunfermline kirk. This was reported to the Synod who disciplined Forrester. He only escaped deposition from his charge through the intervention of the King.

Three years after these events the Synod was once again faced with an unsatisfactory situation at Dunfermline

...considering deeply the largeness of the congregation of Dunfermline, having more than two thousand communicants,³ and weakness and infirmity of Mr Andrew Forrester, minister, unable to bear the great burden alone, (the Synod) thinks it altogether needful that another be joined with the said Mr Andrew in the ministry of the said kirk. For procuring whereof it is ordered that my lord Archbishop and Mr Robert Roch shall deal with My Lord Chancellor (the Earl of Dunfermline) for his lordship's furtherance hereto. Likewise the brethren of the exercise there (the Presbytery) shall deal with the parishioners for their concurrence. Finally willed my lord Archbishop to provide a qualified man and to plant him before the next Synod.

The Synod was held in October 1615 and by the end of the year Mr John Murray had been appointed as assistant minister, after much pulling of influential strings by his supporters. This did not, however, solve the Kirk's problems and in 1616 the Synod was once more forced to intervene. At its meeting that year it was reported

¹ The Dunfermline Parish Register records the baptisms of ten children born to Mr Andrew and his wife Helen Ramsay between 1599 and 1616.

² The incident in which a woman poured expensive perfume on Jesus' feet and Judas Iscariot protested that it should have been sold and the money given to the poor. Verse 6 runs 'He said this not out of any care for the poor but because he was a thief. He used to pilfer the money put into the common purse, which was in his charge.'

³ This was not the population of the town, which at that date had about 1500 inhabitants, but the communicant population of the entire parish.

that the kirk of Dunfermline has been visited by my lord Archbishop, at the which the parishioners kept by their strifes and discontent with their minister, which since have burst forth. In regard whereof the visitors have dealt earnestly for a new visitation. The synod advised the brethren of the exercises to do in the visitation of that kirk as may be most for the glory of God and weal of that congregation and to report to the Archbishop what they may find, that he may do therein as he shall find meet.

The Archbishop of St Andrews, who had finally approved John Murray's appointment, died in that year and his successor Spottiswood, Murray's arch-enemy, deposed him. Forrester, however, could not manage without him and he petitioned the Archbishop for Murray's reinstatement. Given the turmoil that prevailed in the parish and Forrester's obvious unfitness for the charge, Spottiswood had no option but to reinstate John Murray. Forrester left the parish in January 1620 and six months later Murray's wife died. He continued in his opposition to episcopacy and his refusal to sign the Five Articles of Perth, another attempt by James VI/I to bring the Kirk into line with the Anglican church, led to his final deposition from the Dunfermline charge in 1622. He was again imprisoned, this time in a kind of house arrest at Gorthie, which belonged to his brother Sir David Murray. When Sir David died in 1629 Murray moved back to Prestonpans, where he died in 1632.