

The Life and Family of Dr. John Leyden Poet and Orientalist from Denholm 1775-28th August 1811 In September 1775,

In a thatched cottage overlooking Denholm Green, a young father proudly looked down on his first born child, to be named John after his father and forefathers. At the time, neither of the parents, John Leyden nor his wife Isabel Scott, could have predicted the fascinating life ahead for their son - a life which was to see him master over 30 languages, become a minister, surgeon and naturalist, bring him fame as a poet and linguist and earn the respect, admiration and friendship of Sir Walter Scott and other eminent members of 19th century society before an untimely death in Java. A genius had been born.

Times were hard for the Leyden family now that there was an extra mouth to feed and the offer of a job as shepherd by Isabel's uncle, Thomas Blyth who was tenant at Nether Tofts on the Cavers Estate, was readily accepted by the young couple and so young John went to live in a small lonely cottage at Henlawshiels on the slopes of Ruberslaw, an extinct volcano dominating the Border countryside.

When John's paternal grandfather died, it was only natural for his grandmother, Margaret Laidlaw, to come and stay with her son and family and it was she who is credited with having a profound influence on young John. Margaret was a highly intelligent and very religious woman who had passed these same qualities on to her son and through him to her young grandson. As she had done with her own son, Margaret taught young John to read the Bible and told him tales of the Borders.

Thus young John was to grow up in a poor home, but one in which he was fired with enthusiasm for learning. Accordingly, young John found himself steeped in the history of the Borders from a very early age. As he helped his father tend the sheep on the slopes of Ruberslaw, he would gaze towards the English Border and look down on the lands which in days gone by had echoed to the thundering hooves of horses ridden by Border reivers or Scottish and English armies en route for war. It is easy to see how his interest was stirred and, as he grew up, young John loved nothing better than to listen to old folk recounting tales of the Covenanters and the Border Reivers.

John was not destined to be an only child and in the course of time more children were born to his parents. At Henlawshiels, at least two boys and a daughter were born. The name of the second son has still to be ascertained but the third son Robert, was born in 1783 and died in 1838 aged 55 years. In 1788 Isabella was born but unfortunately she died three years later. At the time of her death, young John was 8 years old and her death affected him greatly. He wrote :

"I had a sister who died young. Before that event, the vivacity and cheerfulness natural to youth had always quickly dispelled the mist of sorrow whenever it happened to crowd my brow. My mind was darkened. I attended her funeral in a state of listless and sullen apathy. My breast began to palpitate as I approached the gate to the churchyard, and I shuddered as we tracked the long, rank grass. The dust sounded on the coffin - it fell heavily on my heart. I still love to walk beneath the neighbouring trees when the parting beams of the sun fall softly on her grave, or when the churchyard is chequered by the varying moonbeam that gleams through the rustling leaves. "

Shortly after Isabella's death, the family moved to Cavers Townhead about 1792 and presumably the remaining children were born here - at least one other daughter, Margaret born in 1793, and a son, the youngest son, Andrew, being born in 1799.

But to return to young John. As a child, he quickly developed a voracious appetite for reading and read the whole Bible at an early age. His phenomenal memory enabled him to learn much of it by heart. His only other reading materials were the penny "chap" books carried by the chapmen and a copy of "The Arabian Knights" which he struggled through snow one winter to acquire from a blacksmith's apprentice in a neighbouring village.

It has been suggested that Thomas Blyth acted like a godfather to John and it is assumed that John was allowed access to his great uncle's library, although it is unknown how extensive this library was. In the course of my research, I have been unable to find any mention of the House of Cavers in connection with young John.

In the spring of 1785 when he was 9 years old, John went to the nearby Kirktown Parish School and it was there that he was introduced to the rudiments of Latin, writing and arithmetic. He quickly grasped everything he was taught and in later years, he himself was to attribute his grasp of languages to his schooling in Kirktown School.

But for all his undoubted talents, John remained the son of a poor shepherd. At the age of 13, when John was ready to go to school in Denholm, his father wanted to buy John a donkey to take him the three miles to school, but John did not like this idea at all. A donkey would cost money which his family could ill afford. It was only when he was told that the owner of the donkey had a large book in a strange language which was to be included in the deal that John agreed. This book was the "Calepini Dictionarium Octolingue" and provided Leyden with synonyms in 8 languages: Latin, Greek, Hebrew, Italian, German, Spanish, English and Gaelic.

By now, young John's gift for learning was quite apparent and in accordance with his parents' wishes, it was decided that he should train for the church with the Rev. James Duncan, the Cameronian minister in Denholm, taking young John under his wing and teaching him Latin and Greek.

The church probably made arrangements for John to go to the University of Edinburgh and in November 1790, at the age of 15 years, young John set off on the long journey to Edinburgh. His father accompanied his eldest son for the first 20 miles through the rolling Border countryside, each taking turns to ride their one horse. As they took leave of each other, young John was exhorted in no uncertain terms to behave himself, not bring shame to the family and above else to write to his mother who would be terribly disappointed if a letter didn't arrive with the carrier the next week!

As he left his family and his homeland, young John was faced with the foreboding and excitement of a new stage in his life. He must have found life in Edinburgh a very strange experience after the peace and quiet of the Borders and, in the beginning, quite lonely at times.

The impression he made on his fellow students is not hard to imagine as he has been described as being a rough diamond. Certainly he had a wild and rugged appearance and he always spoke in his broad Scots accent. His first recital of Greek in the university set the other students into fits of laughter which soon turned to amazement as it became apparent that here was a genius who was to master over 30 languages and translate the Gospel into five. Very quickly, John Leyden was to gain a reputation as an aspiring student to whom no branch of science or literature seemed to be beyond his grasp.

On his entry to Edinburgh University in 1790, he took the Arts course as all intending candidates for the Church had to do. His aim was to enter the Church and for four years from 1793 he could be found at Divinity Hall, studying Hebrew, which also included other oriental languages of the Bible, including Aramaic, Arabic and Ethiopic.

Money was short and young John had to earn a living. In the summer of 1792, he taught at the village school in Clovenfords. After this, he was fortunate to have professors who helped him to obtain private pupils. In 1796, John became tutor to the sons of Mr. Campbell of Fairfield and he and the two Campbell boys matriculated at Edinburgh University in May 1798.

John became licensed to preach, but it soon became apparent that his attempts to find a church were half-hearted and that he had drifted into this profession simply because it had been expected of him.

He only once preached in Cavers Church when a large congregation gathered from far and near to hear their local boy. His text was "Get behind me Satan" and an old man whispered to his neighbour, "It's just like him. Aw thought he would be on about the deil, for he never could let the auld ane alane a' his life".

This was reference to the time when the Rev. James Duncan had arranged for John to study in Cavers Kirk which, like other churches of that time, was reputed to be inhabited

by evil spirits during the week. John gained a satanic reputation as he sat studying in the old kirk in the dark, gloomy days of winter and the young lad made the most of this reputation.

One winter's night, he invited the folk in the neighbourhood to see him "raise the devil". The spectators assembled in the "Aisle Loft" which was approached by an open stair on the outside of the building (still visible today). The aisle was separated from the body of the church by a large folding door. John had an accomplice inside the aisle, while he, supposedly with a rod of magic in his hand, walked round a circle which he had drawn in front of the pulpit, muttering an unknown language. Suddenly, he paused and there was silence, which was instantly interrupted by a rumbling noise beneath the spectators' feet. John adopted a weird like attitude, fixed his eyes on the huge door of the aisle and called out, "Satan. Come forth"!

Slowly the heavy door opened and out walked a tall figure wrapped in a mortcloth.

It is easy to imagine the panic as the terrified on-lookers screamed with fear and rushed to get away from this awesome sight. Many tumbled down the stone staircase in their rush to escape and were rewarded with sore limbs for several weeks.

Leyden enjoyed his life in Edinburgh which in the late 18th century was a meeting place for many young intellectuals who were to become famous in the literary field and it was here that young John Leyden was to become acquainted with people who were to recognise his genius and who were prepared to help him to achieve his dreams. He was introduced to families well above his own family's social status.

His love of books took him to a small bookshop in the High Street where Leyden, who could never afford to buy any books, was tolerated by the owner, Archibald Constable. Leyden was fortunate to be given a free run of the bookshop and was often to be found sitting perched on a ladder in the back room. It was there that he attracted the attention of Richard Heber, a wealthy young Englishman and book-lover, who frequented the shop.

It was Richard Heber who introduced Leyden to Sir Walter Scott and so began a remarkable friendship. The two men shared an avid interest in the old tales of the Borders and Leyden contributed much to Scott's "Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border." On one occasion, he tramped over 40 miles and back to recover an ancient ballad from an old man living in Teviotdale after Sir Walter had made a passing reference to the ballad in the course of a conversation.

Now that his preaching career was not going as he had planned, Leyden's thoughts turned abroad and he considered going to Africa to follow in the footsteps of Mungo Park as an explorer. His friends were horrified and managed to persuade him to consider India where he could study Oriental languages. The only way he could get

there was to accept an appointment as a surgeon which meant further study, but this was no barrier to such a man of learning and Leyden was to achieve his medical degree from St Andrew's University in six months.

The Right Hon. William Dundas managed to get Leyden a post as assistant surgeon in Madras, through the East India Company and so Dr. John Leyden sailed for Madras on 7th April 1803 as surgeon and naturalist, arriving in India on 19th August of the same year to find that he was actually in charge of the hospital.

Leyden never seems to have enjoyed the best of health and was in poor health when he arrived in Madras. During his first two years in India, he was at death's door on five occasions.

In January 1804, he was attached to the Commission of Survey in Mysore as assistant surgeon and naturalist and in this capacity, he accompanied the commissioners in a journey over Mysore province. Once more, he became ill and in November, he spent many months seriously ill in the hospital at Seringapatam where he was befriended by another Borderer, Brigadier General Malcolm, later to be Sir John Malcolm, who had been born in the parish of Westerkirk near Langholm.

Leyden was proud of his humble Scottish birth and he used to exasperate Sir John Malcolm as he refused to speak in English. Malcolm begged Leyden to speak in English, but Leyden's response was, "No, never. It was trying to learn that language that spoilt my Scots."

From May to September 1805, Leyden travelled extensively. On one occasion in the Indian Ocean, off the island of Sumatra, a French privateer gave chase to the British vessel in which Leyden was travelling and, once again, Leyden narrowly escaped death.

Leyden arrived in Penang in October 1805 and there he stayed for nearly three months, during which time he was more or less an invalid. It was at Penang that Leyden first met Thomas Stamford Raffles. When they first met, Leyden was still very ill and Raffles took him back to his own house where he remained as Raffles' guest during the greater part of his stay on the island and where he was nursed by Raffles' wife, Olivia.

The friendship between the Raffles' family and Leyden seems to have been deep. It has been suggested that, had he lived, Leyden might have married the last of Raffles' unmarried sisters. Raffles himself wrote in 1819 to Dr. Raffles of Liverpool: -

"Leyden had the promise from me that when I was Governor, he should be my private secretary."

From Penang, Leyden sailed to Bengal, arriving at Calcutta in February 1806. Here he settled for a while, burying himself in grammars and dictionaries of the Indian and Malayan languages and learning more native languages. His knowledge led him to being appointed Professor of the Chair of Hindustani in Fort William College.

He was appointed judge and later became a commissioner of the Courts of Requests at Calcutta, but still he continued to devote a great deal of his time to his philological writings and translations. He was in his element as he often spoke seven languages a day in the Courts of Requests.

October 1807 saw the arrival of Lord Minto as Governor-General of British India. Leyden must have been delighted to learn of the arrival of this man who came from his own Borderland. He wrote to his parents: -

"I have every reason to be pleasantly attached to Lord Minto, who has treated me more like a son than anything else."

Leyden went to Java with Lord Minto, who was full of admiration for Leyden's extraordinary talents, but all too often he was exasperated by him. In particular Leyden's voice seems to have got on Lord Minto's nerves. In November 1811, he wrote to his wife:-

"Another feature of his conversation is a shrill, piercing, and at the same time grating voice. A frigate is not near large enough to place the ear at the proper point of hearing. If he had been at Babel, he would infallibly have learned all the languages there, but in the end, they must all have merged in the Tivendale How, for not a creature would have got spoken but himself."

Britain had been at war with France from 1803 and in 1811, Lord Minto set out on an expedition to secure bases in the Malay archipelago. Leyden went as an interpreter. It must have been a huge expedition as at Madras, an army of about 10,000 men waited to accompany them, between six and seven thousand having already departed.

Lord Minto sailed in HMS Modeste on June 18th, accompanied by the schooner Minto, in which Leyden travelled. On 9th July 1811, Batavia was occupied and Leyden was among the first to land. With another volunteer, he threw himself into the surf in order to be the first Briton of the expedition to set foot on Java.

As usual, he could not wait to search the Dutch offices for possible archives and to examine official documents. On 25th August 1811, he came across a closed room in one of the Dutch public offices.. He forced open the door and spent some time examining the papers on the shelves. The room had not been ventilated and Leyden came out a stricken man, chilled and shivering, seized with a violent fever. Two days later, he died in the arms of his friend, Sir Stamford Raffles.

Both Raffles and Lord Minto mourned Leyden's death and laid him to rest with their own hands in a grave in the cemetery of Tanabang in Java, beside the spot where Olivia Raffles was to be buried three years later.

A headstone was erected : -

Sacred to the memory of John Casper Leyden M.D., who was born at Teviotdale in Scotland and who died in the prime of life at Molenvliet near Batavia on 28th August 1811, two days after the fall of Cornelis.

Leyden's untimely death undoubtedly was a shock to his family and friends. At the time of his death, he had become a well known figure locally and in the wider world. As might have been expected though, Leyden was destined not to be forgotten and in 1861 a monument to Leyden was unveiled in Denholm, while the site of his father's cottage at Henlawshiels was marked with a large upright stone.

Today, over 200 years since his birth, the fame of Dr. John Leyden lives on in the village of Denholm where, each year local schoolchildren write an essay on this great man. Yet, in the wider community, few have heard of him. Too many years have passed for Leyden to remain a household name, a name which seems to have died out in this area. In the Border telephone book, there are no entries under the name of Leyden.

What happened to Leyden's brothers and sisters? So far, I have only been able to ascertain details about Andrew and Margaret. Andrew became a farmer and never married. In March 1857, he lived at Dimpleknowe and in 1866 he was in the employment of the Rev. Alex. Davidson of Cavers. He died in Denholm on 26th April 1869, aged 70 years. Margaret married James Turnbull and died a widow in Edinburgh in 1859, aged 66 years. Her husband's occupation was given as a writer with her daughter Isabella, registering her mother's death. Margaret was buried in Warriston Cemetery but I have yet to search for a headstone. Presumably Margaret had other children and so there will possibly be descendants but who are they? Do they know of their claim to fame? Do they care?

The graveyard at Old Cavers Church is in a sorry state. Even in the midst of winter, Leyden's family grave where his father John was buried in 1829 aged 83 years to be followed in 1837 by his mother Isabel, aged 88 years, can only be reached by crawling under fallen trees or hacking relentlessly through massive rhododendron bushes. In 1997, the inscription on the headstone was still legible, but by the tercentenary of Leyden's death in the year 2011, will anyone be able to reach the stone?

My own interest in Dr. John Leyden continues and, in the course of time, I hope to discover more about the life and times of this great man.

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