

Return of the bishops

Gavin Hamilton

c.1561-1612

When King James VI wanted to bring bishops back into the Scottish church he faced major problems.

Many Scots were fiercely Presbyterian – believing the church should be governed by local assemblies of clergy and elders.

Despite the resistance the king gathered some supporters. Among them was Gavin Douglas, who in 1605 accepted the role of Bishop of Galloway.

Yet it was a hollow title because no matter how much the king wanted to make people bishops, he couldn't.

The rules said only an existing bishop could make someone else a bishop, and they were in short supply.

It took until 1610 to sort the problem out, and Gavin headed to London to be consecrated according to English rites.

By this time, he had accumulated many lucrative titles such as dean of the Chapel Royal at Stirling, commendator of Whithorn, and abbot of Dundrennan and Glenluce.

Gavin's success in power politics contrasted with the fortunes of his father, who was killed at the Battle of Langside supporting Mary, Queen of Scots against her half-brother the Earl of Moray.

By the time Gavin died he was among the wealthiest bishops in Scotland.

To Presbyterians he had betrayed the Reformation, a time when Scotland had thrown off the authority of the Pope and bishops.

Yet Bishop Robert Keith later described him as 'an excellent good man'.

- Read the Oxford DNB biography here: <http://www.oxforddnb.com/public/dnb/12065.html>.