

BROWNLOW NORTH

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THE ALL-AROUND EVANGELIST

Geoffrey Thomas



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orders@heritagebooks.org

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To my three God-fearing daughters,
Eleri Brady, Catrin Alsop,
and Fflur Ellis,
with the very deepest affection and gratitude.

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Preface

How we need men who have been called by God to be evangelists! Yet we do not need “evangelists” characterized by the same theological and moral weaknesses found in many of the professing churches today. I am referring to the “snowflakes,” those who by their lightweight preaching manipulate people into making easy decisions, who are self-promoting and self-advancing, who scarcely bother to mask their greed, who demand no evidence of new spiritual life in those they have touched. That sort of religion can never please God. Regardless of the intensity of brief tingle factors, it can never be blessed by Him.

But not so for the man equipped by an encounter with God, who is convicted of his own unworthiness, who has an unfading hope in the work that Jesus Christ has done, who trusts in the Savior’s righteousness and His atoning sacrifice alone as his hope of eternal blessedness, who longs for everyone whom in providence he meets day by day to hear of this Jesus, who cries with every breath, “Behold the Lamb!” Such a man is characterized by a single eye that can provide eternal wisdom where hitherto there has been

ignorance, the apprehension of mercy where there has been guilt, a protecting Shepherd where there has been impotence and vulnerability, and a longing for God where there has been the unsatisfied itch for worldly pleasures. What expectation we would have if we heard of such true servants of God being raised up in every part of the world in our generation. That would be the dawning of the time to favor us—yes, the set time. Then the churches in the most barren of nations would know that help centered on the Holy Spirit's energy and a new God-honoring life from heaven was coming to them. Alas, as it is, the absence of such graces in those who claim to be God's mouthpiece remains the chief cause of the church's moribund condition. The effects of this for the rest of the world are immeasurably calamitous.

Brownlow North is a crucially important figure—recent enough to be accessible and relevant to today's world yet representing a healthier time for the church. He was the model all-around evangelist, the archetypal definition of a New Testament preacher, the living embodiment of a man who has the conviction, "Woe is unto me if I preach not the gospel." His life displays what an infamous sinner can become when he has been transformed by being joined to Jesus Christ by faith through the grace of God. Knowing the terrors of the Lord, he beseeched men to turn and repent. He was a wise and courageous proclaimer, a humble interceder, a pastoral counselor, a churchman, a letter writer, an author, a theologian, and a redeemer of time. Human friendships were most important to him. One such friend, admiring North's unyielding convictions concerning important moral and theological issues, said, "When he

believes something then ‘not all the king’s horses, nor all the king’s men’ could get him to discard it.”

That was Brownlow North. He did not covet, abuse the weak and vulnerable, or exhibit laziness, yet he knew how to rest. For example, he enjoyed day excursions into the Highlands and onto the lochs of Scotland. He would go fishing with his son and with friends and played chess on many afternoons. He was full of liveliness and spirit, quick at repartee, entering into a burst of humor, especially if the fun was at his own expense. He amused children by imitating accents, and he listened to teenagers with warm sympathy. He was aware of his limits, knowing where to go and where not to go in many areas of his full life. He was characterized by manliness and intelligence, but chiefly with intense earnestness. He was a people person who loved his friends and kept in touch with them by constant delightful letters. He loved to sit in the company of such men as Dr. Alexander Moody-Stuart, Dr. Charles Brown, and Dr. Andrew Bonar. He sat at their feet like a child and delighted in what they taught him. Brownlow would spend his mornings in correspondence and writing his tracts and books, and in the afternoon he entered the drawing room with the family and joined in their occupations. He cared deeply for his mother, reverencing her, and he loved being with his wife and sons. They were not mere amusing illustrations for his sermons. He conducted family worship each evening, applying the truths of the passage with direction and sympathy.

His prayers were full and short, but direct as speaking to God. He believed that the judgment of hell was real and that it was a sin-hating God’s response to all that

contradicts His nature. He warned his hearers of God's judgment, often with tears, and some thought he wept too often as he preached. He told his hearers to count the cost of following Christ. He expected a new, transformed life of discipleship in every single man and woman of any age who made a profession of faith in Jesus of Galilee. New Christians were all to become involved in the prayer life, fellowship, burden bearing, and outreach of local congregations, however small. Led by Providence, they would themselves become growingly unashamed of the gospel, spreading the good news of the Son of God, who gives rest to all who would come to Him. They pursued the characteristics of a true Christian, as described by Jonathan Edwards:

1. He has a true knowledge of the glory and excellency of God, that he is most worthy to be loved and praised for his own divine perfections (Ps. 145:3).
2. God is his portion (Ps. 73:26), and God's glory his great concern (Matt. 6:13).
3. Holiness is his delight; nothing he so much longs for as to be holy, as God is holy (Phil. 3:9–12).
4. Sin is his greatest enemy. This he hates for its own nature, for what it is in itself, being contrary to a holy God. And consequently he hates all sin (Rom. 7:24; 1 John 3:9).
5. The laws of God also are his delight (Ps. 119:97; Rom. 7:22). These he observes, not out of constraint, from a servile fear of hell; but they are his choice (Ps. 119:30). The strict observance of them is not his bondage, but his greatest liberty (Ps. 119:45).

When Dr. Moody-Stuart (whose son became Brownlow North's biographer) met North, he soon found it "unspeakably refreshing to find a man with such a fear of the living God, such brokenness of spirit, and such faith in the everlasting Word." The providential meeting with Brownlow North became a great acquisition in his life, and it reminded him of Dr. Robert Reid Kalley on the island of Madeira, where for a long time there was only one convert. Finally, after more than a year or two, that solitary believer hurriedly came to Dr. Kalley and cried to him, "I have found a man!" There had been a second convert. As Dr. Moody-Stuart stated, "On the day I met Brownlow North it seemed to me that I had found a man whom God was redeeming to himself, was leading and instructing, and was sending as a labourer into his harvest."

I commend to you this man whom I more than admire and have also grown to love. If it were ever true of anyone, it is certainly true of Brownlow North, that to know him is to love him. May his life stir us, inspire us, melt our icy coldness, and make us more than steadfast and unmovable, abounding in the work of the Lord. It is not in vain that we should be wholly active in such laboring. May we know a personal rejuvenation through reviewing the life of this man of God.

Early Years

Wee Kenny was the son of a fine gospel minister in Edinburgh, the Rev. Dr. Alexander Moody-Stuart. Father and son were very close, and one day the minister told Kenny that he had heard of the conversion of an English aristocrat up in the Highlands who had lived there for years, hunting, fishing, riding, and drinking, but now in his midforties (which was an elderly man in 1854) had turned from that lifestyle to take Jesus Christ as his own Lord and Savior. What is more, he had begun to speak about Christ to growing congregations of attentive men and women, many of whom made professions of faith and turned from their unbelief to trust in our Lord. There was an awakening in the north of Scotland. “So,” said Rev. Moody-Stuart, “I have invited him to come to our church, Ken, and preach for some evenings for us.” The young Kenny was very excited, and when he met Brownlow North, he was mightily impressed. He took every opportunity to hear him preach, and he often ate and drank with him in the manse.

Brownlow North died twenty years later, but during those two decades Kenneth Moody-Stuart had become a

close friend, and he was the most suitable person to write a memoir of the evangelist's life upon his passing. It is a splendid biography, and I have read it often with delight and have used it extensively in this version of mine, which tells of how a rich man found greater riches than he could ever have imagined in the Son of God, Jesus Christ.

Brownlow North was born more than two hundred years ago on January 6, 1810. During this year, Beethoven would write his fourth symphony and violin concerto, the foundations of Dartmoor Prison would be laid, and Napoleon would expand his control of Europe. Within a few months of Brownlow's birth, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Andrew Bonar would be born and William Pitt the Younger would die.

Brownlow's mother was distinguished for her deep Christian faith. In the Old Testament, Hannah had cried to God for a son, saying, "O LORD of hosts, if thou wilt indeed look on the affliction of thine handmaid, and remember me, and not forget thine handmaid, but wilt give unto thine handmaid a man child, then I will give him unto the LORD all the days of his life" (1 Sam. 1:11). Similarly, Rachel North's only child was the fruit of her intercession, and he became the focus of her prayers for the rest of her life.

Brownlow was a precocious only child, and one of the stories of those years (incidents that are preserved in every family) is of him as a five-year-old walking with his aunt, Lady Lucy North. Seeing some deer, he said to her, "Aunt Lucy, why are you like that big stag over there?" "I've no idea, Brownlow. I don't think I'm a bit like that stag."

“Because, Aunt Lucy,” said the child, “you’re a great dear.” For that wit he was given half a crown.

He began his studies in Eton at nine and remained there for six years, leaving little impact on the school. However, he had begun to display some rebellious tendencies. When he was nineteen his father died, and Brownlow was sent to study at a theological college in Corfu. He was too wild spirited to remain there, and he soon returned home. He toured Europe with his personal tutor, but he paid little attention to new cities in new nations, learning nothing and marginalizing his tutor. He was much more interested in dancing, horse riding, and being in the company of women. One winter he proposed to no fewer than nineteen girls, all of whom accepted his offer of marriage! His horse riding developed until he became a kind of jockey, racing other aristocrats in places like Cheltenham. Serious accidents and deaths characterized some of those races.

After one such escapade, he went off to Galway, on the west coast of Ireland, to live quietly for a while. There he met a clergyman’s eighteen-year-old daughter, Grace Anne Coffey, and he married her. By the time he was twenty-one, he had two sons to care for (eventually they were to have four sons, one of whom died in infancy). His income came from a position he was given by his grandfather, the bishop of Winchester. Brownlow was appointed the registrar of the diocese of Winchester and Surrey, and he took the duties of this post quite seriously, even though most of the work was done by a couple of lawyers. His salary was three hundred pounds a year, but this sum of money was insufficient to sustain his interest in horses. He became a gambler,

losing much money and borrowing sums that he was unable to repay. He went to Boulogne to escape those demanding repayments, but his time in France was another totally fruitless escapade, and he sent his family home while he enlisted in the Portuguese army. That proved to be yet another debacle, and at twenty-five he returned to England, his life going nowhere. His family covered his debts, and he made the decision to visit his brother-in-law's home in Scotland to shoot grouse. He fell in love with Scotland and remained there for the rest of his life, becoming a virtually naturalized Scotsman.

For the next four years, he spent the summers shooting and the winters in a large house in the city of Aberdeen, during which time he raced horses and won many races. While shooting game in the summers, he walked energetically and tirelessly across the moors, exhausting all who tried to keep up with him. His motto was "Every day and all day." In one season at Glenbucket, he shot 770 brace of grouse in six weeks.

During these years the emptiness of this life would occasionally convict him, and he would kick against the goads of a troubled conscience. His mother's teaching and example could not be eradicated from his mind. He had Christian friends who prayed for his conversion, but none of his occasional seasons of repentance and new resolutions lasted very long. Once at a dinner party, he turned to a Christian lady, the Duchess of Gordon, and said to her, "What should a man do who has often prayed to God and never been answered?" She looked straight back at him and replied, "Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that

ye may consume it upon your lusts” (James 4:3). Those few words made an unforgettable impact upon him; he became quiet that evening and was more thoughtful for some time. When his son Brownlow became very ill, he was further subdued and fearful. The Duchess of Gordon gave his wife a Christian book to read to the boy during his convalescence, but his father also read it and was convicted by its truths.

During the next couple of years, he experienced a temporary reformation of morals and began to consider training for the ministry. He went to Magdalen Hall, Oxford, and spent that time of study quite seriously. We know that from the fact that in his future books, beneath his name as author, can be found the words “Magdalen Hall, Oxford, and Registrar of the Diocese of Winchester and Surrey.” Upon Brownlow’s completion of the course, someone wrote a letter to the bishop of Lincoln, informing him of Brownlow’s earlier excesses. When interviewed by the bishop, a spirit of casualness and uncertainty about his sense of call to be a minister surfaced. The bishop finally asked him, “If I were in your position and you in mine, would you ordain me?” “No, I wouldn’t, my lord,” he said.

What was his spiritual condition at that time? He certainly had a sense of his own guilt and shame; in fact, he would acknowledge with sadness that he was under the wrath of God. But there is a difference between admitting that one is a sinner and experiencing an inward divine change of heart. True repentance toward God is inevitably accompanied by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Looking back at his years of training in Oxford and his awakened

conviction of personal sin, he judged, "I never apprehended Christ. I never accepted him as my sin bearer and my righteousness." He felt like the man in Jesus's parable who had swept and garnished his house and driven out the demon that had lived there, but he had failed to fill the house with the regenerating and sanctifying influences that come from the presence of the Son of God. The demons were hovering around Brownlow North, waiting to return in legion force. He later spoke of this state to a Christian woman, saying, "The house was swept and garnished, but empty, and the last state of that man was worse than the first. Think of the greatness of the love of the Lord Jesus which came to me after that!"

God used Brownlow's years of studying theology in Oxford to challenge his fine mind and deliver him from horse racing and shooting grouse. He was given some knowledge of the history of the church, especially of the Reformation and the Evangelical Awakening. He read and accepted the evidences of religion that Paley and Butler popularly provided in their books. These academic disciplines were not useless in his future ministry. For example, within a year of his conversion, he would be preaching to large gatherings, and he was glad of the grounding he had in the sweep of church history. He was aware of the rise of heresy and error, and he never had to withdraw words preached publicly or apologize for misleading or troubling the church. When he was considered to become a recognized evangelist in the Free Church of Scotland, his supporters could point out to its General Assembly that he had studied for the ministry in Oxford and completed the course.

But after years at Oxford had come to an end, he sadly drifted back to what he had enjoyed doing hitherto. At thirty-five years of age, he was again walking the moors of Scotland, especially around Inverness, gun in hand, month after month. As the time went by, he increasingly ignored God, silencing the voice of his conscience, and for three years he again simply shot grouse in the summer and rode his racing horses in the winter. His children got married, and when he was forty he settled in a large house in Dallas near Inverness, where he continued a totally secular life. His influence during those years was unhelpful to the kingdom of God, although he was always a kind and generous man. None of his friends cared anything for God, but he hated foul conversation. He said, "I never remained in the same room as a man who would encourage ungodliness and blasphemy." Yet what inconsistency he displayed, for on the Lord's Day he and his friends would ride off hunting, going past revived churches full of worshippers or Christian families walking to and from their meeting places. He would spend Sundays fishing for salmon. This is how he described this period of his life:

For forty-four years of my life, my object was to pass time pleasantly; so long as the day was spent agreeably I was satisfied. During those years, whatever harm I may have done, I do not believe I ever did any real good to a human being. From 1835 until 1854, with the exception of about three years, the greater part of my time was spent in Scotland, where I rented moors and fisheries. My greatest idea of pleasure was to shoot grouse and catch salmon.

I believe, at the different shooting quarters I rented, I treated the poor with an average liberality, contributing to the different collections what I fancied would be expected, with an odd five shillings when an old woman lost her cow. What I considered my great act of kindness to the people, and that for which I expected them to be most thankful, was to give them, at the end of the shooting season, a dance and supper....

To this feast and party of mine all the tenants in the neighbourhood, with their wives and their daughters, were invited; as also the gamekeepers, the gillies, the shopkeepers of the village, my own servants, and all and sundry, and every acquaintance that any of them liked to bring. They were very merry. Late in the evening perhaps some were very noisy; and early in the morning I have seen some very tipsy. It would be daylight, perhaps, when a number of both sexes, would give me three cheers, and thank me for my kindness, and cry, "God bless you," and start on their ways home.

They thanked me for my kindness; but was it kindness? They cried, "God bless me!" but could either they or I expect God's blessing on such a meeting? It is true it was intended kindly, and was a return for kindness to those who had taken care of my shootings and preserved my game, and I knew no better way of saying, "I am much obliged to you." Yet again I ask, "Was it kindness?" In the end of 1854 it pleased God to bring home with power to my heart, that it would profit me nothing if I gained the whole world and lost my own soul.