A creed wide enough

New South Wales, Brisbane, United Kingdom
1913–1914

When Lydia Brown farewelled her husband on his way to General Conference in Brisbane in early winter 1913 she may have hoped that he would return with fewer responsibilities and more time to spend at home. She knew that George loved to be with the grandchildren, in deep conversation with Amy’s boys who were now young men, or surrounded by the little ones as he told them stories by the family fireside. His study and museum gave him so much pleasure as he showed a succession of interested guests through its treasures. But Lydia was a realist. His enthusiasm for these grand gatherings was undiminished by his seventy-eight years and she knew that he carried notes in the hope of having opportunities to speak on issues of mission or on anything at all. He had been working with his colleagues in the Board of Missions to prepare a major Development Plan for missions and was eager to be part of the debates about new possibilities.

Any thoughts of a quiet retirement together evaporated a few days later. George Brown sent a message to Lydia from Brisbane with startling news. He would be leaving for London soon after he returned from Brisbane; he had been chosen to represent the Methodist Church in Australasia at the Centenary celebrations of the Methodist Missionary Society around the world, in October 1913. Not only that, but on the first evening of General Conference, in the Albert Street Methodist Church in Brisbane, he had been elected to the role of President General for the next three years! This was the highest honour for any Methodist across Australasia. Later, when she heard the full story, she knew that his election had been by the narrowest of margins. Of the seven nominees, five received almost no votes while Brown and the Reverend J.E. Carruthers received fifty-two and fifty-nine votes respectively. A second vote was taken and this time the old man with the white whiskers found himself with a bare sixty-one votes against fifty-nine for the younger Carruthers. It was hardly a landslide, but after Carruthers had been overwhelmingly elected as Conference Secretary, the two men found themselves side by side on the official platform with the care of the Conference before them.1 It was said, later, that the election of George Brown to the chair of President General was a ‘happy omen’ and ‘most fitting and timely’ because so much of the business of that Conference related to issues of mission.2 Even so, both Brown and his wife knew well that it could easily have been otherwise and that the burdens and blessings of the role had now been laid on his shoulders whether they liked it or not.

1 Minute Book, Wesleyan Methodist Church General Conference, 1890–1913, ML Methodist Church 581, 12 June 1913.
Figure 26. Rev. Dr. George Brown 1905.

Many of the debates during that 1913 General Conference were on issues close to Brown’s heart. The Board of Missions had prepared a very courageous Development Plan for the period from 1914 to 1917 and the mood of the gathering was so optimistic that it was passed with no voice of dissent. There were plans for wider membership of the Board of Missions, the appointment of three additional Organising Secretaries to work across the country and a large increase in mission staff and resources. Even the challenge to the wider church to increase revenue by 100 per cent over the next five years was not opposed. They were ready to take up a new region for mission in India as well as improving their pre-service preparation and education for mission staff. A new General Secretary, the Reverend John G. Wheen, was appointed to follow Benjamin Danks on his retirement. A warm letter was to be sent to their brethren in the Methodist Episcopal Church in Germany with great appreciation for the excellent men who had been sent, and would be sent in future, to work beside the Australians in the German colonies of Neu Pommern/New Britain and Samoa, ‘assuring the German church of the Christian affection and high esteem which the General Conference cherishes towards them and their work.’

The sad separation of the Church in Tonga, which had been a cause of pain for over twenty-five years, was still raw but was showing some signs of a possible healing and reunion. Brown was anxious that they be given all possible encouragement by the Methodists in Australia and consented to be a member of yet another committee willing to offer help toward reconciliation. The Conference sent a message to both the Free Church of Tonga and the Wesleyan Church of Tonga, assuring them of prayer for their future reunion, saying that ‘should they decide to [be reconciled], the Conference will rejoice with exceeding joy, and will heartily welcome the Ministers, Members and Adherents of both churches to fellowship and brotherhood of the Australian Church.’

From his elevated seat in the President-General’s chair, as the Conference finally came close to an end, Brown had a perfect opportunity to tell his church community what he had learned over a lifetime. He may have sometimes regretted that he had been given no formal training in theology but he knew what he believed and he was clear on what drove him to do what he did. He had written detailed notes and spoke from them. He told the gathering, ‘I never attempt to apologise for foreign mission work or defend it either on the grounds of expediency, or only on the grounds of successes that have been achieved. We have the divine command, and the test of love is our obedience to it.’

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3 Minute Book, Wesleyan Methodist Church General Conference, 1890–1913, 12 June 1913.
4 Ibid.
5 Brown, Speech notes, Methodist General Conference, Brisbane, 1913, Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society Correspondence and Papers, ML CY 1365.
The Fatherhood of God, the brotherhood of all men, the capacity of all men to receive the truths of the gospel and to manifest those truths in their lives and in their characters. Christ himself based his command on the great truth of the divine fatherhood and our common brotherhood. I do not attempt to expound these fundamental truths except to say that in my intercourse with savage peoples I have always found that the declaration that One is our Father, even God, and that we are all members of His family, is the Great Truth which is the surest way to commend the gospel to them. The Fatherhood of God, the redemption of the world by Christ, the presence and work of the Holy Spirit and the fact that we all, black, brown and white are the children of God is a creed wide enough for all of the peoples to whom we go and wide enough for all of us here at home.6

He told them that he believed in ‘the capacity of all men everywhere to receive the gospel, to assimilate its truths and to manifest in their lives its power to regenerate and change their entire nature and character.’7 His audience chuckled when he suggested some of the definitions of ‘man’—‘man is an animal which eats cooked food’ or ‘an animal which shaves’—but were silent when he said that he liked best John Wesley’s definition: ‘Man is a creature capable of God.’8 He had witnessed, he said, ‘the compelling power of love,’ a love that transformed people and societies. Widows were no longer strangled. Live infants were no longer buried with their dead mothers. Shipwrecked strangers were no longer clubbed and eaten. Men no longer sailed in war canoes to gather the heads of their neighbours. Men could travel and women could work in their gardens in peace and security. Generosity replaced greed and the peacemaker replaced the armed warrior. These were not simply changes forced on unwilling communities by forceful authority but deep changes in thought, attitude and character as men and women became new creatures under the influence of the Christian gospel.

To this point in his address he was on secure ground, material he had spoken many times in the past. But now his notes faltered. At the bottom of the page, after the thoughtful notes on familiar themes, was a scribbled afterthought. He had written ‘to do with Australia, the claims of Aborigines’. The Australian Aborigines? In all his years of commitment to the work of mission it seemed that his face had always been turned out to sea, looking toward the islands in the far sunrise. Rarely had he encountered Aboriginal people and though he was seen as an authority on the peoples of the Pacific he knew almost nothing

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6 Brown, Speech notes, Methodist General Conference, Brisbane, 1913, Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society Correspondence and Papers.
7 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
about the hidden people of the inland and the far north of the country. It came as a painful jolt as he realised that other people were not blind to the first people of the country. Others were familiar with stories of violence and abuse against Aboriginal people at the hands of those who coveted their country, others saw human need, and others recognised their common humanity. It must have stung him when, near the end of Conference, a plea was made for Christian ministry among the Aboriginal people of the Northern Territory. The grand Development Plan presented by the Board of Mission had not even mentioned such an enterprise, although it was true that the Reverend Samuel B. Fellows, one time missionary in British New Guinea and now a minister in Western Australia, had raised the question at the Annual Meeting of the Board early in the year.9 But now, at the last minute when the meetings of Conference were almost finished, voices were being raised pointing out that the Methodist Church had no agent anywhere in this work, that ‘Her interest in the aborigines [sic] appears to have evaporated … it is her reproach that she has not cast a pitying eye nor stretched a helping hand towards the poor Australian heathen…. Many hearts have been troubled over this neglect over the past few years.’10

Words like ‘inexcusable neglect’ and ‘a matter of urgency’ were spoken. It was pointed out that an Interdenominational Committee meeting in Victoria was recommending that the churches take up the challenge in the Northern Territory, even suggesting distinct spheres of influence. If such a work were taken up by the churches on the latest modern lines, it was said that the Government was interested in supporting it. To his chagrin, George Brown saw that, unlike his concern for the people of the Pacific islands, he had never had a strong sense of call to offer Christian witness or service to the first people of the land. His back had been turned to them. He could think of excuses, but at that moment any excuse would sound hollow. If indeed he truly believed that all people were the children of God, and that this was a ‘creed wide enough’ to include everyone, he could no longer ignore the Aboriginal peoples of the land.

Before the members of Conference dispersed to return to their various States, an additional Minute was written into the vast leather-bound Minute Book, following the final statement that they would meet again in Melbourne in May 1917. Under the heading of Supplementary Agenda, it stated that ‘the General Conference commence a Methodist Mission among the Aborigines of the Northern Territory,’ accepting the sphere proposed by the Interdenominational committee in Victoria and passing responsibility to the Board of Mission to organise and find funds for this new enterprise.11 Brown was not the only one

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9 Minutes, Annual Meeting of Methodist Board of Missions, February 1913.
11 Minute Book, Wesleyan Methodist Church General Conference, 1890–1913, 12 June 1913.
who left the Conference still uncertain quite what this decision would mean in practice. An announcement about the new task in the church journal said, ‘Just what this will mean in the way of a call for additional funds and workers, we cannot say at present. But we doubt not that both will be forthcoming when the church has been told what is needed.’\(^{12}\) It was not long before Brown was invited to join the new Australian Association for the Protection of Native Races, just formed in 1913,\(^{13}\) to serve as vice-president, but it is unlikely that he was able to give it any time that year. His mind was already preparing for another voyage.

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There were only a few weeks between Brown’s return from Brisbane and his departure for London, with Monica as companion. At the July meeting of the Board of Missions Brown’s friends recorded their congratulations on his elevation to the role of President General and their hope that ‘during the whole term of his Presidency he may be given strength of body and vigour of mind for the onerous duties of that high office.’\(^{14}\) A brief record was made of the instruction from General Conference: ‘A mission to the Australian Aborigines is to be commenced. A definite sphere is suggested. A special appeal is authorised.’\(^{15}\) It was in the Minutes, but it would be months before there would be any sign of further action.

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The first time George Brown had sailed to London more than sixty years earlier, he had been Geo. Brown, runaway youth from the north; a lad with limited education and a history of unfortunate attempts at employment, hiding from the agents his father had sent to drag him home in disgrace. Now he was to sail for London again and his father would not have recognised him. This time he was the Reverend Dr. George Brown, Fellow of Royal Geographical Society, Corresponding Member of the Zoological Society, farewelled and honoured by the Governor of New South Wales and the Governor-General, the Anglican Primate, the Presbyterian Moderator General, the President of the Congregational Union in Australia and New Zealand, Professors of the University of Sydney and leaders of his own Methodist Church.\(^ {16}\) On the day he sailed, 28 July 1913, he wrote a message for the Methodists across Australia. He urged them to take seriously the demands of the new Development Plan for the expansion of mission work and asked for prayer that

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12 *Australasian Methodist Missionary Review*, 4 August 1913.
14 Minutes of Methodist Missions Board, Feb 1913–Nov 1917, 15 July 1913, ML MOM 205 CY3307.
15 Ibid.
the whole church may be possessed by a spirit of consecrated generosity and sustained zeal ... that perfect harmony may prevail among us ... that [the Board of Missions] may be granted wisdom to discern and grace to do the will of God ... that people may be prompted to give freely as God may prosper them ... that among our young men and women there may be found many with the right spirit and with needed qualifications and gifts to go forth in the all-prevailing Name as ambassadors of Jesus Christ.17

It was a triumphant return to the land of his birth. He had walked the streets of London as a young migrant ready to sail to the far side of the earth in 1855 and returned there in 1886 and again in 1908 with stories of regions so obscure to the people of British Methodism that they had trouble finding them on the map. Now, joining the international gathering of Methodists to celebrate the centenary of their missionary enterprise in October 1913, he was the legendary George Brown, pioneer, explorer, storyteller and hero. When he was introduced to the packed audience in the Albert Hall, the whole assembly rose to their feet to applaud and honour ‘the veteran from the antipodes.’18 He was invited to speak at churches across the land, with a demanding program of travel. A writer enthused,

Mr Brown will rank with Livingstone, Moffat, Chalmers and Hannington as a great pioneer missionary and Christian explorer, as an enlightener of dark lands, an opener of closed ports, a herald of civilisation, and a notable promoter of trade and commerce.... [Island inhabitants have been] transformed from naked savages to peaceable and decent folks.19

It was sobering to have his name linked with such men—missionaries whose lives had ended violently in Africa and in New Guinea. He too might easily have died violently on a number of occasions but, somehow, he had survived to old age and honour. It pleased him to have the Pacific and its peoples brought before the gaze of the public. Over the years, other regions of Methodist missionary endeavour had been much better known, the vast populations of India and China, the regions of Africa and the islands of the West Indies; even the missionary maps had shown only one side of the planet with perhaps a sliver of coastline to suggest Australia but no sign of the islands across the expanse of the Pacific Ocean. The places and people closest to Brown’s heart had been invisible to audiences in Great Britain. Perhaps, however, Brown was not so happy to be seen as chiefly a person who promoted trade and ‘civilisation’. Certainly he had a strong sense of being part of a great colonial British Empire,

17 Australasian Methodist Missionary Review, 4 August 1913.
18 Brown, Letter, 3 October 1913, in the Australasian Methodist Missionary Review, 4 December 1913.
and understood the historic role of missionaries in many of the colonies. Yet he would have warmed to one of the major addresses of the Centenary celebrations where a speaker declared that ‘tonight all our Imperial and racial enthusiasm is lost in the higher patriotism of the Kingdom of Heaven.’

To the relief of Monica Brown, who had the task of looking after her father’s health and comfort, Brown maintained his energy over the months in England, thriving on the attention and stimulation, travelling, meeting church leaders and scientists, family members and politicians. It was a great delight to him to be invited to chair a meeting of the General Committee of the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society, and to sit with men at the very heart of the web of Methodist missions spun around the world. Far from the ordinary realities of tropical storm and mosquitoes, sunburn and frustration, isolation and irritation, his admirers wove a cloak of heroics over the shape of his life. Perhaps he had a private chuckle, remembering those men long ago in Auckland who had feared that he was too ‘ladylike’ to survive the rigours of a missionary life, when he learned that someone wanted to write about him for the Boys’ Own Annual. As the bleak northern winter began to soften to spring, George Brown and his daughter Monica prepared to sail for home. There was a brief temptation to stay on longer. If he were willing to delay his departure until the annual conferring of degrees at Oxford University, two men from the world of the aristocracy, politics and the sciences were eager to arrange for him to be awarded an honorary doctorate from Oxford. It was a flattering invitation but, although he had always called England ‘Home’, true home was with Lydia and his family.

It would have been impossible for anyone with a nose for the whiff of political unease and the aroma of approaching conflict to miss the signs in Europe and Great Britain early in 1914. George Brown spent time with men in high places and was aware of a growing anxiety. He and Monica sailed from England for Sydney on 14 March 1914. He would not return.

In January 1914, Lydia stood on the deck of the new mission ketch, just launched in Sydney Harbour. After the Litia came to grief on the reef the previous year, Lydia Brown had assumed that her name would now disappear from the islands. The Board thought otherwise, and when a new ketch was commissioned they

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20 Sir George Smith, President of the Wesleyan Laymen’s Missionary Movement, Address given at Albert Hall, London at Centenary Meeting, October 1913, in the Australasian Methodist Missionary Review, 4 December 1913.
21 Australasian Methodist Missionary Review, 4 April 1914.
22 Letter of request to Brown from the editor of Boys’ Own Annual, 6 November 1913, Brown, Correspondence, 1908–1916, ML MSS 263/1 CY 3405.
23 Letter from Viscount Bryce to Sir S.J. Way expressing disappointment that Brown was unwilling to delay departure in order to receive honorary degree from Oxford, 4 March 1914, Brown, Correspondence, 1908–1916.
announced that this too would be called the *Litia*,\(^{24}\) and would serve the islands of New Britain, New Ireland and the Duke of York Islands, sailing in those waters that had once been so familiar to her and her family.\(^{25}\) Standing with the crowd on deck, Lydia looked around her at the masts and listened to the clatter of ropes in the wind. She had no desire to sail in her. Her days of venturing across endless ocean in very small ships were behind her, and she was thankful. Even so, she prayed for those who would trust themselves to the care of the *Litia*, and those who would look hopefully for her coming with news, supplies and friends to their lonely stations.

News of the Board of Missions came to the Brown household even while her husband was away. Despite the optimism about the expansion of their mission work at General Conference, and the enthusiastic response to their ambitious Development Plan, the Board was struggling. Words were not being matched by practical action. Funds were coming in too slowly to support the existing work, let alone anything new. Pressure of new demands, a large number of retirements and resignations, a cyclone in Fiji, some difficult discipline problems combined with congregations delaying their contributions all had the new General Secretary, John Wheen, very worried indeed. He sent out urgent appeals. The situation was so dire that some sixteen laymen, members of the Board, undertook to give their personal guarantee to the bank for £12,000, but that was only a temporary solution. Negotiations with the Methodist Episcopal Church in Germany were promising, with more men arriving to serve in the New Britain District and the expectation of financial help from Germany, but that would not help them to fulfil their commitment to begin new work in North Australia. Month after month passed by and action for work among the Aboriginal communities was repeatedly postponed.

A cartoon in the monthly *Australasian Methodist Missionary Review* was unintentionally prophetic. It depicted several little vessels setting out across the sea toward billowing black clouds, while a beam from a lighthouse shone to light their way. The caption spoke of mission staff setting off to bring light to dark places with the question: ‘1914–1918????’\(^{26}\) An analogy used by Wheen, as he urged Methodist congregations to greater generosity, was also timely. In the streets of Sydney he had recently witnessed a contingent of 18,000 young military trainees marching in all their confidence and pride. Something had blocked the way ahead and the whole mass of men was forced to mark time, going nowhere despite their strength and numbers. Wheen suggested that the

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24 Minutes of Wesleyan Methodist Missions Board, Feb 1913–Nov 1917, 3 October 1913.
26 Ibid., 4 July 1913.
George Brown and his daughter returned to Sydney to observe what appeared to be a period of stability and progress. A good working agreement had been reached with the Methodist Episcopal Church in Germany. New young men were arriving from Germany with their brides as well as single women workers.28 Young Australian couples were also arriving and there was a sense of fresh optimism.29 Heinrich and Johanna Fellmann had been given permission to move to Sydney in 1913, after fifteen years in the islands, and Heinrich was busily working on a revision of Rickard’s translation of the New Testament into the Tolai language.30 By early 1914 he had moved on to a translation of the Old Testament and had

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27 Ibid., 4 March 1914.  
28 German Methodist staff during 1913–14 included clergy H. Fellmann, H. Wenzel, K. Wenzel, E. Boettcher, K. Schmidt and A. Pratsch and their wives, with single women Sisters Amelia and Annah. Pratsch was due to leave Europe in April 1914.  
29 Australian mission staff included clergy W.H. Cox (Chairman), T.B. Lancaster, W. Stocks, J. Margetts and their wives, sisters Kendrick, Ricketts, McKee and McInnes, laymen Broom and Tunnicliff.  
30 Minutes of Methodist Missions Board, Feb 1913–Nov 1917, February 1913.
been given an extension of his time in Sydney for this work.\textsuperscript{31} A fruit of the great World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh in 1910 was a new zeal and energy in Germany for remote missionary enterprises. Major donations for the work in Neu Pommern could be expected soon from both imperial government and private sources. In the current favourable circumstances, it was reported by a German source that the Methodist Missionary Society in Australia ‘will be sure to find the wholehearted support of the German Government and public.’\textsuperscript{32}

Lydia Brown stared at the images in the magazine. Although the photographs were in black and white she could see the colours in her mind and smell the aromas of toasted coconut and frangipani. A wedding party on Easter Monday 1914, caught in the breeze on the deck of the \textit{Litia} bright with bunting, on the way across the channel from the Duke of York Islands to New Britain; friends wait with music and feasting and for Cox to perform the marriage ceremony.\textsuperscript{33} Other images showed large groups of young mission staff, Fijian, German and Australian men and women.\textsuperscript{34} It was hard to believe that this was the same place where she once had lived. Was this the region of memory where she shed tears of grief, and waited endlessly for her man to come home, and comforted the sick and dying, and cooked dinner for explorers, traders and naval officers, and fed and cleansed the sores of foreign refugees, and walked with her husband through jungle leaves of monstrous dimensions, and talked with cannibals, and buried her children? Her name and his were there still, in ship and college, but the world she remembered had been changed into groomed gardens and ordered coconut and cocoa bean plantations, grand houses, a colonial headquarters complete with police and militia, courts of law and the whole edifice of island government and the intricacies of colonial social life. She was glad that these young people could begin their marriages and their work in a place that seemed safe and tamed. Although she knew she would never go back, she was glad that she had seen it when she did, raw and untamed though it was.

At a meeting of the Board of Missions in July 1914, they honoured and farewelled Sir William Macgregor. Macgregor was leaving Australia after long service as Governor of Queensland and formerly Governor of British New Guinea. George Brown was in the chair and recalled the significance of Macgregor’s invitation to the Methodists back in 1890 to begin work in the eastern islands of British New Guinea. Remarkable changes had taken place since that time. Macgregor told them that he had believed the people of Dobu and Normanby Island were among the wildest on the face of the earth and recalled his anxiety for the safety

\textsuperscript{31} Australasian Methodist Missionary Review, 4 February 1914.
\textsuperscript{33} Wedding of Mr. F. Broom and Miss Cherrie, in Australasian Methodist Missionary Review, 4 August 1914.
\textsuperscript{34} The Australasian Methodist Missionary Review, 4 February 1914.
of the pioneer party of Methodists. It was encouraging for Brown and his friends to hear Macgregor’s sincere admiration for the work of the Methodist missions, both in Fiji and in British New Guinea. These days they could report some 25,000 people attending worship and fifty-seven local men trained as village pastors in what had been a violent community. Macgregor turned to Brown. He hoped, he said, that they would long have the ‘unique experience and the great wisdom of his friend Dr Brown, on whose counsels they could place perfect reliance. No man had gone through the fire in the way Dr Brown had done.’

Around the room there were murmurs of ‘Hear, hear!’

On 28 June 1914, two weeks before the Board met to bask in praise for the coming of peace to a warlike society, on the far side of the planet an Archduke and his wife had been assassinated—the tinder to set wildfires ablaze across civilised Europe. Ancient tribal groups had already begun to mass their warriors, call on their traditional allies and rattle their weapons. The noise would soon be heard in Australia and the Pacific islands.

At the beginning of August 1914, in New Britain, Australian Methodist W.H. Cox gave a gift to Dr. Hahl, Governor, as he prepared to leave for Germany, in appreciation for ‘his friendly and helpful attitude toward the Mission and its work.’ It was a copy of the new translation of the New Testament prepared by Heinrich Fellmann, in the Tolai language of New Britain. In Sydney the Board of Missions was delighted to receive a bank draft from Germany for £1,478/15/8, a gift as promised by Bishop Nuelsen of the German Methodist Episcopal Church through the Kaiser’s Jubilee Fund.

On 5 August 1914 the news broke. Australia, through her ties with Great Britain was at war with Germany.

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35 Sydney Morning Herald, 17 July 1914; Australasian Methodist Missionary Review, 4 August 1914.
36 Ibid.
37 Ibid.
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid., 5 October 1914.