

22. 'Beloved chief and father'

New South Wales, New Zealand, Fiji, Tonga, Samoa, Queensland 1914–1917

Within days of the news that the Australian Federal Government would mobilise in support of Britain, Lydia wrote to her German friend Johanna Fellmann. Johanna and Heinrich Fellmann were now living in Sydney while Heinrich worked on translation and their older children were living with family members in Germany. Lydia wrote, 'My dear Mrs Fellmann, I cannot tell you how much we all feel for you and Mr Fellmann in the present very trying time and what anxiety you must be feeling for your dear children and friends far away in Germany.' She continued,

I have been feeling so miserable myself at this sudden breaking out of war and every day the news seems to get worse and worse. We must just go to our Heavenly Father in prayer and trust in Him that He may control and rule all events.... It is very sad indeed to hear of such terrible loss of life and this modern warfare is so very cruel. Monica saw Mr Fellmann this afternoon and she did feel so sorry for him when he seemed so broken-hearted, but may God comfort you both in this sore affliction.... It must be so hard for you when all your friends are in the midst of it all in Germany. How is your dear Mother and your dear boys?... I thought I would like to write you a few lines of sympathy and love ... in which Dr Brown and the girls join.¹

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George Brown, as President-General of the Methodist Church in Australia, had to consider how to be a Christian leader in a time of national turmoil. He was also very concerned for the combined Australian and German missionary community in New Britain District. News of atrocities in Belgium was filtering through to Australia and young Australian men were already enlisting in high excitement, among them their grandson, twenty-one-year-old teacher Leslie Dinning. His grandfather was proud of his 'fine imperial attitude' as he began his training.

1 Lydia Brown to Johanna Fellmann, 7 August 1914, private collection.

Long before the first troops from Australia were anywhere near the scenes of battle in Europe, the war had come suddenly and astonishingly to the Pacific. The Board of Missions was staggered to learn that the first Australian military action of the war had taken place not in distant Europe but in the region they knew as New Britain District. Brown had argued vigorously with W.H. Cox against handing over the District of New Britain/Neu Pommern to the German Church, even though it was a German colony. By September 1914, the Board learned that Neu Pommern had been wrested away from the control of the German colonial authority and was now in hands of an Australian military force. Because there was a superior German wireless installation near Rabaul, as part of a chain providing rapid communication from Berlin to the German fleet in the Pacific, an Australian force was deployed to the area. In a swift action, six Australian ships and two submarines entered Simpson Harbour at Rabaul on 11 September 1914 and, after a brief but violent action, the British flag was hoisted, the Australians had declared a military occupation and, by 21 September the Terms of Capitulation had been signed by German Governor Haber. It was agreed that the German colonial officials would remain at their posts under the military occupation force.² In Samoa, the German Governor had surrendered to British naval ships, without violence, by 29 August.³ The series of detailed maps of some of their missionary regions, recently commissioned by the Board of Missions for distribution to their supporters, were going to be out-of-date before they were even published.⁴

For weeks there was no further news from New Britain. The men of the Board of Missions anxiously tried to imagine what was happening. All the news of war was not only horrifying but unbelievable. George Brown had lived among warring tribes for most of his lifetime; Samoan warriors bearing severed heads, refugees from battle in his own kitchen, the slingshots and axes of angry men of New Britain, the rows of skulls from tribal conflicts in British New Guinea, the elegant enmity of fine war canoes in the Solomon Islands, the Fijian war clubs in his museum. But this was different. As one of their group wrote: 'The dogs of war have been let loose and the great Christian nations of Europe are being deluged with human blood. A few months ago it seemed impossible.'⁵ What made it so shocking was that this conflict in Europe was between nations who claimed to be Christian. The Board had watched the growing understanding between British, Australian and German co-workers in New Britain and believed that it was a sign that they saw themselves as brothers and sisters in Christ. Now everything seemed shaken. In rejection of the recent public outcry against all

2 S.S. Mackenzie, *The Australians at Rabaul. The Capture and Administration of the German Possessions in the Southern Pacific*, in *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914–1918*, 12 volumes, vol. x, St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press [1921–1942], 10th edition, 1941, pp. 120–26.

3 *Australasian Methodist Missionary Review*, 5 October 1914.

4 *Ibid.*, 4 December 1914.

5 *Ibid.*, 5 October 1914.

things German, the Board published a wedding photograph of new missionary, the Reverend K.A. Wenzel and his bride Gertrude with a background of palms and the comment that the German staff in New Britain were, 'greatly beloved by their Australian comrades, and whatever changes may come in the future as the result of international complications, we shall always rejoice that German Methodism and Australian Methodism have been associated in this work.'⁶

September 1914 was a month of mixed emotions. George Brown had the honour of opening the grand new Methodist Church on Tryon Road, Lindfield, in peaceful Sydney. They farewelled their grandson Leslie Dinning as he sailed for Europe with the Expeditionary Force and, to their relief, they had news from New Britain. Despite 'a good deal of inconvenience' as a result of the sudden overturning of the German regime, the mission staff was safe and well. They were thankful that 'none of the Missionaries have been called upon to take any active part in the military operations on either side.'⁷

If they thought that the Methodist missionary community could go on with their work undisturbed, they were wrong. Sometime after the event, news of a very disturbing incident reached Brown. The Methodist Chairman W.H. Cox had gone in the *Litia* from the Duke of York Islands to visit the Wenzels on New Ireland. Walking through the German township of Namatanai on his way to the mission, he was seen by a group of disgruntled German residents who were feeling very antagonistic toward missionaries, particularly British missionaries. They had been drinking heavily and brooding over rumours that Cox was a spy. Late that night, fuelled by alcohol and rage, this group approached the mission house. The German missionary, K.A. Wenzel, was lured away from the house on a false errand. Two armed men burst into the house where Cox was drinking tea with Mrs. Wenzel. Cox was dragged outside at pistol point and hauled down the steps from the verandah where three other drunken men were waiting. Gertrude Wenzel, appalled at the actions of her countrymen, demanded to know what they intended to do, and was ordered back into the house. She ran out through the night to search for her husband. By the time the young couple arrived back at their house, the assailants were fleeing, leaving Cox severely bruised after being struck some thirty strokes with a cane. Shaken and distressed, Cox and the Wenzels set out on a nightmare journey through the darkness to try to walk across the island to the safety of the *Litia*, becoming lost on the way. When they finally reached safety, Cox chose to go on immediately to report the assault to Australian Administrator Colonel William Holmes in Rabaul.⁸ The matter did not stop there. The entire community, both Australian and German, in the

6 Ibid., Neville Threlfall, *Mangroves, Coconuts and Frangipani: The Story of Rabaul*, Rabaul Historical Society, East New Britain Province, Papua New Guinea in collaboration with Neville Threlfall, 2012.

7 Ibid., 4 November 1914. Letters from W.H. Cox, 27 Sept 1914, and K. Schmidt, 22 Sept 1914.

8 Mackenzie, *The Australians at Rabaul*, pp. 120–26; *Australasian Methodist Missionary Review*, 4 December 1914.

area of New Britain was shocked, dismayed that the conduct of a few drunken individuals could bring such discredit on their neighbours. Colonel Holmes sent a detachment of men to arrest the attackers and in due course ordered a 'short, sharp, and exemplary punishment.'⁹ German male residents were commanded to be present to witness the humiliation of the perpetrators with an extended caning in a public square, but most were given permission to leave after Colonel Holmes made a speech justifying his actions. The German residents were highly offended by this event and experienced colonial administrators withdrew from their roles as advisors to the Australians on local affairs.¹⁰

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War or no war, George Brown carried the responsibilities of President General and that meant more travel. When invitations came for him to be present at the Methodist Conference in New Zealand in 1915, it gave him an opportunity of travel to some of the regions that had been important to him over the years. This time Lizzie Brown and his son-in-law Percy Slade travelled with him. They left for Auckland, New Zealand on 19 February 1915. Following the Conference, they spent six weeks touring and speaking in churches around the North and South Islands. In Auckland, so far from the sound of gunfire and battle chaos, they first heard confused news of a distant battle. On a rocky hillside in Turkey overlooking the narrow strait called the Dardanelles his grandson Leslie lay wounded but would live. Perhaps it was the first time Brown had heard the name Gallipoli.

Brown must have known that this could be his last chance to visit places and people who had been important to him. At seventy-nine his physical strength was beginning to diminish even though his fiercely independent spirit drove him on. From New Zealand they sailed to Fiji for one day, where he visited the recently relocated Methodist educational complex at Davuilevu.¹¹ Two days later they reached Tonga where the Reverend Rodger Page and his wife Hannah welcomed them. Twenty years had passed since Brown had last been in Tonga. There were still two separate Churches—the Free Church and the Wesleyan Church—but he wrote, 'I could not, of course, help contrasting the peace and harmony which now prevails in Tonga with the disturbed conditions which existed here some twenty years ago, and I am very glad indeed that I was permitted to witness the great change.'¹²

9 Ibid.

10 Threlfall, Neville, *Mangroves, Coconuts and Frangipani: The Story of Rabaul*, Rabaul Historical Society, East New Britain Province, Papua New Guinea in collaboration with Neville Threlfall, 2012, pp.132–33.

11 A. Harold Wood, *Overseas Missions of the Australian Methodist Church, Vol. 11, Fiji*, Melbourne: Aldersgate Press, 1978, pp. 293–96.

12 *Australasian Methodist Missionary Review*, 4 August 1915.

For the first time in twenty years, Brown met with the President of the Free Church, J.B. Watkin. The two old men shared many painful memories of things done and words said that were regrettable. Brown wrote home, 'We both agreed that there had been great mistakes made by both parties, and that I am sure is a good step towards reunion.'¹³ When Brown was invited to preach in the central church on Mount Zion to a crowded congregation he was hesitant about his memory of the Tongan language, but confident in his message. He spoke from Romans 10:12 'For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile – the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him.'¹⁴ After conversations with key Tongan leaders he concluded that a reunion of the Churches could be a possibility in the near future. However it would be another decade before a partial reunion would be effected, and then only with difficulty.¹⁵

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On the far side of the world men were locked in battles in France and Flanders and in the unforgiving region of Gallipoli. In the Pacific, George Brown travelled on, landing in Samoa on 9 June 1915. As President General, Brown was present for the inauguration of the new Constitution for that District. There was an emotional welcome for 'Misi Palauni'. The Samoan language, so deeply embedded in memory, came back and he amazed newer mission staff with his idiomatic fluency. With the support of Lizzie Brown, on her first visit to Samoa since she left there as a twelve-year-old girl, and Percy Slade, 'the grand old man of the South Seas' set out on a demanding journey around Savai'i and Upolu. They travelled from village to village; night journeys by whale boat, by horse and trap, on foot, carried in a special chair and even twenty kilometres on horseback.¹⁶ He had to admit to being exhausted, sunburned and aching at the end of each day. A violent storm chased them back across the water to Apia. It was understandable if he was weary; during three weeks in Samoa he had travelled at least 500 kilometres, preached fluently in a language he had rarely used in forty years, addressed nearly thirty meetings great and small, met with chiefs and children, been offered generous feasts and shaken hands with endless queues of well-wishers. When the people gathered for a last farewell service the emotion was intense. It was, he wrote, 'the greatest gathering I have ever seen in Samoa.... I have never ceased to love them, and I am very thankful that they still remember with affection their old Missionary.'¹⁷

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 Wood, *Overseas Missions of the Australian Methodist Church Vol. 1, Tonga and Samoa*, pp. 216–25.

16 Rev. E.J. Neil's account of Brown's visit, in the *Australasian Methodist Missionary Review*, 4 September 1915.

17 *Australasian Methodist Missionary Review*, 4 October 1915.

A witness wrote, 'The memory of our last look upon our beloved father in Israel, as he waved a last adieu, will ever remain.... His courageous work, his great sacrifice, his kindly advice, his paternal love.... Farewell, beloved chief and father, and may God bless thee as thou hast blessed us.'¹⁸ Old men wept as they said goodbye. George Brown sailed from Samoa on 3 July 1915, his own 'eyes dimmed with tears of gratitude and affection.' They all understood that he would never return.¹⁹

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The protective wall that had sheltered them while they travelled through the islands was ruptured when they arrived back in Sydney in July 1915. The war in Europe, which had seemed so remote from the perspective of a welcome feast in a Samoan village was suddenly very near and very horrifying. Lydia reported anxiously that young men from the congregations at Gordon and Lindfield had enlisted. She and her daughters joined other women every week to pray for their boys and for peace. Johanna Fellmann had a new baby, Liselotte, born in Bondi, Sydney in April 1915, but she and Heinrich were now seen as enemy aliens. Australian men were still on the barren killing cliffs of Gallipoli, trapped in a deadlock that seemed to go on and on, while others fought in the mud of France. The Brown's grandson Leslie was recovering from his wounds. Terrible lists of the dead and wounded appeared in the papers, even though journalists tried to give the impression that the Allies were triumphing. Their church at home was planning to celebrate the centenary of Methodism in Australia, the arrival of the Reverend Samuel Leigh in Sydney in August 1815,²⁰ and spoke optimistically about plans for new work in North Australia. Yet it seemed hard to be hopeful and feel like celebrating anything while so many men were in grave danger and dying in Europe. In a letter to a friend in England early in the war, Brown had written,

We can think or speak of nothing but the war these days ... there will, I fear, be a fearful sacrifice of life before the end of the war. The Kaiser will bitterly regret his mad folly, and there will be many alterations to be made to the map of Europe and other maps when peace is established.... We are all intensely loyal here and intend to stand by the dear old Motherland to the very last ditch if necessary.²¹

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18 Ibid., 4 September 1915.

19 Ibid., 4 October 1915.

20 Ibid., 5 July 1915.

21 Brown to minister in UK, 15 September 1914, Correspondence, 1908–1916, ML MSS 263/1 CY 3405.

Not long after his return from Samoa, George Brown began to consider arranging his affairs. Perhaps he realised that his own life was finite. The Librarian at the relatively new Mitchell Library in Sydney invited him to 'carefully consider bequeathing to this Library your manuscripts and books relating to your magnificent labours in the Pacific.'²² His museum and personal library was crowded with objects that he valued, with shelves and glass cases packed with artefacts, objects suspended from the ceiling, books and documents crammed into every space. New gifts continued to arrive. He knew that sensible decisions would have to be made, even though it was an overwhelming prospect.²³ He was determined that his artefacts should remain as a single collection in his own name, but it was difficult to find a suitable, and willing, recipient. He completed and signed his will shortly before his eightieth birthday.²⁴

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It was a strange and subdued Christmas that year of 1915. Around the family dinner table when the extended family gathered at 'Kinawanua' there was the empty space where Leslie Dinning might have sat, and his brother Stanley now announced that he was enlisting.²⁵ The Australian troops on Gallipoli were silently withdrawn in the week before Christmas, leaving the empty dugouts and their dead; Leslie was on his way to the trenches of France. At the Christmas services at Gordon and Lindfield, young men were missing from their places and women asked anxiously for news. Lydia Brown wanted to gather all her children and grandchildren closely around her but knew that it was not possible. Optimism that had once thought that the war would be over by Christmas was crushed. Two Christmases had passed and there was no end to war in sight.

It was a difficult time to be a church leader. Behind every conversation, every plan, every decision lay the dark shadow of a distant war. The regular ministries of the churches were being distracted from their work. Some seemed to be hiding from the enormity of the war by retreating into their own very small worlds. Men were enlisting to fight and those who had not volunteered in the early months were under increasing pressure to join them. Recruitment drives swept up the willing and the less willing but by the middle of 1916 it was clear that the number of new recruits was falling and failing to keep pace with the frightening lists of war dead. The quota required was 32,000 each month, it was said.²⁶ Debate raged in the community and the churches about the question

22 H. Wright, Librarian at Mitchell Library to Brown, 24 August 1915, Correspondence, 1908–1916.

23 Inventory, Ethnological Collection of the Rev. Dr. George Brown, Uniting Church Archives, North Parramatta.

24 Brown's will, with his intentions for the disposition of his museum collection to Bowes Museum, Barnard Castle, UK, was signed on 17 November 1915.

25 Stanley Dinning (aged 21) enlisted on 8 February 1916 in the 1st Signal Troop.

26 The *Sydney Morning Herald* announced that 31,873 men had enlisted since December 1915, and 86,000 men had already gone to war. See 10 July 1916, 23 September 1916.

of 'Universal Service' which would oblige all able-bodied men to contribute to the national good in one way or another. With his colleague J.R. Carruthers, George Brown supported the principle of universal compulsory service for war purposes. As the year of 1916 went on, news from the front became darker and darker. Not only had thousands of young men left the farms and offices and factories of Australia to fight, but every day newspapers carried news of deaths and unimaginable horrors. In Australian cities and towns divisions deepened. Some believed strongly that every man should be forced to participate in the war effort, whether or not they liked it. Others objected equally strongly to compulsion. People shouted imprecations at each other in public meetings. Political parties, meetings of women, church denominations of different backgrounds, unionists, newspapers of various leanings, all were at odds with each other.

It was a bitter winter. George Brown accepted an invitation to visit Queensland in July, but even the milder climate could not relieve the strain of a world in torment. His daughter Monica travelled with him. He was able to preach in the Albert Street Methodist Church in Brisbane with the Governor in the congregation, attend a civic dinner to meet the Cabinet in Queensland Parliament House and speak at a number of functions, but a bout of influenza slowed him down.²⁷ To his irritation, for the first time in many years, he was forced to send his apologies for meetings he had been invited to address and cancel an intended further journey to far north Queensland and Cairns; he had to admit unwillingly that he was eighty-years old and ill with the flu.

It was a bitter summer in France. Relentless rain fell on muddy fields and in the unspeakable horrors of fouled and ripped-up earth at Pozieres, shaken by explosions, grey with corruption, Leslie Dinning wrote a letter home; he had survived so far but the dead lay all around him.²⁸ At the family home of 'Kinawanua' in Gordon, Lydia Brown cared for grandchildren and prayed for those who were far away. With other women she met each week to pray, in the new church at Lindfield. It was said that they prayed 'on behalf of Empire and nation, for statesmen and generals, soldiers and sailors,'²⁹ but Lydia was less interested in Empire than in the lads she knew well who were on the battlefield, those names that were read aloud and whose messages from the Front were shared. One comfort in the middle of strain was the news that her son Geoffrey was returning to Sydney after seven years away in Chicago and Edinburgh;³⁰

27 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 August 1916.

28 Leslie Dinning, Letter, 8 August 1916, in the *Methodist*, 9 December 1916.

29 *Methodist*, 19 August 1916.

30 *Ibid.*, 14 October 1916.

Geoffrey had been the sole surviving child who had comforted her in New Britain and she longed to see him again. Her fifty-sixth wedding anniversary had passed while her husband was away, as usual.

The gold of the wattles in August brightened the bushland but there was little to lighten the spirits. George Brown arrived home from his journey to Queensland late in August.³¹ His family observed that he was moving more slowly and was still unwell with a lingering cold. He was very troubled about the referendum on conscription which the government had called for October. The country was divided. Many Methodists expected to vote YES in favour, and the Methodist President in New South Wales, in calling for a Week of Prayer, urged the people that 'it is right that every human and material agency should be pressed into national service in the present emergency ... even, if necessary, up to the point of compulsory military service.'³² To Brown, the only possible response to the referendum was to call for compulsory military service. If not enough men were willing to volunteer to support and relieve the men already in the trenches of Europe, then they should be forced to do so. Brown was very disturbed by the lack of response to recruitment and told a friend, 'I would give anything to be in the trenches at the present moment. All my being seems to cry out for a rifle.... I simply cannot understand young men or old in this great empty land standing idly by while others are fighting and working against the common enemy.... But I am too old. I can only look on.'³³

To their grief, their grandson Leslie lay in a British military hospital seriously wounded, his lungs damaged by a gas attack and his legs paralysed.³⁴ Boys for whom the women had been praying were dead. Church groups draped their pulpits in purple and white, and hung newly inscribed Honour Rolls with the names of sons and husbands in gold but it did not relieve the pain. As the day of the referendum approached, the voices of dissent became more and more strident. Cartoon and verse, letters to the editor and editorial pen, speeches and processions, all manipulated the emotions and minds of voters, shrieking 'Vote No, or you are condemning someone's son to death' or 'Vote Yes, or you are abandoning our men to their doom'. In his role as President General of the Methodist Church across Australia, Brown believed that he needed to send out a message. But what could he say? Others were making a strong case for the Yes vote, and he personally intended to vote for compulsory military service. He brooded long and prayerfully over his message. In the end, his message appeared in church papers across the land. He wrote, 'I have neither the power nor the wish to give any declaration with regard to the political issues that are

31 Ibid., 26 August 1916.

32 Ibid., 2 September 1916.

33 C.Brunsdon Fletcher, 'George Brown and the Pacific', *The Royal Australian Historical Society: Journal and Proceedings*, Vol. VII 1921.

34 *Methodist*, 30 September, 9 December 1916.

involved.³⁵ The Methodist Church was not a political party, he said, and did not authorise anyone to speak on purely political questions. Methodist members 'are citizens and themselves determine their action on all such questions.' He added that the important thing was the

necessity for the exercise of that charity and forbearance towards those who differ from them which the faith we profess demands from us ... [any action must be] in accordance with the dictates of a conscience enlightened by the Spirit of God, and free from the governance of all lower and selfish motives.... [Voters ought not to adhere slavishly to advice of any political party] from which ever side it may be sought to be exercised ... [but to exercise] a judgement influenced only by the highest considerations and after seeking the guidance of the Great Head of the Church and of the nations whose will it should be our supreme purpose to ascertain and follow.³⁶

On the day of the referendum, there was a strange quietness as people approached the polling booths. No one could guess the outcome. The lines of Liberal versus Labor, Protestant versus Catholic, workers versus capitalists were not the only loyalty this time. Although the *Sydney Morning Herald* declared that those who voted 'No' would no doubt be 'trade unions, shirkers and mamma's pets,'³⁷ other strong emotions were at work. It took several weeks for all the votes to be counted and then it became clear. The nation had voted No.

Brown was angry. He wrote to a relative in England who was now caring for Leslie Dinning, describing local nervousness about rumours of a German raider that might be in the region, putting Australian shipping at risk. In an unguarded moment, he wrote, 'In my opinion it would be a good thing if some ship were to pitch a few shells into Sydney. It would be a good lesson to a lot of those shirkers. Australia is the most rotten country I know.'³⁸

The political scene continued to be unstable and Brown was unimpressed with politicians and disgusted with some organisations; according to him one group was 'as bad as they can be' and another had 'gone mad and are expelling all the best men of their party.... Do you wonder that I call the country rotten?'³⁹ More sober reflection suggested that the key issue for many voters was not unwillingness to support their troops in the war effort, but rebellion against compulsion.⁴⁰

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35 Ibid., 14 October 1916.

36 Ibid., 14 October 1916.

37 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 October 1916.

38 Brown to Will Slack in UK, 27 December 1916, Private collection.

39 Ibid.

40 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 November 1916.

George Brown was finding it more and more difficult to keep his busy schedule of engagements. To his frustration, he often needed a supporting arm or his walking stick, although he continued to attend meetings. At a meeting of the Board of Missions it was reported that there was fierce fighting between tribal groups in the Choiseul area of the Solomon Islands.⁴¹ It was hard to be disapproving while the tribes of so-called civilised nations were locked in extreme conflict; the rationale for a renewed regime of headhunting and head-splitting in honour of new war canoes was defended—'The white man fights, why not the black?'⁴² By late in 1916 he was forced to miss some significant events because of illness but took great pleasure in participating in the laying of foundation stones for Wesley College on the campus of the University of Sydney on 2 December, days before his eighty-first birthday.⁴³ He had been promoting the establishment of a Methodist University College in association with Sydney University for some years.

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Just before Christmas, George Brown was guest and speaker at Newington College Speech Day. Perhaps the small, frail white haired old man did not look much like the hero and adventurer the boys had been led to expect. He began to speak and soon the hall full of schoolboys was responding to his warmth and loving personality. He hoped to live long enough to see the opening of Wesley College and victory in the war in Europe, he told them. As he looked out at those young faces, some of them old enough to be among the next wave of recruits in a deadly war, it seemed to him that this was not the time for tales of adventure in the Pacific. There was a word far more urgent to be spoken. If he had done anything worthwhile with his life, he told them, it was because as a young man, not much older than some of them, he had given his heart to God and accepted the Lord Jesus Christ as his Saviour. Personal religion, he said, was not holding to a creed, or observing a religious form but communion with a living person, the living Christ. Many years earlier he had written a quote from John G. Whittier in the autograph book of a friend, 'Nor name, nor form, nor ritual word / But simply following Thee.'⁴⁴ This was still his belief. As he carefully stepped down from the platform, he was not to know that this was his final public address.⁴⁵

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41 *Australasian Methodist Missionary Review*, 4 October 1916.

42 *Ibid.*, 15 March 1917.

43 *Methodist*, 9 December 1916.

44 Brown's entry in the *Autograph Book of Johanna Fellmann*, January 1897.

45 *Methodist*, 23 December, 30 December 1916, 14 April 1917.

The referendum on compulsory military service had made it plain that Australian men were not willing to be compelled to enlist. As news from the war front continued to be unrelentingly grim, the question now was: could men be persuaded to enlist? Church leaders were encouraged to add their voices to the pleas for recruits. With the national leaders of the Anglican, Presbyterian and Congregational Churches, George Brown, as President General of the Methodist Church of Australasia, added his signature to a document titled 'Recruiting: Appeal to Australian Manhood'. They appealed to 'all citizens for a yet fuller response to the call of duty and patriotism.'

We understand better than we did that we are fighting for our hearths and homes, the honour of our women, the lives of our children, and the future of our race.... We appeal for the preservation of national unity at all costs.... We urge that at least during the war there be an end of all industrial cleavage, which is an even greater menace to unity, and therefore, to victory.... Let us prove that even if we have been divided on questions of policy we are not divided on the necessity for Australia maintaining her five divisions at full strength.⁴⁶

When it was suggested by some that the Methodist General Conference, due to be held in May 1917, should be cancelled or at least postponed, he agreed with the writer who declared that a key church council 'which decides that it can serve no useful end by meeting in critical times such as these, forfeits its right to exist.'⁴⁷

It was becoming more and more difficult to do the things he wished. It delighted him to be asked to baptise the infant son of missionaries from Tonga, the Reverend and Mrs. Rodger Page, at Gordon Methodist church; in a dark world and as he experienced the limitations of old age, this new life was a sign of hope.⁴⁸ In February 1917 he took the chair at the opening session at the Annual Meeting of the Methodist Missionary Society of Australasia.⁴⁹ As reports were read he listened to the familiar names—Samoa, Tonga, Fiji, New Britain, New Guinea/Papua, the Solomon Islands, with the new work in India and North Australia⁵⁰—and he could see the faces, and even hear the voices in his heart. This had been his life. But by the time he reached home, exhausted by the

46 John Charles Sydney (Primate of Australia and Tasmania), Ronald G. Macintyre (Moderator-General of the Presbyterian Church of Australia), George Brown (President-General of the Methodist Church of Australasia), W.J.L. Closs (Chairman of the Congregational Union of Australia), 'Recruiting: Appeal to Australian Manhood,' in the *Methodist*, 6 January 1917.

47 *Methodist*, 6 January 1917.

48 Baptismal certificate of Rodger Page Jr., born 2 May 1916, son of Rev. Rodger and Hannah Page, baptised by George Brown at Gordon Methodist Church 19 January 1917.

49 *Methodist*, 17 February 1917. The Annual General Meeting of the Board was held from 7–10 February 1917.

50 *Australasian Methodist Missionary Review*, 4 December 1915, 4 January 1916.

day and the suburban train journey, he knew that he was deluding himself to think he could travel hundreds of miles to Melbourne in May. He would have to content himself with sending a message to the General Conference as he passed the mantle of the President General to another man.

Day by day, the world of George Brown became narrower. Lydia and their daughters realised that he was failing. He had addressed his last crowd, chaired his final meeting and preached his last sermon. Visitors came to see him at home. One brought a copy of a newly published book in which his name was mentioned in glowing terms as 'one of the great empire-builders in the Pacific,' 'a fine type of the strong clear-headed, wide-minded missionary,' and from his old friend Sir William Macgregor, comparing Brown to other church men who had impressed him: 'You would have had no difficulty in a Life of Dr George Brown, a man that has either no weakness, no defect, or is the most cunning man I have ever met in concealing it ... Dr Brown is the most limpid, the most pellucid man of my acquaintance.'⁵¹

The world continued to shrink around him. The women of his family cared for him, family members and other visitors came and went. A visitor was moved when he witnessed Monica offering to read to her father as he lay, unable to hold a conversation. He asked her to read the Bible and whispered 'Luke chapter 15'.⁵² Resting with eyes closed, he listened to the ancient story told by Christ, of the runaway boy who left home to seek adventure and experience, who, in the end, despite his wanderings, his blunders and stupid choices, is welcomed home at last into the embrace of the Father.

Easter in early April was a sombre time. In Europe, Australian troops were bracing for the terrible carnage that would soon be wreaked at Bullecourt, France. In Russia, violent revolution had just overthrown the established social order and on Good Friday, 6 April 1917, the United States of America announced that they were joining the war on the side of the Allies. In Sydney, German residents were being interned under the War Precautions Act and workers were making employers nervous with industrial unrest.

Late in the evening of Easter Saturday 7 April 1917, the family of George Brown gathered around his bed. Each breath was difficult. Soon one breath would be the final one. They could only wait and pray. His sons and daughters were there, and Lydia. Perhaps Lydia wondered at this scene. A man full of years, with his family lovingly around him, was gently breathing his way to death. As a friend would write, it was 'a peaceful slipping of the anchor and a quiet gliding out

51 Viscount Bryce, 'Preface,' to C. Brunson Fletcher, *The New Pacific: British Policy and German Aims*, London: Macmillan and Co, 1917, pp. xiv-xv.

52 Rev. Dr. J.E. Carruthers, 'Tribute,' in the *Methodist*, 14 April 1917.

into the open sea.⁵³ It so easily could have been otherwise. Lydia had waited fearfully for him to come home so many times over the years. He could have died in shipwrecks in the Atlantic or the Pacific oceans, from a Samoan war club, a New Britain spear or a Solomon Island axe or gun. He had gone into danger, often unwisely and against advice. Did he deserve to have such a peaceful end? She could only be thankful for the many years when he had always come home to her at last.

George Brown died on 7 April 1917 in his family home in Gordon, Sydney. The next day was Easter Day.

Lydia Brown sat quietly through the speeches, eulogies, prayers and tributes that seemed to be endless. It was hard to look at the casket and she found herself staring at the crown of flowers on it for their 'beloved President' from the General Conference. Men who had worked beside her man, men who had revered him as their beloved elder, men who respected him as scientist, political writer and missionary, so many had something to say. It seemed natural that only the men should speak, but the women and children had loved him too. She leaned on her children, Lizzie and Monica, Claudia and her family, Fred and Geoffrey and their families, and all the cousins and nieces and nephews who gathered. Those closest had been together for a private service in the family home before they moved to a crowded church at Gordon and finally to the graveside at Gore Hill Cemetery where a vast crowd gathered.⁵⁴ Her man was described as 'a many-sided man', 'a man of many voyages', 'ever wide in his sympathies, wide in his purposes', 'a well-spent life', 'a man of unique gifts', 'the greatest of modern missionaries'. One theme recurred in every speech. Brown had loved people. It did not matter whether it was a child or a young woman, a peer or a politician, cannibal or clergy, scientist or sorcerer, he met each one as a human being, a child of God, and loved them, showing in his own life, as one friend said, 'in his own original way, something of the manifold, the variegated, the many-coloured grace of God.'⁵⁵ A speaker recalled an evening by the family fireside when Brown had declared, 'The longer I live the more I am convinced that the mightiest power in the world is the power of love.'⁵⁶

In Lydia's old autograph book, carried with her over the years since she was a young girl in New Zealand, was the inscription written by George when he came to ask her to marry him. It had seemed an odd message at the time, full

53 *Methodist*, 14 April 1917.

54 In the lengthy accounts of the funeral, fifty-eight Methodist ministers are listed by name plus thirteen leaders from other Protestant Churches. One of the few missing was the Reverend Heinrich Fellmann, who was interned as a German national. See the *Methodist*, 14 April 1917.

55 Funeral reports and obituaries for Brown appeared in *Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 April, 17 April 1917; *Methodist* 14 April 1917; Minutes of Board of Methodist Missionary Society 13 April 1917; Memorial Service, 18 April 1917; *Teesdale Mercury* [UK] 16 May 1917, NLA JAFp BIO 66.

56 *Methodist*, 14 April 1917.

of images of sowing and harvest, and of 'weary days of toil' ahead, an unlikely statement from a bridegroom to his beloved. But then he wrote of 'the promise-keeping God' and asked, 'Shall we doubt His power and love? Oh, no.... Though the day may be full of toil and sorrow ... yet the day will come when they who have gone forth weeping bearing precious seed shall doubtless come again with rejoicing bringing their sheaves with them.'

Tears, toil and sorrow, yes, and rejoicing, too. Their arms were filled with harvest.