

Rev. John McNeill

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1854 – 1933

December 29, 2022

Presbyterian Evangelist John McNeill

Background: On January 8, 1893, William Irvine professed through Presbyterian Rev. John McNeill in the Motherwell Town Hall, Scotland. At that time, Rev. McNeill was affiliated with Dwight L. Moody's evangelistic campaign; he was never a Worker in the Two by Two Sect.

NOTE: The John McNeill shown on the 1905 Workers List is not the same person as the Presbyterian Rev. John McNeill. His biography makes clear that John McNeill was never a Worker in the Two by Two Sect.

At the request of John McNeill's widow, Alexander Gammie compiled the official biography of her husband, titled **Rev. John McNeill: His Life and Work**, first published in 1933. This book is the primary source of the following summary of his life's work.

John McNeill was born on July 7, 1854, in Houston, Renfrewshire, Scotland, to John and Catherine "Katie" (McTaggart) McNeill. The eldest son, he was second in a family of seven children. When he was 12, the family moved to Inverkip where he went to work in a quarry. Beginning at age 15 (from 1869 to 1877), he worked for the railway, starting as a gateboy. He was described as "the burly youth with the frank, open countenance and the strong, cheery voice."

Brought up in a deeply spiritual home with family worship on Sunday mornings and evenings, he attended the Inverkip Presbyterian Free Church. In spiritual matters, he claimed he owed more to his parents than anyone else. "Our religion," he would say, "was dyed in the wool." In a letter to his minister, he declared his choice to become a Christian when he was about 19 years old. He lived a clean life, never smoked and was a teetotaler.

McNeill rose rapidly to the position of railway clerk after transferring to Edinburgh. After joining St. Bernard's Free Church, he became a Sunday school teacher and was ordained as a deacon. He became an active member of the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), a society made up of members of all churches founded in 1844. Had he not been connected with the YMCA, he declared, "Then, humanly speaking, I might never have been a minister."

So convinced was the YMCA vice-president that McNeill should be in the ministry that he helped finance McNeill's education. For three years, beginning in 1877, McNeill studied at Edinburgh University in Scotland and supported himself by performing missionary work for St. Bernard's Free Church. He developed a fondness for open-air preaching and of mission work in general, which ultimately became the passion of his life.

While studying at Edinburgh University, he married Susan Spiers Scott on October 24, 1879; he was 25, and she was 28. Nine months later, their son, John Alexander, was born. But for Susan, it is said, he might not have persevered to the end of his studies. Soon after their marriage, Susan developed an illness from which she never fully recovered. After five years at Glasgow University, in 1886, he completed his Divinity Course at what is now known as the Church of Scotland's Trinity College.

At age 32, in July 1886, McNeill became the pastor of the McCrie-Roxburgh Free Church in Edinburgh, Scotland. There he suddenly burst into fame. Crowds flocked to hear him—both rich and poor, educated and illiterate. Before long, it was necessary to use a circus tent to accommodate the 3,000 plus attendees; some called it the "Circus Church." In a meeting at the huge Waverly Market, the low estimate was 12,000–14,000 attendees. He had come to Edinburgh, poor and unknown; he left as one of the most popular ministers and one of the best known public figures in the city.

Three and one-half years later, the McNeills moved to London where he became pastor of the Regent Square Presbyterian Church on February 28, 1889. Throngs of people followed him from the very beginning of his ministry. He and Charles Spurgeon (20 years his senior), pastor of the Metropolitan Tabernacle, became good friends. Charles Spurgeon (1834–1892) was an English Baptist Preacher, nicknamed *Prince of Preachers*. Rev. McNeill was nicknamed the *Scotch Spurgeon*, which name was used as the subtitle for the 1895 book, *Rev. John McNeill's (the Scotch Spurgeon) Popular Sermons*.

After 12 years of marriage and four children in ten years, his wife, Susan, died on July 7, 1891, aged 40, of pneumonia, just three weeks after giving birth to their fourth child.

About the same time, John Campbell White (soon to become Lord Overton) approached McNeill with the following offer: "Here we

are, two Christian men deeply interested and engaged in Gospel work. Our Master has given me money, and He has given you preaching, and yours is the greater gift. Why should not we go into partnership? I will undertake to relieve you of worldly cares, and you will go wherever you will, preaching the Gospel."

McNeill accepted Lord Overtoun's offer and resigned from Regent Square Church in December 1891. Before long, McNeill was world famous, speaking in Toronto, New York, Chicago and other places. In October 1891, after hearing McNeill preach for a week in Chicago, Dwight L. Moody invited him to join Moody's evangelistic campaign. Until this time, McNeill had no natural desire to be an evangelist. He claimed, "The Lord thrust me out" into evangelism to preach the Gospel.

His evangelistic work with Moody and Sankey commenced in January 1892 with a highly successful mission in Aberdeen, Scotland. He traveled far and wide in Scotland, England and Ireland, preaching in large cities, small villages and country districts. Crowds flocked to hear the popular traveling evangelist. At brief intervals, he returned home to be with his four motherless children.

During this period, in January 1893, Rev. John McNeill had a mission in Motherwell Town Hall, during which William Irvine converted. At that time, McNeill was affiliated with Dwight L. Moody's evangelistic campaign.

In 1893, at Moody's request, McNeill traveled to a special campaign connected to the World's Fair in Chicago, where he preached to huge crowds for five months and made a profound impression. Subsequently in 1894 and 1895, he went on world tours to South Africa, Australia, India, etc. In Melbourne, Australia, he regularly addressed 5,000 people on weekdays and 10,000 on Sundays.

His greatest campaign was held in London, from January to June 1898, concluding with 12 days in the Royal Albert Hall. "Over 10,000 attended his Sunday evening services; the aggregate for the whole campaign at the lowest estimate, was half million." While in London, after seven years of being a widower, he met his future wife, Margaret Lee Millar (1867–1960). They were married on July 14, 1898, and produced six children. Altogether, McNeill was father to ten children.

McNeill continued his evangelistic missions and tours for 16 more years, from 1891 to 1907, under the sponsorship of Lord Overtoun, although there had been no formal written agreement. On February 15, 1908, Lord Overtoun died, aged 69, without leaving any legal provision for the arrangement to continue. After 17 years, John McNeill, age 53, was suddenly left without any means to support his evangelistic tours and large family. Once again, he became a pastor. From 1908 to 1916, he pastored the following churches:

- Christ Church Westminster Bridge Road in London, England, September 1908, for one year.
- St. George's Presbyterian Church in Liverpool, England, April 3, 1910–Nov. 24, 1912.
- Cooke's Church in Toronto, Canada, on January 2, 1913, for about two years.
- Central Presbyterian Church, Denver, Colorado, US, 1915–1916, for nine months, 3,200 members.

After WWI broke out, at the request of the YMCA, McNeill returned to Scotland in September 1916, to work among the soldiers. He was sent to France, Egypt and Malta. After the War, in early 1919, he returned to America for a three-month evangelistic mission. After that, from 1919 to 1928, he was a pastor at the following churches:

- South Highlands Presbyterian Church in Birmingham, Alabama, US, June 4, 1919–July 1920.
- Fort Washington Presbyterian Church in New York, New York, US, on October 12, 1920–December 21, 1924.
- Tenth Presbyterian Church of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, US, December 21, 1924, for two years. Church of the Open Door, Los Angeles, California, US, December 22, 1926–October 7, 1928.

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 "Though a loyal Presbyterian, it was evident that John McNeill was bound by no denominational fetters. If he heard that a number of Christian churches were uniting for a service, he rejoiced and was glad to do all he could to help." When asked why he was sometimes called *Dr. McNeill*, he replied, "I am not a D.D., [Doctor of Divinity]; I was offered the honor once by a college, but I declined it. It is not for me" (*New York Times* May 9, 1897).

"On October 20, 1928, the McNeills said a final farewell to America and returned to London due to Mrs. McNeill's health, where he resumed his role as a minister of the Presbyterian Church of England. His favorite recreations were swimming, golfing and riding horses. He learned to ride after he was 40 and claimed he had ridden over 600 horses" (*New York Herald Tribune*, May 5, 1933, p. 5). Rev. McNeill was preacher, pastor and evangelist for the rest of his life. Whether he was pastoring a church or engaged in a special campaign, he was always an evangelist at heart. He was "not comfortable in keeping a full church full."

He experienced both roles of ministry—that of being a settled pastor and of being a traveling evangelist. A pastorate required preparing fresh discourses every week for the same people, feeding the flock. The work of an evangelist was mainly holding missions, preaching the Gospel, being always on the go, six days a week, often for weeks and even months on end. He gave new sermons and had another hundred prepared evangelistic sermons in his repertoire. He was famous throughout the world. One year he preached 330 times. He claimed there was as much hard work in one ministry role as the other.

Diagnosed with a heart attack in January 1933, he retired and died in his sleep on April 19, 1933, aged 79. Funeral services were held simultaneously in three Scotland locations, at Regent Square Church in London; George's Parish Church in Glasgow; and Charlotte Chapel in Edinburgh. He was buried in the old churchyard at Inverkip, Renfrewshire, Scotland, beside his parents. His widow died September 18, 1967, aged 93. Newspapers across the world carried his obituary and articles lauding his work.

John McNeill's son and wife, Archibald "Archie" and Evangeline (Duff) McNeill, developed the Cannon Beach Christian Conference Center in Oregon in 1945. After their passing, their oldest daughter, Heather (McNeill) Goodenough, took the helm as Executive Director. See website [cbcc.net](http://cbcc.net). See also website *TellingTheTruth.info* in History Articles, Walter Duff.

**In summary,** John McNeill was born July 7, 1854:

- 1) Accepted Christ at age 19, through Rev. Peter Douglas of Inverkip Free Church
- 2) Began his Presbyterian ministerial studies at age 23 at Edinburgh and Glasgow Universities
- 3) July 1886 accepted a pastoral position with McCrie-Roxburgh Church, Edinburgh
- 4) 1892-1908 was a traveling evangelist in Dwight L. Moody's campaigns
- 5) September 1908 accepted a pastoral position with Christ Church Westminster Bridge Road, London
- 6) Died April 19, 1933.

**Note.** As can be seen from the activities above, Rev. John McNeill was never affiliated with a group, sect or movement similar to the Two by Two Sect.

#### References:

*Rev. John McNeill: His Life and Work* by Alexander Gammie, 1933. Great Britain: Pickering & Inglis.

*Evangeline – A Story of Faith* by Bette Nordberg, 1996. Biography of Evangeline (Duff) McNeill and the development of the Canon Beach Conference Center in Oregon, US.

*Rev. John McNeill's (The Scotch Spurgeon) Popular Sermons.* 1896. Edited by J. B. McClure. Rhodes & McClure.

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Motherwell Times, Motherwell, Scotland:

1893 Jan. 07. Announcement of Rev. John McNeill services to be held at Motherwell Town Hall

1893 Jan. 14. Report of Rev. John McNeill week's mission in Motherwell

New York Times:

1897 May 01 p. 13. Dr. McNeill – "the Scottish Spurgeon" – "A Shaggy Master of Pathos"

1897 May 09 p. 12. Travels of Evangelist Rev. John McNeill – Preached all over the habitable globe – Even to Zulus

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#### **Death Notices:**

#### **USA:**

**1933 May 05 p. 5** *New York Herald Tribune*. Rev. John McNeill Was World Famous as an Evangelist

#### **Canada:**

1933 April 29 p. 6 *Vancouver Sun*, Vancouver, BC, Canada. Service for Preacher

1933 April 20 p. 2 *The Gazette*, Montreal, QC, Canada. Rev. John McNeill dies in London

1933 April 22 p. 5 *The Province*, Vancouver, BC, Canada. Rev. John McNeill-Evangelist

Compiled by Cherie Kropp, 2018

**The New York Times**

**May 9, 1897**

**Travels of an Evangelist**

**The Rev. John McNeill, the Scot,**

**Has Been All Over the Habitable Globe**

**PREACHED EVEN TO ZULUS**

**Smiled or Cried at the Same Points That Were Effective in Fifth Avenue**

**Human Nature the Same the World Over**

"The first thing I must tell you," said the Rev. John McNeill, The Scottish evangelist, to a reporter for The New York Times, "is that I am not dead." Hardly a day passes that some one does not come up to me and say: 'Why my dear Mr. McNeill, I heard you were dead.' And I sometimes reply to them in the words of the Irishman: 'I have heard so, too, but I knew it was not true.'

"The reports of my death arise from the fact that the Rev John McNeill, a Scottish Presbyterian minister of my age, who, like myself, forsook his pulpit to enter the field as an evangelist, died in Brisbane about two years ago. My friends in America who had heard me at the World's Fair saw the notice of the death in the religious press and naturally jumped to the conclusion that it was I. A good many Americans are buying a work of my namesake, who was a Highlander, while I am a Lowlander, entitled 'A Spirit Filled Life,' under the impression that I wrote it. It has had a large sale, but I have never disclaimed the authorship, for it is a good book.

### **Why He Became an Evangelist.**

#### **"What induced you to become an evangelist?"**

"The death of my wife five years ago thrust me forth while I was filling the pulpit of Regent Square, London. I had been invited to enter the evangelistic field before, and the change in my life led me to leave my home. After leaving Great Britain I spent six months at the World's Fair in Chicago. Then I returned to England and began a tour around the world with J. H. Burke, who is singing with me at my meetings here. We were three months in South Africa, two months in Tasmania, three months in Australia, two months in New Zealand. Then I went back to India where I spoke eight weeks in Calcutta and Bombay."

#### **"Did you notice in your travels any marked difference in the character or manner of your hearers?"**

"No. An English-speaking man is an English-speaking man the world over. The audiences I have addressed here do not differ from those who heard me in Tasmania or in the Transvaal [South Africa]. The Zulus to whom I spoke, through an interpreter, in South Africa, smiled and cried at the same points that elicit similar expressions from those I have addressed in Fifth Avenue. Human nature, at the point where the Gospel appeals to it, is pretty much the same all the world over."

#### **What is your judgment upon that class of revivals where the penitent hearers come forward and, in full view and hearing of all, make public profession of their conversion to Christianity?"**

"I don't use those methods. I am content to preach the Gospel; and as to the results, my experience has been that they are found after I have gone by the ministers of the congregations where I have spoken."

#### **"There is some discussion as to the value of these special evangelistic services. What have you to say on that?"**

"My experience is that this work of constant preaching is such a strain upon a man's brain and nerves that, as a matter simply of common sense, he wouldn't keep at it six months if there were not results. It is not a form of ministry that any man, be he layman or minister, is likely to exercise long unless definite results become apparent.

In Liverpool for instance, whence I have just come, I have preached three times a day for four weeks to an average of 8,000 people a day. Do you think a man is going to do that and make work like that his life work from place to place if there's to be no definite result in the shape of changed lives and increase of church membership?"

#### **"What evidence have you that there are tangible results?"**

"In Liverpool during the last week of my stay, I asked my audience to be good enough to let me know to what extent the blessing of God had rested upon the preaching. Upward of 1,000 letters poured in upon me directly."

### **Likes to Convert Women.**

While Mr. McNeill's style is peculiarly inclined to attract men, who seem to like his blunt word and his sharp prods, which never are anything but delicate, he has a vigorous answer to the scoffers who say that nobody goes to churches or revivals but women.

"Now supposing they were all woman," he said, "The work would be well worth the doing. A woman is as good as a man any day, and the new woman leaves us all behind. If you reach the women, you'll get at the men also; the devil gets at the men through the women and why should not Jesus Christ do so also?"

Volumes of letters from his hearers pour in upon Mc. McNeill wherever he goes. As an illustration of the far-reaching results of evangelistic work, he cites the case of a young woman who was converted at one of his meetings in Johannesburg. She wrote to her father in Australia, telling him of the change that had come to her. "Months afterward," said Mr. McNeill, "I went to Australia, and this man came to my meetings, and he too, was converted. He was a careless globe-wandering man, one of the kind who go to Johannesburg for the gold and, not finding it, push on to the next place where adventure is to be found. This man came to Mr. McNeill and told him of the results of his work, which in this case extended to two continents.

Another instance of practical results mentioned by Mr. McNeill was the case of a Liverpool man who received a remittance in payment of a bad debt. The debtor in his letter said his conscience had been pricked at one of the meetings held by Mr. McNeill. "These business men's meetings may become popular in Wall Street yet," said the evangelist with a little laugh.

"I am not a D.D.," [Doctor of Divinity] said Mr. McNeill, when asked why he was sometimes called Dr. McNeill. "I was offered the honor once by a college, but I declined it. It is not for me, as your own Artemus Ward said when he was over in England and was offered the 'crown of realms.' 'No,' said he modestly, 'It isn't for me. Give it to the poor.'"

Mr. McNeill laughed heartily over his recollection of the famous humorist. "I read him when a boy," said he. "It was my first introduction to what is called American humor and it appealed to my sense of the ludicrous strongly. Artemus Ward died all too soon."

With Mr. McNeill at the Windsor is his brother Joseph, a student at Princeton Theological Seminary. Mr. McNeill is greatly encouraged by the increased attendance at his noon business men's meeting at Chickering Hall.

**New York Herald Tribune (owned by Greeley)  
Rev. John McNeill Was World Famous as an Evangelist  
May 5, 1933, page 5**

New York May 5—

One of the best ministers of all time—the Rev. John McNeill, Scotch revivalist, died in London, at 78.

He gained worldwide fame by touring the globe as a mission preacher revivalist in the '90s. He began his mission career in 1892—hearing Dwight L. Moody speak—London and traveled for sixteen years, enchanting audiences on every continent by his forthright colloquial—and his humor. Since 1910, he has been pastor of a Liverpool, England church.

The Hindu college students of Bombay and Calcutta and the fashionable—avenue congregations of the—decade were alike to the Rev. John McNeill, says the *New York Herald Tribune*. [1926–1966; owned by Greeley]

He told them both the same thing, that they were afraid to embrace God for fear of what their neighbors would think, and he made them uncomfortable, laughing at their self-consciousness—sneering at them for harboring—pride. In neither of these strong—of conservatism did he win many converts, but he was immensely popular in the provinces of America and England.

The revival movement of Dwight L. Moody and Ira D. Sankey, with the programme of fundamentalism reached—and about the time that McNeill—called down from the suburbs of Pittsburgh to preach at Regent Square Presbyterian church in London.

—appealed to him immediately, and —hearing Moody talk he decided to follow in his footsteps and take —for his congregation instead of a small slice of London.

He was admirably equipped for missionary work, both physically and by —of his training. He was born in Houston, Renfrewshire, Scotland on July 7, 1854, the son of a foreman—quarry. After attending the free—schools in Houston and Inverkip, he entered the railway service as gateboy, being but 15. For eight years, he continued to work his way forward thru various posts in the British railway.

His success was helped by his habit—self-assertion. As a gateboy, he immediately applied for a better job, and one day an official of the railroad stuck his head out of a train window and asked, "Are you the young man who considers himself too good for his situation?" McNeill said he was, in no uncertain tone, and his first promotion followed.

He left the railroad office in 1877 to study for the ministry, taking three sessions at Edinburgh University, one at Glasgow University and four at the—Church Divinity hall in Glasgow.

—was called and ordained to McCrie-Roxburgh Free church, Edinburgh. In 1889, and after three years—called to London.

He preached on every continent; he —an audience of 10,000 nightly for —in the Agricultural Hall in London. He exhorted a shivering little group of forty men on the top of the —on Ben Nuvis, and he —upon the people of Smyrna, Gibraltar, Malta, New Zealand and Cari—to give over sinful living and follow God.

He was unconventional in a convention age, and to help him he had a —wit and a quick intelligence—seized the attitude of his audience and turned it to his own ends. —while traveling to his old home in Scotland, a fellow passenger, attempted to twit im by asking, "Do you think you'll go to Heaven?" "I do," said McNeill, but I would rather go to Greenrock first."

He first came to America with Moody and preached at the World's Fair in Chicago. From one to four times a day for six months he cried —for expiation, and Moody called him "the wheel-horse in the team"—that he came to new York and—a mission at the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian church.

In his first sermon, he thrust his —into his pockets, stared fixedly at the congregation and snapped: —ow, dear brethren, which one of —dare stand up if I were to call out for someone to do so? No one. Even as I speak, some of you are hiding behind your hymn books You don't fear me. You fear your friends. Your stylish friends, the Jones, the Smiths and the Robinsons. They are the Pharisees of today. You dare not come to the Lord for fear of Fifth Avenue and what it might say."

As a preacher he had no pattern, and he was a law unto himself. His treatment of Scripture was like that of Joseph parker, his imagination was swift and creative, and he knew the preacher's textbook by heart. He never wrote out a line of sermons nor carried a note into the pulpit. He loved the Psalms and Robert Burns, and these, with the everyday life about him, supplied his every need of material.

Physically, he was brawny, with a great chest and a handsome beard. He breathed energy and his hands, arms, shoulders and face all helped to accent every word he spoke. He varied the humorous with the pathetic; the prophetic with the hopeful, and always with the same theme. A London writer of the '90s described him as "homely, hearty, charmingly blunt and perilously frank." He listed his recreations as golf, swimming and riding, and modestly entered in "Who's Who" that he "has ridden over 600 horses."

He was married twice, the second time to Margaret L. Miller of London in 1898. In informing "Who's Who" of this fact, he said in parenthesis, "after seven years along." He accepted the call to Christ church, Westminster Bridge Road, London two years later. His sermons were published in three volumes.