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Melanie Storie

Liberty University, mstorie@liberty.edu

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Abstract

Best known as the "Fighting Parson," William G. Brownlow earned his sobriquet during his years as an early 19th century, circuit-riding Methodist preacher in the southern Appalachians. E. Merton Coulter, renowned historian and Brownlow biographer, explained the "frontier man of God was a hard rider, a hard preacher, and a hard liver." Thus, Brownlow learned very quickly how antagonizing his rivals served as a powerful tool in the contest of soul-winning on the frontier. This practice of verbally attacking his enemies was also used during his long public career in both journalism and politics. Consequently, for Brownlow, religion and politics were inseparable as he lashed out at Presbyterians, Baptists, and Democrats alike. Brownlow remains a colorful, albeit controversial, historical character due to his biting sarcasm and often merciless verbal attacks on his enemies. Nevertheless, close examination of Brownlow's life and career offers a reflection of the deep divisions within the generation of which he lived.

Keywords

Methodist church, southern Appalachia, East Tennessee, frontier ministers, reform, early American newspaper editors, Civil War, Presbyterians, Baptists, Whig Party, Democrat Party, denominational rivalry, slavery

Cover Page Footnote

Melanie Storie is a doctoral student in history at Liberty University. Her research interests include 19th century southern Appalachia, East Tennessee, and the Civil War. Her dissertation will focus on the impact of the Civil War on the communities of northeast Tennessee.

Storie: William G. Brownlow, the "Fighting Parson"

**“Cry Aloud and Spare Not”: William G. Brownlow, the “Fighting Parson”
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Melanie Storie

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William Gannaway Brownlow, best known as the “Fighting Parson,” earned his sobriquet during his years as an early 19th century circuit-riding Methodist preacher in the Southern Appalachians. E. Merton Coulter, renowned historian and Brownlow biographer, explained the “frontier man of God was a hard rider, a hard preacher, and a hard liver.”¹ This epitomized the “Fighting Parson,” as he very quickly learned to antagonize his rivals using verbal assaults as a powerful tool in the contest of soul-winning on the frontier. After a decade of riding the circuit, Brownlow settled down, started a family, and moved on to a career as a newspaper editor. Consequently, for Brownlow, religion and politics were inseparable and thus he continued to use his biting sarcasm to lash out at Presbyterians, Baptists, and Democrats alike. In many respects, the years Brownlow spent as an itinerate minister in a rough and unsettled Appalachian frontier, prepared him for his role of newspaper editor as he engaged in the same fearlessness, boldly expressing his views of religion, politics, and society. The “Fighting Parson” never retreated from controversy, thus his character remains significant because he offers a reflection of the deep divisions within the generation of which he lived.

William G. Brownlow was born on August 29, 1805, to Joseph and Catherine Gannaway Brownlow in Wythe County, Virginia. It seemed he was destined to experience religious divisions and disputes all of his life. Indeed, his family background seemed to lay the groundwork for it. Young Billy Brownlow, as he was called as a boy, was the oldest of five children. When he was ten years old, his family moved from Southwest Virginia to Blountville in East Tennessee. Soon afterwards, tragedy struck when his father died and then shortly afterward his mother passed. Now orphans, Billy and his siblings were sent to live with various

¹ E. Merton Coulter, *William G. Brownlow: Fighting Parson of the Southern Highlands* (Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 1999), 9.

relatives.² The Brownlow family followed Presbyterian teaching, while the Gannaways were primarily Methodists. Ultimately, he chose the path of his mother's family. In 1825, Brownlow was apprenticing as a carpenter with his uncle George Winniford near Abingdon, Virginia. When a Methodist camp meeting came to the area, Brownlow attended a service and subsequently underwent a religious conversion. Reflecting on the experience he wrote, "All my anxieties were at an end – my happiness was complete. From this time, I began to feel an increasing desire for the salvation of sinners...."³ Thus, the next year he entered the ministry and became a circuit rider.

Life as itinerate frontier minister was a hard one filled with inconveniences and dangers. Generally, the circuit rider's possessions consisted of his horse, a saddle, and saddle bags in which he carried his Bible and meager provisions. An early minister characterized frontier Methodism in the following terms:

trampled up muddy ridges, it swam or forded rivers to the waist; it slept on leaves or raw deer-skin, and pillowed its head on saddle-bags; it bivouacked among wolves or Indians; it suffered from ticks or mosquitoes – it was attacked by dogs, it was hooted, and it was pelted – but it thrived.⁴

Another Methodist pioneer, Peter Cartwright, could relate to these difficulties. The circuit rider in the early days might receive \$80 a year if his circuit provided for it, but many only earned between \$30 to \$40 a year. They could make more through marriage fees and gifts from benevolence groups connected with the church.⁵ Moreover, camp meetings often brought in all

² Ibid., 1.

³ William G. Brownlow, *Helps to the Study of Presbyterianism* (Knoxville, TN: Heiskell, printer, 1834), 244.

⁴ William W. Wightman, *Life of William Capers, D.D., one of the Bishops of the Methodist Episcopal Church South; including an Autobiography* (Nashville: J.B. M'Ferrin, Agent, 1858), 471-72.

⁵ W.P. Strickland, ed., *Autobiography of Peter Cartwright, the backwoods preacher* (Cincinnati: Cranston and Curts, 1920), 522-23.

sorts of people in addition to those seeking salvation and direction for their lives. There were “bullies, drunkards, pickpockets, horse-traders, horse thieves, and whiskey-traffickers.”⁶

Sometimes the crowds could become unruly and ministers often had to take action to regain control. Cartwright’s creed was “to love everybody, but to fear no one.” Although, he added “I did not permit myself to believe any man could whip me till it was tried.”⁷

In 1826, Brownlow’s first assignment was the Black Mountain circuit, one of the most remote areas of Southern Appalachia. It encompassed the Asheville, North Carolina district and the far eastern slopes of the Blue Ridge Mountains. Just twenty-one years old, he embraced the assignment with exuberance and reveled in the beauty of the mountains. Life was not easy however and he nearly froze to death on Cane River during his first year on the circuit.⁸ As he began preaching, it was not long before he came into conflict with the Baptists in the region. Brownlow apparently walked into one of their meetings by accident, as a meeting house had been mistakenly scheduled for both a Baptist and a Methodist service. As he walked in, the Baptists were engaged in a foot-washing service and Brownlow remarked, “never did I, before or since, see as many big dirty feet, washed in one large pewter basin full of water!”⁹ Brownlow also ran afoul of the Presbyterian ministers in the region. He related on one occasion he attended a meeting where he and several other denominational ministers were slated to preach. During one sermon, a Presbyterian minister elaborated on how the Methodists were the “lukewarm whom the Lord would vomit up.” He went on to insult the way Methodist ministers dressed and

⁶ Coulter, *William G. Brownlow*, 12.

⁷ Strickland, *Autobiography of Peter Cartwright*, 133.

⁸ Coulter, *William G. Brownlow*, 17-18; Brownlow, *Helps to the Study of Presbyterianism*, 245-46.

⁹ Brownlow, *Helps to the Study of Presbyterianism*, 244.

Brownlow, not able to resist, jumped and said, "Sir, I presume this is the style you are aiming at!" After the minister finished with what Brownlow described as a "lifeless" sermon, it was his turn to speak. Brownlow then proceeded to preach on the same text and took his own shots at the Presbyterian minister.¹⁰

For the next several years, Brownlow continued as a minister, riding several other circuits throughout the Southern Appalachians. Because of his combative nature and fiery personality, it is not surprising that he was sued and occasionally censured by the Methodist church. For instance, in 1829, the Holston annual conference censured him for going over the line in his criticism of Reverend William Smith, a Presbyterian. Smith later tried to sue Brownlow for slander, but the case was dismissed.¹¹ The threat of lawsuits or being disciplined by the church did not dissuade Brownlow from speaking his mind. Two years later, in 1831, Brownlow accused Baptist minister Humphrey Posey of selling Bibles and making a profit. This time Brownlow was found guilty of slander and ordered to pay the court costs. Because he could not pay all of the costs for bringing in witness, the deputy sheriff seized his horse, bridle, saddle, saddlebags, and an umbrella to be sold at auction.¹² Nearly twenty years later, Brownlow took great satisfaction in hearing the Reverend Posey had died "in a drunken fit of debauch" and some of the "corrupt jurors" had met with imprisonment and unsavory deaths. Brownlow celebrated, writing, "the probability is, the Devil has some of them, who have departed this life..."¹³ Given his record, it is not astonishing that he was censured again for his "style of writing and manner of

¹⁰ Brownlow, *Helps to the Study of Presbyterianism*, 247.

¹¹ Durwood Dunn, *The Civil War in Southern Appalachian Methodism* (Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 2013), 68.

¹² James C. Kelly, "William Gannaway Brownlow, Part I," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 43, no. 1 (Spring 1984): 27; Brownlow, *Helps to the Study of Presbyterianism*, 272.

¹³ Coulter, *William G. Brownlow, 22-23*; *Knoxville Whig and Independent Journal*, July 5, 1851.

conducting his opposition to the instruction and proceedings of other denominations.”¹⁴

Nevertheless, while the Methodist church may have occasionally tried to reign in Brownlow through censure, they recognized his usefulness in attacking the Baptists and Presbyterians.

After a decade of ministry, Brownlow who was now thirty years old, turned his thoughts to settling down and starting a family. He reflected upon this writing, “Old bachelor! Are you so lost to a sense of the pleasures and enjoyments of a married life, that you can remain contented in a state of single blessedness....”¹⁵ While visiting family in Carter County, Tennessee, Brownlow met sixteen-year-old Eliza O’Brien and was immediately smitten. Unable to see her for nearly a year after their first meeting, Brownlow arranged an assignment to the Elizabethton circuit in Carter County. Soon afterwards, he began courting Eliza. She recalled that “he was so earnest, persistent, and eloquent in his wooing, there was no resisting him.”¹⁶ The couple was married on September 11, 1836 in Carter County. Reportedly, Eliza’s parents were split on the marriage. James O’Brien, Eliza’s father, embraced his new son-in-law wholeheartedly and even offered him a job in family iron works. Eliza’s mother initially objected but later, after seeing Brownlow’s devotion to her daughter, she accepted their union. He and Eliza were married over forty years and had seven children together. By all accounts he was a devoted husband and father.¹⁷

Unable to support a family on a circuit minister’s salary, Brownlow started a newspaper called *The Whig*. It began in Elizabethton in 1839, and a year later he moved the operation to

¹⁴ Dunn, *The Civil War in Southern Appalachian Methodism*, 68.

¹⁵ Brownlow, *Helps to the Study of Presbyterianism*, 287.

¹⁶ Steve Humphrey, “*That D-----D Brownlow*”: *Being a Saucy and Malicious Description of William Gannaway Brownlow* (Boone, NC: Appalachian Consortium Press, 1978), 9.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

Jonesborough, and finally in 1849 to Knoxville. As a newspaper editor, his masthead “Cry Aloud and Spare Not” based on Isaiah 58:1 framed his thoughts about causes he believed important, including, Methodism, the Whig party, temperance, slavery and the nature of the federal Union. The entire verse reads: “Cry aloud, spare, not, lift up thy voice like a trumpet, and shew my people their transgressions, and the house of Jacob their sins.”¹⁸ His editorials blared out like a trumpet revealing transgressions of Baptists, Presbyterians, Catholics, Mormons, Democrats, immigrants, Sabbath breakers, rival editors, abolitionists, and secessionists. Historian Stephen Ash best characterized Brownlow’s editorial style saying his “favorite method of promoting those causes was to chastise and ridicule his opponents, and few men could do so with as much venomous wit as he.”¹⁹

Brownlow, in sounding the trumpet, never minced words especially when sparring with an opponent. For instance, he had a very public battle with Presbyterian minister Frederick A. Ross. A native of Maryland, Ross converted to Presbyterianism in 1823 and began preaching on the Appalachian frontier. After the death of his father, who was a wealthy landowner, Ross inherited land in East Tennessee near Kingsport. He settled there and lived in an estate home he called “Rotherwood.” Ross served as an evangelist for over twenty-five years. In 1825, he and other fellow Presbyterians started the *Calvinistic Magazine* in nearby Rogersville, Tennessee. The first few issues were dedicated to refuting Methodist claims that the Presbyterians wanted to be a state church. A verbal war raged between these two denominations for several years. The

¹⁸ Isaiah 58:1 (King James Version).

¹⁹ Coulter, *William G. Brownlow*, xi; Stephen Ash, ed., *Secessionists and Other Scoundrels: Selections from Parson Brownlow’s Book* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1999), 2; Forrest Conklin, “Parson Brownlow Joins the Sons of Temperance,” *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 39, no. 2 (Summer 1980): 178-94.

magazine ran for about five years and Ross declared victory. In 1837, the Old School-New School split occurred in the Presbyterian church. Ross aligned himself with the New School Presbyterians and continued preaching in Kingsport.²⁰

From 1845 to 1847, Ross revived the *Calvinistic Magazine* on the grounds that the Methodists were back for another fight. The Tennessee Presbyterian Synod wholeheartedly approved of the campaign to push back against the Methodists, declaring, “For the previous twelve years, the Methodists had been allowed a clear field to abuse and misrepresent Presbyterians.”²¹ In addition to reviving this magazine, Ross also wrote *The Doctrine of the Direct Witness of the Spirit, as Taught by the Rev. John Wesley, Shown to Be Unscriptural, False, Fanatical, and of Mischievous Tendency*. Much of it was dedicated to doctrinal disputes over God’s spirit and the individual spirit. Ross claimed that the reason for his publication was to expose Methodist doctrine as being “unscriptural, false, fanatical, and of mischievous tendency.”²² Ross further claimed that Wesley and the Methodists were a group of fanatics who teach “we have a direct, conscious, miraculous intercourse with God. In teaching that, it opens

²⁰ Forrest Conkling and John W. Wittig, “Religious Warfare in the Southern Highlands: Brownlow versus Ross,” *Journal of East Tennessee History* 63 (1991): 36-37; Coulter, *William G. Brownlow*, 54-55; In 1837 theological disagreements resulting from the Second Great Awakening led to a split between “Old School” and “New School” Presbyterians. The Old School, led by Charles Hodge of Princeton Theological Seminary, disagreed with the revivalist and emotional preaching. The New School inspired by Jonathan Edwards and Joseph Bellamy embraced revivalism. The split continued for more than twenty years as the issue of slavery pushed the two schools of thought even further apart. For further information see Bradley Longfield, *Presbyterians and American Culture: A History* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013); George M. Marsden, *The Evangelical Mind and the New School Presbyterian Experience: A Case Study of thought and Theology in Nineteenth Century America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970).

²¹ Humphrey, “That D-----D Brownlow”: *Being a Saucy and Malicious Description of William Gannaway Brownlow*,” 70.

²² Frederick A. Ross, *The Doctrine of the Direct Witness of the Spirit, as Taught by the Rev. John Wesley, Shown to Be Unscriptural, False, Fanatical, and of Mischievous Tendency* (Philadelphia, PA: Perkins & Purves, 1846), 8.

the door into the spiritual world ... now possible for him to see and hear what is in heaven and hell. That is fanaticism.”²³

Brownlow, along with other Methodist leaders, had publicly accused the Presbyterians of conspiring to create a national church. He exclaimed: “Let the Presbyterians once enslave us, as they are aiming to do and we may... beseech them to ... have mercy on us, but it will all be to no purpose.”²⁴ To support his claims, Brownlow included a quote from Thomas Jefferson who wrote, “The Presbyterian clergy are the loudest; the most intolerant of all sects; the most tyrannical and ambitious ... They pant to reestablish by law, that holy inquisition which they can now only infuse into public opinion.”²⁵ Brownlow also sounded an alarm that Presbyterians were spreading what he considered false doctrine under the cover of non-denominational organizations. For instance, the American Sunday School Union, the American Tract Society and the American Bible Society were all controlled by the Presbyterians. He accused them and their “Calvinistic co-conspirators, the Baptists,” of selling Bibles and “growing rich from plundering the poverty-stricken seekers after religion.”²⁶

Ross responded with a series of articles published in the *Calvinistic Magazine* called “The Great Iron Wheel.” Between November 1846 to April 1850, Ross continued his attack on Methodism. Directly assailing Methodism, Ross declared their doctrines worse than Romanism, likening their class meetings to that of confessionals. He also alluded to improprieties by Methodists ministers toward the female members of the church writing they were “under priestly

²³ Ibid, 89.

²⁴ Brownlow, *Helps to the Study of Presbyterianism*, 94.

²⁵ Ibid., 179.

²⁶ Brownlow, *Helps to the Study of Presbyterianism* 90-91; Coulter, *William G. Brownlow*, 32.

control.”²⁷ Furthermore, he claimed, Wesley and the members of the Methodist church descended from the Tories in the American Revolution. Ross reasoned Methodism must be stopped because “it is dangerous to civil and religious liberties, and death to all the institutions for which Washington fought and freedmen died.” He, therefore, likened it to that of a great iron wheel which, if not checked, would roll down on American liberties and crush them.²⁸

Brownlow soon returned fire and called on fellow Methodist ministers to rise up and denounce the attack. While there was pushback against Ross’s criticism, Brownlow thought the response insufficient and sought to destroy Ross, saying, “I take the slanderer by the throat, and drag him from his hiding-place, and shake him naked over hell, in all his deformity!”²⁹ Brownlow acknowledged that such language coming from a Methodist minister might seem rather acerbic to his Christian readers, but he believed the falsehood had to be refuted in the strongest possible way. In offering justification for his hyperbolic language, he did not feel obliged to offer an apology for anything he had said or written.³⁰ After publication of Ross’s attack in the *Calvinist Magazine*, Brownlow published editorials in his *Jonesboro Quarterly Review* refuting Ross’s inflammatory statements. To that end Brownlow weaponized his newspaper to hit back and even created a running column entitled, “F.A. Ross’ Corner.” Later Brownlow also published a collection of his refutations to Ross’s allegations against the Methodist church in *The Great Iron Wheel Examined*. The verbal war became ugly and both men behaved unprofessionally, stooping to vicious personal attacks on the other.³¹

²⁷ William G. Brownlow, *The Great Iron Wheel Examined: Or, Its False Spokes Extracted, and an Exhibition of Elder Graves, Its Builder* (Nashville, TN: For the author, 1856), 141-42.

²⁸ F.A. Ross, “The Great Iron Wheel,” *The Calvinistic Magazine* 3 (October 1848): 303; Ross, *The Doctrine of the Direct Witness of the Spirit*, 108; Conkling and Wittig, “Religious Warfare in the Southern Highlands,” 39.

²⁹ Brownlow, *The Great Iron Wheel Examined*, 108.

³⁰ *Ibid*, iii, xi.

In 1846, Brownlow wrote a series of sermons and challenged Ross to a debate. Ross declined the debate, but Brownlow persisted in his attack. He pledged to his readers that he would “make Mr. Ross sick of his wicked and uncalled for assaults upon the Methodists.”³² Thus Brownlow set out to cast doubt on his credibility and ruin his reputation with a very public and unrelenting attack. He began by challenging Ross’s ancestry. Often referring to him as “Frederick Africanus Ross,” Brownlow claimed that Ross’s father had committed adultery with one of his slaves in Virginia. He characterized Ross as the “degraded son of an old Virginia negro wench – the illegitimate son of an old Scotch Tory of the war of the Revolution.”³³ Indeed, Brownlow’s malicious attacks on Ross and his family knew no bounds and he proceeded to air all the dirty laundry he could find. Brownlow asserted that Ross’s father, besides supporting the British during the American Revolutionary War, had died “a debauched old thief.” He claimed Davy Ross, Frederick’s son, had been guilty of some form of immodesty during a camp meeting, behavior that Brownlow claimed was so immoral that he refused to discuss it further. Yet he continued to disparage the family. Frederick’s brother had committed suicide and his niece had run away with a married man and they were living together in sin. A nephew had abandoned his wife and child to run away with another woman. The attack went on and on. Reportedly, Davy Ross was so angry that he threatened to kill Brownlow.³⁴

³¹ Conkling and Wittig, “Religious Warfare in the Southern Highlands,” 41-44; Humphrey, “*That D-----D Brownlow*”: *Being a Saucy and Malicious Description of William Gannaway Brownlow*,” 72.

³² Brownlow, *The Great Iron Wheel Examined*, 112-116; Conkling and Wittig, “Religious Warfare in the Southern Highlands,” 41.

³³ Brownlow, *The Great Iron Wheel Examined*, 146; Coulter, *William G. Brownlow*, 60.

³⁴ Coulter, *William G. Brownlow*, 60; Conkling and Wittig, “Religious Warfare in the Southern Highlands,” 43.

Ross never publicly debated Brownlow, but the “Fighting Parson” continued his attack in Methodist pulpits throughout East Tennessee and Southwest Virginia. Reportedly, in just three days, he spoke to 21,000 people in sermons which could last hours. He once again he defended his strong language to audiences, maintaining that it was necessary to meet and destroy the assault levied by Ross and the Presbyterians against the Methodists’ doctrine.³⁵ Ross also continued to assail the Methodist church from the Presbyterian pulpit. In May 1848, he preached a series of sermons at the Glade Spring Church in Washington County, Virginia, in which he alleged one hundred ways John Wesley had been proven a liar and a fraud. A group of college students who attended nearby Emory and Henry College, a Methodist school, asked their college president Charles Collins to come and refute Ross’s attack. Reverend Collins obliged and reportedly some two thousand spectators attended his six-hour sermon in rebuttal to Ross. One spectator remarked, “I never witnessed anything like it in my life. No slanderer ever received such an awful scathing at the hands of any living man.”³⁶ After two years of this back-and-forth, Brownlow declared victory and turned his attention elsewhere. Brownlow’s biographer, E. M. Coulter, remarked that Brownlow was victorious because, “Whether Brownlow’s accusations against Ross were true or not, he had heaped such unrestrained abuse upon him that any person with sensibilities would flee them [rather] than involve himself in a defense.”³⁷

Because he was so outspoken, Brownlow had many enemies other than the Ross family and it is surprising he was not murdered. That is not to say no one tried; they were just

³⁵ Conkling and Wittig, “Religious Warfare in the Southern Highlands,” 45-46; Kelly, “William Gannaway Brownlow, Part I,” 32.

³⁶ *Jonesborough Whig and Independent Journal [Jonesborough, TN]*, May 24, 1848; June 14, 1848; Brownlow, *The Great Iron Wheel Examined*, 93, 131; Conkling and Wittig, “Religious Warfare in the Southern Highlands,” 46-48.

³⁷ Coulter, *William G. Brownlow*, 65.

unsuccessful. For instance, in 1840, someone fired two shots into Brownlow's home while he was writing at a table. The suspect was never identified officially, but Brownlow accused Landon Carter Haynes, who was the editor of the *Tennessee Sentinel*, a rival newspaper. The situation between the two men did not improve and two months later there was a confrontation on the streets of Jonesborough. When Brownlow saw Haynes on the street, he proceeded to attack him with his cane. Haynes pulled out a pistol and shot Brownlow in the thigh. Although a nasty wound, it was not life-threatening. A few years after this incident, Brownlow was attending a camp meeting when he was attacked by unknown assailants and severely beaten. He realized the dangers of his occupation as he wrote, he was living "in the midst of an unprincipled band of assassins, bloodhounds and murderers."³⁸ Yet, he continued to express his opinions often in scathing editorials.

For Parson Brownlow, there was no separation between politics and religion. He insisted it was ludicrous to believe that a minister could not have an opinion on political issues of the day. Moreover, he ridiculed those who maintained that "to [be] acceptable to all, as God's Ambassador, he must preach ... to the Whig and the Democrat ... knowing no party, having no preferences and feeling no concern for his country ... he has a commission from God."³⁹ Instead, Brownlow proclaimed it was the duty of ministers to support their country because the "American Clergyman feels and knows that his country was baptized in the blood of Christian forefathers."⁴⁰ He firmly supported the Whig party and Henry Clay was his so-called "political idol." During the 1844 presidential election, Brownlow used his newspaper to denounce the

³⁸ Dunn, *The Civil War in Southern Appalachian Methodism*, 69.

³⁹ *Knoxville Whig*, May 4, 1850.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

Democratic Party, and he regularly attacked fellow Tennesseans Andrew Jackson and James K. Polk. Clay won the Whig Party nomination but lost the presidency to Polk. The following year, Brownlow faced further discouragement in the Whig political camp after he ran for Congress unsuccessfully. Andrew Johnson, a rising star in the Democratic Party, was elected instead. This was the beginning of a political rivalry between Johnson and Brownlow that would span many years.⁴¹ After Johnson was elected governor of Tennessee in 1853 and 1855, despite Brownlow's vigorous newspaper opposition, Brownlow publicly proclaimed, "I therefore pronounce your Governor, here upon his own dunghill, an unmitigated liar and calumniator, and a villainous coward."⁴²

The main issue of the day, of course, was slavery and it was hotly debated by both sides. Predictably, Brownlow did not shy away from the explosive topic and had much to say about the institution. Thus, historians have judged him harshly, as his comments remain controversial to the present day. On the eve of the Civil War, Brownlow delivered a sermon on slavery at Temperance Hall in Knoxville, Tennessee on August 9, 1857. Brownlow's text was from I Timothy 6:1 "Let as many servants as are under the yoke count their own masters worthy of all honor, that the name of God and his doctrine be not blasphemed."⁴³ In this sermon, Brownlow did not offer justification for the system of slavery, but instead he emphasized that the institution was the law of the land and therefore could not be overthrown by abolitionist forces in the North. Brownlow claimed that one would look in vain in the Bible for any word from Christ or the

⁴¹ The two men battled each other throughout their lives, but declared a truce during the Civil War as they both supported the Union cause.

⁴² Kelly, "William Gannaway Brownlow, Part I," 34; Coulter, *William G. Brownlow*, 120-121, *Knoxville Whig*, July 16, 1845; Paul H. Bergeron, *Antebellum Politics in Tennessee* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1982), 72, 95.

⁴³ I Timothy 6:1 (King James Version).

apostles calling for the overthrow of laws enacted by the government.⁴⁴ During his sermon, he also touched on the hypocrisy of the abolitionist movement itself. To illustrate this, Brownlow used the example of Stephen Olin and Bishop James Andrew. Olin migrated from New England to Georgia and was introduced to the ministry by Bishop Andrew. Soon afterward, Olin married a young lady who owned many slaves. Olin sold the slaves, made a substantial profit, and later returned to New England. At the Methodist General Conference in 1844, Andrew was arraigned because he had married a widowed lady who owned slaves. Brownlow pointed to the hypocrisy of Olin speaking out and voting against the Andrew. Yet Olin, a few years earlier, had pocketed substantial funds from the sale of his wife's slaves. Throughout the sermon, he asserted no confidence in those northern abolitionists who had connections with the Methodist church. Brownlow declared that if any of these men make it into heaven then they will have gotten there by "practicing fraud upon the door-keeper!"⁴⁵ To illustrate his views on slavery, Brownlow used a quote from English poet Alexander Pope, "Order is heaven's first law, and this confessed, Some are, and must be, greater than the rest."⁴⁶ He believed God placed man in his earthly roles. To this end, Brownlow compared free blacks in the North to slaves in the South. He concluded the Northern free black man was just as poor and destitute as his slave counterpart in the South. Thus, he called out Northern insincerity for criticizing slavery while free blacks were deprived of rights in the North. While legally free, they were not treated equally in society. They had separate churches, hospitals, and passenger cars. Moreover, they were relegated to the lowest

⁴⁴ William Gannaway Brownlow, *A sermon on slavery; a vindication of the Methodist church, South: her position stated* (Knoxville, TN: Kinsloe & Rice, 1857), 7-8.

⁴⁵ Brownlow, *A sermon on slavery*, 12-13.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 14.

employment positions. While slavery, Brownlow admitted, was a vile institution, it nevertheless was “established by law” and “an inevitable and necessary consequence, growing out of the condition of human society.”⁴⁷ During the course of his sermon, he could not resist taking special aim at the Presbyterian church and long-time adversary Reverend Ross for claiming theirs was the only denomination which had a “defined ground on the slavery question.”⁴⁸ To that Brownlow sarcastically commended them for being thirteen years behind the Methodist church. Moreover, Brownlow called out Ross for deceitfulness. When Ross lived in East Tennessee, he proclaimed emancipation for slaves, but seemingly changed his stance after moving to Alabama and serving in a church where those views were not popular.⁴⁹

As slavery continued to divide the country, Brownlow persisted in his criticism of abolitionists, blaming them for the stoking the fires of violence. When Harriet Beecher Stowe published *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, he was outraged. He characterized the book as “shameful and unmitigated falsehoods” writing that while Stowe was held up “a religious woman, a pious saint” in the North she published “base falsehoods, wicked and malicious slanders, against her Southern neighbors.”⁵⁰ Some months later he continued his attack on Stowe, offering an unflattering personal description. He described her as “ugly as Original Sin – an abomination in the eye of civilized people” and as a “vulgar-looking women – stoop shouldered with a long yellow neck, and a long-peaked nose – through which she speaks.”⁵¹ Brownlow’s outrage over

⁴⁷ Ibid, 16.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 23.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 25.

⁵⁰ *Knoxville Whig*, February 12, 1853.

⁵¹ *Knoxville Whig*, August 13, 1853.

the abolitionist movement further intensified after John Brown's raid at Harper's Ferry in 1859. Brown, a radical abolitionist, led a raid against a U.S. arsenal at Harper's Ferry, Virginia, in an attempt to arm the slaves and start an uprising. The effort failed and Brown was arrested, tried, and hanged for treason. Brownlow was furious that northern clergymen were eulogizing and depicting him a martyr. He wrote, "the gospel these hypocrites preach is a gospel of rifles, of revolvers, of pikes, of fire, murder, insurrection, and all the horrors of civil war."⁵²

As the country descended into a civil war, Brownlow remained faithful to the Union. He detested secession and the Confederacy. He wrote of his "uncompromising devotion to the American Union as established by our fathers, and unmitigated hostility to the armed rebels who are seeking its destruction."⁵³ East Tennessee had petitioned to remain in the Union and become a separate state, but the Nashville "rebel" congress ignored the request and Tennessee seceded from the Union in June 1861. Parson Brownlow continued to print and circulate his newspaper, which contained plenty of anti-Confederate editorials. However, the situation became very dangerous and Brownlow feared for his life and the lives of his family. On October 26, 1861 he suspended publication of the *Whig*, writing, "Confederate authorities have determined upon my arrest, and I am to be indicted before the Grand Jury of the Confederate Court." He continued, "I have committed no offense. I have not shouldered arms against the Confederate Government, or the State." Brownlow declared the reason for his arrest was to "destroy the last and only Union paper left in the eleven seceded states."⁵⁴ Over the next month, tensions escalated when several Unionists burned bridges along the vital East Tennessee & Georgia (E&G) and East Tennessee

⁵² *Knoxville Whig*, December 3, 1859.

⁵³ Stephen Ash, ed., *Secessionists and Other Scoundrels*, 12.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 74-76.

& Virginia (E&V) railroad lines. Tennessee Governor Isham Harris proclaimed martial law in the region. Bridge burners and suspected Unionist troublemakers were rounded up, sent to prison and some were later executed for treason. Brownlow was accused of inciting the uprising, but he denied any involvement. Nevertheless, because of his past inflammatory editorials, Brownlow was arrested for treason on December 6, 1861 and sent to a Knoxville prison. He kept a journal of what transpired and what he witnessed while there. On one occasion Brownlow was offered release if he would take a loyalty oath. Moreover, he was asked to serve as a chaplain in the Confederate army. Brownlow replied in his ever abrasive manner that “When I shall have made up my mind to go to hell, I will cut my throat, and go direct, and not travel round by way of the Southern Confederacy.”⁵⁵ Yet he truly believed he was bound for the gallows and this would have certainly saved him. Brownlow did not hang and in the spring of 1862, he was released and exiled to the North. Once in the North he began making his rounds on the lecture circuit speaking in many venues across Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, New York, and most of New England. He raised thousands of dollars for East Tennessee refugees and toward reestablishing the *Whig*.⁵⁶

Early in 1863, Brownlow returned to Nashville and then finally to Knoxville later in September when Union troops liberated the city from Confederate control. Brownlow immediately began publication of his newspaper and the first issue of the new *Whig and Rebel Ventilator*, appeared November 11, 1863. The northern edition of his paper had an estimated

⁵⁵ Ash, ed., *Secessionists and Other Scoundrels*, 3-4.

⁵⁶ Coulter, *William G. Brownlow*, 169-192; Kelly, “William Gannaway Brownlow, Part II,” *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 43, no. 2 (Summer 1984): 156-158; Humphrey, “*That D-----D Brownlow*”: *Being a Saucy and Malicious Description of William Gannaway Brownlow*,” 254-262.

circulation of 20,000 readers.⁵⁷ When the war ended in 1865, William Brownlow was elected governor of Tennessee. Nearly forty years earlier he had started his career as a relatively unknown circuit-riding Methodist minister, and having achieved national recognition he filled a powerful post-war position. Unfortunately, Brownlow was not very successful in his political life, primarily because of his attempt to govern with an iron fist. After serving five years as governor, he became a U.S. Senator and served one six-year term. The "Fighting Parson" died in Knoxville, Tennessee in 1877.⁵⁸

A Methodist minister and a contemporary of Brownlow, R.N. Price, described him as one who "could express more vituperation and scorching hate than any half a dozen men that ever appeared in American politics The man was a strange compound, and there are no more like him."⁵⁹ His best-known biographer characterized him as "a product of his times, but his times produced none other like him."⁶⁰ Nevertheless, his patriotic legacy extended into the early 20th century and his home in Knoxville, Tennessee became known as a "Mecca" that many public officials, presidents, and prominent men visited. The Parson's widow, Eliza, lived in the home until her death in 1910. The last signature on her guest book was that of William Howard Taft.⁶¹

Today, historians have very few positive things to say about Parson Brownlow. He was certainly controversial, coarse, and often a divisive and turbulent character, yet at least one historian believes it is time to give Brownlow his due credit where it is deserved. Stephen Ash

⁵⁷ Humphrey, "*That D-----D Brownlow*": *Being a Saucy and Malicious Description of William Gannaway Brownlow*," 262.

⁵⁸ Kelly, "William Gannaway Brownlow, Part II," 170-172; Ash, ed., *Secessionists and Other Scoundrels*, 12.

⁵⁹ Coulter, *William G. Brownlow*, 397.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 400.

⁶¹ "A Famous Tennessee Shrine," *The New York Times*, December 10, 1911.

acknowledges that Brownlow was flawed, and his legacy was contentious at best, but during the Civil War, he endured great hardship and risked his life in support of his country. When he was in a Confederate prison, Brownlow was offered amnesty if he would simply pledge his loyalty to the Confederacy. He refused, saying, “I would lie here until I died with old age before I would take such an oath.”⁶² Thus the so-called “Fighting Parson” never retreated from an argument nor did he ever back down from a challenge to his beliefs. His early life as an itinerate minister on the Appalachian frontier prepared Brownlow for his role as newspaper editor and helped him achieve national prominence by engaging in the same boldness through which he declared his uncompromising views of religion, politics, and society.

⁶² Ash, ed., *Secessionists and Other Scoundrels*, 8; Douglas O. Cumming, “Ink and Blood: Dueling as an Occupational Hazard in Southern Journalism.” *Journalism History* 44, no. 1 (Spring 2018): 44-45.

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