

## **WILLIAM BROWNLOW (1830-1901): BISHOP OF CLIFTON**

### **Convert, Scholar, Bishop of Clifton**

**By Giles Mercer**

Why is William Brownlow important for us today? Why did I think he was worth writing about?

First, Brownlow was a convert to the Catholic Church. This life-changing decision to become a Catholic is always important and rarely easy. In mid-nineteenth century England it could come at a heavy cost, in personal, family and social terms, and it needed perseverance and courage. While there were difficulties on the way for Brownlow, conversion brought him deep fulfilment. Beneath the measured, very English tones of his writings there is a scarcely concealed joy, and pride in being a Catholic. That pride and joy is something inspiring for Catholics today.

Unusually, he was not a member of the Oxford Movement. He was a Cambridge graduate. He did not come into the Catholic Church with the droves of others following Newman's sensational and much-publicised conversion in 1845 nor with the large numbers who came over to Rome following Manning's equally sensational conversion in 1851. Brownlow was a member of the Church of England for the first thirty-three years of his life and converted in 1863. That was not so unusual: conversions to the Catholic Church occurred steadily throughout the nineteenth century, and indeed right up to the 1960s, after which they have dropped markedly. One of the spikes was in the First World War when some 40,000 British servicemen entered the Church, as large a number as had been seen since the early Church.

What was unusual about Brownlow – and one of the things that I think makes him impressive for us – was that he was a DIY convert. He knew no Catholics. Indeed, the few he had come across he hadn't much liked. He has spent about eight years on his own, reading on a massive scale, along with his very demanding pastoral duties as a curate and vicar. He thought, read more, thought again, pondered, prayed, struggled. As with other converts, of course, becoming a Catholic was the pivotal experience in Brownlow's life, as he was to emphasise again on his death-bed. Brownlow saw his first 33 years as a journeying towards conversion, and the 38 years after as a deepening and a flowering.

What pushed him towards the Catholic Church – and he resisted this for some years – was history and the Eucharist.

Let's take history first. He immersed himself in early Church history and in the history of the English Reformation of the sixteenth century. He came to what he saw as the inescapable conclusion that only the Catholic Church had fully protected and developed the beliefs of the early Church as handed on from Christ himself. Brownlow became one of the foremost authorities of the catacombs in Rome –

publishing three great volumes and many articles on the subject – and sought to demonstrate that the beliefs seen in catacomb wall-paintings and other art-forms were continued only in the Catholic Church. He immersed himself in the writings of the Church Fathers, did Newman of course. He also became an authority on the medieval church liturgy and devotions. Again, he saw only the Catholic Church of his day continuing this worship in its fullness and continuing the beliefs which underpinned it. He saw the Reformation, particularly the Elizabethan Settlement of 1558-59, as a complete break with what went before. Even the line of authority of the bishops was broken, snapped so to speak. This, by the way, is the general view of contemporary historians, not only the Catholic Eamon Duffy, but the Anglican historian, Diarmaid MacCulloch.

Though he wished it might have been otherwise, history kept nudging Brownlow in the direction of communion with Rome, as it did with Newman. The second driving force – or endlessly nagging element – was the Eucharist. What bothered Brownlow was that within his own Church of England were differing beliefs in the Eucharist: for the Evangelicals it was a spiritual remembrance; for High-Church Anglicans it was the body and blood of Christ; for others it was something in between. And yet Catholics across the world believed the same, and had consistently done so down the centuries. In the end and after much worrying, Brownlow felt, in his words, the Eucharist was not safe in the hands of the Church of England.

After wrestling with these major questions and minor ones too, he was left with only two outstanding questions – one was over the temporal power of the papacy; the other was to do with whether the confessions of Anglicans were valid sacraments. He could get no further so through a friend he was able to make contact with Newman, who answered his questions in wonderful letters, full of care and sensitivity. At last, he was satisfied and so he asked Newman to receive him into the Catholic Church at the Brompton Oratory. Brownlow and Newman were to develop a friendship: indeed, Brownlow could be counted among Newman's twenty closest friends.

But for Brownlow, conversion did not end there. Conversion was a theme in his thinking and spirituality right through his life. He came to the view, which I think is vital in any thinking these days about evangelisation, that conversion was a three-stage or three-layered phenomenon. The first and fundamental step, which he believed must apply to each and every Christian, was the need to establish a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, and a relationship which deepened and strengthened throughout one's life. For this he was grateful to the Evangelical Anglicans who had influenced him. Unless and until one had that personal, life-changing relationship with Our Saviour and the abundant mercy given to the believer, then the graces of the sacraments would not flow as they might. I think this is a point Pope Francis keeps trying to communicate. The second stage or aspect of conversion was joining

the Catholic Church. That is what is commonly understood by conversion. But there was a third and crucially important stage for Brownlow. Conversion must mean a continuous day-by-day process, a constant turning to Christ, a change of mind and heart, making Christ the centre of one's life, despite set-backs and failures. That fundamental point was unusual for that time, or perhaps any time. It puts Brownlow right among our contemporary spiritual writers, especially Americans such as Scott Hahn.

Brownlow wrote about conversion. He wrote about his own conversion first of all. He wrote biographies of two fellow converts: Sir James Marshall a distinguished colonial judge and Mother Mary Rose Columba Adams, a Dominican nun who played an important part in the early Catholic life of South Australia. These two people, great in their own ways, were close friends of his, and these books were widely read, and not just by Catholics. In writing about converts Brownlow did not disguise his wish to attract others to the Catholic Church.

And then Brownlow was one of only seven convert-bishops up to the 1960s. This gave him a strength and an edge, so to speak. Brownlow had not come through the narrow seminary system. His priestly formation in Rome was at the Collegio Pio, the forerunner of the Beda College for mature men. But Brownlow was treated as someone of some standing already and allowed a good deal of freedom. Moreover, Brownlow acknowledged his debt to Anglicanism and brought into the Catholic Church the debt he owed to his experiences in the Church of England.

Conversion then – and all the aspects of it – make Brownlow an important figure for us today. Secondly, he is important because he was a scholar of considerable standing. He believed scholarship should be in the service of pastoral care and evangelisation. He was one of the most effective Catholic apologists of his time, a great defender and advocate of the Catholic Church. He was effective precisely because he showed respect to his opponents and treated them with courtesy. Such courtesy in debate was rare in Victorian religious controversy, when passions ran high and opponents had scorn poured on their heads. He was effective too because he believed that scrupulous attention to the evidence and measured arguments – trying to get at the truth as far as humanly possible – was the only way to influence others and the only way for the Catholic Church to be taken more seriously by her critics. In this he was surely he right.

Brownlow was an outstanding priest in the Plymouth Diocese. His greatest work lay in promoting Catholic schools in the Diocese and serving the cause of Catholic education on the national stage as well. No one was surprised when he was appointed bishop of Clifton in 1894. Throughout his life he had a deep concern for the poor and the marginalised. He worked especially for orphans and children in need, sharing this with other Christian bodies. He worked tirelessly too for the ending of slavery in parts of Africa, a practice that continued into the 1890s. Once again, we

see the priorities and spirit of our own Church as led by Pope Francis and popes over the last fifty years.

I'll now do a bit of filling in and take you through his life and achievements. Like many nineteenth-century converts, Brownlow was the son of an Anglican clergyman. His father was the rector of St Bartholomew's in Wilmslow in Cheshire. The Brownlow forebears were people of substance, landowners, lawyers, clergymen and public servants, in the Midlands and North, and in Northern Ireland, where the Brownlows were good to their tenants and protected the Catholic community, supporting emancipation.

Young Brownlow went to a nearby preparatory school run by a clergyman and then on to Rugby School in 1847. The great headmaster of Rugby, Dr Thomas Arnold, had died unexpectedly in office in 1842, but his vision was kept alive and his legacy developed. Brownlow received arguably the best public-school education of the day, in a school which stood for moral earnestness and an emphasis on using one's talents in life to serve others and to follow Christ. It also taught history in a way that cross-referred the past and the present. This approach to history and the school's ideals of service, left lasting marks on Brownlow. From Rugby, he went up to Trinity College, Cambridge, the greatest Cambridge College then enjoying a golden period. He read mathematics, the greatest Cambridge discipline. This was mixed with a rich diet of classics and twice-daily chapel and regular Divinity lectures.

At 21 Brownlow went with his parents and sister, Melise, on a summer holiday in Switzerland. His journal in the Clifton archives evokes the mid-nineteenth century English Romantic love of the Alps and it gives us details about Swiss life and customs, together with splendid accounts of the English upper classes abroad, including some early mountaineers. Detailed descriptions are illustrated frequently by Brownlow's charming sketches, some of which are reproduced in my biography. Brownlow's imagination was full of Turner and Ruskin, Thackeray and Dickens whom he read enthusiastically, and the Great Exhibition which he had recently looked round. After a good degree, he started as a curate in a coal-mining area in Staffordshire, where he spent about a year.

Thirsty for deeper religious experiences, however, he wanted to learn from the remarkable revivalist preacher, the Revd Robert Aitken, a Scotsman who ministered to the tin-miners at Pendeen near the tip of Cornwall. Brownlow got leave of absence to spend four months living with him and his family, and it proved a deeply stirring and formative period. Aitken governed his family and household like an abbot, with bells for regular prayer and liturgy. This left a deep impression on Brownlow of religious life lived out in a disciplined, yet loving, way in community. It also led to a break-through in Brownlow's understanding of the Church. Aitken showed how one can be both an Evangelical Bible-centred Christian *and* hold a high doctrine of the

sacraments: indeed, the two should be mutually reinforcing, both-and, rather than either-or, as they were so often regarded in nineteenth-century religious polemics.

Brownlow left Cornwall filled with zeal, and he wanted to serve the poorest of the poor. He moved to a curacy in the slums of the east end of London in about 1855 and became very friendly with another curate, James Marshall. Marshall, another clergyman's son, was to fall under the influence of Henry Manning and became a Catholic. Marshall's conversion undoubtedly had an impact on Brownlow who was already on a religious journey, which had begun in London – or even in Cornwall – and that was to lead him into the Catholic Church at the end of about eight years. During this period of spiritual quest and anxiety he was helped by his sister, Melise, a deeply devout young woman, who was immersing herself not only in the best Evangelical writers but also in Catholic writings, notably those of St Teresa of Avila. Melise's death at only twenty-three was a grievous blow for her brother and parents. Brownlow wrote a moving account of his sister's life and his stirring sermon at her funeral was published, at the request of others. He pitched the hardest-hitting part at the young men in the congregation, who were inclined to see religion as women's business.

From 1857 to 1860 Brownlow was a curate in Tetbury in south Gloucestershire. We do not know exactly why he left London, but my own suspicion is that he was nearly exhausted. Nonetheless, Tetbury then was no cushy number. It was suffering something of an economic depression and there was much poverty. Again, Brownlow threw himself into good works and especially teaching the children of the poor. At the same time in Tetbury, he finished off his translation of St Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo*, which, as far as I know, was the first English translation, and it reads well. This reflected Brownlow's growing interest in medieval thought and his personal preoccupations with the Incarnation and salvation. He gave a series of lectures on the early Church in the Assembly Rooms at Tetbury open to all. He made a visit to the nearby Dominican Priory at Woodchester. Whatever took place, this began his link with the Dominican Order that was to be a shaping force in his life.

Health problems, however, had set in for Brownlow – he hints at some kind of nervous exhaustion – and he took leave of absence for nine months in 1859 to 1860 to have a rest and to pursue his growing interest in archaeology. He made a tour of Egypt, to see the recent archaeological discoveries and then on to the Holy Land, to see the remains of the sacred sites. His detailed journal, also with sketches, is in Downside. His final spell as an Anglican curate was spent at the centre of High-Church Ritualism, St John's, Torquay. There he had published a funeral sermon he wrote on the death of a saintly choir-boy in the parish, George Matthew Hoare.

Through his friend, James Marshall, now teaching at The Oratory School, Brownlow in 1863 made contact with Newman, and was received into the Catholic Church on 15 November 1863. In 1864 he began priestly training in Rome. There he

struck up a close friendship with the Irish Dominican prior of San Clemente, the remarkable Fr Tom Burke, one of the greatest pulpit-orators in the English-speaking world, in constant demand for preaching tours of Britain, Ireland and America. Burke and Brownlow made an unlikely pair: Burke, the passionate, highly articulate and deeply austere, yet very amusing, Irish nationalist and Brownlow, the rather reserved, but affable, cigar-smoking, chess-playing, newspaper-reading English gentleman. Burke liked Brownlow for his good sense and good company. Brownlow, for his part, was attracted to Dominican spirituality, joining their Third Order in the cell of St Dominic at Santa Sabina in Rome.

Brownlow's other significant friendship in Rome was with the aristocrat and scholar, Commendatore Giovanni Battista De Rossi, the greatest Christian archaeologist of his time and perhaps of all time, the man above all responsible for the opening up of ancient Christian sites in Rome, mostly the catacombs. Brownlow, collaborating with James Spencer Northcote, the President of Oscott College, was to work tirelessly to make De Rossi's work known to English readers.

Brownlow spent the period from the summer of 1867 until the Spring of 1894 in the Plymouth Diocese, mostly as Missioner at St Mary Church in Torquay and chaplain to the Dominican Sisters next door and to their orphanage and to their school for girls. Again, Brownlow combined heavy pastoral work with scholarship. Brownlow's interest in Christian archaeology sharpened and deepened. He and Northcote brought out their celebrated work in 1869, *Roma Sotterranea*, which was intended to make known to an English readership the results of De Rossi's work, together with the best of archaeology from across Europe at that time. *Roma Sotterranea* was heavily revised, and turned into two volumes in 1879. Besides all this, he was absorbed in massive correspondence in the local press and in polemical debate with local Anglican clergy on the nature of the Church of England, on the true historical continuity of the Catholic Church from earliest times, and on the nature of papal infallibility. He also pursued his interests in medieval spirituality and theology, this time in collaboration with a Cistercian monk of Mount St Bernard in Leicestershire, Henry Collins, a convert.

Brownlow's scholarship was mixed with demanding work for the Diocese. In 1883 he became the Plymouth Diocese's first Inspector of Schools, a subject close to his heart. In 1888 Bishop Vaughan appointed him Vicar General. In his final years at Plymouth Brownlow attended Newman's requiem. He wrote on medieval West Country saints, published a biography of his old friend, Sir James Marshall, who had left teaching for the law and was eventually knighted for his services as a judge in West Africa. He continued to produce a flow of articles and translations and lectures on early and medieval Church history. In 1892 his lectures on *Slavery and Serfdom in Europe* were published, a very notable work which I'll come back to.

Why is William Brownlow important for us today? Two reasons stand out: first, his conversion and all that it entailed; secondly, his contribution to the Catholic Church of his time and later, and his contribution to the wider society. We've already looked at conversion, except I should add that Brownlow told his conversion story so well, in 67 pages of straightforward, measured prose, all the more effective for its brevity, its clarity, its logic, and its lack of triumphalism. Of course, it is outclassed in most ways by Newman's *Apologia* (1864), but Brownlow's *How and Why I Became a Catholic: a Letter to Friends in the Church of England* (1863) has an impressive place, and it was written while Brownlow was staying at the Birmingham Oratory, while Newman was writing his *Apologia*.

I want to say more now about Brownlow's contributions to the Catholic Church and to the wider society. He became one of the notably effective Catholic apologists of the nineteenth century. He had a command of his subject matter and the gift of communicating his thoughts in a fresh, digestible way that made sense. His arguments were credible, even if the reader or listener didn't agree with all of them. He always appealed to reason and fair-mindedness. Brownlow was a true gentleman, showing unfailing courtesy to opponents. He was affable, utterly decent, and extraordinarily generous to good causes. His diplomatic qualities were recognised, even at the highest levels. It was to Brownlow, then only a student in Rome, that Pope Pius IX turned for assistance in dealing with Anglican visitors.

Perhaps more remarkably, Brownlow seems to have been liked and respected by all his clergy in the Clifton diocese. He had a breadth – a breadth of intellectual formation, a breadth from travel, a breadth of pastoral experience. Brownlow was not a dry academic. He took his ideas to the public. Most of his books and articles were publications of either sermons or lectures. He gave lectures in assembly rooms, to the Devonshire Association and other bodies. He made great use of the magic lantern. He wrote several articles for the *Dublin Review*, and strongly supported the Catholic Truth Society and its formula of clearly presented and easily affordable booklets. Brownlow devoted himself to children for much of his ministry, both Anglican and Catholic. He believed that children are special to Christ, as the Gospels tell us, that childhood holiness can be found and that it has important things to say to adults. Perhaps without realising it, he was part of that Mid-Victorian movement of new interest in the dignity and special qualities of childhood, such as we find at best in Dickens and Kingsley.

Brownlow became widely known not only for *Roma Sotterranea* but also for *Slavery and Serfdom in Europe*, a publication in 1892 of six lectures to coincide with the abolition of slavery in Brazil. As far as I am aware, Brownlow was the first to tell a continuous story of slavery from the ancient world, through medieval serfdom in England, Scotland and Ireland, to slavery in the British Empire, and serfdom in France, Germany and Russia. It was to be republished for mainly Afro-American universities

in the USA during the Civil Rights' period of the 1960s. The underlying message was to show the eventual workings of the Holy Spirit on Christian understanding in bringing to an end this un-Christian practice.

Brownlow came to further prominence in his lifetime and in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century through his *Short History of the Catholic Church in England*, first published in 1895. In 500 pages it is still, as far as I know, the only attempt to cover the whole of Catholic history in England beyond mere surveys. Brownlow's *Short History* was intended for an educated laity, for every presbytery and Catholic library in the land, and for teachers and older school students. It was often given on school Prize Days to sixth formers.

Brownlow was Bishop of Clifton from 1894 to 1901. He was 64 when appointed. Although he had poor health for his last year in office, he worked flat out till the end. Brownlow achieved much in a short time. Charitable and Social Involvement were given priority by him. He oversaw the care of the many Irish labourers who came to Avonmouth to work on the construction of the new dock, and their respect for him was marked shortly after his death by the consecration of the church of St Bernard's, Shirehampton, in the dock area in his honour (as he had taken Bernard as a middle name).

He involved himself, like Bishop Clifford, in the issues relating to government inspection of the Convent of the Good Shepherd in Bristol with its three branches: the Refuge for Destitute Children; the Girls' Reformatory; and the Home for Penitents (that is, poor girls who had been prostitutes). He concerned himself with the other three orphanages for girls in the diocese, with the industrial school for boys at Cannington near Bridgwater and the industrial school for girls, St Elizabeth's at Salisbury. He was a tremendous supporter of the Society of St Vincent de Paul. He gave every support, including his money, for the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, the Children's Help Society, and the Queen Victoria Convalescent Home in Bristol. This was an example of his conviction that, wherever possible, Catholics should work with others on charitable projects, an enlightened view at the time. On account of their shared concern for slum children and waifs, Brownlow became friends with the leading Bristol Congregationalist minister, Rev. Urijah R. Thomas, chairman of the Bristol School Board.

In regard to schools and universities, Brownlow invited the Christian Brothers to run Prior Park College, Bath, and St Brendan's College, Clifton, and supported the setting up of several schools in the diocese. It was Brownlow's breadth of mind that ensured his support not only for Catholic laymen attending Oxford and Cambridge, but for standing out against some of his fellow bishops in support of secular clergy studying at St Edmund's House, Cambridge, to which he put in some of his own money.



Brownlow consecrated churches at Cirencester, Minehead, Tisbury and Yeovil. He made great use of sermons at the foundation or consecration of new churches. These were set-piece rallying-cries for the faithful. Brownlow would invariably reconnect his congregation with the history of the Catholic Church in that locality, going back to pre-Reformation times; continuity, restoration, a kind of coming home. Then he would look to the future. He also brought religious congregations and orders into the Diocese or encouraged them to strengthen.

In 1897 the first Anglican bishop of the newly created bishopric of Bristol, Bishop George Forrest Browne, used his inaugural address to his clergy to claim that he was the only true bishop in Bristol. This forced Brownlow into a firm, yet courteous rebuttal, a sermon of 32 clinical yet courteous pages published as *Episcopal Jurisdiction in Bristol*. The controversy continued in the local press for some weeks, and was followed in the *Tablet*.

In 1898 The CTS published his five dialogues dealing with the Wesleyan view of conversion and other matters entitled *Catholics and Nonconformists or Dialogues on Conversion*. This was perhaps unique in this period, not least because Brownlow had his draft approved by both the Methodist and Catholic central authorities. Brownlow organised a highly successful CTS annual conference over three days in September 1895 in the Victoria Rooms in Clifton, the climax of which was to be a great Pilgrimage to Glastonbury, the first since the Reformation. In this he collaborated with Prior Ford of Downside. The pilgrimage is, of course, an annual diocesan event.

In the light of his concerns and efforts across such a wide front, it is not surprising that at his death Bishop Brownlow received glowing tributes not only across the Clifton Diocese and across the Church in this country, but also great appreciation from the Bristol press and civic bodies. The streets between the pro-cathedral and Holy Souls cemetery a mile away were lined for the funeral cortege, and a special pause was allowed to enable the crowds of children to pay their respects. Typical of him was his wish to be buried not in the Cathedral but along with the faithful in the Catholic cemetery.

This talk was given to the North Gloucestershire Circle on February 5<sup>th</sup>. Copies (hardback only) of Giles Mercer's *Convert, Scholar, Bishop: William Brownlow 1830-1901* (Downside Abbey Press, 2016, pp. 608, £30 plus £3 p&p) can be obtained online from [downsideabbey.co.uk](http://downsideabbey.co.uk) or by contacting Steven Parsons at Downside on 01761 235323

