

# Donald Munro

by John Bjorlie

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*Donald Munro was a Scottish evangelist who dedicated his life to spreading the gospel, facing opposition and persecution, and training future leaders in the ministry.*

**Scripture:** Mark 9:24

**Topics:** "Evangelism", "Gods Grace"

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## Description

John Bjorlie preaches about the life of Donald Munro, who despite being resistant to the gospel initially, had a life-changing encounter with God through various evangelists and preachers. Munro's journey of faith led him to become a dedicated evangelist, working alongside others to spread the gospel and establish congregations in various regions. His commitment to sharing the Word of God and leading by example inspired many to turn to Christ, despite facing opposition and challenges along the way. Munro's life exemplifies the transformative power of God's grace and the impact one individual can have on the Kingdom of God.

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## Transcript

Donald Munro (1839-1908) was born in the county Caithness, in the far north of Scotland. His parents, James and Hannah Munro, held the "old Puritan theology of the highlands that conversion is a necessity, the new birth a work of the Spirit in the soul, and the gospel the means used to effect it." They gathered their children daily to read from the Gaelic Bible and to pray. In the Disruption of 1843, James took his family out of the Established Church of Scotland and joined the Free Church which was more evangelistic. But despite his parents' godly example, Donald was resistant to the gospel.

His older brother Charles was the first of the Munro children to make a clear profession of salvation. Charles witnessed to his younger brother on a long walk, but Donald "didn't want to be spoken to in that way again."

In July of 1958, while working as an apprentice cabinetmaker in the town of Wick, he went to hear Hay MacDowall Grant, the laird of Arndilly. He spoke from Romans 8:1, and seemed to talk directly to Munro. "Young man! You may have read your Bible and said your prayers this morning, but did you pray? I warn you now before God, who knows you thoroughly, that if you are not in Christ, you are under condemnation."

Six weeks later, he went to speak privately with Brownlow North, who laid the facts before Donald in a way he had never seen them before. Later that night, he looked to God in faith. Immediately, he wanted to tell his roommate that he had been converted, but was afraid. Finally waking him in the middle of the night, he told the whole story, and the roommate also trusted Christ.

Early in his Christian life he contacted James Dewar, who was preaching under Donald Ross' Northeast Coast Mission among the fishing villages. After working hours, Donald would accompany Dewar. This was harvest season along that coast. Dewar's success owed nothing to any brilliance or natural persuasiveness on Dewar's part. Rather his proximity to God and the throne of grace gave him influence among men. He would spend protracted periods in secret prayer, sometimes cloistering himself for days seeking God in private.

Munro was simply a helper to Dewar. Then, one night James announced to the congregation that there would be two meetings going on at the same time the next evening. Donald knew Dewar would speak at one of them. After the meeting he asked who would be preaching at the other meeting. "You will," Dewar answered.

In 1865, Donald Ross invited Donald Munro to join in the gospel outreach of the Northeast Coast Mission. Donald worked mainly in the far north, in Sutherland shire. He also helped in the awakenings along the Moray Firth and in Aberdeenshire, lending a hand in the reaping of souls at Cairnbulg, Inverallochy, and at Footdee. Where the power of God was manifested, the meetings continued day and night.

As Ross searched his Bible, he decided to end his service in the Northeast Coast Mission. In 1870, he started the Northern Evangelistic Association. Munro was one of the first evangelists to join. It seemed a risky step, but Munro reasoned that if God was leading them out, then God would supply their needs. "His pot will be big enough to hold porridge for me." Soon the new mission society dissolved, and the men discovered that their relationship of co-laboring did not need the artificial bands and ligaments of some society or denomination.

At Inverurie there was strong opposition, but Munro was an overcomer. At their second gospel meeting, "few were present but scoffers, and such an exhibition of the devil, I never did see before anywhere. There were about thirty scoffers. During the time of prayer they hissed, cheered, and shouted so, that one could not hear his own voice." Munro took heart, knowing that sometimes the devil's roars are his admission of defeat, and that he leaves his victims to "wallow foaming" (Mk. 9:20). At the conclusion of the week, they saw twenty saved, among them an eighteen-year-old named John Ritchie, who went on to serve Christ with his tongue and pen, forming what is now John Ritchie Publishers.

In 1871, after a strenuous twelve months of gospel campaigns, Munro took a break to visit his brother Charles in Parkhill, Ontario. He also hoped to witness to his unconverted brother, William.

Mr. Munro reported on the progress of the work. His letters were printed in the Northern Intelligencer, and the Northern Witness, and became seeds of interest to bring other gospel preachers such as John Carnie, John Smith, Donald Ross, and Alexander Marshall over to Canada and the United States.

At this time, Ross was in Scotland examining the issue of Christian baptism, while Munro did likewise in Canada. Ross corresponded with his friend, saying that he saw the matter clearly, and was baptized in the River Dee one Saturday morning. Donald Munro sailed the ocean to have Ross baptize him at Aberdeen on December 31, 1871. Thereafter, believer's baptism was a key element of teaching to the new converts.

Munro also saw a bold step being taken in Scotland. In November of 1871, as James Campbell recalled, "the table of the Lord was spread in the simplicity of early times...It was a beautiful sight to us indeed. We had never heard of such a meeting until we saw it with our own eyes." As New Testament-style congregations sprang up, the opposition sprang up, too.

Munro discovered the meaning of that saying, "Endure hardness...do the work of an evangelist" when a Mr. McIntosh published the inflammatory booklet, *The New Prophets*. The scoffers felt that they had the support of the established church, and all restraint against violence and public ridicule was removed. At the meetings in Huntly, a clergyman stood up to disrupt the message with railing denunciations. Donald Ross said the mockers gave "savage, cruel, and brutal treatment, worthy of the palmy days of the Inquisition...God's truth had laid bare the sores, and they were very sore."

At a packed Sunday evening meeting, the scoffers turned the lights out and tried to cause a panic, but the Christians remained calm--even some of the scoffers were saved! At the climax of that meeting, the opposition rushed onto the platform, threw the preachers to the floor, and told them to desist or they would be murdered. The devil must have been quite worried about losing hold of Huntly. Rightly so! Thereafter it became the birthplace of a number of missionaries and Christian workers.

In October of 1872, Munro returned to Ontario. In 1873, he was joined in the work by James Campbell and John Smith to campaign in Chatham, Dundas, Forest, Galt, London, Orillia, St. Catharines, Stratford, and Toronto. The Word went out in power. Numbers came to the Saviour, and congregations were established.

The opposition persisted. A clergyman in Forest, ON warned, "Mr. Munro is all right so long as he keeps at the gospel, but I warn you against his Bible readings. They are sure to lead you astray."

One night in 1873, Munro visited the town of Shakespeare, near Stratford. "We can never forget the first time we heard the voice of Donald Munro preaching on the street in Shakespeare...Nobody spoke to him, and when he had finished he returned to Stratford. He came again the following night, preached in the open-air, and obtained permission to have meetings in the schoolhouse. There he was joined by Mr. Smith, his fellow-laborer. They preached the Word simply and faithfully each night, and God gave blessing. Sinners were saved, and those who were the Lord's revived."

But the Presbyterian minister was not so encouraged when he noticed some of his sheep straying over to the schoolhouse. He set in motion a cycle of abuse. Munro and Smith lost the use of the schoolhouse, and every place they rented or stayed at was vandalized. Windows were broken, and stones smashed against the doors of private houses. One day a property owner stood looking at the work of a mob on the previous evening, when an elder of the church which was the most guilty of the violence walked by. While embarrassed by his fellow parishioners, he made the lame excuse, "The truth must be upheld at all cost, even if stones have to be used." On hearing this, John Ritchie remarked, "Very likely the murderers of Stephen would have given a similar answer." Yet in the spring Munro baptized twenty-five from Shakespeare.

At Clyde, ON, Munro, Smith and Carnie preached for five weeks. A brother McPherson hosted Munro. "His godly life in our home and his earnest prayers had a wonderful effect on all. He often retired alone to the edge of a wood to pour out his soul in prayer to God, continuing for a long time. He was the first to open up the Word of God to us, and we never knew any who could do it so simply and plainly as he did. In one day Mr. Munro baptized fifty believers in a pond near Clyde."

In June of 1874, Munro and Smith came to Hamilton, ON. They preached six weeks of gospel meetings and decided that the meager results dictated that they should pack their bags. But on the last night, a young man named Thomas Muir was saved. Munro and Smith were heartened, and decided to stay a little longer. They unpacked their bags. Two nights later, Thomas Muir leaned over to a distressed young man and asked, "Have you eternal life?" "No, I have not, but I wish I did have." A few minutes later, the man, William Faulknor, trusted Christ. Sitting behind them, Kenneth Muir listened, and he was saved. Faulknor would eventually go to Angola to serve in mission work with Fred Stanley Arnot, while Muir became a missionary to the metropolis of Detroit.

In Toronto, Munro became a frequent guest in the John and Sophia Ironside home, along with his co-worker, John Smith. A ten-year-old named Henry Allen Ironside would never forget the men who "carried with them the atmosphere of eternity." "One of them was very tall, and wore a long brown beard. His name was Donald Munro. The other was quite short; his beard was long also, but it was black, and his eyebrows were bushy and very shaggy. Harry used to enjoy watching him clip them." The shorter man's name was John Smith (but privately nicknamed "Hellfire Jack"). As they came down the stairs for breakfast, one of them asked, "Harry, my lad, are you born again?" In defense, Harry reported on his tract distribution efforts, Bible memorization, and Sunday School attendance, but the interview ended with a bearded preacher saying, "O laddie, you may give out tracts and still spend all eternity in hell. 'Ye must be born again,' Harry, boy."

When Harry's widowed mother moved the family to San Francisco, Harry thought that those preachers would never button-hole him again, but he was wrong. The next year, 1886, Donald Munro married Miss Helen Dorr, and the Munros settled in Toronto. Meanwhile, in 1887, Ross saw an assembly established in the San Francisco Bay area. That October, they held their first annual Bible conference. And who else would Ross invite to such a conference, but his comrade Donald Munro?

In the late summer of 1889, Munro again appeared. The fourteen-year-old was returning home from school when Mrs. Ironside said, "Harry, who do you suppose is here?" He guessed, by her excitement that it was uncle Henry. "Guess again," and without waiting for another wrong guess she enthused, "It's Mr. Munro!"

Donald greeted him, "Well, well, Harry, lad, how you have grown! And are you born again yet, my boy?" Ironside never could hide his blush. Speechless, Harry was eyeing the floor, when his uncle Allan interjected, "Oh, Harry preaches himself, now," referring to some Sunday School and Bible club work Harry had started.

"You are preaching, and yet you don't know that you're born again! Go and get your Bible, lad."

As his biographer put it, Harry was so eager for an excuse to leave the room that he "flew up the stairs. He knew he had to come down again, but he took as much time as he possibly could to do so. When finally he could stay away no longer without being rude, he descended with his Bible in his hand. The first thing that Mr. Munro asked Harry to do was to turn to Romans 3:19. The boy did, and Mr. Munro said: 'Now read it aloud.' Harry complied: 'Now we know that what things soever the law saith, it saith to them who are under the law: that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God.' He had scarcely begun reading when Harry knew why his catechist had chosen the passage. 'Harry, lad, have you ever been there?'

"'What do you mean?' the boy countered.

"Well, I understand that you have got your mouth pretty wide open trying to preach to other people. When God makes a preacher, He stops his mouth first and then, when he sees his lost condition, God leads him to put his trust in the Lord Jesus. When he trusts, he is born of God and his soul is saved. Then God opens his mouth. You've been putting the cart before the horse, haven't you?"

"Maybe I have," Harry replied.

That interview with Munro gave him emotional whiplash. In six months he still suffered from the jolt. One Thursday night in February of 1890, he again read from Romans 3, then John 3. That night H. A. Ironside looked to the One who was lifted up on a cross for him.

Campbell, Carnie, Gill, Marshall, Munro, Ross, and Smith, "toiled for the perishing." They led by example. Besides the provinces of Ontario and Manitoba, Munro evangelized in Boston, Chicago, Kansas City, New York, and Philadelphia. He made ten trips to the west coast.

The years 1905-1906 were perhaps Donald's busiest, but then his health gave in. Donald and Helen made visits to his many children in the faith, hoping by this to recoup his strength. Donald felt like Gideon, "faint, yet pursuing." At the age of 69, having walked with God over fifty years, he passed to glory in 1908.

Material for this article was taken from:

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2. Hawthorn, J., Alexander Marshall, Gospel Tract Publ.
3. Ritchie, J. Ed., Donald Munro, Gospel Tract Publ.
4. Ross, C. W. Ed., Donald Ross, Gospel Tract Publ.
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