

John Brown of Haddington or Learning Greek Without a Teacher

There are few stories more thrilling than the simple narrative of *John Brown of Haddington*, as he came to be called. The facts are all given in the fascinating biography by Robert Mackenzie, published in 1918. The list of his important works cover three pages (347–9) and include *A Dictionary of the Holy Bible*, republished as late as 1868. The dates of his books run from 1758 to 1785. *The Self-interpreting Bible* was reissued in America in 1919 with 26 editions in all. “*Brown’s Bible*” came to be a treasure to ministers. For twenty years at Haddington, Scotland, in connection with his pastorate, he acted as professor of theology to about thirty students each year, who came to sit at his feet. He sided with the Erskines and the United Presbyterian Church, which later in 1900 was united with the Free Church of Scotland as the United Free Church. But our interest in John Brown, who became the greatest preacher and scholar of his people during this period, lies in the marvelous zeal exhibited by him for acquiring knowledge. He was born in 1722 in Carpow near Abernethy in Perthshire. His father was in winter a weaver of flax on the little farm and a fisher of salmon in the summer. He had taught himself to read and had current religious literature in his little home. Thus the son formed a taste for good reading. It was the law that a schoolmaster should be appointed for every parish, but in the strife between Prelacy and Presbytery little regard was paid to the law. When a school was held, it might be a cowshed, a stable, a family vault, or a hovel. John Brown had a few months in a school like this, but the fire was kindled in his mind and soul that was to become a great light. He read what catechisms he could get. “My parents’ circumstances did not allow them to afford me any more, but a very few quarters at school, for reading, writing, and arithmetic, one month of which, without their allowance, I bestowed on Latin.” So he tells the pathetic story.

But where did the Greek come in? “My father dying about the eleventh year of my age and my mother soon after, I was left a poor orphan, who had almost nothing to depend on, but the providence of God.” That and his own pluck and courage. He found shelter in a religious family, but had fever four times during the year and seemed a mere wisp of a boy. In his twelfth year he was converted. He became the herd-boy for John Ogilvie for several years on the sheep farm of Mieckle Bein. Ogilvie was an elder of the church at Abernethy, who had never learned to read. He was fond of having the shepherd boy read to him. He built a shelter on Colzie Hill for that purpose, where they could watch the sheep and have spiritual communings. Young John Brown borrowed what Latin books he could and used them so well that he mastered the language. He had two hours at noon each day for rest. But he used this time to go to his minister at Abernethy, Rev. Alexander Moncrieff, or to Rev. J. Johnstone, a minister at Arngask, several miles away. These set him tasks in Latin, which he finished with dispatch.

Latin led to Greek, but in a curious way. He hesitated to ask help about the Greek, as it was not so commonly known as Latin. So he took an old Latin grammar, his copy of Ovid, and went to work to find out the Greek alphabet by the use of the proper names in the genealogies of Christ in Matthew and Luke. This was the key to unlock the door between Latin and Greek. He had borrowed a copy of the Greek New Testament and kept on his comparative study till he learned the sounds of the Greek letters. He learned the meanings of the words by comparing short ones with the English translation. He made comparisons of the endings with the Latin and thus made a rough grammar for himself. Now and then he would ask questions of a Mr. Reid in the neighborhood.

He became anxious to get for himself a copy of the Greek New Testament. It was twenty-four miles to St. Andrews, where there was a copy to be had. He got his friend, Henry Ferney, to look after his flock, and set out one evening for St. Andrews and arrived there next morning. This was in 1738, and he was only sixteen. He was footsore and weary and found the book store of Alexander McCulloch. Let us follow Mackenzie: “Going in, he startled the shopman by asking for a Greek New Testament. He was a very raw-looking lad at the time, his clothes were rough, homespun, and ragged, and his feet were bare. ‘What would YOU do wi’ that book? You’ll no can read it,’ said the bookseller. ‘I’ll try to read it,’ was the humble answer of the would-be purchaser. Meanwhile some of the professors had come into the shop, and, nearing the table, and surveying the youth, questioned him closely as to what he was, where he came from, and who had taught him. Then one of them, not unlikely Francis Pringle, then Professor of Greek, asked the bookseller to bring a Greek New Testament, and throwing it down on the counter, said: ‘Boy, if you can read that book, you shall have it for nothing.’ He took it up eagerly, read a passage to the astonishment of those in the shop, and marched out with the gift, so

worthily won in triumph. By the afternoon, he was back at duty on the hills of Abernethy, studying his New Testament the while, in the midst of his flock.” This simple narrative is eloquent in its portrayal of the determination of the poor shepherd boy of Abernethy to know the Greek New Testament. This very copy of the Greek New Testament, a precious heirloom, has been handed down to the fifth John Brown in lineal descent of Greenhill Place, Edinburgh.

But there is a tragic sequel before the final triumph of young John Brown. There were some young men in Abernethy studying for the ministry who became jealous of the shepherd lad who had forged ahead of them in his knowledge of the Greek New Testament. One of them, William Moncrieff, son of the minister at Abernethy, said to him one day: “I’m sure the de’il has taught you some words.” This seemed to John Brown a jest, but it was an expression of jealousy that led to serious consequences. John Brown added Hebrew to his Latin and Greek, and the suspicion of witchcraft grew apace. Even John Wesley in his Journal for May 25, 1–68, expressed sorrow that the English had given up belief in witchcraft, for “the giving up of witchcraft is, in effect, giving up the Bible.” In 1743 the ministers of the Secession in Scotland deplored the repeal by Parliament of the law against witchcraft for the punishment of witches.

Unfortunately his pastor, Rev. Alexander Moncrieff of Abernethy, gave heed to the charge of witchcraft as the explanation of John Brown’s knowledge of Greek. This slander followed young Brown for five years. On June 16, 1746, the elders and session of the church at Abernethy by unanimous vote gave John Brown a clear certificate of full membership in the church; but even so Rev. Alexander Moncrieff, the pastor, refused to sign it and left it to the clerk of the session. The narrow preacher continued to throw difficulties in the way of the brilliant young scholar, who was struggling towards the light. Later in 1752, some members of the church at Abernethy were brought by Moncrieff before the session for going to hear John Brown, “a pretended minister.” But the young man fought his way on as peddler, soldier, schoolmaster, divinity student, and finally pastor at Haddington, theological professor and great scholar and author.

It is a romantic story that puts to rout all the flimsy excuses of preachers to-day who excuse themselves for ignorance of the Greek New Testament or for indifference and neglect after learning how to read it. Any man to-day can learn to read the Greek New Testament if he wants to do it. There are schools in plenty within easy reach of all. But if circumstances close one’s path to the school, there are books in plenty and cheap enough for all. No one to-day has to make his own grammar and lexicon of the Greek New Testament or go without a teacher. One can start with Davis’s Beginner’s Grammar and Bagster’s Analytical Lexicon and go on to the mastery of the noblest of all languages and the greatest of all books. Indeed, to-day one actually hears of young ministers who rebel against having to study books that help them learn the Greek New Testament, and who regard their teachers as task-masters instead of helpers. The example of John Brown of Haddington ought to bring the blush of shame to every minister who lets his Greek New Testament lie unopened on his desk or who is too careless to consult the lexicon and the grammar that he may enrich his mind and refresh his soul with the rich stores in the Greek that no translation can open to him. Difficulties reveal heroes and cowards. Every war does precisely that. The Greek New Testament is a standing challenge to every preacher in the world.