

FREDERICK FYVIE BRUCE: AN APPRECIATION

By Laurel and Ward Gasque*

A month short of his eightieth birthday, our dear friend and mentor, Professor F. F. Bruce, was called to his reward. We in concert with hundreds of his personal friends and thousands of those who knew him through his many writings, will miss him dearly. Truly we — not just the two of us, but the whole community of faith — have reached the end of an era! The greatest Bible scholar of our age has left us to join the ranks of the church triumphant.

Frederick Fyvie Bruce, affectionately known as “FFB,” was born 12 October 1910 in Elgin, Scotland, into a devout home. His father, Peter Bruce, was an evangelist among the Christian (Plymouth) Brethren. His mother, whose name we never learned, was, presumably, his helper in the ministry and a source of strength to her children. From his childhood he possessed a love of the Bible and languages that would go with him throughout his life.

While other children were out playing games, he was home outlining the chronology of the kings of ancient Israel and Judah in chart form and studying his Latin and Greek. Both endeavours were to pay rich dividends in subsequent years as he was to achieve academic and literary success.

His years as a school boy and student were marked by numerous acknowledgments of his intellectual gifts. He was the Gold Medallist in Greek and Latin and Fullerton Scholar in Classics at the Elgin Academy (1932), Ferguson Scholar in Classics (1933) and Croom Robertson Fellow (1932–34) at the University of Aberdeen, recipient of the Sandys Studentship at Cambridge University (1934–35), where he graduated at the top of his class. When he was granted an honorary Doctor of Divinity from Aberdeen University in 1957, the comment was made that he had brought more honour to his *alma mater* than any other person who had pursued an academic career in the preceding fifty years — and this was near the beginning of his fame.

As is well known, FFB started out as a classical scholar. Following a stint as a research student in Indo-European philology at the University of Vienna, he taught Greek at Edinburgh (1935–38) and Leeds (1938–47) universities. When he was called to become the Head of the newly founded Department of Biblical History and Literature at the University of Sheffield, which he served from 1947 until 1959, it was made clear to him that one of the reasons the committee was attracted to him was that he was neither a clergyman nor a theologian and that, therefore, he could be counted on to take an objective approach to his subject. It is quite likely that this perspective was also important to those who recommended his tenure as the John Rylands Professor of

* Laurel Gasque is a cultural historian and writer. W. Ward Gasque is provost and professor of Biblical studies and Eastern College and Fellow of the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies, Oxford, England.

Biblical Criticism and Exegesis at Manchester University, where he was to supervise more doctoral dissertations in biblical studies than any other person in the United Kingdom at the time (1959–78).

FFB loved the freedom provided by being a teacher in a secular university. He did not serve a religious party or theological perspective, but rather the truth. He had no doctrinal statement to sign, as did some of his friends who taught in theological colleges, though he certainly had his convictions, and expressed them openly as appropriate. He once described himself as ‘an *unhyphenated* evangelical,’ one who was whole-heartedly committed to the gospel but who did not wish to narrow the message of Good News in a manner that would separate him from either the whole counsel of God or the entire community of believers. Like his great hero, Paul, he was the Lord’s free man.

His work as a scholar was internationally recognized. Not only did dozens of young men (and occasionally young women) come from all parts of the world to study with him at Manchester, but he was constantly invited to visit other countries. On numerous occasions he lectured in the USA and Canada, in Australia and New Zealand, in Holland and Italy, and even in Uganda (where his daughter and her family lived for some years). Nearly all of these lectures found their way into print in some form or other in his dozens of books and hundreds of essays and articles, which gave him a very wide and appreciative audience.

Not only was FFB proud of his status as a layman, he was equally proud that he did *not* have a PhD! “Some people seem to value a PhD degree more than the knowledge it is supposed to represent,” he commented to us on one occasion. He lamented the tendency toward credentialism of our time, when PhD’s are being multiplied at the expense of both wisdom and true knowledge. In good company with the majority of the greatest biblical scholars in England during his day, not to mention the fathers and mothers of the church down through the ages, he displayed competence in his work rather than diplomas on the walls of his study. (He used to say that the PhD was invented so that Americans could take an advanced degree home with them when they came to the UK for further study. We never asked him what he thought might be the significance of the fact that the PhD in America is called ‘a terminal degree’!)

Although he got something of a late start in writing books — he was thirty-three when he published his *Are the New Testament Documents Reliable?* which has gone through numerous editions, reprintings, translations into other languages, and is in print to this day — once he got started, he kept at it. He went on to publish nearly fifty books and several thousand articles, essays, and reviews. Without the benefit of either a secretary or computer technology, he was as productive in his retirement as he was in his life as a university professor. We often thought that it was a shame that he did not have secretarial help, or at least an electric typewriter — he used an old, portable typewriter that was of the vintage that it could have been the one he used in the writing

of his first book! He could easily have afforded both, and certainly he had the intellectual skill to learn to use a computer, but perhaps it was his Scottish heritage that caused him to think that such things were unnecessary. Besides, he was too occupied with his scholarly work to take time out to learn to drive a car, why should he stop to learn to use a computer?

One key to his productivity was his formidable filing system. His wife Betty said he never threw a piece of paper away, for it might have a useful note written on it, and the whole family was made aware of this. His system was simple. During the war he began to use discarded cereal boxes to store his notes, which were arranged according to the order of the Bible, from Genesis 1:1 to Revelation 22:21. Some people might imagine it difficult to fit everything into such a system but for him it was natural to think of everything in reference to the general flow of Scripture. He did not think topically, but according to chapter and verse. His mind was fundamentally exegetical. In due course he transferred the material into more traditional office files.

FFB was among a handful of the best known and most highly respected biblical authorities of any theological persuasion. In the UK, he was comparable only perhaps to C. H. Dodd, who had also been the John Rylands Professor at Manchester for a brief stint. Bruce was one of two people (both Scots; Matthew Black was the other) elected to the presidencies of both the prestigious Society of Old Testament Studies and the Society of New Testament Study. He was respected around the world by his fellow scholars and also by the thousands of pastors and lay men and women who devoured his writings. He had the ability to build bridges from the Academy to the world where ordinary intelligent but non-academic men and women lived. People who loved God and loved the Bible knew that they could not only trust Bruce but they could understand him. His writings were entirely free from the jargon and technical terms that tend to obscure the work of all too many university teachers.

Some years ago we concluded that he had the whole Bible committed to memory. In the truest sense, he knew the Bible by heart. When he was asked questions — and it was in his spontaneous answers to questions that he shone most brightly — he often would roll his eyes back as if he were scrolling the text to its proper location in his mind. Then he would refer with specific accuracy to the relevant text, often in a manner that it was clear that he was translating from the Hebrew or Greek, but sometimes he would quote a specific translation, appropriate to his audience (AV, RSV, or even JND).

FFB was less than a scintillating speaker. Although he was willing to travel the length and breadth of Great Britain and to other lands to give invited lectures — in churches, universities and colleges, and frequently even in schools, only the keenest of his audiences sat on the edge of their seats. His books read much more interestingly than his oral presentations sounded, and they were normally read from manuscripts (even in the classroom, where his manuscripts were often the page proofs of his books, which could be purchased in the bookstore down the street or read in the library), though a few loyal followers would probably dispute this. But he was absolutely fascinating when he spoke

spontaneously, as he did on a few occasions. One wonders why he did not speak without notes or manuscript more often, for it was here that he was brilliant.

When FFB came across to Vancouver to teach in two of the early summer schools at Regent College, we attempted to set up his classes so that he would leave at least a half hour in each to answer questions. The students loved it. They asked him about everything, not merely the subject at hand but about Paul's view of women, speaking in tongues, Bible prophecy, details of biblical criticism and contemporary church life. His answers were unhesitating, articulate, lucid, concise, illuminating, and frequently witty. They seldom contained a vocalized pause or an unnecessary phrase. If anyone would take the trouble to transcribe them (most of them were recorded), they would be publishable. An impression of what they were like will be found in his "Answers to Questions" published over the years in the *Harvester* and subsequently in book form. In Vancouver and Seattle we even arranged for him to answer questions on the Bible in the place of the Sunday sermon in several prominent churches, a practice that was received with an enthusiasm that we have never heard regarding his preaching.

On the occasion of FFB's presiding over the annual meeting of the Society of New Testament Study, held in the University of Aberdeen in 1975, Howard Marshall arranged for an informal time of fellowship with friends and former students, during which several of his younger colleagues paid him tribute. In response, Bruce gave one of the most enthralling speeches of his life, alas, unrecorded. Without note or without any prior preparation, he spoke for about a half hour, reflecting on his life and its interrelationship with all those in the room, detailing specific events and contributions from the lives of each person systematically.

What are the qualities of Bruce's life that are most memorable? A quality that is frequently commented upon by his friends and acquaintances from all walks of life is his humility. In stark contrast to so many learned and technically proficient individuals, one hesitates to say "educated," he internalized Paul's rule that "a person should not think of himself more highly than he ought" (Rom. 12:3). Although he possessed an buoyant sense of confidence, he wore his great learning lightly. His was a natural piety without pietism, godliness apart from sanctimony. And he had a fine sense of humour (without which there is no salvation) that was often used to a good effect in his speaking and writing. Many people who met him out of the context of the university would have had no idea that he was a really a famous person. When we returned to North America in 1969 from having worked with him at Manchester and were frequently asked about what had impressed us most about F. F. Bruce, "his humility" was the first, unhesitating response.

When one thinks of Bruce as a scholar-teacher, one automatically thinks of Paul, the person whose life and work occupied so much of his attention. His book *Paul, Apostle of the Free Spirit* (The Paternoster Press; called *Paul, Apostle of the Heart Set Free* in the USA by its American Publisher, who

thought that "free spirit" might have the wrong connotation on the other side of the Atlantic) will remain a classic for many years to come. Bruce conceived of his work in terms of solidarity with Paul, fidelity to that great-hearted "Apostle of Christ Jesus." And if he had one theological hobby horse that he flogged, it was the Pauline principle of freedom. "Many people," he once said, "are afraid of liberty. They are afraid of having too much liberty themselves; and they're certainly afraid of letting other people, especially younger people, have too much liberty. Think of the danger that liberty might lead them into! It seems much better to move in predestinate grooves." Such people have not "begun to learn what Paul means by 'the liberty with which Christ has set his people free' "(Gal. 5:1).

Bruce was as free from prejudice as any person we have ever met. There was not a trace of sexism, racism, nationalism (not even Scottish!), or sectarianism in his life or thought! He was true to what he regarded to be at the heart of Paul's thought, namely, "his affirmation that the grace of God is available on equal terms and manifested in an equal degree among human beings of every kind." "When Paul says that in Christ 'there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free person, neither male nor female' " (Gal. 3:28), he commented, "He is saying that distinctions of those kinds are simply irrelevant where the gospel is concerned, and where Christian witness, life, and fellowship are concerned."

Although his ecclesiastical tradition had not been exactly in the forefront of the women's liberation movement, he believed in the full participation of women and men in every aspect of the ministry of the church as well as in all spheres of public and private life. "Personally, I could not countenance a position which makes distinction of principle in church service between men and women. . . . If, as evangelical Christians generally believe, Christian priesthood is a privilege in which all believers share there can be no reason that a Christian woman should not exercise her priesthood on the same terms as a Christian man."

He held similar views on matters of race. He tended to delight in the manifold diversity of human hues and cultures rather than become defensive of his own kind. And it was with delight that he observed the diverse reactions of the visitors to his home when they viewed the picture of his interracial family in Australia. With few exceptions, they did not know what to say, since they did not know whether he and Betty approved or not. And he was generally content to leave them in the dark, though anyone who really knew him knew that he not only approved but believed that such a family was a wonderful portrait of the new humanity in Christ. Perhaps another token of this broader vision was his love of exotic foods. When we first arrived in Manchester, he recommended to us an Armenian restaurant in very unlikely location that we never would have discovered on our own, and we frequently enjoyed eating international food together either at conferences abroad or in our home (where his favorite request was Swiss fondue).

As a person and as a scholar, Bruce was always positive, never reactive.

He always tried to give people the benefit of the doubt. For this reason, his students occasionally complained that his book reviews, for example, were not as critical as they might have been. However, his feeling was that the author of the book had probably done the best he or she could do, considering the limitations of natural talent and education, so he should look for the good things in the book that could be commended. And he was always keen to learn from anyone who has something to say, even from those with whom he had major academic or theological disagreements. Thus, he always had the kindest words to say for his colleagues at Manchester, S. G. F. Brandon and John Allegro, whose views were as different from his as one could imagine, much to the consternation of some of his more militant evangelical friends.

We, in the company of many, knew him as a friend. The dedications of his books, normally to couples, testify to breadth of his circle of friends. Most of them are dedicated to friends who are not academics, though many are to colleagues and occasionally former students. Perhaps the friendship that he treasured most was his friendship with G. C. D. Howley, the late editor of *The Witness*. He loved his visits to Cecil and Robina's home, and missed him dearly when cancer took him from this life. Each visit to Purley, Surrey, was a tonic to Mr. Howley, who was himself a friend to many, especially younger people like ourselves (and through whom we were initially introduced to FFB), and it was a source of great pleasure to Fred Bruce as well. Although he was not naturally gregarious, there were many others whom he valued as among his personal friends and with whom he kept in regular touch.

Bruce loved language — language in general (he used words carefully and accurately) and languages in particular (Greek, Latin, Hebrew, Aramaic, Celtic, German, French, Spanish, Italian, Dutch, Danish, Swedish — where does one stop? He read them all, and more.) By a sub-conscious slip of the tongue, he was once introduced by the late W. J. Martin, the Hebraist, as "Professor Greek"! His approach to the Bible was linguistic and historical. It was hard for him to understand how anyone could love the Bible and regard it as God's word and yet not be willing to take time to learn Greek and Hebrew. He used the approach he had learned as a classicist in his biblical study, an approach he celebrated and defended in his presidential address to the Society of New Testament ("The New Testament and Classical Studies, *New Testament Study* 22 [1975 - 76], 8 - 12).

Only on this one occasion did we ever observe him to be nervous. He did not appear nervous in his lecture, but we were with him immediately before he was to deliver it, and he was clearly agitated. And well he might be, since there were a number of his colleagues, mainly from Germany and North America, who were extremely hostile to what he was saying, since they regarded the very idea of the historicity of the New Testament as theologically objectionable, not to say naive. One of them sat at the back of the hall and muttered in German and shook his head vigorously throughout the entire lecture! Had it not been the presidential address, which does not traditionally allow for questions or comments from the floor, three or four famous scholars would

have jumped to their feet immediately following his lecture to attack him, though there would have been an even larger group of the membership stepping forward to defend him (not that he would have been incapable of defending himself). But his lecture was delivered with both courage and power. In fact, it was the best lecture that we ever heard him give. He was clearly bearing witness to his personal convictions as a scholar and as a disciple.

Although he seemed to be at a loss for words when he was "one on one," or perhaps it was merely that he did not wish to waste words when he did not have anything of substance to say, he always had the ability to say what was appropriate to the context and decorum of any public occasion. In the local assembly, he used the traditional language in his prayers and in his messages, but presiding over a meeting of the Manson Society at the University or a session of a learned society he chose a different vocabulary, even offering a Latin prayer on occasion.

A generation of teachers and pastors will remember him as the man who almost single-handedly revived and rehabilitated evangelical biblical scholarship. His great commentary on the Greek text of Acts, published first in 1951 and recently revised (Eerdmans/Paternoster, 1990), marked the beginning of a new era in biblical studies, for it was the first work by an evangelical for more than a generation to be taken seriously by the general academic community. The influence of Bruce and a few associates (notably Leon Morris in Australia and George Eldon Ladd in the USA) was to lead to the flood of scholarly New Testament writings by evangelicals which was to follow. Today, the situation is entirely changed. Subsequently, Bruce was to write more than a book a year throughout the rest of his life. In retirement, he was to publish two per annum on average.

Most widely circulated of his writings is the book that InterVarsity asked him to write for students, now called *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* (InterVarsity/Eerdmans). His many commentaries — he wrote on all of the letters of Paul, Acts, Hebrews [his other most substantial commentary], John, the Epistles of John, Revelation, and a few of the books of the Old Testament — were received with enthusiasm by pastors, students and laity alike. His *New Testament History* (Marshall Pickering/Doubleday) has been an ever-popular textbook at colleges and seminaries of all theological persuasions, while his book on Paul has proved to be as much interest to the general reader as it has been to students in evangelical educational institutions, where it has been a regularly assigned text for years.

Bruce was also an editor as well as an author. For thirty-eight years he was involved in editing (first as an Associate Editor and then as the Editor) *The Evangelical Quarterly*. He also edited *Yorkshire Celtic Studies* (1945 – 57), the *Journal of the Transactions of the Victoria Institute* (1949 – 57), *The Palestine Exploration Quarterly* (1957 – 71), as well as the New International Commentary on the New Testament (1963 – 90). He served as Contributing Editor of *Christianity Today* from 1956 until 1978, for which he wrote regularly during this period.

Some years ago Bruce noted in our hearing that nearly all of his writing had been done as the result of someone asking him to write on a particular subject or to contribute to a joint project. Combining this knowledge with the facts that (1) we knew he was currently working on an unsolicited commentary on Galatians and that (2) he mentioned that there was only one of Paul's letters that he had never written on, namely, Philippians, led to our inviting him to contribute to the New International Greek Text Commentary (Paternoster/Eerdmans) and the Good News Commentary (Harper & Row), now the New International Biblical Commentary (Hendrickson). We knew that we had made him an offer that he couldn't refuse!

His work as a scholar was publicly acknowledged by three "Festschriften" or collections of essays in his honour, published on the occasions of sixtieth (*Apostolic History and the Gospel*, ed. W. W. Gasque and R. P. Martin [Paternoster/Eerdmans]); Studies in Honour of F. F. Bruce, ed. C. E. Bosworth and S. Strelcyn = *Journal of Semitic Studies* 23/2 [Autumn 1978] and seventieth (*Pauline Studies*, ed. D. A. Hagner and M. J. Harris [Paternoster/Eerdmans]) birthdays. The first two were by his academic colleagues and include only a few of his students, but by the time of the second there were more than enough of students who had reached maturity to fill an entire volume by themselves. A collection of his own essays was in the press at the time of his death and was intended by his publishers to honor him on his eightieth birthday. This is appropriately entitled *A Mind for What Matters* (Eerdmans/Paternoster).

We, along with many, many others, will miss our dear friend. But his influence will linger in our lives. His character and the example of his work will call us to follow him, as he followed Christ, though he himself, in contrast to Paul, never asked anyone to do this. Our prayer is that there will be new leaders arising from among the younger generation of men and women who will rise up to take his place as positive witnesses to the truth. And we are sure that he is now praying the same prayer.

