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One of six children in a farming family, Elinor Thornton (née Wilson) was born in Ireland and moved with her family to New Zealand in 1875 at the age of eight.¹ She loved to learn Scripture and often recounted a time when she was twelve that she was deeply disappointed to learn she would have to plant potatoes at home instead of attending a Scripture exam. To her surprise and delight, the examiner was unable to attend as planned because of a flooded river and forced to reschedule the exam. Elinor was able to participate in the rescheduled exam and won the competition. She was “strangely moved” at confirmation at fourteen, but still longed for more of God, whom she did not yet know as her Saviour.

An avid reader, she became a schoolteacher at fifteen years old. One day, on the six-mile ride to the school where she taught, her horse startled and galloped. She was thrown from the saddle with her foot still in the stirrup and dragged half a mile until she finally fell, bruised and lacerated. In her autobiographical book, *Reminiscences*, she notes, “I did not think of death. . . . I realised the seriousness of my position, but thought only of the grief of my loved ones if what seemed inevitable actually happened. But though I was not troubled by the thought of death, I was troubled by a strange restlessness.”² Thankfully, she got up and made her way home with no serious results.

Elinor next taught in the gold-mining town of Thames but continued to feel restless and incomplete. Touched by the testimony shared by a Salvation Army friend, she read the Bible for herself and found the Saviour. At a public meeting, she stood and admitted to trusting Christ and soon started a small weekly meeting in the town and another in the school at the end of the school day. The first convert from these meetings was a boy of eighteen who would go on to serve as a missionary in Africa.

Soon she moved to a favoured school in Remuera, Auckland, where the headmaster, also a Christian, helped her to meet other Christians. She taught Bible class and helped with Christian Endeavour classes and the Sailors’ Mission for three years before finding “a great door and effectual” opened for mission work “in the heart of the New Zealand bush.”³ For his lumber camp, Mr. Ewen McGregor invited Elinor to teach school for forty children, teach Sunday school, and to lead a service every Sunday evening.



ELINOR THORNTON

BUSH CAMP PREACHER





By Beulah Wood

“Mr. and Mrs. McGregor were as astonished as I when a girl was suggested. But I prayed over the matter for a month or two, then realised that the call was from God,” she wrote.⁴

Elinor left the desirable Remuera position, accepted the job, and set out, taking a “few odds and ends of furniture” and her “theological library, consisting of the Bible, a book of Bible readings by D. L. Moody, and half a dozen of F. B. Meyer’s shilling booklets.” The journey was arduous. After the train, she continued by buggy and finally “a cage running on a wire rope and worked by an engine”⁵ to cross the river.

Elinor taught school daily, studied her Bible, taught a Sunday School class, and led a service each Sunday attended by practically the whole settlement. Women and men were led powerfully to Christ. She described one such event:

On the wettest, darkest nights in winter, men, women, and children could be seen carrying storm lanterns, coming in every direction down the rough bush tracks, wending their way to the schoolhouse. I sought to preach Christ in my own very simple fashion hardly, however, looking for or expecting any definite or immediate results—for I knew nothing of evangelistic methods—when one evening, as I was about to close the meeting in the usual way by announcing a hymn and pronouncing the benediction, a member of the congregation rose to his feet and asked if he might say something.

He was a Mr. Alexander, the clerk and manager (of the timber mill), a man of thirty-five, a splendid character, greatly respected by everyone. I feel still the tense silence, the feeling of expectancy in the meeting as I said we would be glad to hear what he had to say. Then we listened to words something like these: “I want to say that until I began to attend these services a few months ago, I never realised that it was *for me* that Christ had died. Now I know it—I want everybody else to know it, and I am so glad to acknowledge myself His follower. By His grace I will follow Him and serve Him as long as I live.”

The effect of this open declaration was electric. No sooner had Mr. Alexander sat down than there jumped to his feet the young Scotch engineer who worked the engine that ran the cage across



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the river, Mr. Robertson. . . saying “I am ashamed to say I have never taken my stand as a Christian, and I must do so tonight.”

This began what I can only describe as a revival. We experienced continually days of the right hand of the Most High. . . The blessing continued—it seemed only a natural thing that it should—until, in almost every home, there were those who openly identified themselves with Christ.⁶

On another occasion, Elinor was invited to take a service at a cook-house near which a number of men were building the main north-to-south railway line. She and the elderly Mr. McDonald walked several miles and found awaiting them a large number of men. They sang a hymn, “God Loved the World for Sinners Lost.” Elinor commented on the personal love of Christ in the hymn, and the men listened to the service with rapt attention. On the way back, McDonald told her with tears streaming down his face, “I did not know until today, when you spoke about the ‘me’ in the hymn that Christ had actually died for me. . . ”⁷

After two years, Mr. McGregor encouraged Elinor to give up teaching and devote all her time to evangelism. She commenced work in the tiny settlement of Mangaweka, which was then the terminus of the rail line. In her diary, she noted ninety-eight people whom

she had visited, among whom she held prayer meetings for six weeks. She rented the town hall, put up notices of meetings and sermon subjects, distributed handbills, and held a week’s mission. All sorts of people attended, and she was amazed at the results. She gave a second series of meetings, continuing for about two years, travelling and preaching.

In 1902, Elinor married Rev. Guy D. Thornton. They would have two daughters, Lilian Ruth (Platt) and Marjery McGregor (Bradley). The couple joined in itinerant mission work and held brief pastorates at Otahuhu Baptist Church (1905) and Sydenham, Christchurch (1906–8). They began a Baptist mission at Ohakune (1909–12), working among railway workers, sawmillers, and bushmen in the backblocks. Short pastorates followed at Morrinsville (1912–13) and Whangarei (1914).⁸

Rev. Ayson Clifford wrote of Ohakune, which was hemmed in by forest, 1,700 feet above sea level, rough and raw and overshadowed by Mt. Ruapehu.

Rev. Guy Thornton. . . brought his wife and family to Ohakune. At first they lived in a cold shanty. There was no church building. A billiard saloon was sometimes the only place where a service could be held. There were few supporting Christians. . . His health suffered. There were weeks when he

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was laid up. But he had a remarkable wife in Elinor. She was a person of great saintliness and a fine preacher. She could maintain his work when he was out of action.⁹

When Guy left for service during World War I, Elinor kept preaching. Over some months she accepted successive invitations for series of services in Whangarei, Invercargill, and Riccarton. Then Guy, ill in hospital in London, cabled her to come to him. On the sea voyage to England, Elinor's daughter told some passengers her mother could preach, so the captain arranged a service attended by nearly all the women and children in the steerage of the ship. (On the return trip she took services for both men and women, with wonderful response.)

For a while, Guy and Elinor served as missionaries in England under the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA). Elinor conducted the afternoon Bible readings at each mission and spoke at some of the evening gatherings in places like Sunderland, Leicester, High Wycombe, Edinburgh, York, Manchester, Tiverton, Doncaster, and Wales.

At one stage in Woolwich, Elinor and Guy chose not to include her evening sermon because it was a large venue, and they thought her voice might not carry. The minister of the church, saying people would be disappointed, urged her to preach and himself

checked she could be distinctly heard. She then spoke several times, resulting in more conversions.

Elinor returned to New Zealand before Guy and started services in Lyall Bay, Wellington, again a task she was very happy in. Thornton followed in 1920, and in 1922 he became pastor of the South Dunedin Baptist Church. However, recurring poor health forced his early retirement in 1926. He died in Auckland in June 1934.¹⁰

Elinor's love of words continued with five published booklets. The first, *Soul Secrets*, she wrote before leaving England. Others were *A Fragrant Life*, *Guy D. Thornton, Peace: Is It Possible?* and, when she was in her sixties, *Reminiscences*. She died in 1946 and is buried in the Hillsborough cemetery, Auckland.

The story of Elinor Thornton's ministry was passed down in my family, as it resulted in both my parents being brought into the family of God. The Mr. Alexander mentioned above was my grandfather.

Elinor Thornton was an unstoppable woman who courageously accepted some of the limitations of her day and found ways to preach for God in many places. She didn't even talk much about the obstacles—more about acceptance. God used her powerfully to reach hundreds of women and men, a ripple effect that reaches us here today.

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Notes

1. All biographical information in this article comes from the following source unless otherwise noted:
Elinor Thornton, *Reminiscences* (Auckland: Wright & Jaques Ltd., 1943), 9–44.
2. Thornton, 11.
3. Thornton, 21.
4. Thornton, 22.
5. Thornton, 22.
6. Thornton, 23–24.
7. Thornton, 25.
8. Angus MacLeod, "Thornton, Guy Dynevor," in *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, (Te Ara – The Encyclopedia of New

Zealand, 1998), <https://teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/3t35/thornton-guy-dynevor> (accessed 27 February 2020).

9. Ayson Clifford, *A Handful of Grain*, Vol 2, (N.Z. Baptist Historical Society, 1982), 74.
10. Angus MacLeod. "Thornton, Guy Dynevor," *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*



Beulah Wood (BD, DMin) is retired from work as a writer and lecturer in preaching and theology of family at South Asia Institute of Advanced Christian Studies in Bangalore, India. She continues to write for India and teaches preaching for Baptist women in Auckland, New Zealand.