

W.J. CROSSMAN
A Life Well Spent



William John Crossman
Conference President 1941, 1950

by

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The first half of the twentieth century is characterised by a depression bookmarked by two Great Wars. A significant number of Churches of Christ ministers acted as military chaplains during the wars, some serving in both. Some did not return. Others, like G.T Walden OBE, won imperial honours and still others, like A.E. Forbes DCM, Dan Wakeley MM and W.J. Crossman ED, won military honours. Some were home-based and ministered to the troops on home soil. Churches of Christ have a proud history of military chaplaincy and a more detailed discussion on military chaplains must wait for another time. This is the story of the life and ministry of one of them.

Family Background

William John Crossman was born on the 19th January 1891 in the NSW outback town of Bourke. His father, George, had migrated from England aged 10 in 1872. George was an engine driver, and it was this occupation that led to him settling in Bourke with his wife Annie (nee Worboys), whom he had married in 1887. "W.J.", as he was affectionately known to his contemporaries, developed into a man of martial bearing but with a very gentlemanly nature. This comes as no surprise as his father was known as "Gentleman George" to his railway colleagues, and his mother, Annie, was a god-fearing woman, charming, affectionate and of great integrity.¹ He was the eldest son of a family of ten children.²

Of his early life we know little: however, he was in Sydney in 1909 where he attended a Chapman-Alexander Evangelistic Mission, and was among the 3000 who heard Wilbur Chapman preach on "After Death, the Judgement". Geoff Crossman, his son, says:

"... in speaking of this night, [he] said: "As a youth at 9.15 p.m. I gave my heart to the Lord. I shall never forget the thrill when I went home and told my mother. She prayed for me. And now when I think of her and her influence, "'tis but a step to Calvary'."³

His family was involved with the Stanmore Baptist church at the time and he was baptised there by Dr. C. J. Tinsley. Crossman felt the call to ministry very strongly and so, in 1910, he travelled to Adelaide and entered Angas Bible College, an interdenominational college, forerunner of Adelaide Bible Institute, that had been modelled on the Moody *Bible Institute*.⁴ After two years' training he returned to Sydney and enrolled in the Baptist training programme in October 1913 and served as a student pastor at Campsie. He became a Baptist Home Missionary, and as such ultimately came to Concord in Sydney.⁵

Early Ministry

Being somewhat unsettled and, like John Wesley, seeking to “know the way of life more perfectly” he searched the Scriptures and sought counsel from A.E. Illingworth, at that time Conference President of the Churches of Christ in NSW, and G.T. Walden, then minister of the Church of Christ Enmore. Thus it was that in 1914, aged 23, he became a member of the Enmore Church of Christ. He was about to commence his 44 years of faithful and fruitful ministry.

There were two notable characteristics of those early days of the Churches of Christ Conference. One was the reasonably short time that Evangelists, as ministers were then called, remained in any one church. Periods of six to nine months were not uncommon. Randall Pittman describes the other in these terms:

“In the early days of the Restoration Movement in Australia, the proclamation of the message depended on the efforts of consecrated men who, while earning a living in secular callings, found time to preach the word of life.”⁶

Crossman came to the Churches of Christ ministry just at the point when this was beginning to change because of the graduates coming from the College of the Bible at Glen Iris. Moreover, Conference now employed a Home Missions secretary. In 1914 it was William Gale who, recognising his ability and desire to serve, promptly sent Crossman to North Auburn in preparation for a mission by A.E. Forbes. F. Collins was the evangelist at the Auburn church at the time and the Conference Handbook for 1913 says of that field:

“F. Collins has been energetically pushing the work in this field. Fair progress has been made at North Auburn. An evangelistic band of young men has largely contributed to this result.”⁷

It was into this scene of activity that Crossman came. The three week mission in April 1914 resulted in 35 decisions. He did not return to Enmore. He took up the role of full-time evangelist on a subsidy of 10/- a week. Thirty more people were added to the church in the next six months. It is interesting to note that among those 30 was Doris Hall. Doris later married B.G. Corlett who also became a prominent minister of Churches of Christ.

Military Chaplaincy

War broke out on 4th August 1914 and Crossman enlisted as a regular infantryman on 21st August 1915. He was attached to the 13th Battalion, 1st A.I.F. and embarked for Egypt on 14th October 1915. In March 1916 he was in France with the 1st Australian Casualty Clearing Station having been trained in anaesthetics. His military records show that he was “appointed Lance Corporal” on 31st July 1917 in

France.⁸ The service record also shows that he was twice hospitalised himself. It reveals that he had several leaves which he took in England. These leaves are of particular interest. His love of preaching took him to hear some of the great English preachers of the day. On one occasion he listed them: R. J. Campbell of the "New Theology" fame, Sydney M. Berry, the "Gloomy" Dean Inge, J. Fort Newton, J. D. Jones, J. H. Jowett, F. B. Meyer, and G. Campbell Morgan.

He rose to the rank of sergeant. Because he was a minister of the gospel, efforts were made to transfer him to the Chaplain's Department. These efforts were stymied until 11th April 1919 when, as his record states, he was "to be Chaplain 4th Class(ORD) for Continuous Service, Aust Defence Cable WQ 735 of 12/2/19". He was promoted in the field to Captain-Chaplain. On 27th May 1919 the record reads "The change in posting of this chaplain is approved. From Rfemts. to No. 2 Group, A.I.F. Deps. in UK." This was at Warminster, where Australians were encamped prior to repatriation home. There he had the opportunity of preaching the gospel before a concert. He recalled: "... after which the troops clapped. It was the first encore I ever had."⁹ He recalled that on the way home in late 1919, he was nick-named the "Lead Kindly Light Bloke". This nickname stayed with him for many years in RSL circles and at unit reunions.

Crossman was only one of a number of New South Wales Churches of Christ ministers who served in the Great War. The 1918 Conference Handbook states:

"Chaplains Major Walden, Captains Forbes, Cuttris, and Proctor represent us on active service. Captains Saunders and Rush are our chaplains from Home Service in this State. From many different sources we receive abundant testimony of the good work done by our chaplains at the Front. May God soon bring them, with all of our soldier men, safe back home again."¹⁰

In April 1920 the wish expressed in the last sentence was realised. The Conference Handbook reports:

"During the year Chaplains Forbes, Taylor, Crossman and Walden have returned. We take this opportunity of congratulating Lieut.-Col. Chaplain Walden, OBE, on his long service, extending from the Gallipoli Campaign to the end of the demobilization. Chaplain Forbes, DCM, has been appointed Senior Chaplain of OPD Chaplains in NSW."¹¹

He rightly belongs among this illustrious group.

Marriage and Ministry

He married Mabel Maggie Townsend on 13th March 1920. The Rev. R.C. Pickup, a former colleague in the 13th Bn. 1st A.I.F, officiated. One of the speakers at the reception was Lieut.-Colonel T. Henley M.L.A.¹² This began a ministry partnership that lasted for over 38 years. As one recounts the ministerial activities of W.J. Crossman, the unselfish support of his wife must never be forgotten. The

marriage was blessed by two children and seven grandchildren. Their son, Geoffrey, before retirement had risen to the rank of Principal Air Chaplain.



Maggie and William in the late 1930s.

On his return to Australia in 1919 Crossman immediately plunged into ministry. He was offered and accepted the charge of the church at Hurstville, as well as keeping an eye on the daughter church at Beverley Hills.¹³ After four years he left Hurstville for Taree where he served until 1927. Taree was a busy ministry as serving that church encompassed responsibility for the church at Wingham as well as other preaching outposts, nine in all.

In 1927 he was called to the post of Social Service Organiser and Director, the first person to hold this position. It was a role which brought with it ministry at the Erskineville Mission. It was in this role that he became one of the key movers for the establishment of a Children's Home, initially at Tempe in the home of A.L. Carter and then at Dundas.¹⁴ He prevailed upon Dr. C.A. Verco, D.R. Hall and Milton Hunter to act as physician, lawyer and dentist for the children. This period of his ministry was one of activity, innovation and undoubted leadership. In 1928, for example, he initiated the acquisition of an office in Rawson Chambers which also served as a centre for relief work; established an employment bureau that found employment for 58 of 85 applicants; became a member of the Inter-church Migration Committee and as such attended the arrival of a number of immigration vessels, delivered several addresses of welcome and greeting a number of overseas brethren; was appointed to the Executive of the NSW Prohibition Alliance and also to the Campaign Committee. As such he became a contributing editor to their journal, *The Liberator*.¹⁵

As part of his work at Erskineville he took one of the Training Classes for the Bible School and Young People's Department. He initiated a number of Free Breakfasts per year and conducted a Gospel service at the end of each them. Fifty men were catered for at a time, and he was aided by the Sisters' Conference and the Mission Band.

During the Referendum for Prohibition in 1928 the Conference Social Questions Committee allowed him to become involved, acting as an organiser for the Prohibition Alliance. The report on the Erskineville Mission in the 1929 Conference Handbook reads:

Bro. W.J. Crossman has rendered part-time service with this Church during the year. With the co-operation of a splendid band of young men and women, a Mission Brass Band and a consecrated visiting sister who goes about doing good, an aggressive work has been maintained in this somewhat difficult field. Regular open-air services are held. Fourteen persons have been added to the Church upon a confession of Faith and Baptism.¹⁶

However, his heart was more in church pastoral ministry than organising and directing so he returned to pastoral work in 1930 with the church at Lidcombe, while initially still living in Erskineville and acting as secretary to the Temperance and Social Questions Committee. His ministry at Lidcombe lasted 11 years and during that time he commenced the church at Carramar and had oversight at one stage of the Bankstown church.

The Lidcombe ministry was one of wide variety and many challenges. The early years were Depression years and in them he was indefatigable, but he never forgot that he was a chaplain. He maintained a close contact with the Returned and Services League and as a veteran took part in many an ANZAC Day Service. A record of The 2FC Broadcast of the service in 1930 shows him performing the "Commemoration of the Fallen"¹⁷. In 1933 he gave the address at the War Memorial Service. The *Sydney Morning Herald*, under the heading "Glory of Anzac" printed a precis of his address which reveals something of the man and is, therefore, worth quoting in full:

Chaplain Crossman, in his address said: "If this great service had not been held; if this country had erected no stones; if men did not ask what mean ye by this service, there would still be indelibly enshrined on the tablets of men's hearts monuments of undying love and gratitude which time will never erase. The spirit of Anzac will never die; it will grip and thrill as long as this great Empire lasts. We commemorate today a feat of arms that challenges the heroic in men. God proves His love because Christ died for the souls of men. These men who died on the field of battle proved their love by fighting for your freedom. Sacrifice has become a law of life. Those men who died on Gallipoli, on the fields of France and Flanders, or succumbed to the perils of the deep or of the air were the choicest of Australian manhood. We think with pride of those men.

The glory of Anzac will never fade. Bursting through the gloom with radiant glory from their trophied tombs, the sacred splendour of the deathless names of the Anzacs shall guard and grace their country's fame. An occasion like this is a mighty challenge to radiate the ideals of true citizenship and to guard our Empire gates against the enemy within and without. It is a great thing to die for one's country. It is a greater thing to live for it. Loyalty is as necessary a factor in times of peace as in times of war.

As a generation, we are faced with a heavy burden. We require a vision and an inspiration, and we have that here in our responsibility to our beloved dead."¹⁸

But it wasn't only military chaplaincy that he exercised. He was chaplain to the Lidcombe branch of the militant Loyal Orange Lodge:

Members of the Royal Black Preceptory, L.O.L., attended the Church of Christ Lidcombe, yesterday, in regalia. The service was conducted by the Rev. W.J. Crossman, who urged upon members of the order the daily study of the Word of God. An Orangeman, he said, must always acknowledge the Lordship of Jesus Christ.¹⁹

Like the apostle Paul he was prepared to be "all things to all men in order that he might win some". On 10th May 1936 he preached at South Kensington in the morning, at Hurstville in the afternoon, and at Lidcombe in the evening.²⁰

The outbreak of the Second World War again saw him lay down his ministry at Lidcombe to serve full-time as an Army Chaplain.²¹ As Senior Chaplain he was in constant touch with the Military authorities and Chaplains.²² While all this was transpiring he was Vice-President of Conference. He was awarded the Efficiency Decoration and at the close of the war left full-time chaplaincy with the honorary rank of Lieutenant-Colonel. He was appointed by Conference as the Rehabilitation Officer under the Social Service Department for our N.S.W. churches.

Crossman was totally committed to the proclamation of the Gospel and to the ideas and ideals of the Restoration Movement. Returning again to pastoral work he served at City Temple, 1946-1950 and then Wiley Park (1950-1956) which was a fledgling church originating from an E.C. Hinrichsen mission in 1948. Finally he went to his last field, Wentworth Falls-Lawson, where he gave heroic service especially in the period following the disastrous 1957 bushfires when so many homes were destroyed. The fires were particularly ferocious. A large part of the main street of the village of Leura was destroyed as well as Wentworth Falls. Four people died. But the following photograph of the survival of the church at which Crossman was ministering was reported by the Sydney Morning Herald as a miracle.

There is an interesting sidelight to this story. On the previous day the *Daily Telegraph* had reported that the church had been destroyed. However, the writer's now brother-in-law had ascertained that it was still standing. He telephoned the *Sydney Morning Herald* and publication rivalry brought the church some valuable free publicity.



The Wentworth Falls Church of Christ after the fire. The shop on one side and the cordial factory on the other were both destroyed. The damage to the church was minimal²³

During his 44 years of consecrated ministry he served on almost every Conference Committee. He was twice Conference President (1941, 1950), Secretary of Federal Conference and for 7 years, of N.S.W. Conference. As Social Service Organiser, H.M. Secretary, a member of the first College Committee, Boys' Home Board, Advisory Board, Council of Churches, and for more than 20 years on the Chaplaincy Board, he served widely, wisely and well. In his last years he was endeavouring, as Brotherhood historian, and successor to the redoubtable E.J. ("Jack") Hilder, to gather information concerning the early history of our work in N.S.W.

But Crossman wasn't merely a server, he has an initiator. As Conference Secretary from 1933-1939 he guided Conference through some of the dark days of the Depression. He recognised the groundswell for the establishment of a Bible College in NSW and so proposed the establishment of an Investigation Committee to the 1939 Conference.²⁴ He was, of course, a member of the committee and as President

chaired the Conference that brought the College into being. On his retirement as Conference Secretary it is recorded in the 1939 *Conference Handbook* "to Brother W.J. Crossman we again say 'Thank you for your untiring work as secretary. Well done!'"

Because of ill-health he was advised to retire from full-time service and farewell services were arranged for October 12, 1958 but the Home-call came suddenly on the preceding Monday.

The funeral services were conducted by Dan Wakeley who was assisted in the Lidcombe Chapel by Harold Long, Dr Allan G. Elliott, Geoff Benjamin and Ira Paternoster and at the Rookwood Crematorium by H.C. Bischoff and P.E. Thomas — a veritable *Who's Who* of the senior ministers in the State²⁵.

The keynote of his life and ministry was his loyalty to Christ and the plea for the restoration of New Testament Christianity in its fruits as well as in its doctrines and ordinances. His was a life well spent in serving others without much regard to personal cost.²⁶

ENDNOTES

- 1 Crossman's son, Geoffrey, wrote a brief account of his father which was used as the basis for Dan Wakeley's eulogy at W.J. Crossman's funeral, and was printed by Wilkie Thompson in *The Digest of the Australian Churches of Christ Historical Society*, Number 20, August 1967. The author of this paper has made extensive use of it.
- 2 His siblings were sisters Ella, Jessie, Edith, Marjorie, Dorothy, Doris and brothers Harold, Leslie and Clement.
- 3 *The Digest of the Australian Churches of Christ Historical Society* [hereafter *The Digest*] p.1
- 4 Paproth, Darrell – "Faith missions, Personality and Leadership; William Lockhardt Morton and Angas College' *Lucas* 27-8 (2000) pp. 64-69.
- 5 For Crossman's Baptist days see Stanhope, John, "A Two Way Street – Movement of some Baptist and Church of Christ Ministers Between the Denominations in New South Wales", *Journal of the Baptist Historical Society*, September 2012.
- 6 R.T. Pittman, "Taking Up the Torch" in *One Hundred Years*, A.W. Stephenson (ed.), Austral Printing & Publishing: Melbourne, 1946, p. 115.
- 7 1913 Conference Handbook, p. 5.
- 8 A wealth of information is available in Service Record NAA: B2455, CROSSMAN W J, *Mapping Our Anzacs*, <http://mappingouranzacs.naa.gov.au>.
- 9 *The Digest*, p. 1.
- 10 1918 Conference Handbook, p. 1.
- 11 1920 Conference Handbook, p. 1.
- 12 Crossman-Townsend wedding notice in the *SMH* May 4, 1920. About one hundred guests attended the wedding breakfast in the Burwood School of Arts. Annie's father was a Justice of the Peace.
- 13 Obituary in *The Christian Messenger* 36.8 (December) 1958, p. 9 written by his good friend and fellow WWI Chaplain Dan Wakeley.
- 14 *The Digest*, p. 2.
- 15 1928 Conference Handbook, pp. 45-46.
- 16 1929 Conference Handbook, p. 42.
- 17 *SMH* April 25, 1930.
- 18 *SMH* April 25, 1933.
- 19 *SMH* October 31, 1932.
- 20 *SMH* May 9, 1936.
- 21 1940 Conference Handbook, pp. 21-22: "The present National condition calling for greater activity in Military circles has resulted in an increased demand for the services of the Brethren who have undertaken to do the work of Chaplains. . . The Brethren now serving as Chaplains are W.J. Crossman, R. Acland, F.E. Alcorn and S.C. Jenner."
- 22 1941 Conference Handbook, p. 24.
- 23 This photograph was printed in the *SMH* after the fire. A copy can be found in the Blue Mountains Library – Local Studies section.
- 24 There were two motions. (1) "That this Conference affirms the desirability of establishing a 'College of the Bible', in this State, at a suitable time' and (2) That a committee of 10 be appointed to investigate the proposition and submit a suitable motion to the 1939-1940 Conference at Easter."
- 25 *The Digest*, p. 2.
- 26 *The Christian Messenger*, 36.8 (December) 1958, p. 9.