Mary MacNicholl: A Pioneer Preacher

Almost as if John and Charles Wesley, the founders of Methodism[[1]](#endnote-2), could foresee one hundred plus years into the future and hand-pick her from her family tree of ministers, Mary MacNicholl felt an early call on in her life to preach. She could have traced her MacNicholl families, almost all zealot Methodists, back five generations to County Tyrone, Ireland. Born in 1915 in Merchantsville, New Jersey, to Jay and Mary Stoll, Mary MacNicholl recalled “startling her first-grade teacher by announcing that she was going to school to become a Methodist minister.”[[2]](#endnote-3) No doubt what little her instructor replied did little to discourage the child from the reality that women ministers were rare, no matter what denomination. By the time she was a teenager, Mary walked a narrow path to follow that calling. Wisely, she listened to counsel. She knew she had four great uncles who were Methodist ministers, big shoes to fill. Yet, now it was the 1930’s, a time for women, a time for Mary. She wanted to do the same even though she knew her limitations and what would be expected of her. Fortified by her role models, Mary MacNicholl held fast to her vision and beliefs as she climbed a mountain of challenges to become a powerhouse of determination, stability, and inspiration.

MacNicholl had influential family members as well as many role models to encourage and cheer her on to reach her goals. Her elderly grandparents lived with her family as she was growing up. John Harry Stoll, her mother’s father and a Pennsylvanian Dutchman, mentored her in her faith. The two “took walks at sunset” where he tutored her in *Psalms* and sang hymns.[[3]](#endnote-4) He left her a poem written by Reverend John Watson a Scotsman whose pen name was Ian McLaren. Grandfather Stoll admonished MacNicholl that if she wished to be a minister she had to remember the poem’s ending:

Almighty God . . .danna be hard on Wellum MacLure,

For he’s no been hard wi’ onybody in Drumstochty . . . .

Be kind tae him as he’d been tae us . . .

Forgive what he’s dune wrang. . .[[4]](#endnote-5)

(i.e., do not be hard on William MacLure because he has not been hard on others. Be kind to him because he has been kind with others. Forgive what he has done wrong. MacNicholl admitted later that she often did not live up to his instructions. She was hard on others because she expected as much from them as she did herself.)[[5]](#endnote-6)

Mary MacNicholl had a long Scotch-Irish heritage of religiously noteworthy family members. Maybe family lore provided her with the knowledge of her Methodist lineage, but her rich legacy began with her fifth great-grandmother’s religious conversion in the 1700’s. Northern Ireland was ripe for picking for those early Wesleyan brothers and their other ministers who travelled there to bring in those sheep who were either without or lost in other faiths. No documentation exists to claim that either John or Charles Wesley had an intimate hand in her salvation, but this great grandmother died at one hundred and five, ninety-three years of her life a Wesleyan Methodist. Despite bigotry and “persecution, ostracism, and threats of eviction, the godly grandfather for fifty years kept open house for the Methodist itinerant, transformed his parlor into a chapel . . . and dying, left his children a heritage of righteousness of reverence” for the Lord.

Another generation of MacNicholls, Alexander and Mary Jane MacNicholl, raised eight children, to serve the Lord. One was Mary’s grandfather John, and seven other siblings, in a tenant farmer’s cottage “two miles from a village with two churches, Episcopal and Presbyterian, and twelve miles from the nearest Methodist chapel.”[[6]](#endnote-7) Although poor, the parents reared their children in “Methodism as the best form of Christianity.”[[7]](#endnote-8) Robert Turner MacNicholl, John’s brother, who eventually immigrated to the United States, told the congregation at his younger brother Arthur’s funeral, he and his siblings were raised with "[a]ll the advantages of a rich Christian culture . . . Father, though a farmer, possessed a well-used library and gave special attention to the mental and moral training of his children."[[8]](#endnote-9) Their father Alexander’s prayers, "the holy fire, which often glowed with intensity and flamed to a serene height as father poured out his soul in prayer at the family altar, was kindled . . . in the heart of every member of his family.”[[9]](#endnote-10) Unfortunately, Alexander died when Robert, the oldest of the siblings, was only sixteen, approximately in 1870. Times became more difficult. Mary Jane MacNicholl dedicated time with each of her children each week, praying hot tears of love over them as she pled with God for their souls. Yet, her fight “to keep the home intact and educate the children brought the day of coronation to herself and of complete orphanhood to the family.”[[10]](#endnote-11) She died twenty-two months after her husband.

Used to adversity, Robert Turner MacNicholl carried on for his parents until he answered his call to the ministry. He left his full-time education in order to devote time to caring for his siblings, the youngest only six. For ten years he was a teacher and principal, all the while continuing with his academic education. He resigned from his position in Armagh, County of Armagh, despite pleas to the contrary. He may have "won for him distinction as an educator," he argued, but "Providence had chosen him for the work of a religious teacher and preacher and minister." He followed this pursuit and for four years was a licensed minister and teacher in Portadown, County Armagh. Now it was time to follow his desire and prepare to go to America.

Once he arrived in New York, he called upon the Reverend Nathaniel Mead and began to minister in the Roxbury Circuit. One year later, 1875, he was accepted into the New York East Conference of the Episcopal Methodist Church. "[H]is thirty-two years' ministry is clearly testified by the mere recital of his appointments"[[11]](#endnote-12) which were many from Roxbury to Greenpoint, Brooklyn, where he died in 1908. He had the energy of John Wesley, stated his biographer, C. J. North. Reverend MacNicholl, along with many other notable ministers of the time, brought to the forefront many important topics of the day, especially prohibition with the fight against the saloons. In his final hours, Robert Turner MacNicholl instructed those who gathered to his bedside. He spoke words of instruction and encouragement to his brothers: "Do not preach theories. Preach that which ye do know and feel of the word of life." To others he said, "I thank God for the honor or preaching the gospel and for all the honors the church has conferred upon me. Christianity is not a ritualistic formality. It is a personal union with the living God."[[12]](#endnote-13) John Wesley once said, “The world is my parish.” Reverend Robert Turner remarked, “My parish is my world.”[[13]](#endnote-14)

Where Reverend Robert Turner MacNicholl’s fight was on a spiritual plane, his oldest son, Dr. Thomas Alexander MacNicholl, continued the crusade but also on a medical basis. Born in Ireland in 1867, Dr. MacNicholl came with his parents to America and attended New York University. He received his medical degree from Bellevue Hospital Medical College. In 1893, he became co-founder of the [New York Red Cross Hospital](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_York_University_School_of_Medicine) and was Vice President of the American Medical Society for the Study of Alcohol. He became a well-known authority on women’s and children’s health, especially recognizing “awful conditions . . . existing in the large cities” due to the exposure of effects from the consumption of alcohol.[[14]](#endnote-15) He wrote articles and lectured comparing the addictive habits of alcohol to the downfall of Sodom and Gomorrah. At an October, 1912, meeting for the ministers of Buffalo, New York, Dr. MacNicholl stated, “The great burden of drink is not borne by the drinkers but by the drinkers’ children. He declared that “It has been found that drink . . .causes disorders in the second and third generations.” He references Deuteronomy “as containing God’s warning against alcohol among other curses.” He went as far as to predict that if the country did not take a stand against “this awful disease of alcoholism,” people bigger and stronger, “more virile that ours, shall surely supplant us in this land.”[[15]](#endnote-16)

Arthur MacNicholl, another of Mary’s great uncles, was also man of influence. He remembered “the hot tears that would fall”[[16]](#endnote-17) onto his face when his mother prayed with him. An orphan by ten, he “converted” at sixteen and was licensed to preach when he was nineteen. [[17]](#endnote-18) He worked for a number of years in the dry-goods business in Portadown, but after returning to the ministry he was invited “unanimously” to the Irish Wesleyan Conference. He declined the offer, and three weeks after he married in 1875, he and his wife sailed to America where he felt God’s beckoning him to preach.[[18]](#endnote-19) He was accepted into the New York East Conference like his older brother. His ministerial charges included Bethlehem, Southington, Williamsbridge and others, In New York's countryside, Reverend Arthur MacNicholl kept busy with a "spiritual vigor and buoyancy" especially with the younger generations. He also took on the great topic of the time: temperance reform. He was "uncompromising" and courageous in the fight.[[19]](#endnote-20) His biographer W. H. Wardell states that he was a powerful preacher. He realized the “fundamental truths” of the Bible, but he also had a practical trend to his thoughts that made him direct and incisive."[[20]](#endnote-21) He was an accepting man of all religions and respected all who loved the Lord, but he was definitely Methodist through and through. He accepted the discipline and preached "the doctrines of his beloved Church."[[21]](#endnote-22) Strong in his faith, his health began to fail in the late 1880’s. Although he took his doctor’s advice for a much-needed rest, he preached one last time in Woodbury, New York. He stood in the pulpit, “his eye kindled and his whole soul was on fire. The congregation sat with half parted lips and bated breath.”[[22]](#endnote-23) He returned home to Westville, New York. Two weeks later, December 8, 1891, he died. He was only forty years old.

William, the third from the youngest of the MacNicholl brothers called to serve the ministry and as strong in faith as his brothers, was born in County Tyrone in 1853, claiming his "godly parentage.”[[23]](#endnote-24) Reverend William MacNicholl “was mighty in prayer and . . . [h]is pulpit ministry was Biblical.” He may have preached that God had a big heart with tremendous patience, but he was a religious zealot with a hell, fire, and brimstone message as he wielded “the Sword of the Spirit.”[[24]](#endnote-25) He took stances that were not always popular. In fact, his biographer, H. M. Hancock states that he was often” greatly misunderstood.” [[25]](#endnote-26) He, like others in his family, fought hard for prohibition. Like many theologians of his place and time, Reverend MacNicholl during early Prohibition days supported the Ku Klux Klan “and other church-backed vigilance committees in the effort to enforce Prohibition.” The clergymen understood first-hand the necessity for temperance. They saw the evils of “alcohol abuse, the toll on families when earnings were spent on drink, and the brutalizing of wives and children by drunkards.” He stood before his congregation in Long Island’s Centerport Methodist Episcopal Church and “read the KKK's ideals and principals from his pulpit, praised the Klan in sermons, and accepted $100 from a Klansman during a special service.”[[26]](#endnote-27) Yet, the reverend defended himself and other clergy on the grounds that their “main objective was reform of political, police, and judicial corruption, the eradication of 'houses of ill repute,' gambling, and speak-easies, and the reinforcement of . . . historic Protestant values."[[27]](#endnote-28) Biographer Hancock claims, Reverend William MacNicholl held to his opinions because he was a “zealous protagonist and defender of the right as he saw the right.”[[28]](#endnote-29) While some claimed he was a doing the work of the devil, “a fanatic,” others considered him a “saint,”[[29]](#endnote-30) By the 1930’s along with Robert, Arthur, and Alexander and son Alexander, the MacNicholls "had given one hundred and twenty-nine years of ministerial service to the New York East Conference.” His family said that toward his end, he held fast to the faith of his Lord, and claimed only God himself could “command this flaming spirit.”[[30]](#endnote-31)

Mary’s grandfather, John MacNicholl, may not have been a minister in a pulpit, but he was equally attached to his faith, sometimes to the detriment of his family, framing a path others found hard to follow at times. Born in 1846 in County Tyrone, Ireland, he became naturalized in 1863. He was a tailor, but according to Mary Lee Ellis, Mary MacNicholl’s first cousin once removed, he was not as successful in his trade as his brothers because he merely wanted to read, write, and study the Bible. Colossians 3:2 states: “Set your mind on things above, not on the things that are on earth.” Unfortunately, this oft -uoted cliché attributed to Oliver Wendall Holms is more appropriate to John MacNicholl: “[Some](http://www.quotes-inspirational.com/quotes/some/) [people](http://www.quotes-inspirational.com/quotes/people/) are so [heavenly](http://www.quotes-inspirational.com/quotes/heavenly/) [minded](http://www.quotes-inspirational.com/quotes/minded/) that they are [no](http://www.quotes-inspirational.com/quotes/no/) [earthly](http://www.quotes-inspirational.com/quotes/earthly/) [good](http://www.quotes-inspirational.com/quotes/good/)” because he did not seem to “take care of his family and was always in church.” Elllis’s grandfather Arthur went to work at age 15 as a runner [for the] Philadelphia National Bank.” In fact, he postponed marriage to Sarah Kirkpatrick for nine years to help support the family. Jay, Mary MacNicholl’s father, also went to work. He and Arthur were the two youngest children and “helped care for their family with their wages.”[[31]](#endnote-32) While some in Arthur’s line eventually joined the Episcopal church, Jay’s family continued in the Methodist tradition. In her memoir written for the 1969 United Methodist Conference in Minnesota, Mary MacNicholl wrote, “No drinking, no dancing, no card playing were the rules in my Methodist home.”[[32]](#endnote-33) When her Episcopalian Uncle Arthur came on Sundays with her cousin, her steeply held Methodist constitution “wavered” when he was allowed to go outside to skate, and even “borrow her roller skates.” She was allowed only to sit and “watch him skate.”[[33]](#endnote-34)

Mary MacNicholl would not be the first woman forging a path to serve her Lord. John and Charles Wesley knew how invaluable women were to their ministry. In fact, their mother Susanna Wesley, often referred to as “The Mother of Methodism,” held the distinction of being the most influential woman in their lives and in their time. She disciplined them when they were young and prayed and encouraged them when they were in need. The mother of nineteen children, spent spiritual time with each child every week as well as teaching them academically. So in tune with her husband Samuel’s parishioners’ lack of understanding of his Sunday sermons, she led many of them in Bible studies and sermon studies to comprehended what he had preached, much to his dismay. She was “strong, intelligent, and spiritually mature,” an example and role model to men and women.[[34]](#endnote-35) Throughout Methodist history, other women have accepted their calling with and without men’s approval. One of these was Mary Bousanquet Fletcher. Born in 1739 in Leytonstone, Essex, to a wealthy banker and his wife, Mary had an early conversion experience. The “Introduction to Watchwords” published in the *Asbury Journal* states her family considered her radical and “eccentric.”[[35]](#endnote-36) Because of this, she felt an alienation toward them and at aged twenty-two left home to live in London. While there, she met John Wesley. Mary and Wesley had a spiritual connection. She returned home to Leytonstone, and under his encouragement to “give all you can,” she used her resources to shelter “the most destitute and friendless people in London. The house became a school, orphanage, hospital, and half-way house all-in-one.”[[36]](#endnote-37). The “Introduction to Watchwords,” states that Mary ministered to those under her care by “exhort[ing], read[ing], and expound[ing] on the Scriptures.” By 1771, she even began to preach “with Wesley's reluctant approval,” one of the first Methodist women to do so.[[37]](#endnote-38) Later, she married John Fletcher, an evangelical Anglican minster. As a couple, they ignored the acceptable “gender roles,” pursuing “a joint ministry in Fletcher's parish of Madeley in Shropshire. The local tithe barn was converted into a chapel, and Mary preached there regularly in addition to acting as a class leader.”[[38]](#endnote-39) After her husband’s death, Mary Fletcher continued to minister. Her influence and impact among men and women throughout England in high stations and the government. While he lived, John Wesley did all he could to protect her from ridicule and encourage her to carry out the Methodist doctrine. After his death, though the Wesleyan Conference attempted to undermine the role of women but her status as a

She would not be the first woman to answer the call to preach, but she was the first to become a fully-ordained Methodist minister in Minnesota, and one of twelve in the nation.

<http://place.asburyseminary.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1080&context=asburyjournal>

<http://www.1wellbrock.org/Tony%27%20Corner/Women%20and%20Wesley.htm>

<http://www.christianitytoday.com/history/issues/issue-82/i-received-my-commission-from-him-brother.html>

<https://18thcenturyculture.wordpress.com/primary-sources/the-armenian-magazine/an-account-of-sarah-crosby/>

Tenacious,

stalwart

powerhouse

resolute

staunch

stable

woman with vision

dauntless

uncompromising

unshrinking

unwavering

determined

Mary MacNichol

rigid with herself and rigid requirements with others--you have to have a "rule."

1 Corinthians 14:34-35 and 1 Timothy 2:12-15,

Mary embodied the Charles Wesley him, “A Charge to Keep I have.”

1 A CHARGE to keep I have, A God to glorify, A never-dying soul to save, And fit it for the sky; To serve the present age, My calling to fulfill: O may it all my powers engage To do my Master's will!

A charge to keep I have,  
A God to glorify,  
A never-dying soul to save,  
And fit it for the sky.

To serve the present age,  
My calling to fulfill:  
O may it all my powers engage  
To do my Master’s will!

Arm me with jealous care,  
As in Thy sight to live;  
And O Thy servant, Lord, prepare  
A strict account to give!

Help me to watch and pray,  
And on Thyself rely,  
Assured, if I my trust betray,  
I shall forever die.

1. A religious movement begun in the 1700’s by brothers John and Charles Wesley. Both ministers of the Church of England believed in “inviting people to experience God’s grace and to grow in their knowledge and love of God through disciplined Christian living. They placed primary emphasis on Christian living, on putting faith and love into action. This emphasis on what Wesley referred to as “practical divinity” has continued to be a hallmark of United Methodism today,” http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/our-wesleyan-heritage. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. “Women pastors say they like their work.” *Together*. 6.3, March 1962. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
3. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
4. Ian MacLaren. “The Doctor’s Last Journey.” *McClure's Magazine*. Nov., 1909. ...... http://www.archive.org/stream/speaker00unkngoog/speaker00unkngoog\_djvu.txt [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
5. [Star Tribune](https://www.newspapers.com/browse/US/Minnesota/Minneapolis/Star%20Tribune_4474),  [23 Sep 1962, Sun](https://www.newspapers.com/browse/US/Minnesota/Minneapolis/Star%20Tribune_4474/1962/09/23),  [Page 73](https://www.newspapers.com/image/183469737/) https://www.newspapers.com/image/183469737/?terms=rev.%2Bmary%2Bmacnicholl [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
6. New York East Conference, 1908 Memoirs of 1908 p 115. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
7. Ibid 116 [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
8. Ibid 115 [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
9. Ibid 116 [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
10. Ibid 116 [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
11. Ibid 116-117 [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
12. Ibid. 118 [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
13. Ibid. 116 [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
14. [Star-Gazette (Elmira, New York)](https://www.newspapers.com/US/New%20York/Elmira/Star-Gazette_3800) .[26 Oct 1910, Wed](https://www.newspapers.com/US/New%20York/Elmira/Star-Gazette_3800/1910/10/26) **Page 4**

    https://www.newspapers.com/image/275919312/?terms=dr.%2Bt.%2Balexander%2Bmacnicholl [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
15. *The Buffalo Commercial*. Mon. Oct 28i, 1912. P. 9 https://www.newspapers.com/image/278820254/?terms=dr.%2Bt.%2Balexander%2Bmacnicholl [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
16. NY East Conference, 1892, p. 88-89 [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
17. ibid [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
18. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
19. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
20. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
21. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
22. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
23. New York East Conference, 1932 p. 670-672 [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
24. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
25. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
26. *The Long Island Historical Journal.* <https://ir.stonybrook.edu/jspui/bitstream/11401/60287/1/i001.pdf> [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
27. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
28. New York East Conference, 1932 p. 670-672 [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
29. ibid [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
30. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
31. Mary Lee Ellis [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
32. 1969 United Methodist Conference biography “Mary MacNicholl.” [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
33. Eileen Chapman. 23 Sept. 1962. *Minneapolis Tribune*. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
34. <http://www.1wellbrock.org/Tony'%20Corner/Women%20and%20Wesley.htm>. “Women and Wesley’s Times.” [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
35. TheAsbtlryJotirnaI61/2:7-11 © 2006 Asbury Theological Seminary p.8 [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
36. http://www.1wellbrock.org/Tony%27%20Corner/Women%20and%20Wesley.htm [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
37. <http://place.asburyseminary.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1080&context=asburyjournal> [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
38. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)