Alfred Brunton was one of the most popular and dynamic evangelists of nineteenth-century Dunedin. Born in Islington, London, on 11 January 1828, he was baptised at the Union Independent Church. His father was the famous Scottish engineer William Brunton, best known for inventing the ingenious 'Steam Horse' in 1813.
[*This contraption, constructed by the Butterly Company in Derbyshire, had two mechanical legs which gripped the rails at the rear of the engine to push it forwards. It was operated with some success, but abandoned in 1815 after a boiler explosion killed thirteen spectators at a demonstration event.*]

Brunton emigrated to Australia at the age of 19, and there married Mary Ann Scarfe. He had intended to work as a prospector on the goldfields but ended up working as a teacher, becoming headmaster at St Mark's Boys' School in Collingwood, Melbourne. He then ran his own school before becoming a minister in the Congregational Church.

On his arrival in Dunedin in 1866, Brunton became relieving minister to the Moray Place Congregational Church. The following year he became the leader of a small group of Plymouth Brethren who met at Milton Hall. This group soon joined with other Brethren at Farley's Hall in Princes Street.

Brunton's engaging and energetic style of preaching attracted many new members, and in 1880 the assembly moved to the Garrison Hall in Dowling Street, a venue which could seat over 2,000. Brunton also conducted open air meetings, and was involved with the Seamen's Mission at Port Chalmers. Here he converted Frank T. Bullen, who later became a celebrated writer of sea stories.

Music played an important role in Brunton's mission. He established and directed a choir known as Brunton's Choir, which featured as many as one hundred singers. He was also the first to introduce the colourful Moody and Sankey choruses to Dunedin.

Brunton kept an 'open' assembly, maintained friendly relations with other Protestant churches, and became a member of the Dunedin Ministers' Fraternal. This caused dissension among his congregation, and in 1886 a group split off and set up their own 'closed' meetings. Brunton's assembly afterwards moved to the Choral Hall in Moray Place.

Among his other activities, Brunton gave many public lectures expounding theories similar to those of Charles Piazzi Smyth. These connected the design of the Great Pyramid of Giza to prophecy and divine influence, and predicted the imminent destruction of the world. The lectures were given in various New Zealand towns and in Melbourne, and attracted both enthusiasm and scorn. One writer jokingly referred to Brunton as 'Uncle Pyramid' or 'Pyramid Brunton', and he suffered considerable ridicule from the columnist 'Civis'.

In 1888 Brunton was convicted in a widely publicised libel case, and he subsequently declared himself bankrupt. Later that same year his wife Mary died. She had been in chronically bad health for many months and Brunton was surprised to discover among her possessions the sum of over 200 pounds in gold. This allowed Brunton to extricate himself from bankruptcy.

Brunton remained active until shortly before his death on 17 May 1900, at the age of 72. He was survived by his daughter, Rebecca. A eulogist described him as a kind friend and wise teacher who prized the gospel story and preached it well.

David Murray

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