

William Gannaway Brownlow Biography

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Biography

The American preacher William Gannaway Brownlow (1805-1877) became the voice of strongly pro-Union East Tennessee before and during the Civil War through his speeches, writings, and newspapers. He was known as "the fighting parson."

William G. Brownlow was born on Aug. 29, 1805, in Wythe County, Va., and grew up in East Tennessee. After a brief period of schooling he became a Methodist circuit rider in 1826 and developed into an aggressive and controversial writer and speaker. In 1838 he added politics to his activities by purchasing a newspaper, the *Tennessee Whig*, which became an enthusiastic supporter of the Whig party under his guidance. Brownlow's newspaper used even more ridicule, cartoons, and abuse to attack opponents than was customary and gained a reputation that went far beyond East Tennessee. Extracts were reprinted in leading Whig newspapers all over the country. Brownlow also wrote pamphlets and books dealing with religious and political controversies.

When the Civil War began, most people in East Tennessee wanted to remain in the Union, even though the majority of Tennesseans had voted to join the Confederacy. Brownlow fearlessly printed their pro-Union views. He continued to publish in defiance of the state and Confederate governments until October 1861, when his press was confiscated and he was sent through the battle lines to the North. He returned to Knoxville with the Union Army in 1863 and resumed publication of his newspaper.

In 1865 he was elected governor of the newly restored state of Tennessee and was reelected in 1867. His two administrations were turbulent because of the problems of reconstructing a war-devastated state, the terrorist activities of the Ku Klux Klan, and his own forceful and controversial character. Before the war he had supported slavery, but during the war he embraced emancipation, and as governor he supported legislation to enfranchise African Americans. In 1869 Brownlow became a member of the U.S. Senate, but owing to failing health he took little part in the disputes of the times.

Upon his return to Tennessee he acquired half interest in another newspaper, and although by now an invalid, he continued active in its management until his death on April 29, 1877.