

**God's Man for the
Gilded Age:
D. L. Moody and the Rise of
Modern Mass Evangelism**

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The End

ONE

MOODY IN NORTHFIELD,
DECEMBER 1899

The end was apocalyptic and variously reported. “The world is receding and heaven opening,” the dying man was supposed to have said, although accounts differed. “I see earth receding; Heaven is opening; God is calling me,” other newspapers reported to their readers. D. L. Moody had always been greatly annoyed whenever he was misquoted. Perhaps that was why he wrote his own epitaph before the press in his sixty-second year wrote one for him. “Some day you will read in the papers that D. L. Moody of East Northfield is dead,” he had long been famous for saying. “Don’t you believe a word of it! At that moment I shall be more alive than I am now.” His son would use the statement on the eve of a new century to begin his biography of one of the most beloved men of the previous century. “I shall have gone up higher,” Moody wanted his readers to know, “that is all, out of this old clay tenement into a house that is immortal—a body that death cannot touch; that sin cannot taint; a body fashioned like unto His glorious body.” Moody spoke to an estimated one hundred million souls in little more than a quarter century’s ministry on both sides of the Atlantic, reportedly reducing the population of hell by a million in doing so. At his death, he was one of the best-known and most widely quoted men of the Gilded Age. He had fashioned a news release he gave to all the papers in all the cities where he went to work. It amounted to this: “I was born of the flesh in 1837. I was born of the

Spirit in 1856. That which is born of the flesh may die. That which is born of the Spirit will live forever."¹

The 62-year-old Massachusetts-born shoe salesman with a fourth-grade education had been in the midst of revival work in Kansas City when congestive heart failure forced him to reluctantly give up his pulpit. "I have had trouble with my heart for a good many years," he confided to the press, as a special car was outfitted for his comfort along the Wabash Railroad. Moody's failure to preach "with the old-time energy and power" had led to speculation in the press that he might be gravely ill, but he wouldn't hear of it. "There is nothing alarming about my condition," he said reassuringly, despite published reports that trains east of Chicago were being rerouted "to hurry his car homeward in the shortest possible time."² The press appeared at every stop along the way. In Detroit, as Moody's train awaited a car ferry to carry it across to Windsor and the end of the Grand Trunk Line, Moody's personal physician told reporters and well-wishers that his famous patient was "tired and nervous" but was "resting nicely now, stretched out in an invalid's chair in the smoking compartment." The doctor gave orders there were to be no interviews with reporters or anyone else. That had not stopped the press from spreading the sad news nationwide that Moody might not recover. Readers everywhere were alarmed. William Jennings Bryan, the Democratic Party's former and future presidential nominee, wrote Moody that he had "read with sorrow of your sickness" and prayed that the great revivalist's "recovery may be speedy and permanent." Booker T. Washington thought "Moody's work is of lasting value to all races." That was why nine-year-old Lenore B. Anthony of El Dorado Springs, Missouri, spoke for many when she said she "couldn't bear picking up the paper and reading that you are very sick" and would pray for Moody's complete recovery.³ Moody's secretary was under orders not to excite the evangelist with news from well-wishers. A nationwide vigil began, the press soon reported, on behalf of "God's man for the Gilded Age." It led many to hope that Moody might still recover for a nation that desperately needed him.⁴ Moody was quoted as saying that he would recover if the Lord willed it, but his many admirers couldn't bear the uncertainty. Charles Blanchard, the president of Wheaton College, went so far as to say that Moody was "a little mistaken in his view" if he didn't agree with those eager to see him stay. Blanchard had no doubt "Satan is seeking to destroy" the servant God had lifted up. Walter Douglas, general secretary of Philadelphia's Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), an organization long championed by Moody, believed there was "no man living in the United States" who could be taken away at greater cost than Moody. Frederick del Booth Tucker, the U.S. commander of the Salvation Army, thought that was why "the Lord will spare your life for many years of increased useful-

ness.” The Yoke Beavers Bible Class of Syracuse was among the many that felt the same way. M. B. Williams of Shenandoah, Iowa, thought it inconceivable that the Lord would take a man such as Moody before he finished his “earthly pilgrimage.” That was why Arthur Long of West Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, “searched the paper this morning and every morning to catch a glimpse of some word from you.”⁵

Moody feared that reports in the press had frightened his family and friends. He cabled home on November 17 saying that “the doctor thinks I need rest” and a day later that he was “improving rapidly” and “hadn’t felt so well for a week.” He wired home from Montpelier, Ohio, later that day insisting that he had “had a splendid day.” He had “no fever, no pain,” and his heart was “growing stronger all the time.” Moody told his wife “I am taking good care of myself, not only for loved ones, but for the work that I think God has for me to do on this earth.”⁶ The press shared this sentiment. The *New York Times* was exclusively reporting that “Moody had eaten a hearty breakfast” and “is improving.” Editorial writers, however, feared Moody’s “phenomenal career” might be over. The *Chicago Tribune* thought “no one is better known in this country and more highly esteemed.” Moody had become “a household name” as a “simple earnest man” who for more than a quarter of a century had “placed his hand upon the shoulder of his audience and talked to it as one friend talks to another.” The paper had long championed Moody’s crusade work, his schools for needy boys and girls, and his training centers for men and women preparing to follow him into ministry. That was why its editors could think of no man since John Wesley “who has exercised a more potent moral influence” or been “a greater power for good.”⁷

As Moody’s train neared his boyhood home of East Northfield, Massachusetts, church leaders across the nation led their congregations in prayer that their hero would live to see the twentieth century, even if there was some uncertainty when it began. “The church of the Twentieth Century will take its stand more firmly than ever on the great, soul-comforting truth of a supernatural book,” said one. The Higher Criticism had had its day, said another. Moody’s “pure and undefiled” ministry had powerfully demonstrated “the masses need for pardon” and their restless search “to find a cleansing fountain.” For 40 years Moody had shown that way in his work as a revivalist, and later as an evangelical publisher and educator. “Now the hope is universally felt,” the secular press was reporting, that God would again raise up His prophet “to this generation.”⁸ The nationally syndicated *Christian Herald* had “stopped the presses and changed the electrotypes,” hoping to give “the earliest and widest circulation” to Moody’s request that “Christian people pray for him.” John Wanamaker, the Philadelphia department store king and former postmaster general, wired his lifelong friend: “anxious how you

are and if I can do anything.” A quarter century earlier, the two men had been central to the great Philadelphia campaign of America’s centennial year. Now, a Wanamaker family-owned newspaper, the *Philadelphia North American*, cabled the gravely ill evangelist that “Mr. Wanamaker will regard it as a favor if you will wire to the *North American* a statement concerning your condition.” Ira D. Sankey, the gospel singer who teamed with Moody in staging their great evangelistic campaigns of the 1870s, well knew Moody’s power in publicity and didn’t know what to believe about the true state of his health. He sent Moody a clipping from a New York newspaper whose November 22 headline claimed: “Moody Improves Fast.” He wrote from New York City, hoping it was true, while wondering whether “it would be too much for you to see an old friend.”⁹

By the first week of December, Moody was still not seeing any visitors, leading friends and the press on both sides of the Atlantic to fear the worst. Britain’s leading evangelical weekly, the *Christian*, which had been more responsible than any journal in building Moody’s reputation when he came to England in the summer of 1873 as a relative unknown, begged Moody’s family for “a word of information” that would serve “some consolation for our many readers.”¹⁰ J. Wilbur Chapman had become a “hero worshipper” of Moody as a young man after reading “exciting accounts” of Moody’s big-city spectacles in the Gilded Age press. The two men had worked together at the Chicago World’s Fair of 1893 and in building the educational institutions that marked Moody’s emphasis in later years. Chapman told Moody that “the whole Christian world waited anxiously for favorable news from Northfield.” Chapman thought Moody “a master in moving men.” In one of two dozen book-length appreciations that appeared in the months after Moody’s death, Chapman would argue that Moody “reached more people during his lifetime than any other man, possibly in the world’s history.”¹¹ That this was so owed much to Moody’s mastery of the press and his exquisite use of the twin powers of prayer and publicity. Moody’s press aide Will C. Howland had seen each at work. “Moody realized the power of the press as few men do,” Howland told the *Congregationalist*. It became central “to the work of spreading the gospel. He never ran to the press with personals. The papers ran after him.” Press tables were always front row center at Moody’s many meetings with his evangelistic team, who were well aware of the deadline pressures reporters always faced. Moody made certain that their wishes were always gratified “so long as he could use them for the good of the cause.” He drew the line only at posing for artists. “No, I can’t let you take my picture,” he would tell them. “That would be preaching Moody and not Jesus Christ.”¹² It was a distinction lost on many in the press, whose stories

saw Moody and not the Spirit at the center of the civic spectacles that filled seats and sold newspapers across the Gilded Age.

Daily medical bulletins were reporting by mid-December that Moody's health had deteriorated and his condition was now considered critical. The family's physician, P. N. Wood, confided to reporters that Moody's "extremities are swelling" and "albuminuria has appeared." On the basis of that report, some in the press speculated that Moody was suffering from Bright's disease and had "little hope of recovery," although Wood never said so. Frederick C. Shattuck, professor of clinical medicine at Harvard, consulted on the case and was reported "quite hopeful of ultimate recovery," even as many in the press were predicting that "Mr. Moody is likely to die within a few days." The *Broadway Tabernacle Tidings*, remembering the evangelist's unparalleled success at bringing Gotham to its spiritual senses a quarter century earlier, spoke for many when it said: "When we consider the size and number of the audiences that Mr. Moody addressed, the marvel is, not that his heart broke down at the age of sixty-two, but that it did not collapse many years ago. Had there been less blood in his veins," it reported, "there would have been less fire in his sermons."¹³ It was difficult, however, for many to imagine a world without Moody. He seemed "such a primitive and elemental man" with "a tremendous capacity for work," a "general so full of life and hope" with "a genius for bringing things to pass," that it seemed impossible that he would not again be in his pulpit. The neighboring *Springfield (Mass.) Republican* remembered him there: "Standing before his audiences, a stout man, with no physical grace, a large head, abundant hair, that well-trimmed brown beard, growing grayer year by year; his eyes bright, though not large, his swaying motion as he spoke, like a bird springing to flight, a light, high-pitched voice, given to earnest and downright talk, when his moment had come."¹⁴

In the week that remained of his life, D. L. Moody staged one last, highly publicized fight to live. Doctors reported "a little improvement" and then "steady gains," leading friends and family to hope he would recover. Fans were heartened to hear Moody tell his family: "If God has more work for me to do, I'll not die." It was difficult for many to imagine that God hadn't more work for the man who Scottish religious leader and lecturer Henry Drummond had said had exceeded every other man "in uniting man to God and in restoring men to their true center." That achievement made Moody in Drummond's view "the greatest man I have ever met."¹⁵ The press was reporting that Moody's family had been told he "soon might be out and about." But in the early morning hours of December 22, his energies ebbing, Moody came to realize "the end was near." He told his doctors to stop treatment,

“for it is only prolonging the suffering of those who are dear to me.” He called his wife, two sons, and a daughter to his bedside for what one later described as his “triumphant march into heaven.”¹⁶

The press, particularly in those communities that Moody had evangelized in his big-city sweep of the 1870s, were quick to record that celestial procession. “The death of Brother Moody,” the *Chicago Tribune* lamented, was “a great grief in this great, bustling, worldly city,” which he had long called home. As head of the infant YMCA in the 1860s, Moody had greatly annoyed the paper’s Presbyterian publisher, Joseph Medill, by his frequent visits to *Tribune* offices in behalf of Christian causes. The city’s leading daily thought Moody an overly aggressive “self-seeker” then, but his success and sincerity eventually changed all that. Medill was now dead—preceding Moody to the pearly gates by nine months—so his surviving editors could now enlarge on this history, claiming that the paper had “discovered” Moody and “shared him with the world.” Although he had not seen “the whole of the truth” that presumably the paper and its class of business readers saw, Moody did champion a truth that was “the corner-stone of salvation” by “an earnestness so great and a personal appeal so forcible that everyone felt Moody was talking to him alone.”¹⁷

The strictly Sabbatarian *Chicago Daily News*, published by Victor Lawson, a devout Norwegian Lutheran, got Moody’s age wrong but his reputation right in celebrating “the greatest lay preacher and evangelist of this or any other time.” Lawson had reportedly rededicated his life to Christian service at a Moody meeting in the city 23 years earlier, and had “the closest personal knowledge of the man and his work.” Moody had come to Chicago in 1856 as a 19-year-old New England farm boy who hoped to make a lot of money in the boot business in the fastest-growing city in America. Within three years he became a leader among laymen in the city’s YMCA and organized a mission school to the city’s poorest children. He stopped selling shoes, slept in church basements, and dined on cheese and crackers. Lawson thought that “energy” and “zeal” set Moody apart for Christian service and later gave him “a strange power the press called magnetism” that was “absolutely unique in the modern religious world.”¹⁸

Thousands of mourners converged on the tiny hamlet of East Northfield, Massachusetts, the day after Christmas in 1899 to pay their final respects to Moody. Press coverage suggested the funeral of a head of state. Thirty-two students from the evangelist’s Mount Hermon School carried the body, on an oblong ebony-colored bier 30 feet long and 12 feet wide, from the modest frame home where he lived and died to a local Congregational Church. There those long associated with the life of “the lion of the age” offered their tributes. Among them was Moody’s veteran coworker the singer Ira Sankey, who had been an

anonymous and ill-paid Internal Revenue Service agent, living in New Castle, Pennsylvania, when he had first met Moody at a YMCA convention in Indianapolis in the summer of 1870. Three years later the two men and their young wives, with barely a cent in their pockets, sailed to England for the start of revival work that would make both men household names on both sides of the Atlantic.¹⁹

It had been an amazing adventure that was now being commemorated in memorial services across America. In Boston, the site of the highly publicized New England revival of 1877, Moody was likened to Lincoln. "American boys in the next century," listeners were assured, "should study the lives of a model patriot and its preacher of righteousness." Chicago was certain that even Emerson would admit that "here lies a Christian!"²⁰ The *New York Sun*, a reluctant convert to Moody's cause, now praised the dead revivalist as "a master of men. His strong, bearded face, round head, thick neck and big burly body with short fat hands and feet all went with the type of the gladiator of trade or politics, who neither asked nor gave quarter." He was Tennyson's man who "made by force his merit known."²¹ Philadelphia found the "irrepressible" evangelist "the dominant personality of the English-speaking religious world." December 22 may have been the shortest day of the year, but "to Dwight L. Moody its dawn ushered in that day that knows no night." Thousands who gathered in Association Hall were told "though he made no inventions and had no discoveries, though he wrote no poems, painted no pictures and led no triumphant armies, the unlettered son of a poor widow in New England who has been carried to his grave made an impression on the world that this dying century has seldom seen."²²

Mountain ivy and holly covered every inch of the evangelist's simple grave atop Round Top, a spot with a commanding view across the foothills of the Connecticut River valley. In the days that followed, scores of visitors came to the site, leaving flowers in their wake. It was becoming apparent, reported the *New York Times*, that "the death of no man now living could so greatly stir the hearts and minds of so great a multitude on both sides of the ocean." The paper had puffed Moody when he staged his famous crusade in America's centennial year in P. T. Barnum's old Hippodrome. "No man in modern times," it thought, "had come nearer the standard" set by Christ in proclaiming the gospel. The *Herald* shared the sentiment. "No man living," it felt certain, "has made more friends."²³ In Brooklyn, where Moody and Sankey began their Gilded Age campaign across America, even the Plymouth Church now sang Moody's praises. Twenty-four years before, its sin-stained celebrant Henry Ward Beecher had taken Moody's measure and not been sure what all the excitement was about. His successor, Newell Dwight Hillis, thought Beecher's preaching "an orchestra of many instruments"

and Moody “a trumpet of narrow range.” But it was a rush of brass, when heralded in the press of the period, “that sounded the advance.” In those days Moody admittedly was “the leader of a flying band, who went everywhere in the enemy’s country,” as “a friend of the common people” and as “an advocate for reaching the country’s great unchurched masses.”²⁴

It had been in another country, however, that Moody’s name first became widely known. There, the London *Telegraph* spoke for many when it lamented Moody’s loss. “Our bishops have back of them a state income, great cathedrals and a small army of paid helpers and musicians,” it reported. “But where our bishops have reached tens, this man has reached thousands.” London’s *Evening News* thought it impossible “to exaggerate Moody’s phenomenal success” in moving masses.²⁵ The *Manchester Guardian* well remembered Moody’s “remarkable” mission to Britain, starting in the summer of 1873, although his Yankee pertinacity had greatly irked the paper then. It now admitted that “the secret of his magnetic charm was not apparent on the surface.” His “educational deficiencies seemed so great,” it had once thought, that “he appeared unlikely to be of much service in propagandistic work.” To have made that cursory assessment, the paper now admitted, was to miss that Moody was “deeply in earnest” and able to surround himself with workers who were equally so. As a result, Moody “addressed more people and spoke to larger audiences than any man of the nineteenth century.”²⁶

Twenty-six years earlier, only six souls had come out to see the 36-year-old evangelist when he arrived in Britain. The press that had ignored him then acknowledged now that he “had been a powerful force for good” even if his “denunciations sometimes seemed extreme.” He had “done his best” to leave the century “better than he found it” and had succeeded beyond everyone’s early estimation other than his own. Moody appeared to put the lie to “the wise men who are telling us that Christianity is played out.” Moody’s methods of evangelism, including his citywide spectacles of faith and men in action seemed to show that “the old-fashioned gospel message” had “lost none of its power” and in the hands of a cooperative press had gained even greater reach.²⁷ As Moody’s reputation began to grow in Britain, old-timers recalled, publicity preceded his appearance in succeeding cities. That press release told a personal story that became widely reported and well known. It began with his birth on February 5, 1837, “in the lovely little valley of Northfield in New England.” Then followed the early death of his father, a stonemason, and the continuing efforts of his proud mother, “a woman of singular capacity to rein him and his siblings in.”²⁸ The narrative of his life had Moody “carving out his own career in the world” through his own energy and intuition, first as a clerk in his uncle’s Boston shoe store and later as a dogged recruiter for the YMCA in

Chicago. The same insistence that Moody had shown in selling shoes, obituary writers would say, explained his ability to persuade Britain's evangelical leaders to join him in a holy crusade to save their island from its sins. He "worked heroically," as Belfast's Protestant press saw it, "with a genius for organization." Moody lived to see "his method of evangelism become a system," the *Glasgow Herald* said. The city became the site of perhaps Moody's greatest triumph. There was something "intensely American" in the man, the paper found, in his optimism and in his "gospel of hope that quaintly influenced large masses of men for the better" while inspiring them to a better life." The "Pool of Bethesda," the paper preached, was stirred "by a Yankee whose faithful following and influence" approached that of Wesley and George Whitefield.²⁹

Moody's success was not without its critics. Queen Victoria heartily disapproved of Moody's methods of stirring up the populace through the press to religious excitement. Some editorial offices were equally antagonized. "Moody was not a mission adapted to every taste," the self-consciously snobbish *London Daily News* had found in 1875 and insisted even at his death. His capacity to nightly pack London's large Agricultural Hall had admittedly been a "sensation." More than one million heard him there. "A rural ignorance and roughness," the paper sniffed at the time, was behind his "bumptious conceit," which may have entertained the masses but made him "totally unfit for cultivated society."³⁰ Moody did, indeed, seem the least likely of men to move the masses. His early inability to articulate his faith had led Congregational elders in Boston to reject his petition for membership. His initial efforts at evangelization in Chicago were met with chagrin. Church fathers there asked him to remain silent and to take his unfettered enthusiasm to street children. He did. The outcome was a congregation of street urchins so large that even Abraham Lincoln came to have a look. Once he was on the revival trail, not a single stenographer on either side of the Atlantic could keep up with him. As his fame and following grew, secretarial staffs would work in relays, picking up gaps in syntax and grammar that required the blue pencil of more than an occasional copyeditor. He admitted he was the least of all laymen likely to command such crowds. It made the careful chronicling of his journey through the Gilded Age one of the great stories of the century and the century of celebrity evangelism that would come.

R. A. Torrey would live to follow Moody's footsteps without capturing his following. Billy Sunday and Billy Graham would do that. As head of the Chicago Bible Institute, founded by Moody and soon to bear Moody's name, Torrey told mourners at Moody's graveside that the great man's death had made "life on earth a little less real" and "the life of heaven more real." It was a sentiment widely shared in the North American cities that marked the start of his unrelenting campaign to use

something old and something quite new—the power of prayer and the power of publicity—in bringing the continent to its spiritual senses. “Thousands in Philadelphia are poorer for his going,” the *Ledger* reported, remembering the time he came to the centennial city. “They are richer for his life and will bless him in all eternity for the message that they heard here,” it announced. The modern world required “recivilizing,” the city’s *Evening Bulletin* had observed at the close of Moody’s meetings in that city a quarter century earlier. New times required “new methods,” and Moody’s success had given many the hope that the “uncertain and onward sweep of progress” might yet continue through Christianity. “The immense force of Moody’s zeal,” the *North American* noted, in an age of religious indifference, had strangely “kindled cooler men to sympathetic action.”³¹ “The greatness in the man,” the Boston press found at his funeral, was “a conviction that never halted” and was ever needed. “I would rather be D. L. Moody dead and in his grave,” they acknowledged in a widely quoted remark, “than any man now living.”³²

Wendell Phillips has written “how cautiously men sink into nameless graves, while now and then one forgets himself into immortality.” That view would have applied well to D. L. Moody, the unexpected evangelist. What follows is the story of how an ordinary man of modest gifts and Old-World inclinations helped revolutionize religion in America. By building on the foundations set by Whitefield and by Charles Grandison Finney in colonial and rural America, Moody helped harness the power and reach of modern mass media to serve the cause of mass evangelism in the first days of the modern era. As a child of revival, I am a descendent of this revolution. In the spring of 1962, I was one of the 704,900 individuals to attend Billy Graham’s evangelistic campaign in Chicago’s old McCormick Place and was one of the 16,597 who came forward to express a personal need for a savior.³³ My personal pilgrimage followed weeks of press accounts of Graham’s meetings that magnified their outreach and seized the attention of my family. We came out of curiosity just as thousands of others did. It was part of the preevent planning and organization of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Society that was patterned on the late Gilded Age work of D. L. Moody. In 1954, as Graham was beginning to build his reputation by retracing Moody’s steps in Britain, he admitted to “standing on the foundations that Moody had laid” that were “everywhere apparent.” Moody’s work had “changed the entire religious structure of a nation,” Graham observed, and with it the future of big-city evangelism.³⁴

By millennium’s end, technology had evolved so that Graham could preach to the wired world via satellite from a single small studio. Moody

would have greatly admired this outcome. In his day, the sense that something significant was happening had to be built brick by brick in preevent planning, preparation, prayer, and publicity. This book is an account of how revival became a mass media campaign, begun anonymously and innocuously in the summer of 1873 an ocean away, and how it created a space and set a standard for revival work on this side of the Atlantic ever since. In Moody's world and since, the sacred and the profane have been mixed to serve mighty purposes and each others' interests. Moody needed the publicity, and the press needed a good story. Their transaction, however, was not without cost, as Moody reluctantly came to understand. Religion would be played in the nation's press as civic spectacle, commodifying belief and making Moody a spiritual celebrity, something he both resisted and resented. Moody's campaign machinery sought to use the press in publicizing spiritual activity. However, it had the inadvertent effect of making Moody the star of the show. The spectacle drew rave reviews from circulation managers in search of a good story at a time of acute economic panic and from readers and worshippers who in city after city had never seen anything like it. In chronicling Moody's use of the press and their use of him, the historical intersection of mass media and popular religion comes into view, and with it a glimpse of modern America.