

# **Surprised by God**

Lives turned upside down

Faith Cook



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## William Mackay

### The doctor's Bible

*Although trained as a doctor, William P. Mackay, born in Montrose, Scotland in 1839, became a highly-acknowledged preacher and writer. His sixteen years' ministry in Hull, East Yorkshire, was cut short by his death in an accident in 1885.*



## William Mackay

### The doctor's Bible

**I**t was 1856 and seventeen-year-old William Mackay was about to leave his home in Montrose, Scotland to start his medical studies in Edinburgh. An ambitious and intelligent young man, he was eagerly anticipating his future career, but as his mother helped William pack his belongings, she felt a dart of anxiety. Would her son remember the faith that his parents had taught him over the years or would he quickly adopt the ways and attitudes of his fellow students? Carefully she slipped a parting gift into William's trunk—a Bible, inscribing it with her son's name and with her own. Underneath Mrs Mackay added a verse of scripture as a beacon to guide the young man through

the maze of temptations and snares which might so easily entangle him.

### ***Despising the Scriptures***

Quickly absorbed into his new surroundings and studies, William paid little attention to his mother's gift. Day after day the Bible lay in his room neglected, its pages unopened, its warnings unheeded. The friends he made were very different from the company he remembered from his childhood. These men had little time for those truths and principles that William had been taught to respect. Unbelieving and cynical, they looked with contempt on anyone who held what they considered to be long outmoded ideas. Soon William, too, started to throw off any lingering pangs of conscience and to spurn the faith he had learnt at home. Like his peers he began to drink indulgently and would frequently be seen with a tot of whisky in his hand whether he was studying or socializing. Gradually drink became his master, until his slim student finances could scarcely indulge his habit.

Then came a day when William had no money left to finance his craving. His mind turned to the three golden balls that hung temptingly outside the nearest pawnshop. What could he pawn to buy himself a little more whisky? He glanced round his room. His eyes fell on the Bible his mother had given him. He blew off the dust and turned it over carefully in his hand. Little used, it should fetch a good price, and of course he would redeem it one day, he told himself. At least it would meet his present needs. Hardening his conscience against any remembrance of the one who had

lovingly inscribed both his name and hers on its flyleaf, the medical student took the Bible to the local pawnshop.

All thoughts of the Bible soon faded from his mind, however, as William became engrossed in his work, his friends and his prospects. The years passed and eventually, despite his whisky drinking habits, the young man graduated with high honours in his medical studies, and before long gained a prominent position in an Edinburgh hospital. Now he freely and publicly disparaged the faith he had been taught in his youth. The God in whom his mother trusted was held up as a subject for ridicule and unbelieving jokes. More than this Mackay became a leading member of a society known as the Infidel Club. His rejection of God quickly led to a rejection of the moral standards that God's Word demanded, as William Mackay yielded to all the pressures around him, becoming dissolute and profligate in his lifestyle.

### ***Fighting death***

One aspect of his work, however, gave the young doctor unusual satisfaction, but not for the right reasons. With no belief in God, he delighted to pit his medical skill against humanity's final and last enemy: death itself. When he could drag a patient back from the very gates of death, he would revel in his conquest, for it proved, or so he thought, that by his own innate ability, he could be master of his own destiny. Whenever he heard the rattle of a cart turning into the hospital gates, bringing in another victim of some tragic accident, the adrenalin began to flow. Dr Mackay gloried in a further opportunity to demonstrate his superior powers over the course of nature. Once more he would be the centre of an