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# A CHRISTIAN IN THE LAND OF THE GODS

## *Journey of Faith in Japan*

### JOANNA R. SHELTON

“It would be hard to imagine a cultural adjustment more severe or more dangerous than traveling in 1877 from the Tennessee mountains to become a Christian missionary in Japan. Joanna Shelton’s family story is a reading adventure well worth taking and enjoying.”

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“Joanna Shelton’s impressive research reveals the amazing story of Itagaki Taisuke’s invitation to her great-grandfather and his fellow missionaries to preach Christianity in Itagaki’s native Tosa region. Itagaki, who was on Japan’s 100 yen bill in the past, was leader of the democratic movement in the early Meiji era and created Japan’s first major political party, ancestor to the Liberal Democratic Party of Japan, of which I am a member.”

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“Shelton’s highly engaging narrative about her great-grandfather opens a window into Japan’s turbulent transition from rule by shoguns to its status as Asia’s first constitutional democracy. . . . This fascinating, often poignant, story should be read by serious scholars and general readers alike.”

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President, U.S.-Japan Foundation and Dean Emeritus, Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS).

“Anyone interested in how one person can have a significant impact across borders and boundaries in today’s world will be impacted by this book.”

—THE REV. DR. KATHARINE R. HENDERSON

President, Auburn Theological Seminary

In November 1877, three months after Emperor Meiji’s conscript army of commoners defeated forces led by Japan’s famous “last samurai,” the Reverend Tom Alexander and his new wife, Emma, arrived in Japan, a country where Christianity had been punishable by death until 1868.

*A Christian in the Land of the Gods* offers an intimate view of hardships and challenges faced by nineteenth-century missionaries

working to plant their faith in a country just emerging from two and a half centuries of self-imposed seclusion. The narrative takes place against the backdrop of wrenching change in Japan and Great Power jockeying for territory and influence in Asia, as seen through the eyes of a Presbyterian missionary from East Tennessee.

This true story of personal sacrifice, devotion to duty, and unwavering faith sheds new light on Protestant missionaries’ work with Japan’s leading democracy activists and the missionaries’ role in

helping transform Japan from a nation ruled by shoguns, hereditary lords, and samurai to a leading industrial powerhouse. It addresses universal themes of love, loss, and the enduring power of faith. The narrative also proves that one seemingly ordinary person can change lives more than he or she ever realizes.



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JOANNA REED SHELTON lives with her husband in Montana’s Rocky Mountain Northwest. For over twenty years, she was intimately involved in US-Japan relations in increasingly senior positions of government and diplomacy. A quest for knowledge about her great-grandfather’s life and work in Japan launched her on a new path. After long holding religion at arm’s length, she now serves as an elder in the Presbyterian Church (USA). Please visit her website: [www.joannashelton.com](http://www.joannashelton.com).

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A Christian  
in the **Land** of the **Gods**  

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*Journey of Faith in Japan*

Joanna Reed Shelton



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A CHRISTIAN IN THE LAND OF THE GODS  
Journey of Faith in Japan

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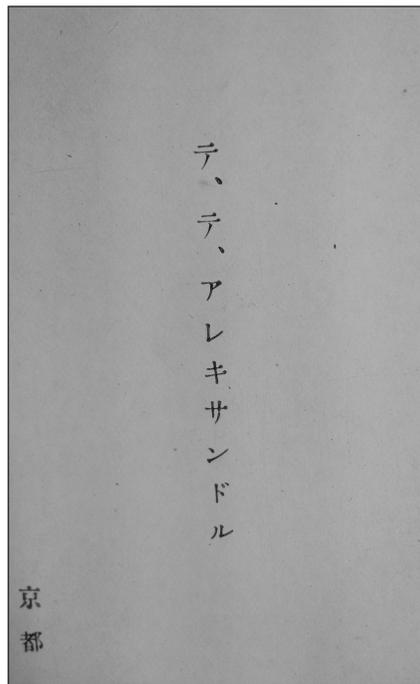
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Apology to e-readers: In order to minimize the use of footnotes that would break up the narrative, I have used endnotes that electronic devices are not able to track. Most endnotes consist of source citations, but there also are some explanatory notes interspersed among them. I apologize for any inconvenience.

You may contact me through my website, [www.joannashelton.com](http://www.joannashelton.com).

Dedicated to all those who came before.



Tom Alexander's Calling Card in Kyoto

Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies,  
it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.

(John 12:24)

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# Preface

*A Christian in the Land of the Gods* is the true story of one man's journey of faith in nineteenth-century Japan, set against the backdrop of social and political turmoil in Japan and great power rivalries on the international stage. I have made every effort to portray my great-grandfather's life and experiences as accurately as possible, drawing on a wealth of information, including personal journals, letters, scholarly works, and contemporary accounts of daily life in Japan in the late 1800s. My aunt, Emma Shelton, gave me my great-grandfather's diary to read before my first trip to Japan in 1980 and filled in some of the family history that appears in the pages that follow. Visits to places of importance in my great-grandfather's life in Japan and America yielded helpful information about his work. These visits also allowed me to see firsthand the places he lived and traveled and to meet ministers and members of churches he founded in Japan.

My own extensive experience of living and traveling abroad has given me a unique perspective on my great-grandfather's life and the challenges of living in a country without knowing a soul or speaking a word of the language upon arrival. Living in Europe for six years—including two formative years in my late teens and early twenties—and traveling to thirty countries during my life and career, I have experienced the acute loneliness and sense of isolation that comes from living far from family and friends in the days before Internet, Skype, and cell phones. I also have experienced the deep satisfaction that comes from mastering foreign languages and building lifelong friendships in countries other than my own.

Finally, as I have come to know my great-grandfather through his own writings; through written accounts by his family, friends, and colleagues; and through family oral history, I have identified some obvious family traits that have passed down through the generations to me and other family members. These family characteristics have helped me paint a fuller picture of my great-grandfather, including his response to the many challenges, sorrows, and successes he experienced during his life in Japan and America.

# Alexander Family

Thomas Theron Alexander  
(1850–1902)

*Married*

Emma Edwina (Brown) Alexander  
(1855–1937)

## Their children:

Ella Lillian Alexander  
(1878–1892)

Emma Thomasina Alexander (Young Emma)  
(1880–1904)

Theron Ralph Alexander  
(1882–1968)

Lois Alexander  
(1884–1958)

Mary Victoria Alexander  
(1887–1973)

Eva Alexander (Evie)  
(1889–1980)

Lula Christine Alexander (Christine)  
(1893–1975)

# Abbreviations

BFM	Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions, records located in Presbyterian Historical Society, Philadelphia
MC	Maryville College, Maryville, TN
MG	Meiji Gakuin University, Tokyo, Japan
PCUSA	Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.
PHS	Presbyterian Historical Society, Philadelphia
TTA	Thomas Theron Alexander

## Author's Note

I was barely five when my Grandmother Evie put a pair of chopsticks in my right hand, showing me how to anchor one stick with my middle and ring fingers and move the other with my thumb and index finger. I wasn't very good at using them then, but the lesson served me well many years later when I visited Japan for the first time as a young government economist deeply involved in US-Japanese relations. Of course, by the time of my visit to Japan, I had used chopsticks many times, mostly eating meals with friends at American-style Asian restaurants. But my ability to use the utensils without dropping my food or looking completely foolish had impressed my Japanese hosts and helped me feel more at ease in their culture.

Evie, daughter of a missionary, was born in 1889 and spent her formative years in Japan. When I first met her, she lived in a suburb of Washington, DC, having moved there with my grandfather, father, and aunt during the Great Depression. My family moved frequently as I was growing up, from one coast to the other and to states in between. But we managed to visit Evie and Pappy every few years. During each visit, she would tell me stories about her life in Japan.

Those stories flooded back into my mind early in my career, when I served as the Japan economist at the US Treasury Department—the first woman to do so—and struggled to learn the difficult Japanese language. Not only had Evie taught me how to use chopsticks, but she also had taught me to pronounce a few Japanese words, including the name of a well-known Japanese fairy tale, “*Shita kiri susume no doko ita*,” or “The Tongue-Cut Sparrow.” She gave me Japanese dolls and other toys and books she had used as a child. She told me how her Japanese nanny, kneeling on a sidewalk during a morning outing in Tokyo, had pulled urgently on her skirt, beseeching her to bow down as a royal family passed by with their elegant procession of horses, carriages, and courtiers.<sup>1</sup>

Evie also told me I had a relative buried in Japan, or was it two? I couldn't remember who it was or where this relative was buried. Details of these stories had faded into dim memory, as if not quite real. What I did know was that Evie's father, the Reverend Thomas Theron Alexander, had served twenty-five years as a Presbyterian missionary in Japan in the late nineteenth century, an era of unprecedented change for Japan. Evie's daughter, my Aunt Emma, had given me a copy of his journal to read just before my first trip to Japan in 1980. His story had fascinated me, and I'd longed to know more. I vowed during that trip that I would write about his experiences one day.

We - Emma and I - first saw each other sometime in the autumn of 1868, at Maryville, E. Tenn. I cannot recall the occasion on which we first met: The exact when & where have alike vanished from my mind beyond recall. I only know that early in Sept. of the year mentioned above, I left my father's home in Jefferson Co, and went to Maryville in order to enter upon my college course. It was only three or four years after the close of the "Great Rebel- lion". The roar of cannon had just died away among the hills and the smoke of battle had barely had time to clear away from the valleys of E. Tenn. The country had hardly begun to recover from the dreadful ravages of the fierce & bloody conflict. Maryville college had, with difficulty, survived the shock which had paralyzed the whole country. However, an earnest effort had been made to re- vive the institution, & the effort had not been altogether without success. Previous to the war, Emma's father, the Rev. W. B. Brown, had been living in Georgia. But soon the political atmosphere became too hot for a union man to live there in peace, so in 1864 he removed, with his family to Cleveland, Tenn., where he remained till the close of the war. When he heard of the effort to revive Maryville college, he determined to remove to Maryville.

First page of Tom Alexander's journal

In 1999, after reaching top levels of government and diplomacy in the field of international economics and trade, I moved with my husband from Paris, France, to a farm in the Rocky Mountain Northwest region of Montana. One of my first thoughts upon arrival in my new home was that I finally would have time to write the story of my great-grandfather and how he helped shape a new Japan emerging from centuries of self-imposed

seclusion. It took more years before I actually embarked on research and writing. When I finally did so, I found my own path changing in surprising ways.

*A Christian in the Land of the Gods* tells the human side of one man's—and one woman's—journey, set against the backdrop of wrenching change in Japan and great-power jockeying for territory and influence that would culminate in two world wars in the first half of the twentieth century. This story of personal sacrifice, devotion to duty, and unwavering faith sheds new light on the role that missionaries like the Reverend Thomas Theron Alexander played in Japan's transformation from a largely agrarian nation ruled by shoguns, hereditary lords, and samurai to a democracy and industrial powerhouse. The narrative also proves that one person can change lives more than he or she ever realizes.

## Notes

1. In 1884, the Meiji regime adopted a new nobility system granting the titles of prince, marquis, count, viscount, and baron to hundreds of men who had served the regime in significant ways. Trinity Church in the foreign settlement of Tsukiji in Tokyo attracted Christian members of the nobility. In addition, some members of the nobility lived in large estates in the area surrounding Tsukiji. Young Evie and her nanny, Etsu-san, may have been on their way to church one day or simply out for a walk when a nobleman passed by with his family and retainers. Following ancient tradition, many Japanese people knelt down and touched their foreheads to the ground to avoid looking at aristocrats. Although this practice had formally ended by the early 1890s when this incident occurred, some Japanese, such as Etsu-san, clearly still observed it. Evie recalled that the procession stopped in front of her. The nobleman in the carriage looked directly at her and then signaled to his driver to continue. He evidently decided that the foreign girl was too young to consider her staring as a sign of disrespect.

CHAPTER 1

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# Leaving Home

At the gate stood her father, leaning on his crutch and weeping.

*Maryville, East Tennessee, October 24, 1877.* Tom Alexander hated good-byes. Parting from his family at Mount Horeb just ten days before had been hard enough. “It was, for me, a sad trial to leave my father, sister and brothers. They did not then, nor will they ever, know how hard a struggle I had.”<sup>1</sup> But today’s farewell was even worse. He stood with his bride of five months, Emma Brown Alexander, surrounded by her parents and eight siblings in front of the rough-hewn log farmhouse she had called home for most of her twenty-two years. Tom’s words reflected his and Emma’s angst.

That was a sorrowful parting, especially for Emma, who had hardly been from home at all, since her childhood. She was the first among five sisters to get married and leave the old home. When we came to start, they all clung to her; with many tears and kisses reluctantly let her go. It was harder still to leave her mother, how hard no one can know except by sad experience.

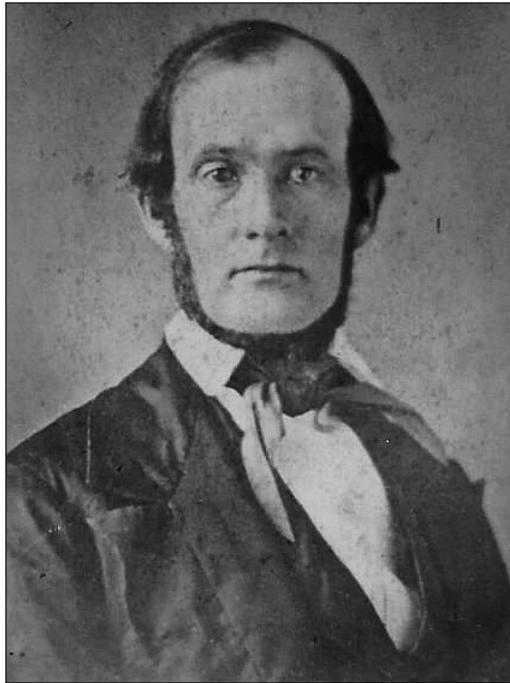
At the gate stood her father, leaning on his crutch and weeping. He bade us goodbye as cheerfully as he could, but said he never expected to see our faces again in this world.

Were these words prophetic? Would we ever see all these friends again? We hardly dared to hope it. Which one would be taken first? The future seemed dark and uncertain.

1. Alexander, *Personal Journal*. Unless otherwise specified, all quotations attributed to Tom Alexander are from his journal spanning twenty-five years in Japan. In order to minimize use of notes, no further citations will appear for excerpts from the journal.



**Brown family homestead.**



**Emma's father, the Reverend William Beard Brown.**



Emma's mother, Mary Elizabeth Bicknell Brown.

Tom struggled with his emotions as Emma's close-knit family embraced, possibly for the last time. He was almost as heartbroken as Emma in saying goodbye, since in many ways he felt closer to her family than his own. A mixture of fear, excitement, nervousness, and hope churned inside, but he hid his anguish behind the wall of reserve he had built up since the earliest days of childhood. Years of back-breaking farm work and his upbringing by a stern, God-fearing father and a series of loveless stepmothers had long since taught him to keep his feelings to himself.

Tom could hardly believe how much his life had changed in the past six months. He had graduated from New York City's Union Theological Seminary in early May and been licensed as a Presbyterian minister just a few weeks later. In late May, he had married the love of his life, Emma Brown, at the homestead where they now gathered with her family. In September he had been ordained as a minister<sup>2</sup> and in October celebrated his twenty-seventh birthday. Together with Emma, he was about to embark on a journey to the other side of the world, to a country just emerging from two and a half centuries of self-imposed seclusion. Soon Tom would take on the mantle of missionary in Japan.

What had he been thinking? Not long after accepting the posting in Japan, he had received offers from four churches in America, each one promising positions that were closer to home and more prestigious than overseas service. He could have accepted one of them, even though doing

so would have meant breaking his word. Surely he would not have been the first seminarian to change his mind. But something, some indefinable force, had pulled Tom toward Japan. Maybe it was the lure of the unknown drawing him to an exotic land where he could plant his faith in unplowed territory. Maybe he sought release from the mundane world of everyday life in America or a way to distance himself from his dysfunctional childhood and ne'er-do-well father. Or maybe Tom was caught up in the missionary zeal that had swept America and propelled so many young men and women to far-flung posts in foreign lands.

Whatever the reasons, Tom relished new challenges and knew in his heart that going to Japan was the right move for him. Tom also trusted God to set him on the right path. Before deciding, he had talked the matter over with Emma, and she had agreed to join him on this bold new adventure. But now reality was hitting home. He and Emma were saying goodbye to the people they loved most.

From his vantage point on the outskirts of Maryville, Tom was treated to a panorama of town and country. This late October morning probably was like most fall days in the southern Appalachian foothills. Golden sunlight bathed fields and hillsides, still damp with morning dew. Radiant leaves of yellow, red, and orange shimmered on towering maples, elms, and oaks; some leaves lost their hold on life-giving branches and fell to earth like tiny cradles rocked by the breeze. Dried corn stalks and a rough blanket of wheat stubble stood as mute reminders of the bountiful crops harvested a few months before. The musky scent of decaying foliage contrasted with the sweet smell of hay, and the melody of mockingbirds' full-throated songs filled the air. In the clear light of early morning, Tom could pick out the Three Sisters Peaks of the Smoky Mountains to the east, their weathered crowns forming a soft purple backdrop to the lower elevation Chilhowees. The forested hillsides stretching north to south as far as Tom could see were part of the great Appalachian mountain chain dividing Tennessee from eastern coastal states.



Maryville in the 1870s

Looking west, Tom could see familiar landmarks of Maryville, a town of about twelve hundred nestled in the hills that rose from the banks of a meandering Pistol Creek. Church steeples and the town hall tower dominated the horizon, keeping silent watch over homes, barns, mills, and shops that dotted the rolling landscape. The three-story brick façade of Anderson Hall, one of Maryville College's proud new additions, stood high above a thick stand of young cedars on campus. Though hidden from view, a winding network of roadways and hidden paths connected town and campus. During their college years, Tom and Emma had spent many hours ambling side by side along those lanes, the two of them falling a little more in love with each step.

But the time had come to say goodbye. Tom pulled Emma gently from her mother's arms, choked out a few words of farewell, and guided his young wife into the two-horse carriage that would carry them to the train station about a mile away. Emma's brother, John, had loaded their trunks into the back and climbed into the driver's seat beside them. "Git up," he commanded the team, and the carriage lurched forward. Tears still flowing, Emma turned and waved to her family, not stopping until her loved ones had faded from sight.



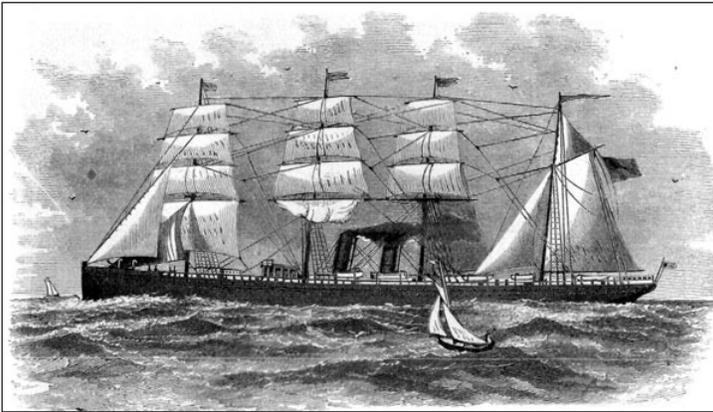
The Industrial Revolution brought steam power to America, opening western territories to new waves of settlers and shrinking the distance between America and Asia. Tom had booked passage on the transcontinental railroad, opened to traffic just eight years before in 1869. Traveling first to Chicago, Tom and Emma's five-day trip across America took them through Iowa, Nebraska, Wyoming and Utah territories, Nevada, and on to San Francisco.

A wide expanse of territory lay between their Tennessee home and the Pacific Ocean coast of California. Tom and Emma went to sleep on open plains of grasslands and scrub brush and woke up hours later to largely the same surroundings. They passed through boomtowns that had sprung up seemingly in the middle of nowhere, settled by unemployed soldiers, miners, and other adventuresome men and women pushing west after the Civil War. Herds of sheep and cattle grazed on native grasses where millions of buffalo once had thundered. Those proud animals faced extinction from hunters hungry for their pelts and soldiers aiming to wipe out the Indians' main source of food and sustenance. Huge piles of buffalo bones and hides sat

near the tracks along the way, destined for factories and tanneries back east. As their train passed into Wyoming territory, passengers likely talked about Custer's Seventh Cavalry, whose men had met their death the year before in nearby Montana territory as the Plains Indian Wars had drawn to a close.

The vastness of the Great Plains eventually gave way to the majesty of the Rocky Mountains, rising like a massive wall of forest and stone from a sea of dried grass and sagebrush. Snow-covered peaks glistened in the late autumn sunshine. The coal-fired steam engine labored up steep, winding canyon slopes and over mountain passes towering five to seven thousand feet above sea level. The fresh scent of mountain pine, spruce, and cedar competed with smoke and coal dust that seeped through partially opened windows and settled like a gritty crust on everything and everyone inside. Mountain goats, pronghorn antelope, elk, and deer, panicked by the approaching train, scrambled over rocky outposts or bounded through snowdrifts forming along the tracks.

As October drew to a close, Tom and Emma arrived in San Francisco, a rough and tumble city whose population had burgeoned after the Gold Rush of 1849 and California's entry into statehood in 1850. Although the attractions of San Francisco may have enticed them, they didn't linger long; they held tickets for *The City of Tokyo*, a steamer that would depart November 3 and carry them on a three-week journey across the Pacific. *The City of Tokyo* was the largest steamship in America and second largest in the world, with four sailing masts to complement its powerful steam engine.



**The City of Tokyo**

After two or three nights in the city, surely glad to sleep in a bed that wasn't rocking back and forth, Tom and Emma made their way to the wharf

and settled their belongings in a small second-class cabin. Tom climbed up on deck as the steamer pulled away from its moorings and began moving slowly through the harbor. The ship picked up speed as it neared open waters.

Tom wasn't prepared for the wave of sadness and fear that washed over him as he watched the shoreline recede from view. Although Emma was with him on this journey, he felt more alone and isolated than ever before. He poured out his emotions in his journal.

What a strange feeling is that which comes over one, as he  
flies away from all past associations of home and childhood!  
Every day and night put him hundreds of miles farther from  
all the scenes which have hallowed and blessed his earlier days!  
Stranger still is the feeling when he stands on the steamer's deck  
and sees the last connection between him and his native land  
severed; sees the shore slowly receding, and, at last, is out at sea!

## Notes

2. Licensure and ordination are two separate steps in acquiring a pastoral ministry. The Presbyterian Church in Tom's time required a candidate wishing to be ordained to be examined by his Presbytery (women were not eligible for the ministry until 1956) following studies at a theological seminary. The Presbytery examined the candidate's knowledge in a range of areas, including the Bible, ecclesiastical history, theology, original languages of Scripture, and church doctrine. After licensure, the candidate was eligible for ordination after receiving a call from a ministry and going through further examination. Some branches of the Presbyterian Church today (e.g., Orthodox Presbyterian Church and Presbyterian Church in America) still observe these separate steps for ministerial candidates. Westminster Theological Seminary, "Ordination Process." Online: <http://www.wts.edu/students/services/careerplacementhandbook/ordainedministry/ordinationprocess.html>.

## The Early Years

For us, the course of true love did run smooth.

*Mount Horeb, East Tennessee, October 8, 1850.* Tom was the first of twelve children born to Elias Alexander, a stern, devout man, who dreamed of great things but was weighed down by the grim reality of subsistence farming in East Tennessee's hill country. Elias couldn't hold onto wives any better than he could hold onto money. He divorced Tom's mother, Jane Rankin Alexander, a few years after Tom's birth, leaving the shy, sensitive lad to the mercy of one stepmother after another, three in all. The second was of the storybook kind, harsh and unloving. Tom tried to shield his siblings from her unpredictable bouts of wrath, becoming a welcome island of stability in the midst of family dysfunction.<sup>1</sup>

The hardscrabble Alexander farm offered a bare living. Its poor, red clay soil sprouted just enough corn, hay, potatoes, and vegetables to feed the growing family, sometimes yielding enough extra to sell for some much-needed cash. A few chickens, pigs, and cows supplied eggs, meat, and milk. Situated amid East Tennessee's rolling gaps and hollows and its spring-fed ponds and lakes, Mount Horeb seemed like an ideal place for a young boy to grow up. Tom loved exploring the fields and forests surrounding his farm, playing imaginary childhood games under the canopy of shade from hickories, oaks, pines, and chestnuts. But Elias frowned on idleness and put Tom to work as soon as he was old enough to wield a pickax and guide the horse-drawn plow.



**Mount Horeb Presbyterian Church**

Tom loved his father and knew his father loved him, but he craved an occasional word of encouragement or praise. Instead, all he ever felt was Elias' severity and discipline. Son of a Scot, Elias was a strict Calvinist and a leading elder in Mount Horeb Presbyterian Church, located across the dusty road that passed by the farm. Perhaps mindful that the Presbyterian Church had strong roots in his ancestral home of Scotland, Elias seemed to take personal responsibility for making others live up to the most conservative interpretation of biblical teachings.<sup>2</sup> He imposed a daily regimen of work, study, and worship in his household and made his children's lives miserable on the Sabbath. No running, playing, whistling, or otherwise having fun on Sundays. Instead, Tom and his siblings remained cloistered inside, learning psalms and memorizing the Shorter Westminster Catechism, a tome containing more than one hundred questions and answers about God, creation, and the Scriptures. Elias always began with the first question and worked down the list.

"What is the chief end of man?" he asked. "Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever," the children answered dutifully.

"What is God?" came another question. "God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth" came the well-memorized reply.

Because true believers never worked on the Sabbath, Elias made his family prepare for the holy day on Saturdays. Tom and his brothers hauled water and wood inside, while his sisters helped their mother peel potatoes and prepare meals. Elias even shaved on Saturday evenings, as did Tom and his brothers when they were old enough. The strict regimen carried over to mealtimes on Sundays. Elias ordered his children to stand at the table to

eat their dinner and contemplate God's grace, lest they forget the source of their blessings.

Although Tom never rebelled against his father's rules, he learned early on to bury his emotions deep inside, hidden from the sight of others and possibly even from himself at times. He never did manage to control his occasional flashes of temper, though. Before he could stop himself, he sometimes would lash out at siblings or friends—never his parents—with sharp, biting words that he bitterly regretted afterwards. But Tom also knew how to make people laugh. He aimed his dry wit at himself as often as at his family and friends, bringing welcome relief from the day-to-day drudgery of life on the farm.

School proved to be his greatest escape. Tom relished the hours spent in the schoolhouse next to the church and the time he devoted to studying. His thirsty mind soaked up lessons taught by the local schoolmarm, and he began dreaming of life beyond the farm and the narrow confines of East Tennessee. But the Civil War cut his boyhood short, as soldiers and their battles spilled into the valleys of East Tennessee. Unlike the plantation owners of Middle and West Tennessee, who depended on slave labor to work their larger land holdings, many hill country East Tennesseans were Union sympathizers who had voted not to secede from the Union. They even had tried to break away from Tennessee when the state did secede in 1861, but Confederate troops moving into the area quickly crushed their efforts to remain with the North.

Southern armies weren't the only aggressors. Confederate and Union forces both swept through the strategically important state from the onset of hostilities in 1861, seizing horses, cattle, grain, and other necessities for armies on the move. Even churches succumbed to the divisiveness rending the nation, with Presbyterians splitting into northern and southern factions. Half of Mount Horeb's congregation threw their lot in with their southern brethren, leaving the Alexanders and other Union supporters struggling to keep worship services going during the war.<sup>3</sup>



The war ended in 1865, leaving death, destruction, and divided families in its wake. In 1868, Tom headed to Maryville College in a Tennessee town of the same name. The college, like most others in the region, had closed its doors for six years during and just after the war, resuming classes in 1867. Tom was shocked by what he saw. General William T. Sherman had come to

Maryville in 1863, bringing nearly 30,000 men, but little in the way of food or other provisions. His army had stayed just three days but left much havoc in its wake. Soldiers not only had wiped out Blount County's entire stock of hay and food but had also used the college dormitory and classrooms as barracks and horse stables. Confederate forces did the same when they swept into the area. Floorboards still bore the imprint of boots and steel horseshoes. Soldiers had ripped wooden banisters and door and window frames from walls and burned them as firewood.

The college seminary had been dismantled and its bricks used to build ovens for cooking. The library and its six thousand-plus books lay in ruins. In downtown Maryville, only the courthouse had survived fires set by Major General Joseph Wheeler's Confederate cavalry during its October 1863 raid on Union supply lines, and it still bore ugly scars from bullets and cannonballs. The rest of the town lay in cinders and ash. Tom's experiences during the war and its aftermath would help him understand, in a deeply personal way, the turmoil and divisiveness plaguing Japan as it plunged headlong into the modern world just a few years later.

Working during breaks from his studies, Tom labored alongside other students to repair damaged buildings and to assist in construction of three stately buildings to be called Anderson Hall, Memorial Hall, and Baldwin Hall, while college leaders struggled to rebuild the school's curriculum and funding. The work was hard, but Tom flourished in the new environment where his intellect was free to explore classical knowledge and new ideas. Work consumed most of his time and energy, but something else—or someone, rather—also captured his attention: his future wife, Emma Edwina Brown.



Emma as teenager

We—Emma and I—first saw each other sometime in the autumn of 1868, at Maryville, East Tennessee. I cannot recall the occasion on which we first met: the exact when and where have alike vanished from my mind beyond recall. I only know that early in September of the year mentioned above, I left my father's home in Jefferson County and went to Maryville in order to enter upon my college course.

It was only three or four years after the close of the "Great Rebellion." The roar of cannons had just died away among the hills and the smoke of battle had barely had time to clear away from the valleys of East Tennessee. The country had hardly begun to recover from the dreadful ravages of the fierce and bloody conflict. Maryville College had, with difficulty, survived the shock which had paralyzed the whole country. However, an earnest effort had been made to revive the institution, and the effort had not been altogether without success.

Previous to the war, Emma's father, the Reverend W. B. Brown, had been living in Georgia. But soon the political atmosphere became too hot for a union man to live there in peace, so in 1864 he removed with his family to Cleveland, Tennessee, where he remained till the close of the war. When he heard of the effort to revive Maryville College, he determined to remove to Maryville in order to educate his children in the same institution where he himself had been educated years before.

So early in 1867, Emma found herself in Maryville. What was left of the college buildings after the war was over stood on Main Street, truly in a most dismal and dilapidated condition. Its advantages, such as they were, were open to both sexes. Emma's older sister, Ella, with one or two other young ladies, was reciting in some of the classes. Emma was attending a girls' school in another part of the town. She was then thirteen years old and I was eighteen. I remember to have seen her passing the streets on week days, and on Sundays at the church service then held in the old college chapel—for want of a better place.

I recall now, with ease, her girlish face, form and manner: her round cheeks, short hair and keen black eyes. How little did she or I think in those bygone days how closely linked together our destinies were! The college year came to a close without our becoming acquainted, except in the most distant way. It had been a hard year to me, and when it was past, I drew a long sigh of relief as I thought of getting home once more. Though anxious to get away, I decided to remain over one day longer in order to attend the closing exercises of the Female Institute.

It was a warm evening in June (1869), and the audiences were provided with seats in the open air. I went alone and took my seat among them. I had not been seated long when I saw Emma sitting not far away, and without an escort. I inwardly resolved that it would be my duty to see that she got home safely after the exercises were over.

In due time, I presented myself. She took my arm voluntarily and with a ready consent to my request for her company. The walk (a mile or more) to her home was a pleasant one. I liked the frank and girlish creature at my side. Her pleasant face and cheery talk were refreshing after the hard experiences of the year just past—far more than she suspected at the time.

Arrived at her door, I took my leave at once and walked back to my room with a lighter step than usual. The next morning I was just about taking the train for home when someone said to me: “Emma Brown said tell you goodbye for her!”

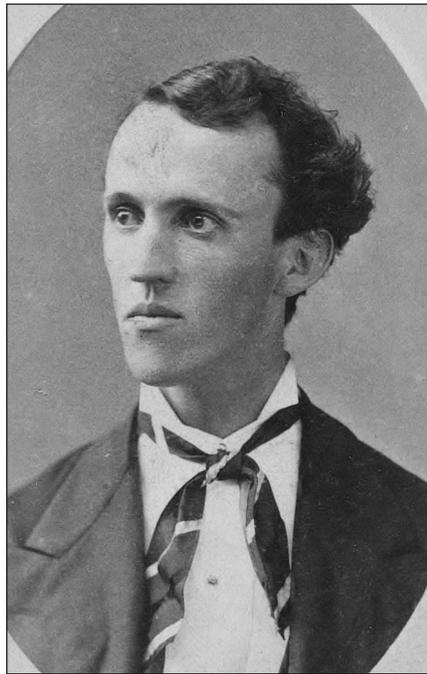
After a summer break spent working on his father’s farm, Tom returned to college and boarded with a family outside of town. He and Emma saw little of each other for a couple of years, except for an annual visit he made to her home. Tom tried to convince himself that the other young men flocking to her side did not concern him. No, Emma is only a friendly acquaintance, nothing more, he thought. Tom moved back to campus his senior year. By then, Emma was a freshman. Both sang in the church choir, and they found themselves thrown together more often than ever before. Soon, fate would draw them even closer.

During the Christmas holidays—1872—she and I, with other students were invited to a party at the house of the good lady with whom I had formerly been a boarder, two miles from town. I and another young man united in hiring a hack for ourselves and partners. In the morning of the day on which the party was to be, I sat down and began writing a note to Emma asking for her company that evening, when a young man who was present intimated that she was going with him. As he had been keeping her company, I said nothing, but just quietly erased the “Emma” and wrote “Ella” instead, sent the note and got an affirmative answer.

At the time appointed, I called for Miss Ella. She was not quite ready, and as I waited, I enquired about Emma. “Oh, she isn’t going,” was the reply. “Why?” “Hasn’t any company.” I said: “She must go, she can ride with us.” So they both went with me. The weather was bitter cold but we enjoyed the ride as well as the party.

From that night, we thought of each other not as friends only but as something more. But in comparing notes afterwards, we agreed that we always had a liking for each other. A short time only passed till I was in her company again. I then made known the state of my mind. I got no immediate response, but felt sure I was treading on safe ground. That was late in the winter or early in the spring of 1873. From that time till the term closed, we were often in each other's company, and though there was no formal engagement between us, we were conscious within that our hearts were mutually pledged and so were happy.

My college course was completed May 30 (?). The trustees of the Institution, however, offered me the position of tutor for one year. I gladly accepted. Emma and I went together very much during the year that followed, and learned to know and love each other more and more.



Tom in 1874, age 24



From Maryville College, Tom ventured to New York City and Union Theological Seminary. His roommate, a college friend, was the only familiar link to home in a city that impressed Tom with its grandeur and rush of life.<sup>4</sup> New York City in the 1870s was America's showcase, home of high-rise buildings, factories, and financiers. The city's population had swelled to nearly one million, and its ports handled almost half of America's burgeoning overseas trade. Opera houses, theaters, and Tammany Hall, with its well-known purveyors of graft, were juxtaposed with disease-ridden neighborhoods, where a flood of foreign immigrants, freed slaves, and fortune-seekers from America's rural heartland crowded into dark, airless tenements.

A brand new Gothic-style Presbyterian church on Fifth Avenue boasted New York City's highest steeple, rising 286 feet into the sky and dwarfing neighboring buildings. With its seating capacity of two thousand, graceful vaulted ceilings stenciled with intricate designs, massive pipe organ, and dazzling stained glass windows, it was the most majestic church Tom had ever seen. America's Gilded Age was on full display in New York City, but so were many sad reminders of the Panic of 1873 that had sparked an economic depression lasting four years. Large numbers of homeless boys and girls had been forced into begging or worse. Legions of unemployed men wearing tattered clothes, many without socks or overcoats, waited forlornly in the city's long bread lines.

Union Theological Seminary's brand of teaching offered a sharp contrast to Tom's strict Calvinist upbringing and opened his eyes to a new way of viewing religion and faith. The first major seminary established in a vibrant city rather than a small secluded town, the Presbyterian-affiliated school also had broken new ground with its ecumenical approach, opening its doors to students from all Christian denominations. The seminary challenged traditional interpretations of the Bible and encouraged students to embrace emerging fields of sociology, comparative religion, and science—including Darwin's controversial theory of evolution, first published in 1859. While this open-minded approach may have prepared seminarians to confront the challenges of an increasingly secular America, it also enraged conservative theologians, who decried these teachings as a threat to the central role of religion in society.

One of Tom's professors, Henry Ward Beecher, was a noted social reformer, who supported women's suffrage and opposed slavery. His sister, Harriet Beecher Stowe, had penned America's popular novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, a searing indictment of slavery that had strengthened abolitionist sentiment in northern states. As for evolution, the Reverend Beecher firmly believed that natural selection was God's way of bringing about change in species. He argued that the church, like species in nature, must adapt to

modern culture if it hoped to remain relevant. But Beecher also was a man of voracious appetites, some of which landed him in trouble.

While still a first-year seminarian, Tom wrote to a friend at home that “Beecher is stretching himself now. He draws immense crowds to his church as well as to the court house. Everyone wants to hear him now while his trial is going on,” referring to Beecher’s trial for adultery that ended without a verdict after six days of jury deliberations.<sup>5</sup> Beecher eventually was exonerated by a church board. His female accuser, though, was excommunicated along with her husband, a prominent New York City newspaperman, who had dared to support his wife’s assertion that Beecher had initiated the illicit relationship. Beecher’s acquittal by church peers delighted his supporters, but questions about the truth lingered, particularly since another of Beecher’s sisters supported his accuser’s story.

Another one of Tom’s professors, Dr. Charles A. Briggs, was chair of Hebrew and cognate languages at the seminary and one of the country’s most respected biblical scholars. Briggs challenged traditional views of the Scriptures, including the long-cherished notion of biblical inerrancy. He was one of a growing number of “new” theologians, who viewed the Scriptures not as God’s literal word but rather as man’s interpretation of God’s will. Conservative theologians, who believed that everything in the Bible must be taken literally, accused Briggs and other liberals of blasphemy. Briggs would be tried for heresy in the 1890s, at a time when Tom was teaching theology in Japan. Just as Briggs’ liberal views invited opprobrium and attack from his colleagues, so, too, would the liberal views Tom formed at the feet of Briggs, Beecher, and other professors come back to haunt his career.

Tom thrived in the competitive, stimulating atmosphere of the seminary. He honed his rhetorical skills in weekly debates and gained real-world experience by working with the city’s poor. Tom also took on outside tutoring jobs to help pay for school. Hard work, perseverance, and high standards propelled him to the top of his class, but high grades were not the only thing that distinguished him from his classmates. A lanky six-footer, Tom stood at least a head taller than most of his friends. And while he normally shunned displays of ostentatiousness, he secretly admired the fine clothing worn by many well-heeled New Yorkers and a few of his fellow seminarians. One day, taking some of his hard-earned money, Tom indulged himself in a new black wool coat and soft kid gloves, completing the outfit with a silk top hat that set off his keen, observant eyes.

Perhaps Tom justified this unaccustomed splurge by telling himself he would need good, warm clothing when he ventured forth as a new preacher. Or, just as likely, he had someone special in mind when he bought his new outfit. During his three years in seminary, he kept up a lively correspondence

with Emma. He also visited her each summer in Maryville and welcomed her at least once in New York City, where she could see him in his new surroundings. “For us, the course of true love did run smooth,” he wrote. But not everything was going his way.

Tom may have earned top marks in his class, but he grew more and more concerned as graduation approached. He congratulated one friend after another as they told him about positions they had accepted in different parts of the country, but their successes only reminded him of his own failure to find a place to serve. What was wrong? Why hadn’t he received a call from any church? Tom knew he did not control his destiny—only God did that—but he grew more worried with each passing week. He told himself that something would turn up, that surely God had a place for him and would direct him to it at the right time. Before long, Tom’s faith was rewarded as his good friend and classmate, Thomas Winn, reminded him of an option he had considered before but never seriously pursued: service in a foreign country.

Tom was not alone in contemplating a faraway venture. America in the 1870s was on the move, pushing into Indian territories in the West and caught up in yearnings for a new frontier beyond the nation’s borders. Americans were driven by a strong missionary zeal stemming from their renewed belief in America’s Manifest Destiny “to shine as a beacon among nations for the natural rights of man,” as John L. O’Sullivan had put it in his famous—and controversial—article, “The Great Nation of Futurity,” published in 1839.

Although not nearly as zealous as some of his contemporaries, Tom felt the choice of overseas missionary service was right for him. After consulting with Emma, he offered to go anywhere, and the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions promptly appointed him to serve in Japan. Three churches in Tennessee and one in Texas soon offered him attractive positions, each one closer to home and more prestigious than overseas service, but he turned them all down and remained faithful to his commitment to go to Japan. He served twenty-five years there and never regretted his decision.





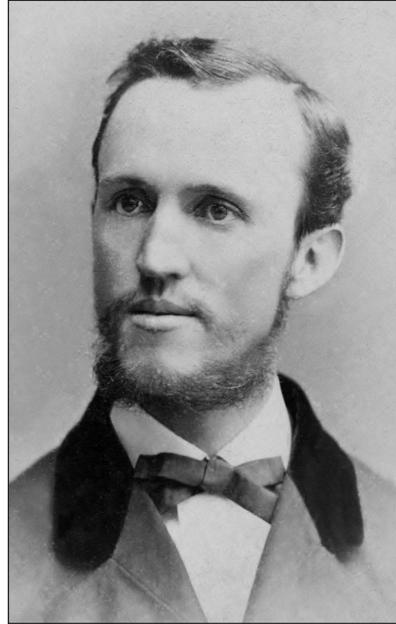
**Maryville train depot**

Tom graduated from seminary in early May, 1877, and traveled to his home church at Mount Horeb, which was hosting a meeting of the Union Presbytery, the regional governing body of the Presbyterian Church. After examining in great depth and detail his knowledge of Greek, Hebrew, the Old and New Testaments, and other ecclesiastical matters, members of the Presbytery licensed him as a minister. As excited as he was by this milestone, Tom could hardly contain his excitement over his next big step.

On the morning of the 21st, I started to Maryville to attend my own wedding. The day dragged slowly by, for I was impatient to see my dear girl. It had been eight, or nine, months since we had seen each other. As the long day drew toward its close, I drew near to Maryville—a happy man if ever there was one. . . .

The train stopped at the Maryville depot, and when I got off, I found Emma's brother, John, waiting to convey me to her house. The horses, as if conscious of my feelings, made due haste and soon brought me to the door. On the verandah and in the house, a goodly company of friends had already gathered to witness the ceremony.

I pushed my way through more expeditiously than politely, and was shown to Emma's room, where she, dressed as a bride, awaited me. Just as the sun was sinking in the west, we were married by the Rev. T. J. Lamar. The next day, we took a little journey to the hills in Anderson County, where we spent two, or three, of the happiest days we ever saw.



Tom in 1877



Emma's wedding picture, 1877

After their brief honeymoon in Tennessee's Welsh coal country—an odd choice for a bridal tour, Tom admitted—the young couple divided the summer between their families' homes in Mount Horeb and Maryville. Time raced by as they prepared for an autumn departure for Japan. In early October, with his call to missionary service in hand, Tom was ordained as a full-fledged minister. On October 24, 1877, Tom and Emma boarded a train bound for San Francisco and the steamer that would carry them to their new lives halfway around the world. They were the first graduates of Maryville College to serve as missionaries abroad.

## Notes

1. Descriptions of Tom's father, Tom's relationship with his father, and Tom's childhood are drawn from Thomas Theron Alexander, *Personal Journal*; Emma Edwina Brown Alexander, *Recollections*; Mary Alexander, *Japan Notes*; and oral family history related to the author by Tom's granddaughter, Emma Shelton.  
Descriptions of Mount Horeb, the Alexander family farm, and Elias Alexander's role in the Mount Horeb Presbyterian Church stem from the author's visit to the site and from records of Hebron Presbyterian Church (the church's current name).
2. America's Presbyterian Church has strong roots in Scotland, where preacher John Knox (c. 1514–72) set an austere moral tone for the church and shaped its democratic form of governance. Knox is considered to be one of the founders of English Puritanism.
3. Descriptions of East Tennessee and Maryville during the Civil War are drawn from Thomas Theron Alexander, *Personal Journal*; Wilson, *Chronicles of Maryville College*, 115–17.; and information related to me by Maryville's historian, Dr. Sarah Brown McNeill. The Presbyterian Church split into northern and southern factions just before the war began in 1861, reuniting as the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. (PCUSA) only in 1983.
4. His roommate was Edgar A. Elmore, an 1874 graduate of Maryville College hailing from Newmarket, Tennessee, near Tom's home at Mount Horeb. They shared Room 36 of the seminary's student housing. *Catalogue of the Union Theological Seminary 1874–75*, Burke Library archives. New York: Union Theological Seminary.
5. TTA letter of March 3, 1875, to the Rev. G. S. W. Crawford at Maryville College, cited in Crawford, *Tall Tennesseans*, 83–84.