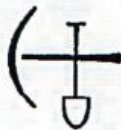


From Cornstock Bonanza
Rare western Americana
collected & edited by
Duncan Emrich

J. Ross Browne

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J O H N Ross Browne was born at Beggar's Bush, near Dublin, Ireland, on February 11, 1821, the family emigrating in 1833 to Kentucky, where they settled at Louisville. At the age of eighteen, Browne worked as a common hand on a flatboat trading between Louisville and New Orleans, and the following year, in 1840, he went to Washington, D.C., as a reporter of Congressional proceedings for the *Globe*, forerunner of the present *Congressional Record*. He had hoped from his earnings to gain enough to permit European travel, but was disappointed in this, and, instead, joined the crew of a whaling ship out of New Bedford, voyaging with it for two years and publishing, as a result of his travels, *Etchings of a Whaling Cruise, with Notes of a Sojourn on the Island of Zanzibar*, in 1846. Following this, Browne returned to Washington, where he married Lucy Anna Mitchell and also became private secretary to Robert J. Walker, Secretary of the Treasury.

With the Gold Rush under way, Browne obtained an appointment in the Revenue Service and sailed for California in January, 1849, arriving at San Francisco on August 5. With the change of administration in Washington, however, he found his appointment

had been canceled and that he had been made, instead, an Inspector of Postal Service. In this capacity he traveled extensively in California, and was fortunate enough to be at Monterey in September for the California constitutional convention. He acted as secretary for the convention's proceedings, and was granted the sole right to publish the proceedings. In 1850 he received ten thousand dollars for this work, a sum ample enough to permit him to voyage with his family for two years in Italy and the Near East. Following this trip, he published *Yusef, or a Journey of the Frangi: A Crusade in the East*, in 1853. Returning to the United States, Browne traveled the Canadian and Mexican borders, and Oregon and Washington Territories, as confidential agent for the government. With General Jack Hayes he made, in 1854, a thorough survey of the Sacramento Valley.

In June, 1855, he moved to California for an extended stay of four years, during which time he was occupied with official duties as Inspector of Custom Houses and Indian Agencies. With the termination of this appointment, Browne, in 1859, followed the rush to the Comstock, staying long enough to gather material for a series of articles which appeared in 1860 and 1861 in *Harper's Monthly Magazine*. He then returned to Washington and sailed, in 1860, for Europe, where he traveled as roving correspondent for the *San Francisco Bulletin*, the *Sacramento Union*, and *Harper's*, visiting Germany, France, Spain, Algeria, Portugal, Poland, Russia, and the Scandinavian countries. In 1863, Browne was again in California, living in Oakland, but still traveling the adjacent region and writing regularly for *Harper's* on the mining camps of Nevada and Arizona, and on extended trips through these states. In 1868, he was appointed United States Minister to China, and proceeded with his family to Peking. The appointment was, however, withdrawn in 1870 with the change of administration in Washington, and Browne returned to the United States, journeying to London in 1871 to report on various mining matters. After this trip he returned to California, where he died in Oakland, very suddenly, at the age of fifty-four, of acute appendicitis on December 9, 1875.

There can be no question that Browne was one of the most widely traveled, observant, and versatile men of his time. It is unfortunate

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that his ability as a writer and the influence which he exerted on other writers of his time has not been more widely recognized. His *Etchings of a Whaling Cruise*, for example, preceded Melville's *Moby Dick* and was known to Melville, while his "Peep at Washoe" and "Washoe Revisited" were clear forerunners of Mark Twain's *Roughing It*. His *Yusef, or a Journey of the Frangi* also preceded Twain's *Innocents Abroad* and the relation—even indebtedness—of the latter work to Browne's book is apparent.

"A Peep at Washoe," *Harper's Monthly Magazine*, December, 1860, and January and February, 1861. Reprinted as part of *Crusoe's Island: A Ramble in the Footsteps of Alexander Selkirk. With Sketches of Adventure in California and Washoe*, New York, 1864. See also: E. Miriam Lone, *Check List of First Editions of the Works of John Ross Browne*, New York, Lathrop C. Harper, 1930; Francis J. Rock, *J. Ross Browne: A Biography*, Washington, D.C., The Catholic University of America, 1929 (doctoral dissertation).