

George Hamilton Browne

By Ian Knight and Adrian Greaves

George Hamilton Browne (the name was not hyphenated in early official documents, though it has often been written as such) remains one of the most intriguing and controversial characters to emerge from the Anglo-Zulu War. He was by nature an adventurer, and a garrulous one at that, whose own stories are the principle cause of the confusion that still surrounds his life and career.

George Hamilton Browne was born on 22 December 1844 in Cheltenham, the son of Major George Browne of the 35th Regiment, and his wife Susanah. The Browne family seat was Comber House, in County Londonderry, Ireland, and George was one of nine children. He was given a public school education, but by his own account he gained ‘far more laurels in the playing fields than in the lecture-rooms, for although I worked hard in a desultory way, still my best efforts were given to the play-ground and gymnasium’. He remained athletic in later life and took a keen interest in boxing.

From an early age, George enjoyed the sights and sounds of military life at the barracks where his father was based, and when he left school he was sent to an academy in Lausanne with the intention of eventually joining the Army. If he can be believed, Browne’s youth was characterised by a romantic penchant for duelling and for dramatic entanglements with women that, between them, prevented him gaining entry into the Royal Military Academy at Woolwich. Instead, he ran away to join the Royal Horse Artillery as a driver, but was discovered by a relative and was discharged as under-aged. There followed, he said, a duel over a lady, and a rapid flight across the Channel, which resulted in enlistment in the Papal Zouaves – the first taste of an essentially mercenary lifestyle – and some action in the Italian War of Unification.

In January 1866 Browne arrived in New Zealand, and entered the most controversial period of his extraordinary career. New Zealand was, at that time, drawing towards the end of several decades of bitter warfare between European settlers and the indigenous Maori over the question of land ownership. Browne later wrote a book about that period – *With the Lost Legion in New Zealand* (c. 1911) – in which, curiously, he refers to himself throughout by a pseudonym. The reason for this has since become apparent, in that the adventures he ascribes to his alter ego were by no means all his own. He claimed to have served with the famous Forest Rangers, but no official record of service in his own name exists prior to 1872, by which time the fighting was over. If Browne saw service in the active phase of the wars between 1866 and 1872, as he claimed, it was not under his own name; it is, however, entirely possible that he enlisted under a false one. Whether he had witnessed them himself, or heard them from participants later, many of the incidents described in the book did not in any case occur to George Hamilton Browne, and the use of a pseudonym appears to have been a rather transparent attempt to deflect criticism that he was claiming other men’s glory.

Whatever the truth of his adventures, the implication that he had considerably embellished them caused considerable offence in New Zealand when the book was published. What seems to have irritated Browne’s former comrades as much as anything, was the fact that, at a time when white New Zealand society was striving to achieve a sense of common identity and respectability, Browne had portrayed the men of the old

volunteer units as piratical rogues and vagabonds. One officer went so far as to claim, in response, that Browne was not entitled to the New Zealand campaign medal he habitually wore, but had misappropriated it by falsifying the records of a man with a similar surname who had died in service. Certainly, there can be no doubt that the love of a good yarn was often foremost in Browne's reminiscences, and that he had few qualms about bending the facts to suit.

Browne seems to have left New Zealand about 1870. He probably did then fight Bushrangers for a spell in Australia – where he was wounded - and might perhaps have served on the American frontier in the wars against the indigenous Americans. A year or two later he was back in New Zealand, serving in the Armed Constabulary until discharged at his own request in 1875. He then tried his hand at running a pub, but the venture failed and he left New Zealand under something of a financial cloud. He was troubled throughout his life by money worries, and admitted that he was often 'reckless'. Nevertheless, he continued to refer to himself by the nickname 'Maori' Browne throughout the rest of his life.

At the beginning of 1878 he arrived in southern Africa. Here he met a number of former acquaintances among the 1/24th Regiment, then serving on the Cape Frontier, and volunteered as an officer in Pulleine's Rangers, an irregular unit formed by Col. Henry Pulleine, 1/24th. At the end of 1878, with the 24th joining the troops assembling on the Zulu border, Browne again volunteered, this time securing the rank of Major in the 1st Battalion, 3rd Regiment, Natal Native Contingent.

When Browne wrote a second book about his experiences – *A Lost Legionary in South Africa* (c. 1913) – he wisely decided to do so under his own name, aware, no doubt, of the controversy his earlier book had caused in New Zealand. Fortunately, his part in the Zulu campaign is well documented and supported by a wide variety of official reports, private diaries and correspondence. It is interesting to note, however, that where two accounts of the same incident exist written by Browne – an official one and a later one in his reminiscences – the one in the book is invariably prone to greater exaggeration.

Browne was present at the crossing of the Centre Column into Zululand at Rorke's Drift on 11 January 1879 (there is, incidentally, no independent evidence to support his comment that several of his men drowned in the crossing), and he was in the thick of the action at Sihayo's homestead on the 12th. Here he led several companies from his battalion into the centre of the Zulu position among the rocks at the foot of the Ngedla cliffs, only to find that most of his men fled before they reached the Zulus. On 21 January his battalion was appointed to sweep through the Malakatha and Hlajakazi hill ranges. His men were engaged in clearing Zulus from the Magogo and Silutshana hills on the 22nd when they were ordered to return to the camp at Isandlwana to assist in packing up for a general column advance.

Browne's men approached to within two or three miles of the camp before realising that it was under attack. They then took up a position on a commanding ridge on the left of the road, and Browne's description – from his memoirs – of what he saw there remains one of the most chilling accounts to emerge from the war;

Good God! What a sight it was. By the road that runs between the hill and the kopje, came a huge mob of maddened cattle, followed by a dense swarm of Zulus. These poured into the undefended right and rear of the camp and at the same time

the left horn of the enemy and the chest of the army rushed in. Nothing could stand against this combined attack. All formation was broken in a minute, and the camp became a seething pandemonium of men and cattle struggling in dense clouds of dust and smoke ...

That night, on the Nek below Isandlwana, Browne claimed to recognise the body of his old friend, Henry Pulleine.

The following morning the remnants of Lord Chelmsford's column returned to Rorke's Drift. They arrived to find the garrison had made a stout defence during the night – and that a large number of wounded Zulus lay out in the surrounding bush. Browne's men, assisted by numbers of regular infantry, swept the bush and killed them all. Browne's comment that 'it was beastly but there was nothing else to do' reflects a ruthlessness which may have been learned in the tough fighting in New Zealand – whatever he saw of it – and which characterised his career.

In the aftermath of Isandlwana, Browne remained at Rorke's Drift, making occasional forays across the border to skirmish there ('on turning the body over we found it was a woman', he remarked after he and a companion shot two Zulus making ritual preparations; 'we neither of us expressed any regret ...') until ordered to the Cape to recruit men for a newly-raised unit, Lonsdale's Horse. He returned to the border in time to serve with Lord Chelmsford's expedition to relieve the besieged garrison at Eshowe, and was present at the battle of kwaGingindlovu on 2 April. Sent back to the Cape, with a party of irregulars due to be discharged, Browne was badly injured when he was crushed between a mule and its shipboard stall.

Browne spent several months convalescing at the Cape, during which time he met one Dolphina Spolander, whom he married on 25 June 1879. The couple later had six children, although Browne spent much of his time away from the marriage, adventuring in southern Africa. He served in the BaSotho 'Gun War' of 1880, and in Sir Charles Warren's Bechuanaland expedition of 1884. In 1885 he was appointed Adjutant of the Diamond Fields Horse. In 1888 he served briefly in Zululand again, during the Dinuzulu rebellion, where he met Robert Baden-Powell.

In 1890, he joined the British South Africa Company's Pioneer expedition to occupy Mashonaland (Zimbabwe), the beginning of several years' involvement in 'Rhodesian' affairs. He served under Major Forbes in the war against the amaNdebele ('Matabele') in 1893 and in 1896 commanded volunteers under Baden-Powell during the Rebellion. Baden-Powell remembered him with obvious affection from the 1888 expedition, and photographed Browne 'as he liked to be photographed', pointing a gun at a cowering African. While Baden-Powell clearly regarded him as a colourful and rather extreme character, whose views were not necessarily typical of the regular soldiery, his attitude reflects a darker understanding that it was by men such as Browne that empires are won and held.

Browne seems to have remained in 'Rhodesia' throughout the Anglo-Boer War, before returning to the Cape. He had, apparently, lost much of his investment in the cattle diseases that swept through southern Africa at the end of the nineteenth century. At the Cape, there was worse to come; his wife Dolphina died in May 1904. This ushered in a new period of hardship for Browne, who appealed to the British Government for a pension, but was refused. About this time he seems to have sold his campaign medals,

which perhaps explains why of those he wore in later life – now in a private collection – only his British and South Africa Company medal* was as issued; indeed, the official status of his medals remains something of a mystery. He was so reduced in circumstances at one point as to seek help from the Salvation Army, by which time his medals had been sold.

In 1909 his luck turned, and he married Sarah Wilkerson, a lady of independent means, and they returned to England. The meeting was apparently a romantic one; Sarah Wilkerson is said to have corresponded with Browne after the Zulu campaign, for she had been engaged to a man whose life Browne had ‘saved’. Her fiancée had later been killed in the Sudan, and Sarah had never married; seeing the news of Browne’s misfortunes she contacted him again.

Browne was by now in retirement, his health impaired by the hardships of the life he had endured, and he embarked upon writing up ‘his’ experiences, although his tone suggests a certain disillusion with the practical rewards of a lifetime spent servicing Imperial adventures;

I had made the Crown and flag my fetish from early childhood, and in my own stupid and conceited mind reckoned it to be my bounded duty to fight for them, and that so long as the war continued I must continue to serve, not matter what it cost me in pecuniary and personal losses. This infatuation has stuck to me all my life, and is as quick now as it was then, my life in consequence, so far as gaining the good things of this world goes being a wretched failure ... as for your country, represented as it is by a gang of greedy, self-seeking politicians, you may starve in the gutter or rot in the workhouse. Therefore, my romantic new chum, when you see the chance to make money on the one hand, and fighting for your country on the other, you go for the money. There are plenty of bally fools such as I have been to do the fighting.

Browne’s last years were spent with his wife in Jamaica, where he died in a nursing home in February 1916. His recklessness with money must have continued to the very end, if the story that his wife had been a wealthy woman is to be believed, for a few years after his death Sarah, back in England, was reduced to repairing soldiers’ worn clothing in a munitions depot. A friend appealed on her behalf to the New Zealand government for support in recognition of George’s role in the old Maori Wars. In view of the controversy surrounding his time there, the Government declined.

This article was previously published in Part II of *Who’s Who In The Anglo-Zulu War 1879* (Knight and Greaves) and has been re-printed at the request of a number of Society members.

*The BSA Co. medal is the British and South Africa Company medal for the Matabele & Mashona rebellions of 1896/97. It was issued by Cecil Rhodes’ company and was, effectively, issued by him for his private army.