

Charlatan of Empire?
Did a colourful Victorian adventurer invent his military career?

By Ian Knight.

In 1920, the friend of an elderly widow, Sarah Browne, approached the government of New Zealand on her behalf. Sarah Browne was the widow of an old and apparently distinguished soldier, but had fallen on hard times since her husband's death and had been reduced to working as a seamstress at a munitions depot in England, repairing soldiers' clothing. The friend appealed to the New Zealand Government for assistance in the light of the prominent role played by her husband, who had fought 'again and again in the Maori Wars.' To her surprise, after careful deliberation, the Government declined. It could, it said, find no evidence of the distinguished service claimed by the soldier in question.

The rejection must have been a bitter blow to Mrs Browne, and it has certainly compromised for posterity the veracity of a man who rejoiced throughout his career in the nickname – earned, he said, during his time in action – of 'Maori' Browne.

George Hamilton Browne was by nature an adventurer, and a garrulous one at that. Much of what we know about his career comes from his own extensive writings – and that cannot be regarded as in any sense reliable. Indeed, it seems that, ninety years after his death, the greatest victim of his love of a good yarn – and his reluctance to let truth stand in the way of it – may prove to have been his own reputation.

Hamilton Browne (the name was not officially hyphenated, though it is often written as such) was born on 22 December 1844 in Cheltenham, the son of Major George Browne of the 35th Regiment, and his wife Susannah; that much, at least, is reasonably certain. The Browne family seat was Comber House, in County Londonderry, Ireland, and George, one of nine children, considered himself an Irishman throughout his life. He was given a public school education but by his own account he gained 'far more laurels on 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 was to remain athletic in later life and took a keen interest in boxing, which seems to have served him well in his boisterous career.

From an early age, he had 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 – a common enough practise for the sons of professional British Army officers at the time - with the intention of eventually joining the Army. If he can be believed, however, Hamilton 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. 'I was called out by an Italian nobleman, of sorts', he once recalled, 'who objected to some small attentions I had paid to a Tyrolese chantress in a café'; instead, he ran away to join the Royal Horse Artillery as a driver. Here he was discovered by a relative and was discharged as under-aged, and a typical adventure ensued;

Saying good-bye to my comrades necessitated my imbibing too much beer, so I reached my father's town-house full of beans and benevolence, where, with my usual bad luck, I ran foul of two very big military swells, who in my exuberance of spirits I astonished and quite unintentionally insulted. Next afternoon, at my father's orders, I attempted to apologise to the mighty potentates, and should have most likely been forgiven had not my infernal bad luck still stuck to me, for just at the moment that the tomahawk was being buried, I handed my father a vile squib cigar which I had placed in the case for my elder brother, who I considered had been too handy with his toe while assisting me to bed the previous night, and which I had completely forgotten. The debacle that ensued was too much for my nerves, and I fled from the house...

Browne's solution was to cross the Channel and enlist in the Papal Zouaves. This was to prove his first taste of what amounted to an essentially mercenary lifestyle, for Browne never did enlist in the regular British Army, although most of his life was spent in military service of sorts, much of it in the service of British Imperial interests. He saw action in the Italian War of Unification but a duel over a lady made Europe too hot for him, and at the end of 1865 he decided to try his luck in New Zealand.

It is this period in his career that remains most controversial, and his true adventures there are almost impossible to validate.

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. In the 1860s, Maori resistance had become focussed upon a religious movement known as Pai Marire – ‘the good and peaceful’ – which had fused borrowings from Christian beliefs with traditional Maori practices to form a potent form of nationalism. Followers of the Pai Marire cult – known to their enemies as ‘Hau Haus’ from a chant that formed a significant part of their rituals – had contested European control of the North Island forcing the whites to wage a series of campaigns between 1866 and 1871 to suppress them. Although British Imperial troops were involved in the earliest of these expeditions in significant numbers, the protracted guerrilla warfare which characterised the later stages was almost entirely by Colonial volunteers, militias and police units.

The controversy surrounding Browne’s involvement hinges upon the book he wrote about his experiences in later life, *With the Lost Legion in New Zealand*. Browne was particularly fond of the term ‘lost legion’, which he borrowed from Kipling. For Browne, it summed up the lives of the forgotten ‘legions’ of adventurers who fought across the British Empire with scarcely-remembered colonial units, whose service was often overlooked in official histories. Indeed, Browne claimed as his motive for writing the book a desire to place their service on record, ‘to educate some of my fellow countrymen, and let them know what sort of life the men of the Lost Legion led during the wars that took place in New Zealand’.

Throughout the book he wrote of himself, significantly, by a pseudonym. He talks of himself as a young Irish adventurer named Burke, and, after describing the events that brought him to the Colony, he gave a vivid pen-portrait of the men among whom he served;

Yes, they were all there, the ex-public schoolboy, the ex-army man, the ex-sailor, stock rider, bushman, gold-digger, professional man, ay, and, had you looked carefully, you would no doubt have found the unfrocked parson. The great majority of them are British, but among them is a sprinkling of vivacious Frenchmen [and] stolid Germans ... No matter what nationality they belonged to, they all had the same indescribable air of reckless good nature, combined with determined and latent ferocity...

It was in the company of such men that Browne apparently underwent his baptism of fire in New Zealand, he said, in the attack on the Maori pa – fortified stockade – at Otapawa on 14 January 1866. The pa was stormed by regular troops with colonial forces in support. His evocation of the opening stages of the battle remains extraordinarily vivid;

I crawled forward. I was under a low punga (tree fern), making for a big rata-tree some twelve feet further on, when a rush of flame and smoke darted out of the bushes not twenty yards in front of me, and I heard the fern leaves just over my head torn to ribbons, while the howl of slugs through the air and the crash of the volley sounded simultaneously ... A few moments before the bush had been as silent as the grave, but now it was an inferno; fire darted from the roots and sides of the tree-trunks in front of us, while yell after yell tore the disturbed air; and the smoke from the black powder either lay low on the ground or curled in spiral wreaths up through the trees.

Browne’s book is full of such descriptions as Burke takes part in most of the major actions of the North Island campaigns, rising to the rank of officer. Among his many adventures was this gruelling account of a struggle that occurred when his unit blundered into several cornered Maori stragglers during a pursuit;

There was no time for speech-making nor tactics, so we jumped at one another, and I had no sooner fired my carbine than I saw a big native with his tongue protruding and the whites of his eyes turned up spring at me through the smoke, twirling a long-handled tomahawk around his head ... the razor-edged blade at the business end of the six-foot flexible manuka handle, whipping over my carbine barrel, cut my left ear in two, scarred my cheek, and gashed my eyebrow so deeply that the flap of the wound fell over, which besides deluging me in blood quite obstructed the sight of my left eye, so much so that I thought I was blinded ... [I] flew at his throat like a wild cat, which I was fortunate enough to get a firm hold with my right hand ...

The moment I had closed with him he dropped his long-handled weapon and strove with all his might to tear away my grip on his throat with his left hand, while with his right he attempted to seize mine, but I successfully guarded it ... The struggle seemed to last for hours, in reality it did not last for five minutes, but it was a hot five minutes ...

For a few seconds we tugged and heaved at one another, and twice he swung me off my legs into the air, but I hung on and landed on my feet. In vain he tried to sink his nails into my right forearm, but the muscles, hardened by years of fencing, cricket and gymnastics, were as rigid as

iron, for although he scratched and scored the skin yet he could make no impression on the arm itself ...

Again and again he made desperate efforts to throw me off, and after one prolonged, furious struggle, in which I thought my sinews must give way, his feet got caught by a vine and we fell heavily sideways to the ground; when with one tremendous heave I gained the upper hand and drove my right knee into the lower part of his breast-bone. Oh, but it was a glorious feeling of exultation that rushed through my brain as I tightened, if possible, my clutch on his windpipe and, using the leverage of my knee, tugged and tugged again.

There is little in this account which is inconsistent with a life and death struggle between two opponents, one of whom – the unknown Maori – had been raised in a tradition of desperate close-quarter combat. Yet the excitement with which Browne relates it reveals an aspect of his personality that was to become more pronounced as his career progressed – the sheer enjoyment that he experienced at the prospect of a good fight. There are suggestions, too, that he adopted a certain ruthlessness, shaped by these early wars and often displayed thereafter, which was influenced by the unforgiving Maori code of *utu* – of revenge to be paid in blood.

By his own account, after years of intermittent warfare, the coming of peace was something of a disappointment to Browne. He tried his hand at running a canteen but the business failed and he left the colony under something of a financial cloud, eventually pitching up in southern Africa, where his career entered a new, better-documented phase. It was at this time that he took to introducing himself by the nickname ‘Maori’ Browne, and the stories he told about his adventures added currency in his dealings with the equally tough volunteer soldiers he encountered in Africa. He served in the closing stages of the 9th Cape Frontier War and, towards the end of 1878, enlisted as an officer in an auxiliary unit – the 3rd Regiment, Natal Native Contingent - which was being formed for the coming invasion of Zululand.

Browne would later write another book chronicling his adventures in southern Africa - *A Lost Legionary in South Africa* – and it is generally regarded as one of the most colourful memoirs of the campaign. If it is notable that he wrote of his adventures in New Zealand under an assumed name, it is equally significant that in his later book he adopted his true persona.

Browne was in the forefront of the war, and his own account of his adventures makes for an exciting read. His participation, moreover, is confirmed by a wide variety of official and semi-official sources, including his own reports. It is interesting to note, however, that where two accounts in Browne’s name exist describing the same incident, his later memoir is usually more highly coloured. This is no independent confirmation, for example, of Browne’s famous story, celebrated in the 1979 movie *Zulu Dawn*, which several of his auxiliaries were drowned in the river crossing at Rorke’s Drift on 11 January 1879.

Nevertheless, Browne was undoubtedly in the thick of the action at Sihayo’s homestead on the 12th, the first action of the war, where he led a company of his men into a close-quarter fight among fallen boulders. On 21 January he was attached to the force led by Lt. Gen. Lord Chelmsford, the senior British commander, away from the fated camp at Isandlwana into the Mangeni hills. At noon on the 22nd, Lord Chelmsford, blissfully unaware of the Zulu movements near the camp, sent Browne’s NNC back to Isandlwana. Browne’s account of what he saw from the road is one of the most chilling eyewitness 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, when Chelmsford re-occupied the ruined camp, Browne claimed to recognise the bodies of old friends lying among the dead.

The following morning the remnants of Lord Chelmsford’s column returned to Rorke’s Drift. They arrived to find the garrison had – famously - made a stout defence during the night, and that a large number of wounded Zulus lay out in the surrounding bush. Under the circumstances, there was little the British – with their own medical supplies lost at Isandlwana – could have done for large numbers of wounded enemy, but Browne reacted with typical ruthlessness. His men passed over the field, killing all the wounded they found. ‘It was beastly’, he recalled simply, ‘but there was nothing else to do’. Ruthlessness was, indeed, the order of the day among the British troops, who had been horrified by the sights of Isandlwana and were deeply shocked by the extent of their defeat. Browne

took an active part in patrolling, and seems to have set the tone of revenge. One day he and a companion shot two Zulu civilians who were engaged in performing a ritual designed to drive the enemy away; 'on turning the body over we found it was a woman', he remarked, 'we neither of us expressed any regret ...'. On another he rode down and brought into camp a Zulu scout; the man was judged to be a spy and hanged. When later called upon for an explanation, Browne breezily admitted that he had told soldiers to 'hang the bally spy' – but that he was in a bad mood at the time, and had merely intended to convey his lack of interest in the spy's fate!

When, over the following weeks, the British recovered from the initial shock of defeat, Browne was sent to the Cape to recruit reinforcements for the irregular corps. He was back in time to take part in Lord Chelmsford's next offensive, and was present at the battle of kwaGingindlovu on 2 April, in which the Zulus were heavily defeated. In the aftermath of the battle, a young colonial volunteer later recalled that, on going over the field afterwards, he had found two Zulus lying wounded in the bush. Despite severe body-wounds, both men were persuaded to accompany the volunteer back to the British camp in anticipation of medical treatment.

The Zulus chatted with their captor cheerily enough, but on the outskirts of the camp they were intercepted by a colonial officer. The young volunteer did not identify the man, saying only that he was older than himself, and senior in rank; the officer promptly damned the trooper as a fool, drew his revolver and calmly shot both Zulus dead. While the identity of this man cannot be established with certainty, there is much about the incident which speaks of George Hamilton Browne.

In fact, Browne's career in Zululand ended ignominiously. Sent back to the Cape with a party of irregulars due to be discharged, he was badly injured onboard ship when he was crushed between a mule and its stall. He 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, pursuing adventures in a series of campaigns which marked British expansion across southern Africa. He served in the BaSotho 'Gun War' of 1880, in Sir Charles Warren's Bechuanaland expedition of 1884, and in Zululand again during the Dinuzulu Rebellion of 1888.

In 1890, he joined the British South Africa Company's Pioneer expedition to occupy Mashonaland in present-day Zimbabwe, and this proved to be the beginning of several years' involvement in 'Rhodesian' affairs. He fought in the invasion of Matabeleland in 1893, and during the rebellion of 1896 commanded volunteers under Robert Baden-Powell. Baden-Powell, who enjoyed the company of colourful frontiersmen and could be ruthless enough himself when the occasion demanded, remembered him with obvious affection from the 1888 expedition. Baden-Powell took a telling snapshot of Browne 'as he liked to be photographed' - pointing a gun at a cowering African.

Baden-Powell's attitude towards Browne is, indeed, revealing. While B-P recognised that Browne's more extreme attitudes were not necessarily typical of the regular British officer class, he understood that men like Browne had their usefulness; it was by such rough and ready material that Empires were, in the end, built and maintained.

The end of the 19th century brought tough times for Browne. He had invested in the settlement of 'Rhodesia', but he lost his stock during the cattle diseases, which swept through the region at that time. In 1904, moreover, his wife Dolphina died. Browne appealed – without success – to the British government for a pension, and was forced to sell his campaign medals. He was so reduced in circumstances at one point as to seek help from the Salvation Army.

In 1909, however, his luck turned, and he married one 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, however, and Sarah had never married; seeing the news of Browne's misfortunes she had contacted him again.

Browne was by now in retirement, his health impaired by the hardships of the life he had endured, and as he embarked upon writing up his experiences he revealed 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.

The temptation to offset his financial shortcomings – and by his own account, he had often been ‘reckless’ with money – by trading on the stories he had dined out upon so many times proved too much. In 1911 he published *With the Lost Legion in New Zealand*. If the book earned him tolerable reviews in England and enjoyed modest success, however, when it finally reached New Zealand it caused outrage.

When prominent veterans of the wars of 1866-1872 read it, they rejected it as a tissue of self-serving lies. Major Christopher Maling, who had long and distinguished career as a scout with the famous Forest Rangers, and had won the New Zealand Cross, was particularly indignant to find some of his own adventures ascribed to Browne’s narrator, Burke;

I have felt very sore about Browne’s book ... not so much about his appropriating my particular part in the war but on account of his continued allusions to the drunken habits and cut-throat propensities of the corps of Guides ... It is only natural that I should feel annoyed that he should cast such vile aspersions on a body of men whom it was an honour to command and whom no commander would ever have allowed to commit such atrocities which G. Hamilton Browne considers the correct thing to be done by men under his control...

On the face of it, the accusation that Browne was a complete impostor has some weight. A search of surviving records reveals that George Hamilton Browne did not enlist under his own name – and then only as a trooper in the Armed Constabulary – until the middle of 1872. The last shots in the war against the Maori had been fired five months before; there is no record that he ever saw active service in New Zealand at all. One officer went so far as to suggest that Browne only received the New Zealand campaign medal by falsifying records and claiming the medal of a dead comrade who had the same name. (1)

Much of Maling’s indignation was, of course, shaped by the relish with which Browne had characterised his fellow ‘lost legionaries’ as rogues; at a time when New Zealand was striving to establish a respectable image as a colony, such portraits were decidedly unwelcome. And it is, of course, quite likely that Browne, who enjoyed the company of such men, had exaggerated their failings for dramatic effect.

Yet, was George Hamilton Browne the barefaced liar that this impression suggests - which still prevails in New Zealand? Perhaps not. A careful study of the book indicates that he was well aware that he stood in danger of claiming for himself adventures that were not his own – and that he sought, on the surface at least, to ward off the charge by claiming that the book represented only a composite tale, typical of the experiences of many such men;

... thousands of novels [my italics] have been written with plots founded on the splendid achievements of our gallant army and navy, then why should not one be penned about the deeds of the Lost Legion ... ? And now if I need any further excuse for inflicting this badly written (for I claim no pretensions to literary skill) yarn upon you, let me inform you that in the main the facts are strictly true, and that the men I have tried to depict lived, starved, fought and died in the very manner described in this volume.

With the Lost Legion in New Zealand was never, then, intended as a true portrait of George Hamilton Browne’s own adventures; that is why he ascribed the story to his mythical narrator, Burke. It was a heady mix of campfire stories and personal impressions, conflated into a single tale of daring-do, designed to capture the public imagination in cold and smoggy England, a world away from the bloodstained bush of New Zealand. It was written, moreover, when the genre of Imperial adventure tales was at its height.

Browne never claimed the rank of Colonel for his service in New Zealand; that was the equivalent of the irregular rank of Commandant, which he had achieved in southern Africa. And if the choice of such a self-conscious literary device suggests that Browne knew he was sailing close to the wind, the truth is that, if anyone made the mistake of confusing Burke’s experiences with his own, he probably didn’t, at that stage in his life, care very much.

Nevertheless, the inference of the different style authorship displayed in his second volume, *A Lost Legionary in South Africa* - where he wrote of verifiable incidents under his own name – is clear enough.

There is one final conundrum about his time in New Zealand. Browne’s descendants are adamant that, as he claimed, he did indeed sail to New Zealand in 1865; what, then, did he do between that time and his first documented enlistment in the Armed Constabulary in 1872?

He would not have been the first man of the time to enlist in a volunteer unit under an assumed name and – if he had – he would remain, in the absence of surviving evidence of his true identity, almost impossible to trace. Whether or not he truly saw any action against the Maori is a question unlikely ever to be resolved.

George Hamilton Browne's last years were spent with his wife in Jamaica, where he died in a nursing home in February 1916. Whatever money his wife had brought to the marriage had by then been spent; what became of her in the face of the New Zealand Government's rejection of her claim for assistance is not known.

George Hamilton Browne was typical of that class of adventurers who were useful enough in their time but, with the coming of a new and more ordered age, were largely rejected by the Society which had produced them – a Lost Legion indeed. There is no doubt that George Hamilton Browne was at times brutal and self-serving, and that he enjoyed the power of a good story, but his role in southern African cannot be denied. Whether history will, in the end, judge him to be no more than a glory-seeking fantasist or merely a misunderstood product of Empire, time alone will tell.

Reference.

1. The case against Hamilton Browne in New Zealand is outlined by Barbara Cooper in *George Hamilton-Browne; An Investigation into his Career in New Zealand*, Bay of Plenty Journal of History, Vol. 33 No. 2 November 1985.

Editor's note.

By chance, I was offered the opportunity of viewing 'some old Zulu War medals' owned by a local farmer in Kent. I was astonished to see that the collection included the SA Campaign medal, the Moiri War and Mashonaland campaign medals – all awarded to Hamilton- Browne.

Research revealed that Hamilton-Browne was never eligible for the SA campaign medal, and indeed, on expert evaluation in London, it was discovered that the S.A. medal had been skimmed and re-named with the details of Hamilton-Browne. The experts' view was that H-B had acquired a medal and had his own name engraved. It is known that H-B 'fell out' with Lord Chelmsford over H-B's disposal of captured Zulu prisoners following Rorke's Drift, and this may well account for him being denied the SA Campaign medal.

The experts confirmed the authenticity of the other medals.