

1998

George Landon Browning (d. 1947)

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Recommended Citation

William Hamilton Bryson, *George Landon Browning (d. 1947)*, in 2 *Dictionary of Virginia Biography* 326 (John T. Kneebone et. al. eds., 1998).

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DICTIONARY *of* VIRGINIA BIOGRAPHY

VOLUME 2
Bland–Cannon

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RICHMOND • 2001

Success notwithstanding, Browne engendered controversy in Richmond's African American community. His conservatism and enormous ego irritated many of his contemporaries, most notably John Mitchell Jr., the editor of the *Richmond Planet*. Two incidents in 1895 particularly raised hackles. After Mitchell and a black Massachusetts legislator presented themselves in March at the governor's mansion for a reception tendered to the visiting Massachusetts Committee on Mercantile Affairs, Browne wrote to a local newspaper criticizing their behavior and explaining his own less confrontational view of race relations: "Legal equality and cordial relation—to the extent of building up the negro race—are the desires of respectable and sensible negroes; and they are as much opposed to social equality between whites and blacks as are the whites themselves." The following September Browne arranged to sell his copyrighted plans for the True Reformers to the order for \$50,000. Many in Richmond, and Mitchell in particular, regarded the transaction as an overwhelming proof of Browne's greed.

Nonetheless, Browne's standing was widely recognized. He was one of only eight men, including Booker T. Washington, selected to represent African Americans at the Cotton States and International Exposition in Atlanta in 1895. The True Reformers' exhibition there enhanced Browne's stature and that of his order in what proved to be his last major achievement. In 1897 physicians discovered a cancerous tumor and urged him to have the affected arm amputated, but he refused. The cancer spread quickly, and William Washington Browne died in Washington, D.C., on 21 December 1897. He was buried in Sycamore Cemetery, and his funeral was one of the largest ever seen in Richmond's black community. Browne bequeathed his estate to his widow, except for small legacies to the boy and girl they had adopted. After his death the True Reformers initially continued to prosper, but the order collapsed in the wake of the scandalous failure of its bank in 1910.

W. P. Burrell and D. E. Johnson, *Twenty-Five Years History of the Grand Fountain of the United Order of True Reformers, 1881-1905* (1909); James D. Watkinson, "William Washington Browne and the True Reformers of Richmond,

Virginia," *VMHB* 97 (1989): 375-398 (por. on 377); David M. Fahey, *The Black Lodge in White America: 'True Reformer' Browne and His Economic Strategy* (1994), which includes a reprint of D. Webster Davis's 1910 biography, *The Life and Public Services of Rev. Wm. Washington Browne; Acts of Assembly, 1883-1884 sess., 18-19, 1887-1888 sess., 423-424; Richmond Dispatch, 23 Mar. (quotation), 9 Apr. 1895; obituary and account of funeral in Richmond Dispatch and Richmond Planet, both 25 Dec. 1897.*

JAMES D. WATKINSON

BROWNING, George Landon (3 April 1867-26 August 1947), judge of the Virginia Supreme Court of Appeals, was born at Greenfield in Rappahannock County, the son of Mary Lewis Willis Browning and John Armistead Browning, a prominent farmer and orchardist who represented the county in the House of Delegates from 1889 to 1892. He was educated in the Rappahannock County public schools, attended the University of Virginia in the academic years 1886-1887 and 1888-1889, and worked for several years as a messenger in the United States House of Representatives. While in Washington, Browning attended Georgetown University and in 1895 received an LL.B.

Browning began the practice of law in Madison Court House in 1899 in partnership with James Hay, who represented the district in the House of Representatives. In 1909 Browning moved to nearby Orange Court House. There he practiced law with John G. Williams until Williams's death in 1911, when he formed a new partnership with Alexander T. Browning, a distant cousin. Starting in 1922, after Alexander Browning was elected a circuit court judge, George L. Browning practiced with Severn M. Nottingham. While he was in practice in Orange County, Browning was active in the Democratic Party, and he represented the county in the House of Delegates from 1914 to 1916. During the 1914-1915 sessions he sat on the Committees on Confirmations, for Courts of Justice, on Executive Expenditures, and on Special, Private, and Local Legislation. During the 1916 session he served on the Committees for Courts of Justice, on Privileges and Elections, on Rules, and on Special, Private, and Local Legislation. On 27 February 1906 in Washington, D.C., Browning married Evelyn Byrd Hill Ransom, a

widow with one son and one daughter. They had three sons.

After many years of successful law practice in Orange County, Browning was considered by the Democratic caucus for a seat on the Supreme Court of Appeals during the 1930 session of the General Assembly. He was not chosen initially, but soon thereafter a vacancy occurred when one of the justices died, and the Democratic caucus selected him on 11 February 1930 by a one-vote margin over Joseph William Chinn, who was placed on the court to fill another vacancy almost two years later. The vote for Browning in the General Assembly was unanimous. He was elected to a full twelve-year term in 1940 and served until his death. Regarded like the other justices during his tenure as conservative, Browning was the author of judicial opinions noted for their clarity, incisiveness, and brevity. He wrote nearly three hundred formal opinions during his seventeen years on the Supreme Court of Appeals and filed more than fifty dissenting opinions.

One of Browning's most significant opinions struck down a 1944 Virginia law creating a special fund and registration procedure by which the poll taxes of the state's servicemen could be paid and they could accordingly be registered to vote in state and local elections. Writing for the court in *Staples v. Gilmer*, he stated laconically that it required "no mental ingenuity" to perceive that the law was merely "a scheme to circumvent the intentment and the terms of the Constitution, and to avoid the State's declared policy. The fact that it was conceived in altruistic motives renders it none the less obnoxious and offensive to constitutional restrictions and limitation." As a result, the General Assembly summoned a special limited-purpose convention that in April and May 1945 drafted an amendment to the state constitution exempting members of the armed services from the state's poll tax requirement and permitting them to register to vote while on duty outside Virginia.

In 1940 Georgetown University awarded Browning an honorary LL.D. He served on the board of visitors of the Virginia Military Institute from 1907 to 1920 and was active in the Episcopal Church, as senior warden of Saint Thomas

Episcopal Church in Orange from 1911 until 1947 and as a lay delegate to several general conventions of the Diocese of Virginia and to the General Convention of the Episcopal Church. Browning was an enthusiastic and extroverted person. He loved hunting and fishing and spending the evenings singing and dancing with friends. The Browning home was one of the social centers of Orange County. After his wife died on 21 March 1940, he spent most of his time in Richmond. George Landon Browning died on 26 August 1947 at Johnston-Willis Hospital in Richmond after months of illness and the amputation of a leg. He was buried in Graham Cemetery in Orange.

NCAB, 36:406; marriage date in *Washington Evening Star*, 28 Feb. 1906, and wife's obituary, *Orange Register*, 28 Mar. 1940; *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, 12 Feb. 1930, 31 Aug. 1947; elections to court in *JHD*, 1930 sess., 280, and 1940 sess., 265; *Staples v. Gilmer* (1944), *Virginia Reports*, 183:338-352 (Browning's opinion, 340-350; quotations on 345, 349); Hummel and Smith, *Portraits and Statuary*, 13 (por.); obituaries and editorial tributes in *Richmond News Leader*, 26 Aug. 1947, and *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, 27 Aug. 1947; memorial in *Virginia State Bar Association Proceedings* (1948): 146-150 (por.).

W. HAMILTON BRYSON

BRUCE, Charles (17 August 1826-6 October 1896), planter, was born in Halifax County, the son of James Bruce, a wealthy planter and merchant, and his second wife, Elvira Cabell Henry Bruce. He graduated with an A.B. from the University of North Carolina in 1845 and from the law school at Harvard University in 1847. In the latter year Bruce came into his fortune on attaining his majority. In rapid succession he hired John Evans Johnson to build a country mansion, left for a grand tour of Europe, and after his return married Sarah Alexander Seddon, a native of Fredericksburg and sister of future Confederate secretary of war James Alexander Seddon, on 19 September 1848.

Johnson, known as an extravagant architect, built for Bruce the Gothic Revival confection in Charlotte County known as Staunton Hill. It cost more than \$50,000, but the cost overrun did not faze Bruce, who was once described by his half brother, James Coles Bruce (1806-1865), as "quite a sybarite" in his tastes. One of the