J. Ross Browne

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  The Fine Arts in Arizona

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About the cover:
J. Ross Browne's self-portrait, titled *The Fine Arts in Arizona*, is reprinted
from *Adventures in the Apache Country* (New York: Harper's, 1869), 126.
J. Ross Browne
Caught by his own whimsical pen often used to illustrate his books, the writer sits on a log with sketch pad in hand. He's in the midst of a vast, wild country. Behind him are mountains and, closer, an apparently abandoned adobe. Beneath a sans-souci floppy hat, he gazes over spectacles comically slid down his nose with that look of the artist in the intense act of considering a scene or of a schoolmarm about to scold. Yet there's also a different kind of tension to his body. One eyebrow is raised, almost as if he's listening for something behind him, ready to leap to his feet and defend himself against what might be creeping up—a threat confirmed by the rifle at the ready across his knees. That is, the sketch captures the airiness of art combined with danger, resulting in a self-mocking, ironic humor. Here, a sensitive aesthete is commenting on trying to make art in a land where the ruling, everyday concern is for Apaches lurking in the bushes, ready to come screaming out and riddle travelers with arrows. The wry caption: "The Fine Arts in Arizona" (Adventures in the Apache Country 126).

More than anything else, the sketch captures the enriching conflicts of J. Ross Browne, a man critic J. Golden Taylor praises for giving us the "most reliable account" of the mid-nineteenth-century west (90). One might suggest, however, that the applause should go further; for in the swirl of issues involving honesty, optimism, fights against corruption balanced by doubts about humanity, in
his constant footloose itch warring with a longing for home, Browne's life and writing embody the conflicts of a nation struggling to come to terms with the frontier west.

In a large sense, the exploration of the American west from about the middle of the nineteenth century was a literary exploration intimately paralleling and sometimes influencing the adventurers leading their pack trains across deserts and mountains. The early literature of western travel taught the nation what lay between the Mississippi River and the Pacific Ocean. True, from at least Herodotus, on through Marco Polo, and down through the centuries, travel has generated accounts, sometimes accurate, more often fantastic, to dazzle stay-at-home readers. However, in the nineteenth-century American west, a number of forces were coalescing to push books to the front as never before. With this, western travel writing became a broad cultural influence and shaper of the nation's psyche.

Effecting this, any number of seemingly disparate dynamics might be cited. When the news of the discovery of gold in California reached the east coast in 1848, some long-settled villages dating back deep into Colonial times were all but depopulated as excited farmers abandoned their plows and clerks dropped their pens to rush west and claim their share of promised riches. Naturally enough in the heightened and subsequent flood of westering, additionally swelled by increased immigration from Europe, people wanted to know what they faced out there and what other excitements and possibilities they might encounter in the Wild West. Caught up by the news of geysers, strange animals, and fantastic landforms, those who stayed at home sought vicarious thrills from deliciously horrid stories of white girls carried off by savage brutes to suffer fates detailed more in whirling imaginations than in the sexually guarded prose of the day. In a more sober mode, geologists and soldiers, railroad surveyors and
botanists, increasingly sponsored by the government, returned from expeditions to publish revelations in handsome editions.

Other factors, although not so evident, came very much into play in the influence of western travel writing on the nation. With the Civil War came the impulse to push a railroad to California and thus bind that rich state to the Union. The Civil War also heralded the Republic’s manufacturing might and a growing prosperity allowing people the leisure to travel, write, and read books. Closely related to this but often overlooked was the growth of the middle class, expanding apace and providing a market for writers quick to realize that their audience wanted ever more chromatic exotica as escapes from humdrum lives. In the overall picture, the country was becoming an industrialized, educated, continental nation, with the emerging awareness that the western frontier was a bona fide and exciting part of the United States. Among the several things this demonstrates, one is central to our purposes: literature about the American west, whatever the many and sometimes exaggerated notions it passed on, sprang from the realities of the landscape and people’s changing relationships to it. It also emerged, as Stephen Fender points out in discussing the writing of the ‘49ers, from a host of complex motives and anxieties arising from leaving home and plunging into sometimes bewildering circumstances such as unfamiliar landforms, very real physical dangers, and the societal flux of the frontier (51-83). Writers such as Browne gave a literary structure to these circumstances, providing a handle for the psyche to deal with the sometimes thrilling, yet often threatening, newness.

One would have to be generous with definitions to construe any large portion of the resulting literary work as belles lettres, that is, writing presenting itself as almost wholly an aesthetic experience, with its informational content verging on the nil. In fact, as we’ve seen, one of western literature’s main purposes was to
instruct, to reveal the west. Yet western literature also was taking on its own life, establishing its own romance apart from the facts. The writing of the time was a creature growing robust on the fare of scalplings, burning wagon trains, and descriptions of scenery ranging from the arctic no-man’s land above timberline to the no-man’s land of endless, desiccated cactus sweeps, scenery new and often appalling to eastern audiences. Such prose might be churned out by hack writers in New York City who had never been west of the Hudson, by ambitious but semiliterate stumblebums tough enough to brave the new land’s hardships, as well as by professionals with full bags of literary graces. As a consequence, western literature came in an astonishing variety of content and quality. In deference to this variety, we should resist the easy temptation to place individual works at points along a linear scale stretching between two poles, with the potboilers on one side grading through the mediocre to a few lasting works of talent shining on the other end of the spectrum. It would be convenient to do so but dismissive of the complexities at work. Yes, Captain Mayne Reid’s adventure tales were pretty much episodic thrillers of the cliffhanging type, featuring, for instance, a heroic frontiersman locked in desperate embrace with a feathered opponent as the two roll toward a fatal precipice (291-93). Thrillers like Reid’s are so gripping that the landscape is mere prop and we are quite unsure where we are geographically, except somewhere in the dramatic wildland of the west. Yet such fantasies schooled several generations of mostly young readers, preparing them as adults to see the west as a region of fantastic possibilities where unprecedented dreams, whether irrigation projects of Gargantuan proportions or quick dollars from planting groves of eucalyptus trees, might be their western behoof. And lest we forget that literature is but one element, albeit a huge one, shaping a culture, such wonderful mental longings about western expansion were given additional thrust by the
pictorial arts. (See Goetzmann and Goetzmann, *The West of the Imagination*.)

On the other hand, there probably was no more solemn and moral a writer than Horace Greeley, abolitionist editor of the *New York Tribune*, who in 1859 took a jolting stagecoach tour of the west. The purpose of his trip was singular: to penetrate the western furor and inform his readers of what actually lay out there so that they might weigh the prospects of becoming settlers. When Greeley reached the alkali flats in present-day Nevada, this bespectacled dreamer of rose-covered cottages dotting the west was so pained at the useless horror before him that he cried out, “Here, on the Humboldt, famine sits enthroned” (231). Now that’s a powerful trope. In fact, Greeley, for all his veracity and other earnest virtues, was such a wifty eccentric as he stumbled about in his thick glasses and white duster while lugging a huge, folded umbrella that Mark Twain, kindhearted as he was, couldn’t help but lampoon America’s famous editor in *Roughing It* (481-88). Thus, even early on, western literature was becoming aware of itself, was becoming self-referential in ways indicating a healthy growth and sophistication.

One central issue in western literature, then, given the circumstances surrounding it, is to find a writer at once delightfully entertaining and accurate (the former being a prerequisite for selling books and making a living, the latter a moral imperative). Yet there’s more. Bret Harte, Mark Twain, Francis Parkman, and many other writers spent relatively little time in the American west, despite the literary mileage they made from their brief stays. Ideally, we’d find a person who not only saw the west but was deeply *engaged* in the region for much of his life, who was a man of literary grace as well as of keen observation and tough moral fiber.

As we’ve seen, J. Golden Taylor proposes that we find that man in J. Ross Browne. For years, in addition to his other attributes,
Browne served as a government agent, sometimes as a secret government agent, traveling much of the west, knowing it intimately because that was his job, then recording what he experienced in memorable, revelatory prose. To expand Taylor's comment, Browne's "letters, journals, articles, and reports constitute the fullest and most reliable account of life in the West left by a single person in the third quarter of the nineteenth century" (90). Not only that, Browne was a thoroughly likeable fellow, armed with virtues as well as with the literary graces. Even that euphletic view, however, leaves room for a larger vision of the man. Browne's pen is so deft and his adventures so charmingly spun that we're easily tempted to stop at our own immediate pleasures in reading him, assuming, wrongly, that these, along with his reliable pictures of the developing west, are more than sufficient in themselves.

Yet Browne's reputation does not rest solely on his pleasurable, reliable prose. Other writers eyed the growing cachet of this popular author and, adjusting their own prose, followed his lead. With scholarship too exact to spring from mere family pride, Lina Fergusson Browne summarizes the cases that Browne's *Etchings of a Whaling Cruise* (1846) helped Herman Melville shape his classic *Moby Dick* (1851) and that a good deal of Browne's literary method, such as his piquant humor and journalistic immediacy, was absorbed by Mark Twain and transformed by the younger, developing writer into *Roughing It* (1872) and *Innocents Abroad* (1869) (Lina Fergusson Browne, ed, *J. Ross Browne* xix-xxi).

To date, the scholarship on Browne is by no means complete. As will be seen below, once Browne enthusiasts took fire at the man's talents, his happy students tended to focus on particular aspects of his career—the intricacies of his service as a government agent, his life in the American west, and his place among other Americans writing on the Holy Land. Worthy as these studies are,
Browne, says Donald M. Powell, “was born with an itch in his feet and ink in his veins” (ix). That aptly summarizes a lyrical life, but it also implies a number of tensions, often productive, both blessing and dogging a particular writer’s career. The son of an Irish Protestant immigrant exiled to America for his opposition to the repressive British rule of those harried isles, from his youth Browne burned for three things: justice, adventure, and a writing career. Yet he also had a strong domestic urge for wife, children, and stable family to provide an anchor for his creativity. That he was fortunate enough to marry a woman willing to accept his long absences, and even nurture her peripatetic husband’s writing ambitions, illustrates one of those seemingly accidental circumstances that can make or break a writer’s pursuits. Much to his credit, Browne hardly took this aspect of his good fortune for granted; yet his devotion to his wife, as we’ll see from his letters, sometimes had him burning with guilt over the lone journeys necessary to produce the books that supported his family; and his nearly constant scrambling to please the public, to “write for the market,” while also maintaining literary integrity shows how admirably he handled plaguing realities without losing his equanimity or his optimistic spirit.

For Browne was idealist and realist at the same time, a sensitive artist tough enough to deal with the demands of the rough-and-tumble frontier. As a sometime government employee, Browne
irked both local westerners feasting at the public trough and logrolling politicians in Washington by producing reports that exposed the corruption riddling federal agencies. At times, this did not serve Browne well; yet on the other hand, the honesty gained him the reputation that here was a man who could be trusted. And lastly, a nearly alchemical factor, J. Ross Browne had charm—or, rather, he led a charmed life. Sent to San Francisco on government assignment, he arrived in that distant place only to find that the job had fallen through, but by the accident of meeting an old friend, he stumbled into yet another government appointment to carry him along. In Apache country during an era of Anglo-Apache warfare, the Indians failed to pick him off. In short, Browne had good luck.

Although perhaps it is not necessary to detail every twist and turn in Browne’s life as he skitters about to Russia and Iceland, Texas and Nevada, to see the connections between Browne’s life and writings is especially important in this exploration of the west through one man. John Ross Browne was born in 1821 in Beggarsbush, a poetically named village outside Dublin, Ireland. Foreshadowing Browne’s own activities, his father, Thomas Egerton Browne, lambasted the injustices of British rule. His sharp pen led to a jail sentence. It ended in a few months when the elder Browne accepted banishment and sailed for America in 1833. After a stay in Cincinnati, the Browne family moved to Louisville. There, the father opened a school for young ladies.

Early on, young John started wandering. At the age of seventeen he plied between Louisville and New Orleans on a riverboat, then ranged afoot, on trips not fully documented, through several states, including Texas (Powell ix). Beginning the second element in a lifelong pattern, he started writing romantic tales, and in 1841, barely out of his teens, turned out Confessions of a Quack, an exposé of medical charlatans, and The Great Steam Duck, an extravagant spoof on man’s dreams of building a flying machine.
In that same year, he learned shorthand, acquiring a critical skill for his future livelihood, and, moving to Washington, D.C., worked with his father reporting for what eventually became the Congressional Record while also making the connections that would assist him throughout his life. Yet his feet continued to itch. With hardly a penny in his pocket, off he went in 1842, signing on a whaling ship. He endured a tyrannical captain but eventually took revenge by exposing the inhumane conditions on many whalers by writing Etchings of a Whaling Cruise, with Notes of a Sojourn on the Island of Zanzibar, To Which Is Appended a Brief History of the Whale Fishery (1846), a book which, in an unsigned review, Herman Melville praised as “a faithful picture” of life at sea (Melville 105; attributed in Seelye 12-13). Meanwhile, returning to Washington, Browne again took up reporting and married Lucy Mitchell, a physician’s daughter. Laboring as a secretary in government posts, Browne tried to be a dutiful husband, but he couldn’t take the routine (Powell x).

That impatience, that romantic insistence on following one’s own way despite love of family, niggardly means, and uncertain prospects, can land many a life on the shoals. In Browne’s case, however, to the good fortune of western literature, he brought it off. His mature years focused largely on the roiled frontier, an exciting place then much in the nation’s eye. Turning out a steady stream of articles in the popular magazines of the day, such as Harper’s, pieces later assembled into books, Browne would be the western frontier’s happy amanuensis.

Through his employer, head of the Department of the Treasury, in 1849 Browne obtained an appointment as third lieutenant in the U.S. Revenue Service. His job, among other things, was to go to San Francisco and investigate the desertion of sailors jumping ship and heading for the gold fields. On the way to this assignment, during the long sea voyage around South America to
California's coast occurred some of those events which Browne turned into a successful series of articles, then the book, *Crusoe's Island* (1864). In this work, Browne recounts yet another mad sea captain, and the writer appends to his tale later adventures on the frontier. The main attraction of the book, however, is a somewhat madcap visit to Juan Fernández, the Pacific island of Robinson Crusoe fame—just the sort of venture tale to whet the appetites of the day's readers (Powell x-xi).

Once in California, Browne demonstrated remarkable flexibility and the readiness to massage events to his favor. As we've seen, when Browne's original assignment fell through, he quickly hunted up another government position. Then, after a trip through the outback establishing post offices, he seized a further opportunity. Again bringing both his shorthand skills and important friendships into play, he won appointment as recording secretary of the California Constitutional Convention. His *Report of the Debates* (1850), a mammoth job of editing, hardly was literature, but it certainly had a bearing on how literature was produced. Due to the intense national interest in the riches pouring out of the Golden State, the book sold well and gave Browne a grubstake of $10,000, a huge amount for the day (Dillon 15-16). Off he went with the money, establishing his family in Florence, Italy, while he wandered about the Mediterranean and the Middle East. The result, first appearing, like much of his work, in a magazine and illustrated with his own charming sketches, was *Yusef, Or the Journey of the Frangi* (1853) (Powell xi).

When Browne's money ran out, back he went to the west as a federal agent, this time investigating, among other duties, the often scandalous condition of Indian reservations. In 1855 he brought his family to California, settling it in Pagoda Hill, an eccentric, if whimsically pleasant, architectural mishmash he built in Oakland. The elaborate estate would be his home base for the
remainder of his regrettably short life (Powell xii; a brief essay and fine photo of Browne’s home appears in Lina Fergusson Browne’s “Pagoda Hill”).

Perhaps taking on such a large establishment as Pagoda Hill was a financial mistake, an overreaching for elegance other writers, including Mark Twain, tended to make. Nevertheless, as a measure of Browne’s prosperity from his writing, he went back to his wanderings, then took the family off to Europe again. Following the pattern of his earlier trip, he put down temporary roots for the family, this time in Germany, then with a pack on his back containing little more than a change of clothes and a sketchbook, he was off, mainly to the northern countries of Russia, Sweden, Norway, and Iceland. His literary production from this was more bright travel writing for Americans increasingly visiting, or yearning to visit, foreign lands. In 1866 appeared An American Family in Germany, in 1867 The Land of Thor. These were, indeed, happy days for Browne as his dreams, both as traveler and writer, became ever more fulfilled.

After that, one becomes almost dizzy following Browne’s peregrinations. Having brought his family back to California in 1863, he made use of his keen observation and knowledge of the mining country to write reliable reports on the mineral potential of the west. Then another stroke of good luck, both for him and for us, another of those conjunctions of Browne with good fortune. Late in 1863, on the streets of San Francisco, he bumped into an old friend, the pioneer Charles D. Poston. Recently appointed Superintendent of Indian Affairs for Arizona, Poston was leaving that afternoon on a tour of the new Territory to see if he could quiet down the natives of that mineral-rich land. Would Browne like to come along? Sure. Browne ran home, threw a few shirts into his knapsack, kissed his wife good-bye, and he was off again (Powell xii-xiii). Out of that dangerous trip through enemy country
came Browne’s greatest blessing to the west, *Adventures in the Apache Country* (1869), “the most literate and entertaining book on pioneer Arizona,” Powell well sums up (xiii), and one of the west’s most gracious yet informative portraits of the frontier.

The writer was only forty-eight years old when *Adventures* appeared. He turned out further mining reports, but his book on Arizona marked the end of his literary career. In 1868, he served briefly as minister to China, an exotic post he had long desired, but it soon went sour on him due to political conflicts in Washington (Powell xiii-xiv). Browne spent the next few years scurrying about, trying to shore up his interests in mining and irrigation. Pagoda Hill was an expensive affair, and he scrambled to make ends meet, while also realizing that he was slowly falling out of favor with one of his main sources of income, Harper’s magazine.

The end came quickly. On his way home from San Francisco on 7 December 1875, he became suddenly ill. Browne died the next day, it is thought from appendicitis (Powell xiv).

Lina Fergusson Browne’s *J. Ross Browne: His Letters, Journals, and Writings* (1969) lends depth to this overview of Browne’s life and work. Strictly speaking, this book is more history than literature, since it is a gathering of disparate material for the most part not crafted with publication or artistic effect in mind. Nonetheless, one can’t help but be impressed while informed on three main points. The bulk of the volume, Browne’s letters to his wife, Lucy, illustrates his fluid grace with a pen even when he was writing disarmed, directly from the heart, to the one he loved and with no intent for a wider audience. Secondly, in an era when we almost dare not have heroes for fear that upon investigation they will be revealed as villains, or at best the lukewarm, easily compromising individuals typifying the rest of humanity, the documents confirm Browne’s genuine charm based on a moral integrity persisting
often in the face of nasty realities. Lastly, the material forms an illustrative continuum, showing the vital links between the daily affairs blessing and cursing a writer and the literature he produces.

The collection will disabuse cynics who discount the love between Browne and his wife as a convenient fabrication on Browne’s part, enabling him to hi-ho off on his romps while his wife sat dutifully at home, cozened by Victorian values to suffer patiently until her husband satisfied his selfish impulses and returned to take advantage of the refuge she provided, until he once more felt the urge for wider fields. True, Browne was a born traveler. Also true, the love between husband and wife, whatever the unconventional circumstances, was genuine and unusually deep. In fact, Browne’s own distress over his absences often plagued him, creating, one might suggest, one of those major tensions driving the wheel of creativity. Before his success, he wrote Lucy from Monterey, California, on 21 September 1849, “It is only when I get the blues, and reflect seriously upon the poor contemptible acts of a life uselessly spent without aim or object, forever pursuing a shadow, that I know myself as I really am—a ship at sea with mighty little ballast and a great deal too many sky-sails aloft” (132). While feeling a deep obligation to support his family, Browne made his living through writing, a markedly uncertain enterprise. On 11 December 1863, about to leave Los Angeles and plunge off into Apache country, in the context of discussing household finances he shows the scourge that often pained him: “I will do my best,” he promised Lucy, “to make enough money on this trip to pay off all my debts” (281). Again, a few years later, writing Lucy from Washington, D.C., he yearns for home, hoping to give up the traveling life for the joys of Pagoda Hill and his growing family (15 July 1866; 326).

Part of his earnestness lay in his capacity, despite nearly continuously rubbing shoulders with both frontier licentiousness and the
more sophisticated financial hijinks of the civilized world, to be appalled at immorality. In the letter of 11 December 1863 quoted above, he describes the country around Los Angeles as “infested with all sorts of robbers and cut-throats” (280). And, despite his own developing skills in business, he realized that the world of realpolitik cared nothing for fair dealing, yet he adhered to his honest principles anyway (25 March 1871; 360-61).

One should not form the impression of a grim moralizer going through the ragged world with a stern look and thick-soled shoes. Quite to the contrary, perhaps most to his credit, as a true moralist Browne for the most part was cheerful. Yes, he realized that his travel books went largely uncredited for breaking the way for others in the genre, such as his friend Mark Twain (16 October 1872; 399), but he had an admirable ability to let such things go, concentrating instead on a larger, optimistic belief in progress beyond individual fortunes. As one eulogist said of Browne at his funeral, “There was not a tinge of malignity in his nature,” and given allowances for the kindly exaggerations often heard at such rites, from everything else we know about Browne, the praise is deserved (409). Despite typical human worries, Browne went buoyantly through life, holding family musicales at Pagoda Hill (“The Pagoda Hill Glee Club,” between 296 and 297) and, a true artist, taking sheer delight in the words flowing from his pen. As he chastened Senator Garfield in hopes that he’d vote against a tax on California wines:

Tax crinoline if you please; tax the light of woman’s eye; tax the light of other days; tax your own ingenuity; tax human forbearance; tax Patience on a monument smiling at Grief; tax wax, hacks, sacks, backs, tacks, tack a tax on all attacks on tax; but don’t, I beseech you, tax such a beverage as this. (20 June 1866; 323)
And yet the hard fact of the matter was that after the publication of *Adventures*, J. Ross Browne was falling out of favor with *Harper’s*, his mainstay publisher both of magazine articles and books. Was he loosing his touch? There’s no evidence of that. Politics may have been a factor, as in the rejection of a series of articles on Browne’s experiences in China, deemed by *Harper’s* too critical of the Grant Administration (15 March 1871; 360). However, it would not be like Browne, who had often picked himself up and bounced merrily on after defeats, to stay down on that account. It could be that, in need of money for his growing family, he thought real estate and mining ventures would offer more immediate gain than selling his prose. Or perhaps, in the shifting fortunes of writing and publishing, there was no definable cause.

It’s a grim thing to contemplate—and best not thought about too long—how often truly fine writers, after their fulgent years of sailing, sink beneath the steely waves of the literary ocean. Again, the reasons for this are not always evident, nor is it always apparent why some authors surface again to enjoy a recrudescence. In Browne’s case, his revival began when in 1929 J. Francis Rock published his fairly short, if intense, *J. Ross Browne: A Biography*. This was followed by Richard H. Dillon’s *J. Ross Browne: Confidential Agent in Old California* (1965), with a number of other studies following in quick succession. In 1966, David Michael Goodman brought out *A Western Panorama, 1849-1875: The Travels, Writings, and Influence of J. Ross Browne*, and in 1974 Franklin Walker offered a valuable comparative study, *Irreverent Pilgrims: Melville, Browne, and Mark Twain in the Holy Land*. Accompanying the renewed attention have been numerous articles and reprints, notably Powell’s edition of *Adventures*, a flurry substantially augmented by Lina Fergusson Browne’s gathering of documents. In 1988, the U.S. Customs Service, in an unusual move, issued *Missing Pieces from the Mosaic of J. Ross Browne’s*
In general terms, the books of J. Ross Browne divide neatly into two categories: his straightforward expository writing and his creative works. Although fairly easily described and not particularly pertinent reading for our day, the former should not be dismissed, for his various formal reports tell us much about Browne, his times, and how he operated within his changing context. They show his knowledge, especially of mining, his keen perceptions of worldly affairs, and his engagement with the west, while also demonstrating his penchant for accuracy. Certainly the reports were a large element in Browne’s growing reputation and future popularity. They show the nation’s craving for information about an exotic and developing region, a strong factor in Browne’s sales; and they served a critical role in a writer’s life, providing the financial means for an author to move on to the business truly dear to his heart, writing his creative works.

For instance, already touched on, his Report of the Debates, spun from California’s efforts at forming a state constitution, is a transcription of various speeches and arguments. Behind it lies Browne’s business acumen, the ability through his connections to win the assignment as the Convention’s official reporter, and his exactness in carrying the large, complex project through to publication. Furthermore, his good service caught the attention of people in power, specifically leading to yet another profitable assignment (Goodman 33-37); and the Convention Report, as we’ve noted, earned him the windfall of $10,000, a huge sum, providing

Career, a pamphlet bringing to the fore recently discovered documents clarifying and expanding Browne’s activities as a government agent. My own chapter “J. Ross Browne and Samuel W. Cozzens” (1999) attempts to show Browne’s unique position in western letters as a reliable and entertaining travel writer.

BROWNE’S BOOKS

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the means of his travel to the Middle East, a trip resulting in the creation of the delightful Yusef. So things tie together in Browne's life. As Goodman puts it, in obtaining the position and cutting the financial deal, "Browne hoped to succeed with a shrewd maneuver. Not only would he be paid well for the job, but his name appended to the title page of the book would greatly increase his national reputation, since the eyes of the nation were anxiously focused" on the emerging Golden State. Heaped on that, his success couldn't hurt by impressing officials in Washington, where Browne was angling for a diplomatic post (34). Goodman concludes, Browne was "[a]lways seeking a way in which to combine pleasure with profit" (36-37). He had to, of course, in order to make a living in the way he chose. Finding a path through those hoops could be frustrating, but his efforts happily found the mark often enough not only to keep him solvent but to provide comfortably for his family.

Something similar might be said for other books in this category. His *Reports upon the Mineral Resources of the United States* (1867), written with James W. Taylor, is an amazingly comprehensive survey sponsored by a government eager to obtain a rational assessment of the west's furious development. Ranging across the United States and beyond to parts of Canada, including Nova Scotia, the book has much to say about the west, alerting Congress to the needs, described in minute detail, for changes in mining laws and regulations. In a like vein, the *Report of J. Ross Browne on the Mineral Resources of the States and Territories West of the Rocky Mountains* (1868) is a work of even greater concentration on the west. Running to 674 pages, the tome was the first volume of such great scope, investigating salt beds, gold deposits, and transportation issues vital to a raw region of great distances whose wealth was useless unless it could get to market. So earnest was the study that Browne's recommendations got down to the specifics of flume construction. And so popular was this work that
various publishers brought out their own commercial editions, for instance, Appleton’s edition called *Resources of the Pacific Slope: A Statistical and Descriptive Summary* (1869). In 1915, Browne’s son, Ross Egerton Browne, a mining engineer, observed with considerable pride that such works by his father “are standard books of reference to the present day” (Lina Fergusson Browne, ed., *J. Ross Browne* 327).

A few things might be said before turning to Browne’s creative work. For one, Browne could be polemical. In *Etchings of a Whaling Cruise*, among the charms of adventure he includes a strong exposé of a captain’s abuses to his crew on the high seas. In the same way, his *Adventures in the Apache Country*, while an entertaining and informative tour through one of the west’s wildest and most violent territories, also is a plea for change, arguing that this country both of wondrous climate and mineral wealth cries out for military protection and the blessings of a firm and rational civil authority before its benefits can be fully realized by settlers (*Adventures* 288).

For the most part, however, both pleasing himself and keeping an eye on the market, Browne takes readers on fetching and instructive tours. He gets the land and the people mostly right, mentioning figures who can be historically identified and, for instance, offering a sketch of Picacho Peak, north of Tucson, readily matched with the rock mass actually there (*Adventures* 129). Yes, the spires in the background soar too vertiginously; Browne combined his need to entertain with an impish streak that could favor thrills over accuracy. Ferol Egan notes that elsewhere traveler Browne engages in a gory shoot-out. The dramatic incident did, indeed, occur, but it happened some months before Browne passed through the area (11).

Related to this, Browne’s humor can be breezy—sometimes a bit too breezy for the situation. Coming across the dried corpse of an
Apache stretched on a cross and crucified by a band of enemy Maricopas, Browne admits that the scene is “ghastly,” but the horror of the act is somewhat undercut by his quip that the Indians, although not converted, after all had learned something from the Christian missionaries (Adventures 104). Yet to be fair about it, Browne’s stark drawing of the gruesome scene is from the stuff of nightmares (103). Turning to another work, Yusef, Browne’s faithful (in his way) but picaresque guide, ends up hopelessly imprisoned by the Turkish authorities, not known for their kindness. This is the dramatic ending of the travel book, yet Browne’s tone has been so light throughout that he can’t breach it by confronting the seriousness of Yusef’s hopeless plight. It is one of the drawbacks of Browne’s otherwise successful method.

Beyond that, his style is not complex, rarely drawing on learned allusions or manipulating time in subtle ways, and sometimes playing over surfaces when we’d prefer deeper analysis; but Browne offers a wry, tongue-in-cheek running commentary as one colorful episode leads chronologically to the next, and his impressions generally are reliable. The persona he projects, partly true to his optimistic nature but belying his own toughness as a traveler through sometimes risky, if not downright dangerous, places, is that of the self-effacing, wondering neophyte, puzzled by strange customs and constantly bested by the erumpent horses and mules he rides. This is, despite some drawbacks, aesthetically satisfying.

Not as satisfying, although not to be put to Browne’s account, is the lack of unity in some Browne books. The Arizona portion of Adventures, at nearly three hundred pages, forms a united whole. At its end, the reader could close the book at a job well done and nicely rounded off. Yet there’s more. Appended to Browne’s tale of adventures are five further travels, all ranging through the mining country of California and Nevada. Such a compendium reflected the publishing mode of the day: farmers wanted big books to get
them through the winter. Even such a western classic as Twain's *Roughing It* does something similar, after the major frontier adventures leaping halfway across the Pacific to begin yet another tale, in Hawaii.

Rather conveniently, Browne's books show a developing pattern over the years and hence lend themselves to a chronological treatment.

Among Browne's extant early writings are two brief works, both appearing in 1841: *Confessions of a Quack: The Autobiography of a Modern Aesclupian* and *The Great Steam Duck: Or, a Description of a Most Useful and Extraordinary Invention for Aerial Navigation*. The first tells the story of a Dr. Grayson, a scurrilous medical fraud, while the second pokes fun at efforts to create a flying machine, embodied in a brilliant invention by a Mr. Richard Oglesby Davidson. This breakthrough consists of a huge duck-like contraption having wings made of whale bone and fabric and containing a steam engine in its bowels.

One is left puzzled by scholars' treatment of these pieces. For reasons that can only leave one gaping, Rock categorizes *Confessions of a Quack* as one of Browne's "serious books" (4). On the other hand, Dillon lambasts the work as "verbose, pompous, stilted, humorless, and—worse—unoriginal" (6). Neither man deals with the *Steam Duck*. Goodman goes only so far as to list the first in his bibliography while ignoring the second. With this dismissal, the critics miss an opportunity. It's certainly true that neither book is a lasting literary accomplishment, for both display an inept, if enthusiastic, hand at work. However, we should be generous with Browne, for he was but twenty years old at the time, finding his way, a writer producing those early works writers sometimes later cringe to remember.

Added to this, Browne's exposing of hypocrisy, corruption, and human folly will be a theme running through his successful books,
while the bizarre quality of Dr. Grayson’s antics and the surreal contraption of the steam duck preview the delight of Browne’s eye at capturing the odd and the extraordinary, at times squeezing pleasure out of unsavory realities. Handled with the admirable sophistication and humor of a mature writer, this eye for idiosyncrasy becomes one of the graces of Browne’s work. For instance, to leap ahead a bit, many aspects of the Arizona trip must have been thoroughly unpleasant. It was a hot, dusty, snake-infested land, whose natural dangers were compounded by the threat of Apache arrows flying out of the bushes at any moment. And there was little succor in the few settlements the well-armed party encountered—only a different set of miseries. We know historically that the old pueblo of Tucson was a shabby, nasty place, a filthy rat’s nest where whiskey-sodden cutthroats caroused day and night while travelers tried to sleep on the mud floors of abandoned hovels infested with lice. During his stay, Browne tells the truth about this frontier outpost, but he does so with an exaggerated touch that gains him considerable literary mileage. The place reminds him of “what Sodom and Gomorrah must have been before they were destroyed by the vengeance of the Lord” (Adventures 131). As to the particulars of street scenes, they consist of scrawny half-coyote dogs wandering about and poison-soaked miners slumped in doorways, with “Sonoranian buffoons, dressed in theatrical costume, cutting their antics in the public places to the most diabolical din of fiddles and guitars ever heard” (133). Thus, one can be aesthetically buoyed by Browne’s prose while being informed. This is the jejune author of Confessions of a Quack and The Great Steam Duck having refined his wayward impulses into a mature, revealing talent.

Browne’s Etchings of a Whaling Cruise (1846), his first full-length book, was not spun from the imagination of a stay-at-home teenager but was the result of a serious adventure; it previewed
the course of his future books. These would tone down the morality of *Etchings* in favor of a lighter treatment of events, but the volumes would continue to parallel Browne's wanderings.

Compelled by a "thirst for adventure" overseas (2) but without funds, at the age of twenty-one Browne quit his reporting work and signed on to the crew of a whaler in New Bedford. The subsequent account of the journey comes in two parts: the sea voyage and Browne's excursion through the island of Zanzibar, off the east coast of Africa. This latter section for the most part is pleasant, with surprising experiences and observations of exotic events as the youth makes his way through the funerals, marriage customs, and other colorful barbarities of the Arab-African culture, playing his flute and sketching to ease his way.

Yet the bulk of the book deals with the sea voyage, and Browne makes clear in his Preface that revealing the "cruel and oppressive abuses prevalent in the whale fishery" (iii-iv) is his main goal. He hopes that the book will enlist "public sympathy" (iv) leading to reforms. In this Browne takes for his inspiration Richard Henry Dana's *Two Years Before the Mast* (1840), which had recounted the inhumanity prevailing in the merchant marine and led to improved conditions. Browne gladly acknowledges that he is trying to accomplish something similar for the whaling industry (v), and in his introduction to the modern reprint of *Etchings* John Seelye gives a particularly measured comparison and contrast between the works of Dana and Browne (11-18).

Browne need not lecture us, for his scenes show the cruelty of the tyrannical captain. One incident will do. In "a savage humor," the captain, seeking an object on which to vent his spleen, attacks Frank, a Portuguese youth who, although sick and not understanding directions in English, is put at the helm. The captain bellows at the boy "to perform so many impossibilities with the wheel that the poor fellow became confused." Whereupon, a true bully,
the captain advances and gives the cringing lad a beating (265). Thus, in his first book Browne shows the violence which in following volumes will come with doses of the antacid of a sweetening humor; this, if not making harsh realities palatable, at least helps them go down without great upset.

The reasons for the change to the lighter touch after Etchings are not entirely evident. Sometimes, the injustices that fire up the ire of youth cool somewhat with experience. Then, too, although Browne continued to take serious shots at wrongdoing, his was an essentially optimistic nature, lacking the bile perhaps necessary to drive the singleminded reformer. One also suspects that the popular magazines of the day, Browne's first means of income before his articles were turned into books, correctly imagined that their wide audience preferred entertaining travel pieces to a steady fusillade against the evils of society.

From the outset, Yusef (1853), Browne's second full-length literary work, shows the change in tone and manner from Etchings. With his family comfortably established in Florence, Italy, the author tells us that wandering alone down to Naples he was "[l]ounging about the quay one afternoon" and "it occurred to me that a trip to Palermo would be just the thing" (13). And so, we have for our guide an intelligent young man with time on his hands, eager for the diversions of new places. His tone will be relaxed, his humor light, playing over people, places, and events as his readers have the pleasure of following him from adventure to adventure. Occasionally, the naive and openhanded traveler will get into a bind, to keep our interest by raising our adrenaline level now and then, but we have every confidence that everything will turn out all right.

The book begins with a tour through Sicily, but after a visit to Greece, Browne gets down to the real business of his work: extended travel through the Middle East, with his main focus on the
Holy Land. As to the swing away from violence already remarked upon, at the time the region was both poverty-stricken and under the heel of the corrupt and crumbling Ottoman Empire. Walker notes that the Holy Land was an unhappy, even a wretched, place, with open latrines running through the streets (Irreverent Pilgrims 31), but we get to see little of this to disturb us in Browne's version. In Yusef, Browne hardly is a reformer, even a commentator, on social ills.

In Irreverent Pilgrims: Melville, Browne, and Mark Twain in the Holy Land, Walker elaborates on the fascination for the Holy Land. Early American travelers there largely were Protestants, since that was the bent of the nation at the time, and although they respected religious sites for their historical significance, they were put off by the emotionalism of their Catholic counterparts from Europe prostrating themselves before holy places and kissing relics (31). On top of this, Americans' eyebrows shot up at the near hysterical atmosphere at sacred sites as copies of relics of this or that were hawked in the streets (29)—and, worse, at the competition of various religious factions pushing and shoving as they sought precedence in controlling various shrines. This déclassé behavior, together with the wretchedness of the country (32), the fleas (18), and the real or imagined dangers of the countryside inspiring travelers to go about armed (15), led to skepticism about the false show and hoopla having little to do with a faith that should dwell in the heart. The Holy Land hardly was as holy as it was supposed to be. Yes, Americans certainly were curious about the places where Jesus and the Disciples trod, but as tourists they weren't about to be taken in by all the tawdriness. In response, as Walker discusses, Browne and other writers were not overly solemn about experiencing the Holy Land; in fact, they tended to go to the other pole, reacting with a standoffish wink at all the
folderol, a stance likely augmented by the humor, exaggeration, and irreverence Browne brought from the frontier.

What holds the core of the book together, besides the unity of an excursion through the Holy Land, are features seen in the title. In Yusef, Or the Journey of the Frangi: a Crusade in the East, Browne presents three elements. With a slight, even self-mocking, chuckle he tells us where we're going, while also hinting with the use of the word "crusade" that the book will not take itself too seriously, for, if anything, Browne is the toppler of pomposity. Working backward, we next come to the word "Frangi," a generic term used in the Levant for European and American tourists.

The eye, however, first lights on "Yusef," a signal for exoticism, and, it will turn out, for far more. Yusef we learn is a dragoman, an essential for tourists. At the time before large, organized tours, with air-conditioned buses and professional tour directors, travelers were, indeed, innocents abroad. They arrived vulnerable, in the midst of a strange culture, beset by strange languages, hardly knowing where to go or how to get there—and, furthermore, having heard of bandits in the hills lying in wait for them. The native dragoman, or interpreter, was the answer to the need. He was far more than a translator. Hiring such a guide, flummoxed travelers put themselves all but completely in his hands. He was responsible for obtaining horses, finding food and lodging, providing information on the sites visited, and easing the way through the double threats of outlaws on the one hand and suspicious Turkish soldiers on the other. The hired dragoman was critical to the outcome of a trip through the Holy Land.

In Browne's book, out of the clamor of competitors for the position steps Yusef. He takes charge of the situation, immediately inspiring, if not confidence, at least the belief that if he's such a chronic, bombastic liar, he believes his own words. He's also a survivor and will use his devious skills, if one clings to him dearly
enough, to get both himself and the party through difficulties. As evidence of such skill, Yusef delivers a speech to Browne and the few companions he’s joined, a cunning piece of rhetoric combining humor, substance, play on the tourists’ fears, and cajoling:

“Gentleman, I am YUSEF SIMON BADRA, the dragoman for Syria. This is my book of recommendations. I have taken a thousand American gentlemen through Syria. Yes, sir; the Americans like me; I like the Americans! I hate Englishmen; I won’t take an Englishman; they don’t suit me; can’t get along together; I know too much for ‘em. But the Americans suit me; always ready; up to every thing—fun, fight, or frolic. . . . The robbers know me. The name of Yusef Badra is guard enough in any part of Syria.” (177)

Who wouldn’t hire such a man, a psychologist capable of such engaging bamboozling? In dicey situations as one faces the unknown, effective slipperiness may well outweigh the virtue of truth. As Browne puts it on the next page with a shake of his head at himself: “I felt that we were perfectly safe in his hands; that he would fight for us; nay, wallow in blood for us.” So confidence is born out of desperation. That Yusef indeed gets the small party through tricky places, some of them as outlandish as the man himself, lends the book much of its color.

The one thing that haunts writers is cliché. Yet J. Ross Browne demonstrates how fortunate travel writers, using a little deftness, can be in this regard. The riffs of Browne’s humor, combined with an exotic setting and the addition of colorful Yusef, make for a successful formula. The self-effacing, bumbling, but good-hearted writer gains the sympathy of readers, who in similar situations might be almost as distressed as he. For instance, as usually occurs in Browne, despite his earnest resolve he has trouble with horses. Illusionist that the guide can be, when Browne looks at his
mount with circumspection, Yusef boldly assures him that he should feel privileged to ride this noble beast fit for a prince. “O General!” Yusef weaves his web, “such an animal, too, as, I'll venture to say, the richest pasha in Beirut can't match this very moment” (184). And so they go jouncing off, Browne losing the stirrups, the horse plunging frantically, until its rider is forced to the humiliating expediency of clinging desperately to the mane. That continuous spectacle, as the party progresses through the expected attractions, the Cedars of Lebanon, the Holy City of Jerusalem, and Christmas Eve in Bethlehem, must have caused constant titters in Victorian living rooms.

The dramatic high point not surprisingly but appropriately occurs one night when Yusef takes it into his head to impress the local girls by performing the Raas, the traditional sword dance. Solemnly, showman that he is—for his whole life is an act of one sort or another—Yusef steps forth into the firelight in a lavish costume. Posing with his sword aloft, he begins to turn, begins slashing this way and that, until he seems to lose his senses entirely, now whirling like a maddened dervish, while the crowd screams with pleasure (221-23). Then Yusef, expended, falls “dying” to the ground before a sloe-eyed maiden, resting at last with his head in her lap (223).

Entrancing as the scene is and occurring midway through the journey, the wild performance also is a hint that the ebullient Yusef might be capable of a dangerous instability. In fact, nearing the end of the trip, Browne notes that their guide is becoming ever more delusional, eager to pick fights and “daily giving way more and more to his fierce passions” (412). Finally, after Yusef’s further display of bizarre behavior, Turkish soldiers appear. They arrest him and take him off to jail. When the anxious Americans enquire, they find that Yusef has turned irrational, beating a defenseless old man (419) whom the party passed on the road to
Beirut (415). The Americans can do nothing for Yusef; he, more a pitiful mental case than a criminal, is in the grip of the jackbooted authorities, and his fate is grim in an empire not known for its mercy. This is a discordant end to a lighthearted book, for in our enjoyment through four hundred pages, we have not been prepared for this final turn. Aesthetically, the darkening shadow rushing through the last pages undercuts what has gone before, injecting a sour note of irony, for it confirms how precarious the travelers’ lot, although jocularly depicted, has been all along.

In the larger picture, Yusef set the tone and pattern for Browne’s subsequent literary works. These would follow his travels, both instructing and delighting Americans about strange places as readers sat chuckling at the author’s adventures. The volumes would sometimes be pastiches, assemblages of adventures to disparate places, with few other links to the territories covered than that footloose Browne happened to be traveling there, yet holding together quite well on the strength of the guide’s established personality and style, a combination of merriment, accurate reportage, and a moral rectitude flattering to readers’ self-righteousness. It is, then, Browne as persona taking us through the dramas of changing panoramas that pulls us through. Browne is our trustworthy, avuncular docent, and he so gains our confidence and constantly delivers on our expectations of pleasure that we are willing to travel with him where e’er he goes.

In illustration, the book with the alluring title of Crusoe’s Island (1864) contains four major sections. The first, “Crusoe’s Island” (9-165), concerns Browne’s voyage around the horn of South America to assume his government duties in California. The second, “A Dangerous Journey” (167-247), describes what he did when he got there; while the third, “Observations in Office” (249-308), reflects on his experiences as agent for the Secretary of the Treasury. The last, “A Peep at Washoe” (309-436), recounts the writer’s excursion
into the booming silver fields of Nevada's Comstock Lode, an excitement then much in the national news.

To work backward toward the first section, the main feature of the book, it should be said that, while expertly displaying them, Browne hardly is duped by the wonders of the places he visits. Despite the author's gentle nature, the silver fields are a brutal place where man's delusions, hyper-stoked with greed, thrive. It may be entertaining to see the rough miners and vertiginous landscape pass before our eyes, but the pictures also come laden with moral messages. Browne's friends in Virginia City are consumed men. They are rich, not in actual silver but in anticipation of what their mining claims may contain—"and bent on getting still richer" in their poker game of trading back and forth their paper holdings. This false grandeur bewilders our honest guide (384). We learn the real human toll in this lawless place of polluted water and bad whiskey, where the reward for dreaming far more often than not is paid in sickness and broken lives (385-88).

Further holding up human folly to public exposure is the penultimate section, Browne's ruminations on public office. Here, in contrast to the ideal of the "dignity" of government service (249), out in the field Browne discovers rampant featherbedding, laziness, and nepotism (252). More brutal still is the treatment of Indians, at times systematically slaughtered by settlers. Reasoning that efficiency consists of eliminating the problem, the pioneers descended on an Indian camp and "shot all the men, women, and children they could." Dropping his guise as the writer wrapping evil in literary niceties, Browne presents a stark picture: "Children climbed upon their mothers' breasts, and sought nourishment from the fountains that death had drained; girls and boys lay here and there with their throats cut from ear to ear" (304). With that, the tittering must have stopped in the nation's living rooms.
More typical of his rendering of western experience is the book’s second section, “A Dangerous Journey.” This involves a mule trip in 1849 south of San Francisco to the San Luis Obispo area on yet another government assignment, on this occasion to levy import duties and establish a string of post offices (167-68). At the time, this was wild country, recently taken over by the United States from Mexico, and Browne makes the most of the colorful flux. At his relaxed best, Browne becomes the raconteur spinning yarns about the Wild West to the horror and delight of his readers. In contrast to his actual moral toughness in fulfilling his duties by fighting corruption, he projects the image of the self-effacing, wondering neophyte thrown out on his “own resources” as he blunders along, somehow landing on his feet “in an almost unknown country” (169).

The newness of the land gives Browne the opportunity to display his evocative powers, and he seizes it gladly. He makes much of this “wild region of enchantment,” with distant mountains alluring in the haze and thousands of cattle grazing across the lush valleys. It is a reality heightened by yet another reality, the mirages shimmering over the land. The awed and bewildered Browne sees “wondrous temples glittering with jewels and precious stones. Bands of antelope coursed gracefully over the foreground; but so light and vaguely defined were their forms that they seemed rather to sail through the air than touch the earth” (174).

However, perhaps because fear generates more potent impressions than delight and desolation makes a more lasting impact than pleasure, “A Dangerous Journey” emphasizes the trip’s darker, more threatening aspects. The traveler’s encounter with abandonment echoes an ill land:

A more desolate place than Soledad can not well be imagined. The old church is partially in ruins, and the adobe huts built for the Indians are roofless, and the walls tumbled
about in shapeless piles. Not a tree or a shrub is to be seen anywhere in the vicinity. The ground is bare, like an open road, save in front of the main building (formerly occupied by the priests), where the carcasses and bones of cattle are scattered about, presenting a disgusting spectacle. (177)

If that's dolorous, next comes the population, consisting largely of degenerates, con artists, and murderers in what is becoming a Kafkaesque phantasmagoria. Browne spends the night with a melancholy couple who are former members of the Donner party. To his horror, the rawboned, wild-eyed wife had survived the ordeal by feeding "for some time on the dead body of a child" (171). When she serves Browne a plate of meat, his gorge rises at "the same hands that had torn the flesh from a corpse and passed the reeking shreds to her mouth" (172); before him she turns into an ogress, her teeth growing "long and pointed" (170).

Providing a dash of comic relief, as usual Browne's wily mounts get the best of him; recognizing the greenhorn on their backs, they tend to throw the trusting writer, then run hilariously off, leaving him in desperate straits in dangerous places (182). However, for all his projected naiveté, Browne is a survivor. He has the presence of mind to ease his way with natives antagonistic to strangers by picking up a guitar and singing a funny song about a frog until his grim host "gradually relaxed into a smile, then into a broad grin" (179). Elsewhere, our adventurer whirls through a Mexican fandango where the belle of the ball has flashing eyes that bespeak her dangerous jealousy, for she has "stabbed to death a rival of hers" in a love affair (240); and he has the presence of mind when falling in with four reptilian desperadoes to escape their designs, barricading himself in an adobe house, drawing his pistol, and blazing away at his pursuers (214-20). This is fast-paced, colorful writing taking place in a macabre world. The writer, constantly in jeopardy, ends his series of tales on the most
gothic note of all, viewing the body of a woman “horribly mutilated by the wolves” (246).

By the last page of this section, one is left with the impression of a young writer so swept up by his excited imagination that the tales from his pen couldn’t all possibly be true, although, much to Browne’s credit, at the moment of reading they’re convincing nonetheless. With the ever-changing tones and shades, highs and lows, it’s as if we’re watching a young pianist, his fingers impossibly flying in a brilliant performance (Wild 41-45).

It might be repeated that much of Browne’s writing originally appeared as articles in various magazine series before their gathering into books. Thus, although Crusoe’s Island consists of one collection between hard covers, actually it is four distinct works, each of which, taken alone, presents a literary whole. Since Browne’s recrudescence, publishers have been reprinting such sections as individual works, which stand well on their own merits, often now with instructive introductions. Concerning Crusoe’s Island, Lewis Osborne, for example, brought out both the visit to the silver country and the dangerous journey in separate, handsome editions, and readers first turning to Browne through them likely would have no suspicion that they are sections in a larger collection. Crusoe’s Island consists of four books appearing as one only because of the course of Browne’s travels and the expediency of getting his popular works into print to tap a market first formed by his following in the magazines. Browne reprints have continued to appear in recent decades, some gathering articles never before collected into books and hence additionally pointing to Browne’s popular rebirth. These include Explorations in Lower California, the result of a bit of investigative work Browne did in Baja California for a potential developer, and The Coast Rangers, recounting a rollicking hunting foray of a bibulous party into the wilderness of California’s north-coast country.
However, in publishing not all worthy possibilities receive their proper due, and one only can speculate why the title section of Crusoe's Island has not yet been printed on its own. Books need markets, and although "Crusoe's Island" is by far the most exotic of the four offerings in the volume, it also is the one not directly concerned with the American west, a region whose literature has a widening audience. In the pages of the original Harper edition, likely crumbling with age, lies high adventure and a compelling narrative once again taking us into a fantastic realm.

The brief opening covers an incident on Browne’s voyage around South America on his first trip to California. In yet another case of Browne’s opposition to tyrannical authority, on the way strife breaks out between the captain of the Anteus and his passengers over the lack of food he allows them (9). Upon reaching Rio de Janeiro, the passengers, with Browne among their leaders, plead their case to the American consul. In consequence, the captain is replaced by a new commander. The incident, however, is stated pretty much as a journalistic fact of the trip, receiving less than three pages (9-11). Although we note parenthetically that some years later one of the passengers, J. D. B. Stillman, would give a detailed account of the conflict in Seeking the Golden Fleece, one justifying Browne’s role (35-63), quite wisely Browne, while feeling obliged to acknowledge an event covered in the newspapers of the day, wants to put this unpleasantness behind him and move on to the colorful tale dear to his storyteller’s heart.

Yet as the narrative immediately proceeds, Browne reveals himself, intentionally or not, to be at the center of a glaring irony, the machinery for the whole following adventure. He has just shown himself the soul of reason, good sense, and sturdy right thinking by opposing a captain whose irrationality has endangered his passengers. Now Browne, along with ten of those same shipboard friends, becomes part of a totally foolish, madcap scheme. As the
Anteus pauses in the Pacific, it is in sight of distant Juan Fernández, a group of islands several hundred miles west of the coast of Chile and the locale of Defoe’s famed venture story, Robinson Crusoe. Say, wouldn’t it be grand to visit that romantic spot? Because the conspirators know that the new captain would scotch such a lunatic foray, in secret they appropriate a rowboat, and, piling into the flimsy vessel made for five passengers, not eleven, with three cheers they push off.

The plan is to row seventy miles across the sea, explore what they see in their imaginations as an enchanted isle, then intercept the ship as it passes. In their boyish rush to sneak off, they are ridiculously ill-equipped. They have two jugs of water, a little beef and biscuit, and, for defense, two guns and “an old harpoon” (12). As it happens, the captain comes out on deck as they depart, and since in the past the passengers have occasionally rowed around the ship for exercise, his suspicions are not overly aroused. When the adventurers in their enthusiasm wave their hats, calling out that they’re off for Juan Fernández, the absurdity of it is so huge that the captain thinks they’re joking; in return he calls out to be sure to bring back some peaches (11-13).

Browne later will say that he has “endeavored faithfully to describe” his visit to Crusoe’s island (147), and while we take him at his word, it’s difficult to account for such utter folly. Perhaps anticipating criticism, his sheepish excuse on reflection is telling both in terms of how such adventure stories are written and in terms of the cravings they satisfied in readers. Youthful Browne says that “I was too full of joy at the idea of a ramble in the footsteps of Robinson Crusoe to think of risk at all” (13). Of such, sometimes, is the generating stuff of literature.

Once on the island of his dreams, Browne delivers a Tom Sawyer series of episodes, breathless moments of scaling peaks, finding a skull, exploration of a pirate’s cave. A sampling of the chapter
headings alone gives a taste of the adolescent excitement: "The Valley on Fire," "The Cave of the Buccaneers," "The American Crusoe." This last presents a contemporary counterpart to Defoe's hero. Addled by isolation and somewhat put out by intruders of the past who have robbed him, the recluse warns the newcomers to behave "like Christians" (98). In a book full of bright points, one of the brightest is the discovery of what Browne dubs "The Valley of Enchantment" (75-77). After a perilous ascent of a peak with a companion, the two romantic wanderers gaze down into an idyllic interior valley of mists and blooming garlands; there, oats grow wild, springs gush from the earth, and wild horses dash about, tossing their manes "in all the joyousness of their freedom" (77). With its golden mistiness it's a passage worthy of a James Hilton or a Zane Grey.

Because of the delights offered by such books as Crusoe's Island, by 1866, says David Goodman, "Browne was the best known of the travel writers who had written in popular magazines" (215). Yet he had not reached his apogee. Between 1860 and 1863 the Browne family lived in Germany. Two books, An American Family in Germany and The Land of Thor resulted from the stay and furthered Browne's reputation. Although they make pleasant reading and in their day were revelations of foreign sights and cultures, today the two books likely are of interest mainly to specialists. Whimsical as they are, their material is dated, and they can claim no great analysis. As Browne says, he is content to catch only "what is visible to the eye" (An American Family ix). Although the two books are not quite as superficial as that, the quotation does give an idea of their unchallenging ease.

An American Family in Germany ranges across the culture, for instance describing a German Christmas, with a tree "hung all over with colored wax tapers" (183) and wagons "freighted with big dolls" (186). This hardly is exciting fare for our times. It may owe
much to Browne’s enjoyment of domesticity as he luxuriates in the role of good husband and father. When, however, the old travel itch overwhelms him and he stuffs a few things in his knapsack and a little money in his pocket to hit the road again, the pace and color pick up. The Land of Thor, Browne’s account of a walking tour through parts of Russia, the Baltic countries, Sweden, Norway, and Iceland, although also dated, has that rushing sense of possibilities before a man glad to be footloose on his own with little means, traveling light and alert for whatever fate may throw in his path. Of travel writers he quips, “If they didn’t tell of very remarkable things, nobody would care about reading their books” (510-11). This, combined with Browne’s appealing, wide-eyed boyishness, takes us most notably into Iceland’s wilderness, a stark no-man’s land of geysers and volcanoes. In that frightful hinterland of swirling ash storms and sulphurous vapors, Browne delivers the goods, presenting us, he winks a bit at the trope, with a “bouquet of wonderful experiences” (386).

More than likely, despite such charms, we would not be reading about J. Ross Browne were it not for one book, his stellar Adventures in the Apache Country: A Tour Through Arizona and Sonora, with Notes on the Silver Regions of Nevada. As the second part of the long-handed subtitle indicates, the volume consists of two sections, two distinct explorations, one in the region of Arizona, the other in Nevada. Far more than geography distinguishes the two sections. The first is a true adventure tale, a trip full of wonder and wild excitements as the writer travels through a new land and experiences the fear of whizzing Apache arrows. The second is more in the nature of an investigation, a five-chapter report to readers on the silver mining in Nevada. That is, factual as both are, one has an oneiric aura, while the second, whatever its patina of humor, remains reportage.

Browne begins with mock meekness. Referring to “A Peep at Washoe,” appearing in Crusoe’s Island and before that in Harper’s
magazine, Browne claims that some readers found his report on Nevada's chaotic mining frontier too remarkable for belief (293). He's also heard that some residents of the silver region were so offended by his depictions of the troglodytic locals that word has gone forth "that he had better not show himself in Washoe again." In fact, the brutish citizens even now are lurking along the road to Washoe, armed with pistols, pitchforks, and clubs, panting to teach a lesson to the man who besmirched their escutcheon (296). Because of this, in all fairness and as a sensitive and moral writer, Browne feels the obligation to return and see if he can make a more favorable report.

That, of course, is a tongue-in-cheek set-up. When the "diabolical quill-driver" (298) arrives in the mining precincts, he is pleased to report on the region's "progress" (319). The tents once dispensing bad whiskey have been replaced by substantial taverns, and whereas three years ago accommodations were so scarce that many a traveler had to sleep out on the ground, now the weary can enjoy inns well-supplied with fleas (320). Once a fairly peaceful place, now Virginia City is a frenzy of greed where lawsuits fly almost as frequently as bullets (379). In a more sober vein, Browne pities the poor animals hauling wagons over the bad, mountainous roads. Pushed beyond their endurance, the beasts drop in their tracks and die (345). In sum, the silver region exhibits a nadir of humanity. On a more positive note, scurrying through mines and evaluating the land generally, Browne finds the potential for agriculture (459) and mineral development grand, if only people can transcend the greed that has driven them into rampant dishonesty and wild speculations (529). Fortunately, despite the moral messages, Browne rarely becomes cloying, for his innate optimism is always breaking through. Although the Yahooos presently prevail, there must be hope for the country, he tells us, for in one house he discovers—a copy of Harper's magazine (464)!
Although far more than adequate, the Nevada section doesn’t have the outstanding literary qualities of the Arizona portion of *Adventures in the Apache Country*, which in contrast makes his other books, readable as they are, pale. With the Arizona section of *Adventures*, Browne offers a geographic, emotional, and aesthetic whole. Many factors contribute to this, including the book’s geographic architecture. In Browne’s other travel books rarely do we find a compelling necessity for where he is going. He’s an entertaining and often informative wanderer whom we gladly follow as he skitters about where his fancy leads, but by the end of the trips we’ve not experienced much more than intriguing times.

One need not be a psychologist, or even a philosopher, to posit that in the Burkean sense ultimate thrills, whether in literature or in the life beyond books, depend upon the simultaneity of beauty and very real dangers. It is one thing to ride a Ferris wheel, quite another to climb a cliff, digging one’s fingers inch by inch into the sheer rock face. Fear and beauty quicken us. On his trip into the Arizona Territory, Browne was taking his life into his hands to explore a little-known, even mystic, country. Newness was all about him, and so were dangers. Yet this is not the folly of a sophomore but the brave adventure of a mature writer youthful in spirit, aware of the risks he’s taking but compelled to go on. Innate in the situation itself, then, is a series of parallels and tensions, such as humor and seriousness, daily joys and daily threats, man’s brutality and the beauty of nature, the potential wealth of the land contrasting with its current ramshackle condition. To put these in broader terms, the adventure trembles in that unsettling yet appealing realm of dream versus reality, the conflict of the factual with the ideal, which is one of the great themes of literature.

One prime virtue is that the beauty and danger of Arizona are embedded in the details as Browne’s story unfolds. To circle in on specifics, Browne begins by stating his long fascination for the
American southwest, for the romantic history of Spanish exploration, the old tales of fabulous silver mines, and the exotic nature of the land of cacti and snowy peaks. He sees the region as a Dreamland, gripped, since the outbreak of the Civil War and the withdrawal of many federal troops from the Territory, by rampant lawlessness, both from criminals fleeing the states and from marauding Indians burning ranches and murdering travelers (11-26). Thus piqued, readers are on the delicious alert, about to enter “a paradise of devils” (22). Then, after warming his audience, Browne begins the story proper with a vignette.

Wandering the streets of San Francisco late in 1863, he bumps into an old friend and Arizona hand. Recently appointed Superintendent of Indian Affairs, Charles D. Poston is off to Arizona in an attempt to quiet down the flaming frontier. He’s leaving at four p.m. Would Browne like to go? As we’ve seen, our inveterate traveler rushes home, throws a few things in a knapsack, and is off (28-29). Sometimes, the best of thrills come as surprises. Thereafter, his route will take him by boat down the California coast to Los Angeles, then overland by wagon across the Colorado Desert to the military post at Yuma and eastward to about the present site of Phoenix. Browne then turns south toward the notorious robbers’ nest of Tucson, threads through the wild countryside exploring mines, loops down into Mexico, and returns to San Francisco by the way he came.

One guesses that it may well be the situation, and especially the presence of Poston, that help make this Browne’s most successful work. Here, he is not alone but part of an expedition with a military escort, its members camping out as they progress. Thus Browne, free to address more important issues, dispenses with the fussiness of telling us how he found his nightly lodgings and spares us the mundane confusions of the tourist not speaking the language. Furthermore, Poston was a frontiersman with long,
firsthand experience in the Arizona Territory, a man who spoke Spanish fluently and knew Arizonans well. Not only was Browne relieved of many daily concerns and left to apply his creative powers to the scenes before him, he had a strong, experienced man at his side constantly supplying the writer with deeply enriching details. On top of that, Poston was leading mild Browne into encounters he likely could not have had on his own in that wild country of desperadoes and scalphunters.

Two examples of this appear early in the Adventures. At Yuma, making his first official stop as Indian Agent, in an effort to gain the Indians’ support Poston distributes gifts. Tagging along, Browne witnesses a bizarre sight as the rejoicing Indians make off with their prizes: “One went with a necklace of mattocks around his neck and three Collins axes in his girdle; another with his head thrust into a glittering pile of tin-ware” (63)—and while catching the glitter of such a circus, Browne, far ahead of his time, hardly can hide the futility of such government largesse.

A second example occurs soon after. As their wagons travel along the banks of the Gila River, the party pauses at the graves of the Oatman family. Ten years earlier, Indians had slaughtered most of the lone, California-bound family but took two daughters captive. It was a cause célèbre at the time, much in the nation’s newspapers, and a grim tale often told by travel writers. Browne’s recounting, however, is among the richest. He takes us point by point through the unfolding massacre and the horrors the two slave girls endured before their rescue some years later (86-98). He is able to do this because at his side feeding him the particulars is Charles D. Poston, the very Arizona frontiersman who gathered the family’s scattered bones and buried them (86).

What we have, then, as the journey unfolds is not so much an airy description of the land as an experience of it. Browne is not telling us about the land but showing it and its people to us.
When we encounter the crucified Indian already remarked upon, we actually stand before the dried corpse bound to its cross, with its “head hung forward, showing a few tufts of long hair still swinging about the face” (104). Books about Arizona from this period consider such scenes, then go overboard to exaggerate the drama beyond credibility. With Browne we stand awed and believing, confronting the very thing itself.

And that thing, Browne’s experience of this wild and exotic land, begins to change the writing itself. As the trip progresses, he’s taking us ever deeper, not into some old-fashioned European country with quaint customs, but into an ever weirder Walpurgisnacht. Here, his habitual humor begins to give way to harsh and colorful realities. In Tucson, we’ve seen Browne burlesque the “Sonoranian buffoons, dressed in theatrical costume” (133), but such chuckles pale before the brutal facts of the land. Continuing south of Tucson down the Santa Cruz Valley, Browne passes the spot where just a month before the bodies of two ambushed white men lay “naked and disfigured with wounds,” the corpses riddled with arrows and mutilated by lances (198). Thereafter, his party rides past ranch after burnt-out ranch. Obviously, fun-time is over.

Replacing what would be inappropriate jests are two new elements. One is the celebration of the land, its climate, and its potential wealth as he rides invigorated by the “unbounded opulence of sunshine” pouring down on this distressed land. As he jogs along, Browne builds “castles in the air” out of the silver waiting in the ground to bless Arizona with prosperity in more peaceful times (226). The other new element is his deepening sympathy as he confronts the human wreckage often awash on a frontier. In particular, deep in Mexico, stopping at a bedraggled town of a few mud huts and a collapsed church, among the ruins he finds a derelict American woman of dubious history. She is manic, wanting to dance and “stir up the town,” and although Browne passes
on some of her bizarre story as she relates it, rather than make sport of her he shows us a lunatic woman, someone to be pitied, a compassion he and his partners confirm by taking the babbling, distracted woman along on the return trip (185) and turning her over to the commanding officer of the Army post in Tucson (186). It is a poor solution but the best that can be obtained in that land of sorrows. For all this, Donald M. Powell in his modern edition of Browne’s *Adventures*, much recommended for its scholarly notes, calls the volume “the earliest Arizona classic” (xiii). It is truly an artistic and deeply moving work.

**CONCLUSION**

J. Ross Browne, an idealist striving to support his family by penning popular travel pieces, along the way managed to produce true art and influence Melville and Twain. Constantly beset by the lure to compromise in order to maintain his popularity, he nevertheless remained one of those rare, trustworthy writers who not only lived a life intimately involved with the west, but created some of the most reliable accounts of the frontier. Yet from our perspective, he skittered about too much, both geographically and figuratively, becoming popular in his own day but, through his perception that he needed to be more a humorist than a humanitarian, just missing in book after book a more lasting profundity. Strong signs of change appear in a final piece of literature which any writer might envy for a capstone, yet it’s one leaving us all the more sorrowing that Browne did not live beyond the age of fifty-four to leave us more western classics by developing the potential he began to realize at the close of his relatively short life.
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About the Author

PETER WILD was born in 1940 in Northampton, Massachusetts. A journalist, backpacker, and avid conservationist, he has written and edited over seventy books, both poetry and prose, and was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize in 1973 for *Cochise* (Doubleday), a collection of poetry. Currently, culminating fifteen years of research, he is working on a history of the famed Van Dyke Ranch in Southern California's Mojave Desert.
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