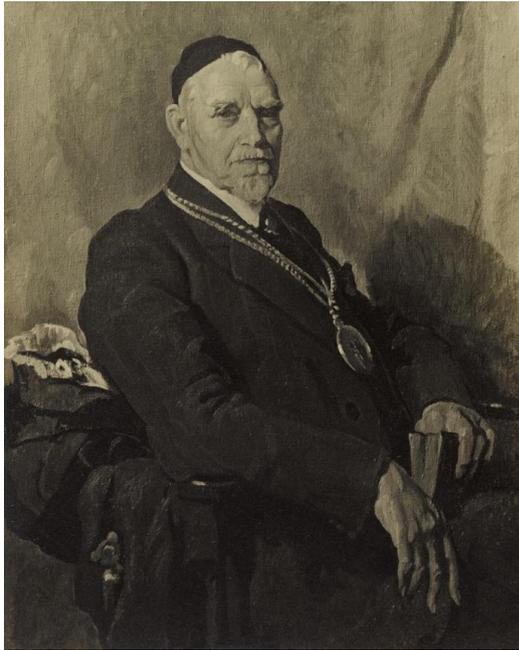


Sir George Washington Browne



Royal Scottish Academy Collections

George Washington Browne was born in Glasgow on 21 September 1853, the son of an employee of Glasgow Corporation Gas Company. He was articled in 1869. In 1873 on completion of his articles he joined the office of Campbell Douglas & Sellars, from which he won John James Stevenson's measured drawing prize; and in 1875 he moved to London where he shared lodgings at 60 Brompton Square.

He then joined the Architectural Association in December of that year. After two years, Browne moved to the office of the church architect, Arthur William Blomfield, and during his time there he won the Pugin Studentship in 1877, enabling him to travel in France and Belgium.

Browne returned to Scotland, having obtained the post of principal assistant to Robert Rowand Anderson, then engaged on the Edinburgh Medical Schools and Glasgow Central Station, and in 1881 he became Anderson's partner, enabling him to marry Jessie Brownlie, daughter of Robert Brownlie, Glasgow, in that year. His London Architectural Association experience quickly brought him a prominent role in classes run by the Edinburgh Architectural Association of which he became President in 1883, holding this post until 1886.

Browne opened his own office at 5 Queen Street in 1885 and his design for the Central library, Edinburgh won the competition.



Central Library, Edinburgh. © Gerald Blaikie

The magnificent Central Library on George IV Bridge is the only Carnegie library built in Scotland's capital, although the Corstorphine library, built in 1904, was subsequently taken into the city's system in 1920. Edinburgh's earliest branch libraries were provided by the publisher, Thomas Nelson, and built in conjunction with the network of local "Nelson Halls".

In 1864 the citizens of Edinburgh had rejected a proposal to adopt the Libraries Act by 1106 votes to 71 as it would have caused extra taxation.

Opinions were to change however after Carnegie wrote to the Lord Provost, Sir Thomas Clark, on 27th April 1886 offering £25,000 to build a central library for the city. To make the adoption of the Act practically certain he cabled an amendment to this letter few days later, increasing this sum to £50,000.

The public meeting which followed approved the adoption of the Act almost unanimously, with only 4 objections. The Central Library opened on 9 June, 1890. While touring Scotland on honeymoon with his new wife, Louise, during the following summer, Carnegie found time to lay the memorial foundation stone, on 9 July 1887. His interest continued up to the opening ceremony in 1890, when he sent a telegraph to be read to the assembled crowd. The message read "We trust that this library is to grow in usefulness year after year and prove one of the most potent agencies for the good of the people for all time to come".

George Washington Browne's design for the library building was in the French Renaissance style with much elaborate decoration, as the architect was very indulgent with his large budget. The front elevation, with the entrance on George IV Bridge is deceptive, as there are actually 4 storeys below the bridge, with the library standing in the gorge below. The elevations below the bridge are completely unadorned. The library was officially opened by Lord Rosebery on 9 June 1890, and opened to the public one week later.

This was followed by the Redfern building on Princes Street in 1891.



Royal Hospital for Sick Children

Then came the Sick Children's Hospital in 1892.

This established him in independent practice and brought him election as an Associate of the Royal Scottish Academy (ARSA) in that year.

He was able to move to a smarter office at 1 Albyn Place, Edinburgh.



Caledonian Station

By this time Browne had formed a loose relationship with Kinnear & Peddie, some of the details of their Caledonian Station, 1890, suggesting his hand.

This arrangement was formalised in 1895 or 1896 when John More Dick Peddie took him into partnership, Kinnear having died in 1894.

The immediate catalyst for taking him into partnership seems to have been a surge in branch bank building, particularly for the British Linen Bank. As Kinnear & Peddie's South Charlotte Street office had belonged to Kinnear, the new partnership moved to much larger premises at 8 Albyn Place late in 1896.



This engraving shows the British Linen Bank's offices on the east side of St Andrew Square. (Reproduced with acknowledgement to Peter Stubbs, www.edinphoto.org.uk)

The Peddie & Washington Browne partnership was initially hugely successful, enabling Browne to build a very sophisticated neo-Jacobean house, The Limes, in Blackford Road, and even accommodate Peddie's brother, Walter Lockhart Dick Peddie, as third partner in 1898. But soon thereafter Walter became ill and emigrated to British Columbia in the hope of recovery.

He died there in 1902 and was not replaced in the partnership. From about 1905 the partnership began to drift apart, probably because of a sharp decline in bank business, although Peddie and Browne were to remain in formal partnership until 1907 and share the same office at 8 Albyn Place until 1908. From about 1904 Browne had begun moving in a more Edwardian Renaissance direction which can be seen in mature form in his competition designs for London County Hall (1907-08) which reached the final stage and attracted considerable interest. But the bank business remained with Peddie and after he moved out of Albyn Place to his own office in Charlotte Square he had few private clients and was largely dependent on success in competitions.



Edward VII Memorial Gates

He was not placed for the Usher Hall competition but he did win that for the Edward VII Memorial Gates at Holyrood, which were built in a reduced form in 1912-22; and in 1914 he achieved UK fame by winning the competition for St Paul's Bridge in London, a project abandoned at the outbreak of the First World War.

Although he had one significant commission, which was actually built, in the YMCA Building in Edinburgh's St Andrew Street, seen here on the right of the Grey monument, Browne drastically retrenched in 1913-14. Both The Limes and his Charlotte Square office were given up, house and office thereafter being in a ground floor flat at 1 Randolph Cliff.



In 1914 he was appointed Head of the Architecture Section at Edinburgh College of Art, a post which provided him with a regular source of income until 1922 when he was succeeded by John Begg. He did not retire completely, however, continuing to visit the architecture studios as a governor. He prepared prototype designs for council houses in 1919 but as some of these were under the aegis of the Royal Scottish Academy it is doubtful if they brought in any fees. On the completion of the Holyrood gates and a number of war memorials his last assistant, Frank Wood, was virtually offered the practice but was not in a position to accept.

Browne did, however, still have a significant role as a competition assessor and was belatedly admitted to Fellowship of the Royal Institute of British Architects on 19 March 1926 on the recommendation of the RIBA Council: an event probably not unconnected with his election in 1924 as President of the Royal Scottish Academy, of which he had been Treasurer since 1917. His election also brought honorary membership of the Royal Academy, the Royal Hibernian Academy and the Royal College of Art. He was knighted in 1926, the year of the RSA's centenary exhibition, and received King George V and Queen Mary at the Academy on 16 July 1927.

Browne retired from the Presidency of the Academy in 1933, but he continued to exert a significant influence as a founder member of the Royal Fine Art Commission for Scotland, which had been set up in 1927. In 1933 he substantially redesigned the massing of the Office of Works proposals for St Andrew's House, his scheme significantly influencing the final design by Thomas Smith Tait; and he also had a role at Edinburgh Sheriff Court, where he redesigned A J Pitcher's Lawnmarket façade in bolder form.

In 1938 failing health and diminishing means compelled Browne to leave his flat at 1 Randolph Cliff to live with his daughter Jessie (or Jenny) Agnew Preston (Mrs Norman S Preston) at The Lodge, Sambrook, Wellington, Shropshire. He died there on 15 June 1939. The RSA took charge of his funeral, the service being conducted by the Very Reverend Dr Charles L Warr in its library.

Browne was red-haired and, for most of his life, bearded. Although normally dignified and very courteous, he had a fiery temper and was prone to use his boot if provoked by incompetence. His personal life was clouded by tragedy. His first wife Jessie Brownlie died on 26 February 1900. They had three sons and two daughters, but all three sons were either killed in the First World War or died from the effects of it. In 1905 Browne married a second time to Louise (or Louisa) Emma, daughter of Dr David Laird Adams, Professor of Hebrew and Oriental Languages at Edinburgh University, and they had a daughter, Margaret, but Louisa, too, predeceased him on 14 October 1931.

Among his closest friends were the architect John Kinross and the painter Martin Hardie. In later years he spent much of his time at the Scottish Arts Club where he excelled at billiards. Browne's will, drawn up in March 1933, indicates that he had an estate of at least £3,000 and provided for a monument at Grange Cemetery which was to be carried out by his friend and former colleague, Burnet Napier Henderson Orphoot; but he revoked most of it 'because I have lived overlong without an income'. He left moveable estate of £1,930 17s 3d, much of which consisted of insurance policies, and nearly all of which was bequeathed to his daughter Jenny.

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