



Edward W. Browning
1874-1934

Founder of the
Edward W. Browning Fund in

The New York Community Trust
909 Third Avenue
New York, NY 10022

The Will of Edward W. Browning established a philanthropic program to be initiated upon the death of his daughter. In 1969, the remainder of his estate was assigned by court order to the New York Community Trust to make annual awards for outstanding achievement.

The children in the hospital ward waited restlessly, for their nurses had told them a special visitor was coming. Soon a smiling, elegantly-dressed man, accompanied by a liveried footman carrying stacks of boxes, entered the ward and warmly greeted the solemn-eyed children. He spoke to each of them in his gentle, fatherly manner as he handed them the toys he had brought to relieve the dreariness of their days of confinement in the hospital. The little patients responded with an affectionate enthusiasm that deeply touched the heart of the wealthy donor. Most of the children were too young to know the story of the man the newspapers called "Daddy" Browning. All were old enough to respond to the sincerity and kindness of the man whose work was his life and whose charity was his greatest pleasure.

Not since Peter Minuit had purchased Manhattan from the Indians for twenty-four dollars worth of trinkets had dealers in New York real estate encountered the business acumen demonstrated by Edward W. Browning. He achieved the pinnacle of success in the 1920's, three centuries after the Dutch West India Company had acquired its fabulous island. Beginning at the turn of the century and continuing for the next thirty years, Browning accumulated real estate of all kinds — commercial properties, hotels, offices, apartment buildings, vacant land. He was known in the harshly competitive world of New York real estate as one of the shrewdest and most powerful real estate operators in the city. He also had a reputation for being one of the city's most generous — and unusual — philanthropists.

Edward W. Browning was born on October 16, 1874, the son of Edward Franklin Browning and the former Lucy Richardson. The elder Browning, a law school graduate, was a successful business man, member of a retail clothing firm, and owner of a considerable amount of real estate. His house at 54 West 50th Street, where young Edward and his sister Florence were born, was on a site which later became part of Rockefeller Center.

Edward's mother, the daughter of a clergyman, was a devout Baptist. The boy's father was an active

member of the Congregational Church, where he was a noted Bible Class teacher. Young Edward grew up in an environment that emphasized the virtues of hard work and service to others. That he had a complex personality was evident even in childhood. He was athletically inclined and drove himself to keep fit. He was enterprising: At the age of twelve he was selling home-made pens to older schoolmates. He was also a dreamer who cherished the ambition of becoming a builder when he grew up and spent hours drawing elaborate plans for mythical houses.

As it turned out, however, Edward became not a house builder but an empire builder. He went into the real estate business with his father, whom he deeply admired, and began to invest in income-producing real estate. Soon his firm, Edbro Realty Company, was a formidable giant of the industry and he himself was a millionaire.

To a large extent, Browning's firm was responsible for the growth of New York's West Side. Browning's acquisitions followed Broadway, the thoroughfare that bisected Manhattan from south to north. Profiting from the extension of subway lines to the upper West Side, he developed the area north of Columbus Circle at 59th Street. In fact, from Canal Street in lower Manhattan to the upper limits of Harlem, he bought real estate of every description.

Browning's brilliance in business dealings inspired awe among his associates and competitors. Unfortunately, however, financial genius is no promise of similar talent in other areas. And Edward Browning seemed to have an unhappy faculty for exercising poor judgment in personal matters. His difficulties were compounded by his deep and continuing need to explain himself publicly and to be accepted. As a result, by the decade of the Twenties, spectacular headlines in the tabloid newspapers brought him notoriety. Like most such headlines, they rarely brought understanding.

On April 15, 1915, the good-looking and wealthy bachelor Edward Browning married Nellie Adele Lowen, a pretty clerk in his office. He was forty years old and his bride was fifteen years younger. For a time the two were happy together, living in a penthouse apartment with a hanging garden. Both of the Brownings yearned for children, but after three years of marriage they remained childless. In May of 1918, they arranged to adopt the three-year-old daughter of a Bronx truckman who was unable to support his family. The Brownings named their little girl Margery Gloria.

Two years later, Edward decided to adopt a sister for Margery. Convinced that "children of the poor

make the healthiest children and do better in world affairs than children of the rich," Edward pursued his search through the tenements of New York, making gifts of toys to the youngsters he was considering, so that he could observe their reactions. It did not take him long to choose a bright-eyed little girl whom he named Dorothy and began to call "Sunshine".

To please his wife and two little daughters, Edward built a luxurious 24-room residence on top of a building on West 81st Street. On the roof of his home he installed an elaborate garden, complete with a lake large enough for a boat to be rowed. There were fountains, masses of flowers, song birds, and Japanese temple bells. Lanterns and colored lights were turned on at night to illuminate the rooftop estate.

Yet the sumptuous gardens high above the streets of Manhattan fell short of Paradise. In 1923, Adele and Edward separated. Adele took Margery and went to Paris. Edward and Dorothy stayed in New York, and Edward later obtained a divorce. Hurt and disappointed by the failure of his marriage, Edward sold the furnishings of his fabulous home and moved with his daughter into simpler quarters. Dorothy attended private school in New York and went off to camp in Vermont in the summer. When she was away, her father missed her so much that frequently, on the spur of the moment, he laid aside his work and drove up to see her.

Desperately lonely himself and worried that his daughter, too, might be unhappy, Browning decided to adopt another girl as a companion for her. His direct method was perhaps better suited to the rough business of real estate dealings than to the sensitive business of adopting a child. He placed an advertisement in newspapers for a "pretty, refined girl, about fourteen years old." The strength of the response astounded and flattered him. More than 12,000 children wrote to him. Many came to his office with their mothers or other relatives for personal interviews. He talked with each, asking the child if she really wanted to be adopted, comforted those who wept, and sent them home again in his limousine.

He added their letters to the piles that eventually totaled over two million, accumulated over a long period, with postmarks from all over the world. Some were addressed simply to "Daddy, New York." To the lonely Edward Browning, the letters represented the affection he craved. He saved them all and kept them locked in a glass-lined vault in his office.

Of the 12,000 applicants, it seemed to Browning that one, a pretty girl with long curls and a winning smile, was just the girl he was looking for to be a daughter to him and a sister to Dorothy. He signed



In 1921, with Margery Gloria (left) and Dorothy "Sunshine" Browning.

the papers to adopt her. But soon he learned that she was not sixteen, as she had told him, but 21 years old, and that she had lied to him about many things besides her age. Disillusioned and sad, Browning had the adoption annulled.

Browning genuinely enjoyed being with young people, and he continued to seek their company. There was a high school near his home, and he sometimes stopped there when a dance was being held. He loved to dance, and the gaiety of the students relaxed and cheered him.

At one of the dances he met a tall, sturdy blonde girl of fourteen. Her name was Frances Heenan. Soon Browning began courting the young girl, climbing five flights of stairs in a working class building in the Washington Heights section to call on her and her mother, who was a nurse. When Frances reached her fifteenth birthday, Browning asked for her mother's consent to marry the girl. In the spring of 1926, Edward and Frances were married by a justice of the peace in Cold Spring, New York. Both the bride's mother and her father, who were separated, were present at the wedding.

Browning and his young wife, whom he called "Peaches", lived together for only a few months. Then the girl ran away and refused to return. Their brief marriage and stormy divorce made sensational headlines. When her divorce suit failed and the large settlement she asked for was not granted by the court,

Frances Browning capitalized on her fame by going on the vaudeville stage. It was a stunning blow and a humiliating experience for Browning.

But Browning refused to believe that happiness was not within his reach. He still had Dorothy. His realty operations thrived. And, reasoning that the best way to find happiness was in doing good for others, he made up his mind to devote himself to philanthropy. He organized baseball teams, called "Daddy Browning" teams, for East Side boys. He took toys to children in foundling homes and in hospitals. In the fall of 1928 he offered to give New York City a million dollars to be used to convert an old Central Park reservoir into a swimming pool, with a beach and playgrounds, for neighborhood children. He had plans drawn up for the conversion, but the city did not accept his offer.

Two months later, in December of 1928, Browning published newspaper advertisements inviting the children of New York to a Christmas party at his offices. He bought bins of toys and hired men dressed in Santa Claus suits to help him distribute the favors. A crowd of youngsters began forming early in the morning. Eventually it grew to thousands — enough to stop traffic for blocks, to require thirty police reserves to be rushed in to keep order, and to warm the heart of the well-meaning man who loved children.

But, like so many of Browning's oversized gestures of kindness, the occasion was marred by misfortune. Several children were slightly hurt when the eager crowds accidentally pushed in a store-front window. A year later the family of one of the injured children brought suit against Browning. The case was in the courts for several years before it was finally dismissed.

Edward Browning's sense of philanthropy began to increase and the following spring he announced some of his plans. He said he hoped to build and maintain children's playgrounds, preferably near hospitals, in various parts of the city. He also planned to endow the children's wards of hospitals with expensive play equipment, such as doll houses, mechanical railroads, and model farms, which were beyond the budgets of most hospitals.

To finance these plans, Browning proposed to sell six million dollars worth of his real estate holdings at public auction. It was reported that he had already disposed privately of holdings valued at five million dollars. But for sixty parcels of land still in his portfolio, he arranged for an auction to be held at Madison Square Garden. Business buildings, apartment hotels, elevator apartment houses, tenements, and other properties covering a total area of more than

six acres, distributed from one end of Manhattan to the other, were to go on the block.

Attracted by Browning's newspaper advertisements, three thousand people flocked to Madison Square Garden when the auction was held there on June 17, 1929. Browning himself appeared to greet the crowds and to pose for photographers. Some of the parcels had been withdrawn before the auction began; others received no bids. But the fifteen properties that were sold that day brought in over two and a half million dollars. Browning, who pronounced himself satisfied with the results, described additional plans for his philanthropy. According to press releases he distributed, he wanted "to make it worth while for larger boys and girls and young people to help others and to put a premium on doing good."

Browning's decision to sell off his property appears to have been well-timed. A few months after the auction, the stock market crashed and the country was plunged into an economic crisis. "I think that Browning was the first man who saw the crash coming," remarked a business associate. "He hadn't sold a thing for fifteen or twenty years, and then early in 1929 he started turning properties into cash." Whether by shrewd planning or simply luck, Browning remained wealthy through the worst of the Depression. And soon he began buying again, turning to the up-and-coming areas of Queens and Nassau Counties.

Edward Browning invested a great deal of time and effort in his philanthropies, as he did in his business. He was used to working twelve to fourteen hours a day, seven days a week, fifty-two weeks a year. On New Year's Day, 1934, a reporter found him at his office as usual. "I work all the time," Browning explained. "I've taken one day off in four years. You get so you think in your sleep."

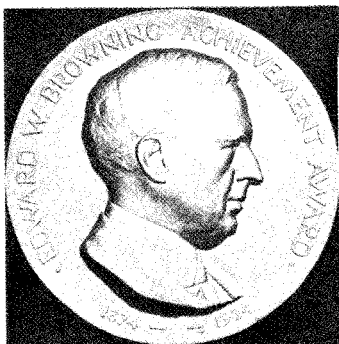
Especially during the last six years of his life, he also worked hard at physical fitness. In 1927, soon after the end of his second marriage, Browning began a rigorous health regimen. He got up every morning at six and took a cold shower. He kept dumbbells and muscle toners in his limousine so that he could exercise while his chauffeur drove him to work. For two months he lived on a diet of raw vegetables, fruits, and nuts. "Cooked food is not fit provender for a healthy animal," he said. "Get back to nature and you'll get back to health."

But his health program apparently did not compensate for overwork. On June 23, 1934, he suffered a cerebral hemorrhage. Through the long summer, Browning lay in the hospital. In mid-September he was taken to convalesce in a spacious mansion that he had leased in Scarsdale, New York. Four nurses

and a housekeeping staff attended to the patient's needs. Though Browning remained bedridden, he never relinquished his hopes for recovery. He talked of the party he planned to give for his staff when he was better. His daughter Dorothy, who a few months earlier had married Clarence B. Hood, the proprietor of a laundry in North Carolina, came to stay with her father.

But Edward Browning's health did not return. He died on October 12, 1934, just four days short of his sixtieth birthday. His beloved Dorothy and her young husband were at his side.

During his lifetime, Browning's generous impulses were frequently thwarted, misdirected, or misinterpreted in the glare of publicity that he seemed unable to avoid. But after his death his abiding wish to do good was at last fulfilled. His Will provided a life income for Dorothy, who died in 1968. His Will then provided that the remainder be used to establish a series of annual awards for outstanding achievement throughout the world in different categories of human aspiration. He asked that the individual recipients of these awards be given both a check and a trophy to symbolize their work in making the world a better place than they found it. The garish headlines forgotten, Edward W. Browning came to be remembered as the farsighted philanthropist he labored all his life to be.



*The Edward W. Browning
Achievement Award Medal.*



The New York Community Trust is a publicly-supported community foundation which provides centralized management for many charitable funds. New York's major banks serve as trustees. Trustee for the Edward W. Browning Fund is the Bankers Trust Company.