



BIG CEDARS BY BOLTON COIT BROWN. COURTESY INDIANAPOLIS MUSEUM OF ART. GIFT OF MRS. LUCY FLETCHER BROWN

STANFORD ARCHIVES

Fearless and fervid, Stanford's first art professor left his imprint on California's peaks and on lithography.

THE UNBIENIDABILE BOLTON BROWN



For Bolton Brown, as to all supreme workmen, there were no 'accidents' in any process except those resulting from error on the part of the practitioner.

—JOHN TAYLOR ARMS

WHETHER BOLTON BROWN EMERGED FROM THE WOMB a raging antiauthoritarian or was backed down that path by his minister father, let's leave to family hairsplitting. One way or the other, when Brown arrived in Palo Alto in the fall of 1891, tasked with creating Stanford's art department from scratch at the ripe age of 26, he already had a deep loathing for any submission to power and a claustrophobic fear of rules. Before he accepted the position, he wanted to know: Who was this fellow—David Starr Jordan, president of the university—who wanted to hire an artist? Was Jordan a man of taste? Would he answer questions frankly? Did he have art books on his shelves—and had he actually read them?

Brown came to Stanford with a not-so-secret agenda. He wanted to create a department that would rival the art schools of Paris. He laid out his plans in a 20,000-word manifesto. The course of study he proposed would last seven years. He would transform his students. By the end they would be no mere brush swingers but true artists, trained eye to brain to fingers. Brown wrote at length on the physical act of drawing; on the need to develop muscular and mental powers equally; on the im-

perative to draw, morning, noon and night. He was an earnest fanatic, compelled to set his students on the right, true path to genuine artistry—a path he would lead them to if only he were allowed the necessary creative freedom. As with so many fanatics, he found the world to be full of people who thwarted him, which is why this story ends with Brown in a solitary shack in the woods instead of basking in the gratitude of the disciples he imagined for himself as he prepared to travel west.

BY DANIEL ARNOLD

BBROWN SPENT his boyhood in rural New York, roaming the countryside as something of a wild child, free in mind and body. An early memory of his tells the story of Brown's lifelong relationship to authority figures. When still young, Brown awoke to the revelation that Satan was an "intellectual convenience" and no more real than Santa Claus or fairies. Filled with the light of discovery, Bolton eagerly began to explain the matter to his siblings. In due course, word of Bolton's informal religious salons reached the elder Brown, who called Bolton before him, tried and convicted him of heresy, and informed him what he would and would not believe for all time to come. Bolton walked away from the interview stunned that his father (or any man) would tell him what to think. Of course, it changed nothing but his understanding of the world. "Authority might stop my mouth, but not my brains," Brown recounted in writings about his childhood. An instance when authority did actually stop Brown's mouth is not at all easy to find.

Another memory, a counterbalance:

Bolton and his friends took to the forests, creeks and lakes as if called in by the naiads and dryads themselves. Bolton's favorite times were thundering storm days, when the wind plowed up waves. Naked, Bolton would hook his toes into the lake bottom and let crests 4 feet high wash over him. Standing inside a wave, he'd hold his breath, open his eyes and watch the silver sheet at the back end of the wave fall past his face. Then he'd haul in air and wait for the next wave, and the next.

Brown entered Syracuse University—one of the few American universities at the time to offer art courses—at age 16. He graduated with a bachelor's degree in painting and then began teaching free-hand drawing to architecture students at Cornell, work that he found predictably unsatisfying. For several years, Brown wrote insightful, sometimes beautiful essays and instructional texts about art, but in his personal communiqués he turned strident, pompous and hyperreactive to criticism, so it can be difficult to tell which was being rejected, Brown's

proposed program or Brown himself. Giving up on Cornell, Brown bounced between schools, searching for an institution with resources and students and the good foresight to put him in charge of both. And then, in the spring of 1891, he received a letter from his sister's husband, who happened to be secretary to David Starr Jordan, asking Brown if he would like to go west and help birth a new institution on the Pacific Slope.

In New York, Brown had been more at home in wilderness than at home. When he traveled to Europe in the summers of 1887 and 1888 to study Turner, Veronese and Bouguereau, Brown spent as much time tramping around the Trossachs and Swiss Alps as he did in museums. Arriving in the West, Brown gravitated just as surely to the Sierra Nevada, California's granite backbone, the mountains John Muir called the Range of Light. Brown began in Yosemite, found it too touristy, then worked his way up into the wild solitude of the high mountains, where he spent months each summer climbing and sketching.

Erase any thoughts you might have of



SIERRA WOODS BY BOLTON COIT BROWN. COURTESY INDIANAPOLIS MUSEUM OF ART, GIFT OF MRS. LUCY FLETCHER BROWN

A SIERRA PEAK BY BOLTON COIT BROWN. COURTESY IRIS & B. GERALD CANTOR CENTER FOR VISUAL ARTS AT STANFORD UNIVERSITY, COMMITTEE FOR ART ACQUISITIONS FUND

The original Californian climbers were all soloists, trusting fingers and boots and nothing else. . . . Brown took right to this committing version of mountain craft.

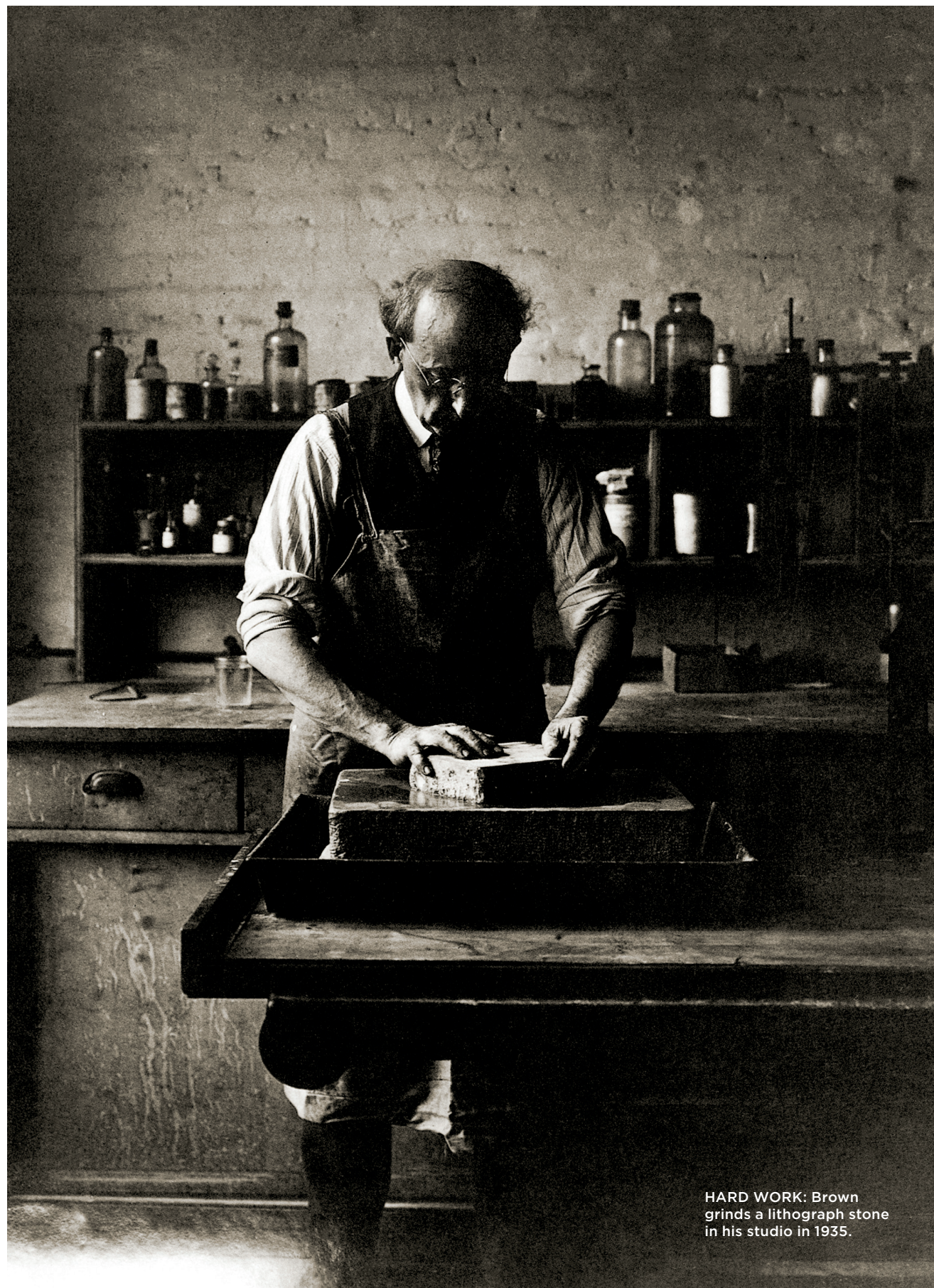
tweedy mountain strolling. Rock climbing was already a high art in California in the 1890s. Moreover, the art was practiced in a time before the arrival in the Sierra of climbing hardware or even roped belays. The original Californian climbers were all soloists, trusting fingers and boots and nothing else. As one who lived the imperative of training mind and fingers equally, Brown took right to this committing version of mountain craft. He was as comfortable holding a wrinkle of granite as a pencil or brush.

There are two veins to Brown's art during the first half of his career. He inked an inordinate number of nudes, mostly generic curvy bodies bathing in woodland creeks. Maybe those images link back to a certain adolescent fantasy he wrote about of a woman in the woods.

Maybe he felt compelled to tweak the nose of the Victorian prudishness that had invaded American high society. Either way, Brown's nudes became a lifelong off-note from a man who, in 1887, rolled his eyes at the Parisian parade of nude women forced into every pose imaginable on canvas after canvas.

The far better half of Brown's work is a variety of hypnotic skiescapes, some in ink or pencil, some using oils, above forests and lone houses. Strange shapes and hints of color emerge from clouds and rays of light. These images contain the storms and waves of his youth and also the Sierra alpenglow, that morning and evening light when the rising or setting sun turns the granite orange, rose and red, and illuminates whole volumes of sky.

BY 1896, Brown was well-established in California. But his grand vision at Stanford had been put on hold by a stock market crash and other institutional financial difficulties—at least that was the official line. In one letter, Brown complained to President Jordan that he couldn't "make bricks without straw." Whether Jordan actually had any desire for Brown to construct the intensive program Brown had in mind is another question. Brown had been hired to instruct students in painting and drawing, not to create a whole separate college within the university. Nevertheless, Brown was recognized as an excellent teacher and a master of line and form, and his future seemed bright. That June he married Lucy Fletcher, a teacher at the nearby girls' preparatory school, Castilleja Hall. Brown's sister wrote that "it was inevitable that Bolton should fall in love with Lucy Fletcher, she being the most beautiful thing in sight"—high praise for Lucy wrapped around a subtle dig at her brother's end-



HARD WORK: Brown grinds a lithograph stone in his studio in 1935.

COURTESY CHRISTINA GARDNER

less discourse on visual loveliness. The newlyweds ran off to honeymoon in the Sierra, roughing it in storms, bathing in creeks and climbing mountains, fulfilling all Brown's dreams and more.

One of the first mountains Brown climbed that summer was Mount Gardiner, an unclimbed peak named 25 years prior to Brown's arrival in California, during a brief window before first ascensionists received naming rights to the mountains they climbed. Early one morning, Brown left Lucy (he was always rushing off somewhere) at their camp by Bubbs Creek and scrambled up the convoluted girth of the mountain, passing over loose talus and an endless network of ridges and gullies carved into the mountain by the passage of water and ice. The sun floated up off the horizon and turned the day bright and blue. Just below the summit ridge, Brown turned a final corner of the mountain, and instead of greeting a widening expanse of empty sky and stone, he bumped into Joseph LeConte Jr. and a gaggle of LeConte's friends, who had ascended another side of the mountain and arrived at the same spot at the same time.

Little Joe LeConte was a second-generation Sierra explorer, preceded by his father, who had met John Muir in 1870, when Muir was, of all things, a sawyer working in the Yosemite Valley. Also like his father, Little Joe taught at UC-Berkeley, though he was only 26. While Brown and LeConte were close in age, the two could not have been much more different: LeConte was gregarious, easygoing and always surrounded by a crowd, while Brown was uptight, high-strung and usually alone. Yet in many ways Little Joe's life was the future Brown might have desired for his own children, born into California's mountains and universities, at home on the edge of the wilderness.

Mount Gardiner's final summit ridge was a stone tightrope, and LeConte's entourage declined to follow him out along it. So Brown and LeConte climbed the knife-edged ridge together. The ground was far below, and if either man's fingers failed him, nothing would catch him but the wind. Neither of the two wrote anything about their shared climb, but much can be inferred about it. Brown had made

it his mission for the summer to find a high, wild Sierra mountain to name for Stanford. And Brown was the type to blabber about his plans (climbers nowadays call this "spewing"—words change, but personality types don't). With limited space to maneuver around Mount Gardiner's summit, LeConte would have made a captive and ideal audience. Six years earlier, LeConte had already named a small peak for his institution, calling it simply University Peak. Three days after sharing Mount Gardiner with Brown, LeConte and his friends climbed a much larger and more impressive mountain than the original University

That Brown should have provoked Jane Stanford seems almost as inevitable, given Brown's nature, as his falling in love with Lucy. Jane's husband had died in 1893, nine years after her son, leaving her alone to devote herself to the university. In 1896, at the same time that Bolton and Lucy were trekking through the Sierra, Jane wrote, regarding the Stanford faculty: "Mr. Stanford always felt at liberty to make his comments and express his opinion as to their ability. And I endeavour as far as possible to carry out this same resolve." For Brown, who was as psychologically thin-skinned as his hands were cal-



Brown's climb of Mount Clarence King would stand out as the most difficult ascent in 19th-century California.

Peak, and LeConte switched the "University" name to it. Some of the first shots of the Stanford-Cal rivalry were fired right there in the High Sierra.

Brown had personal reasons for searching out a suitable mountain to carry the Stanford name: After all, he believed that he (along with a few others) was creating something special at Stanford. To fit with Brown's expectation of what Stanford could become, the new university required the appropriate regalia. But Brown had also run afoul of another authority figure—Jane Stanford, patron and matron of the university—and Brown surely wanted to ingratiate himself with royal gifts. Later, in high summer, above one of the remotest headwater creeks of the Kings River, Brown found the mountain he was looking for and named it Mount Stanford. It was an inspired choice, high and striking, with massive hanging curtains of stone and a narrow summit accessed by a wildly exposed catwalk ledge. And at 13,979 feet, Mount Stanford overtopped University Peak's 13,589 feet.

lused, and who really only wanted to be left alone to run his department as he saw fit (except when he wanted money for same), the hovering presence of Jane Stanford nearly undid him. There could be only one micromanager in Brown's universe, and that post was filled.

The summer of 1896 was the high-water time of Brown's years in California, perhaps of his entire life. And at the top of the wave crest stood Mount Clarence King. At summer's end, the nights turning cold, the creeks drying up, Brown left Lucy (again) for one last climb. After two months of living in the mountains, his legs and lungs were strong, and he fairly flew over the rocks and through the meadows. Mount Clarence King, never before climbed, waited for him on the other side of a fairy-tale landscape of blue lakes and bare stone. A perfect mountain: three steep faces, three sharp ridges, all converging at a zenith where perched a gleaming, monolithic cube of granite above big air falling away on all sides. The higher Brown climbed, the

SUMMIT OF MOUNT CLARENCE KING "DRAWN ON THE SPOT," JULY 1895, BY BOLTON COIT BROWN. COURTESY CHRISTINA GARDNER



AT REST: Brown's gravesite in Woodstock, N.Y.

steeper the mountain became, his fingers and boots edging crystal studs set in the stone, small holds separating his desires from the wants of gravity. For sheer boldness and gymnastic difficulty, nothing like it had ever been done in the Sierra. Brown's climb of Mount Clarence King would stand out as the most difficult ascent in 19th-century California.

BACK AT STANFORD, the backside of the wave Brown rode that summer proved steep. He and Lucy never again traveled alone together in the mountains. In 1899, they took their daughter Eleanor there, but Bolton spent his time sketching the lakes below Mount Clarence King, and Lucy spent her time with Eleanor in camp—except for one day, when Bolton reversed their roles—and the three of them were hardly together. A year later, following the birth of their second daughter, Brown spent the three weeks of Christmas recess alone, trekking through the mountains, towing a sled of provisions from his waist through the snow. Cold company compared with his honeymoon only a short while past.

Meanwhile, Brown feuded with Jane Stanford over his use of nude models in his classes. President Jordan recounted her shock and indignation when, having dropped by to observe a drawing class, she discovered that Professor Brown had procured as a model “a young lady from San Francisco, a very well-developed young lady, and she didn't have any clothes on.” Brown had professional criticisms for the contrived nudes he had observed overpopulating European galleries (criticism that,

oddly, he never turned on himself), but for students learning to craft the human form, nothing could replace a nude subject, nor was there any reason to want a replacement. Had she been specifically trying to give Brown apoplexy, Stanford could not have chosen her censure more precisely. Not only had she, an untrained administrator, dared to tell him how to conduct a class, but on top of that she dragged in the Victorian-era Christian morality that had haunted Brown since boyhood. As both an artist and a man, he never forgave the Church for demonizing the sexual parts of the body.

Brown and Stanford went back and forth, mediated by Jordan, who kept his humor about the situation but clearly became exasperated with Brown. “He was really a great artist,” Jordan later said, but “he didn't have any discretion.” They reached a series of agreements, and, reading between the lines, it appears Brown probably bent or broke every one. First, Brown wouldn't be allowed to have nude models in mixed classes. Second, the models would have to be clothed. In one final, frantic letter, Brown wrote to Jordan that he was concerned that a colleague had become unnecessarily nervous about one of his recent drawing classes. Brown had reason to be concerned. Jane Stanford attentively received informants. According to the university registrar at the time: “Knowing Mrs. Stanford's Victorian ideals, somebody always took care that suspicious happenings, or rumors of happenings, were brought to her attention.” To President Jordan, Brown explained that they did have a model in class that day, but knowing the rules, Brown had her modestly wrapped. Brown even detailed the exact square footage of cloth (122 square feet) used to drape the woman. Then, in a postscript below his usual signature, as if he couldn't bring himself to just lay his pen down and show some discretion, Brown wrote: “The drapery is thin, but not transparent.”

Imagine Jane Stanford's reaction to that line! Brown was politely fired in 1902. And his legacy at Stanford was largely expunged. Orrin Leslie Elliott, Brown's brother-in-law, the man who first contacted Brown about teaching art at Stanford, all but wrote Brown out of

his book about Stanford's first 25 years. The one monument to Brown in California came from climbers, not from artists or academics. Mount Bolton Brown, named 20 years after Brown exited California by climbers who had come to revere the stories he left behind, is a proud, reticent mountain standing 13,538 feet high in the southern Palisades, one of the wildest subranges in the Sierra.

The Brown family of four moved back East. Lucy divorced Bolton a few years later, though they lived in the same house and kept their separation secret even

fitting that a man who spent some of his best years and happiest moments in the midst of Sierra granite should devote the rest of his life to making art from stone. He knew what to expect from—and how to work with—rocks.

At the age of 71, sickening with cancer and told by his doctors that the illness would be fatal, Brown again found comfort in stone. He began hiking through the woods near his home in New York, searching for his grave marker. Eventually he found the stone he wanted resting in a dry streambed: a tremendous old



The one monument to Brown in California came from climbers, not from artists or academics.

from their children for many years. Bolton told his sister-in-law, Mary, that he felt sorry “he had nagged Lucy into marriage”—probably Lucy, too, grew exhausted with his argumentativeness and inflexibility. Later, on his own, Brown reverted to his wilderness ways, living in a house without electricity or water, proud of his woodstove, lantern and hand-pumped well.

Brown devoted most of the last 20 years of his life to lithography. With a wheelbarrow he carted 100-pound blocks of flat-cut limestone into the woods, where he sketched on them with grease crayons. Back home he washed the drawing surface with acid, the grease protecting the image he had sketched while the acid ate away at the blank surface. The slight difference in elevation between the grease-protected positive space and the acid-eaten negative space produced sharp, detailed prints when he pressed ink and paper against the stone's surface. Though his work drew scant notice outside the art world, Brown became one of the most expert American practitioners of lithographic printmaking. It's

boulder showing the work of years of water and sun on its polished surface. Brown hired a crew with a small crane to excavate the rock and transport it to his backyard, where he engraved it with his name and the years of his birth and death, leaving only the last number of the latter date to be carved by someone else. Even in those final weeks, he still clutched at the details, trying to control them just as he had his entire life. Brown's boulder is still there in Woodstock, holding down the ground where Brown was buried, resting in the shade between two trees. ■

DANIEL ARNOLD, '01, is a writer based in Jacksonville, Ore., who wrote about Bolton Brown and other pioneering Sierra mountaineers in his book *Early Days in the Range of Light (Counterpoint, 2009)*. For four years, he immersed himself in their journals and physically replicated their treks, using no modern equipment on the climbs, sleeping with only a wool blanket and traveling with limited food. Arnold's most recent book, *Snowblind, is a collection of fictional short stories about mountaineering.*

Further Reading About Bolton Brown

Orrin Leslie Elliott mentions Jane Stanford's practice of receiving informants in the “Mrs. Stanford as Administrator” chapter of *Stanford University, the First Twenty-Five Years* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1937). Francis Farquhar, in an interview with Ann and Ray Lage, describes Dr. Jordan's summary of the incident with the nude model (“Sierra Club Mountaineer and Editor,” *Sierra Club Reminiscences*, UC-Berkeley Special Collections). Jane Stanford writes about expressing her opinion of faculty members in a letter to Alex Hogg dated July 20, 1896, and included in *Iron Will: the Life and Letters of Jane Stanford* (Stanford:

Stanford Alumni Association, 1985). Ellen Elliott (Brown's sister) comments on Lucy Brown's beauty in *It Happened This Way* (Stanford: Stanford University, 1940). Long sections of Brown's manuscript “Boyhood Memories” are quoted in Clinton Adams's *Crayonstone: The Life and Work of Bolton Brown* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1993); passages include the stories of Brown's father and also of the waves in the lake. Adams also includes passages from Brown's April 1891 letter to Orrin Leslie Elliott with Brown's questions about David Starr Jordan's art background and Brown's plan for a great art department.

CHRISTINA GARDNER

MOUNT BOLTON BROWN, 1919. COURTESY THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE