

# **Dictionary of National Biography, 1885-1900, Volume 07 — Brown, William (1784-1864)**

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**1886**

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**BROWN, SIR WILLIAM** (1784–1864), benefactor to Liverpool, eldest son of Alexander Brown of Ballymena, county Antrim, and Grace, daughter of John Davison of Drumnasole, was born at Ballymena on 30 May 1784. At twelve years of age he was placed under the care of the Rev. J. Bradley at Oatrick, Yorkshire, whence in 1800 he returned to Ireland. Soon afterwards he sailed with his father and mother for the United States of America, and at Baltimore, where his father continued the linen trade in which he had been engaged in Ireland, received in the counting-house his commercial education. In a few years the house at Baltimore became the firm of Alexander Brown & Sons, consisting of the father and his sons, William, John, George, and James. In 1809 William returned to the United Kingdom, established a branch of the firm in Liverpool, and they shortly afterwards abandoned the exclusive linen business and became general merchants. The transactions of the firm soon extended so as to require further branches. James established himself at New York and John at Philadelphia, and on the death of their father the business, then the most extensive in the American trade, was continued by the four brothers, George remaining in Baltimore. The disastrous aspect of affairs in 1839 induced the brothers George and John, who had by this time realised ample fortunes, to retire from the firm, leaving William the eldest and James the youngest to continue the concern. They now became bankers in the sense of conducting transmissions of money on public account between the two

hemispheres, and in this pursuit and the business of merchants they acquired immense wealth. In 1825 William took an active part in the agitation for the reform in the management of the Liverpool docks. He was elected an alderman of Liverpool in 1831, and held that office until 1838. He was the unsuccessful Anti-Cornlaw League candidate for South Lancashire in 1844. He was, however, returned in 1846, and continued to represent South Lancashire until 23 April 1869. He was the founder of the firm of Brown, Shipley, & Co., Liverpool and London merchants, and at one time was the chairman of the Atlantic Telegraph Company. His name is probably best known by the munificent gift which he bestowed on his adopted town. He erected the Free Public Library and Derby Museum at Liverpool, which was opened on 8 Oct. 1860, at a cost to himself of 40,000*l.*, the corporation providing the site and foundation and furnishing the building. At the inauguration of the volunteer movement in 1859 he raised and equipped at his own expense a corps of artillery, which ranked as the 1st brigade of Lancashire artillery volunteers. He was created a baronet on 24 Jan. 1863, and in the same year he served as sheriff for the county of Lancashire. He did not, however, live long to enjoy his honours, as he died at Richmond Hill, Liverpool, on 3 March 1864. He was always an advocate of free trade, and particularly favoured the idea of a decimal currency. On the proving of his will on 21 May 1864 the personalty was sworn under 900,000*l.*

He married, on 1 Jan. 1810, Sarah, daughter of Andrew Gibson of Ballymena; she died on 5 March 1858. The eldest son, Alexander Brown, having died on 8 Oct. 1849, the grandson, Lieutenant-colonel William Richmond Brown, succeeded to the baronetcy in 1864. Sir W. Brown was the author of a pamphlet entitled 'Decimal Coinage. A Letter from W. Brown, Esq., M.P., to Francis Shand, Esq., Chairman of the Liverpool Chamber of Commerce,' 1854.

[Gent. Mag. xvi. 667-8 (1864); Illustrated London News, xix. 70 (1851), with portrait; H. R. Fox Bourne's English Merchants (1866), ii. 299-301, 306-20.]

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