David Davison and Edwin Davison, eds.

Frank Browne: A Life Through the Lens. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015.

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In 1912, the thirty-two-year-old Jesuit theologian and photography enthusiast Frank Browne received a ticket for the first leg of the *RMS Titanic*'s maiden voyage. Browne boarded at Southampton, and spent a single night on the ship as it traveled to Cherbourg and then Queenstown (now Cobh), Ireland, where he disembarked. In the wake of the disaster that followed three days later, he made the eighty photographs he took during the voyage available to the press. They appeared in publications around the world, bringing Browne a small quantum of fame—as well as a lifetime supply of free film from Kodak. Browne made full use of the firm's generosity, and in the following decades produced more than forty thousand negatives. A representative selection of these appears in *Frank Browne: A Life Through the Lens*, the most recent of the nearly thirty books published since a chest of his long-forgotten photographs was discovered in the Irish Jesuit Archives in 1986. Unlike previous books, nearly all of which have focused on particular aspects of Browne's archive—*Father Browne's Cork* (1995), *Father Browne's Ships and Shipping* (2000), *Father Brown's Kerry* (2012)—this volume takes a retrospective approach, presenting photographs chronologically from the beginning of the twentieth century through the early 1950s (Browne died in 1960). With a few notable exceptions—such as a dynamic quartet of portraits depicting traditional Irish laborers (66–67)—this strategy emphasizes the eclecticism of Browne's practice rather than illuminating its continuities or preoccupations. Yet, combined with three short essays, the photographs capture the photographer's optimistic spirit and consistent affection for humanity, as well as the occasional example of an adventuresome formal approach. We follow Browne from the *Titanic* to the trenches of the First World War (where he served as a chaplain with the Irish Guards), from Australia to Egypt, and finally home to Ireland, where he became a popular teacher and a beloved member of the Jesuit Retreats and Missions staff.

The pioneering curator and museum director Colin Ford contributes a brief forward to this book. Its other two contributors have long histories with Father Browne: Father E.E. O'Donnell, S.J. discovered the trunk containing his negatives, and has spent the ensuing years shaping his legacy through more than two dozen books. Indeed, of the twenty-eight books on Browne's life and work published to date, Father O'Donnell has edited or written all but one. David Davison is a photographer and conservator, and with his son Edwin Davison has been conserving, cataloguing, and making prints from Browne's negatives since their discovery. The Davisons take the lead with the present volume,

which distinguishes itself from its predecessors in format and quality. Its goal, though never clearly stated, seems to be the establishment of Browne's artistic credentials, the historical significance of his work having already been widely recognized. Whereas most of the earlier books were conceived as narrowly-focused scrapbooks, combining multiple photographs on each page, often alongside newspaper clippings and other ephemera, *A Life Through the Lens* has higher ambitions. Most of its pages reproduce a single beautifully-printed photograph to emphasize its tonal nuances and formal, rather than historical interest. And all three essays make a point of mentioning Browne's time in Italy at the Jesuit philosophate of Chieri, where he spent three years as part of his studies. During the summers he traveled to Florence and Venice to view their collections of paintings by the Old Masters, some of which he photographed. The discussion of these travels is meant to establish Browne's art historical credentials and his interest in photography's expressive possibilities, in addition to its documentary function.

As Davison rightly points out, there is also abundant evidence of a different kind of art historical education, one rooted in the history of photography, which had undergone a paradigm shift since Father Browne received his first camera in 1897. "New vision photography" describes the loosely-affiliated collection of experimental photographic approaches that developed in Europe and the United States beginning in the 1910s. It was characterized by a rejection of the compositions and subjects traditionally found in painting, as well as a shift in emphasis from purely documentary efforts to abstracting vantage points, combined imagery, and unconventional darkroom techniques. Evidence of Browne's interest in these approaches appears beginning in the 1930s, in photographs like *Advertisement for Beatty's and Kingston's menswear seen from a railway carriage, Dublin* (78). The soft silhouettes of the train's passengers, nearly indistinguishable from the carriage's dark interior, frame a group of brightly-lit posters beyond the window, one of which features a smiling woman, whose amused face peers at us through the train window and emphasizes the uncanny nature of photographic seeing. This experimental approach is also present in one of the more intriguing threads in Father Browne's photography: the thematic representation of photography through portraits and self-portraits with camera in hand. The most playful of these, *Self at Maison Prost Hairdressers* (187), from 1940, shows us the photographer framed by and reflected in a large oval mirror, his face partially obscured by his camera, with the space behind him reflected in two additional mirrors. Yet another reflection appears in the similarly round lens of his camera. This small reflection is brilliantly echoed in another photograph that appears on the opposite page, in which a brightly illuminated circle—the end of a tunnel

under construction, seen from within—is surrounded by a bold rectangle of complete darkness. It is at once an experimental perspective on an otherwise mundane subject and an evocation of the *camera obscura* effect that makes possible both human sight and photography.

We know that Father Browne was a popular and devoted teacher, who took great delight in human nature, and the majority of the pictures selected for this volume represent what we might expect from such a figure. But they do not tell us much about an inner life—spiritual or otherwise—and it is the outliers, the few innovative exceptions to his familiar pictorial style, that are the most intriguing. These pictures, with their combined negatives, fragmented compositions, and abstracting perspectives, speak to a quirkier personality, and a more experimental impulse, than we might otherwise have reason to expect. Some viewers might long for a selection of Browne's work that more fully explores his formal risk-taking and creative innovation.

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