Edward E. O'Donnell, S.J.

Father Browne's Dublin: Photographs 1925–1950. Dublin: Messenger, 2015. Pp. 96. Pb. \$32

Father Browne's Donegal. Dublin: Messenger, 2015. Pp. 128. Pb. \$32.

The story of Frank Browne S.J. is well established: as one of the few passengers to disembark the Titanic in Queenstown (now Cobh) after the first leg of its journey, he took most of the existing photographs of the ship's passengers and interiors. The wide publication of those images brought the young theologian brief international fame and a lifetime supply of film from Kodak. He spent the next four decades photographing prolifically while serving as a chaplain in the Irish Guards, as the superior of St. Xavier's Church in Dublin, and as a popular member of the Jesuit Retreats and Missions staff, which involved extensive travel throughout Ireland. He made many photographs during his travels in the United Kingdom and Europe as well as further afield, in Australia, Sri Lanka, and South Africa, but it was in Ireland that his photographic sensibilities were formed, and many of the pictures he made there—35,000 of the 42,000 he took over the course of his life—demonstrate a confidence that is characterized not only by comfort and affection, but by a willingness to experiment and take formal risks. After sitting forgotten in a trunk for twenty-five years, Browne's negatives were discovered by Edward E. O'Donnell, S.J., the author of two new volumes exploring work made in two very different Irish landscapes.

Father Browne's Donegal and *Father Browne's Dublin*—a new volume and a revised edition of a 1993 publication—are the latest to result from O'Donnell's tireless commitment to Browne's legacy. Since 1987, when the first of Browne's photographs were published after their rediscovery, he has become widely known once again; thanks in great part to O'Donnell's work, Browne is now considered among the masters of early twentieth-century Irish photography.

Although he first became known for photographs taken at sea, it was Ireland, and particularly Dublin, that kept his interest as a photographic subject throughout his life. *Father Browne's Dublin* follows this interest from 1925 to 1950, and presents the pictures in chronological order, accompanied by brief but enlightening explanatory captions and interspersed with timelines of contemporaneous Irish cultural and political history. The book takes as its starting point Browne's return to Ireland after an extended trip abroad to recuperate from the effects of injuries suffered during the War. It was at this point that his commitment to photography expanded considerably. Although it was separate from his primary responsibilities at St. Xavier's, Browne devoted considerable

time to photography, and once settled in Dublin he quickly established a circle of friends who shared his enthusiasm and a desire to enrich local photographic culture.

The city's commercial photography industry dates back to 1841, and the Dublin Photographic Society, later the Photographic Society of Ireland, was founded in 1854. During the nineteenth century the practice of photography was limited to professionals and serious amateurs who were willing to master the chemical expertise and laborious processes required to make high-quality photographs. By the turn of the century, the medium's popularity had grown enormously, thanks to the wide availability of small, portable cameras produced by Kodak and other manufacturers that made it possible to take and develop successful pictures without ever entering a darkroom. Camera clubs around the world flourished, as professionals were joined by much larger numbers of enthusiastic hobbyists. By the 1920s, Dublin's photographers benefited from a variety of clubs and societies dedicated to photography—Browne himself had previously founded a camera club at Belvedere College—which offered opportunities for exhibition and publication. In 1927, with leaders of the Photographic Society of Ireland, the Dublin Camera Club, and the journal *The Camera*, as well as prominent Irish artists including Sir John Lavery, Browne helped organize the First Salon of Irish Photography. It was a great success, and became the first iteration of a biennial exhibition that displayed Irish photography alongside selected works from the United Kingdom and Australia. Through his association with the Salons and the city's camera clubs, Browne was exposed to a wide array of contemporary photography, and we see in his work an open-minded experimentation with a diverse range of styles and approaches.

Nineteenth-century Irish photography was closely associated with landscapes, and while these understandably play a large role in Browne's work—*Father Browne's Donegal* has several chapters devoted to them—they are not his best work, and are often missing the excitement of his urban subjects and street photography. In his Dublin pictures, particularly beginning in the 1930s, we see Browne experimenting with closely-cropped portraits and bird's eye views, with the textural effects of inclement weather, and with the possibilities offered by reflections and bold framing devices, including train carriage windows and a dark, hulking gasometer. While some photographs evoke sentimental pictorialist tendencies in their focus and composition, it is clear that Browne was interested in social documentary work and the kind of spontaneous dynamism we associate with Henri Cartier-Bresson (1908–2004), a photographer to whom he is perhaps too often compared. In the best

pictures reproduced in the Dublin book, Browne presents careful compositions providing pleasingly solid formal structures for figures in motion, many of them visibly unaware of the camera's presence. *Through the Windscreen*, from 1928, is an excellent early example, in which two bicyclists pedal down a wet street along the Grand Canal in the city's Portobello neighborhood. Each one carries a ladder over his shoulder, and their off-kilter angles, along with those of the fuzzy, dark windscreen frame through which they appear, play against the elegant repeating forms of the warehouses ahead. This kind of freedom is often missing in the later work, which is quieter, more straightforwardly documentary, and less willing to enliven its subjects with playful compositions.

The photographs in *Father Browne's Donegal* have a different character than those made in the capital. They are organized by theme rather than chronologically, and give the impression that Browne was using the camera to explore the county's towns and landscapes rather than to learn about and take joy in photography and the ways it transforms its subjects. Several of the landscapes are sublime, and his records of traditional rural life are charming and sympathetic, but his pictures of country churches and early Christian crosses do not reflect the interest we know they held for Browne. Photography can serve many purposes for its practitioners. Among other things, it can be a form of casual note-taking, a passport to friendly engagement with strangers, a form of self-expression, or an exploration of identity, faith, or great beauty. In an oeuvre as substantial as Father Browne's, there are inevitably examples of all these modes. Mixed in with the photographs that seem like casual notations, or sober records for posterity, are pictures that both celebrate the medium's bold transformation of space and form, and take visible joy in the world. It is these pictures that confirm his reputation as an inventive master of photography.

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