“. . . an unbearable truthfulness”? : Picturing Dublin in 1911

1. Introduction

This paper arises from research carried out on behalf of the National Archives of Ireland as part of its project to digitize the records of the 1911 census. When the census records are available online, they are certain to provide a vital resource for genealogists and scholars of early 20th-century Irish history. Four and a half thousand rolls of microfilm were required to store the data contained within the 1911 records -- this gives some idea of the phenomenal scope of the resource soon to be made available to desktop researchers.

In order to help online visitors interpret the census data, the National Archives of Ireland has commissioned an online exhibition that will enable them to position the various threads of information within a wider historical framework. As well as essays across a range of themes encompassing the social, economic, political and cultural life of the country, this exhibition will ultimately provide a route into alternative primary historical source materials like pamphlets, parliamentary reports, employment records and photographs.

It is the photographic sources that I would like to discuss this morning, in particular those that are available for Dublin in 1911, as the capital city was the focus of the project’s pilot initiative. As well as displaying a sample of photographic images earmarked for inclusion in the online exhibition, I will discuss the origin and scope of the visual source material available and consider what it reveals about Dublin and Dubliners in 1911. Finally, I will touch briefly on the utility of photography, highlighting how still images might be used to deepen understanding of Irish historical experiences.

The visual record of 20th-century Ireland has expanded in line with technological advances and media developments, the most significant of which, perhaps, was the establishment of an Irish television service in 1961. An understanding of changes in Irish society over the last four decades would be impossible without reference to the influence of television, or recourse to the visual archive that has been built up by the Radio Telefís Eireann (RTE), the national public service broadcaster. Film predated television, of course, and scenes of late 19th- and early 20th-century Ireland are also captured in an extraordinary stock of moving images held by the Irish Film Archive in Dublin and in British Cinema newsreels now managed by the Independent Television News (ITN) media group in London.

The earliest film of Ireland dates from 1897, when the pioneering Lumière Brothers filmed Sackville Street, Dublin’s main thoroughfare (later renamed O’Connell Street after the 19th-century champion of Catholic emancipation). There is also remarkable newsreel footage -- almost two and half minutes’ worth -- of Queen Victoria riding in an open carriage through the streets of Dublin in 1900, the enthusiastic crowds that lined her route evoking a city seemingly untouched by the nationalist fervour that would soon engulf it. Even so, there are but a handful of Irish newsreels from the opening decade of the 20th century; it was not until the turbulent years of 1913 to ’21 that national events and leading political figures were covered in any great detail. Most of this footage has been splendidly collated in two fascinating films by the filmmaker and photographer George Morrison: *Mise Eire*, released in 1959, and *Saoirse?*, which followed two years later.

But if pre-revolutionary Dublin is, quite understandably, poorly represented in moving pictures, the same cannot be said of their still counterparts. Photography was an early 19th-century invention, and as technological processes improved, a growing middle class emerged and tourism developed, taking pictures -- freezing moments in time -- became a thriving enterprise. By the beginning of the 20th century, Dublin was home to countless amateur photographers and a large number of professionals. The business of photography tended to be clustered along the most elegant city streets, and the "photographic mile" was said to span the River Liffey, reaching from Grafton Street on the south side to Sackville Street on the north.

The National Archives of Ireland contextual exhibition for the 1911 census will draw heavily on the legacy of this prolific period of picture-taking, making use of surviving photographs from the collections of schools, universities, voluntary organizations, commercial bodies and public institutions. Among these collections, two, perhaps, stand out above the rest: the Lawrence Collection, held by the National Photographic Archive, a branch of the National Library of Ireland and the single largest repository of still images in the country; and the Darkest Dublin collection, a unique visual record of Dublin tenement life in 1913, which is owned by the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland, a group established in the mid-19th century to "preserve, examine and illustrate" the monuments, manners and customs of Ireland's past.

The Lawrence and Darkest Dublin collections provide the two key visual representations of early 20th-century Dublin, counterpointing the extremes of wealth and poverty and illustrating much of the daily life of the period.

2. The Irish Photographic Tradition

Both the Lawrence and Darkest Dublin collections belong to an Irish photographic tradition that quickly established itself in the wake of the invention of photography in 1839. In Ireland, as elsewhere, the birth of photography was met with a mixture of fear, loathing, fascination and delight. In many ways, the shock of the new was understandable: photography would transform the way people saw themselves and the world about them. Unlike established interpretative art forms like drawing and painting, photography presented what an editorial in the *London Times* (October 20, 1909) described as an "unbearable truthfulness" -- it created a likeness to a person, event or scene that was less art than imitation.

Photography quickly replaced painting as the principal means of visual communication, and in Ireland it gained an enthusiastic following. When, in 1854, a group of amateur photographers came together to form the Dublin Photographic Society, it was only the second such body to be established, trailing the French Photographic Society by just one week. Though time-consuming and expensive, amateur photography in Ireland was an elite pursuit and it was widely practised in the large houses of the upper classes from the 1850s onwards. Professional photography also developed at this time, helped by the popularity of portrait-taking among the middle class and the patent-free invention of the collodion wet plate process by Frederick Scott-Archer in 1851. By

1865, according to the Dublin Trade Directory, there were 34 professional photographers in the capital city.

This was the year that William Lawrence established his studio on the site of his mother's toyshop on Dublin's Upper Sackville Street. The son of English parents, Lawrence was less a photographer than an entrepreneur and he soon established himself as one of the city's most prominent businessmen and a pillar of the establishment: in 1872, for example, a mere seven years after it was established, his firm was appointed official photographer at the Dublin Exhibition, an event modelled on the Great Exhibition of culture and industry in London in 1851.

The Lawrence business model was twin-edged: as well as accepting private commissions to take portraits or cover special events, the company produced scenic images for a general audience. The business flourished, boosted by the development of the dry plate process in the late 1870s, which eliminated the need for outdoor photographers to carry their darkrooms and chemicals with them. (By the 1880s -- prior to the development of the Kodak box camera, which democratized somewhat the practice of picture-taking -- the tools of an outdoor photographer's trade had been reduced to camera, tripod and glass plates.)

The age of mass-produced images overlapped profitably with the growth of tourism in the late 19th century. With railway and coach companies facilitating travel throughout the country, hotels sprang up in communities and places of scenic attraction. All this boosted demand for photographs of Irish locations, as did the introduction in 1902 of the picture postcard, which enabled tourists to send those at home a snapshot of the world into which they escaped. Picture postcards were instantly popular: in 1903 alone, the year after they were introduced, the British Post Office handled a phenomenal 600 million cards.

Although William Lawrence never dominated the lucrative Irish picture postcard market, he certainly benefited from it. The Lawrence reputation was built on the quality of its scenic views and the comprehensiveness of its island-wide coverage. Between 1880 and 1914, Lawrence amassed the largest single body of Irish scenic images. The collection comprises some 40,000 glass-plate negatives, the vast majority of which -- 30,000 it has been claimed -- were taken by Lawrence's in-house photographer, Robert French.

A native of Dublin, French was the key instrument of Lawrence's business ambitions. While the proprietor chose the locations and bore the cost of transport and accommodation, the selection of subject matter was entrusted to the photographer. French travelled extensively in Ireland and his photographs document the physical character and social life of the places he visited. It is no surprise that landscapes feature prominently, but so do churches, monuments, public buildings, military manoeuvres, fairs, markets and modes of transport. Regardless of subject matter, however, all the photographs adhere to a uniform style. The imperative to obtain views meant that all photographs had to be taken from a certain distance, creating images that have been likened to cinematic "long shots."

French's photographs of Dublin conform to this "stylistic limitation," yet taken together they appear a distinct body of work, different from the rest of the collection. The late Kieran Hickey, a writer and filmmaker who did much to raise awareness of the contribution of Robert French to

Irish photography, once wrote that the Dublin pictures went "far beyond the somewhat conventional subject-matter of the views of the rest of Ireland. The aim, the urge rather, seems to have been to capture the urban personality of the city in an unprecedented way within, as always, the limitations of topographical coverage."[1] Indeed, Hickey maintained that what French achieved with his Dublin photographs, albeit unconsciously, amounted to "social documentation."

Dublin as portrayed by the camera of Robert French appears almost genteel in character, while the focus on schools, churches, parks, monuments, military barracks and impressive public buildings evokes both a sense of order and a consciousness, on the part of the photographer, of the city's historic development. French's work is enhanced by his decision to move beyond the two canals that bound the city proper, the better to document the increasingly populous suburbs and villages that had developed on its outskirts, as well as the largely rural aspect of the surrounding county.

The scope and quality of the Lawrence Collection is without equal, and yet historians will be struck as much by what is concealed as what is exposed. Lawrence is faithful to only one particular face of Dublin. The photographs, taken at an objective distance, betray nothing of the tensions simmering beneath the city's still surface. Behind the fine façade of elegant streets, landmark buildings and Georgian squares lay an alternative and darker reality. Early 20th-century Dublin, the city of the young James Joyce, was also home to some of the worst slums in Europe. The appalling squalor of Dublin's tenement dwellings had, in the late 19th century, proved a catalyst for a number of philanthropic housing initiatives -- including the Dublin Artisans' Dwelling Company, founded in 1876, and the Guinness Trust, founded in 1891-- which, while helpful, were completely inadequate to the scale of the re-housing job required.

Many of Dublin's major photographic businesses, including that of William Lawrence, were situated a matter of streets from the worst slums, yet remarkably, they showed little interest in documenting the grim reality of life on their own doorstep. Certainly there is no 19th-century pictorial chronicle of Dublin equivalent to John Thomson's *Street Life in London*, published in 1877 as a devastating visual commentary on the living conditions of the working class in the United Kingdom's largest urban centre.

Visually speaking, until 1911 Dublin's overcrowded slums, symbols of political neglect and physical decay, went largely undocumented. The professional photographers' lack of interest in working-class living conditions mirrored an official mindset that demonstrated little willingness to compel landlords to effect the improvements necessary to house their tenants safely. It would take the collapse of two tenement dwellings on Church Street on September 2, 1913 and the deaths of seven people -- three of them children -- before official and public opinion was shaken from its complacency and awoken to the calamitous housing conditions of Dublin's working class. The subsequent clamour for action on housing arose partly from a concern for the safety of tenement dwellers, but it also owed much to a desire to pacify an increasingly demonstrative working class.

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[1] Kieran Hickey ed., *The Light of Other Days: Irish life at the turn of the century in the photographs of Robert French* (1973) p. 25

The conservative *Irish Times* held that the “condition of the Dublin slums… [was] responsible not only for disease and crime but for much of our industrial unrest.” Many members of the Irish Transport and General Workers’ Union (ITGWU), it was noted, lived “for the most part in slums like Church Street,” and workers, “whose only escape from these wretched homes lies in the public house, would not be human beings if they did not turn a ready ear to anybody who promises to improve their lot… If every unskilled labourer in Dublin were the tenant of a decent cottage of three or even two rooms, the city would not be divided into two hostile camps.”[2]

The outcry that followed the Church Street collapse forced an inquiry into the housing crisis in the city. The Local Government Board for Ireland appointed a Committee to Inquire into the Housing of the Working Classes in the city of Dublin. The committee’s final report, published in 1914, came to only 30 pages, but it was accompanied by almost 300 pages of evidence submitted to the inquiry team. One of those who submitted evidence was John Cooke, then Honorary Treasurer of the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC). In compiling his evidence, Cooke did what none of the city’s professional photographers of the time did: he brought a camera into some of the most distressed parts of Dublin and dutifully recorded the ruinous living conditions there. Cook was not a photographer by profession, but he clearly believed in the power of pictures to convey truth and compel change. The fruits of his labours make up most of what is known as the Darkest Dublin collection, an album of about 100 images now held by the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland. Fifty of these images were included as an appendix to the 1914 Housing Report, and even today they speak more eloquently than any printed record of the horrors of Dublin tenement life.

Many of the photographs displayed this morning are from the Darkest Dublin collection. They were taken between September and November 1913 and they include a number of shots of Church Street, where the building collapse that gave rise to the housing inquiry was situated and where, as you can see, other buildings look vulnerable to a similar fate. The number of children in the photographs, many of them barefoot and raggedly dressed, may of course reflect the child welfare concerns of the photographer, John Cooke, a member of the NSPCC. You may also have spotted a number of shots of tenement interiors: it was in single rooms like these that some 20,000 Dublin families lived in 1911.

This is photography as a form of advocacy, a vehicle for promoting social reform. The Darkest Dublin photographs are unlike anything produced by the studio of William Lawrence, and they depict a very different city. Given these vastly contrasting perspectives on Dublin, it is important that we probe the value of photographs to historical research and teaching, and question how still images have been used in the past and may be used in the future. In short, what is the historical validity of photography?

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[2] Ruth McManus, *Dublin 1910-40: Shaping the city and suburbs* (2002), p. 24

3. History and the Utility of Photography

Photographs function both as a source of information/evidence and as a means of communication. As such they have a role to play both in how we interpret history and how we develop interest in it.

A Source of Evidence

Photographs are essentially historical documents, and where available and appropriate, should be considered alongside the written records upon which historians traditionally rely. As such, questions of context, selectiveness and bias must apply to photographs as to all other source materials. In terms of our understanding of Dublin in 1911, however, the Lawrence and Darkest Dublin collections underscore a reality of deep social division.

There are, needless to say, other visual records of this time, but Lawrence and Darkest Dublin are undoubtedly the most coherent and significant. Together, these two collections preserve the physical appearance of early 20th-century, pre-revolutionary Dublin, and in so doing shed light on how a cross-section of Dubliners lived, dressed, worked, relaxed and moved about. To reach beyond the surface image and flesh out the reality of what it felt like to live in this Dublin, historians must turn to other source materials; but by showing us the city and its people as they were rather than as we might imagine them to have been, photographs provide, at the very least, a valuable framework of reference.

A Means of Communication

Finally, in the age of all-pervasive visual media in which we live, photographs have a value beyond the pure information they convey. The still image also serves as an ideal device for promoting historical awareness through exhibitions and television documentaries; this is particularly true for those periods of history undocumented by film or television. For its part, the National Library of Ireland has taken a lead in this regard and in recent years has drawn large crowds and wide praise for two multi-media exhibitions on the great Irish writers, James Joyce and W.B. Yeats -- wonderful installations that, in terms of scale and presentation, would have been inconceivable without the extensive use of photographs.

Photographs are, then, but one of the raw materials that enable historians to reconstruct the past; however, their more creative use, in exhibitions and television documentary, should have the added benefit of educating audiences beyond the academic community. The extensive use of photography to contextualize the digitized 1911 Irish census records may well prove a case in point.