

Who Is This Fr Browne?

A look back at the life of a well-known Jesuit photographer, adapted from www.jesuit.ie by the editor.



Few can claim to have seen as much in their life as Francis Browne, sailing on the Titanic, serving in World War I, travelling the world. Not only did he live it but, as an amateur photographer, he also recorded his life and experiences, allowing us today immeasurable insight into that period in our history.

Born in Cork in 1880, Francis Browne was the youngest of eight children. His mother died of puerperal fever not long after his birth and his father died

in a swimming accident when he was nine, so Browne was taken care of by his uncle, Robert Browne. After finishing school in Dublin in 1897, Browne went on a grand tour of Europe, seeing France and Italy. For his travels, his uncle bought him his first camera as a present, and this began Browne's lifelong interest in photography.

Upon returning to Ireland, Browne entered the Jesuit novitiate in Tullabeg. He studied at the Royal University of Ireland in Dublin, where he

was classmates with James Joyce. He taught in Belvedere before his ordination and founded the first Camera Club which is still to the good today and gave many pupils including your good editor a chance to learn about photography, go on photographic tours and print their own black and whites (still in excellent condition today!).

In 1911 he began studying theology in Milltown. The following year, his uncle gave him a ticket aboard the newly built ship *Titanic*, to sail from Southampton to Queenstown, now Cobh. Browne brought his camera, as was his hobby, and took many pictures. When he arrived in Queenstown he would have continued on the crossing to America, but was told in no uncertain terms by his Provincial to return to Dublin, 'Get off that boat!'. When word arrived days later of the sinking of the *Titanic*, Browne realised how valuable his photographs were and sold them to various newspapers leading to their publication all over the world.

Browne was ordained in 1915, and the following year was sent to Europe where he served as chaplain to the Irish Guards. During his time in the service, Browne was at the Battle of the Somme, at Flanders, Ypres, and many other places on the frontline of the war. He was wounded on five occasions, and was awarded a military cross and bar for valour in combat. During this time too he took photographs, recording life at the frontline. His commander said of him: 'Fr Browne was the bravest man I ever knew'. He was decorated as a military chaplain during the First World War.

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Australia in 1924. Never parting from his camera, he took countless photos of the places he saw on his way over, as well as in Australia. After returning, he was appointed Superior in Gardiner St community where he oversaw the first sound system in the church. He was later appointed to the Retreats and Mission staff, and travelled all across Ireland. By the time of his death in Emo novitiate in 1960, Browne had taken photographs in many parishes in Ireland. He developed his own negatives and there are stories of the community going to take a bath and finding his negatives in 'fixer' in the bath! When his negatives were discovered twenty five years later, there were in the order of 42,000 of them, which have since been restored. Twenty three volumes of his work have now been published and the importance of his work has been recognised internationally.

His best selling book is *Travelling on Titanic* revised recently. Other books are *Wandering Wicklow with Fr Browne; First World War; Life and Lens of Fr Browne*, all available from Messenger Publications.