

Lawrence, William Mervin

by Noel Kissane

Lawrence, William Mervin (1840–1932), photograph merchant, was born 5 July 1840 in the General Post Office, Lower Sackville (later O'Connell) St., Dublin, second surviving son of William Lawrence of Pembrokeshire, Wales, then clerk of works at the GPO, and Elizabeth Lawrence (née Mervin) of Leicestershire, England, six of whose children, three sons and three daughters, reached maturity. Lawrence lost his right arm due to a minor accident, probably in early manhood. He acquired merchandising skills in his mother's toy and fancy goods shop located at 7 Upper Sackville St., and in the fancy goods bazaar and photographic studio established in 1857 by his elder brother, John Fortune Lawrence, at 39 Grafton St. On 20 March 1865 he opened a photographic studio in his mother's shop, offering the services of a well known portrait photographer. In addition to studio portraiture and commission work, he sold photographs of topographical views, initially generated from negatives purchased from other studios. Aiming to provide a range of original views representing each of the thirty-two counties, he dedicated an exceptionally talented photographer named Robert French (qv) exclusively to topographical work from the late 1870s onwards.

For thirty-five years French provided Lawrence with a constant supply of up-to-date views of picturesque landscapes, city streets, remote towns and villages, monuments and public buildings, trams, trains and railway stations, seaside resorts and tourist attractions, incidentally generating a unique documentary record. The views were sold in agencies throughout the country, being offered in the form of plain or coloured prints, lantern slides, or stereoscopic views. In addition, they featured in advertisements, cigarette cards, guide books, and Lawrence's own 'Emerald Isle' series of albums. In the late 1890s the firm secured a substantial corner of the lucrative postcard market by providing a range of attractive views and having the cards printed by a specialist German firm to ensure quality.

Although the photographs all carried his name, Lawrence was not a photographer but rather a businessman who employed photographers and a staff of dark-room printers, colourists, framers, clerks, and shop assistants. In the period 1880–1910 the firm dominated the photographic trade in Ireland. It also had profitable lines in high-quality toys, jewellery, sportswear, and fancy goods. Lawrence was a prominent and respected figure in the Dublin business community. A supporter of home rule, he became a JP, and was a member of the guard of honour on the occasion of Queen Victoria's visit in 1900.

He married (14 November 1866) Fanny Henrietta Greatbatch in Oxford, where her family had a china business. They had four sons and three daughters, none of whom worked in the firm while Lawrence was in control. On his retirement at the age of 75

early in 1916, he prevailed on his youngest son, William, to take over the business. Disaster soon followed: the premises, then consisting of 5–7 Upper O'Connell St., were accidentally burnt down by looters during the Easter rising, resulting in the loss of the portrait negatives of two generations of Dubliners. The view negatives survived, as they were stored in a building in Rathmines where printing was carried out. The firm never fully recovered, eventually closing in December 1942. The 45,000 view negatives (mainly by Robert French) were purchased by the NLI the following year; known as the Lawrence collection, they are now held by the National Photographic Archive. Lawrence died in Dublin on 9 August 1932.

For fifty years Lawrence provided an important commercial service, with his photographs making a distinctive contribution to Irish popular culture. They had considerable educational impact at the time and promoted a positive image of Ireland abroad. The Lawrence collection constitutes a major visual resource for the study of landscape, the built environment, and various other features of Ireland in the period 1865–1916. William Mervin Lawrence bequeathed an educational and cultural heritage of immense significance for this and future generations.

Lawrence collection, National Photographic Archive; extract from Lawrence pedigree compiled by family members (1935), NLI, accession 5540; Representative Church Body Library (St Thomas's church, Marlborough St., baptismal register for Lawrence and some of his children); GRO (births of some of Lawrence's children); *Ir. Times*, 11 Aug. 1932, p. 8; *Ir. Independent*, 12 Aug. 1932, p. 5; Kieran Hickey, *The light of other days: Irish life at the turn of the century in the photographs of Robert French* (1973); Edward Chandler and Peter Walsh, *Through the brass lidded eye: photography in Ireland, 1839–1900* (1989); Noel Kissane, *Ex camera: photographs from the collections of the National Library of Ireland* (1990); Sarah Rouse, *Into the light: an illustrated guide to the photographic collections in the National Library of Ireland* (1998); Edward Chandler, *Photography in Ireland: the nineteenth century* (2001); information from Mr Dermott Coyle (great-grand-nephew), Mr John Kennedy, photographic historian