

Welch, Robert John

by W. A. Maguire

Welch, Robert John (1859–1936), photographer, was born 22 July 1859 in or near Strabane, Co. Tyrone, second of six children and second of the three sons of David Welch and Martha Welch (née Graham), daughter of a local shoemaker, who was aged 17 at the time of her marriage in 1857. David Welch was a Scotsman from Kirkcudbright, who had come to Ulster to work as ‘agent’ for a Strabane shirt manufacturer. In the early 1860s, however, he set up as a professional photographer, enjoying the patronage of the leading landowner of the Strabane area, James Hamilton (qv), 2nd marquess and (from 1868) 1st duke of Abercorn. Abercorn's appointment as lord lieutenant of Ireland in 1865 enabled his protégé to call himself photographer by appointment to the viceroy. In 1863 Welch moved to Enniskillen, and thence in 1868 to Newry. A short spell in England in the early 1870s was followed by a return to Ireland. David Welch eventually settled at Bangor, where he died suddenly in 1875.

Forced to abandon his hopes of entering the Queen's College, Belfast, as a student, Robert Welch trained as a photographer in the studio of E. T. Church, subsequently setting up on his own in 1883. He worked from the small terrace house in Lonsdale St. (now demolished) which was to be both home and studio for the rest of his life. In 1880 he joined the Belfast Naturalists' Field Club, a lively and well supported body whose wide-ranging interests included archaeology and ethnography as well as natural history. He was to be one of its most active members, later serving as secretary (1908–9) and president (1910–12). He also joined the Conchological Society of Great Britain and Ireland, achieving more than local fame for his knowledge of Irish molluscs (he discovered and described two important species) and becoming president in 1923. His scientific interests also included geology and botany. Such was the reputation this amateur enthusiast gained for his practical knowledge of science that, though lacking formal higher education qualifications of any sort, beyond diplomas in drawing, geology, and geomorphology acquired in his teens, he was elected to membership of the RIA in 1904; later, in 1923, Queen's University awarded him an honorary M.Sc. degree.

Welch's main contribution to knowledge, however – apart from the bracing effect of his energy and enthusiasm on a wide circle of friends and acquaintances – was the range and quality of the photographs by which he earned his living or recorded his observations. His pictures of sea birds' nests on Rathlin Island in 1889 were apparently the first of their kind. The photographs of Irish geological sites he took in the early 1890s constituted a landmark in the history of the subject when published (1894) as a catalogue with expert scholarly commentary by Professor Grenville Cole (qv). Many of his *Irish views*, the series by which he became most widely known to the general public (who saw his platinotype prints in railway carriages,

transatlantic liners, and tourist outlets, or reproduced in travel guides), were of archaeological sites and ancient monuments throughout Ireland. Some of this work was commissioned by the Office of Public Works. Other photographs, often taken during outings of the Field Club, were of ethnographic subjects – ‘Irish country life’ was Welch’s term. Those he took for the Congested Districts Board in the 1890s led to the award of the royal warrant in 1900, when Queen Victoria visited Ireland – one of only four warrants granted to Irish photographers during her long reign (the others were Lafayette and Chancellor, of Dublin, and Abernethy of Belfast).

Welch’s bread-and-butter work in his prime consisted of industrial and legal work. In particular, he was commissioned to record the workplaces and activities of many of the leading firms in the northern Linenopolis – all aspects of the linen industry itself, from flax to finished product; the great Belfast ropeworks; some of the engineering works in which Belfast abounded. By far his most important commission, both in scope and in time, was as official photographer for twenty years to the shipbuilding firm of Harland & Wolff. Between 1894 and 1914 he recorded the construction, fitting out, and preparation of a whole series of great transatlantic liners from keel-laying to sea trials, culminating in *Olympic* and *Titanic*.

The outbreak of war in 1914 ruined Welch’s business and destroyed his modest investments, already affected by loans to importunate relatives. His anxieties were increased by the death in 1915 of the unmarried sister who had acted as both housekeeper and bookkeeper (their mother had died in 1908). Photography picked up again after the war, but Welch never recovered financial comfort. In 1927, however, his friends successfully lobbied the new government of Northern Ireland (Welch was stoutly unionist in politics) on his behalf for a civil list pension of £100 a year. He died on 28 September 1936 at the age of 77, leaving estate valued at less than £500.

After his death his friends acquired, by donation or by purchase from his executors, a collection of some 5,000 of his glass plate negatives, along with many lantern slides, original prints, and various memorabilia. This ‘Welch collection’ was presented to the Belfast Museum and Art Gallery – now the Ulster Museum – as a memorial to the man and his work. A selection of these photographs, with commentary, was published in 1977. The glass negatives of the photographs taken for Harland & Wolff are in the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum.

Welch’s work, though generally of excellent quality, was not technically innovative. Its exceptional interest derives rather from its unusually wide range and scope, and from the evident enthusiasm of the photographer himself for scholarly pursuits beyond the reach of most of his professional brethren.

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'Obituaries of R. J. Welch' (by various hands), *Irish Naturalists' Journal*, vi (1936–7), 131–40; E. Estyn Evans and Brian Turner (ed.), *Ireland's eye: the photographs of Robert John Welch* (1977); W. A. Maguire, *A century in focus: photography and photographers in the north of Ireland, 1839–1939* (2000)

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