



Public Record Office  
of Northern Ireland

# **INTRODUCTION**

  

# **COOPER PAPERS**

November 2007

# Cooper Papers (D1422)

## Table of Contents

Summary .....	2
Background.....	3
Conserving the Collection .....	4
Strabane .....	5
Burroughs photographs .....	6
Photographs of circuses .....	7
Transport .....	8
North-West.....	9
Photographs of people in the workplace .....	10
Sport .....	11
The West in Focus .....	12

## **Summary**

2,500 photographic prints from the collection of H.F. Cooper, commercial photographer, Strabane, Co. Tyrone.



## **Background**

Herbert Cooper was born in Hammersmith, London, in 1874 and arrived in Strabane just before the outbreak of the First World War. He took over the photographic studio in Railway Street which had been run by J. Burroughs from about 1901 until 1913. From then until his death in 1960, Cooper amassed a huge collection of photographs. He also recorded films, for instance of race meetings at Carricklee, managed the Pallindrome cinema in Railway Street, Strabane, and had a commercial photographic studio in Blackpool.

Cooper took photographs throughout the counties of Tyrone and Donegal. He also visited towns in Counties Derry, Armagh and Fermanagh, and made occasional sorties into Co. Down (Bangor). His style is noticeably different from the other well- and, until now, better-known photographers of life in Ulster since 1900, including R.J. Welch, A.R. Hogg and W.A. Green. Cooper's more informal approach is evident throughout the collection. Of course, he did take formal photographs in a stylised way: this is particularly true of his portraits. But his 'snap-happy' policy has given us a record of many aspects of life in the countryside and small towns of the west of Ulster for the entire first half of the twentieth century. His subjects ranged across the whole community: with his professional eye and the detached view of an Englishman, he was in an ideal position to photograph scenes which were characteristic of both main traditions in Ulster. The collection has been, with justification, described as the best record of life in provincial Ireland before the Second World War.



## **Conserving the Collection**

In the 1970s, over 70,000 of Cooper's glass plate negatives were deposited in PRONI, and they were subsequently purchased by the office. Between 1989 and 1992, curatorial staff undertook the task of identifying, selecting and cataloguing the contents of the collection. The work of cleaning and conserving the negatives, which had acquired the grime and dust of decades, was undertaken by PRONI's conservation staff. In order to ensure the long-term preservation of the originals, and to make the collection truly accessible to the public, modern, celluloid negatives were made by Irish Colour Laboratories, Larne. A catalogue of the 2500 prints selected for processing in this way is now available for consultation in the Public Search Room. Most of the remaining unprocessed glass plates are passport photographs and studio photographs of individuals and families who cannot be identified. For conservation reasons these remain closed to the public.



## Strabane

The Strabane in which Herbert Cooper began his photographic business in 1913 was a fairly prosperous regional centre for the North-West. It had a population of just over 5000 people and was particularly important as a market town. A fair, at which a wide range of goods were bought and sold, was held in February, May, August and November. In each of the other eight months of the year there was a market for all produce, a weekly grain market was held on Tuesdays and a flax market on Wednesdays. Its marketing role is strikingly captured in a Cooper photograph of Strabane Fair, c.1930. Many of the other photographs of Strabane in the collection, however, pre-date Cooper's arrival in the town and must have been taken by Mr J. Burroughs, whose photographic business Cooper bought in 1913. One photograph of their studio in Railway Street actually has had Burroughs' name removed and 'H.F. Cooper' etched in on the negative.



## **Burroughs photographs**

Prominent among the photographs of the Burroughs era are those of the flooding which seriously affected Strabane in January 1909. Two of these, in particular, show the extent of the devastation and also portray something of the community spirit and droll sense of humour for which the town is noted. The horse-drawn carts carry on serenely as the new-fangled invention, the car, is left stranded in the flood water; and the impromptu Strabane life-boat service brings food, in the shape of a loaf of bread placed precariously on an oar, for marooned families in their houses, watched attentively by local people. Of the town itself, there are street views of Derry Road, Irish Street and Railway Road in c.1910, all of which can be studied for the many signs of change that have taken place over the last 80 years and also for aspects which are recognisably the same. One view of the town across the River Mourne from near the bridge is possibly the best means of seeing the extent of the overall development of Strabane in the twentieth century.

Strabane's commerce was more varied than the label of 'market town' would initially suggest. Taylor's Foundry, for example, manufactured machinery that was used on farms and in agricultural businesses (as one Cooper photograph of a scene in a scutch mill, where the flax rollers are in use, suggests). Mills, such as the steam saw mills and corn mills, provided employment locally. Of the several cinemas in the town, one, the Pallidrome, was owned and managed by Cooper himself. And throughout the Inishowen Peninsula, Co. Donegal, there were small pockets of commercial and industrial enterprise, including the woollen mills at Convoy, boatbuilding at Burtonport and the co-operative creamery at Finn Valley. Indeed, there were co-operative creameries scattered throughout the north-west, all established in the 1890s to make available to the dairy farming community the new technology of centrifugal separators. This equipment separated at high speed butter and cream from local milk produce, and the Irish Agricultural Organisation Society (IAOS), led by Horace Plunkett, provided a network of creameries which allowed farmers access to the more sophisticated machinery which had been introduced on the continent. In addition to recording these activities, Cooper's photographs on the theme of commerce in the North-West include some striking shop fronts, such as that of McSwiggan's public house, McDevitt's pawnbroker's shop and the Home and Colonial, which often do not compare favourably with their modern equivalents.



## Photographs of circuses

A number of circuses toured Ireland in the years before 1914 providing entertainment and excitement for the crowds they attracted. Cooper's photographs of some circuses which arrived in Strabane are particularly useful for the behind-the-scenes views they record. It was evidently not possible for him to photograph acts in progress in the Big Top (which was, until the early 1920s, lit by flares rather than electricity) though he was able to catch acts, such as acrobats and clowns, in the middle of their rehearsals out of doors. However, he still manages to recreate something of the sense of excitement which the arrival of a circus generated in any provincial town. He has scenes from the parade in Abercorn Square, Strabane, from a wall of death act (with a car, rather than a motor-bike) in the 1920s and of the animals of the circus, including lions and a sign for 'bears that talk'.

The three main shows photographed by Cooper (or Burroughs) were Duffy's Circus, Buff Bill's American Circus and Hanneford's Canadian Circus. The photographs of Duffy's Circus were, almost certainly, all taken during the visit to Strabane in 1911. Duffy's Circus was begun in the late 19th century by John, who died in 1909; by the time Duffy's Circus arrived in Strabane in 1911, it was run by John's widow, Annie. One of John Duffy's sons, James, married Lena Kayes, daughter of William Kayes who ran the famous Buff Bill's American Circus in Ireland before and after the First World War, Kayes himself being 'Buff Bill'. Ned Hanneford's Canadian Circus toured Ireland up to 1916. It was renowned for its menagerie, including lions and 'bears that talk'. It also featured a splendid street parade headed by an ornate, gilded bandwagon drawn by 8 sleek horses. Cooper's photos of Hanneford's Circus must have been taken before 1914, a period which seems to have been the heyday of circus visits to Strabane.



## Transport

Cooper recorded in his photographs all forms of horse-drawn and mechanised transport, including horse-drawn buses, children's carts drawn by goats and a stately landau carriage. In many ways, the collection signals the end of an age and the start of the revolution of mechanised transport. This is exemplified in one photograph of the Model T Ford alongside the traditional Irish jaunting car. The extent of the revolution which motor transport brought to people's lives, particularly in the years between the wars, is evident not just in the means of transport themselves but in the condition of the roads on which the early cars had to travel. This is perhaps best represented in scenes of a traffic accident c.1933. In that year, 141 people were killed on the roads of Northern Ireland at a time when there were only 38,000 motor vehicles being driven. The other spirit of the modern age, the aeroplane, made a dramatic entry into the lives of people in the North-West, firstly when Amelia Erhardt became the first woman to fly solo across the Atlantic in May 1932, landing in Ballyarnet in the Shantallow district, just north of Derry city, and then, as recorded by Cooper, in July 1933 when one of the Italian airforce's sea-planes touched down on Lough Foyle, en route from Rome to New York. The age of progress, which motorised transport is generally regarded as having brought, is perhaps best seen in two views of ambulances, at least one of which brought patients to Waterside Hospital, Derry, in cases of emergency.



## **North-West**

Cooper took photographs throughout the North-West of the province of Ulster, particularly in Counties Tyrone, Derry and Donegal. For the first few years of his time in Strabane he would very probably have travelled by train. From the early 1920s he was almost always accompanied by his wife (who had been born in Lancashire) who drove their car to the various venues and functions. The legacy of this redoubtable husband-and-wife team is a superb photographic record of many small towns within a 60-mile radius of Strabane, the best photographic record of small town provincial life in Ireland between the wars. There are several photographs of Sion Mills – particularly Herdman's Flax Spinning Mill – and Derry, as the two main centres of population and employment adjacent to Strabane (though, curiously, the archive contains not one identifiable photograph taken in Omagh). Elsewhere in Tyrone, there are photographs of Castleterragh, Drumquin, Newtownstewart, Gortin, Ballymagorry and Baronscourt (one of them showing a Catch-my-Pal temperance movement event in progress), and in Co. Donegal photographs of Lifford, the quayside at Burtonport and Main Street, Buncrana. These photographs enable us not only to see these small towns as they were in the past, but also to make a 'then and now' comparison with them. In most cases it is possible to stand in or near the spot where Cooper stood with his camera and compare the view we see with the image he captured 60, 70 or 80 years ago. Everywhere is different but nevertheless is not unrecognisable. Indeed, there is in many cases at least as much continuity as there is change.



## **Photographs of people in the workplace**

Cooper's and, before him, Burroughs' roving commission meant that, in addition to taking portraits of individuals or groups by arrangement, they were also able to capture people going about their daily business. Both Burroughs and Cooper recorded people at work more frequently than their contemporary counterparts did: workmen on Lifford railway bridge, women in the machine room of the woollen mill at Convoy in Co. Donegal, Royal Irish Constabulary officers on parade, preachers at a mobile evangelical mission hall. Scenes of local people in the town of Strabane include a view of the Agricultural show in 1911, a demonstration led by a military band in Abercorn Square, the assembled children (most of them in bare feet) of Fountain Street, and men gazing at the aftermath of the fierce fire of 1910. This began accidentally at J.W. Russell's bakery in Church Street on the evening of Sunday 19 June 1910. Another disaster, the railway accident at Donemana on 7 September 1913, must have been among Cooper's first 'public' photographs, for it was about then that he took over from his predecessor, Burroughs.



## Sport

The Cooper collection also contains a sprinkling of photographs relating to sport – for example, soccer and hockey – and local clubs and societies, among them a group portrait of members of Strabane Irish National Foresters' Organisation. One striking photograph shows a mock suffrage parade, in which men dressed as women lampoon the campaign for votes for women, unaware that within five years, due mainly to the sterling efforts of women during the First World War, a limited female suffrage would be won. The quiet dignity of a photograph of the female ward in Lifford Hospital, by contrast, reflects the serious side of Cooper's work.



## **The West in Focus**

The completion of PRONI'S work on the Cooper collection was marked by an exhibition entitled 'The West in Focus' which opened at the Ulster American Folk Park, Omagh, in June 1992. This was a most appropriate venue for an exhibition which celebrates the work of the photographer of North-West Ulster. The exhibition catalogue has provided the basis for this Introduction to the collection.

