

# Four Generations of Micklethwaite Photographers

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By: William (Bill) Frederick H. Micklethwaite (a would-be fifth generation)



## William Barton Micklethwaite

### Biography

William Barton Micklethwaite was born in 1817 in Ripponden, Yorkshire, England. In 1840 he married Mary Ann Horsfal (of Todmorden) with their first surviving child, Emily, arriving seven years later. In this interval he is listed on census records as a (house) painter, eventually employing 4 men.

They moved to Ashton-under-Lyne, Lancashire where a son Frank William came in March, 1849. William apparently became interested in photography about this time, as he was hauled into court for non-payment of debts as a “photographic artist” late in 1856 although the census of 1861 still shows him as painter. It is remarkable that photography had become so popular so quickly as the first permanent, negative images made with silver salts date to 1840 and the first viable (portable) process based on collodion emulsions on glass plates dates to 1850.

He then seems to have tried his hand at something different as the London Gazette of Jan 20, 1860 notes the demise of the brass foundry in which he was a partner.

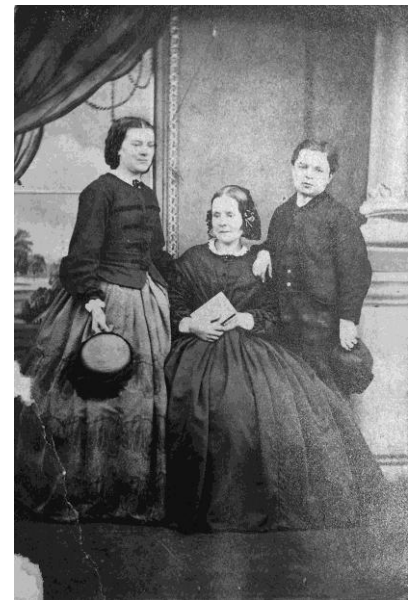
There was, however, a clear interest in photography in his family as Emily married James Philips (Jr.) –James Sr. was also a photographer and may have rekindled William’s interest. James Sr. took this “carte de visite” photograph of WBM.

William Barton Micklethwaite died in 1902 at 85 in Ireland.

### Photography

Sometime after he reverted to photography he moved his young family to Newry, in Ireland; establishing both a travelling and a fixed studio there, photos exist of both. The photo of his Newry studio shows all sorts of photographs displayed on the outside walls so he clearly continued this trade. There is also evidence that he returned to England, at least temporarily, as his imprint appears ~1870 on a ‘carte-de-visite’ photograph prepared in Biggleswade, Bedfordshire and the 1871 census lists William in Heckmondwike, Yorkshire as a “photographic artist” with Frank as his assistant. Directories from 1897-1903 list a “Micklethwaite, Photographer” in Newry or Newcastle, County Down and Frank departed Larne (just north of Newry) for New York and Canada in 1875 so the family clearly had moved back to Ireland.

Here is a photo dated 1865 taken by “W.B. Micklethwaite, Photographic Artist, Heckmondwicke” {on reverse} showing Emily, Mary and Frank.





If one blows up the images of WBM's studios (remarkably detailed because of their exceptionally fine grain) the photos on the walls are all portraits, probably the most saleable kind of image. Since they were of people they were widely dispersed to families and usually lost to accidents or intergenerational housecleaning. At this point, there are few of his photographs available in North America, save those passed down through the Micklethwaite family. One possible exception, available online, is this portrait of Mary Thompson on her 109<sup>th</sup> birthday, taken in Newry in 1863. Although there is no documented connection with her, it is interesting to note that William Barton Micklethwaite was practicing photography in Newry, County Down at the time and was apparently the only photographer there at that time according to contemporary city directories.

The collodion (solubilised nitrocellulose) with silver salts, wet-plate photographic process used at the time required the photographic material to be coated, sensitized, exposed and developed within the span of about fifteen minutes, staying wet all the while. While the wet plate process allowed for a shorter exposure time than previous photographic methods, it still required the camera shutter to be open for several seconds with bright illumination. As a result, photography of moving objects was impossible, as any moving object would blur. Making this image of Mary Thompson and the two girls would not have been easy in 1863. It wasn't until the 1880s that the collodion process was largely replaced by gelatine dry plates which used an emulsion of silver halide in gelatine. The dry gelatine plate was not only easier to handle and lasted longer but could be made much more sensitive, greatly reducing exposure times. Both processes were characterized by exquisitely fine grain and detail.

The necessity of doing this all in the dark with chemicals and rinsing gave rise to portable darkrooms such as this one, somewhere in Ireland (probably near Newry). Three photos of this caravan exist, the last two of which show a young boy and woman, Frank and Mary, while the first shows a man, probably WBM. Note the curtained 'sunroof' and windows for strong, controlled lighting.



The Caravan at Station 1



The Caravan with butcher's cart



The Caravan at Station 2

## Frank William Micklethwaite

### Biography

Frank W. Micklethwaite was born in Ashton-under-Lyne, England on March 13, 1849. Educated at Hay's Academy in his home town, Frank Micklethwaite served a year in an architect's office before turning his attention to photography, studying under his father for about fifteen years as they moved around. Later in that interval he regularly "registered" his work in the British Journal of Photography.

While in Newry, he married Ruth Hill {May 19, 1873}. Ruth who, born in Biggleswade England in 1852, had emigrated to Canada in 1870. Apparently she and Frank had met and fallen in love as teenagers in Biggleswade (where Frank was ~1870) as she returned to Ireland to marry him.

Their first child, John, was born October 8th, 1875. Shortly after, the new family emigrated to Canada. They arrived by steamship from Larne (north of Newry) on December 27<sup>th</sup>, 1875 in New York then travelled on to Toronto where they settled after fifteen years of wandering with his father.

He and Ruth had two more boys, Frederick William (Fred) and Percival (Percy) born May 8<sup>th</sup>, 1878 and February 7<sup>th</sup>, 1881 in Toronto.



Frank and Ruth, about 1885

He began working as a proof-reader for the Toronto "Mail" newspaper but clearly remembered and preferred the freedom and artistry of photography of which he eventually became a recognized master in his own time. Apart from his business interests, F. W. Micklethwaite was for much of his life a member of the Sons of England and the Wilson Masonic Lodge.

Ruth died in 1906 and Frank married again to Louisa Cummings a year later. Frank himself died on December 5, 1925 at his Hillsboro Avenue home in Toronto and was buried beside Ruth in Mount Pleasant Cemetery.

### Photography

Frank opened a commercial photography business at his home on 22 Queen Street West 1878. For more than 47 years, he operated his studio at a variety of locations around downtown Toronto, including 40 Jarvis Street (1881-1891); 5 Temperance Street (1891-5); then 203 and 227 Yonge Street and finally 243 Yonge Street, where the business settled in 1907 and remained until after his death .

Initially, his 'bread and butter' came from portraits of people posed stiffly in typically Victorian settings. With indoor lighting, it was often necessary to position rests or even clamps to assist clients in holding still. Outdoors, buildings and landscapes are naturally still thus well adapted to photographs using these early, slow emulsions. With advent of the dry-plate process and faster emulsions he expanded his repertoire to include group photographs as the odds of having no one move in an exposure improved. The arrival of flash powder in about 1890 made shots possible at night and in large, poorly lit indoor spaces. By about 1900 sheet film based on cellulose nitrate became available, avoiding the issues of handling wet glass plates (but adding a fire risk) further mobilizing the photographers.

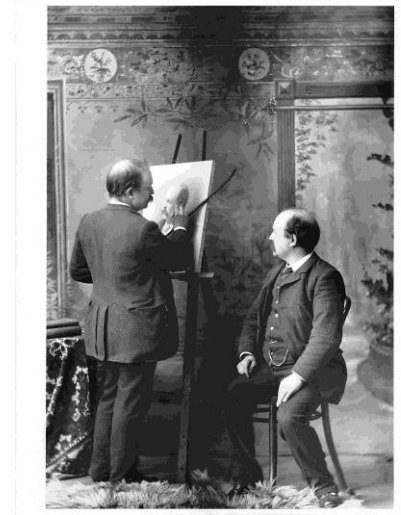
By its nature, the photographic process of exposing a negative then printing one or many positives, full-sized or cropped, allowed the photographer to make any desired number of image copies, adjusted to a customer's liking. Retouching, an art in itself allowed, blemishes to be 'tuned out' to further please a portrait sitter. These factors all combined, in the hands of an artist such as Frank, made photography a viable business. As a commercial photographer and of economic necessity FWM concentrated more on creating products that would readily sell than in documenting all of Toronto's complex society.

His business also included both public clients (such as the City of Toronto) and private clients (such as the Consumer's Gas Company) and myriad individual patrons. He was commissioned between 1891 and 1898 by the Toronto City Engineer's department to document public works projects, most of these photographs endure today in the Toronto Archive. The photos illustrated major reconstructions of the city's sewage and water facilities, as well as bridge construction and street improvements.



Literally thousands of 'cartes de visite' and larger portraits are referenced in documents he left behind. These usually went to private homes where they were proudly displayed in parlours throughout the city but unfortunately this dispersion has again resulted in rather few of them surviving today. Shop signs and print frames guaranteed "copies may always be had" to encourage repeat orders but time and unstable emulsions almost inevitably led to glass negatives being 'recycled' to re-use the expensive hand-polished glass plates. They also made superior window panes and the Micklethwaite cottage in Bala today has at least one pane that retains a ghostly image to this day.

As was the custom, every print came with an embossed "Micklethwaite Photo" on the print or its frame. The reverse sides of 'cartes de visite' gave the studio address and were styled to the tastes of the times. Frank was not above a little fun with his advertising; one memorable photograph demonstrating his skills shows a standing Frank retouching a Frank portrait while a seated Frank looks on. Even then you couldn't always believe a photograph!



Frank was rapidly recognized for the quality of his work, repeatedly winning awards at the Toronto Industrial Exhibition (precursor to the C.N.E.). In 1891 this excerpt appeared in "Toronto, Old and New", a memorial volume, historical, descriptive and pictorial, produced to mark the hundredth anniversary of the passing of the Constitutional Act of 1791:

*"he was an attaché of The Mail newspaper for three years, resigning to open a studio at 40 Jarvis Street. Since then he has taken a high rank in the profession, and continues to do first-class work. His specialty is outdoor views, and many of the pictures of streets, parks and public buildings in this work are from pictures by this clever artist."*

There is ample evidence that Ruth was an active partner in the business –there are many photographs of her either on-scene with camera equipment or working at home with photographs.

## The Third Generation



In 1895, Frank's eldest son, John (centre), joined the business and by 1900, sons Frederick (L) and Percy (R) had also become active partners. They collectively operated as the Micklethwaite Photo studio. In failing health toward the end of his life, Frank increasingly entrusted the operation of the studio to his sons. The photography business was willed to his son Fred, who, in turn, bequeathed it on to his own son, Jack, who remained an active photographer into the 1970s. As such, the F. W. Micklethwaite Studio was sustained for nearly a century by four successive generations of Micklethwaite photographers.

John married Nellie Garside in 1899 and they had a son Frank A. in 1901. John and Nellie do not appear in photographs taken outside of Toronto which suggests that he remained in Toronto 'minding the shop' while Frank and rest of the family ventured north in summer. John died in 1921

Fred married Ellen Orr Dewar in 1903 and they too had three sons; Fred S. in 1905, William E. in 1909 and John H. in 1916. Fred was fully involved in the studio's work from about 1900 although his early work is hidden behind the studio's "Micklethwaite Photo" imprint. Indeed, there were not one but two "F.W. Micklethwaites" –Frank William and Fred William. There is an interesting photo showing Fred and an assistant bedding down for the night in their tiny Port Sandfield "studio" surrounded by photographs, chemicals and paper. Frank was not well in his later years so Fred apparently ran the business then took it over on Frank's death, continuing until his own death in 1941.

The stock market crash of 1929 and financial chaos that followed were very hard on photographic businesses -photos were a luxury that could be foregone. Fred's work evolved into more "commercial" photography –taking contracts to document new buildings, machinery and vehicles became the mainstay although portraiture did continue. The studio remained at 243 Yonge Street until 1932 then economics forced a move to his home on Ossington Avenue.

Percy was also very active in the business, there are many photographs showing him at shoot sites with a camera, negative carriers or other equipment. His work too was done under the studio's umbrella. One image shows him and an assistant washing prints, up to their knees in Lake Rosseau outside that same Port Sandfield "studio". Percy never married, living with Frank's or John's family for much of his life until his death in 1931.

## **John (Jack) Harold Micklethwaite, the Fourth Generation**

### **Biography**

Fred Micklethwaite continued the family business until 1941, passing it on to his son, John Harold (Jack) Micklethwaite, the fourth generation of Micklethwaite in the photography business. Starting in the early 1920's he assisted Fred, learning the trade. They continued as a team from 886 Ossington Avenue until WW II broke out. In 1941, on Fred's death, Jack took over completely then in 1942 he joined the R(C)AF and spent several years in an aerial intelligence unit. On his return the business continued as a commercial studio for the following 20 years until his death.