

IRISH LINKS TO THE TITANIC

The Titanic sank 93 years ago this month and continues to fascinate generations of readers, film makers, scientists and historians. On April 14, 1912 at 11:40 p.m., the Titanic struck an iceberg off the coast of Newfoundland. Crippled and taking in more water than its pumps could handle, the "unsinkable" ship went under in 2 hours and 40 minutes. With it went more than 1,500 passengers and crew. Although the Titanic was a British ship, the story of its tragic sinking has many Irish dimensions to it. Among the most prominent are the fact that the famed liner was built in Belfast and made its last port of call in Cobh (then Queenstown) in Cork.

The world's largest ship at 882 feet long was constructed at the world's largest shipyard, Harland & Wolff – the pride of Belfast. Or more accurately, the pride of Protestant Belfast, for the shipyard was notorious among Belfast Catholics for its "no Catholics need apply" hiring policies. And with 15,000 men employed at the yard, there was a lot to be bitter about. The Titanic was also designed by an Irishman, County Down-born Thomas Andrews. As Harland & Wolff's Managing Director, he also headed up the company's "Guarantee Group" -- a team of eight men sent on the ship's maiden voyage to advise the captain and crew and to handle any problems that might arise. None of the eight survived the trip.

After a gala launching, the Titanic left Belfast on April 2, 1912 and traveled to Southampton, England. On April 10th, the ship took on nearly a thousand passengers and steamed for Cherbourg, France. After picking up 200 or so more passengers, the ship headed for Cobh, in Cork. There on April 11th, the final 113 passengers – mostly Irish immigrants traveling in third class – boarded the vessel heading for New York.

One Irishman, however, stepped off the ship in Cobh. Cork-born Francis Browne was a theology student intent upon joining the Jesuits which he later did. With a ticket courtesy of his uncle, he traveled only the first few legs of the journey from Southampton to Cherbourg to Cobh. While aboard, the amateur photographer took dozens of pictures of the ship and its crew, including the last photo taken of Captain Edward Smith. When he stepped off in Cobh, he carried with him the most important photographic record of the ship's only voyage.

Of the ship's 2,223 passengers and crew, only 712 were saved – mostly women and children. The intense class prejudice of British society ensured that not everyone was equal when it came to survival. Two-thirds of the Titanic's first-class passengers survived, including Margaret Tobin Brown, an Irish American known thereafter as the "Unsinkable Molly Brown" because it was reported that she rowed for 7½ hours delivering herself and her passengers to safety. Bertha Mulvihill, one of the fortunate third-class passengers who made it to a lifeboat remembered the next morning when the ship Carpathia arrived. "Two big green lights broke through the mist above it, and we knew it was a ship coming to rescue us. We cheered and cheered. Some cried. I just sat still and offered up a little prayer."

Most of her fellow steerage passengers were not so lucky. Fully three-quarters of Titanic's third-class passengers (including 50 of 73 children) perished in the icy waters. Among those who died were 74 of the 113 passengers who embarked at Cobh, including Margaret Rice of Mayo and her five children. Five of ten additional Irish-born passengers who boarded at Southampton also died, bringing the total Irish deaths to 79. Dozens more Irish died as members of the ship's crew. Their

stories and that of the other Irish passengers aboard are chronicled in a book by Senan Molony called *The Irish Aboard the Titanic* (Wolfhound Press, 2000). It tells countless tales of tragedy and loss, but also many of heroism and survival.

The memory of the Titanic and its victims of all nationalities is kept alive today by several organizations, including the Irish Titanic Historical Society. In Ireland, a memorial was unveiled in Cobh in 1998. It depicts Margaret Rice and her five children heading for the Titanic. Their story reminds us that while the dominant image of the Titanic remains that of a luxury liner catering to vacationing high society types like J.J. Astor, Benjamin Guggenheim and Molly Brown, a great majority of its passengers saw it as a means to an end – a ship that would carry them across the sea to a new life in America.

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Last picture of the Titanic taken by Francis Browne