

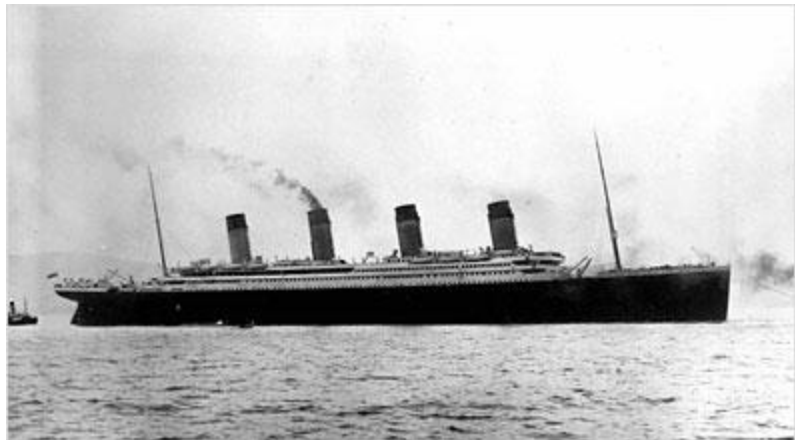
## The Titanic

How Irish is the *Titanic* story? As the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the sinking of the unsinkable *Titanic* approaches—April 15, 2012, this essay will explore the fated ship's Irish connections.

Clearly not Irish is the actual sinking of the *Titanic*, unless we give credence to the stories of curses placed on the vessel because of the employment bias in its construction. Well known is that the *Titanic* collided with an iceberg in the mid-Atlantic on the

"Night to Be

Remembered," April 14, 1912, sinking the next morning. Ownership of the *Titanic*, the White Star Line, was American since 1902 and management was British. A J.P. Morgan company was the majority owner of the vessel; indeed, Morgan had a stateroom especially built



for him on the ship but cancelled his passage on the maiden voyage owing to illness. He escaped the death at sea suffered by other wealthy people like John Jacob Astor. The ship, according to testimony at a United States Senate hearing, was travelling far too fast in a sea in which there were icebergs identified and reported on by other ships in the general area. Trying to avoid an iceberg that had been observed by the watch on deck, the *Titanic* sustained a 300 foot gash amidships, an injury that destined the ship to rest at the bottom of the Atlantic. No Irish were involved in the decisions which led to the fatal crash.

Nor was anyone Irish charged with the decisions which made the *Titanic*'s sinking such an unmitigated disaster. For example, it was a corporate decision to urge maximum speed from the great ship in its competition with Cunard and German ocean liners for the trans-Atlantic passenger traffic. It was British management which decided to put lifeboat seats for 1178 passengers on a vessel carrying 2223 passengers and crew [Senate investigation number]. The fact that the lifeboats were not filled even close to capacity [706, 711, 712 are three of the estimates of lifeboat passengers] reflects again on the leadership aboard ship, none Irish.

A word about the numbers associated with the *Titanic* disaster: Depending on the source, the total number of people on the *Titanic* is reported as high as 2265 and as low as 2201. The number who lost their lives also varies among official reports: 1517 [Senate]; 1503 [British Board of Trade]; 1490 [British Enquiry].

Since we are citizens of the land into which we are born, the *Titanic* is Irish by birth, not a citizen of an independent Ireland—that would happen in 1922—but, nonetheless, born in an Irish city, Belfast. She was built by Irish laborers and mechanics at the Harland & Wolff shipyards. The Irish who built the *Titanic* were almost entirely Protestant Irish. The lot of the Roman Catholic working class in Belfast was not a happy one in the time of the *Titanic* and before and after the *Titanic*, for that matter. The tenor of intolerance in Ulster in that time can be gauged in the sermon of Dr. William McKean on Ulster Day, September 28, 1912: *The Irish question is at bottom a war against Protestantism; it is an attempt to establish a Roman Catholic ascendancy in Ireland...* Stephanie Barczewski's book on the *Titanic* underscores that Irish Catholics were blocked from many of the better jobs in Ulster. She writes, "Almost all... workers were Protestant... defending their privileges... from the flood of predominantly Catholic emigrants pouring into Belfast." In 1912, she reports, the Catholic Irish held 9% of the jobs in shipbuilding and engineering but were 24% of the population. Tracing conflict back to 1864, Barczewski relates an incident in which Harland & Wolff shipwrights demanded the dismissal of all Catholic navvies who attended the unveiling of a statue of Daniel O'Connell in Dublin. Harland rebuffed the demands. Home Rule agitation, in 1886, led to shipbuilders loyal to the Orange Order roaming the streets of Belfast armed with scraps of metal pipe in Catholic neighborhoods. The Catholics in the shipyard were so worried for their safety that, of the 225 Roman Catholics employed in the shipyard at that time, 199 quit over fear for their lives. In the decades of the *Titanic*, the police found the H&W yards so dangerous that they were reluctant to enter through the gates. Three months after the *Titanic* launching, Unionist workers evicted all Roman Catholics from the yards in retaliation for an attack on a Presbyterian Sunday School outing by Roman Catholics. The anti-Catholic atmosphere at Harland & Wolff assured that few Irish Catholic laborers helped to construct the *Titanic*.

The more recent history of Harland & Wolff's employment policies is easier to quantify than it was in the time of the *Titanic* owing to reporting requirements. Jonathan Bardon in his *History of Ulster*, says, "... hard evidence [of discrimination in private employment] is available for the 1970s onward." That evidence shows four hundred Roman Catholics in a workforce of 10,000 at Harland & Wolff in 1970. The Fair Employment Agency's records in 1978 show only 4.8% of employees in Shipbuilding and

Engineering were Catholic. There is no doubt that the *Titanic* was built by an Irish work force, an Irish work force more attracted to the Orange than the Green.

Owing to Harland & Wolff's biased hiring practices which kept Irish Catholics from working on the *Titanic*, many stories and legends sprang from the sinking of the unsinkable *Titanic*. One is that one of those few Catholic workers painted "Let God sink this vessel if he can" on the side of the *Titanic*. Seems this painter did not have a belief in an omnipotent god. Another is the "No Pope" legend. It goes like this: The vessel's registry number—3909 04—if written in longhand and looked at in a mirror will read "No Pope." This legend embodies the hope of the injured parties that H&W's discriminatory hiring policies would be met with retribution. Some call this legend the Curse of the *Titanic*. In fact, the *Titanic* had never had the No Pope number assigned to it. Its registry was 131,428 and its yard number was 401. So much for the Curse. There is also a message in a bottle story related to the *Titanic*. Jeremiah Burke of Cork, who did not survive the tragedy, is said to have put a note in a holy water bottle: "From Titanic. Good Bye all." The bottle, the story goes, washed up on shore a year later near his home in Cork. These stories have a wonderful Irish feel about them.

The last landfall seen by passengers on the *Titanic* was Ireland. After embarking passengers at Southampton and Cherbourg, the *Titanic* took on passengers at Cobh (called Queenstown then). The list of the Queenstown passengers reads like a list of the members of the Irish Cultural Society—three Kellys; three Murphys; six Rices; a McCormack and an O'Connell, and so on. These 113 Irish passengers were a part of the total steerage list of approximately 712 passengers. Only thirty-four of the 113 Irish were rescued, one being Ellen Shine, grandmother of Christine Quinn, President of the New York City Council. Was there discrimination against the Irish as the vessel was being evacuated? Probably not. But class distinction, steerage vis-à-vis first class, most likely affected the rescue effort. 62% of first class passengers were rescued while only 25% of steerage survived. The rescue effort's chief goal was women and children first regardless of ethnicity. Unlike the bias in the building of the *Titanic*, there was no anti-Irish bias in the tragic mismanagement of the rescue effort.

One of the most well-known survivors of the *Titanic* was not a steerage passenger; in fact, she was a first class passenger travelling with the Astors. She was the almost legendary Unsinkable Molly Brown. Margaret Tobin was a Narrowback, daughter of Irish immigrants. Her husband J.J. Brown, also child of Irish immigrants, became a millionaire through gold mining in Colorado. Margaret spent much of her wealth in self-improvement

and on the arts. In fact, she boarded the *Titanic* at Cherbourg after a trip to Egypt. Attributed to her is her taking command of Boat 6 and insisting that the boat attempt to rescue passengers in the water. Aboard the *Carpathia*, which was the rescue vessel for most of the *Titanic* survivors, Margaret raised money for the less fortunate survivors. Over the years, she kept in touch with some of the survivors and aided them financially. Played by Tammy Grimes on Broadway and in the movies by Debbie Reynolds and Kathy Bates, Molly Brown seems to have had an Irish sense of humor as noted in a letter to her daughter after the rescue: "After being brined, salted, and pickled in mid-ocean, I am now high and dry." Margaret Tobin Brown lived her last days as a resident of the Barbizon Plaza Hotel in New York City and is buried in Holy Rood Cemetery in Westbury. Hers is a *Titanic* story of courage and unselfishness of which the Irish can be proud.



How Irish do movies make the *Titanic* story? In the film "The Unsinkable Molly Brown," about the only Irish touch is Margaret's father's brogue and her Huck Finnish Tom-boy portrayal by Debbie Reynolds. About the only Irish in the 1953 "Titanic" is a defrocked, alcoholic priest, played by Richard Basehart, returning to America. He finds his inner priest in the last hours of the sinking. In "A Night to Remember" (1958), there is a realistic Irish village scene of a priest and the community seeing parishioners off on their voyage to America, and in steerage scenes, the audience sees many Irish faces, the performance of a jig, and hears Irish music and lyrics. The blockbuster James Cameron "Titanic" is the most Irish of the *Titanic* films. Irish music plays as Leonardo DiCaprio runs to catch the about-to-depart *Titanic*. Molly Brown, played by Kathy Bates, is an important figure in the film. There is a lengthy scene of a céilí in steerage with a lively jig, tin whistles, a bodhrán, pipes and a squeeze box adding to the Irish flavor of the scene complimented by pints of Guinness. This film, owing to its popularity, has probably done more to write an Irish chapter into the *Titanic* story than any other influence.

In this Narrowback's family, the *Titanic* story was not a part of our oral history. We heard plenty about the Black and Tans, the great sport of hurling, Eamon deValera, the Shannon Scheme, holy wells, how to read tea leaves, turf, but no *Titanic*. Surely, in April 1912 the newspapers in County

Galway and County Clare published the tragic news of the sinking of a great ship bound for America, but the readers might have been more interested in the mysterious death of a cow or the results of the football matches. Only many years later did this writer learn that the *Titanic* was built in Ireland, something to be proud of. Even later, as a researcher for an article in an Irish-American newsletter, did the writer learn of the job discrimination against Irish Catholics in the Harland & Wolff shipyards. No one in our Irish ghetto in Brooklyn spoke about the *Titanic*; apparently, no one's descendents earned any sweat equity by working on the *Titanic*. Surely, some of us who are descendents of Irish Catholic immigrants heard something about the *Titanic* from their parents.... But for me, the story of the *Titanic* is a great tragedy; a historic event which merits attention on the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of another reminder of human fallibility.... But not an Irish tragedy.

(Written by John Walsh)

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