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**Tipperary Historical Journal
2003**

Tipperary and the Titanic

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Introduction

The sinking of the R.M.S. *Titanic* on the night of April 14/15 1912 is widely acknowledged as one of the greatest peacetime tragedies in maritime history. The details of how 1,500 passengers lost their lives in the frigid waters of the north Atlantic have been well recorded in books, films and even a Broadway musical, as each generation grapples anew with the arresting horror of the event. The Irish element in *Titanic*'s story has entered the realm of popular folklore in this country, and often fact and fiction rest too comfortably in claims of direct family links to the catastrophe. The local history aspect to this signal episode in 20th century history has never sufficiently been exploited in Ireland in my view and in this essay I hope to address this failure to some slight degree, particularly as regards Co. Tipperary.

Of the 2,207 passengers and crew aboard *Titanic* as she steamed west from Queenstown I have managed to account for six who were born in County Tipperary, one who was possibly from the county and three more who had some connections with the county, howsoever tenuous.

On April 6 1912, four days before the liner departed Southampton, two crewmembers born originally in Tipperary signed articles of agreement with the White Star line to serve aboard *Titanic* on her maiden voyage. Katherine Walshe, aged thirty-two, was engaged as a second-class stewardess. She was to be aboard ship at 6 a.m. on the morning of the sailing and was to receive a monthly wage of £3-0-0. Her address in the formal contract was given as 57 Church Street, Woolston, Southampton. The other crewmember was one Dennis Corcoran, aged 33. Corcoran was engaged to serve aboard ship as a fireman, for which he would be paid a monthly wage of £6-0-0. He had no permanent address (that being recorded as 'Port of engagement address') while his temporary address at time of signing the agreement was the Sailors' Home, Southampton. Corcoran also signed his articles of agreement with the shipping line on April 6 1912 and was due to be aboard *Titanic* at 6a.m. on the date of sailing.¹

Intriguingly, both Walshe and Corcoran had last been to sea together as crewmembers aboard the S.S. *St. Paul*, from which both had been discharged at the same time i.e. '1912' (immediately, one presumes prior to their new contract with White Star).² They were both roughly the same age, from the same Irish county and had worked previously together at sea. Is it too far-fetched a conjecture to suggest they may have been romantically involved? Regrettably we will never know, for both perished in the sinking. Mr. Corcoran was last seen by his friend and colleague Mr. Thomas Patrick Dillon with whom he jumped into the water from the slanting ship's deck.³

It is unknown whether there were any other Tipperary people serving as crewmembers aboard *Titanic*. However, the *Tipperary Star* of June 8 1912 announced under the headline 'Stoker from Strad' that a ship's stoker from Stadavoher, Thurles who had been aboard *Titanic* and survived, had given evidence to 'the Inquiry'. Unfortunately the article fails to mention either the man's name or which 'Inquiry' was in mind. There were in fact two Inquiries into the sinking, one by the U.S. Senate and another by the British Board of Trade.

In the excited, merry throng crowding the wharf at Southampton eagerly awaiting the opportunity to board the Leviathan for her maiden voyage were three passengers with Tipperary connections. Mr. William T. Stead was a noted British writer, editor, spiritualist, evangelist and reformer.⁴ In his travels he had met many of the great leaders and figures of the day, including the Czar of all the Russias, to whom he was presented in 1899.⁵ Indeed he was on his way to address a meeting in the U.S. on the invitation of (then) President Taft.

In 1886⁶ he spent a week in Thurles as the guest of Archbishop Croke. Mr. Stead was shown about the cathedral by the Archbishop and 'expressed his appreciation of its grandeur'. On being shown the memorial slab to the late Dr. Leahy he is said to have remarked 'A magnificent tomb to a great man'.⁷ One night during his stay Mr. Stead was present at a sermon preached by a certain Rev. Dr. Butler O.P. who was giving a mission at the time.

It's perhaps unfortunate to recount that Mr. Stead, apparently on his 'departure...wrote a character sketch of his host which caused a tremendous sensation and was adversely commented on by many people'.⁸ Mr. Stead travelled first-class and was drowned in the sinking. He was last seen sitting in the first-class smoking room reading a book.

Mr. Edward Pomeroy Colley also boarded the ship at Southampton as a first-class passenger. From a distinguished family in Co. Kildare, Mr. Colley was a successful businessman and brother of Major Pomeroy Colley, the Resident Magistrate for Tipperary. Mr. E.P. Colley was killed in the sinking, which occurred in the early hours of his 37th birthday. Upon hearing of the disaster Major Colley had 'rushed post haste to Dublin to inquire about his brother, Mr. Ed Pomeroy Colley of Dublin and Limerick'.⁹

At the next subsequent sitting of the Tipperary Petty Sessions the Chairman of the Magistrates Mr. E.J. Murnane J.P. proposed a resolution of sympathy towards Major Colley on his loss. The solicitors present, Messrs. John O'Dwyer, N.F. Maher and William Frewen, as well as D.I. Brownrigg on behalf of the R.I.C., supported this motion. It was reported that following the resolution 'Major Colley arrived and took his seat on the bench, but no further reference was made to the subject'.¹⁰ At the close of business at the Golden monthly sessions, over which Major Colley presided on May 18, magistrate James Hourigan proposed a similar vote. Mr. Hourigan 'referred to the high opinion the magistrates held of Major Colley', adding 'he was only expressing their feelings in sympathy; deeply regretted the terrible occurrence'. Mr. James Ryan R.M., Mr. Chadwick C.P.S. and Sergeant Sullivan, Kilfeacle, supported the vote. Major Colley, who was 'visibly affected... thanked them all for their kindness'.¹¹

Major Colley not long afterwards departed Ireland to attend to the estate of his brother in British Columbia where he had extensive mining interests. Unusual for the time, it seems that Major Colley was highly respected in Tipperary as a popular, fair magistrate and following the death of his brother he received expressions of condolence from 'all creeds and classes in Tipperary'.¹²

One further traveller with a Tipperary link who boarded *Titanic* at Southampton was second-class passenger Miss Hilda Slayter. Miss Slayter was a sister of a Mrs. Haslam, wife of Captain Haslam of the Royal Irish Regiment, Clonmel¹³ and she survived the tragedy.

Among the 113 passengers who boarded *Titanic* at Queenstown (now Cobh) at noon, April 11, 1912 were four who had travelled south together from Tipperary. All had been booked as third class passengers by Mr. William Clarke, Cahir, agent to the White Star Line. Katie McCarthy, Katie Peters, Roger Tobin and Katie Connolly were near neighbours in south Tipperary and the indeed the three young women shared the same cabin on board.

Two of them were returning to the States after a visit home, and two were emigrating for the first time. Although the contemporary emigration figures for Tipperary were shockingly high

by current standards, by 1912 the numbers leaving the county to seek their fortunes overseas were in decline. Between 1901 and 1911 12,307 persons left Tipperary to go abroad, compared with 19,050 between 1891 and 1901. Indeed between 1851 and 1911 Tipperary lost almost 250,000 of her people to the lure of the emigrant ship.¹⁴ For all the reputed luxury of her appointments and elegance of her design, *Titanic* was, ultimately, a glorified emigrant boat.

Katie McCarthy from Ballygurtin, Kilmoyler, Cahir, boarded the ship as a third-class passenger. She was the only one of this foursome to survive. Her ticket, no. 383123, had cost her the princely sum of £7-15-0. Katie, aged 24 and the daughter of farmer Mr. P. McCarthy, was heading for Guttenburg, New York 'to join some relatives'.¹⁵ It has been suggested that she escaped the foundering liner in lifeboat no. 16.¹⁶ Certainly it is likely she escaped, as she subsequently claimed herself, on one of the last boats to leave. I believe it was lifeboat no. 13. This lifeboat was filled mainly with second and third class women and children and pulled away from the stricken vessel just 45 minutes before she disappeared under the surface.¹⁷ In his definitive work on the subject of the sinking 'A Night To Remember', Walter Lord tells of how second-class passenger Laurence Beesley was surprised to discover as he tucked a blanket under the toes of a crying baby in lifeboat no. 13, 'that he and the lady holding the baby had close mutual friends in Clonmel, Ireland'.¹⁸ Could this have been Katie McCarthy? Of course it could also have been Hilda Slayter (See above).

Shortly after the sinking 'A cablegram (was) received in Bansha from Miss McCarthy's brother in the States stating that she (had) arrived at her destination but that her two companions (had) been lost'.¹⁹ The 'two companions' were Katie Peters and Roger Tobin, also from Bansha.

Peters and Tobin, like so many steerage travellers, had not been as fortunate as Katie McCarthy. Miss Peters, aged 26 from Ballydrehid, Cahir was a daughter of Mr. William Peters, a local farmer.²⁰ In a poignant twist of fate Katie was returning to America where she had been working for the previous four years, following a three month holiday at home in Ballydrehid. Her destination was New York City and she was also travelling steerage. Her ticket, no. 3330935, had cost her £8-2-9.

Mr. Roger Tobin, Ballycarron, Cahir, aged 22 was also heading for New York City as a third class passenger. He too was the son of a farmer, Mr. Patrick Tobin, and it is known that he occupied cabin no. 38 on 'F Deck'. As male steerage passengers were quartered in the forward compartments of the liner, and as 'F Deck' was deep in the ship's hull, a little above the water line, it is likely that Roger Tobin would have been amongst the first to be woken by the jarring groan as the iceberg collided with *Titanic*. These forward compartments were also the first to flood and so Tobin would have been quick to evacuate that part of the ship, sensing that something was seriously amiss.

Roger Tobin was later described variously as 'a young man of splendid physique'²¹ and 'a splendid type of Tipperaryman, and . . . a universal favourite . . . he was famous in the local Gaelic fields as a hurler and footballer and brought with him on his voyage a fine selection of camans'.²² Roger Tobin was a member of Galtee Rovers F.C. in Bansha. At a meeting of the Club on April 28 members present 'spoke with deep emotion' of his loss, and following expressions of sympathy with his parents, brothers and sister 'It was unanimously decided to have Masses offered up for the repose of his soul'.²³ As a third-class male passenger his death was something of a statistical inevitability. Of the 454 steerage males on board only 55 survived.²⁴

Miss Katherine Connelly, 22, from Bank Place in Tipperary Town also perished that night. It seems that, like Katie Peters, Katherine Connolly was returning to America after a visit to her widowed mother.²⁵ The tragedy of her loss was cruelly compounded for her family by a

particularly unfortunate series of misunderstandings following the disaster. In the immediate aftermath of the ship's demise Major Pomeroy Colley having travelled to Dublin to ascertain the fate of his brother, promptly wired from Dublin: 'Katie Connolly on Carpathia according to list published – Colley'. A subsequent wire from a Mr. P. McCarthy, Sallins, stating 'Katie is saved' understandably increased the rapture of her mother and brothers. To confirm their relief a final cable was received from a Miss Queenie D'Arcy stating 'Katie's name among survivors in the evening papers'.²⁶ The *Tipperary Star* captured the general relief of Katie's family and community in a brief article, which trumpeted confidently in a wire report from Tipperary Town:

Great satisfaction was expressed here this morning on the arrival of the Dublin papers giving further confirmation that Miss Katie Connolly was among the rescued from the unlucky Titanic, and the Connolly family in Park Place (sic), are the recipients of many congratulations.²⁷

Tragically the general jubilation proved premature as a subsequent wire to the family from the White Star offices at Queenstown revealed that in fact two third-class passengers sharing the name Katie Connolly had embarked on the liner at Queenstown. The 'Katie Connolly' mentioned in the published lists of survivors was, in fact, a 21 year old lady from Ballynarry, Co. Cavan.²⁸

A letter written by Katie McCarthy, the sole survivor of the group, shortly after the sinking is the only first hand account we have of a Tipperary person's experience of the disaster. It is an invaluable source as it recounts exactly what happened to her and her companions on the night in question. Writing to her father from New Jersey where she was staying with her sister, Katie wrote:

About twelve o'clock on Sunday night Roger Tobin called us to get up, but told us not to be frightened, as there was no danger. To make sure, however, of our safety, he told us to get lifebelts. There were three of us in the room – Katie Peters, Katie Connolly, of Tipperary, and myself. When Roger Tobin called us I wanted them to come up on deck, but they would not come. They appeared to think there was no danger. That was the last I saw of them'.

Katie left the cabin alone and when she reached the deck above was fortunate enough to meet 'a man from Dungarven, who took me up to the second-class deck, where they were putting out the boats'. She was put into one boat 'but was taken out of it again as it was too full'. Finally being placed in one of the last boats to leave she continued:

We were only just out of the way when the ship split in two and sank. We remained in the boat all night until near eight o'clock next morning when we were rescued by the Carpathia. Our boat was so full that I thought it would go down every moment, and one of the boats capsized when we were leaving the sinking ship. I did not, however, feel at all frightened, and did not realise the full danger and the full nature of the awful tragedy until I was safe on board the Carpathia. When we were put on board the Carpathia we were immediately given restoratives and put to bed. I slept for an hour, and then got up, feeling all right. When we landed in New York . . . we were met by a number of Sister of Charity Nurses, who took us to St. Vincent's Hospital, where we were treated with the greatest kindness.²⁹

Katie's reference to a capsizing lifeboat confirms my suspicion that she was on board lifeboat no.13. Lifeboat no. 15 almost capsized when, being lowered too quickly, it nearly fell down on top of boat no. 13, which pulled away just in time.³⁰

One of the few male third-class passengers to have survived the sinking of Titanic was 24-year-old Edward Ryan. Both the *Irish Times*³¹ and the *Tipperary Star*³² give 'Tipperary' as his address at various points. This was shortly after the sinking, however, when much of the data published was either confused or inaccurate. In fact it seems that Mr. Ryan was from Croom, Co. Limerick.

A brief perusal of the local newspapers of the time reveals how significant a story the sinking of *Titanic* was for the people of Tipperary. For weeks and even months after the event the story continued to steal the headlines, with shocking accounts of how the 1,500 passengers perished, and detailed descriptions of the panic and confusion as the listing liner was evacuated. Indeed some of the county's "ex-pats" sent back newspaper reports from the U.S. to satisfy the popular local appetite for added details about the sinking. *The Nationalist* received 'a bundle of New York papers containing long reports with 'scare headings' about the Titanic Inquiry' from Mrs. T. Farrell, 443 W. 43rd St., N.Y. City. Mr. J.J. Morrissey of New York posted the same paper 'an article on the Titanic disaster' as well as some risible poetry thereon.³³ Bad verse inspired by the sinking seemed particularly prolific at this time and certainly 'Lament for the Titanic' by Francis Phillips of Cashel (published in the *Tipperary Star*) is a fine example.³⁴

The papers also bring into sharper focus the more individual, intimate tragedies of the local families who lost loved ones in the disaster. They represent a valuable record of how rural communities sought to come to terms with a tragedy whose scale was beyond their experience and ability to understand.

At such a time and in such an era religion offered obvious consolations. On the confirmation of Katie Connolly's death the *Tipperary Star* intoned solemnly that she had '... met the rewards of a pious Catholic life and a martyr's death...'.³⁵

On Sunday April 21 1912 at first mass in Bansha, a parish that lost two of its members to the catastrophe, Rev. J. Quinlan C.C. asked the congregation to pray for the repose of those souls lost. At second mass the Rev. D. Moloney 'who was deeply moved' asked the congregation to pray for the eternal rest of the victims. He noted that the three passengers from Bansha, Katie Peters, Katie McCarthy and Roger Tobin had all 'in accordance with the custom of Irish Catholics... approached the sacraments' together at their parish church before leaving. The congregation that morning included 'the weeping mother and sister of the young Mr. Tobin... and the scene was extremely touching'.³⁶ At second mass in the parish church of Cappawhite that same morning the Rev. M. Ryan C.C. Thurles also 'referred in touching terms' to the cataclysm.³⁷

Civic acknowledgement of the disaster in Tipperary came in the form of resolutions of condolences with the bereaved from many public bodies, including amongst others the Magistrates of the Tipperary Assizes and the Tipperary Guardians. Stories, many perhaps apocryphal, began quickly to emerge in the county of passengers who had 'near misses' in their choice of transatlantic liner. The *Tipperary Star* gave mention of one such putative case in which '[a] young Templemore man, booking at Mr. J. K. Moloney's Office, Thurles, suddenly changed his mind from the White Star Line to the Cunard, for both of which... Mr. Moloney is agent...'.³⁸ *The Nationalist* carried the same story adding that the young Templemore man 'had been some years in America and was returning there', but in changing his choice of liner at the last moment 'he undoubtedly escaped death'.³⁹

Tipperary people, probably numbed by the immediate local impact of the sinking, were generous in their contributions to the Mansion House fund established soon after by the Lord Mayor of Dublin, to provide for victims' relatives. Amongst the county's contributors were:

Lady Carden (of Templemore):	£1-0-0. ⁴⁰
Collection Fethard Church, per Rev. R.C. Patten:	£8-3-0. ⁴¹
Offertory Littleton Church, per E.G.S. Crosthwait M.A.:	£3-10-0.
Two Roscrea Sympathisers:	£0-12-0. ⁴²

Indeed on April 27 the Mayor of Clonmel 'at the request of many influential inhabitants of Clonmel and neighbourhood' decided to open a subscription list to aid the victims of the catastrophe. Money could be donated via the various banks in Clonmel or through Mr. William Casey at the Town Hall.⁴³ In just over a fortnight £27 had been subscribed.⁴⁴

On Monday night, May 20 1912 a benefit concert was held in the Electric Hall Clonmel in aid of those bereaved by the sinking. Organised by a local committee consisting, amongst others, of Mr. P. English and Mr. R. M. Scale, it was held under the patronage of Very Rev. Arthur Canon Ryan, P.P. V. G. The concert was highly attended and proved a great success. The management of the new theatre had kindly given the use of the Hall 'with its appurtenances, cinematograph and lighting machine' free. The entertainment consisted of a Western drama entitled 'Woman's Wit', some comic pictures as well as pictures of the *Titanic* and the rescuing *Carpathia*. Songs were also sung by Miss May M. Ryan, Mrs. P. Hogan, Mr. James F. D'Arcy, Mr. Gerald Fitzgerald and Mr. T. English.

The tragedy of *Titanic* was soon overtaken for the people of Tipperary by the greater horrors of the First World War and the disruption and terror of the Irish Revolution. The cataclysm, unparalleled in its own time, was quickly rendered insignificant by comparison with the socio-political upheaval which succeeded it. Thus has Tipperary's *Titanic* story been consigned to the footnotes and margins of the county's history.

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