

THE RIVET COUNT: obsessives and the Titanic

A personal view of the Titanic disaster by Mike O'Leary

I live in Northam, which is an old dockland area of Southampton. In 1912 whole streets in Northam, and the adjoining area, Chapel, lost their menfolk when the Titanic went down. I've lived in Northam since 1979, but during my first decade there I can't say that this story figured prominently.

In the early 1990s I wrote the historical introduction to a book called "Chapel and Northam; an oral history of Southampton's Dockland Communities". I had just become a primary school teacher, so I was rather showing off when I showed the book to the children. They weren't interested, though, in anything I'd written, all they wanted was the couple of pages about the Titanic. I began to realise the extent to which this was an obsession in Southampton. Northam and Chapel, as communities, had been shattered by all the forces that have shattered inner-city areas, but a lot of the community had been relocated to the peripheral council estates, and I was teaching in Millbrook, which was one of them.

All of the children, and their parents, seemed to reckon that they'd had an ancestor who had



Memorial to the engineers who died on the Titanic in St Andrews Park, Southampton.

gone down on the Titanic, and many of these ancestors were improbably recent. After a while I realised that some children were talking about ancestors who had been on ships sunk during World War Two, and it became apparent that these sinkings were being subsumed by the Titanic story - much in the way that the stories of various kings and chieftains have been subsumed by the story of Arthur. A comparatively recent event was already morphing into folklore.

Given all this enthusiasm, I decided that in my class room we'd carry out a topic on the Titanic - but I hadn't realised that the year, 1992, was an anniversary of the sinking. Partly because of this, the whole thing spiralled into something much

bigger. It got picked up by local TV, the children's models and writings became part of an exhibition of Titanic memorabilia at the Hilton hotel, at which, Milvina Dean, the last living survivor of the Titanic disaster, was trotted out.

People began to think that I was some sort of an expert on the Titanic; I even got a phone call, in the early hours of the morning, from someone in America who wanted to know some obscure detail about the Titanic's construction. I didn't have the first idea: I wasn't an expert, and I'd never claimed, or wanted, to be such a thing.

Then it all began to weigh me down. The story had become a magnet for obsessives; people (men) who could tell you how many rivets were on the boat, the extent of the cutlery; people who could trot out endless statistics about the numbers of survivors, numbers lost - and who were continually telling me that one of the four funnels was purely decorative - as the saying goes: "If I had a penny for every time I'd been told that, I'd be a millionaire." It was as if there had never been any other disasters in the world - and yet, at the same time, this obsessive de-

tail collecting distanced us from the human reality of the disaster.

But then of course: This was the maiden voyage of a great, and unsinkable, liner - so there is hubris. Then there is Thomas Hardy's "Convergence of the Twain" - so there is inexorable fate. These are powerful elements of myth - things to make it much more than a terrible historical incident. But it was different to a myth, it was an incident that had become everyone's property.

A few years later, when I was working as a storyteller, I was called upon to tell stories at the local maritime museum. I tried to tell the story directly, no clever-clever stuff, no judgements, no pretending knowledge of minute details. Always, though, these bloody blokes would descend on me to tell me how many rivets there were, and how many dinner plates, and on and on and on. More so; I was descended on by people who would only interpret the story according to their own personal agenda. This was often about the class structure on board ship; about the disparity in loss of life between first, second, third class and steerage. This was true, and very telling, but these men would rage about it, as if class discrimination was frozen into that one incident, and not into the world that the ship sailed through, or - more importantly - the world that still exists.

One time, I was telling tales in Northern Ireland, and on being told that I'd been involved in Titanic projects, a school asked me to talk about it. They were unaware of the Southampton connection, they were obsessed with the fact that she'd been built in Belfast. "People don't appreciate what a blow her sinking was to the protestant working class of Belfast" declared the head-teacher. In a flippant and irritable mood I suggested, most unfairly, that they should have made a better job of it. I was never asked back to that school.

Then, recently, in Newfoundland, I came across an exhibition about the Titanic. It was obsessed with the role that irresponsible, English, upper class capitalists had played in the disaster. The disaster was all due to corner cutting and the attempt by the Titanic to claim the Blue Riband, the award for the fastest crossing of the Atlantic. This, of course, never led to any critique of capitalism beyond the disaster; it was all an exercise in inverted snobbery and xenophobia.

My suggestion that all of these factors can be grouped together under the phrase "shit happens" can never satisfy someone who wishes to use this tragedy to pedal their own agenda. And "use" is the word - and that is what is so deeply depressing. Everyone was just using this human tragedy. In Southampton a Titanic survivor, who died in 1965, was buried in Hollybrook cemetery. The "Titanic Historical Society Inc. of Indian Orchard, Mass, USA" reported that he was buried in a paupers grave, and erected a grave stone complete with a picture of the Titanic. It wasn't a paupers grave, the man had sisters who weren't consulted, and were upset by this temerity. These obsessives and their society were perfect examples of people for whom a story is more important than the reality that lies therein, and who have divorced a story from the reality of flesh and blood. They created a shallow story, set in a deep sea. For the man who died, the Titanic was part of his life - but he'd had a life before, and a life after. There had been love and good things in his life, and also, unfortunately, other bad things. It wasn't all about the Titanic. The obsessives of this Titanic society were intruding. They had no right





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to do so.

What should we get from the story then? From my own point of view, I have to remember that the last port of call was Cork, and my grandfather stood on the cliffs at Clonakilty and watched her sail past. Oh, ok, he never did - I made that up. You see, everyone has to claim personal ownership - and the passengers in steerage, they weren't mainly Irish, as they are in the films, dancing around to surprisingly professional Chief-tains like bands; they were mainly Swedish. So what should I say? And, of course, I'll be pedalling my own agenda.

Well, let's drop the myths, and now I use that word in its lesser definition; "a fiction or half-truth"; the nonsense about the upper class man dressing as a woman in order to board a life-boat, the rubbish about cursed Egyptian mummies in the hold, the cobblers about the Belfast ship builder welded up in the hull. Rather, what about those stokers, working class men mostly from Southampton, who kept the fires burning till the

last possible moment so the ship could remain illuminated, what about those people who passed the children through the crowd to the lifeboats. And what about Captain Rostron - captain of the Carpathia. He did everything right. He cleared the decks, readied and lowered the life boats, and steamed full speed to the rescue of the survivors. His story may not have grand titles like hubris, nemesis and fate; rather it has qualities that were more valued in Southampton; humanity, professionalism and seamanship.

I'll leave the last words to the wonderfully named Mrs. Winnifred Quick Van Tongerloo. She was Winnie Quick from Plymouth, who, with her mum, sailed on the Titanic as an eight year old girl, emigrating to America (she later gained the Van Tongerloo part of her surname from marriage). She lived until 2002, but was never keen on being part of a Titanic circus, though demands were made on her after the films "A Night to Remember" in 1958, and "Titanic" in 1997. In the 1960s, Winifred and her husband, Alois, travelled America in their station wagon; they visited every state except Hawaii. In spite of her fear of deep water, they once made the overnight crossing from Michigan to Wisconsin on the Ludington ferry. Al awakened in their cabin during the night and found Winnifred was gone. He got up to look for her and found her standing silently at the railing looking out into the darkness. Winnifred had awakened and heard an odd, vaguely alarming noise which made her think of the

Titanic. Not wishing to disturb her husband's sleep, she had slipped quietly out of the cabin to give herself a chance to face and conquer the uneasiness alone. It was a part of her life.