

THE TITANIC

by Mike McCormack, NY State Historian

Just 14 years before the end of the Twentieth century, an unthinkable tragedy occurred when the Challenger space shuttle exploded on its maiden voyage. That disaster echoed another unthinkable tragedy, which had taken place only 12 years into the century when the great ocean liner, Titanic, went to the bottom of the Atlantic on her maiden voyage. Both events shook the international community, because each represented the epitome of modern technology, each was believed disaster-proof and each forced us to pause and reflect on our fallibility.

The earlier tragedy occurred on April 15, 1912, when the largest and 'safest' ocean liner built by the hand of man, sank to the ocean floor. Taller than an 11-story building, that marvel of engineering slipped beneath the icy waters of the north Atlantic carrying almost 1500 souls to a watery grave. By 1999, the shock and horror had been largely forgotten as millions flocked to see Titanic sink twice nightly in a Las Vegas stage production, a Broadway musical based on the disaster broke box office records, and the movie **Titanic** became the biggest money maker to date. But then, it always was a good story!

As strange as it seems, the story fascinated the public before it ever happened. Back in 1898, a full 13 years before Titanic was even built, a Morgan Robertson novel **Futility** was published which portrayed the hopelessness of man's obsession with technology in the face of his own mortality. It was the story of a fabulous ocean liner of 70,000 tons displacement (Titanic was 66,000 tons), and 800 feet long (Titanic was 882 feet). Both the fictional ship in Robertson's novel and Titanic were triple screw driven, both could make 25 knots and carry about 3,000 people. Significantly, each carried life boats for only a fraction of that number since each was considered unsinkable. Robertson loaded his ship with rich, complacent passengers, and sailed it into the Atlantic, also in April, where it collided with an iceberg and went down with a tremendous loss of life. If it sounds like an uncanny coincidence, consider this: the name of the ship in Robertson's novel was **Titan**.

Fascination with Titanic was revived in 1985 with the discovery of her wreckage. Photos showed opulent, modest and meager accommodations based on the ability to pay. The wealthy traveled first class; they played shuffleboard or strolled the airy deck until cocktail time was announced in one of the luxury salons where they occupied their time until gourmet meals were served in a spacious dining room. Dancing in the ballroom often capped off their evenings. Second class passengers occupied comfortable, but unpretentious, smaller cabins on the middle levels and those least able to pay were placed in steerage or third class, at the lowest level, in multiple occupancy quarters. These accommodations were filled with many Irish immigrants reflecting this time of extremes in wealth and poverty. However, that was not the only connection with Ireland.

Designed by Irishman Thomas Andrews of Co Down, Titanic's first keel plate was laid on March 31, 1909 at Harland and Wolfe's shipyard in Belfast whose workforce was known for its anti-Catholic attitude. It was even claimed that the folio number of the plan of Titanic was 390904 which, when viewed in a mirror roughly read NOPOPE. Launched on May 31, 1911, her maiden voyage took her to Southampton, England; Cherbourg, France; and Cobh, Co. Cork before crossing the Atlantic to America. Advertised as the marvel of the age, some said God himself couldn't sink her; many later claimed that such arrogance had placed a curse on her. She was built to carry 3400 people, but fortunately only 2200 were on her maiden voyage, since there were only enough lifeboats for 900.

There were 322 passengers in first class, 277 in second class, and 709 in third class, most of whom boarded at Cobh. The rest were crew members. About four and a half days out of Cork, Titanic hit an iceberg; two and a half hours later, she slipped below the icy waters taking 1500 with her. Most of those were the passengers who were trapped in steerage, where access gates had been locked to insure that first class passengers could depart on the available life boats first. It was later stated that during evacuation, women and children from all classes were given preference in the lifeboats. Facts later showed that only 3% of the women and none of the children from first class perished, while 45% of the women and 70% of the children in steerage were lost. Further, 34% of the men in first class survived, but only 12% from third. In all, fully 75% of Titanic's Third Class passengers perished.

One of Titanic's survivors was the daughter of Irish immigrants who became known as 'the unsinkable Molly Brown.' She kept up spirits of the survivors and later raised money to aid the survivors of Titanic's third class.

Another of Titanic's more fortunate passengers was also named Brown, only with an 'e'. He was an Irish Jesuit named Fr. Frank Browne, a native of Cork whose ticket was a gift from his uncle, Bishop Robert Browne. The Bishop provided passage from Southampton to Cobh, where he resided. Knowing of his nephew's interest in photography, the Bishop gave his nephew the opportunity to photograph the maiden voyage of the world's largest ship, while returning to Ireland for a visit. On board, Father Browne befriended an American family who offered to finance the remainder of his trip to New York. He cabled the Jesuit Provincial Superior in Dublin for permission to accept the offer. The four word reply read, *Get off that ship*. Years later, he remarked that holy obedience had saved his life. It also saved some remarkable photographs, for among the vast collection of photos taken by Father Browne in his lifetime, those taken aboard the Titanic during her two day voyage to Co. Cork, are the only record of the liner at sea. They were seen in newspapers around the world after the tragedy. His shots of the ship's structure were even used in 1986 by the salvage crew to confirm the identity of the wreck.

One of Fr Browne's photos even led to a heartwarming story. It seems that a wealthy Frenchman had run away with the family governess, taking his two sons, aged four and two, with him. He booked passage on the Titanic under an assumed name. Both the father and his lover were lost when the ship sank, but the boys were lifted into a lifeboat and saved. Arriving in New York, they were called the **Titanic Orphans**, and were asked for in adoption by Mrs. Benjamin Guggenheim, widow of one of the Titanic victims. Across the world, the boys mother saw one of Father Browne's photos in a newspaper and recognized her lost sons. Finally aware of where they'd been taken, she sailed to New York, and reclaimed her sons just before their adoption became final, providing a happy ending to at least one Titanic story due to a photo taken by an Irish priest aboard a ship that had been built in Ireland.