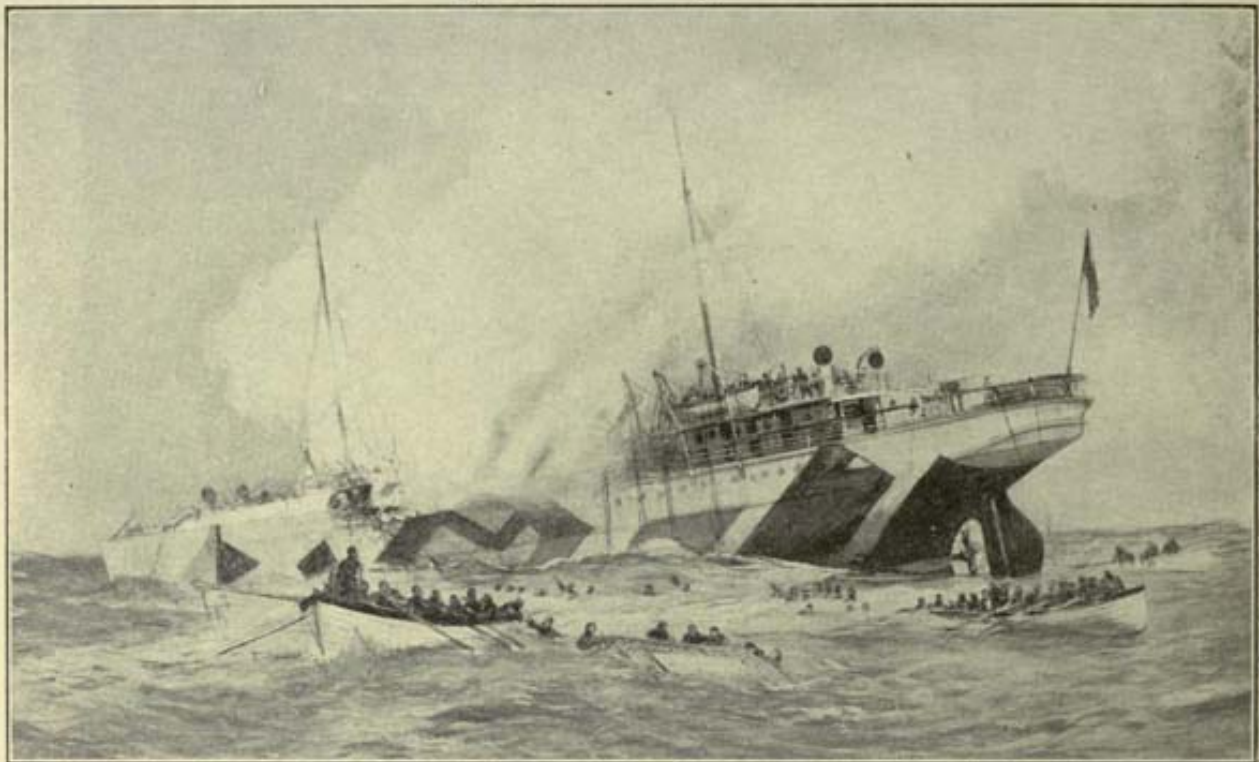




remembrance ni

## Murder on the High Seas by the Kaiser's Minions



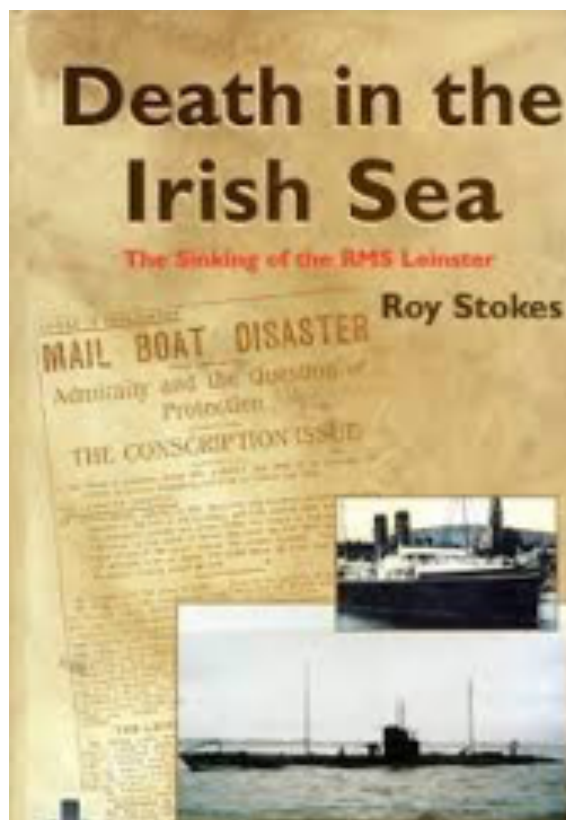
## The sinking of the Royal Mail Ship Leinster

On October 10, 1918 one of the most controversial actions of the war took place a few miles from Kingstown (Dun Laoghaire), when German U Boat torpedoed the RMS Leinster resulting in the deaths of servicemen and women, and civilian staff and passengers. In all some 565 people, including Josephine Carr (19) from Cork, the first ever Wren (Women's Royal Naval Service) to be killed on active service.

The sinking of the RMS Leinster resulted in the greatest ever loss of life in the Irish Sea and the highest ever casualty rate on an Irish-owned ship.

Between 1850 and 1920, the City of Dublin Steam Packet Company (CDSPCo) operated a mail and passenger service between Dún Laoghaire (then Kingstown) and Holyhead, Wales.

Having the post office contract to carry mail across the Irish Sea, the four ships covering the route carried the prefix RMS, for Royal Mail Steamer. Nicknamed the “Provinces”, they were named RMS Connaught, RMS Leinster, RMS Munster and RMS Ulster.



Each ship had an onboard mail sorting room, staffed by members of Dublin Post Office. Irish post for Britain was put aboard trains at Westland Row (now Pearse Street) railway station, from where it was sent to Dún Laoghaire (then Kingstown). British post for Ireland was sent by rail from London to Holyhead. At both ports the post was put aboard the mailboats.....

Leinster was under the command of Captain William Birch (61), a Dubliner who had settled in Holyhead. His crew of 76 were drawn from both Kingston and Holyhead.

In the ship's postal sorting room were 22 postal sorters from Dublin Post Office. The 181 civilian passengers - men, women and children - were mostly from Ireland and Britain.

But by far the greatest number of passengers on board the Leinster were military personnel. Many of them were going on leave or returning from leave. They came from Ireland, Britain, Canada, the



**The image above shows the anchor which was recovered from the wreck of the RMS Leinster and is displayed at Dun Laoghaire as a permanent memorial to all those who lost their lives when The Leinster was sunk by a German U-Boat on the 10th of October 1918. There were 491 military personnel on board the ship when it was sunk, 339 were killed and 152 survived.**

United States, New Zealand and Australia. There were 25 members of the Royal Navy aboard the ship amongst the military personnel.

On the Western Front the German Army was being pushed back by the relentless assaults of the Allied armies. The war was in its final month. Thousands of Irish men and women were serving in Britain's armed forces. The British and Americans had a number of airfields in Ireland. A large American and British naval force was based in Co Cork. There were smaller British naval forces at other ports, including Kingstown.

As the Leinster, a city of Dublin Steam Packet Company ship, set sail the weather was fine, but the sea was rough following recent storms. Earlier that morning a number of Royal Navy ships at sea



off Holyhead were forced to return to port due to the stormy conditions.

Shortly before 10 a.m. about 16 miles from Kingstown (Dun Laoghaire) a few people on the deck of the Leinster saw a torpedo approaching the port side of the ship. It missed the Leinster, passing in front of her. Soon afterwards another torpedo struck the port side where the postal sorting room was located. Postal Sorter John Higgins said that the torpedo exploded, blowing a hole in the port side. The explosion traveled across the ship, also blowing a whole in the starboard side. German Submarine UB 123 had struck with deadly accuracy.



In an attempt to return to port, the Leinster turned 180 degrees, until it faced the direction from which it had come. With speed reduced and slowly sinking, the ship had sustained few casualties. Lifeboats were being launched. At this point a torpedo struck the ship on the starboard side, practically blowing it to pieces. The Leinster sank soon afterwards, bow first.

Many of those on board were killed in the sinking. In lifeboats or clinging to rafts and flotsam, the survivors now began a grim struggle for survival in the rough sea. Many died while awaiting

rescue. Eventually a number of destroyers and other ships including HMS Mallard arrived. The survivors were landed at Victoria Wharf, Kingstown (Dun Laoghaire), where the ferry terminal now stands.

Doctors, nurses, rescue workers and a fleet of 200 ambulances rushed to Victoria Wharf. Those needing medical care were brought to St. Michael's Hospital in Kingstown (Dun Laoghaire) and several Dublin Hospitals. Those not requiring medical treatment were brought to local hotels and guest houses.

In the days that followed bodies were recovered from the sea. Funerals took place in many parts of Ireland. Some bodies were brought to Britain, Canada and the United States for burial. One hundred and forty four military casualties were buried in Grangegorman Military Cemetery in Dublin, including Colin Campbell, his wife and baby daughter.

Officially 501 people died in the sinking, making it both the greatest ever loss of life, and the highest ever casualty rate, on an Irish owned ship. Research to date has revealed the names of 529 casualties.

The sinking of the Leinster has to be seen in the wider context of the war. In late 1918 the German army were being worn down by the relentless assaults of the Allied forces.

The German fleet, still confined to port, was on the verge of mutiny. Meanwhile the men of the submarine service continued to attack enemy merchant shipping. In the final weeks of the war submarine UB-123 left Germany.

On board were 35 young men who were determined to strike a blow at their country's enemies. Commanded by twenty-seven year old Robert Ramm, UB-123 sailed north of Scotland and entered the Atlantic. Then sailing down Ireland's west coast and along her south coast, the submarine turned north into the Irish Sea. There on 10 October 1918 she torpedoed and sunk the R.M.S. Leinster.

On 18 October 1918, while returning to Germany, UB-123 struck a mine in the North Sea. Robert Ramm and all of his young crew were lost.

The sinking of the Leinster jeopardised for a few days the peace talks which were being sought to end the war.

On 6th. October, 1918, US President, Woodrow Wilson, had received a message from Germany - "The German Government requests the President of the United States to arrange the immediate conclusion of an armistice on land, by sea and in the air."

The Leinster was sunk on the 10th and on the 14th, President Woodrow Wilson replied to the German Government which included the comment: "At the very moment that the German Government approaches the Government of the United States with proposals of peace, its submarines are engaged in sinking passengers ships at sea . . ."

Soon afterwards, Germany ceased its attacks on merchant shipping. On 21st October Reinhard Scheer, Admiral of the German High Seas Fleet, signalled his submarines: "To all U-boats: Commence return from patrol at once. Because of ongoing negotiations any hostile actions against merchant vessels prohibited. Returning U-boats are allowed to attack warships only in daylight. End of message. Admiral."

On 11th November, 1918 the armistice was signed between the combatant powers ending the First World War

### **Leading inventor of naval compass from Dungannon lost in sinking**

Lieutenant Commander George Richard Colin Campbell - known as Colin, was a career naval officer. He had been promoted to Lieutenant Commander in 1916.



He joined the Admiralty Compass Department, rising to become superintendent of the Magnetic Compass Branch. With Dr. G.T. Bennett he invented the Campbell-Bennett Aperiodic Compass.

Travelling with Campbell on RMS Leinster to Dun Laoghaire was his wife, Eileen, and four and a half year old daughter, also

named Eileen. All three were lost in the sinking of the Leinster. Eileen Campbell's body was recovered from the sea with her baby still tightly clutched in her arms. He was 34 years of age. He was born at Ballyeglish, Moneymore. He was the son of Canon Edward Fitzhardinge Campbell, who was rector of Killyman (1886–1921) and rural dean of Armagh.

A report of the Armagh Diocesan Synod in the Belfast News-Letter of 26 October 1918 included an account from Canon Abraham Lockett Ford, rector of Ardee recounting how his daughter, who had connections with the VAD, happened to be in the Kingstown area when the Leinster went down.

She volunteered to help in the days that followed as they struggled to transport and identify the 'mangled remains', and had told her father of one the most pathetic scenes she witnessed was that of a mother around whose neck her infant child's arms were so tightly entwined they found it impossible to separate them.

Canon Ford was unaware at the time that the woman was known to him, or that she was in fact daughter-in-law of his diocesan colleague, the Revd Edward Campbell.

## The mystery of two Fusilier Neills from Portadown

Among the bodies plucked from the sea in the days that followed was that of a Private James Neill of the Royal Irish Fusiliers who had been returning to the battlefields of France after a few days of home leave in Portadown.

His widow, Elizabeth, brought his body back to his home town and he was buried in Seagoe Cemetery with full military honours, another human tragedy in that war of human tragedies.

His story, however, does not end there.

In France, another James Neill was also to lose his life, overtaken by wounds received in battle. Again, he was serving with the Royal Irish Fusiliers and again he came from Portadown.

This Private Neill, however, was buried close to where he fell; in France.

His name was later added to his family's memorial tablet in Seagoe Cemetery.

After the war, the newly formed Commonwealth War Graves Commission was faced with the mammoth task of trying to ensure that casualties' final resting places would be known and remembered. This mission took them all over the world.

In Portadown, however, the coincidence of two men with the same name, from the same town, belonging to the same regiment, was to lead to a 94-year mix-up that took until November 2012 to put right.

The error only came to light in 2006 when Barbara Murray, a volunteer with the War Graves Photographic Project, realised something was wrong in Seagoe Cemetery. She contacted the War Graves Commission and Amanda Moreno from the regimental museums.

"In the six years since Barbara realised something wasn't right, there was a lot of research and hard work," said Amanda.



"Sometimes you hit the brick wall and you walk away from it. Then you come back and try again.

"Then, just a month ago, I actually found James Neill's service record which hadn't been available before then. That just allowed us to finish the research so completely to allow the family to learn all about him, which they hadn't known before." James' closest living relative, his granddaughter Elizabeth Haworth, was guest of honour at a service to unveil his headstone in Seagoe Cemetery.

## **RMS Leinster NI Roll of Honour**

### **CAMPBELL, George Richard Colin**

Royal Navy. Lieutenant-Commander. R.N. Compass Dept. (Slough). H.M.S. "President." He died on the 10/10/1918 aged 34. A career naval officer, he had been promoted to Lieutenant Commander in 1916. He joined the Admiralty Compass Department, rising to become superintendent of the Magnetic Compass Branch. Inventor of Campbell-Bennett aperiodic compass. He was born in Ballyeglish, Moneymore, Co. Derry. He was the son of the Rev. Edward. F. and Lydia Campbell, of Sheskburn, Ballycastle, Co. Antrim; husband to the late Eileen Campbell (nee Knox-Browne), of Aughentaine, Fivemiletown, Co. Tyrone. Grangegorman Military Cemetery, Dublin. Dungannon WM

### **DYSART, John**

The Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers. 12th Battalion. Private. 19787. He died on the 10/10/1918 aged 37. He was born in Coleraine Derry. Transferred to Labour Corps (464875). He was the son of Hugh and Sarah Dysart, of Coleraine; husband of Nancy Dysart, of Pate's Lane, Coleraine. Grangegorman Military Cemetery, Dublin. Coleraine WM

### **EARLEY, Patrick**

Royal Garrison Artillery. 1st Res. Battery. Gunner. 43279. He died on the 10/10/1918. He was born in Camus County Tyrone. Strabane Cemetery, County Tyrone

### **GARTLAND, Felix**

Royal Irish Rifles. Rifleman. 9389. Transferred to Labour Corps (390357). He died on the 10/10/1918 aged 63. He was the son of James Gartland, of Lisavery, Crossmaglen, Co. Armagh. He was a native of Creggan, Crossmaglen. Hollybrook Memorial Southampton

### **HUGHES, James**

Royal Navy. Able Seaman. SS/6769 HMS Walrus. He died on the 10/10/1918. Son of John and Rose Ann Hughes. Born 10/07/1897 in Moy, County Tyrone. The family lived in Anagasna Glebe, Moy. James was one of 12 children. Plymouth Naval Memorial, Panel 27 Moy WM

### **LUTTON, George**

Royal Munster Fusiliers. 6th Battalion. Private. 5251. He died on the 10/10/1918 aged 32. George Lutton made his last will and testament in which he left his property and effects, Half to John Lutton, Seylocan Moy, County Tyrone. Half to Mary A Colgan, Canary Moy, County Armagh, Ireland. He was born in Moy, County Tyrone. Kirkpatrick (Holy Trinity) Churchyard, Isle of Man. Moy WM

### **McMULLAN, Robert**

Royal Irish Rifles. Rifleman. J 730. transferred to Labour Corps (223596). He died on the 10/10/1918. He was born in Donaghcloney County Down. Husband of the late Isabella McMullan (nee Cairns), Drumlough, Hillsborough, County Down. Hollybrook Memorial, Southampton

## **NEILL, James**

Royal Irish Fusiliers. Private. 18132. transferred to (617046) 195th Prisoners of War Coy. Labour Corps. He died on the 10/10/1918. Aged 46. Son of Edward and Mary Neill. Husband to Elizabeth Neill, of 28, Fowlers Entry, Portadown. Seagoe Cemetery. Portadown WM

## **SHEERIN, Hugh**

Irish Guards (Reserve Battalion). Private. 12284. He died on the 10/10/1918. He was born in Templemore, Londonderry. Hollybrook Memorial, Southampton

## **THOMPSON, Thomas**

Royal Dublin Fusiliers. Private . 20747. He died on the 10/10/1918. He was born in Templemore County Londonderry. Youngest son of Susan Thompson of Melrose Terrace, Londonderry; and the late Thomas Henry Thompson. Brother of Winifred Thompson, Melrose Terrace, Londonderry. Brother of Henry Norman Thompson and Victor Logan Thompson, who also lost their lives in the First World War. Thomas Boyd Thompson was a member of both Ebrington Presbyterian Church, Waterside, and the Congregational Church, Great James Street, Londonderry. He enlisted in March 1915, at the age of sixteen. He was twice wounded, and wore four service chevrons and two gold stripes. He was returning to England after a week's leave. His funeral took place on Sunday, 13/10/1918. The cortege was of immense dimensions, all classes being represented, and as it passed slowly to Londonderry City Cemetery numbers lined the streets. The funeral was with full military honours, and, in addition to the soldiers, the procession included the minister and deacons of the Congregational Church, of which deceased's father was a deacon; the minister, teachers, and boys of Ebrington Presbyterian Church (the soldier being a former Sabbath School scholar); and the president, committee, members, and Bible Class of the Y.M.C.A. The coffin was borne on a gun carriage, covered with the Union Flag and surmounted with wreathes. The service in the home was conducted by the Reverend David Dale, B.A., and the Reverend T.A. Hickson Moriarty, M.A.,

and at the graveside by the Very Reverend the Dean of Derry, Reverend Leslie Rankin, and Reverend D. Dale, B.A. Londonderry City Cemetery. Diamond War Memorial, Londonderry

## **Acknowledgments**

BBC NI - Tale of a headstone and two James Neills

C of I RCB Library - archive by Dr Miriam Moffitt

Diamond War Memorial Project

Irish Medals

Irish Times

Ulster War Memorials

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The **remembrance ni** programme is overseen by Very Rev Dr Houston McKelvey OBE, QVRM, TD who served as Chaplain to 102 and 105 Regiments Royal Artillery (TA), as Hon. Chaplain to RNR and as Chaplain to the RBL NI area and the Burma Star Association NI. Dr McKelvey is a Past President of Queen's University Services Club. He may be contacted at [houston.mckelvey@btinternet.com](mailto:houston.mckelvey@btinternet.com)

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