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Elisabeth Thorsell

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An almost forgotten tragedy at sea

The story of the *Empress of Ireland*

BY ELISABETH THORSELL

The *steamship Empress of Ireland* was launched at Liverpool on January 27th, 1906; she displaced 14,191 tons, and had accommodations for 1,700 passengers and a crew of 500. Her service speed was 18 knots (33 km/h). She had 2 propellers. She was owned by the Canadian Pacific Steamship Company.

On her departure on her fatal voyage on 28 May 1914 from Quebec City just 1,057 passengers and 417 crew were aboard, as she sailed down the St. Lawrence River that late Spring afternoon. Dinner was served; the Captain, Henry Kendall, entertained prominent guests at his table – actor Laurence Irving and his wife (he was the son of Sir Henry Irving); Sir Henry Seton-Karr (former British M.P.) and his wife were amongst the number.

Some years before, when Commander of the ship *Montrose*, Captain Kendall had been responsible for the arrest of the infamous murderer Dr. Crippen, and perhaps he would have told his guests of this adventure.

The catastrophe

At 1:35 a.m., the ship's lookout, Jack Carroll, reported: "A ship's masthead spotted on the starboard bow!" It was a squat, graceless freighter, far ahead. Shortly afterwards, a blanket of fog descended, then lifted, and they saw that the boat was heading directly towards them. The *Empress* gave a long blast on the foghorn, then the fog descended again. Captain Kendall gave the order to go full speed astern, and the liner stopped as the engines were reversed.

Within two minutes, the ships

were about one length apart, and he gave orders to his engine room to go full speed ahead, to reduce the shock of collision. Just at that moment, the freighter came right in, and cut the *Empress* in a line between the two funnels.

The freighter was the *S.S. Storstad*, a Norwegian collier of 6,028 tons, and fully laden with coal. It was commanded by Captain Thomas Andersen, said to be a strict disciplinarian. For this reason, no doubt, First Officer Alfred Tuftenes, in charge on the bridge, didn't wake his captain until just before the collision. Had he done so, a thousand lives might have been saved.

Captain Kendall later reported: "When he struck me, I had stopped my engines. I shouted to him to keep full speed ahead, to fill the hole he had made and then he backed away!"

The ship began to fill, and almost immediately listed over to starboard. The wireless operator quickly sent out an S.O.S. Very few passengers even heard the collision, and others didn't stand a chance, being trapped in their cabins. Within five minutes, the ship was listing so badly that it was impossible to walk on the deck.

The first lifeboat just dropped into the water; the second one was more successfully launched; others were

almost impossible even to reach. In fourteen minutes, the ship went down, in 110 feet of near-freezing water. After the *Storstad* took aboard nearly all the survivors, they were later transferred to two smaller ships, the *Eureka* and the *Lady Evelyn*, which then took the survivors to Rimouski, a city on the Saint Lawrence inlet.

The inquiry

Lord Mersey, who had presided over the Inquiry regarding the sinking of the *Titanic* in 1912, and would do so again when the *Lusitania* was torpedoed by a German submarine off southern Ireland, presided over the Board of Trade Inquiry into the sinking of the *Empress*.

Convened in Quebec City on June 16, 1914, the Inquiry found the *Storstad* at fault. A Norwegian Inquiry, conducted at the Norwegian Consulate General in Montreal, ultimately exonerated the *Storstad* and its captain, Thomas Andersen. To this day, the two conclusions are irreconcilable. The *Storstad* was seized as requested by the CPR in a \$2,000,000 lawsuit for damages and sold for a sum of \$175,000 to Prudential Trust.

This was Canada's worst peacetime maritime disaster.

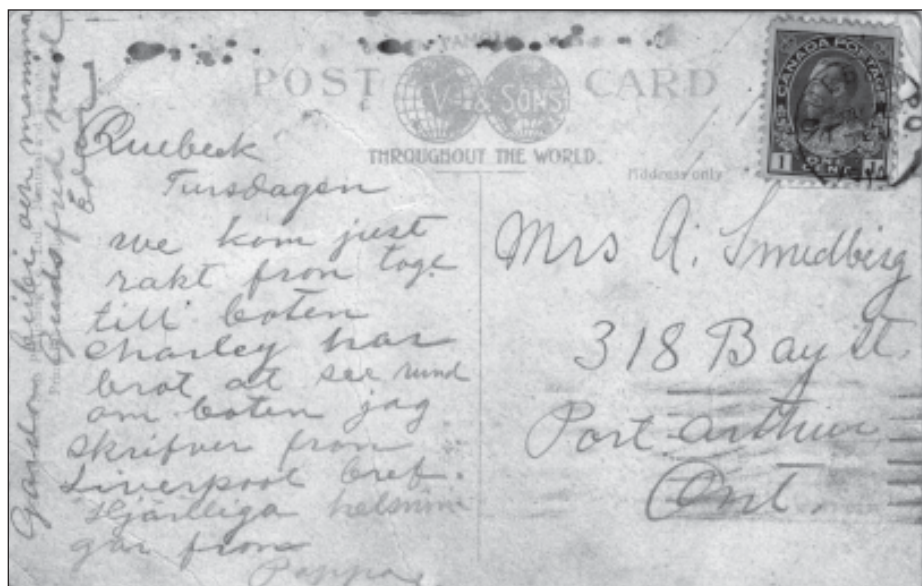
	Saved	Lost	Total
First Cabin - -	36	51	87
Second Cabin - -	48	205	253
Third Class - -	133	584	717
Crew (including Musicians)	245	175	420
Total - -	462	1015	1477

Third class passengers with a destination in Sweden

Anderson, Mrs. Alvin, Minneapolis, MN	Gothenburg	lost
Anderson, A., Vancouver, B.C.	Malmö	lost, body identified
Blomqvist, August, Winnipeg, Manitoba	Gothenburg	lost
Blomqvist, Mrs., " "	Gothenburg	lost
Blomqvist, Fred " "	Gothenburg	lost
Blomqvist, Erik " "	Gothenburg	lost
Carlson, A., Minneapolis, MN	Gothenburg	lost
Clausen, David, Lethbridge, Alberta	Gothenburg	saved by <i>Corsican</i> 31 st May
Engstrom, John, Minneapolis, MN	Gothenburg	lost
Erickson, Eric J., Rossland, B.C.	Gothenburg	lost
Erickson, Nels I., Bellingham, WA	Gothenburg	saved by <i>Corsican</i> 31 st May
Evans, Russell, Chicago, IL	Gothenburg	lost
Fransen, Oscar, Fernie, B.C.	Gothenburg	lost
Gustafson, John, Minneapolis, MN	Gothenburg	lost
Johnson, Andrew, Minneapolis, MN	Malmö	saved by <i>Corsican</i> 31 st May
Johnson, Alida, Chicago, IL	Gothenburg	lost
Larson, Nels, Omaha, NE	Gothenburg	lost
Lindqvist, Jonas, Shellbrook, Sask.	Gothenburg	sailed on <i>Empress of Britain</i> 11 June
Lindqvist, Martha, Shellbrook, Sask.	Gothenburg	" " "
Nelson, Gust., Minneapolis, MN	Gothenburg	lost
Nilson, Sigfrid, Kamloops, B.C.	Helsingborg	saved by <i>Corsican</i> 31 st May
Olsen, Gustav, Racine, WI	Gothenburg	lost
Parsk (Barsk), Maria, Chicago, IL	Gothenburg	to Chicago 1 st June
Peterson, G., Sherbrooke, Que	Gothenburg	lost
Samuelson, Carl, Omaha, NE	Gothenburg	lost
Swan, Chas, Minneapolis, MN	Gothenburg	at Montreal 6 June
Swanson, Amandus, Kamloops, B.C.	Helsingborg	saved by <i>Corsican</i> 31 st May
Swanson, Martin, Maple Creek, Sask.	Malmö	saved by <i>Corsican</i> 31 st May
Towlander, Mrs., Winnipeg, Man.	Gothenburg	lost
Vinquist, C.J., Omaha, NE	Gothenburg	lost

This passenger list found at

http://www.sea-viewdiving.com/shipwreck_info/empress_home/passengerindex.htm



Postcard from victim

The *ålänning* Rafael Smedberg and his son Charley, age 10, from Port Arthur, Ont., decided to go back and visit relatives on Åland and in Finland. Just after boarding, Rafael wrote a postcard to his wife, and told her that they had just arrived at the ship and that Charley was eager to inspect the boat. He would write more from Liverpool, and wished the ones at home God's peace.

(We kom just // rakt från toge // till boten // Charley har // brot att se runt // om boten[.] Jag skrifver från // Liverpool bref. // Hjärtliga hälsningar från Pappa .

Across the card: Garda, Bibi [illegible name] och mamma // Guds frid med Eder)

Postcard belongs to Don Arril. Thanks to Elinor Barr and the Swedes in Canada project.