

# SHIPWRECKED LIVES

A NOVEL ABOUT  
THE GOVERNMENT INQUIRY INTO  
THE DISASTROUS SINKING OF  
THE EMPRESS OF IRELAND



NICHOLAS KINSEY

*The Empress of Ireland passenger liner collided with the Norwegian collier Storstad in the St. Lawrence River on a foggy night in May 1914, sinking in 14 minutes and claiming the lives of 1,012 people. This is the story of the survivors and the government inquiry into Canada's worst maritime disaster.*

## **Shipwrecked Lives**

by Nicholas Kinsey

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## LEXICON OF NAUTICAL TERMS

aft:	the back of a ship
bow:	the front of a ship
masthead lights:	two white lights with the front masthead light lower than the stern masthead light
port:	left side of ship looking forward (showing a red light)
porting or hard to port (hard-a-port):	turning to starboard (to the right) by bringing the tiller to port with the rudder going to starboard
starboarding or hard to starboard:	turning to port (to the left) by bringing the tiller to starboard with the rudder going to port
starboard:	right side of ship looking forward (showing a green light)
stern:	the back part of a ship
whistle or horn:	signals a ship's movement
a prolonged blast:	means that a ship is making way under power in fog
three short blasts:	means that a ship is stopping its forward movement by running the engines astern
two long blasts:	means that a ship is not moving but lying still in the water



# One

May 29, 1914

A long blast from the ship's whistle awakened Tiria Townshend in her berth. She turned over in bed and then got up to look out of the porthole at the dark night. A heavy fog was blowing in near the ship and all that was visible was the edge of the lower promenade deck. A second long blast was heard from the ship's whistle.

Tiria was a young New Zealand woman travelling to England with her Aunt Wynn timer in the berth just across from her. She returned to her bed just as three short blasts were heard on the ship's whistle. She gave up any thought of sleep and lay wide-awake listening to the sounds of the ship.

The passenger liner had started to slow down going through the thick fog. On the bow of the proud vessel, one could read: *EMPRESS OF IRELAND*. She was the sister ship to the *Empress of Britain* and was a fast ship on the North Atlantic run.

A second series of three short blasts was heard. Tiria supposed that passenger liners blew their whistles all the time on the St. Lawrence River as a greeting of some kind or perhaps it was customary in a fog. Still, it was very annoying and made sleep impossible. She glanced at her aunt and saw her stir fitfully in her berth. At that moment the ship's engine faltered briefly and then she heard a long blast coming

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presumably from another ship.

“What was that?” Wynnie asked, rubbing her eyes.

“It’s a fog horn, Auntie,” Tiria said, “we’re going through fog.”

There was a sudden change in the engine noise as the ship started to move again.

On the bridge, Captain Kendall yelled through a megaphone at a collier which had suddenly appeared out of the fog heading straight for the starboard side of the passenger liner.

“Go back, go back.”

Moments later, the two ships collided in the fog. The *Storstad* bow cut into the side of the *Empress* like a knife going through butter. Steel sliced through steel to a depth of 18 feet. A bronze plaque from the *Empress* cabin number 328 fell noisily onto the bow of *Storstad*.

“Keep your engines full speed ahead,” shouted Kendall in desperation at the *Storstad*. “Keep full speed ahead.”

The *Storstad* officers ran out onto the bridge of their ship as Captain Anderson in the wheelhouse attempted to keep the nose of the collier in the side of the *Empress*, but it was a useless manoeuvre as the two ships quickly separated in the fog.

In her cabin, Tiria got up and went to the porthole looking out briefly, but the ship remained enveloped in the fog.

“Something’s happening, Auntie.”

Tiria opened the cabin door to pandemonium. She saw several passengers milling about in the hallway and others



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emerging from their cabins. Some were going up to the promenade deck to take a look. An assistant steward was lighting the gas lamps and moving down the hall.

"Is everything all right?" asked an elderly woman.

"Of course, ma'am," the steward replied.

The woman returned to her cabin as the steward disappeared from view. Tiria stepped back inside to find her aunt sitting up in bed.

"What's going on, dear?"

"I don't know, I think we hit something."

There was a sudden listing to starboard and Tiria lost her balance, before grabbing the side of her berth.

"Let's get dressed and go have a look," Tiria said.

She put on her coat, stockings and shoes as Wynn timer got up and started to pull on her coat.

From the hall, they could hear a loud male voice going from door to door. A knock was heard at their door and the voice announced: "EVERYBODY OUT."

Tiria rushed to open the door and saw Chief Steward Gaade, pulling on his white jacket, as he went down the hall. The first-class passengers were standing around, holding canvas and cork lifebelts in their arms.

"Get your lifebelts on and go out on deck," Gaade yelled to the passengers. A panicked woman grabbed his arm.

"Have we struck an iceberg?" the woman asked.

"Please save us," another woman cried.

"No one will be saved unless you go out on the deck and get in the boats," Gaade insisted.

Tiria slammed the door and quickly finished dressing.

"Come on Auntie, we've got to get out of here. Hurry up."

Wynn timer put on her shoes and stood up.

"I'm ready, dear."

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Tiria grabbed her aunt by the arm and pulled her towards the door as the floor of the cabin tilted at an angle. The door swung open, slamming them both up against the wall. Together they scrambled up the inclined floor and left the cabin.

The corridor was almost empty as Tiria and her aunt headed for the promenade deck, bouncing off the side wall due to the list of the ship. They struggled up the almost vertical stairs to the boat deck on the starboard side where they could hear a lot of shouting and people milling about.

Tom Bingham held his little family close and desperately looked for a safe way off the ship. It was a miracle they had gotten this far. They had been travelling in second class, several decks below first class, and it had been just that much further for them to reach the boat deck.

Tom and Alice were young, strong, and driven by the need to get their little boy Jamie to safety. They had been wakened by the ship's whistles and struggled to dress the sleeping child before leaving their cabin. They had to fight their way through the crowded passageways and the stairwells made hazardous by the list of the ship.

Now Tom looked at the chaos on the boat deck and wondered if they were going to be saved at all. Several steel lifeboats on davits were being lowered into the water, but an impenetrable mob of desperate passengers was already clamouring for places on them. He dragged his wife and son over to a railing and then went in search of lifebelts. The list of the ship was worse by the time he got back.

"I could only find two," Tom said. "Put one on Jamie and another on yourself."

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Alice put Jamie in the lifebelt and had to double it around him due to his small size. She had to brace herself by putting a foot on the railing to avoid falling overboard. Many passengers had already fallen off the slippery deck into the water.

Nearby the crew was busy lowering a lifeboat full of frightened women and children into the water some thirty feet below. In the river, there were some twenty passengers, who had escaped from a capsized lifeboat and were struggling to stay afloat among debris from the ship.

Alice finished attaching Jamie's lifebelt and then held the other one out to her husband.

"I can swim, Tom. You put it on."

"No, you put it on. Do it now," Tom insisted, "I'll hold Jamie."

He put his arms around the child and grabbed the railing. Alice had just finished putting on her lifebelt when she suddenly lost her balance and flipped over the railing into the water. There was nothing Tom could do but watch, horrified at the disappearance of his wife.

Tiria had pulled her aunt away from the chaos on the starboard side. It had been an uphill struggle against the list of the ship but somehow they had managed to climb to the port side railing. On the way, they had run into an assistant steward who was busy distributing lifebelts. Tiria had been lucky to get the last one after having struggled with a man holding several in his arms.

People screamed as the ship listed dangerously in the water. Tiria looked down the way they had come. It seemed like an almost vertical drop to the starboard side. The ship was

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sinking fast and was almost on its side. Tiria and Wynnie climbed over the port side railing and walked down the side of the ship over the portholes.

Wynnie stopped briefly to look at a small boy's panicked face looking out at them from a porthole. She thought about the frightened child and his parents who had no chance of escaping the sinking ship. They had barely had time to escape themselves from their cabins in first class, but there was no hope for those with cheap accommodations in steerage. Tiria pulled her aunt away and they continued down the side of the ship towards the water.

Most of the steel lifeboats on the port side were stuck on their davits and unmovable, while several Englehardt collapsible wooden lifeboats had been cut free and were drifting on the water. Knots of terrified passengers gathered near the waterline in their lifebelts hoping to get into one of the drifting wooden boats.

Tiria thrust the lifebelt on her aunt.

"Put this on, Auntie."

"I can't accept it, Tiria. You put it on."

"Auntie, please. We're going into the water. You can't swim. I can swim, in fact, I am an excellent swimmer. Give me your coat."

Tiria helped her aunt off with the coat and put on the lifebelt, attaching it at the front. She helped her aunt remove her shoes.

"I love you, dear," Wynnie said.

"I love you too," Tiria said. "We're going to be all right, you'll see."

Wynnie was frozen with fear as she stood at the edge of the water, watching Tiria pull off her shoes.

"Tell Brian, I love him. I'll miss him."

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“I will, Auntie. I’ll tell Uncle Brian, I’ll tell everyone.”

Suddenly, the ship lurched to starboard as the funnels struck the water with a loud crash and a cry went up from the passengers. Tiria and her aunt slipped off the ship into the water as a load of rigging and debris cascaded down the port side.

## Two

The *Empress of Ireland* passenger liner had gone down fast, the suction from her massive hull dragging a large number of people down with her. She sank in only 14 minutes and there was little hope for survival among the passengers in second and third class.

In the dark cries could be heard from passengers struggling to stay afloat on the black water of the St. Lawrence. A heavy steel lifeboat appeared out of the fog with a sailor on the bow holding a kerosene lantern illuminating the water. The men were pulling survivors into the boat as fast as they could find them. Nearby in the thick fog, Tiria struggled with her coat as she looked around for her aunt who had disappeared from view.

"Wynnie...Wynnie," Tiria called out as she swam in circles trying to locate her aunt. She swam near a man wearing a lifebelt and pushing a floating suitcase.

"Can you help me pull off my coat, please," Tiria asked the man. He took pity on her and swam closer.

"Here, take the case," he said.

Tiria grabbed the case for support as the man pulled the wet coat off one shoulder. She dumped the coat as she climbed onto the case.

"Thank you, sir," Tiria said, but the man had already

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disappeared behind a wave in the fog. The lantern of a Norwegian lifeboat appeared dimly out of the fog. Tiria abandoned the case and swam towards the boat.

In the dawn light, a farmer and his wife were driving along the coast road in a horse-drawn wagon to the market in St. Luce, when they stopped to look at the figure of a woman walking on the shore.

It was a very strange sight so early in the morning. The woman was wearing a torn shift and was naked from the waist up. She had very white skin and long auburn hair down her back, as she walked east along the beach into the sunlight.

The husband and wife glanced at each other, unsure whether their eyes were deceiving them.

*"Qui est là?"* the woman asked her husband.

*"Je ne sais pas, ma chère,"* he said, "but it is quite unusual to see someone walking naked on the beach so early in the morning."

The farmer secured the reins and climbed down from the wagon.

"She needs our help, the poor woman," the wife said in a charitable tone.

"Maybe she's a crazy woman," the husband said with a naughty grin, "or perhaps a Protestant temptress put there by the devil."

The wife laughed at the dark humour of her husband.

*"Le père Simard* might say that, but I think she's a real person, not a ghost. Take the blanket."

The husband set off after the woman who appeared to be in a daze as she stumbled along the beach in her bare feet, talking to herself.

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*"Mademoiselle, vous avez froid. Please, take the blanket."*

Alice glanced at the man following her, covering her breasts with her arms and shivering from the cold. She lurched away from him. He watched her go and his heart went out to her. Something terrible had happened to this young woman. She was wet and cold and unstable on her legs, like a boxer who had just received a knockout punch and was struggling to maintain her equilibrium before collapsing.

The man stopped and looked back at his wife, raising his arms in a sign of frustration. After a moment of indecision, he decided to take matters into his own hands and ran after Alice. He seized her in the blanket after wrestling her to the ground.

*"Vous parlez français?"*

The woman shook her head.

*"You speak English?"*

Alice lost consciousness in the man's arms.

The wagon drove along a street in the town of Rimouski and pulled up at the portico of the Ursuline monastery on Notre Dame street. The monastery was an impressive building perched on the heights with a view overlooking the St. Lawrence River. The Ursuline sisters were the first Catholic nuns to land in the New World. They ran schools and cared for the sick and the needy across the continent.

The farmer and his wife climbed down and helped Alice in her blanket into the foyer. Once inside the dark entrance, they were met by a sister in a black habit who whispered something to them in French. They sat down with the sister in an alcove and quickly explained the situation. The sister took pity on the poor English women with the damp hair and blanket. She put her arm around Alice and thanked the farmer and his wife. She



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led Alice away to the infirmary as the couple left the building.

In the infirmary, the sister sat Alice down in a corner and went looking for clean clothes. She returned with the clothes and an older sister, who put a cup of hot tea in front of Alice and helped her to dress. The clothes were worn and had holes in them, but they were warm and comfortable.

Alice in a white blouse and grey wool cardigan drank her tea as the two sisters tried to make conversation.

*"Madame, vous êtes une rescapée du bateau?"*

Alice nodded.

*"Comment êtes vous arrivée sur la plage?"*

*"La plage, you mean the beach?"*

The sisters nodded enthusiastically before Alice shook her head, unable to reply to the question.

A third sister arrived with a bowl of soup and a crust of bread. Alice was ravenous and quickly ate the food under the sisters' watchful eyes. After she had finished the soup and eaten a portion of the bread, she suddenly stood up, looking very agitated and ran out of the infirmary.

The sisters watched her go as their mother superior, an older woman wearing spectacles, stepped into the room from the stairwell.

*"Où est-elle?"*

The sisters pointed to the chapel down the hall.

*"Elle est partie en courant, mère. She ran away."*

The mother superior followed Alice and found her looking very agitated in the chapel. In the dark interior Alice was marching up and down and talking to herself.

"Jamie, come to mummy," Alice demanded of the voice in her head. "I told you to come back!"

The mother superior stepped into the chapel and gently took Alice by the arm.

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"Miss, I speak English," she said. "How are you feeling?"

Alice said nothing as the woman led her back to the infirmary. The sisters sat Alice down again as the mother superior questioned her.

"You were on the ship?"

"The ship?"

"Yes, the passenger liner, dear. Everyone in town is talking about the sinking of the ship."

Alice looked down at a button on her cardigan hanging by a thread and started to pull on it. She appeared to not understand the question.

## Three

After dark, Alice was taken in an open buggy to the railway station by the monastery driver. She had on an old woollen coat and seemed alert as she sat next to the driver. The horse trotted up to the station door and stopped. The driver came around to help Alice climb down and then led her into the building.

*“Attention à la marche, madame.”*

They climbed the stairs and entered a crowded waiting room. They wound their way across the floor, filled with groups of men talking in loud voices and foreign tongues, and descended the stairs to a large room in the basement, which had been turned into a makeshift dormitory for the surviving women and children from the ship. The women sat on foldable beds talking in whispers, as the children played together nearby. Intermittent sobbing could be heard, coming from the dark recesses of the room. A woman with an apron appeared carrying a tray full of cups of tea.

*“Merci, Georges. I’ll look after her now.”*

*“Bonsoir, madame,”* said the driver as he left.

The *Empress of Ireland* had belonged to the Canadian Pacific

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Railway (CPR) along with her sister ship the *Empress of Britain*. The ships were built on the Clyde in Scotland with Liverpool as their home port. The *Empress* brand of passenger liners travelled the oceans of the world, linking Liverpool to Quebec City and New York, Vancouver to Hong Kong, Yokohama, Sydney and Auckland. *Empress* ships offered the ultimate experience in trans-Atlantic or trans-Pacific travel. It was almost inconceivable that such a prestigious passenger liner could be lost at sea.

The news of the disaster had travelled like wild fire. During the first twelve hours, a lot of misinformation circulated in the press. When the news arrived in Liverpool on the afternoon of May 29, they were reporting that every passenger had been saved. CPR offices around the world were besieged by people who wanted to know whether a relative or crew member had been saved. As the actual numbers of lost lives started to come out, there was enormous public pressure to get the story right.

The town of Rimouski situated at the mouth of the Rimouski river in the Gaspé peninsula was soon besieged by journalists from around the world. They arrived by train on the Grand Trunk (GTR) rail line from Montreal in the west and from Moncton and Halifax in the east. They gathered at the pier, east of the town opposite St. Barnaby Island, waiting for the boats bringing in the bodies of the dead on the high tide.

A steamer arrived and started to unload the cadavers from the wreck, laying them out in pyramid shapes on the dock with the adults on the bottom and the children on top. The faces of the victims were swollen and bruised from floating in the river. There was a great state of agitation among the survivors and their families as they pressed forward, looking for their loved ones. The journalists were quickly pushed aside by the curious townspeople who had never witnessed such

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horrors before in their small community.

Alice advanced mechanically down the long rows of bodies peering furtively at the contorted faces of the dead. At the end of the pier, she suddenly burst into tears.

"I can't find them," Alice sobbed.

A sailor by the name of James Galt approached Alice.

"There's still the *Lady Evelyn* out there, missus. It'll be back in no time."

"They're both missing, my husband and my son."

"Well, I'm sure they're doin' their best to find them. Come back to the station. We'll get you a hot cuppa tea."

Galt took her arm and led her away from the crowd along the road to the railway station. Near a coal shed, several local children in rags were playing hopscotch. One of the girls stood out from the rest. Blonde and full of life, five-year-old Vicky Hayes wore a woman's cardigan that practically touched the ground. She had survived the disaster and was waiting for her parents to arrive.

Captain Kendall of the *Empress* was a survivor. Unshaven and leaning on a cane for support, he had insisted on filing past the rows of bodies on the dock. He was trailed by Johnson, his exasperated first officer.

"I'm the captain, Edward," Kendall said, "I have the right to see every bloody corpse I want to."

"You're making a fool of yourself. There's no point to it, Henry."

"I have to, I have to see them."

Kendall pulled away from Johnson and moved down the dock towards a woman, weeping over her dead husband. The woman looked up as Kendall approached.

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"You the captain of the ship?" the grieving woman asked him and he nodded wearily.

"Well, you should be downright ashamed of yerself. You kilt me husband, dam' you man."

The woman spat at the captain, who stepped back in shock. To his relief, Johnson arrived and led him away.

"What's the good of being a whipping post for these poor folk?" Johnson said. "It won't bring back their loved ones, that's for sure. Leave 'em in peace, I say."

Kendall was speechless as they left the crowd on the dock.

"I had a talk with Murphy, sir," Johnson said, "he'll go along with whatever you have to say. The other men will back you anytime."

"I sent my report to Walters. He..." Kendall stopped in mid-sentence and looked off into space.

"You did your best, sir," Johnson said.

The two men looked at each other in silence. Kendall felt ashamed and humiliated by the bodies on the pier while his colleague seemed quite unaffected by the ordeal.

Alice Bingham lay on a cot in the makeshift dormitory at the station and tried to have a nap. Finally, she gave up and struggled to her feet. She made her way among the sleeping bodies towards the exit where she noticed a little blonde girl playing with a doll.

"Shouldn't you be resting?" Alice asked.

"I don't want to miss my mummy," Vicky mumbled, sitting cross-legged on a cot. "Dolly wants to go for a walk."

"She's very pretty. My name's Alice, what's your name?"

"Vicky."

"How old are you, Vicky?"

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"Five."

"I'm going upstairs, do you want to come with me?"

Vicky got up, collected her doll and gave Alice her hand. Together they climbed the stairs to the waiting room where the men were lodged and then walked through the crowd on the platform to the canteen.

In the canteen Alice ordered a hot chocolate for Vicky and herself. They sat down in silence at a table, observing each other over the steam from their cups. Vicky took a spoon from the saucer and fiddled with it, playing at feeding her doll spoonfuls of hot chocolate.

"My mum and dad are coming to fetch me tomorrow."

"They are, are they?"

"My mum has red hair, your hair is brown."

"My hair is auburn, reddish-brown. You can see the red tint in it, if you look carefully."

Vicky held a blonde curl in her hand, smiling.

"My hair is blonde."

"Yes, it is and it's lovely."

Vicky drank her chocolate, observing her new friend.

Captain Kendall and First Officer Johnson were lodged in an old farmhouse near the edge of town belonging to the local CPR agent. The plan was to keep the captain and the first officer of the *Empress* away from any journalists who might be looking for a story in the small town.

"Walters is worried about the inquest tomorrow," Johnson said, sitting at the kitchen table drinking tea in the fading light. "He thinks that it is a sight too early. People are demanding it, so the newspapers are sending their reporters here."

"Did you see the face of that woman on the dock?" Kendall

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asked, looking exhausted.

“Don't you worry about her, sir. She's just an old bag, lost her man, that's all. Forget it.”

Kendall sighed and said nothing as the yellow light from an oil lamp flickered across his tired face.

“Would you like a drink?” Johnson asked. “Got a good scotch whisky from the harbour master. It'll do you a world of good, old chap, keep yer mind together.”

Johnson stood up to get two glasses and poured the whisky. He handed a glass to Kendall, who pushed it away.

“Drink it later if you like, sir. Nothing like good, hard liquor. Mustn't waste it, that's what I say.”

Kendall closed his eyes as Johnson drank his whisky.

“When a ship goes down, that's the hand of fate,” Johnson murmured. “Fate's a sly bastard, he is, always doing what's least expected. I say it's no fault of the skipper or the crew when a ship goes down.”

Johnson looked over at Kendall, who had fallen asleep in his chair from exhaustion.



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