

Launch of Philip Lecane's *Women and Children of the RMS Leinster: Restored to History*, Elm Books, Dublin, 2018*

I first met Philip Lecane through the internet when I was researching Australian soldiers of the First World War who are buried in Ireland, of whom four at Grangegorman Military Cemetery were victims of the sinking of RMS *Leinster*. Philip generously provided me with information from his extensive research on that tragedy.

I am not the only person with whom Philip has had contact concerning this project. The extensive list of acknowledgements at the beginning of this book stands as testimony to the vast international network that Philip has built up over the years. His generosity has led to a reciprocation that has borne fruit in this magnificent publication which pulls together snippets of information from numerous sources enabling Philip to comprehensively cover his subject matter.

But that is not the only thing which makes this book stand out. For we have come to expect that from Philip, judging by his earlier works. For me, what makes this book exceptional among the vast literature dealing with the First World War is its innovative approach in that it concentrates on those non-combatant victims of the war, the women and children, who are often forgotten when we talk about the casualties of that conflict.

It is true that many books have recently appeared that examine the role of women in the war – but almost all deal with women as participants – nurses and munitions workers – not victims. Yet, Philip reminds us that in that very masculine war in which the grim reaper's scythe flayed a generation of Europe's young men, women too were victims, and children, as well. And in that regard, the subtitle, 'Restored to History', is apt.

If that makes this book exceptional, what makes it compelling reading is the fact that Philip devotes but little space to statistics and metanarrative, preferring instead to give human form to these victims. Of particular interest to me as an Australian is the story of Sydney-born Nurse Winifred Starling, who was serving with a NZ military hospital. Having visited Ireland, she was on her way back to England to join a hospital ship for the return journey to New Zealand when she died in the sinking of the *Leinster*. But let me give you a few examples to whet the appetite:

For instance, Philip gives us a fascinating account concerning Mary Coffey, Senior Stewardess on RMS *Leinster*. After relating her family background, he notes at p. 65 that she reported that she was washed off a life raft three times, before being rescued. But then he adds:

She did not return to work with the CDSPCo after the sinking. She subsequently became a travelling companion/governess to a Spanish or Venezuelan family for a period. ... Mary never married and subsequently lived at the family home until her death. The Coffeys became involved in Ireland's War of Independence and weapons were stored in the family home. Her family took the anti-treaty side in Ireland's civil war. During the Second World War she was one of a group of women who hid the German agent Hermann Goertz in their homes, moving him around to escape detection. Goertz had come to Ireland to make contact with the I.R.A. Subsequent to the arrest of Goertz, Mary was among a group of people interned by the Irish Government. She died on 20 December 1953 and was buried in Deansgrange Cemetery, County Dublin.

* The book was launched on 9 October 2018 at the Dún Laoghaire Library.

Philip tells us of the fate of another female steward, Louisa Parry, known as Louie (pp 66-67):

Parry ... went downstairs and got some women and children to the upper deck. She then went below again. She was helping a woman and child in a cabin when the door slammed shut, trapping all three. Some of the crew tried to open the door, but they were unable to do so due to the steep angle of the sinking ship and the pressure of water that was in the corridor. Eventually, in order to save themselves, they [ie the crew] had to leave. Louie and the two passengers she was helping went down with the ship. Engaged to be married at time of her death, her body was never recovered. Her mother mourned Louie for the rest of her life. For many years she would not allow the doors of the house to be locked in case Louie came home. But her grief was so great that she never spoke of Louie or allowed her name to be mentioned.

Philip divides the narrative into sections dealing with similar cases, such as women in uniform, families, youth, people travelling together, etc. One of the families he describes is the Blackburne family (pp 78-83): Charles and his wife Emily Beatrice (known as Bee), their children Audrey and Peter and the children's governess, Rose de Pury. Charles had been serving in the war and was wounded in the shoulder, losing the use of his left arm. Philip tells us:

Of the group, only Bee survived the sinking. The bodies of Audrey and Governess Rose De Pury were never recovered. The bodies of Charles and Peter were recovered and buried in the Officers Burial Ground in the Royal Hospital Kilmainham, Dublin.

Philip then quotes from a report in the London *Times* of 12 October 1918:

One gallant man, highly stationed and very popular in Dublin, was last seen swimming with his little child on his back. He and his two children have perished but his wife was saved.

The image of Charles desperately swimming with Peter on his back, able to use only one arm is very poignant. But what about poor Bee and the survivor guilt she must have felt. One can only imagine the grief that she suffered for the rest of her life.

Families were victims in other ways. According to the book, Charlotte and Thomas Foley were travelling on the *Leinster* in order to visit Charlotte's brother who had been wounded in the war (pp 89-91). They both died in the tragedy. Philip tells us:

The death of Charlotte and Tomas Foley left ten children orphaned. [But then he adds this interesting piece of detail:] Thomas's sister Lily was married to world famous tenor, John McCormack. The McCormacks adopted Kevin, the youngest child and made financial provision for the rearing of the other nine, who went to live with Thomas's mother and eldest sister

But it's not all doom and gloom. There is some humour as well to lighten the narrative. In telling Elizabeth Costello's story (pp 69-71), Philip quotes from an account of her ordeal she gave her daughter:

I found myself floating near a raft so packed with people that at times it submerged, tilting sideways, and many were thrown into the sea. I made no attempt to get onto it, but after a time I realised I was getting very cold and would soon lose control of the situation, So I tied my arm to the raft by means of

some rope that hung from the side. A Tommy in uniform was lying on his face on the raft, looking down at me. He kept repeating in a slurred voice, 'Oh dear. I don't like to see you down there. Come up here with me, my dear.' [Elizabeth must have blacked out as she continued:] I have no memory of the interval between this and the time I woke up to find myself completely naked, lying on a table, very drunk, in a torpedo destroyer that picked me up. No doubt I had been given artificial respiration and had the scum washed off me. I had also been given whiskey, which accounted for my cheerfulness. I vaguely remember sitting up, surrounded by my rescuers, making tea-party conversation, quite unembarrassed by my lack of clothing, which was remedied by someone's dressing gown.

There are many other stories of courage and cowardice, of good luck and bad, of sadness and joy. But that is the hallmark of Philip's writing on the First World War, both with regard to the sinking of RMS *Leinster* in both his books on that topic and, in his 2015 book *Beneath a Turkish Sky*, describing the slaughter of the Dublin and Munster fusiliers at V Beach on the first day of the Gallipoli campaign. It is a fine example of history from the bottom up where the stories of individuals are told in the context of the broader story of the war. And as such it is a valuable contribution to the work of those who write the grand meta-narratives, ensuring that the experiences of ordinary people are not written out of the history taught in schools and universities.

Philip shows a complete command of his subject matter, both at the level of the individuals whose lives and deaths he so respectfully relates, and of the submarine war that was going on in the Irish Sea. His research is detailed. Appendix 1 is a masterpiece of investigation, piecing together who was where and when. And Philip is a man after my own heart in that he provides footnotes both to cite his sources and to explain further details. If, like me, you like to read footnotes you can do so by casting your eyes to the bottom of the page. There's no fumbling of pages to look for endnotes at the back of the book. If you prefer not to read footnotes then you just read the text.

The book is beautifully presented for which Alan Nolan is credited. It is full of illustrations, which in the case of the people involved adds to our empathising with their predicaments.

It gives me great pleasure this afternoon to launch *Women and Children of the RMS Leinster: Restored to History*.