

# LEITRIM & THE LUSITANIA

## THE STORY OF JOHN PRIOR, KILTYHUGH

*Fergal McGirl*

IT WAS A COLD wet Sunday on the 10th May 2015 with no sign of Spring to appear when I went to visit my grandparents and uncle's grave in Corraleehan. After I paid my respects, I turned to leave before the next shower arrived. Leaving I glanced at the grave beside theirs and my eye caught the word Lusitania.

I had read it previously but this time it was different, as I realised that it was nearly a hundred years to the day since the man whose name was inscribed on it had perished on the 7th May 1915 with the sinking of the Lusitania.

John (Sonny) Prior was lost along with 1,197 other lives in the Atlantic waters, 18 KM from the Old Head of Kinsale Co Cork, when the Lusitania was hit by a single torpedo at 14.10 from the German U-20 submarine commanded by Captain Walter Schwieger. The ship had left New York on the 1st of May 1915 and was heading for Liverpool when struck and had sunk within 18 minutes of the first of two explosions to occur.

I was now curious as to the story behind John Prior who lost his life on that ship, and who was commemorated in a Graveyard in Co Leitrim far from where he died.

When I got back into Ballinamore I asked my mother of any details she knew about the story of John. She told me that he came from Kiltyhugh in Corraleehan originally. She knew his son James, also known as Sonny, and described him. She told me that he had two sisters, Mary Kate



■ John Prior on the Lusitania

and Rose. She also mentioned that a fellow who was on RTE was related to him but she couldn't recall his name but that he was down the country.

The Lusitania was known as *The Greyhound of the Seas* and was considered the fastest liner afloat at the time. On the 7th May, it was not running at full speed due to fog, nor was it taking an evasive Zig Zag action to avoid the enemy threat. This would have been advisable as Germany had declared the seas around the British isles a war zone in February after Britain had declared the North Sea a war zone in November 1914.

The Imperial German Embassy had placed a newspaper advertisement in 50 American newspapers warning people of the dangers of sailing on vessels which were flying the flag of Great Britain. This created a worry with some of the ships passengers and crew prior to departure. Many did not believe that they would

carry out the threat due to the fact that firing on a non military ship would breach International laws, known as the Cruiser rules.

About a week after visiting the graveyard, I happened to be reading through a two week old copy of *The Irish Times* (I know, don't ask) and saw an article written by Damien Tiernan, the South East correspondent for RTE in *The Irish Times* on 1st May. It turned out that John Prior is the great grandfather of Damien and he recounted John's story in the article. He wrote:

*"My great-grandfather perished on the Lusitania. His birth name was John Prior but he is listed as John Pryor. The family are not sure why or when this change happened. When the ship went down, he was listed—like the other Irish passengers—as "British", because Ireland was part of the United Kingdom at the time. It is believed 140 Irish passengers and crew died when the Lusitania was hit by a German torpedo on May 7th, 1915 off the Old Head of Kinsale.*

*John was from a small farm in Kiltyhugh, Cloverhill in County Leitrim. In the 1911 Census, it shows he was married to Mary Anne and they lived with his father Patrick, a widower.*

*John Prior met my great-grandmother on an earlier Atlantic crossing to Ireland. At that time, both were returning home to Ireland to live, having spent some years in the United States.*

However, their dreams of settling down in Leitrim were thwarted by harsh economic circumstances, and John Prior had to leave his wife and family behind to go back to America to make a living.

John Prior managed to get work in New York, possibly through his older brother James whom we believe emigrated a few years previously. It must have paid well, as we believe he was one of the few who travelled back to Leitrim for the summer months to help on the farm, and then returned to New York for the winter.

In 1915, he was on his way home for the summer on the Lusitania, and this time he intended to stay at home in Ireland, come what may.

John Prior was in third-class accommodation. This was forward of the bridge, above where the torpedo struck on the starboard side—at about 2.10pm in the afternoon. The ship went down in less than twenty minutes.

John Prior's body was never recovered. The tragedy, which has always been spoken openly about in our family, left three children without their father: James (Sonny); my granduncle, who was the oldest; my grandmother, Mary Kate who was born in 1912; and the youngest Rose, who was just three months old when her father died. John Prior never saw his youngest daughter.

His widow, Mary Anne, went on to marry again. She married Danny Bohan. One of Mary Anne's daughters from that second marriage, Annie Gallagher, is living in Boyle, Co Roscommon.

My grandmother Mary Kate, who married and made her home in Drumgowla, Cloone, Co Leitrim, dearly cherished the only photo we know that was

taken of her father, who drowned on the Lusitania. She married Joseph Tiernan from Cloone, and their eldest son Sean Tiernan is my father."

While we cannot know the exact detail of how John spent the final hours or minutes of his life on The Lusitania, an interview in *The Sligo Champion* with a survivor, Mr P J Mc Loughlin from Calry, Sligo, gives a good eyewitness account of how quickly things changed aboard the ship after it was hit and the confusion and tragedy that followed.

### **Excerpt from *The Sligo Champion***

"Mr McLoughlin had been in America about 16 years and was employed at the Hotel Bond, Hartford, Connecticut, before sailing for home. It was some four years ago since he visited Ireland, but was now returning with the intention of settling down at home with his wife and family.

With a view of ascertaining the full and true facts of Germany's latest act of piracy, our representative interviewed Mr McLoughlin at his own residence after his arrival.

Mr McLoughlin is a fine hearty type of Irish gentleman, and despite the fatigue and painful memories of his unique experiences, he courteously complied with the Pressman's request.

'I got aboard the Lusitania', he said, 'on Saturday morning, 1st May, 1915, about 10 o'clock. Our journey was very beautiful until Friday afternoon. I had just finished lunch was about 15 minutes on deck when a man said to me, "What's that coming along?" and I could see the ripple of the water. Just about a couple of minutes after he spoke, the torpedo struck the ship right underneath us. When the ship was struck, she trembled

for a couple of minutes and then began to list over to the starboard side. As it was thought the water-tight compartments would keep the liner afloat until help had arrived no boats were lowered. The Lusitania was again torpedoed about six minutes afterwards, and commenced to list over faster. As many of the passengers saw the Old Head of Kinsale in the distance, a great many on board felt quite happy, and did not think they were going to be doomed to a watery grave. At this time the life-belts were down in the cabins below and many of us felt somewhat afraid to go down. I thought the only chance for me was to get away to the rear end of the boat, as I felt it would be the safest plan to keep away as far as possible from the boilers in case of an explosion".

'When the boats were lowered', he continued, 'I saw some of them being toppled over, and women and children dashed to pieces against the side of the vessel. Where ropes were attached to the ship, I saw people clutching and hanging by them. A county Sligo girl whom I knew then came along in my direction and said to me, "For God's sake try and save me if you can".'

'However, I got a life belt and put it on her and told her to hold on to the railing until I would get one for myself. But, sad to relate, when I came back she had gone. At this time I could see nobody else on the ship and I jumped into the water. Just as I landed into the water another man leaped down on top of me, and one of his feet caught me on the shoulder and also hit me on the forehead (pointing to the mark.)

Of course this stunned me and drove me under the water. After recovering I scrambled to get to the top of the water again, but I found it was impossible, as

the surface was covered with dead bodies. The suction of the sinking vessel was so great that it drew me towards her, and I got such a crash I could not remember anything for some considerable time. After recovering again there was an explosion, which drove me away from the side of the ship, and I came to an upturned boat."

There was a little rope which extended out from her, and I held on to it until I gained further sufficient strength to crawl to the top. As I had drunk a good deal of salt water, I felt very sick but having got relieved of this after a little I began to improve. Next I came to a lady and I got hold of her, but she was so heavy, she gave me a great deal of trouble'. However, I managed to get her head upon the top of the boat, and while I was doing so she looked up and said 'God bless you, I have not got a life belt.' "I shall never forget that woman," he added. "When I got her safely upon the top of the boat another man came along, lying on the top of an upturned boat, and he said, 'When we get strength enough our only chance is to attach both boats together, so that we won't get capsized so quickly. Shortly after we heard noise and I believe that it came from a ship which was protecting the steamers coming to our rescue. About five vessels had now arrived and by 7.30 all those who had been in the water were practically picked up.

The only thing I remember after that was being taken on board a steamer called 'The Indian Prince.' When we were taken aboard this steamer, we had very little clothes and we felt cold. Having arrived at Queenstown we were taken to the Rob Roy Hotel, where we were treated with extreme kindness."

Captain Schwieger who commanded the U 20 boat known as the *Tiger of the Seas*, kept a diary.

This is his account from catching sight of the ship.

*2pm—Straight ahead the 4 funnels and 3 masts of a steamer with a course at right angles to ours. . . Ship is made out to be a large passenger liner.*

*3.05pm - Went to 11m and ran at high speed on a course converging with that of the steamer, in hopes that it would change course to starboard along the Irish Coast. The steamer turned to starboard, headed for Queenstown and thus made it possible to approach for a shot. Ran at high speed till 3 pm in order to secure an advantageous position.*

*3.10pm - Clear bow shot at 700m. . . angle of intersection 90 (degrees) estimated speed 22 nautical miles. Shot struck starboard side close behind the bridge. An extraordinary heavy detonation followed, with a very large cloud of smoke (far above the front funnel). A second explosion must have followed that of the torpedo (boiler or coal or powder?) The superstructure above the point of impact and the bridge were torn apart; fire broke out; light smoke veiled the high bridge. The ship stopped immediately and quickly listed sharply to starboard, sinking deeper by the head at the same time. Great confusion arose on the ship; some of the boats were swung clear and lowered into the water. Many people must have lost their heads; several boats loaded with people rushed downward, struck the water bow or stern first and filled at once. On the port side, because of the sloping position, fewer boats were swung clear than on the starboard side. The ship blew off steam; at the bow the name "Lusitania" in golden letters was visible. It was running 20 nautical miles.*

*3.25pm Since it seemed as if the steamer could only remain above water for a short time, went to 24m. and ran toward the Sea. Nor could I have fired a second torpedo into this swarm of people who were trying to save themselves.*

*4.15pm Went to 11m and took a look around. In the distance straight ahead a number of life-boats were moving; nothing more was to be seen of the Lusitania. The wreck must lie 14 nautical miles from the Old Head of Kinsale light-house, at an angle of 358 degrees to the right of it, in 90m of water (27 nautical miles from Queenstown) 51 degrees 22' 6" N and 8 degrees 31' W. The land and the lighthouse could be seen very plainly.*

*5.08pm Conditions for shot very favorable: no possibility of missing if torpedo kept its course. Torpedo did not strike. Since the telescope was cut off for some time after this shot the cause of failure could not be determined. . . The steamer or freighter was of the Cunard Line.*

*6.15pm It is remarkable that there is so much traffic on this particular day, although two large steamers were sunk the day before south of George's Channel. It is also inexplicable that the Lusitania was not sent through the North Channel."*

It is clear from his account that it was fortunate that another liner was not struck that day. It also raises the question around the failure to divert shipping away from the area in light of the previous day's action. Speculation in the past raised the issue of whether it was a deliberate attempt to draw the USA into the war. In any case, whatever the reason, John Prior perished that day as did so many others.