

A Matter of Course

by Randy Bryan Bigham

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The story of Noëlle Rothes, *Titanic's* 'Plucky Little Countess'

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There was more to Great Britain's fashionable Countess of Rothes than banquets and garden parties. She proved that the night *Titanic* went down.

Finding herself in an undermanned lifeboat, the pretty young peeress — called “Noëlle” for her Yuletide birth — practically took charge. Calming panicky fellow survivors, pulling an oar, even managing the tiller herself, Rothes led her small boat through choppy seas, past icebergs and debris, to the safety of the rescue ship the next morning. Even after *Carpathia* docked in New York, she remained aboard to aid steerage passengers who had lost everything they owned and had no place to go.

But her courage and compassion didn't end there. Randy Bryan Bigham examines the life of the Christmas-born countess and discovers that the heroism that made her famous in 1912 was par for the course for this real-life Lady Bountiful.



**Noëlle, Countess of Rothes
in 1907**

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The Gloucestershire village of Prinknash Park, nestled in the leafy hills of the Cotswolds, is a picture-perfect oasis of English charm. Peace pervades this little country nook, and it's easy to see why. Prinknash (pronounced “Prinnage”), is famed for its 16th century abbey where Benedictine monks blend incense and craft rosaries, and for a pastoral wildlife preserve where peacocks promenade among grazing fallow deer.

Prinknash Park was even more peaceful over a century ago when, having but three houses in it, the town may have been the smallest in England. One residence was the abbey itself, then owned by multimillionaire Londoner Thomas Dyer-Edwardes, who treasured his country seat nearly as much as he cherished his only child, a daughter he named Lucy Noel Martha — “Noëlle.”



Prinknash Park, the Dyer-Edwardes country estate.

Noëlle was born to Thomas and his wife Clementina (nee Villiers) in London on December 25, 1878, and if having such an auspicious birthday wasn't enough to ensure goodness, the child had the idyllic atmosphere of Prinknash to inspire and mould her. With playgrounds at Prinknash, in Kensington Square, the Dyer-Edwardes' London home, in Sussex, and in Normandy, where the couple had a chateau, no more perfect upbringing could be imagined than that provided young Noëlle.

Her mother and father certainly did their best. Small-framed, black-haired and bewhiskered, Thomas was sensitive and artistic, and for all his love of the country, he was cosmopolitan in his tastes. A Cambridge graduate, he made lucrative investments in firms and properties all over the United Kingdom, from India to Australia, where his own father was a substantial landowner. In fact he donated the bells for Melbourne's St. Paul's Cathedral in honor of Thomas Dyer-Edwardes, Sr.

Noëlle's mother, Clementina, was pretty, well-adept at the social graces and spoke fluent French, being part of a large, aristocratic family descended from the Dukes of Perth and Melfort. Despite her entree to the highest London circles, Clementina was countrified in her outlook.

"Clementina was more retiring than her husband," says writer and researcher Craig Stringer, who has made a special study of the Dyer-Edwardes family. "She preferred the country to life in London, and was happier by the sea in Sussex, and in Gloucestershire."

Thomas' education and success in business, and the cultural and political connections of Clementina's noble family, brought prosperity to the Dyer-Edwardes, a fact that could have bred complacency in their daughter. But the young heiress, though much petted by her loving parents and their rarefied circle, remained unspoiled by the privileges afforded her. The London gossip magazine, *The Bystander*, described Noëlle as "small, blue-eyed and very gentle and appealing in manner."



**Thomas Dyer-Edwardes,
Noëlle's grandfather**

Yet she was hardly perfect. Researcher Geoff Whitfield learned through interviews with family members that Noëlle could be quite formidable. Her descendants remembered her as generous and kind but also said she was quick-tempered, hard-nosed and "bossy."

"She could get quite cross," recalled her grandson, the late Ian, 21st Earl of Rothes. "But she was so charming one soon forgot it."

Unimpressed by her wealth, Noëlle seems to have been just as unaffected by her physical allure. Fair-skinned with dark blonde hair, the adorable little girl became an exquisite beauty.

"My grandmother had that true English rose beauty," said Ian Rothes. "She appeared ageless and kept her beauty her whole life long." He added, however, that Noëlle was shy about her appearance. "When someone complimented her looks," he said, "she was gracious but seemed uncomfortable accepting the praise — and rather annoyed!"

Modesty was the least of the fine qualities Noëlle inherited. Her main gift was a sense of familial duty and social responsibility. From an early age she witnessed this trait in her father especially. For instance, despite Thomas' love for his Prinknash estate, he intended to bequeath it to a group of Benedictine monks in London. He wanted his family to enjoy the property for the time being but he instructed Noëlle that eventually it must be returned to the religious order for which the abbey was originally built in 1520. Noëlle promised her father she would make sure that it was done.

In the meantime, Noëlle had come of age. Her first season was a bright one, making many a male conquest, but "she failed to succumb to love and refused all proposals," as a later profile in the *London Daily Mail* noted.

It was in her second season, in the fall of 1899, that 20-year-old Noëlle Dyer-Edwardes met her match. After dancing with a lanky, dapper soldier at a London ball, Noëlle accepted his calling card, and in the ensuing weeks of their courtship, fell in love with him. Despite this family story, Craig Stringer believes it's possible the pair had met before, through mutual connections in southwest England.

The man who won Noëlle's heart was 21-year-old Norman-Evelyn Leslie, 19th Earl of Rothes (pronounced "Roth-ez").

"A nice young fellow, well set up, with pleasant face and manners," the nom-de-plumed society columnist Marquise de Fontenoy wrote of Norman Rothes. A lieutenant in the 4th Battalion Devonshire Regiment, which was about to be deployed in the Boer War, Norman soon attained the rank of Captain in the Fife Royal Garrison Artillery Militia. In time, Norman would join the Royal Highland Regiment, the famous Black Watch fighting force. His distinction as a soldier was equaled by his social position. Head of one of the oldest peerages in Scotland (dating to pre-1457), Norman succeeded to the earldom at the death of his grandmother in 1893, the Rothes line being one of the ancient order that permits the right of descent through females. Norman also held two subsidiary titles — Baron Leslie and Baron Ballenbreich.



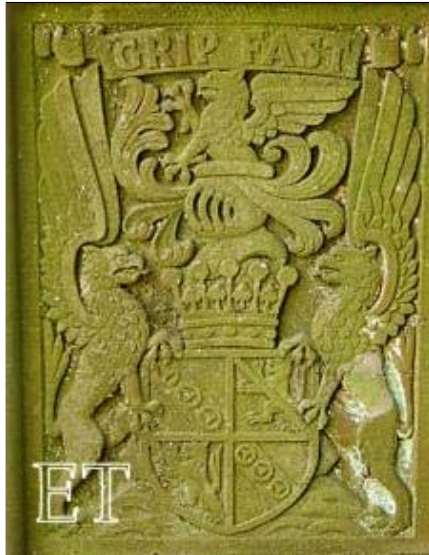
Norman, Earl of Rothes

His family, the celebrated Leslie clan, had been in possession of their 10,000-acre Fifeshire estate, Leslie House, since the mid-17th century, and they also owned numerous other properties across Scotland.

Scotch by ancestry, the earl's upbringing was British. "Norman grew up in the southwest of England," according to Craig Stringer, "and was familiar with Devonshire, Somerset and Gloucestershire. It is not inconceivable that he came to know Noëlle through the local gentry, especially as Thomas Dyer-Edwardes was High Sheriff of Gloucestershire in 1895."

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Noëlle may have been drawn to Norman as much for his colorful heritage as to his personal charm, and she soon embraced his family's history as her own. She had every reason to be proud of the house she would marry into. The Leslies had played a large part in the history of Scotland, even before the investiture of the 1st Earl of Rothes. It was as far back as 1070 that a royal decree gave the Leslie name to a Hungarian nobleman called Bartoff (later known as Bartholomew) upon his marriage to Princess Beatrix. Bartholomew presided first as Chamberlain to Queen Margaret and was later appointed governor of Edinburgh Castle by Malcolm III. According to an oft-repeated anecdote, the Leslies obtained their motto "Grip Fast!" when Bartholomew, in carrying the queen on horseback through a raging river, shouted for her to "grip fast" to his belt buckle, saving her life. Interlocking buckles and the famous axiom today form the family crest.



The Leslie family coat of arms contained the motto "Grip Fast."

Over the centuries, successive earls of Rothes made their mark in society and politics, and no less than five countesses presided as peeresses in their own right. The most famous of Norman's ancestors was the 7th earl who, as Lord High Commissioner of Scotland, was made a duke in 1680 by Charles II. But he died without an immediate heir, and so only the earldom survived him. The Duke of Rothes left his family a considerable debt, which the King promised to pay, but he, too, soon died, and his successor, James II, refused to fulfill the Crown's obligation. The Leslie family, left in comparatively dire straits, was forced to mortgage most of their lands.

The Leslies' enormous wealth had never been fully recovered; perhaps they hoped that would change with Norman's marriage to the rich Noëlle. The wedding took place on Primrose Day, April 19, 1900 at St. Mary Abbot in Kensington, the same church where Noëlle's parents were married. As the London society magazine, *The Sketch*, reported in its April 25 issue:

Delightfully bright and genial weather favored the wedding of the Earl of Rothes and Miss Noëlle Dyer Edwardes on Thursday afternoon last. The ceremony took place at St. Mary Abbott's Church, Kensington; and the officiating clergy were the Dean of Gloucester, Cannon Pennefather, the Rev. Shapley Smith, and the Rev. R.R. Hanson. What did the bride wear? Well, she looked charming in a pretty gown of white satin covered with exquisite Brussels lace, a Brussels lace veil, and a dainty crown of orange blossoms.

Noëlle's seven bridesmaids, made up of cousins, friends and Norman's sisters, wore gowns in alternating white and cream crepe de chine and carried bouquets of carnations and white heather. There was an impressive choral programme followed by a reception at the Dyer-Edwardes' town house at 2 Kensington Court. From there the earl and his countess "left to pass the first portion of their honeymoon on the Isle of Wight.



Noëlle Dyer Edwardes at the time of her marriage to Lord Rothes

Despite the capital Norman's bride brought to his family's sagging fortunes, all the money she had couldn't obtain for the newlyweds the property of Leslie House. Owing to the last will and testament of his great-aunt, Henrietta, 17th Countess of Rothes, Norman and his wife had to live elsewhere until the death of Henrietta's widower, to whom she'd granted life-long use of the Rothes chief estate. The couple therefore chose to remain temporarily in England, settling in Paignton, Devonshire.

While the Rothes could not yet live in the grandeur of the Leslie ancestral home, this temporary dent in Norman's privileges didn't affect his or Noëlle's popularity, and the two were very active socially in London, where they were favorites at the Royal Caledonian Ball. The annual event, under the patronage of Queen Victoria, was a charity in aid of the Royal Caledonian Schools and the Royal Scottish Corporation; Noëlle was to become a patroness of both institutions and eventually helped to organize the yearly balls.

Unavoidably, the new countess made many grand friends, her youth and exceptional beauty turning heads wherever she went. Less than a month after her marriage, in fact, Noëlle stood out as the most striking of all the pretty brides presented at Court. Her looks and dress attracted the attention of everyone at Buckingham Palace, from the Princess of Wales, representing the queen that day, to members of the press who recorded the event in keen detail.

Noëlle Rothes' presentation took place on May 14, 1900 at the fourth Drawing Room of the season. Accompanied by the Prince of Wales (the future King Edward VII), and other members of the royal family, the Princess (later Queen Alexandra) received Noëlle, who glimmered in a gown of "satin and priceless old lace," according to *The Scotsman*. Presented by her mother, Noëlle was "one of the most beautiful young women seen at the Courts this season," as a column in the *Washington Post* reported. The rare 16th century Brussels lace Noëlle wore that day, inherited through her mother's family, was among her treasured possessions, and she afterwards incorporated bits of it into her attire for special occasions.

As Norman and his lady made the social rounds, the attractive pair were increasingly mentioned in the Scottish and British media, and in international dispatches. Norman made the news in August 1900 when he went to America to buy a pair of Clydesdales for his stables, drawing criticism from breeders in Scotland. Norman was an enthusiastic sportsman, shooting being a favorite pastime, but he loved his horses best, especially his prize-winning broad mare "Stormy." Noëlle shared in all her husband's sporting interests — from riding and hunting to cricket and boating, which would one day prove handy.

Neither of the Rothes cared for the gossipy press attention they attracted. An International News Service report from about this time, referring to the earldom's "financial embarrassment," was an example of the intrusive media coverage they were subjected to. According to the piece, the Leslies' debts "had only been wiped out since the marriage of the present earl to the daughter and heiress of

the exceedingly wealthy Thomas Dyer-Edwardes.” Another similar article snidely played on the fact that Norman’s great grandfather had been poor and illiterate before marrying into the family:

Lord Rothes is very good looking, a fact which many people are disposed to ascribe to the circumstance that he has a strong strain of peasant blood in his veins. The earl’s great grandfather was a Devonshire peasant, one George Gwyther by name, who could neither read nor write, employed by the day in the garden of the 12th Earl of Rothes.

One widely circulated story — claiming Norman was a “bootblack to royalty” —amused the Rothes when they learned of it during a “motoring holiday” in 1901. The press had misunderstood an old feudal prerogative granted one of Norman’s ancestors. This was a hereditary privilege that gave the Leslies the right to remove the sovereign’s boots following a state ceremony at Falkland Palace, the traditional country seat of Scottish royalty, or after any other formal event occurring in the “Kingdom of Fife.”

When reporters asked the couple about the ancient rite, both stifled their laughter. The earl explained that the 12th century appellation was actually that of “Grand Bootjack to the Crown of Scotland,” not “bootblack.” The custom had seldom been enacted in modern times, he said, and was even then much modified. The last occasion the Leslie prerogative was observed was in 1878 when Queen Victoria was returning from inspecting the Tay Bridge in Fifeshire. Norman’s great aunt, the sitting countess, awaited Victoria’s train at a point near Coupar Fife on a specially built railway platform onto which the queen alighted. The countess greeted the queen, presented her with a simple pair of hand-sewn slippers, and Her Majesty was on her way again.

Noëlle loved Norman, his family and its romantic past — one that would become part of her own. It was with great pride then that she gave birth to a sturdy male heir on February 8, 1902. Christened Malcolm George, the tiny Lord Leslie brought domesticity to the Rothes’ hectic social life. Her first-born awakened in Noëlle a love of all youngsters, and it was at this time that her charitable works to help poor and sick children, their families, and others less fortunate, began.

The year was also important for the Rothes in an official capacity. Great Britain celebrated a new king and queen when Edward VII and Alexandra were crowned on August 9, and the Rothes participated in the coronation. Though decorum demanded a blasé attitude, seeing their names — “Norman-Evelyn Earl of Rothes” and “Noëlle Countess of Rothes” — entered into the Garter’s Roll for this momentous state occasion must have been a thrill for the young couple. While the petite and dainty Noëlle stood out as one of the most beautiful in the procession of peeresses paying homage to Their Majesties during the ceremony at Westminster Abbey, Norman was an inspiring sight in his coronation robe, coronet and sword. The cane chair in which the earl sat during the event is still in the possession of the Leslie family.

Back home, the Rothes resumed their social and civic lives. Noëlle was especially busy, proving that long before her husband inherited Leslie House she was enacting her role as *chatelaine*. Indeed, as baby Malcolm grew into a cotton-haired toddler, his enchanting mother looked after not only his needs but saw to the welfare of the children of her tenants, fellow parishioners, and other county families in Devonshire. Noëlle helped by donating her own money and services, and by arranging charity bazaars, dances, and suppers. A popular annual sale of clothing and linen at her church was one of the first fundraisers she organized.



The Rothes' first child, Malcolm George, Viscount Leslie.

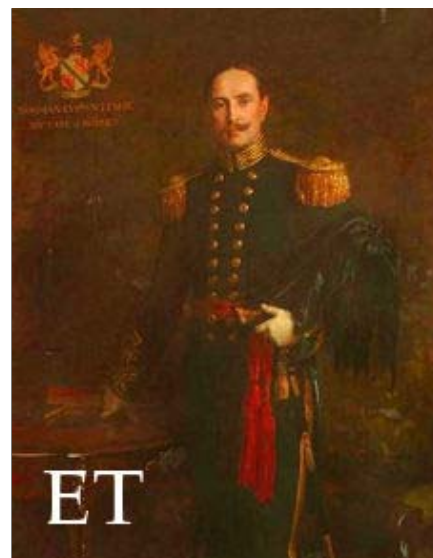
The countess' generosity only increased after she and her new family moved to Scotland in the summer of 1904, at last taking possession of Leslie House, Norman's great uncle, the Hon. George Waldegrave Leslie, a Coupar County Councillor, having died at age 79.

The huge Rothes estate, with Leslie House its centerpiece, comprised three parishes (Leslie, Markinch and Kinglassie) in Fifeshire, and included over 30 farms and holdings with some 20,000 pounds in rentals. Noëlle would virtually adopt the sick and needy among her new tenants, but for the time being she applied her energy to breathing life and beauty back to her husband's ancestral home.

Built by the Duke of Rothes in the time of Charles II, Leslie House, some four miles west of Glenrothes and 34 miles from Edinburgh, has had a fascinating, resilient history.

"Originally it formed an immense quadrangle," as writer de Fontenoy described it in his July 31, 1904 column. "But three sides burned in 1763, and it is the fourth side that forms the present mansion, standing on the summit of a hill with terraced gardens sloping down to the River Levan."

The remaining wing of Leslie House, revitalized in 1767, was situated between a meadow and a grove of beech trees, ordered planted by King James V when Fife was a royal seat. The old church in the village of Leslie also had a famous connection to the monarch — a ballad he penned, "A Country Wedding," paid tribute to the beauty of the chapel, calling it "Christ's kirk on the green."



Portrait of Norman Rothes in 1904



The 10,000-acre estate, Leslie House, was built in the 17th century.

The property's royal pedigree was matched by the manor house's splendid interior treasures. As de Fontenoy related:

Among the family relics preserved at Leslie House are the dagger used by the Master of Rothes in assassinating Cardinal Bethune, and the magnificent sword of state carried by the Duke of Rothes at the Coronation of Charles II. There is a picture of John, Earl of

Rothes, by Sir Joshua Reynolds and a wonderful portrait of Rembrandt by himself.

Despite its grandeur, the five-story, 30,000-square foot manor was in need of a makeover. Its amenities were far out of date and the whole place was in a severe state of neglect. Noëlle's good taste — and money — saw to it that a "thorough renovation" was commissioned, the result being that the weather-beaten old palace became not only livable but extremely luxurious. The remodeling of interior and exterior alike reflected the most fashionable trends of the day and cost over 11,000 pounds. With 37 bedrooms and 20 other rooms, as well as 26 acres of lawn and woodland, the redecoration and landscape revision took two years to complete. Among the countess' personal touches were the addition of a conservatory and an Italian garden.

Leslie House still stands today. Sadly, the old place is in danger of being altered considerably by a real estate development company that purchased it last year from the Church of Scotland, owners of the property since the 1950s. In May 2006 the new owners' proposal to convert the historic manor into 17 luxury flats went before the Fife Council for debate. At present, Noëlle Rothes' conservatory is intact and the rhododendrons she planted as part of the home's original garden scheme are still growing on the estate.



Leslie House Today

According to her grandson, Noëlle "loved her home and loved the townsfolk of Leslie even more." Newspaper accounts concur that both Norman and Noëlle took the citizenry of Leslie to their hearts.

As a correspondent for *The Scotsman* later wrote:

Lord and Lady Rothes did much to win the love and respect of the community of Leslie by the interest they showed in local affairs, their kindness to the poor and aged, and their generous regard for the young folks.

Noëlle, especially, took the children of Leslie under her wing. *The Scotsman* recorded that "not a Christmastide passed but the countess celebrated her birthday, Dec. 25, by treating all the children in the parish to an entertainment in Leslie Town Hall, and presenting each with a Christmas gift."

In 1906, as Noëlle involved herself in local charities, Norman's interest in business and politics won him an election to the British House of Lords as a Representative Peer for Scotland, a position he held for the next 17 years. Although Norman's work often took him away from home and family, Noëlle wasn't lonely.

While the earl conducted business in France, Egypt, India and the United States, her own fundraising activities kept her busy. The couple was so involved in various undertakings during their first three years in Leslie that they didn't participate in the London season, which caused some comment. As *The Bystander* noted in 1907, Noëlle was

so devoted to her Scottish home, Leslie House, that neither she nor Lord Rothes are often to be seen in London or anywhere else the world of amusement foregathers.

One of the first projects the countess took up after becoming mistress of Leslie House was that of the Queen Victoria School in Dunblane, planned for the education of children of Scottish soldiers and sailors, and as a memorial to the late queen. In this campaign Noëlle worked closely with Constance, Countess De La Warr, one of the more prominent society matrons involved in the suffrage movement, and the Marchioness Tullibardine, an administrator of the fund.

According to Dunblane civic records, raising money for the Queen Victoria School became

a national effort that captivated the imagination of the Scottish public. For example every serviceman donated a day's pay, and an appeal for contributions from the Scottish workforces received a generous response.

Among the ambitious entertainments Noëlle helped arrange for the benefit of the school was a series of themed balls held in the Assembly Rooms and Music Hall in Edinburgh in January 1906. One of these, called the "Jewel Ball," in which the patronesses and lady guests were all attired as precious stones, received a lot of press coverage. This owed mainly to the extravagance of the decorations, which were designed to replicate a Moorish palace, complete with "porticos, pillared halls, gardens, fountains and mosaic pavements."

For the Jewel Ball the countess and other women blossomed forth in bright-colored frocks and heirloom jewelry, and the men sported a hodge-podge of military uniforms, period hunting costumes and traditional Highland garb. In all, more than 600 guests attended the event.

Noëlle also gave her time to fundraising for a social club for young girls employed in Falkland factories, a clinic in the parish of Kinglassie, and for the previously mentioned Royal Caledonian Schools and Scottish Corporation. She had a hand, too, in planning parties for the 2nd Battalion of the Highland Light Infantry

In addition to her philanthropies, Noëlle was active politically. A staunch Tory, she was chairman of the Markinch Women's Unionist Association (from about 1907), and she later chaired the Leslie Women's Unionist Association. Though forceful in her views, Noëlle was not a public speaker and, apart from serving as mistress of ceremonies, she seldom addressed key issues at gatherings. Notable exceptions were her opposition to Home Rule, her support of a blistering anti-Socialist editorial published by a member of the Markinch group, and her praise of a controversial speech delivered by a family friend, Lady Ninian Crichton-Stuart. In it, Crichton- Stuart

criticized the Government severely for its policy of destroying the Constitution in the name of reform, robbing the Church and pushing through measures in the most disgraceful manner.

Despite her interest in national causes, Noëlle never neglected local responsibilities, hosting not only her Christmas parties in Leslie village, but supervising an annual sale of handicrafts at Leslie Parish Church in aid of needy families; this she started in early 1907.

Noëlle's dedication to charity work didn't prevent her enjoyment of the glamour of her privileged position. After Leslie House's refurbishment was completed, and the Rothés had settled into their new lives, the couple resumed attending the lavish banquets and court levees essential to Edwardian high life. With the encroachment of winter in 1907, Noëlle and Norman joined the social exodus to the south, spending the season in Egypt with a party of friends that included the Duke and Duchess of Devonshire, with whom they cruised the Nile for the first time.

Balls, opera, weekend house parties, the Cowes Regatta, Raneleigh — all were part of the Rothés' rarefied world, but perhaps no event on the social calendar of the period was more picturesque than a village wedding. Noëlle and Norman were invited to many of these affairs over the years but the 1908 Cairns-Scott marriage may have been the most beautiful and distinguished.

Taking place in an ancient chapel on the grounds of Dalkeith Palace, the ancestral seat of the earls of Cairns, long time Leslie friends, the ceremony united the Hon. Douglas Cairns to Lady Constance Scott, daughter of the Duke and Duchess of Buccleuch, friends of the Villiers, Noëlle's mother's family. The dignified but simple backdrop of chrysanthemums and palms, candelabra and stained glass rivaled the loveliness of the bucolic surroundings and clear January day. Joining royalty, politicians and other prominent guests, Noëlle and Norman went to the reception in the castle afterward. There the bride collected her gifts, among them an "eight-day watch in a silver case" from the Rothés.

Socially, the year was a busy one for the couple, culminating on Sept. 28, 1908 with Edward VII's formal opening of the Queen Victoria School in Dunblane. The earl and countess were honored guests at the ceremony and were in the receiving line for the king on his arrival. Remaining a vital institution today, the Queen Victoria School still serves the children of members of the British Armed Forces, and is particularly known for its award-winning pipe band.

The following year the countess took a rest from her civic responsibilities to prepare for the birth of the Rothés' second child, the Hon. John Wayland Leslie. The arrival of their new son found Norman in Egypt, where he'd accompanied Lord Milner and other colonial ministers on business; after learning of John's birth, the proud father hurried home, canceling the second leg of his trip to Italy.

It wasn't long before Noëlle was back in the busy groove of her increasingly public life. Socially, she and Norman were as active as ever, attending soirees, state ceremonies and sporting events together, as well as hosting their own dinner parties, noted as much for the wonderful food prepared by their Italian chef Valence as for the Rothés' hospitality. The pair's good looks, charm and sincere interest in the public welfare made them an exceptional team.

"There are very few young couples in Scottish society more admired," observed *New York World* reporter Nixola Greeley-Smith, "than the handsome Lord and Lady Rothés."

But the earl and countess weren't without critics. More conservative and religious than many members of the aristocracy at the time, they were derided by some for maintaining a domestic lifestyle not commonly adopted by the upper classes. A snooty *Bystander* columnist even called the Rothés "a most unfashionably devoted couple." Their affectionate attachment may have been unusual in the jaded, amoral world of the Edwardians but it didn't affect their overall popularity; in fact it gave them a special cachet.

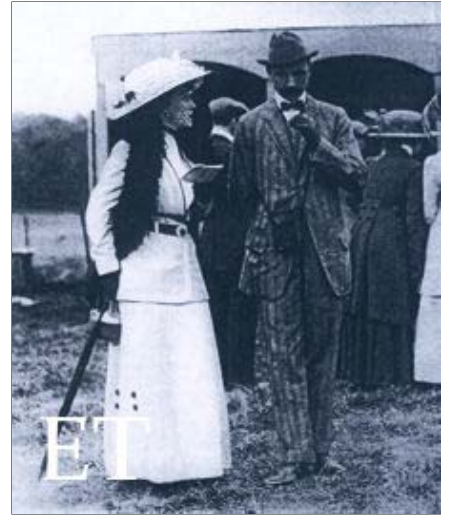
For instance, when Noëlle and Norman went to the Perth Hunt Races in September 1910 they were sought out by press photographers because, unlike other married couples in attendance, they remained together throughout the event. Several London news magazines, including *The Tatler*, published snapshots of the Rothés making their way to the paddock (and looking rather perturbed by



Noëlle with her son Malcolm, age 5, in 1907

the publicity). Their fame as pious young socialites wasn't something the Rothes encouraged but they grew accustomed to the attention.

Noëlle, especially, was becoming more visible as a talented hostess and charity organizer. Perhaps her finest moment came at Christmas 1910 when she directed a spectacular set of *tableaux vivants* honoring the history of Falkland Palace, presented at the former royal residence as part of an anniversary program for the owners of Falkland — her friends, the Crichton-Stuarts. The more than 20 *tableaux*, performed by 130 members of old Scotch nobility, were elaborately staged and costumed. Lead parts were taken by the countess herself and two of her little cousins, while Norman joined his son, Malcolm, and their host, Lord Ninian Crichton-Stuart, in another scene.



Noëlle and Norman at the Perth Hunt Races, 1910

Shortly thereafter, the Rothes participated in the so-called “Tally Ho!” Ball, an annual two-part dance benefit, again held at Edinburgh’s Music Hall, and drawing a good deal of publicity. Keeping with the first ball’s “Glory of the Hunt” theme, the evening’s quadrille was divided into reels named for famous hunts. Though taking place in January 1911, some months after the death of Edward VII, the court was still in mourning, which dictated the attire of the revelers. The second ball also followed mourning etiquette, with women in black, purple or white gowns, and featured a quadrille with reels named after each of the event’s patronesses. In the “Countess of Rothes’ Reels” gentlemen were dressed in the costume of Highland regiments and the ladies in black gowns with sashes of corresponding clan tartan.

That year was a rewarding one for Noëlle and her work. Having founded a branch of the Red Cross in Leslie, which she endowed with three ambulances, 1911 saw the completion of first aid training for volunteer members, 63 of them receiving certificates from area doctors who conducted the classes.

The Leslie Red Cross Society’s ambulance corps, headquartered at Leslie Town Hall, was called The Countess of Rothes Voluntary Aid Detachment. But Noëlle didn’t just lend her name and money to the Red Cross post in Leslie, she received the necessary training herself, including instruction in artificial respiration from her aunt, already a Red Cross nurse. In light of coming events, it’s a poignant fact that during Noëlle’s initial lessons, she was specifically briefed on first aid for the drowning.

Later in the year, the countess was happy to assist in fundraising for a new ward of the Randolph Wemyss Memorial Hospital in Buckhaven, named for the late husband of one of her friends, Lady Eva Wemyss. Under the patronage of H.R.H. Princess Louise and the Duchess of Wellington, a large outdoor bazaar was held on the grounds of Wemyss Castle to raise money for the proposed 12-bed addition to the hospital. Noëlle was a member of the opening committee and supplied several stalls in the bazaar, donating oil paintings, watercolor drawings, old prints, engravings, rare books, pottery and needlework, among other items from the Leslie collection.

Today the Randolph Wemyss Memorial Hospital is a busy, state-of-the-art modern facility.

As the New Year approached, the earl and countess spent much private time together. In October the couple were guests of the Marquise of Bute, staying a fortnight on his estate. It was a relaxing vacation — a cottage all to themselves, long walks and rides over the hills. And after Norman and Lord Bute’s six-gun posse hit Kyle moor, bagging grouse, Noëlle and other ladies of the house party “would drive out through the fields to meet the men for an elaborate picnic lunch.”

Back home in Leslie, Norman and Noëlle attended several County Fife test cricket matches. Cricket was one of Norman’s favorite sports, in season or not, and Noëlle shared his interest in the game. According to Ian, the couple’s grandson, Norman was chiefly remembered locally for his fine sportsmanship.

“Lord Rothes was a keen cricketer,” *The Scotsman* concurred posthumously, “and did much for the game in Leslie.”

By the end of February 1912 cricket wasn't on the earl's schedule as he prepared for yet another business trip, this time to America. Arriving in New York Harbor aboard the Cunard Line's *Lusitania*, accompanied by colleague Sir Curtis Lampson, Norman was on a mission to compare the efficiency of the U.S. telegraph service, operated by private enterprise, to the state-run British system. As a *New York Times* correspondent wrote:

There is a great difference of opinion on this subject in England, where it forms a continual and somewhat heated discussion. There has always been a feeling there that the government made a bad bargain when it acquired the telegraph companies by purchase.

Although Norman Rothes' visit was originally a professional one, his tour of the States and Canada so exhilarated him that he decided to make a pleasure trip of it. On the Pacific Coast by late March, the warm breezes, rambling roses and sea views worked their magic, and he sent a wire to Noëlle, inviting her to come out and join him in Pasadena, California, for an extended holiday. If she left soon, they'd even be able to spend their 12th anniversary together. Norman told Noëlle he would be winding up a business jaunt in Vancouver, British Columbia, at that time, and suggested she meet him there. Afterwards the couple would go back to Pasadena where Norman had rented an idyllic summer place, a bungalow in a grove of orange trees. According to the *London Daily Graphic*, it was Norman's “intention to settle down there fruit farming.”

The countess was ecstatic at the possibility of sunny California and asked Gladys Cherry, Norman's first cousin and one of her own close friends, to “experience the adventure of America with her,” as Ian Rothes put it. Gladys accepted the invitation, seeing it as a fine opportunity to spend time with her brother, Charles, then living in New York.

Gladys, daughter of James Frederick Cherry and Lady Emily Cherry (nee Haworth-Leslie), shared with Norman a grandmother in the late Mary Elizabeth, 18th Countess of Rothes. Gladys was three years younger than Noëlle and led an active life in London, being notably “excellent in amateur theatricals,” as the *Daily Sketch* reported. Gladys may not have relished missing the upcoming social season but the prospect of America was a tantalizing lure.

In the meantime, Noëlle delved into planning their trip, “right down to the details,” she admitted. Typically feminine, her first objective was to order new clothes — “practically everything (was) new.” Leaving her two sons, Malcolm, 10, and John, 2, to the care of their governess at home was the only regret Noëlle had as she busily prepared for her well-earned holiday.

When the countess told her mother and father about the trip, the Dyer-Edwardes decided to join their daughter as far as France, where they would then go on to open their chalet in Normandy for the spring. This estate, the Chateau de Retival, had been written up in the press as one of the finest French coastal properties (Noëlle had spent much time there in her youth, and had a hand in laying out the gardens with her mother)

Early in the morning of April 10, 1912, following a day of shopping for last minute additions to her new wardrobe, Noëlle, her parents, her maid, Roberta “Cissy” Maioni, and Gladys boarded the boat train at London's Waterloo Station, bound for Southampton Harbor. The group would sail at noon, and everyone was in anticipation of the voyage, which the countess later admitted to her grandson was to be “the great journey of my life.”



One of Noëlle's best friends was her husband's cousin, Gladys Cherry

The prospect of seeing America was exciting for Noëlle but so was the fact that she and her family would be making the maiden voyage of the greatest ocean liner in the world.

The venerable White Star Line spared no expense in the construction of its latest wonder ship, largest and most luxurious ever built. According to publicity, it was also the safest afloat; one trade journal labeled the vessel “practically unsinkable.” When the countess’ party went aboard that morning, they must have marveled at the size of the behemoth. Over 46,000 tons, 11 decks high, nearly 900 feet long, the great liner’s name was justified — *Titanic* it was indeed.

Before the ship left the pier, a horde of journalists scrambled to interview the many wealthy and famous travelers. Noëlle likely considered it a nuisance but she consented to speak briefly to a correspondent for the *Paris Herald*. Confirming she and her husband were interested in buying an American orange grove, she said they’d be coming back home in July “to take their children over.” Asked by the reporter “how she liked the idea of leaving London society for a California fruit farm,” Noëlle couldn’t contain her amusement and frankly replied, “I am full of joyful expectation.”

Noëlle’s parents, Thomas and Clementina, were also enthusiastic, although for them the voyage would be but a short trip across the Channel to Cherbourg, *Titanic*’s first port-of-call. There they would disembark — a lucky thing for the couple. But what of the ominous near-collision during the departure from Southampton, when another ship was sucked from its moorings by the sudden displacement of water caused by the sheer size of *Titanic*? Did it cause the Dyer-Edwardes to worry for their daughter’s safety as she continued overseas alone on the new, unpracticed liner?

Whiling away the time, the pair enjoyed exploring the ship and testing its amenities, ordering tea in the reception room, perhaps, or strolling the decks with their daughter. Conversation might have included concern for the children back home, plans for a reunion in a few months, or their delight in — or anxiety about — the ship’s performance.

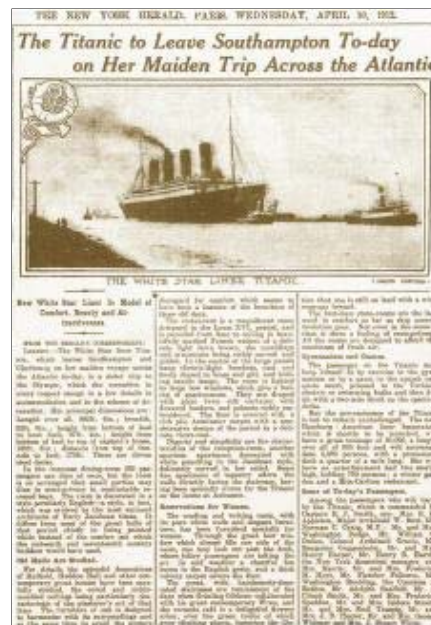
Delayed by the mishap, *Titanic* didn’t drop anchor in Cherbourg Bay until dusk. White Star’s shuttle *Nomadic* was awaiting the late arrival, and as the leviathan dropped anchor nearby, the wash from its approach caused the smaller craft to pitch and wallow. With nightfall the ferry began unloading passengers and cargo, and the group of cross-Channel ticket-holders prepared for the ride back to port. Boarding *Nomadic* at about 7:30 p.m., the Dyer-Edwardes bade farewell to Noëlle and Gladys. Noëlle later said her mother hesitated for a moment, then “rushed back for a final embrace.”

As the tender steamed out into the night the couple waved goodbye. Though seemingly ill at ease about leaving, they could never have guessed the danger that lay ahead for their daughter and her friend.

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Danger was the last thing on anyone’s mind as the “unsinkable” *Titanic* glistened in the sunlight of the following morning, April 11. At anchor at its second and final port-of-call, Queenstown (now Cobh), Ireland, the ship took on more passengers and cargo. Any anxiety caused by the brush with disaster the previous day had subsided. The near-miss was now seen as a lark by many, even as proof of *Titanic*’s supposed invincibility; no one regarded it as an omen. Gladys Cherry marveled at the “perfect confidence people had in that great boat.”

Noëlle and Gladys, still in high spirits about this first trip to America, were settling into their ocean-borne home. Booked together in a small stateroom, No. 37 on C-Deck, the women possibly upgraded later to a larger one further down the corridor. Researchers, including Daniel Klistorner, an



On April 10, 1912, *Titanic* (and Noëlle's presence aboard) was front page news
- [Enlarge](#)

expert on *Titanic's* accommodations, think the pair may have been reassigned to starboard cabin C-77.

Making the space livable without a luggage closet, with which some of the bigger cabins were equipped, may have posed a problem for the women, laden as they were with all the fussy accoutrements dictated by early 20th century fashionable life. Noëlle was traveling with no less than three steamer trunks, in addition to other suitcases, and Gladys probably had as much luggage. Still, there's no documented evidence that the ladies moved cabins.

The countess seemed to have packed everything, from her elaborate gold and silver dressing table set with matching wardrobe clock to the new dresses and lingerie she'd bought in London. She had with her all her favorite furs (ermine, seal and black fox) along with every adjunct of the Edwardian belle — feather boas, fans, gloves, high-buttoned shoes and, of course, an array of fabulous jewelry. Most of Noëlle's collection consisted of pearl and diamond pieces, including an extraordinary \$900 diamond belt buckle (\$27,000 today) which may have been in the motif of the Leslie coat-of-arms. While the countess' athleticism was reflected in her choice of practical linen sportswear and motoring veils, she indulged her flair for style in her selection of hats from the ultra chic Hanover Square shop of Zyrot et Cie. But nothing in her wardrobe was as valuable or as sentimental as a length of 400-year-old Brussels lace. The ancient material was a wedding present from her mother, and Noëlle still used it to trim her gowns.

Unpacking their bags may have been a task Noëlle and Gladys attended to without the aid of Noëlle's maid, Cissy, who became sick the night before and was confined to her own cabin on E-Deck for most of the voyage. Nineteen years old, blonde and very pretty, Cissy's illness didn't discourage the attentions of an unidentified bedroom steward, and the two had a romance. It's not clear if Noëlle was aware of her maid's dalliance at the time but she knew of it soon afterwards, and in later years Cissy wrote a story about it for a newspaper competition.

As *Titanic* lifted anchor at Queenstown that afternoon and headed for open sea, a series of wireless messages were delivered to Noëlle. They were from Norman, telling of the success of his tour, and informing her that his plans to meet her in Vancouver had changed; he now said he'd be in New York to greet her when she landed. Another message soon arrived, this time from home, informing Noëlle that Malcolm was sick, which upset her. Although her young son's health would remain a problem for some time, the nature of his illness isn't clear.

There was nothing Noëlle could do but pray for Malcolm, and hope that his condition improved under the care of the battery of Leslie town doctors who were called in to attend him. Despite the pall that fell over her with the news of her son's sickness, she did her best to enjoy the voyage, and with Gladys socialized with the surprising number of friends and acquaintances they found aboard.

Foremost among these was 50-year-old Henry Forbes Julian, a former Devonshire neighbor of the Rothes. A distinguished metal works expert, he had made himself wealthy through a patented process of extracting gold from quartz in South Africa. Julian was accompanied by his business partner, Colonel John Weir, 60, a Scottish-born mining millionaire who had lived for many years in America, making most of his fortune in Utah and Nevada. The pair was headed to inspect mining property in California.

Noëlle and Gladys also knew Elmer and Juliet Taylor, middle-aged Americans living in London, who were traveling with Elmer's business partner, an Englishman, Fletcher Fellows Lambert-Williams. Taylor had founded a successful manufacturing concern, Mono Containers Ltd, which had factories in 10 countries. The Mono company made moisture-proof food containers and invented the



Noëlle in her peeress robes for the 1911 Coronation of George V.

disposable paper cup. Others among the ladies' shipboard coterie were Tyrell and Julia Cavendish, an attractive young couple active in London charities. Julia, an American, was the daughter of New York merchant Henry Siegel, whom the Cavendishes were going to visit. Like Noëlle, they had two little boys at home.

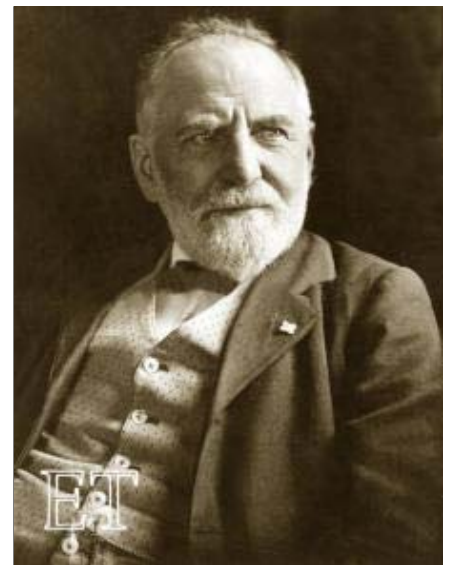
Although it isn't documented, it is likely the ladies knew Christopher Head, the dapper 42-year-old former mayor of Chelsea and a popular figure in the social life of the borough. A Cambridge graduate and former barrister, Head was director of his father's insurance brokerage, Henry Head & Co., as well as a senior member of Lloyd's of London. As Head's specialty was shipping claims, it's possible he personally handled the White Star Line's account for *Titanic*, heavily insured through Lloyd's.

The fame of one fellow Englishwoman aboard ensured her recognition among *Titanic's* first class passengers. Lady Duff Gordon, otherwise known as the dress designer "Lucile," was en route on business connected with the New York branch of her fashion salon. Celebrated for her provocative creations in lingerie and eveningwear, Lucile, 48, was accompanied by her second husband, Scottish landowner and sportsman Sir Cosmo Edmund Duff Gordon. The chic Noëlle was almost certainly a client of Lucile's but mutual family friends in the Crichton-Stuarts provided a further common bond with the Duff Gordons.

For Noëlle and other English people in first class the most recognizable face in the crowd was that of bewhiskered W.T. Stead, 62, pioneering journalist and social activist, whose controversial writings and causes had made him a household name. Going to New York to attend a peace conference at the invitation of President William Howard Taft, Stead was aware of his celebrity, and to avoid attention kept to himself for much of the voyage.

Titanic's distinguished British contingent was outnumbered by American travelers, returning home from winter vacations in Italy, Egypt, the Riviera and other resort destinations. Multimillionaire moguls John Jacob Astor IV, Benjamin Guggenheim and Isidor Straus headed the list of the wealthiest passengers; according to reports the bevy of tycoons aboard were collectively worth half a billion dollars. Apart from corporate bigwigs there were many others who had achieved fame and fortune in society, literature, the arts, entertainment, politics and sports.

Among these were Major Archie Butt, military adviser to President Taft; Henry B. Harris, the Broadway producer; tennis champion Karl Behr; painter Frank Millet; motion picture star Dorothy Gibson; Helen Churchill Candee, Washington hostess and interior design maven; detective novelist Jacques Futrelle; and Denver heiress and philanthropist Margaret "Molly" Brown. *Harper's Weekly* would claim that *Titanic's* first class passengers were "the most distinguished ever carried by an Atlantic liner." This isn't strictly true but ocean liner historian Eric Sauder contends that *Titanic's* passenger list did include more celebrities than were present on almost any other maiden voyage during the golden age of ocean travel.



W. T. Stead

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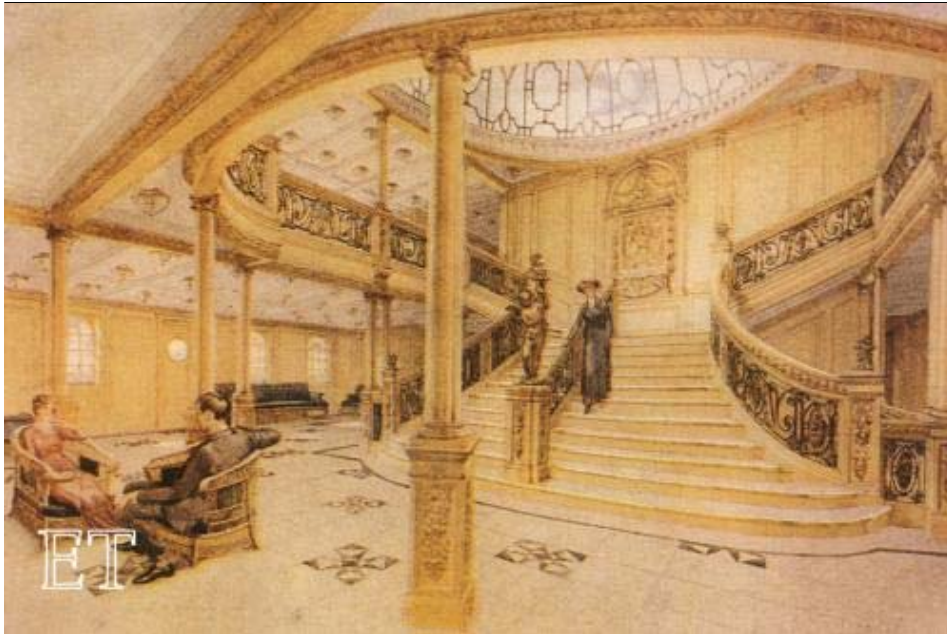
With their shipboard friends, Noëlle and Gladys sampled the luxuries of *Titanic*. Whether chatting at lunch in the French restaurant, strolling along the promenade, taking tea in the verandah café, listening to the band in concert in the lounge, perhaps even playing shuffleboard, the ladies had a fine time. One imagines, too, that the slim young countess turned many a head as she and her companion walked the decks to show off their new frocks and hats.

Two of Noëlle's fellow travelers weren't passengers at all. Thomas Andrews, 39, nephew of *Titanic's* builder Lord Pirrie, was the ship's chief designer and was aboard to observe the performance of his latest brainchild. Suave and gentle-spoken, Andrews made daily rounds of the ship and its passengers, making sure all was working properly and that people were comfortable. The White Star

Line's managing director, J. Bruce Ismay, 49, was also on hand to give his seal of approval. Ismay was an affable, outgoing personality, whose family was well connected in London society; his in-laws, the Cheape family, had been close friends with Norman Rothes' grandmother. Noëlle undoubtedly knew his name but she hadn't seen him before sailing on *Titanic*. As she recalled:

I did not know Mr. Ismay by sight until one night at dinner in the restaurant he came in late, and someone pointed him out to me.

By April 14, *Titanic's* fourth day at sea, passengers had settled into a happy routine. Noëlle was no exception, enjoying her favorite hot cocoa in the morning in lieu of breakfast, followed by a brisk walk with Gladys around the boat deck.



Titanic's most opulent interior feature was the first class grand staircase

It was Sunday, and as both women were active churchgoers, they may have attended an interdenominational service in the lounge that morning, presided over by 62-year-old Captain Edward J. Smith, *Titanic's* jolly, bearded commander.

The day was bright and chilly, and as night fell the cold increased. Despite the frost in the air a crowd gathered on deck to watch a stunning sunset. Peachy-purple streaks of sky sparkling through a mist of sea spray was the last daylight many would ever see.

The exquisite dusk obscured an ugly fact — *Titanic* was nearing a vast field of ice, and though other ships in the vicinity had passed along warnings of potentially dangerous floes ahead, the new liner sped on at an unchecked speed of 22 and a half knots. "Why did we go at that pace when they knew we were near icebergs?" Gladys would later ask in a letter to her mother.

The evening of April 14 saw a star-specked sky but no moon, and the ocean was unusually calm; not a ripple creased the surface.

"What a lovely night it was," the countess recalled. Some likened the stillness of the water to that of a pond or a garden pool. Only the intense cold interrupted the beauty of the night.

Notwithstanding the weather, which Noëlle described as "bitterly cold," she and Gladys had a festive time at dinner in the restaurant where a special party was given, honoring the captain, and where the orchestra played, taking requests till quite late. Major Butt, in full dress uniform, was also a guest of honor at the party that night, and a number of other notables were present, too, including Henry B. Harris and Jacques Futrelle and their wives. Although Sunday night aboard ship was usually somber, tonight was celebratory — men in white tie and tails, women in lovely evening dresses.

Noëlle must have looked beautiful in her designer gown and jewels, including a 300-year-old necklace of Leslie heirloom pearls, re-strung in the latest style. "Very gay we felt that night," Gladys recalled.

Between ten and 10:30 p.m. the ladies retired to their C-Deck stateroom, looking forward to another pleasant day.

That was not to be, of course. *Titanic* continued furrowing through the sea at near top speed until 20 minutes to midnight when destiny was met in an icy embrace. Emerging from the darkness too late to be avoided, the ghostly mass punctured *Titanic's* forward starboard side. As the great ship glided to a halt in the flat sea, the berg slipped silently back into the shadows. *Titanic*, regal and oblivious, had met its match. In a matter of seconds, nature had delivered a death wound to man's pride, and the "unsinkable" ship was doomed.

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Snug in their cabin, Noëlle and Gladys were awakened by the collision. Gladys remembered it as "an awful sort of bang" while Noëlle recalled the sound as a "grating noise." The women lay puzzled in their beds for a few moments until they noticed the engines weren't running.

"We had an extraordinary feeling that something dreadful had happened," Gladys said, "as there was a terrible silence."

Noëlle turned on her bedside light and glanced at the clock on the dressing table. It read 11:46. Sitting up, she asked Gladys if she "did not think it strange that the engines had stopped."

Just then there came a frightening roar as the exhaust valves on the smokestacks above began releasing steam from the boiler rooms. Both women shot out of their beds, and hearing people walking in the corridor, they rushed out to see what was the matter. Noëlle lead the way.

"As I opened our cabin door," Noëlle said, "I saw a steward. He said we had struck some ice."

Gladys admitted that "this rather excited us and we put on our dressing gowns and fur coats, and went up on deck." Passing Chief Steward Andrew Latimer on the way, Gladys asked if there was any danger.

"Oh, no," he replied, "we have just grazed some ice, and it does not amount to anything."

As the women hurried on deck, they ran into one of their friends, Fletcher Lambert-Williams, who told them not to worry as "the watertight compartments must surely hold."

Noëlle and Gladys went all the way forward on the starboard promenade deck. Looking over the rail, Gladys said they "saw all the bow of the ship covered in ice but we could not see the berg." The ladies remained on deck talking with others, none of whom were alarmed. People seemed to regard it as an adventure — "no one could believe there was danger."

After a few minutes, Captain Smith came up to the group. "I don't want to frighten anyone," Smith said, "but will you all go quietly and put on your lifebelts, and go up on the top deck."

Everybody in the area "dispersed very calmly and slowly," according to Gladys, although Noëlle confessed they were "stunned by the order."

Reaching their room, they found Cissy, Noëlle's maid, sitting in a chair, holding a lifebelt. Though apparently still unwell, Cissy was more scared than sick. The young woman told them she'd just come from her cabin on E-Deck, which was beginning to flood, moreover that "water was pouring into the racquet court." Noëlle consoled her, "gave her some brandy" and tied on the girl's lifejacket.

Gladys and Noëlle had trouble finding their own lifebelts. These were supposed to be stowed atop the wardrobe but they weren't there. Lambert-Williams, dropping by to check on the ladies, couldn't locate them either. Before darting out into the hall to find a steward, he tossed a box of raisins to

Gladys for an impromptu snack.

The steward that Lambert-Williams sent to help the women duly arrived but, as the countess recalled, “the man said he was sure wearing lifebelts was unnecessary — until we told him we had been ordered to do so.” The steward finally located the belts under the women’s beds and on his way out he urged them to dress warmly.

They did so, choosing woolen suits and their heaviest furs. As they started to leave the cabin, some urge made Gladys pick up a miniature photo of her mother: “Then I thought ‘How silly, we shall soon be back here,’ and I put it down again.”

In her haste to get on deck, Noëlle forgot her purse. “The only thing I took was a small brandy flask,” she told her grandson. “I had nothing else with me, no money at all.”

She may not have carried any money or valuables with her but Noëlle did stop to put on the priceless string of pearls she had worn at dinner.

Heading for the boat deck, the two friends held each other by the hand as they made their way with Cissy through the crowded C-Deck foyer. They passed *Titanic*’s cheery purser, Herbert McElroy, on their way to the stairs.

“It is quite all right,” he called out to Noëlle. “Don’t hurry.”

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Ascending to the boat deck vestibule, the countess’ party found it swarming with other lifejacketed passengers. Only a few had ventured out into the cold where crewmen were clearing the tarpaulins off the lifeboats and swinging them out flush with the deck. Scattered in little groups around the room, people discussed the situation. Others quietly awaited orders. In the throng, the women noticed Julia Cavendish, standing alone near the balustrade on the starboard side, and across the gallery, near the port deck door, they caught sight of Sir Cosmo and Lady Duff Gordon.

The foyer was soon so crowded that people began filing onto the boat deck. The three stuck close together as they went out on the starboard side, following a group that included John Jacob Astor and his 19-year-old bride, Madeleine. The din of escaping steam made conversation difficult, so the women just stood and watched as the boats were uncovered. No instruction had been given to abandon ship but it seemed inevitable as sailors ran to and fro preparing the boats. The crush of people on deck grew increasingly concerned as they watched the activity but there was no panic.

“I stood close to Mrs. Astor,” Noëlle said. “She was waiting under the starboard ports (of the gymnasium), and her husband got a chair for her. She was quite calm. The last I saw of Col. Astor was when he stood by his wife, trying to comfort her.”

There was still no official word from the crew as to what was going on, and after a few more minutes of “milling about and wondering,” Noëlle grew restless. Leading Gladys and Cissy through the foyer to the portside, they found the same calm, bewildered crowd, awaiting orders from the captain or his officers.

“I can’t blame anyone,” Gladys told her mother later, “but there seemed no discipline on the boat.”

Finally, around 12:20 a.m., some 40 minutes after the collision with the iceberg, Second Officer Charles Lightoller gave the command for women and children to enter the lifeboats. It was about time; people were growing uneasy. The deck was now noticeably inclined toward the bow as well as to port, and the exhaust was still roaring overhead, adding to the tension. Some of the stress was relieved when the steam finally stopped and the band set up their instruments on the boat deck, playing light melodies to soothe passengers’ nerves.

But the waiting around and confusion weren’t over. Officer Lightoller had the ambitious idea of loading the lifeboats not from the open boat deck but from the promenade (one deck below), which

proved problematic as the windows there were closed. While one of the forward boats, No. 4, was lowered abreast of the promenade, a number of women were called down to get on board, then ordered back up when it was clear that opening the windows would take a while longer. At last, realizing he was wasting time, Lightoller ordered his men to iron out the kinks while he moved aft to the last two boats, Nos. 6 and 8.

Work commenced simultaneously at these stations at around 12:45 a.m., Lightoller superintending the loading of No. 6 while Chief Officer Henry Wilde, joined by Captain Smith himself, assisted women into No. 8. The urgency of the situation was emphasized by the firing of the first distress rocket from *Titanic's* starboard bridge wing at about this time.

For the most part, it was an orderly evacuation. Despite the tilting deck and the macabre backdrop of exploding rockets set to the band's ragtime music, Gladys said people kept their wits. Most people, that is.

An aristocratic young Latin woman, the niece of the prime minister of Spain, stood crying with her maid in the shadows of Boat 8, waiting for the return of her fiance, who had dashed below for his bride's jewelry. When 24 year-old Victor Penasco came back, he tried to convince Maria, 22, to get into the lifeboat. She refused in a flood of tears. Gladys, standing by, recalled the "terrible scene" of the newlyweds' parting. Finally Noëlle interceded, speaking in Italian to the young couple. But the senora couldn't be consoled, and as Gladys remembered, the husband "threw her in our arms and asked us to take care of her."

Noëlle, Gladys, Cissy and their new charge were handed into the lifeboat by Captain Smith just as another dramatic scene took place a few feet away, the most famous demonstration of love and courage to occur that night. The elderly Isidor Strauses, co-owners of Macy's Department Store, were among the passengers assembled near Boat 8. Ida Straus had resisted her husband's insistence that she get aboard; at last she consented and approached the lifeboat. But before stepping into it she changed her mind, handed a fur stole to her maid and told her to go without her. Although the young woman tried to dissuade her employer, Ida returned to her husband's side. Crewmen moved to stop the old lady but she held firm.

"I stay with my husband," she told them, and to Isidor, her companion of 40 years, she said simply, "Where you go, I go."

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It was now approximately 12:55 a.m., an hour and 15 minutes since *Titanic's* fateful scrape with the iceberg, and Boats 6 and 8 were still far from fully loaded. With only about 28 women in each, there was room for 70 more.

But Captain Smith and Chief Officer Wilde were eager to get the boats away. Whoever else may or may not have realized the impending disaster, these men did, and time was clearly running out. After a sailor put in a lantern, some blankets and a few other provisions, Wilde called out that there were "quite enough" women in No. 8 to lower it. Captain Smith agreed and took hold of the forward falls. Noticing Alfred Crawford, 41, a bedroom steward, standing near, Smith ordered him into No. 8 to help row the boat, instructing him to make for what looked like "two masthead lights in the distance."

These lights are now widely believed to have been those of a small freighter, the Leyland Liner *Californian*, stopped at the eastern edge of an ice field about 10 miles to the north (the ship appeared even nearer to many who saw its lights). Later evidence, much disputed, contended that the lights were from another boat that lay between *Titanic* and *Californian* that night.

Crawford kept his eyes on the steamer's twinkling lights as he got into No. 8, pointing them out to some of the ladies aboard to cheer them.

Captain Smith, scanning the deck for more crewmen, spied Thomas Jones, a 32-year-old able seaman who had helped load Boat 8. The captain ordered him to take charge and Jones jumped in. Noëlle heard Smith tell the sailor about the lights on the horizon.

“Row straight for those ship lights over there,” Smith said, indicating their position. “Leave your passengers on board her, and return as soon as you can.” The captain spoke loudly enough that many women in No. 8 heard the order. Crawford, Jones and others, including Noëlle, thought the ship looked quite near, maybe as close as three to five miles. To deliver such an order to the lifeboat’s crew, the captain must have thought they were at least that close.

Noëlle later praised Smith and his efforts:

Captain Smith’s whole attitude was one of great calm and courage, and I am sure he thought that the ship whose lights we could plainly see would pick us up, and that our lifeboats would be able to do double duty in ferrying passengers to the help that gleamed so near.

Just as Boat 8 was ready to launch, following No. 6 by a few seconds, a group of steerage women and children suddenly appeared from below decks, escorted by steward Edward Hart, perhaps the only crewmember to make a concerted effort to save those in third class. There was some commotion among the women in Hart’s flock when it was obvious that No. 8, already starting down its falls, would not be able to take them on. Only one woman got in after the order to lower away — Tillie Taussig, 39, who had just put her teenage daughter aboard, was literally dropped into the boat as it creaked down the side of the ship.

In the tumult, Seaman Jones, who noticed Hart in the crowd near the boat as it was lowering, thought the steward had jumped in, too. But Hart, after delivering his lucky bunch to the safety of the boat deck, had turned back to bring up more third class women.

Noëlle recalled the incident of the “obstreperous” steerage passengers and, in the parlance of her class, said “it was instantly put down.” In actuality, the women left on deck after Boat 8 was launched were directed aft by Officer Wilde to Boat 10; most were probably saved.

While No. 8 started its 60 foot descent to the ocean, Boat 6 was held up between B and C-Decks, waiting for an extra sailor to be sent down to man the craft; none was found and a passenger, Maj. Arthur Peuchen, filled in for the crew. The only male passenger allowed into a boat on the portside, the 52-year-old Canadian yachtsman showed his salt as he swung himself out onto a rope and slid down into the boat.

Owing to No. 6’s delay, Boat 8 reached the water first. It was just after 1 a.m. when it plopped down in the calm, cold sea, unhooked from its falls, and paddled slowly out into the moonless night.

Noëlle remembered that the launching went “quietly” but fear gripped Gladys:

The lowering of that boat into the darkness seemed too awful. When we touched the water I felt we had done a foolish thing to leave that big safe boat.

Cissy, Noëlle’s maid, shared her mistress’ confidence. “I was not at all frightened,” she said. “Everybody was saying as we left the ship that she was good for 12 hours yet.”

Number 8, with only an estimated 24 women and four crewmen aboard, was the first lifeboat to clear the portside of *Titanic*.

Riding somewhat high, its oars slogged in the water at odd angles and in uneven strokes as the men tried to get the hang of the exercise. Alfred Crawford had been at sea since he was 11 years old but as a bellboy and steward, not a seaman, and he had little knowledge of rowing. The other crewmembers were similarly inexperienced, except for Tom Jones, the only sailor aboard. Under Jones’ direction, the men did their best, though their lack of skill was criticized by several women as No. 8 cut loose from the ship. Pressure to get the boat away caused some bickering among the crew, adding to the strain.

“If you don’t stop talking through that hole in your face,” a man said to another, “there’ll be one less in this boat.”

Two of the crewmen puffed on cigarettes and this caused more aggravation among the women. Objecting were 55-year-old Ella White, a feisty New York widow, and her companion, Marie Young, 36, a shy music teacher from Washington who numbered the Roosevelt children among her pupils. Young reprimanded the men for blowing smoke in her face while White made sarcastic comments about their rowing. "Why don't you put the oar in the oarlock?" she nagged.

If this weren't enough, the lamp placed in the lifeboat kept going out, and there was cursing as Crawford and others had to repeatedly light the wick. Ella White tried to help by waving around her walking stick with its electrically lit tip. Her efforts confused others, however, who thought the streaks of light were signals from a ship. Asked to stop swinging her cane, Ella grumbled and sulked.

Things weren't starting out well for Boat 8. Noëlle, still trying to comfort a sobbing Maria Penasco, should have had her patience tried already, but the general squabbling and lack of leadership only inspired her natural compassion and talent for organization, and she rose to the challenge. Immediately she began calming the women around her, speaking in a low, steady voice to instill strength and assurance.

"The first impression I had as we left the ship was that, above all things, we must not lose our self-control," Noëlle said. "We had no officer to take command of our boat, and the little seaman (Tom Jones) had to assume all the responsibility. He did it nobly, alternately cheering us with words of encouragement, then rowing doggedly."

Jones' had the same high regard for the countess.

"I heard the quiet, determined way she spoke to the others," he recalled, "and I knew she was more of a man than any we had on board."

Realizing she'd be a good shipmate, Jones decided to make use of her ability.

"I was in command," he said, "but I had to row, and I needed someone at the tiller, so I put her at the tiller."

Noëlle's account was a little different:

When we pushed off from the *Titanic's* side, I asked the seaman if he would care to have me at the tiller, as I knew something about boats. He said, "Certainly, lady." I climbed into the stern sheets and asked my cousin to help me.

Whichever way it happened that Noëlle took the tiller of her lifeboat, take it she did. On this simple act rested much of the fame that would carry her name around the world as one of the heroines of the *Titanic* tragedy. Noëlle was not the only woman to steer or row a lifeboat that night, but her positive, selfless attitude — and what her grandson called her "gung-ho spirit when it came to hard work" — set her apart as an exemplary leader. The press later made much of the fact that she was a noblewoman, and while that certainly gave her bravery a special cachet, her title held no value in the middle of the North Atlantic. It was Noëlle's innate resourcefulness and fearlessness that inspired the confidence of her boat mates, not her social position, though one wonders if she remembered her husband's family motto of "Grip Fast," which she suddenly found herself enacting.

Yet to Noëlle's mind there was nothing brave about what she accomplished — she saw it as a team effort, and her interviews reflect that. Always ascribing equal credit to the other women who helped row and navigate, it was Tom Jones whom she praised as the real hero that night.

Whether or not she accepted that her work was remarkable, others claimed it was. Noëlle never gave a full account of her experience in the lifeboat. In addition to the countess' one official interview, what's known of her actions comes from interviews with other survivors, Gladys' private letters, and the memories of her grandson. Rowing and steering her lifeboat while comforting others may have been a natural response for a woman whose avocation centered on helping people, but that Noëlle was able to assert herself with such composure in a moment of intense crisis makes her efforts extraordinary by any measure. Indeed, the course she set for the lights on the horizon that night

followed the course of hope and faith that already defined her life.

Ian Rothes agreed that his grandmother's toil in the lifeboat was a metaphor for her life:

She did exactly what anyone who knew her would have expected her to do My grandmother approached daily life with that sort of determination. It may sound precious, but she always rowed for the light. Her religious faith directed her wherever she went.

It was this inner strength that Jones recognized in Noëlle as the lifeboat set out. Separated by class, countess and sailor were united in courage, and together they restored order and direction as Boat 8 splashed away from *Titanic* and out into the night.

There were six oars but only two were used by the four crewmen who arranged themselves in pairs on either side of the boat. It was slow going. Luckily, following Noëlle's lead, other women volunteered to assist, and at least seven began taking turns rowing.

"Let me help!" sang out Margaret Swift, 46, reaching for an oar. Active in church work in Brooklyn, Swift was returning from a European trip with her friend, 49-year-old Dr. Alice Leader. Alice was with her in the boat, along with another of their friends, Marion Kenyon, 31, who had bid a casual farewell to her husband when she got into No. 8, not realizing the danger. Alice and Marion also offered to row.

One argument the occupants of Boat 8 didn't have was over which way to go. Almost everyone had heard the captain's instructions to Jones to head for the lights in the distance, and with all oars in use now, and Noëlle steering, they were making good headway.

While Boat 6 rowed aft — it had been lowered a few moments after No. 8 was afloat — Jones and Noëlle navigated straight for the lights on the horizon.

Titanic appeared solid as they shoved off. Twenty minutes later, from a distance of about a hundred yards, the list was alarmingly obvious. The sight of the ship leaning to port, "her bows right down in the water," as Gladys put it, was unbelievable. Lights blazed from the portholes, the band continued to play, and distress signals were still being fired every few minutes. One by one, lifeboats were lowered and rowed clear, yet *Titanic's* decks were lined with hundreds of people.

"It was so unreal, like a scene on a stage," said Alice Leader, rowing beside Margaret Swift.

Gladys wondered how such a horrible event could be taking place in a setting so beautiful. "It was the stillest night possible, not a ripple on the water, and the stars were wonderful," she recalled. "That icy air and stars I never want to see or feel again."

The only hope the people in Boat 8 had was that they would soon reach the glittering lights ahead of them. But the two orbs, one higher than the other indicating the masts of a steamer, seemed to be playing tricks with the rowers — they never got any nearer.

Noëlle, sitting at the tiller, kept her eyes firmly on the lights. They appeared stationary yet were growing dimmer. She regularly called out to Tom Jones about these "phantom lights," particularly when another light became visible, a red running light, designating the strange steamer's portside.

Crawford, pulling his oar, faced *Titanic* as he rowed but every once in a while he turned around to check the lights. Like the countess, he noticed them growing less distinct; it wasn't clear if they were actually moving away or just rotating in the current. Crawford also noticed *Titanic* was trying to signal for help with its Morse lamp but,



One of the first lifeboats launched, No. 8 rowed for a ship's lights in the distance - [enlarge](#)

as far as he could tell, there was never a reply from the mysterious ship.

• • •

By 2:10 a.m., it had been over an hour since No. 8 cast off from *Titanic's* side, pulling all the while for the unreachable lights. The occupants of Boat 8 never stopped rowing but their morale dipped from time to time. One or two women kept asking if they were getting any closer to the elusive ship on the horizon, and the disheartening reply was always “no.”

Noëlle said their vain attempt was “pitiful.” To her the lights looked tantalizingly close but regardless of how fast those at the oars rowed, it was apparent “there was simply no getting there.”

It was also evident that *Titanic* was going down very quickly. When Boat 8 left the ship, the danger didn't seem imminent; water had only risen to just under the portholes of E-Deck, the lowest passenger deck. But the ship's bow was now almost completely submerged, its stern beginning to rise above the surface of the sea to expose three giant propellers. From a distance of about a mile, the farthest away of any of the lifeboats, No. 8's people had a bird's eye view of the harrowing event.

“The most awful part of the whole thing,” remembered Noëlle, “was seeing the rows of portholes vanishing one by one.”

All the lifeboats were gone, yet over 1,500 people remained aboard. Sufficient boats weren't thought necessary on an “unsinkable” ship, and more than half of those who sailed on *Titanic* would pay the price for the White Star Line's overconfidence in technology.

The situation was underscored by grim silence. There were no more shooting rockets, no band playing, as *Titanic* began its fatal plunge. The last distress flares had been detonated, the Marconi operators tapped out a final SOS, and the crew were unlashng two small canvas rafts, trying to launch them before the rising sea swept everybody off the deck. Meantime, a mass exodus had begun — as *Titanic's* stern swung upward, burying its bow in the waves, crowds of people rushed for the highest part of the dying ship. Hundreds ran along the decks, clambered up ladders, scrambled over rails, in a race against the invading water.

From such a distance it was impossible for anyone in Boat 8 to see in any detail the final moments of those left aboard the doomed liner. In the darkness it was only by watching the portholes disappearing that Noëlle and the others were able to gauge the rate of the sinking. These lights, which had burned brightly the whole time, were now glowing a reddish color; suddenly, as the stern continued swinging up, they flickered out, and a cacophony of terrified voices shattered the quiet night.

The horrifying sounds from *Titanic* jarred everyone in No. 8, and all eyes were fixed on the ship, cloaked now in total darkness. Hearing the despairing cries that echoed over the sea, Maria Penasco, whom Noëlle had quieted before taking the tiller, lost control of her emotions again, and began moaning loudly. The young woman's maid held her but she still wailed uncontrollably.

Noëlle sprang to her aid. Turning the helm over to Gladys, she made her way to the side of the young bride. Whispering kind words, she tried to shield Maria from the sight of the ship's terrible end.

“Senora Penaso began to scream for her husband,” Noëlle recalled. “It was too horrible. I left the tiller to my cousin and slipped down beside her to be of what comfort I could. Poor woman! Her sobs tore our hearts.”

Maria's moans — “unspeakable in their sadness,” the countess said — mingled with the death screams from *Titanic*, standing almost on end.

“The terror of seeing that boat go down, and the fearful shrieks of the passengers who were left was too awful,” said Gladys. “Then the awful sound of all the air-tight compartments going.” She compared it to the rumble of an earthquake.

The countess, too, was shocked by the sounds, and to prevent further hysteria in Maria, she put her hands over the desolated woman's ears.

"When the awful end came," Noëlle told an interviewer later, "I tried my best to keep the woman from hearing the agonizing sounds of distress. They seemed to go on forever."

Things were happening too quickly for people to be sure of what they saw in the dark. But before plummeting to the bottom of the sea, *Titanic* had split in half, and the traumatic wrenching away of the keel below the surface caused the huge liner's stern to rotate over the spot where the bow had disappeared. Swimmers in the water around the sinking ship, and survivors in boats nearby, saw the twisting stern more clearly. Those in Boat 8 could discern little in the dark, only swaying shadows.

To Alice Leader, tugging at her oar, the confusing picture she had was that of the ship resurfacing. "The black hulk seemed to rise out of the water again," she said, "and sink a second time."

Noëlle didn't see the ship go down – her head was pressed to the senora's, and both were looking away. But Gladys saw it all. She said *Titanic* went under with the roar of a "distant battle." It was 2:20 a.m.

The sound of the ship's destruction faded but the shrieks of the drowning persisted. Tom Jones' reaction was visceral. He stood up and called out that the boat would row back and try to save some of those struggling in the water. The response to his order was anything but what he expected from the women, several of whom had left husbands behind. In a nearly unanimous cry, the frightened ladies protested against going back.

Noëlle felt very differently. Supported by Gladys and an American woman, most likely Margaret Swift, who was now rowing beside Jones, the countess insisted it was their duty to go back and help.

But she and Jones were bitterly rebuked. Noëlle was incensed by the other women's attitude:

Several of us — and Tom Jones — wanted to row back and see if there was not some chance of rescuing anyone that had possibly survived. But the majority in the boat ruled that we had no right to risk their lives on the bare chance of finding anyone alive after the final plunge. They also said the captain's own orders had been to row for the ship lights, and that we had no business to interfere with his orders. Of course, that settled the matter and we rowed on.

Gladys was also surprised by the reaction:

I could not hear the discussion very clearly, as I was at the tiller, but everyone forward and the three men refused.

She added that she felt the others were so upset about the proposed return that they "would have killed us rather than go back."

Jones, astounded by the majority's decision, made his stance clear when he shouted: "Ladies, if any of us are saved, remember I wanted to go back. I would rather drown with them than leave them."

• • •

With the cries of the dying filling everyone's ears, Boat 8 dutifully resumed its chase of the elusive lights. Lost in thought, nobody talked. After about half an hour the cries faded and in their place fell a terrible stillness.



Titanic went down at 2:20 a.m., April 15, 1912 - [enlarge](#)

“The silence of a lonely sea dropped down,” Noëlle said. “The indescribable loneliness, the ghastliness of our feelings, never can be told.”

The countess remained with Maria Penasco for the time being, then relieved Gladys at the tiller for a while before taking her turn at an oar beside Emma Bucknell, the 59-year-old widow of Bucknell University’s namesake, William Bucknell. Noëlle’s rowing partner was one of those who had disagreed with her about returning to help people in the water but Emma was a team player at the oars; she rowed all night and had blisters on her hands to prove it.

Despite the earlier clash, the women in Boat 8 were of the same community spirit and, with few exceptions, they worked together well. Marie Young later commended the self-control of her boat mates — true “20th century women,” she called them.

Those at the oars included 22-year-old Edith Pears, wife of the grandson of the founder of the Pears soap company. Saved with her aunt and two cousins, Caroline Bonnell, 30, also rowed. So did Ruth Taussig, 18, and Mary Holverson, 35. These women didn’t know it yet, but each had just lost husbands, fathers or other male relations.

Also rowing were Alice Leader, Marion Kenyon, and the energetic Margaret Swift, whom Noëlle said remained at her oar all night::

Mrs. Swift did yeoman service. She rowed for five hours with Tom Jones without taking a rest. Really she was magnificent, not only in her attitude but in the whole souled way in which she worked.

Even those who weren’t rowing did their bit. One lady held the lantern to help people maneuver in the dark as they relieved each other at the oars. Even fretful Ella White got into the act, counting strokes for the rowers. From time to time, she couldn’t resist swinging her electric cane to illuminate the scene, and no one bothered to complain.

The women were glad to row — to keep their spirits up and to keep warm. Many wore only negligees and robes under their coats. One woman looked ready for a ball in her evening dress and high heel slippers. Another was barefoot, with just a sweater over her nightclothes. Alice Leader had on a blue serge tailored suit and hat, covered by a lightweight cloth motoring cloak. Caroline Bonnell wore three coats while Ruth Taussig discarded her extra wrap. Gladys’ thick suit and full-length fur cape weren’t enough insulation, and her “stockings were all ripped.” She said she felt “numb from the waist downwards.”

While Noëlle rowed next to Emma Bucknell (and perhaps shared her brandy flask), the latter turned round to find her maid rowing beside the countess’ maid, and the sight filled her with pride. Noëlle meantime called out reports on the distant lights to Jones; they would flicker every once in a while, or seem to move, and she wanted him to know in the event that a change in course was necessary. Seeing the faint outline of icebergs around the boat, she also guided Gladys in her steering, suggesting which way to go to avoid them.

For all their efforts, the glimmering lights were no nearer than they had seemed when Boat 8 started for them. At one point both running lights of the weird vessel were seen, indicating its bow had swung to face the lifeboat. Noëlle and Alfred Crawford saw the red and green lights distinctly, but only for a moment or two, and they disappeared.

During this time, an hour after *Titanic’s* sinking, Gladys handled the tiller while Noëlle rowed. This is a significant point, as the countess’ future celebrity was based partly on her having steered Boat 8. The truth is Gladys was at the tiller for more than half the time, having taken over from Noëlle just before the ship sank. But this fact doesn’t diminish Noëlle’s leadership. Along with steering for the first hour or so, she did her share of rowing and, as has been shown, she even acted as lookout.

She was almost unofficial skipper, her example of grace and calm inspiring those around her to forget their fear and take an active part in managing the boat. Jones was in physical command of Boat 8 but Noëlle was the motivational heart of the work accomplished that night. Without her morale

boosting and volunteer spirit, it seems unlikely that the nervous, privileged ladies in No. 8 would have rallied so enthusiastically to the side of the young sailor and his motley crew of stewards and kitchen help.

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It was now almost 3:30 in the morning. Dawn was coming, bringing relief to the huddled survivors from the misery of their cold night vigil. And with the first faint streaks of daylight came rescue.



Titnic's lifeboats, surrounded by icebergs, was the scene that greeted the rescue ship Carpathia

Boat 8 was still pulling for the unattainable lights in the north when a dot of illumination appeared in the opposite direction, gradually resolving itself into a bright, moving object. It seemed to be heading straight for them. That wasn't the only thing the survivors saw. White-capped waves were hurtling towards them. A breeze had sprung up, tossing the sea about, and the boat heaved in the swell.

Jones was the first to see the new light appearing in the south and called out to Noëlle, asking if she could see it. She looked but couldn't make anything out. Then, as No. 8 crested a wave, Noëlle clearly saw a brilliant light, speeding across the horizon, and she replied in the affirmative. With that, Jones announced to the others there was a ship coming on full steam. Gladys immediately swung the boat around.

"Suddenly we saw the lights of a steamer.," she recalled, "and we turned and began rowing towards her."

It wasn't an easy task because of the waves. "That awful time until we got to her I shall never forget," continued Gladys, "It was beginning to get rough and very difficult to steer."

Boat 8 had quite a way to go. Because it had pursued the mystery lights for over two hours, it was one of the farthest of the 20 scattered lifeboats from the approaching rescue ship; Crawford thought they were as much as two miles away.

It would be a long haul in the choppy sea but no one was fussing. Salvation was in sight, and the women were ecstatic. Ella White waved her electric stick with abandon and Margaret Swift, rowing beside Jones, suggested everyone sing, "Pull for the Shore."

Noëlle recalled "Lead, Kindly Light" as another hopeful tune sung in the boat that morning. It was one of her favorites, and she cheerily joined in:

Lead, kindly light, amid the encircling gloom,
lead Thou me on!
The night is dark, and I'm far from home,
lead Thou me on!

Jones was caught up in the excitement as well. "To keep up our spirits," he said, "we sang as we rowed — all of us. Then we stopped singing and prayed."

The ship coming to their rescue looked as good as the shore to the numbed, exhausted survivors. Less than half of the 2,200 people who set sail on *Titanic* lived to greet the dawn of April 15, 1912 and the shelter of the Cunard Liner *Carpathia*.

Under the command of Captain Arthur H. Rostron, the ship was just starting a Mediterranean cruise when *Titanic's* SOS was received. Lunging 58 miles through a sea dotted with icebergs, *Carpathia* found only the remnants of the great liner — a mile's radius of strewn wreckage and lifeboats with too-few survivors of the world's worst maritime tragedy.

The people in Boat 8 watched the other boats ahead of them drawing up alongside the rescue ship, unloading their occupants by rope ladders and chair swings. Grimly, several in No. 8 also realized they were rowing through a field of debris from the wreck. They had apparently retraced their journey to the site of *Titanic's* grave. All that was left now were odd bits of cork, some splintered pieces of wood, and a bunch of green couch cushions from the reception room. They had come back, but it was far too late.

Rosy rays of dawn revealed six or seven icebergs surrounding the little fleet of lifeboats as they threaded their way to the side of *Carpathia*. The beauty of the sun rising contrasted to the nightmare the survivors had passed through, accentuating their gratitude to the comforting faces lining the rails and the kind arms that pulled them from their frozen odyssey.

Two agonizing hours later, at around 6 a.m., Noëlle and her shivering comrades reached the safety of *Carpathia*, drifting at last under an open gangway door and its promise of safety. Strong crewmen secured the lifeboat and began helping the women aboard. It was such an emotional release from their plight that many were overcome.

Gladys and Noëlle fought back tears of happiness — and exhaustion — as they waited their turn to be hoisted aboard.

"Noëlle went up just before me," Gladys said. "I could not walk when I got up as my legs were so numb."

Gladys didn't see Noëlle when she gained the deck, and after looking for her she decided she must have been taken to the dining room where survivors were given breakfast and hot coffee. But she wasn't there either. She eventually learned Noëlle had been taken to the ship's hospital.

"She had fainted directly she got off the hoist," Gladys recounted. "The strain had been too much."

After being given a sedative to help her rest, Noëlle was shown to a stateroom. According to some reports this was Captain Rostron's private cabin, which she and Gladys shared with Philadelphia society matron Eleanor Widener, whose husband and son were lost, and Madeleine Astor, wife of the multimillionaire, also lost. It was cramped but as many fellow survivors were sleeping on the floors of *Carpathia's* public rooms, the women were grateful for the comparative privacy.

Unable to sleep herself, Gladys put Noëlle to bed. The countess' maid, Cissy, whom Gladys praised for behaving "splendidly in the boat" despite her illness, was given accommodation in a nearby stateroom.

"My nerves are all to pieces," Gladys told her mother in a letter she penned aboard *Carpathia*. "It's all been too ghastly."

It took four hours but the rescuing Cunarder pulled aboard 712 survivors from the lifeboats. Carefully cruising over the wreck site, Captain Rostron searched for more life among the scattered ruins of *Titanic*. But only one body was seen, the rest having drifted with the current into the ice floes. Satisfied there was nothing more to do but take the survivors back to port, Rostron ordered *Carpathia* turned around. By 9 a.m. the ship was heading full steam for New York.

The voyage home was one of overwhelming sadness. *Carpathia* was, as the newspapers were soon calling it, a “ship of sorrow.”

“There are about 150 widows,” Gladys said, “and to see all these poor women is too terrible ... The separation of husbands and wives was ghastly. Noëlle and I are so thankful we had no man with us.”

While recuperating in a deck chair the next day, sipping broth served by a kindly *Carpathia* passenger, the countess wondered about her son Malcolm back home. Was he feeling better? She'd sent Cissy to the Marconi office to wire her parents in France, Norman in New York, as well as Norman's mother, who was staying at Leslie House with the boys. Cissy came back to say she had filled out the forms but that a long waiting list meant the messages wouldn't be dispatched for a while.

Noëlle tried to make sense of the last 36 hours. How could such a disaster have happened? Where were the friends with whom she and Gladys had socialized aboard *Titanic*? The Duff Gordons had been spared and Elmer Taylor was saved with his wife, too. But where was Taylor's business partner, Fletcher Lambert-Williams, who had been so solicitous to Noëlle and her party during the evacuation? No one had seen him since. He was so selfless, trying to assure them there was no danger, even helping them find their lifejackets; Gladys still had the box of raisins he'd given her.

Missing, too, was the countess' old neighbor, Henry Forbes Julian; it would now be her responsibility to tell his wife of his last days. Julia Cavendish survived but her husband Tyrell stayed behind and was lost. Christopher Head also perished, as did W.T. Stead, most famous of the English coterie. The loss of life — some 1,500 people — was too unbearable to contemplate.

Noëlle also thought of those with whom she had shared the hardship of the night in the lifeboat. She was so grateful to Tom Jones that she sought him out to thank him personally, asking for his address so they could keep in touch. The countess did the same with Alfred Crawford, who had faced such hostility from some of the other women in Boat 8. But he kept his cool, rowing the whole five hours the boat was afloat, and in Noëlle's mind was as much a hero as anybody.

But neither she nor Gladys were content to reflect, as the latter's correspondence with her mother proves. In letters written on *Carpathia* she told of their efforts to aid the sick, injured and despondent. With Gladys, Noëlle went below to attend to some of the steerage survivors.

“My grandmother's natural dedication to serving others,” Ian Rothes said, “compelled her to seek out those in need.”

The women also visited the makeshift hospitals, set up in the various classes, to provide what comfort they could. Gladys admitted the work was therapeutic:

Our *Titanic* men, with legs and feet frozen, are wonderful when you think of what they have been through ... a cheery face and word did so much for them ... Noëlle and I have helped in seeing after these poor distressed souls, and it has helped us so much...

The women did more than smile and chat with the sufferers, who included *Titanic's* wireless operator Harold Bride. As a nurse, Noëlle was qualified to assist in bandaging and administering medication, and it was believed by her grandson that she aided the *Carpathia's* surgeon in treating some of the survivors. Gladys, in her letters, mentioned that they both helped the doctor but she didn't describe the duties they performed.

In addition to nursing, the women helped in other ways. Joining forces with a *Carpathia* crewman, who rounded up spare blankets and linen, Noëlle, Gladys and a group of other women put their sewing skills to work. They spent one morning

cutting out garments for the steerage and second class children, some of whom had no clothes at all. We made little coats and leggings out of the blankets.

Among those whom Noëlle's makeshift sewing circle fitted out with clothes were two French children.

These little girls, Simone Laroche, 3, and her 20 month-old sister Louise, had been saved with their mother but their father had died.

The Laroches — 25 year old Haitian-born Joseph, an engineer, and his mulatto French wife Juliette, 22 — were the only black passengers known to have been aboard *Titanic*. Everyday Gladys took the youngest girl, Louise, out for a little play time on deck while the mother took a nap.

Another beneficiary of the ladies' project to provide clothing for the children was three-year-old William Richards, later photographed wearing a coat made from a blanket by the countess' little sewing team.

Noëlle in fact spent most of her time on deck cutting out and stitching warm wraps for the kids. Before long, word spread of her role in managing Boat 8 and of the work she was doing now to help the steerage and second class. An unidentified *Carpathia* passenger even took a picture of Noëlle's band of seamstresses, unfolding blankets and sewing. Ian Rothes claimed the woman seated in the center of this image, and apparently knitting a coat, was his grandmother. Seen in profile, wearing a light colored cardigan and a headdress of scarves, she definitely resembles Noëlle.



Women survivors on the deck of *Carpathia* sewing clothes out of blankets for children. The central figure in the scene is believed to be Noëlle.

At some point during Noëlle's sewing, one of *Titanic's* stewardesses ventured to apprise her of the gossip going about, adding that she had been nicknamed "the plucky little countess."

"You have made yourself famous by rowing in the boat," the woman said.

"I hope not," Noëlle replied, barely looking up from her work. "I have done nothing."

It was the first small sign of the media hoopla that awaited her in New York.

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By day, Noëlle and Gladys distributed their handiwork, accompanied *Carpathia's* doctor on his rounds, and consoled some of the widows, including Maria Penasco, Marion Kenyon and their friend, Julia Cavendish. At night sleeping was difficult, especially for Gladys who on April 18, the third day after the sinking, had to take a tranquilizer to relax:

I slept a little better, but one wakes terrified ... The nights are so awful ... How we long for land. This water all around is terrible and one's nerves now seem worse than on that dreadful night ... It is all such a horrible nightmare ... I can't stand another night on the sea

Luckily she didn't have to spend another night on *Carpathia*. The rescue ship, after much delay due

to bad weather, finally steamed into New York Harbor that evening. Emerging from a dense fog into a full-on thunderstorm, *Carpathia* was met by a batch of tugboats chartered by local and national newspapers, each crowded with reporters shouting questions through megaphones at the wan, silent faces lining the decks. Magnesium powder exploded all around the ship as cameramen on the bobbing boats captured flashlight images of what had become the biggest news event of the early 20th century.

All of New York seemed to have turned out to watch the *Titanic* survivors come ashore — an estimated 50,000 lined the piers. Gladys recalled the incredible sight:

We got into the dock at 9:30, after having a dreadful time coming up the river, with all the newspaper tugs that wanted to put pressmen on board. But of course our captain would allow no one to board us but the pilot.

After yet more delays the first survivors sauntered down the gangplank into the arms of family and friends. Of course, many thronging the dock waited in vain for loved ones that would never have a homecoming.

Noëlle didn't go ashore with Gladys — she was down in the steerage sickbay making sure those she'd been caring for had somewhere to go when they disembarked. Among them was seriously injured Rhoda Abbott, 39.

The only woman saved from the water after *Titanic* went down, Rhoda endured the most traumatic experience and loss of any other female survivor. Recently separated from her husband, she was returning home on *Titanic* with her two adolescent sons after a visit to relatives in England. The three made it on deck too late to get into a lifeboat and were swept overboard during the final plunge. The Abbotts had been holding hands when they were washed off the deck but the current separated them, carrying the boys away. Rhoda never saw them again. Managing to swim to a swamped lifeboat, she stood for five hours in the flooded craft waiting for rescue, suffering severe frostbite in her feet and legs.

Her story stung Noëlle's heart.

"My grandmother said this lady could not walk at all," Ian Rothes recounted, "and was very poor, and so of course she helped her with the Christian charity that was her natural response to the unfortunate."

Although Rhoda assured the countess, and another distinguished caretaker, Molly Brown, that she would be looked after by the Salvation Army, the women insisted on helping her as long as she was in need. For the time being it was decided that Rhoda should be transferred via ambulance to New York Hospital for treatment, at Noëlle's expense, then to a hotel where Molly picked up the bill for the duration of her recovery. A listing of hotel guests in the *New York Times* the next day revealed that Molly had already booked the injured woman's room.

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When Gladys Cherry stepped off the rescue ship's gangway on April 18, happily wearing new stockings lent her by a young lady on *Carpathia*, she anxiously searched the numbered queues along the wharf for her brother, Charles, and his friends. Finally recognizing each other, they embraced, but wary of the hordes of photographers, headed at once for a waiting car. Gladys remembered the hectic scene of "officials standing in lines to keep back the crowds and motors by the million."

Gladys had a reservation at the Plaza Hotel but her brother convinced her to stay with him at his apartment for a few days. She wasn't worried about her cousin-in-law — she knew Noëlle was being met by Norman and would be taken to the Ritz-Carlton. There, as one newspaper noted, the earl had seen to it that their suite "had every room banked with flowers in preparation for the countess." There the pair would also celebrate their 12th anniversary the following day. Gladys was careful not to get in the way of what promised to be an ardent reunion between husband and wife. Still, she'd been

instructed by Noëlle to telephone her the next morning so they could go out shopping for new clothes. According to one of Gladys' letters, a fellow survivor — an unidentified New York woman — had offered to “take us round in her car to buy some things as we have nothing but what we stand up in.”

For Noëlle, acquiring a fresh wardrobe couldn't happen soon enough — not only for her anniversary but for meeting the press that clamored for her story of the disaster from the moment she checked in at the Ritz. Escorted by Norman and a group of friends, Noëlle and Cissy arrived at 11:30 p.m., about the same time as Sir Cosmo and Lady Duff Gordon, the latter's secretary, and two other first class *Titanic* survivors, millionairess Charlotte Drake Cardeza and her son. Reporters swarmed about the group at the reception desk, asking for interviews that were politely denied. As the *New York Times* wrote, the women were muffled up in raincoats supplied by the Cunard Line, looking like they were returning from some merry automobile excursion. The Duff Gordons “appeared in excellent health and spirits,” the paper maintained, while Noëlle was also “in good health in spite of her experiences.”

As the Rothes entourage was led to their rooms, the only comment the *Times* correspondent could get was from an unnamed member of the group who said the countess was “particularly happy because her maid was saved.”

That wouldn't do for an exclusive, so a note was delivered to Noëlle's suite, inviting her to give a brief statement. She declined, sending a message down to the front desk that she was “too weak to see anyone.”

It seemed a brush off at first but around midnight the reporters learned Noëlle had requested a doctor, though hotel management claimed the “countess is not seriously ill.”

Dr. Edward Dinkelapiel attended Noëlle, treating her for exhaustion — information the good surgeon was authorized to share with the press. The media onslaught had begun:

The Countess of Rothes is at the Ritz-Carlton under the care of a physician. It is not so much the exposure and the shock that ails her as the effects of her hard labor in pulling at the oars of her lifeboat.

So read an Associated Press release the next day, April 19. The Rothes awoke to find the notice printed in several papers, but if they thought they had sated the media's appetite for Noëlle's story they were mistaken. Beginning early that morning the couple was inundated with telephone inquiries from newspapers everywhere, and cards from journalists were slipped under their door all day long; so much for a quiet celebration of their anniversary.

For the time being, all that mattered to Noëlle was communicating with her parents, her children and her friends at home. The Dyer-Edwardes were jubilant in their wires and so was Noëlle for their safety,

“If they had accompanied her for the rest of the voyage,” Ian Rothes said, “my grandmother felt she would have lost her father.”

While recuperating, Noëlle and Norman were also overjoyed to learn their son, Malcolm, ill at home, would fully recover. Elsewhere in Manhattan, Gladys was settling in with her brother. She, too, was grateful for friends and family, and for her rescue.

“I am here with Charlie and am all right,” she assured her mother. “At last I am safe and sound. Am resting, I am so tired. Thank God I am here.”

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Over the next few days, a spate of news stories — more or less true — about Noëlle appeared, as fellow survivors gave their accounts and enterprising reporters sniffed out leads.

“Countess of Rothes Brave— Took Charge in Her Boat” ran an April 20 headline in the *New York Times*. Noëlle felt it overstated her role, and didn’t accurately reflect Gladys’ contributions. But an interview with Tom Jones that was included in the piece touched her very much. The correspondent described the seaman as “tired” but said that

his eyes light up and his speech becomes animated when you ask him what part the women played in the trying hours after the *Titanic* sank.

The reporter added that when Jones spoke of his admiration of Noëlle’s bravery he “straightened up in her honor.”

Boat mate Alice Leader paid a similar tribute to Noëlle in an article syndicated by United Press:

The Countess of Rothes is an expert oarswoman and thoroughly at home on the water. She practically took command of our boat ... Several of the women took their places with the countess at the oars and rowed in turns.



A news placard in Times Square listing Noëlle as one of the survivors - [enlarge](#)

A follow up story was soon published in which an unidentified Rothes relative was consulted:

The Earl of Rothes’ family, on being interviewed, said that the countess could not be called an athlete in any sense of the word. To describe her as an “expert oarswoman” was quite wrong. Nevertheless, the countess seems to have done sterling work and to have been a comfort and inspiration to other women.

Although the Leslie’s knew Noëlle was indeed an avid sportswoman, they didn’t appreciate the sudden publicity surrounding her, and issued the denial of her athleticism, hoping to protect her and to discourage further inquiries.

With her in-laws now being contacted by media, it was clear Noëlle would have to give an interview if she wanted to be left in peace. As soon as she felt well enough, and after she’d replaced her wardrobe (except, of course, for her priceless wedding lace), Noëlle submitted to a press conference held in a private lounge at the Ritz-Carlton. She and Norman agreed that offering an “exclusive” to a newspaper wouldn’t prevent requests from competing publications, so an invitation went out to representatives of all major papers and wire agencies.

On the morning of April 22 reporters assembled en masse to hear Noëlle’s official account of her experiences in the tragedy. Norman sat beside her as she recounted the whole story, then answered questions. A glimpse of how Noëlle felt about people is caught in the fact that on the other side of her sat her maid, Cissy Maioni, whom she insisted be a part of the interview.

The countess kept her composure throughout the meeting. Only at the end, when she was asked to give her opinion of the actions of the men passengers and crew, was there a catch in her throat.

“Brave men all,” she said of *Titanic*’s heroes, “that stood back so that women should have at least a chance to live. Their memory should be held sacred in the mind of the world forever.”

Noëlle’s story was syndicated throughout the USA and abroad, appearing first in the *Washington Post* that evening (in a heavily edited version) and in the *New York Herald* (in its entirety) the next day. Unfortunately, there were numerous inaccuracies in the published pieces, especially in the *Herald* article, ranging from misquotes to incorrectly transcribed names and times. It must have been aggravating but at least the hardest part was over. Or so she thought.

The fact was that since her story was now a matter of public record, it was out of her control to a great extent, unless she wished to grant another interview to clarify matters. She definitely did not

want to do that, so she had to endure the repetition of the garbled facts of her one and only authorized account.

The wire services soon spread Noëlle's *Titanic* fame to her native England and adopted Scotland. An April 30 story in London's *Daily Sketch* featured the recollections of *Titanic*'s stewardesses. These women extolled Noëlle's bravery, repeating the "plucky little countess" moniker she had won while aboard the rescue ship:

The women spoke with great admiration of Lady Rothes who rowed all night in one of the boats and devoted herself during the whole time she was on the *Carpathia* to the care of the steerage women and children. Her ladyship helped to make clothes for the babies and became known as the "plucky little countess."

Quoted in other publications, the pet name stuck.

Meantime *The Scotsman* proclaimed Noëlle a national heroine:

Through the terrible disaster and appalling loss of life caused by the wreck of the *Titanic*, the eyes of the world are turned to the conspicuous bravery of the Countess of Rothes who took command of a lifeboat and brought the rescued men and women in it into the safety of the *Carpathia*.

At home in Leslie a huge open-air demonstration was held on May 6 to celebrate Noëlle's salvation. With cheers and flag-waving from the crowd, the Women's Unionist Association, of which the countess was chairman, hosted the ceremony. *The Scotsman* reported that the group's acting chair

moved a resolution to instruct the secretary of the association to convey to the Countess of Rothes an expression of their profound thankfulness that her Ladyship had been among those saved from the foundering of the *Titanic*, their admiration at the courage and helpfulness displayed by her during the trying time in the lifeboat, and their appreciation of her womanly kindness and sympathy in devoting herself to the care of the suffering steerage passengers after her rescue by the *Carpathia*.

Mentally and physically exhausted from her experiences in the sinking of *Titanic* and by the subsequent news coverage, it was a welcome relief for Noëlle to be able to enjoy the peace of the cottage in the Pasadena orange grove that Norman had rented for their extended vacation.

It's not known if the aborted trip to Vancouver was reinstated on Norman's itinerary but according to the Rothes' grandson a visit was made to Canada. The tour which the earl and his partner, Sir Curtis Lampson, had made of the States since February was successful thus far, though their original object of studying the telegraph system had spread to other business interests.

The idea of buying a fruit farm in California was not one he and Noëlle decided to pursue. Maybe the *Titanic* disaster made them more appreciative of their home life; perhaps they even saw it as a sign to stay safely put in Leslie.

The pair enjoyed the rest of their American jaunt but from time to time *Titanic* cast its shadow. Both the U.S. Senate and the British Board of Trade had now mounted investigations into the disaster, and the somewhat sensational hearings were making headlines.

Noëlle was sorry to read that Alfred Crawford and Tom Jones were being grilled before the inquiries in Washington and London, and she immediately communicated to them her support and sympathy.



Noëlle in the 1910s

She also surprised each with the gift of an engraved silver pocket watch as a token of her gratitude. Both timepieces were recently sold for enormous sums by the firm of Henry Aldridge & Sons, leading auctioneers of *Titanic* memorabilia.



The engraved watch Noëlle gave to Seaman Thomas Jones

The British Inquiry, conducted at Scottish Hall in Buckingham Gate was presided over by Justice John Charles Bigham, 1st Baron Mersey, who seemed dismissive of Crawford in his cross-examination of the steward. This irritated Noëlle as did a particularly broad-brushing remark Lord Mersey made during proceedings. His comment was to the effect that all the women in Boat 8 had refused to return to help people in the water after *Titanic* sank. Learning that evidence was being heard soon about her lifeboat, Noëlle provided Attorney-General Sir Rufus Isaacs with an affidavit bearing out that she, her cousin-in-law Gladys Cherry, Tom Jones and an American woman wanted to return to aid the drowning but that they were overruled by the others.

Sir Rufus interrupted Crawford's testimony to suggest that Mersey clarify his summation that "all" the women in the boat objected to a rescue effort. Isaacs informed the judge that he had in his possession an authorized statement from the countess' solicitors denying that she was opposed to going back, and requesting that the record be set straight.

"Lady Rothes is rather concerned about that," Isaacs added.

Mersey amended his statement to mean that "most" of the women objected.

Publicity about *Titanic* pursued Noëlle throughout the spring and well into the summer of her tour with Norman. The attention subsided with time but her status as a heroine of the tragedy hasn't been forgotten.

Through the years, histories of *Titanic* have honored Noëlle Rothes' courageous actions in the legendary shipwreck. Today some of her correspondence relating to the event is preserved at the National Maritime Museum in England, and there's also a tribute to her at the Titanic Museum in the USA, opened in April 2006.

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The Rothes' return to Scotland in the late summer of 1912 found Noëlle busily acknowledging congratulations on her safety from friends and family. Happy to resume her charitable and club work, she was mostly glad to see her sons again, especially Malcolm, whose weak health worried her and would continue to be a concern for some years.

Noëlle Rothes didn't say much publicly about her *Titanic* experiences on returning home, confining her thoughts to private correspondence with fellow survivors Alice Leader and Tom Jones. In time, the countess included Jones on her Christmas card list, and he returned the favor by presenting her with a framed case of the numeral "8" which he'd saved from their lifeboat.



Tom Jones presented to Noëlle a plaque mounted with the number 8 from their lifeboat

Noëlle also wrote to the widow of Henry Forbes Julian, her Devonshire comrade lost in the sinking; Mrs. Julian later published a collection of tributes to her husband that included Noëlle's memories of her friend. Both Noëlle and Gladys Cherry, now at home in London, took care to avoid the press, although one of Gladys' own letters to Jones, lauding his bravery, was printed in the newspapers. She may not have approved of her letter winding up in the media but Gladys' words show her respect for Jones and her deep regret that Boat 8 didn't return to help the drowning:

I feel I must write and tell you how splendidly you took charge of our boat on the fatal night... I think you were wonderful. The dreadful regret I shall always have, and I know you share with me, is that we ought to have gone back to see whom we could pick up; but if you remember, there was only an American lady, my cousin, self and you who wanted to return... You did all you could, and being my own countryman, I wanted to tell you this.

Soon Noëlle was back in the swing of local politics, weighing in on a rather complicated civic dispute.

The trouble concerned the issue of county control of the water supply and a projected rise in domestic rates for use of the system; it began before Noëlle left for America but was coming to a head by the time she came back to Leslie. Noëlle had been unhappy with initial plans proposed by the Kirkcaldy District Committee, feeling the Rothes tenantry was adversely affected. She therefore appointed a team of lawyers to represent her in her absence, and they reported to her at various points during her American vacation. (There is some indication that problems with the water system dated to the time of the 17th countess, so it may have been that Noëlle inherited an ongoing issue)

The drawn out proceedings of the tribunal were presided over by the County Council of Fife at Parliament House in Edinburgh. The hearings finally wrapped up at the end of July, when the original preamble to the provisional order promoted by Kirkcaldy was amended to satisfy objections from The Countess of Rothes Trustees, as Noëlle's representatives were called. The trustees withdrew their opposition to the order only after it was clear that the rights of the Rothes' tenants were fully protected, and by September, with Noëlle's blessing, the county assumed management of the regional water system.

Socially, Noëlle wasn't as active as she had been. It's tempting to ascribe her lower profile to the *Titanic* disaster but her son's health was probably a factor, too. Yet *Titanic* was still on her mind. As the countess would relate to historian Walter Lord, she was with friends at a London restaurant in the spring of the following year when she was suddenly overcome with emotion. At first she couldn't understand what was wrong but soon realized it was because the orchestra was playing "The Tales of Hoffman," the last selection *Titanic's* band played at dinner the night of the sinking.

Noëlle Rothes resumed her social activities by the 1913 London season, but on a small scale, attending only a few signal fetes. She preferred entertaining quietly during this period from the townhouse she and Norman kept in Chelsea.

For the first time she didn't join in the popular reels of the Royal Caledonian Ball, given at London's Hotel Cecil in June. Although she sat out the dances, Noëlle was part of the planning committee and so had much to do with the ball's success. She appeared on the dais with the other patronesses and "presented a really dazzling sight" in her "superb jewels." Noëlle's attractiveness was commented on as outstanding, praise indeed considering that her fellow organizers included some of the most beautiful society women in Great Britain — the Duchess of Sutherland, the Duchess of Roxburghe and the Countess of Strathmore (whose daughter was the future Queen Mother).

Noëlle was absent at the Leslie Unionist Association's year-end meeting in November, owing again to Malcolm's ill health. She did communicate to the group's secretary her continued opposition to the Home Rule Bill, the hot political question of the day, and expressed support for Lady Paget's speech, in which she called the proposed law "a menace to our country."

The year 1914 witnessed a bright social season, perhaps the most festive of all. Noëlle's Royal Caledonian Ball, this time benefiting the Royal Scottish Hospital, was the largest gathering in the history of the fundraiser, with 2000 guests attending the event. The quadrilles were packed, some 40 couples dancing six reels — gentlemen in kilts, ladies in white gowns "with sashes of their clan's tartan fastened across one shoulder." Noëlle danced in the second reel of the evening, joining other couples representing the Black Watch.

In May the Rothes hosted a series of supper parties at their house in Chelsea, guests including the Archbishop of Canterbury, former prime minister the Earl of Roseberry and Lord Curzon, future Foreign Secretary. Noëlle also gave a "tea dance" for the benefit of the Queen Victoria School, with a number of debutantes attending to show their proficiency at the Maxixe, the Tango and other popular



Noëlle in the 1910s

jigs. Ian Rothes recalled a photo one of his aunts showed him of his grandmother at this party, trying out the new steps.

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The urban legend that people feel a strong impulse to dance in times of impending political crisis gained currency in the summer of 1914 when the Tango craze reached its height just as war was declared in Europe. Not surprisingly, once Britain entered the war, Noëlle was among the first to leave the dance floor for volunteer work in behalf of the cause.

In mid-August, while assisting the Leslie Red Cross Society to prepare facilities and supplies for wounded soldiers, Noëlle converted her own drawing room at Leslie House into a ten-bed ward staffed by herself and three other nurses. Within a few months it was filled to capacity, and overflow space in the halls of the church was given over to Noëlle's hospital.

In the meantime Norman, who had attained the rank of Colonel in the Cyclists Battalion of the Highland Light Infantry two years earlier, was called up as Lieutenant Commander of the HCB. Before leaving for St. Andrews, where he was to manage a surveillance of the Fife coast prior to going to France, he helped Noëlle set up her hospital. He even fitted the library out with a sophisticated communications system, linking Leslie House to Admiralty offices by wireless and direct telephone service. As news dispatches reported, Norman also presented "his best motor car and chauffeur for the use of the Government."

In October the countess was still adding to her responsibilities, giving shelter to a number of Belgian refugees at Leslie House and joining the Perthshire Combatants' Aid Committee, collecting clothing and comforts for soldiers serving at the front as well as in camps. The committee provided socks, flannel underwear, bootlaces, handkerchiefs, sleeping caps, jerseys, gloves and belts, as well as furnished luxury items like pipes, cigarettes, tobacco, chocolate candy and picture postcards of pretty actresses.

The French Wounded Emergency Fund

At the present time there are 6863 Hospitals in France, and Medical Requirements are urgently needed.

A Flower and Flag Day

Is being held To-morrow—Saturday,

with the direct approval of the French Government, and the money raised will be devoted to supplying these requirements.

At Charles Jenner and Company's,

Primroses, Daffodils, and other Spring Flowers will be sold by the following Ladies:—

The Countess of Rothes,
The Hon. Lady Curzon Howe,
Mrs Farquhar.

The flowers will be sold at a counter near the Princes Street Entrance.

JENNER'S
PRINCES-STREET
EDINBURGH

Noëlle sold flowers to aid the French Wounded Emergency Fund

For three years beginning in 1915, Noëlle lent her services to the French Wounded Emergency Fund, selling flowers to raise money for medical supplies for field hospitals in France. With other ladies she sold primroses and daffodils from stalls at fairs and rallies, even outside of department stores in Edinburgh and London.

"My grandmother presided over a lot of garden party bazaars in the interest of the war," Ian Rothes recalled. "That sort of thing was at the center of life in villages then, and held more importance than it does today. I remember meeting people, even years after her death, who said they recalled my grandmother's charming way with guests, her laugh and her knack for getting money for her charities out of the hardest-heart cases! 'More tea?' she would ask, quickly followed by, 'And you know you have got to pay for it!'"

While Noëlle engaged in relief work and fundraising, her father, Thomas Dyer-Edwardes, now a Gloucestershire magistrate, was doing his bit, not only to help the war effort but to lend civic aid where it was needed. For instance, just before the outbreak of war Thomas gave land in Melbourne, Australia for a park to be developed around the city lake (it's still known as Edwardes Lake Park).

The next year his project was to buy a lifeboat for the small Scottish town of Fraserburgh, the only port on the East Coast without a properly equipped rescue service.



The crew of the lifeboat *Lady Rothes*, named in Noëlle's honor, 1915

At the launching and dedication ceremony for the boat in August 1915, Dyer-Edwardes christened it *Lady Rothes*. Addressing the crowd with a touching speech, he declared that his gift “was a thank-offering to Almighty God for the safety of his only child from the wreck of the *Titanic*.” It was believed by Ian Rothes that the honor was meant to

soothe my grandmother’s heartsickness at being unable to save anyone from the *Titanic*. That haunted her, I think, and must have been the great sadness of her life.

If her father’s present to Fraserburgh was expected to cheer Noëlle, it succeeded. In less than a week, *Lady Rothes*, manned by volunteers, had according to *The Scotsman*, “already done a war service by saving 14 of the crew of a Belfast steamer.” Noëlle was overjoyed when a telegram arrived with news of the rescue her namesake vessel had performed; she shared her happiness with Norman who was home on leave at the time.

But the earl was soon back in the trenches with his regiment, while Noëlle coped with the stress of his absence by devoting her time to war charities, local and national.

Though Norman assured her that he was stationed far from any immediate danger, Noëlle wasn’t convinced, and on October 16, 1916, her fears were confirmed when his name appeared in the casualty lists as seriously wounded. As it turned out, Norman’s injury (“a bad shrapnel wound to the leg,” reported the *Times*) wasn’t life threatening, and after a short recuperation he was back commanding his men.

Despite repeated promises in letters to his wife and sons that he was no longer on the frontlines, Norman was obviously still in harm’s way in France. And in the summer of 1917 he was again injured in action — worse this time, losing an eye from a shrapnel hit in the face.

“He was invalided out of the war at that stage,” his grandson said, “and had a series of operations.”



Noëlle with her youngest son, The Hon. John Wayland

Norman Rothes was sent to a London convalescent center for treatment and observation, and Noëlle rushed to his side, determined to help nurse him to health. Even in this time of personal travail, Noëlle didn't forget the people of Fife. Away in London tending Norman, she asked Malcolm, now a robust teenager making high marks at Eton, to open a flower show in her absence at Leslie House in aid of the local Soldiers and Sailors Fund. The show went off without a hitch, Malcolm relaying his parents' good wishes for the event to a large assemblage, and leading a tour of the gardens and mansion house; the young Lord Leslie even gave a spirited description of the tapestries and paintings to his guests.

After Norman recovered and returned home, Noëlle stayed on in London for some months, leading a unit of Red Cross nurses serving the Coulter Hospital. She was also involved in fundraising for a clinic for wounded soldiers at Hurlingham, helping to launch several programs, such as the Hurlingham Fete and Fair, between early and mid-1918.

In July that year Noëlle participated in a special jewelry exhibition at the Grafton Galleries. Benefiting the Red Cross,, the show celebrated "the beauty and history of the pearl," with magnificent donations from Queen Alexandra,, Princess Mary (the Princess Royal) and other notables. Among the many examples, arranged singly and in pairs, that went on view were two superb pearls selected by Noëlle from the centuries-old necklace she wore the night *Titanic* sank. Displayed in a case framed in royal blue silk, the countess' pearls were suspended from a slim satin ribbon on a cream velvet pillow. Fully described in the exhibition catalogue, their "ancient and recent history" was also given in the programme under the heading "Lead, Kindly Light," after the hymn their "noble owner sang as she pulled an oar in her lifeboat."



Noëlle with other nurses at a fundraising fair for wounded soldiers, 1918

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As the war wound down so did the Rothes' finances. It isn't known whether this was due to bad investments, Norman's medical problems or the general economic slump that came with the end of the war. But by 1919 the earl had made the monumental decision to sell Leslie House, most of its contents and all the land remaining as part of the estate, which was now only 3,562 acres (over 6,000 acres had been sold since he and Noëlle took possession of the property in 1904). Norman wasn't the only peer giving up his ancestral home in the wake of World War I, but Leslie House was the oldest, most distinguished estate in Scotland to be put on the market at the time.

The sale of Leslie House in June 1919 to Captain Alexander Crundall (who eventually sold it to Major

Sir Robert Spencer-Nairn) was a difficult decision, made only with the consent of the Rothes' son, Malcolm, heir to the estate. The news came as a shock to the couple's tenants and the entire community of Leslie, where Norman's family was adored. The townsfolk, dreading the Rothes' move to England, even formed a delegation to appeal to them to stay.

In September, the love of the people of Leslie was demonstrated at a farewell ceremony — enormous in size and emotion — held at Leslie Town Hall.

Noëlle and Norman were treated by the tenantry to a supper, following which they were presented with tokens of their affection — a gilt silver and onyx cup of the Empire period for him and a gold bracelet for her. The earl then made an affecting speech in which he admitted that it had been

a heavy blow to him to sever his connection to a property which had been in his family for many generations, and which has been his chief interest in life for the last fourteen years. The estate of Leslie, he regretted to say, was the last of the many properties which had been owned by his family in Scotland.

As if leaving Leslie behind wasn't hard enough that year, the family was saddened to learn that *Lady Rothes*, the lifeboat named in Noëlle's honor at Fraserburgh, capsized in a storm, claiming the lives of two of its crew.

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The Rothes began their new life in England, taking up residence at their Buckinghamshire estate, Leslie Lodge at Iver Heath, and they continued to maintain their London residence in Chelsea.

Norman's health wasn't good, but he kept up his responsibilities as Representative Peer for Scotland until 1923. That year Malcolm came of age, being the first Lord Leslie to gain majority in 134 years.

The countess, now age 45, remained active in her philanthropies, lending a hand to sponsoring a fashion show in aid of the Regimental Agency, King George's pet charity. The event took place in April 1923 at the Hyde Park Hotel in London, opened by Princess Louise, Duchess of Argyll. The show was staged by Lady Duff Gordon, the "Lucile" of the fashion world (now semi-retired), and a fellow survivor of the *Titanic* sinking. Noëlle's portrait was painted by Munro Mackie at the time of the show, wearing a gown her grandson believed was designed by Lady Duff Gordon.



Noëlle circa 1918, her grandson's favorite photograph



Noëlle in a 1923 portrait by Munro Mackie

Noëlle Rothes' devotion to Royal Caledonian benefits was unabated throughout the 1920s but she was seldom part of the whirling cotillions she so loved in her youth. Norman stayed behind altogether, his war injuries preventing his taking part in the festivities. He was also unable to hunt or compete in cricket matches but he played the game privately. The earl seems to have had a good-natured attitude toward his condition and apparently encouraged his still-beautiful and lively wife to go out without him.

She did, and while there's no evidence of an affair, it's fairly certain that it was at this time that Noëlle made friends with Colonel Claud Macfie of the Seaforth Highlanders. Macfie, who received a Distinguished Service Order in honor of his bravery in combat during World War I, had recently retired from the military (he was later attached to the War Office, however, in an advisory capacity). Macfie seems to have been widely admired as a soldier and a gentleman, and he may have been a friend of Norman's.

In 1924 Noëlle's father officially converted to Catholicism and, while this seems to have caused some disruption in the family, according to researcher Craig Stringer, Noëlle's relationship with her father was, if initially strained, apparently unaffected in the long run. His change of faith couldn't have been a surprise to her, as Thomas Dyer-Edwardes had always been sympathetic to the order of

Benedictine monks that originally occupied the abbey in Prinknash, now his country house. But it was a shock to others in the family.

Thomas followed the bombshell of his religious transformation — which evidently angered his wife Clementina the most — with an equally surprising announcement that he was offering to the Benedictines of Caldy Island a sizeable present — Prinknash Park itself. Again, there was some opposition within the family, and as Stringer's research seems to bear out, a rift began between the Dyer-Edwardes and, possibly, between the Rothes at this time. Noëlle initially appears to have supported her father in his desire to donate the estate, while Norman wanted it to go to their son. Eventually, it is thought, Noëlle took a neutral stand in the dispute.

Ian said he didn't know of any disagreement between his grandparents over the matter of Prinknash Park but added he did "not rule out the possibility." Even so, the real quarrel appears to have been between Thomas and Clementina.

Craig Stringer has found that Thomas drew up a succession of wills in 1924-25, in which a marital separation between he and Clementina is clear. He actually favored Norman over his wife of 46 years in some of his bequests, and eventually reneged on promises of land to Noëlle, whom he may have feared was too sympathetic to Clementina.

The extent of the bickering over Prinknash hasn't been recorded but Thomas won out, with a deed of covenant finally struck, giving the property to the monastery. Unfortunately, Thomas' death in early 1926, occurring before his present was fully legalized, prevented the immediate passing of the estate to the Caldy community. Instead Prinknash Park became the property of his grandson, Noëlle and Norman's son Malcolm, Viscount Leslie, now age 24. Malcolm had the right to transfer ownership to the Benedictine order but he did not do so.

It's possible Norman Rothes exerted influence on his son to retain the estate, despite his wife's desire to give it up, but there is no way to confirm the suspicion at this stage. Even so, when Norman died the following year, age 49, one of the first duties Malcolm performed as the 20th earl was to draw up a new deed and complete the process of the gift his grandfather had begun to make. The Caldy Benedictines finally took possession of Prinknash Park in 1928.

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The countess' life had entered a new chapter, alternately one of deep grief and sweet fulfillment. In less than two years, the father she adored and her beloved husband of nearly 30 years had both gone. She had also remarried, accepting Col. Macfie's swift proposal. For Noëlle, the sadness of Norman's loss may have been compounded by the fact that they'd drifted apart somewhat, owing to his ill health, and that they had argued over the wishes of her father.

But the new love she found with Claud lessened the pain of losing two of the most important people in her world, and she went to live with him at his estate, Fayre Court, in Fairford, in the heart of the Gloucestershire she and her family cherished.

Little is known of Noëlle and Claud's years together. It seems they preferred quiet country life to the fast paced parties of London. Noëlle, now in her early 50s, still radiant, even gorgeous, kept up her support of the Red Cross, and continued to help those in need in her church and town. In fact the essential trait of her personality — loyalty — was undiminished. She'd remained true to her father and to her first husband, choosing in fact to retain her title of Countess of Rothes.

Noëlle's happiness with Claud was enhanced by her children's happiness. Malcolm was married now — to the Hon. Violet Dugdale — and John was at college. Soon Noëlle was a grandmother, Violet giving birth to two daughters, Jean and Evelyn, in 1927 and 1929, and Ian, the only son, in 1932.



Norman, Earl of Rothes (1877-1927) was interred in the family mausoleum at Leslie house

Noëlle also spent time with her aged mother at the latter's country place in Paintwick; Clementina died there in 1947.

Like her mother, Noëlle lived out the rest of her life in the country, coming to love Fayre Court as much as she had Leslie House. She often saw her sons in London and at Leslie Lodge in Buckinghamshire, as well as visited Claud's relatives at Bath and Hove, Sussex, where the couple owned property.

For a woman who tread so remarkable a path, was so often in the social spotlight, had even become famous for her bravery in a moment of supreme tragedy, it's interesting that Noëlle's twilight years were a time of comparative ordinariness and anonymity.

It was only at the end of her life that its peace and simplicity was threatened. A young American journalist by the name of Walter Lord had written her, asking her to share her memories of the *Titanic* disaster for a book he was writing. Noëlle agreed to help the man whose efforts would soon form the definitive account of the sinking. But as her health was increasingly frail by the mid-1950s (she was suffering from heart disease), her correspondence with the reporter was brief. The countess could never have guessed the influence Lord's story would have on literature, film and popular culture.

Much loved by her small, close-knit family, and with memories of "a life well lived," as her grandson said, 77-year-old Noëlle Rothes died in her sleep on September 12, 1956 while on a visit to Sussex.

Not long after Walter Lord's book hit the best-seller lists, featuring Noëlle's heroism and that now iconic cameo of her with swan-like neck and half-closed eyes, the "plucky little countess" closed them forever, slipping away quietly, her husband and sons at her side. It is believed, but unconfirmed, that her body was interred with Norman's at Leslie House.

Epilogue

Although Noëlle lived to see her bravery immortalized in Lord's *A Night to Remember*, she didn't welcome the press attention it brought her. Resisting all newspaper offers, she consented to speak only to David Astor, publisher of *The Observer* (London), whose cousin, Col. John Jacob Astor IV, was a victim of the disaster. Unfortunately Noëlle died the week before she was to give her first interview about *Titanic* in over 40 years.

It was just as well as she may have been unable to cope with the resultant publicity. Nor would she have approved of her subsequent portrayals in movies and TV shows about the sinking. Cast as a sex-pot (*SOS Titanic*, 1979) and a snob (*Titanic*, 1997), she was neither. What Noëlle really was — a proactive, compassionate woman — would have made even better cinema.

While the world focused on the most famous demonstration of her fortitude and charity, the countess didn't need the spotlight to continue helping others. In fact, the lesser-known fact of Noëlle's gallantry — her near 50-year involvement with the Red Cross, providing funds as well as hands-on support — was ultimate proof of what her grandson called her "warm understanding of humanity."

Ian did his best to keep Noëlle's memory fresh over the years, through active membership in the British Titanic Society and by participation in book and other media projects. It's fitting that he should have passed away on April 15, 2005, the 93rd anniversary of his beloved grandmother's extraordinary destiny.

Equally fitting is the inscription on a plaque struck in Noëlle's honor at St Mary's Church in Fairford. Placed on the west wall of the chancel, it reads:

"Holiness is an infinite compassion for others. Greatness is to take the common things of life and walk truly among them. Happiness is a great love and much serving."

To the end Noëlle Rothes walked "truly." She also more than adequately answered the ancestral cry of her first love's family. Like Queen Margaret crossing the torrent, Noëlle passed her own watery test of valor. She stood firm in that defining moment, proving she had learnt well the lesson of her credo — to face fear, embrace hope, and "Grip Fast" to life.

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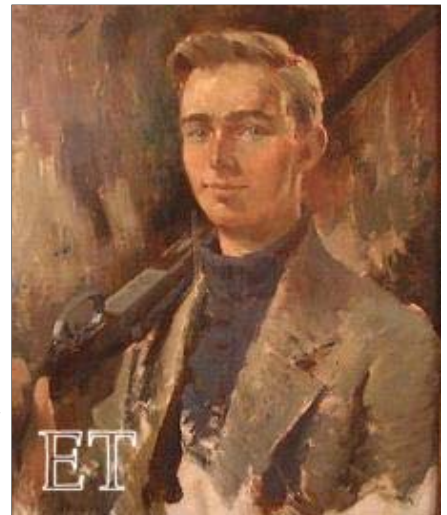
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**Noëlle, Countess of Rothes
(1878-1956)**



**The late Ian, Earl of Rothes
(1932-2005)**

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