

## Bruce Ismay and the Ring's Taunt

by Senan Molony

### ***Titanic Research***

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**As Ismay pushed the brute oar, his eye fell on his ring. The ring inscribed:- Be Mindful.**

He hesitated as the bobble of heads met his feet and headed lower. He who hesitates further in this event is assuredly lost. Bruce Ismay buckled; slipped his slippered feet over the side, and dropped free. In an instant he was sharing the communion of the saved.

An event is such a little piece of time-and-space you can mail it through the slotted eye of a cat. A surge of relief was passing through Ismay's frame. As the craft reached the supportive slap of water, he was buoyed anew and grateful in casting off. And then one hand on flimsy canvas side told him something else. That the skin of safety need not have been this thin.

Axel Welin he had met. The davit-designer proclaimed its ingenuity: They can take more boats. The regulations will be changed. It is sensible to be ready. But the regulations had not yet been changed, and so they had made do with the davits themselves and occasional collapsibles. The very word now mocked him &ndash; collapsible. He, the head of the White Star Line, travelling to see what improvements could be wrought for the Gigantic, swathed in a few strakes and pliable yards of impermeable cloth.

Bruce Ismay found that he had his back to his sinking rapture. The pit of his stomach heaved as he assisted a crewman by pushing forward the oar that the latter was heaving. They moved away from the twilight of a brief Titanic glory. As Ismay pushed the brute oar, his eye fell on his ring. The ring inscribed:-

Had he not been mindful? He had tried to attend to everything. Consulting chief engineer Bell at Queenstown, concerned about the coal, the need to be off the lightship by five o'clock on Wednesday. Meeting passengers, drawing them out; keeping Smith on his toes &ndash; the regular conspiracies with Andrews. A speed run. The full inspection from top to bottom he planned before New York.

Within succeeding hours, Ismay became a vacant shell. Mechanically, he climbed the Jacob's ladder to the teak planks of a competitor. Mumbled through a handshake with a man in command; accepted coffee. Put about for New York? Yes, yes, as you see fit. Was led through a corridor to a large cabin and a bunk. &ndash; he seized the steward's sleeve. A doctor came, and collapsible Ismay met a craved oblivion.

*Bruce Ismay is under opiate.*

Bruce Ismay was quite restored within a day or two. That fellow Rostron had been very understanding.

Telegrams marked YAMSI had begun to flow, issuing personal directives:

Confounded slippers!

He arrived in New York, was met aboard by Franklin and Sanderson. Then the bally politicians had barged in, waving papers &ndash; and he hadn't even set foot in the city! By lengths he was escorted to the private car at dockside. Lightning and flashbulbs lit the enfolding gloom.

His men were talking about it not being possible to hold a ship, although they had tried to make the Lapland wait. Politicians and their Inquiry. Limelight-seeking - quite dreadful at a time like this. Thought best to tell you when you arrived and not before. But am sure you would much prefer to read this, a private cable from your wife. And soon we shall be at the Waldorf&hellip;



The very next day Bruce Ismay was mindful, aye, and to the point. He issued instructions that no ship belonging to the International Mercantile Marine was to leave any port unless she had sufficient boats on board for the accommodation of all passengers and the whole of the crew.

Ismay brooked no resistance, reiterating that no ship of the company would henceforth sail from any port unless she had sufficient boats. He conceded to company officials: It may be necessary, and probably will be necessary, to reduce the number of passengers in the cabins. A solution for the short term.

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*Mr Bruce Ismay arrived at Queenstown yesterday on board the Adriatic, and was met by Mrs Ismay. Customs officers and officials of the White Star Line were the only people other than passengers allowed on board.*

Meeting Florence was all he needed. The public face of the White Star Line found privacy and a healing well. A day later, on May 12, 1912, the couple arrived in his home city, Liverpool, pleasantly cheered by

the applause of a large crowd gathered at the landing stage.

Looking pale and haggard, he doffed his bowler hat to the throng and disappeared into another vehicle while a bland prepared statement was distributed to the press. It indicated that he could not be expected to say anything with a domestic Inquiry pending, but acknowledged with a full heart the many messages of sympathy he had received.



Liverpool had always been kind to the Ismays. J. Bruce drank this full draught of the city's support on his return, and reflected on the esteem, nay the adoration, in which the maritime heart of England had perennially held his father, the great Thomas Henry Ismay.

His father was loved for his founding of the Liverpool Seamen's Pension Fund in the last century, the occasion being marked by the presentation to Ismay senior of a silver service and an illuminated address on parchment paper. The Oceanic Steam Navigation Company had also used the inauguration to confer on T.H. Ismay a portrait of himself from the brush of the pre-Raphaelite artist Sir John Everett Millais.

Millais himself, Bruce Ismay might have reflected, had also since become a man of the people. He gave the new century one of its first popular icons &ndash; the painting entitled Bubbles, whose curly-haired boy blowing gossamer globules had been transformed into a trademark of Pears Soap, the million-selling bathroom requisite whose manufacture was headquartered locally at Port Sunlight. Advertising history, built on a blown kiss! It was a famous success story among Merseyside merchant princes and further afield.

The reverie he allowed himself burst as quickly as any soapy sphere. The British Inquiry loomed. But at least he was home.

*An attack was made in the course of the Inquiry on the moral conduct of two of the passengers, namely, Sir Cosmo Duff Gordon and Mr. Bruce Ismay, Lord Mersey wrote. It is no part of the business of the Court to enquire into such matters, and I should pass them by in silence if I did not fear that my silence might be misunderstood&hellip;*

Mersey attached no blame and yet left stigma. He seemed to suggest that Ismay deserved to live, but only by tolerance. Duty had not bade him stay, yet manliness might still have tethered his fate to that of his vessel. Bruce Ismay was damned with faint acquittal.

And so began his exile. The distance was first given by others in his social set, and it gained ground with his departure from the White Star Line in 1913. Thereafter J. Bruce Ismay began a personal retreat, one that drew him away from London's chattering classes, and somehow back to the sea.

The truism is that a broken Bruce Ismay never crossed the Atlantic again. It is accurate insofar as it goes,

but it clouds the strange hold the Western Ocean held over him until the day he died. His withdrawal from London society coincided with greater investment of time in Ireland.



J. Bruce Ismay bought this house and lands at Casla, Co Galway, in January 1913, in preparation for his retirement later that year from the shipping conglomerate and firm established by his father. Costelloe Lodge would be his sanctuary from all the afflictions that stemmed from the word 'Titanic.' The name could never be enunciated within these walls, property in which he would spend much of the next quarter of a century.

Perhaps it was aversion therapy, for Costelloe Lodge is on the lapping fringes of the Atlantic. From here westward, the next parish is literally in New York. The lady lifting her lamp beside the golden door might mutely invite the storm-toss'd huddled millions&hellip; but Ismay's twinkling lights beguiled only ghosts.

By lengths he took again to a humble rowboat on the Atlantic swell, riding out with ghillie along the rocky shore behind the house. Most often however, the boat lay becalmed on a fishing lake, a bywater of the River Corrib. Here Bruce Ismay sat for hours, hunched over a rod, alone with his thoughts. Mindful of all that had gone before.

The lodge was burnt to the ground by Irregular forces, who called themselves the IRA, during the early 1920s.<sup>1</sup> It was a time when stately homes, the trappings of an absentee ascendancy, were everywhere going up in smoke. It is not clear whether Ismay was in occupation at the time, nor whether he had to make another dramatic night escape in his pyjamas. But J. Bruce Ismay would soon be confronted with the charred remains &ndash; and would order the lodge rebuilt, brick by soot-smudged brick.

The new house was completed by 1925. Thereafter it became his impregnable seat.

Ismay died in October 1937 from a stroke caused by the circulatory illness which had forced the amputation of a leg the previous year. He was 74. His widow Florence had a stone inscribed in the grounds of the lodge which still remains. It reads:

His remains were committed to the flames at Putney Vale crematorium. Ironically, one of those listed as attending was a gentleman who signed himself E.J. Smyth, but this was another Edward, a Board of Trade official who once administered at Dublin port.

It is said that Florence brought some of her beloved's ashes back to Connemara and scattered them in the garden. It might have been poetic indeed, if a swirling inshore breeze had caught a single powdered petal and carried it out to sea.

From an appreciation in The Times of London, October 23, 1937:

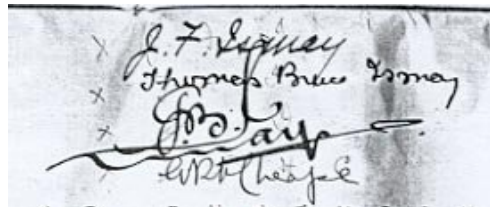
In later years his heart was in the wonderful sporting estate which he owned in Galway, with its superb fishing; but keen fisherman as he was, he still had time to spare for the wants of the needy inhabitants of that part of the country, and there must be many there who are sorrowing very greatly at his passing and

who will maintain a deeply affectionate memory of "his Honour" for many years to come.

And so to the tale of the Lost Will and Testament of Joseph Bruce Ismay.



Probated in Liverpool in November that year, it appointed his widow, Julia Florence Ismay, and his sons, Thomas and George Bruce Ismay, as executors. Also made trustee was George Ronald Hamilton Cheape, husband of Ismay's daughter Margaret.



*In business Mr Ismay was accounted an austere man. He was certainly taciturn by nature, but could be a charming host. **He had an extraordinary memory***

*He had an extraordinary memory* and Ismay's will proves him heedful to the smallest detail, fully in keeping with that ingrained family watchword that encouraged maximum awareness.

To his wife Florence, now his widow, Ismay left the prestigious London address at 15 Hill Street, off Berkeley Square. He also willed her my wearing apparel, watches, jewels, trinkets and all other articles of personal use or ornament belonging to me, and my wines, liquors, fuel and consumable household stores and provisions.

He added: I give to my wife for her absolute use and benefit all my freehold and leasehold land, fisheries, sporting rights and other property in the County of Galway in Ireland, and all household or domestic furniture, and all boats and their furniture, and tackle fishing appliances, and other effects belonging to me and used or intended to be used in connection therewith.

Boats and the equipping of boats. There is an eerie resonance here, in Ismay's will, one quarter-century after the world's most infamous maritime disaster.

The portrait of T.H. Ismay by Millais, precious to his son, was given to Florence. Ismay also expressed the intention that it should also pass to his eldest son and lineal descendants as a memorial of his connection with the White Star Line and the Liverpool Seamen's Pension Fund.

\* Eldest Son Thomas Bruce Ismay was left the casket in which the Freedom of the City of Belfast was presented to T.H. Ismay, as well as a silver salver left to the testator by his own grandfather. Thomas also received the large gold cigarette case given to Ismay by Florence &ndash; and his father's collection of various lawn tennis prizes.

\* George Bruce was bequeathed Ismay's jewelled watch and chain, a further wristwatch, the original present of Florence, and the seal formerly used by Ismay's grandfather. The brothers were also to share their father's guns, rifles and implements of sport. George also benefited through receipt of a second portrait of Ismay pere, this time by Herkomer.

\* Daughter Evelyn Constance Sanderson, whose father-in-law, Harold Sanderson, had testified at the British Titanic Inquiry as a director of the White Star Line, was given a number of silver treasures. So too was her sister Margaret, benefiting by two silver centerpieces, one the previous gift of William Imrie, Thomas Henry Ismay's former partner in the White Star Line.

There would, however, be a second war, and it would swiftly claim the life of Ismay's youngest son. Major George Bruce Ismay was killed in action within five years of his father's death, by one account falling to enemy fire in North Africa in 1943.<sup>2</sup>

The inscribed ring Bruce Ismay wore while escaping from the Titanic still survives.

It is in the possession of the Cheape family, passing down from his daughter, Margaret, wife of a Brigadier General.<sup>3</sup>

*To my daughter Margaret&hellip; my ring with the inscription 'Be Mindful'...*

Lives come and go. The Ismay family is today in eclipse and an American millionaire named Jack Toohey now inhabits Costelloe Lodge. But still the ring reminds its wearer of the dark shadow J. Bruce Ismay carried to the last, until his soul was, as his wife believed, made boundless with the ocean, earth and stars.

*Be Mindful.*

### Notes

1. It has not been possible as yet to establish the exact date of the blaze which gutted Costelloe Lodge during the turbulent nation-birth of modern Ireland, although the incident itself is well attested. "The house was completely destroyed by the fire," says the current owner. Newspaper research has thus far proved fruitless, while police records no longer exist.
2. George Bruce Ismay was serving as a Captain in HM Army when he was killed on April 30, 1943. He left a widow, Dorothy, who lived at 20 Charles Street, Berkeley Square.
3. Ismay's daughter, Margaret, lost her sister-in-law Catherine Beatrice Cheape Cay, in the Empress of Ireland disaster in 1914. I am obliged to Geoff Whitfield for this information.

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Courtesy of Senan Molony

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