

# **The True Story of Annie Kelly**

**Michael A Martin and James M Farrell**

How did a nineteen year old girl from Galway come to lose her life aboard the RMS Lusitania when it was torpedoed off the Old Head of Kinsale on the 7<sup>th</sup> May 1915.

## **Family Background**

Annie Kelly was born in the townland of Newgrove, beside the village of Newbridge in County Galway on 27<sup>th</sup> September 1895. One of a family of twelve children she had six brothers and five sisters. She was the ninth child of John Francis Kelly and Margaret Brannelly. They had married in Ballygar on 3<sup>rd</sup> February 1876. There were four older brothers and then four older sisters in the family before she was born.

John Francis Kelly (1853-1905) was a son of Matthew Kelly (1804-1894) and Catherine Hynes (1820-1886). At the time of Griffith's Valuation (1855) Matthew Kelly was not an occupier of any holding in Newgrove. Marcella and John Gerrard were the landlords who had been responsible for the eviction of tenants in nearby Ballinlass and other townlands in pursuit of a policy of clearing their estate of tenants to make way for grazing livestock. Following the death of Marcella Gerrard in November 1865 the estate was eventually divided among three inheritors in 1867 after protracted legal proceedings. One of these was John Fallon who donated the land on which Newbridge Church was built. Matthew Kelly had obtained a tenancy in Newgrove from John Fallon not later than 1872. It appears that Matthew Kelly was a tenant of Denis H Kelly of Aughrane Castle in Killeroran at the time of Griffith's Valuation but this holding was transferred to a Daniel Clarke in 1862.

John Francis had one sister and two brothers. His sister, Catherine married Luke Kilcommons of Tyrur, Newbridge. One brother, Michael, was the occupier of the farm beside John Francis in Newgrove. One of his descendants continues to reside there. Another brother, Thomas, emigrated to Australia. Twice, after he married, John Francis Kelly travelled to Australia working as a fireman/stoker aboard steamships. Australian immigrant deposit records indicate that it was his intention to bring his wife and then three sons with him. Eventually he travelled there alone about 1884 and again from about 1887-1891.

Margaret Brannelly (1855-1926) was born in Rooaun, Ballygar the daughter of Thomas Brannelly (1828-1898) and Mary Naughton (1832-1898). Thomas was a tenant of Denis Henry Kelly of Aughrane Castle. She had three sisters and three brothers one of whom, Patrick emigrated to the United States and became a proprietor of a public house in Roxbury area of Boston, Massachusetts.

## **The Boston Connection**

Annie Kelly's oldest brother, Matthew, in the normal practice, was designated to inherit the family farm. Born in 1877 he did so when his father died in 1905. However, he unfortunately contracted pneumonia and died in 1908, aged 30 years. By this time three of his brothers had emigrated to the United States, facilitated by the presence of their uncle Patrick Brannelly in Roxbury. Thomas, born in 1878, was the second eldest son and he returned to Newgrove to take over the farm. Michael, born in 1879 emigrated in 1901 or early 1902 and remained in the United States until returning to marry Ellen Coleman in 1912 and settle in Killeroran, Ballygar on the farm of her mother and to pursue his trade as a blacksmith. Before Michael left, he and his brother John had been joined in New England by their third sister Mary, born in 1892, who arrived in Boston on 26<sup>th</sup> April 1911. She married Edward Farrell from Ballaghlea on 20<sup>th</sup> April 1919 and they remained in Boston. In due course, their sister Delia (born 1894) arrived in Boston on 16<sup>th</sup> September 1912. She married John Gordon from Currabane, Ballinamore Bridge on 25<sup>th</sup> November 1917. They later returned to Ireland and settled in Currabane.

## **Annie Kelly's Letters**

Delia Kelly was just about one year older than Annie. A series of six letters written to Delia between April 1914 and November 1914 remain in the possession of the Gordon family. In them Annie graphically narrates the life and the activities in the Newbridge and Ballygar area at that time as well as anxiously expressing her wish to join Delia in the United States. It is obvious that she was very close to Delia. Initially she needed the funds to travel and for this she was depending on her brother John. World War I had broken out on 28<sup>th</sup> July 1914. Transatlantic travel became more dangerous with the presence and threat of German submarines in the waters around Ireland. Annie was about to travel in the autumn of 1914 but this was deferred, probably because of the threat to shipping posed by the Germans. In one of her letters to Delia Annie wrote "I am afraid it is dangerous to go this time". She also reminded Delia that her brother Johnny "mentioned in his letter that the German Battleships follow the steamers going across from Boston & New York so it must be dangerous"

## **Emigration**

Annie Kelly's dearest wish, to join her sisters Delia and Mary, her brother John and her uncle Thomas Brannelly in Boston, was about to be fulfilled when she set sail from Liverpool aboard the SS Lusitania on 17<sup>th</sup> April 1915. Her destination was Boston where she was to join her uncle Patrick Brannelly at 16 Greenville Street, Roxbury. From August 1913 the Lusitania no longer stopped to take passengers on board at Cobh/Queenstown. Therefore she had to travel to Liverpool to embark.

She did not travel alone. Among the passengers was Nora Doyle from Boherbannagh, Newbridge. Newgrove and Boherbannagh townlands are only a

short distance apart. It is reasonable to assume that they travelled together. Nora was the second youngest of ten children born to Pat and Bridget Doyle of whom nine were alive in 1911. Nora was travelling to join her sister Delia Doyle at 21 Central Street in Whitman.

Annie and Nora travelled in Third Class accommodation. This included a number of permanent cabins as well as large sections of berths formed by moveable wooden partitions so that the numbers and sizes of cabins could be adjusted to the number of passengers. The unused space could then be given over to open common areas. The Third Class galley offered plenty of good food.

## **Ellis Island**

The Lusitania reached Ellis Island in New York harbour on 24<sup>th</sup> April 1915. Before they disembarked the passengers had been checked by the ship's doctor, James McDermott. He detected that Annie had a "valvular disease of the heart affecting her ability" to maintain herself. Her entry to the United States was refused. The report of her personal interview says that she came to the United States to secure employment and that she expected to support herself although her uncle had promised to assist her. The report stated that she was rather frail in appearance and had been certified to have a physical defect which would affect her ability to earn a living and that her passage was paid for by money from another. Per se she was ineligible to land

On the 27<sup>th</sup> April 1915 a hearing was conducted by the Board of Special Inquiry in the presence of Annie, her sister Delia, her brother John and her uncle Patrick Brannelly. The board reaffirmed the decision to exclude her from the United States. The basis for the decision was that sending her back on the same ship on which she came was not viewed as a hardship given that her mother and other siblings still lived in Ireland. Further considerations were that she had very little money with her and that she had no one in the United States legally obligated to assist her.

Her appeal against that decision failed.

Her family engaged the assistance of Mayor James M Curley of Boston and US Congressman James A Gallivan of Massachusetts. Mayor Curley sent a telegram on 30<sup>th</sup> April to the Commissioner General for Immigration in the Department of Labour assuring the authorities that Annie would not become a public charge and stating that her uncle was a worthy and deserving man whom he knew personally.

Congressman Gallivan had sent a telegram on 28<sup>th</sup> April stating that he was deeply interested in the matter. He received a telegram on 1<sup>st</sup> May confirming the deportation. He then sent one stating that he had heard from Annie's family that she was to be deported that day. This was confirmed to Gallivan by Mr Hampton the Acting Commissioner General for Immigration.

## **Letter from Ellis Island**

While being held on Ellis Island Annie wrote a short letter to her sister Delia. She remained optimistic that she would be permitted to enter the United States. Her brother John visited her daily for about two hours. It was he who brought her the notepaper and pen to enable her to write the letter. Her heart was still set on going to Boston

## **Deportation**

When the Lusitania set sail for Liverpool on 1<sup>st</sup> May 1915 Annie Kelly was on board on her way back to Newgrove. Submarine warfare was intensifying in the Atlantic. Germany had declared the seas around the United Kingdom to be a war-zone, and the German embassy in America had placed a newspaper advertisement there warning people not to sail on Lusitania. There were 1959 passengers and crew on board.

## **Disaster**

The sailing was uneventful until the afternoon of the 7<sup>th</sup> May when the Lusitania was 11 miles off the Old Head of Kinsale, County Cork. At 2.10 pm she was spotted by the German U-boat, U-20 under the command of Lieutenant Schwieger. He gave the order to fire one torpedo, which struck Lusitania on the starboard bow, just beneath the wheelhouse. Moments later, a second explosion erupted from within Lusitania's hull where the torpedo had struck, and the ship began to founder with a prominent list to starboard. Almost immediately, the crew scrambled to launch the lifeboats but the conditions of the sinking made their usage extremely difficult, and in some cases impossible due to the ship's severe list. In all, only six out of 48 lifeboats were launched successfully with several more overturning, splintering to pieces and breaking apart. Eighteen minutes after the torpedo struck, the bow hit the seabed while the stern rose into the air and slid beneath the waves.

Of the 1,959 passengers and crew aboard Lusitania at the time of the sinking, 1,195 lost their lives. They included Annie Kelly. Her body was never recovered.

The Irish rescuers who had heard word of Lusitania's distress signals succeeded in bringing the survivor count to 764.

## **The Vanderbilt Connection**

Among the 1195 casualties on the Lusitania was Alfred Gwynne Vanderbilt, an extremely wealthy sportsman and a member of the famous Vanderbilt family of philanthropists. By a strange coincidence, Annie's brother Michael had worked for the Vanderbilt family in Rhode Island. This work included travelling to London in 1907 and returning to New York aboard the SS Minnehaha with a group of men taking care of racehorses being transported from London to Newport, Rhode Island for William Kissam Vanderbilt. The latter was an uncle of Alfred Gwynne Vanderbilt.

The Minehaha sailed from London on 29<sup>th</sup> June and arrived in New York on 9<sup>th</sup> July 1907.

## **Myths**

Two myths in relation to Annie Kelly have emerged.

One story associated with Annie Kelly's move to the United States was that her boyfriend, a certain William Murphy, had emigrated earlier. There is no evidence to support the narrative that she followed him. No William Murphy who would be likely to have known her can be found in either the 1901 or 1911 Census of Population for Ireland. None of the letters to Delia make any reference to a boyfriend of that name. There is no reference in her immigration file that she intended or planned to marry.

The immigration file does not support the narrative that her family members in the United States had succeeded in having her allowed to enter the country but were late when they arrived in New York as the Lusitania had set sail on her fatal journey at noon on the 1<sup>st</sup> May 1915.

## **More Kelly Emigrants**

Two of Annie's younger brothers, Patrick and James, subsequently went to Boston while her youngest sister, Sarah, remained in Ireland and married Michael Gavin of Cappagh, Newbridge. Of the ten surviving children of John Francis and Margaret Brannelly, four settled in the United States while the other six settled in Ireland. Those who settled permanently in the United States were Johnny, Mary, Patrick and James. In Ireland were Thomas, Michael, Katie (Crehan), Margaret (Crowe) Delia (Gordon), Sarah (Gavin),

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