

Lest we Forget: The Sinking of the Lusitania

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Lest we Forget by Thomas Hemy, oil, 1915-17
y Gaer, Brecknock Museum and Art Gallery

As part of the re-development of y Gaer the lobby of the former Shire Hall has been restored to its original proportions. This has revealed a large wall space, which is big enough to now hold one of the largest pictures in the museum's collection and one which has for many years languished in the Museum store, rolled up like a carpet. Substantial renovation and conservation work was carried out on the canvas and frame by Valentine Walsh and Cath Lloyd Haslam before it could be rehung.

Its subject is the sinking of the great passenger liner the Lusitania in May 1915 after being hit by a single torpedo from a German submarine. The Lusitania had been travelling from New York to Liverpool and was 11 miles off the Irish Coast when it sank.

A survivor wrote a vivid first-hand account of the sinking, describing how "*many of the life boats were shattered as they fell from the ship's side as it tilted and rapidly sank*". Survivors clung to rafts and upturned boats before being rescued by craft which had sailed out from the coast of Ireland in response to the ships SOS. Hemy's

depiction of the rescue taking place as the Lusitania sinks shows artistic licence. She sank twenty minutes after the torpedo hit while the rescue flotilla took over four hours to reach the survivors.

1,198 lives were lost. The Lusitania had been sailing from New York with many Americans on board and the tragedy was used to fuel anti-German propaganda aimed at bringing America into the War on the side of Britain.

There is still controversy over the sinking. Were civilians put at risk by the use of the “passenger” ship to carry war materials? Was there a second explosion caused by ammunition on board the ship? Did the carrying of arms make it a legitimate target from a U-Boat attack? Both sides used the attack for propaganda purposes and the picture now in y Gaer was part of that campaign.

About the Artist

An accomplished maritime artist, Thomas Madawaska Hemy (1852-1937) came from a family of artists and musicians. He was born on board a passenger ship, the SS Madawaska when his family were travelling from Newcastle to Australia. There they stayed for a couple of years before returning to Britain to live in North Shields.

Hemy became a painter of seascapes and in particular of disasters at sea such as “Wreck of the Birkenhead” and “Women and Children First” but perhaps his most famous pictures are of football matches, including “Sunderland v. Aston Villa 1895”, and “Goal” painted for the Boys Own Paper, a goal which would certainly be disallowed today!



Women and Children First, Thomas Hemy, oil, 1892, Lang Art Gallery



Goal, Thomas Hemy, Boys Own Paper, 1897

How the picture came to Brecon

On the plaque attached to the bottom of the frame are the words, "*Presented by the Artist to the Lady Glanusk for the A.G.U. Cause & Red Cross Society*".



Lady Glanusk (1871-1938) wife of the second Baron Glanusk had founded the Breconshire branch of the Red Cross in 1910. During the war Penoyre, just a few miles west of Brecon and former home of the Watkins family, became a Red Cross Hospital and Lady Glanusk and her husband were strong supporters, helping to supply the kitchens with food, including the occasional salmon, from the Glanusk Estate.



Lady Glanusk and Staff of Penoyre Hospital

But Lady Glanusk was also a fierce advocate of the movement to intern enemy aliens in Britain. Her letter of February 1915 to the Daily Express, reprinted in the Brecon County Times, outlines her feelings. Following the sinking of the Lusitania she received thousands of letters of support and it was reported that Lady Glanusk "*has turned the drawing and reception rooms of her fine house, at No. 30 Bruton Street, Mayfair, into offices for the committee*" of what had now become the "Anti

**THE BRECON COUNTY TIMES,
THURSDAY, FEB. 18, 1915.**

LADY GLANUSK PROTESTS

Against Soft Policy Towards Aliens.

The London "Daily Express" of the 10th instant gave special prominence to the following letter from Lady Glanusk, of Glanusk Park, Crickhowell:—

"Sir,—As a woman of Great Britain I protest most emphatically against the continued liberty granted to enemy aliens, and the possible release of enemies of military age. I ask the women of Great Britain to form representative committees in every county to get signatures of protest against this continued menace to our country and our men. I have given my husband and sons, and practically all of us can say much the same thing, therefore we have every right to protest against this danger to our country and men. If these enemies of military age are released, what is to prevent their dribbling over to Germany and fighting against us? And how can we tell how much harm may be done by those who remain here, and give information and otherwise aid a foe? Again, why should we work so hard to try to collect funds to help our own people who cannot get work when our enemies are being liberated and competing in the labour market? I cannot see how we women can be expected to go on preaching patriotism and trying to induce men to enlist, as long as this tomfoolery is allowed to go on."

German Union" (AGU). A petition of over a million signatures was collected and forwarded to the Prime Minister.

One of the main concerns of the Union was the number of "German" waiters in London who could be listening in to confidential discussions over the dining table and passing on information to hostile powers.

Many people believe that German butlers in the employ of British Cabinet ministers and British generals have been the most important agents for conveying military information to the enemy. Standing silent and discreet behind their employers and their guests at the table, they listened to many military secrets and they also had other opportunities for gathering information (Article in "New Yorker") and in April 1915, Lady Glanusk opened a hostel in London funded by the AGU specifically for British waiters.

In July 1915, Lady Glanusk gave an interview to an American journalist which was printed in Pearson's Weekly and later reprinted in the New York World. It included her description of the role of the AGU:

The Anti German Union has members all over the country, and very large proportion of our members are ready to act as emissaries, if need be, to spy on spies is what it comes to. Women, we find, are very keen in this sort of work, and generally very good at it. They usually can spare more time than men, for one thing, and they are not apt to arouse so much suspicion, for another. It was the inquiries made by women members of the Anti-German Union that led to the private wireless apparatus owned by Professor Arthur Schuster, naturalised Englishman, being seized some time ago. Professor Schuster, it will be recalled, had his apparatus installed at his country house, and one day, doubtless rather to his surprise, a band of detectives descended upon him and it.

However Professor Schuster, an eminent scientist and second generation British national, did not take the charge that he was a traitor lying down. He took Pearson's Weekly to court for libel. Supported by the Royal Society, of which he was secretary, and even the Prime Minister, he won an injunction against the publisher which



Poster for Anti-German Union
1915 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

required all copies of the magazine which included Lady Glanusk's interview to be destroyed.

Lady Glanusk's leading role in the AGU may have prompted Hemy to gift her the painting with the idea of displaying it in London and elsewhere to raise funds for the AGU and Red Cross. Whether this happened or not I have not been able to discover. Did it perhaps hang in the Jury Room of the Shire Hall and was there a small fee for visitors to see it? Many years later Lady Glanusk's granddaughter, the Honourable Dame Shân Legge-Bourke, donated the painting to Brecknock Museum.

Propaganda Medal



Replica of Goetz Medal, 1915
y Gaer, donated by Peter Freeman QC



Following on from the unravelling of this story a further donation has been made to y Gaer by Peter Freeman, QC. As a keen naval historian, he had inherited a medal from his grandfather which records the sinking of the Lusitania. Originally minted in Germany by the sculptor Karl Goetz to celebrate the attack, it was quickly recalled by the German authorities aware of the damage being done to their cause in America. However the British Government, realising the potential of the medal for anti-German propaganda, asked Harry Selfridge, department store entrepreneur, to create copies. This he did and over 250,000 were sold at 1 shilling each to raise funds for the Red Cross .

On the rim of the medal are the words "Geschäft Über Alles" or "Business Above All". One side of the medal shows the sinking Lusitania, heavily loaded with armaments. The reverse shows passengers lining up to buy their tickets from the booking office of the Cunard Line and ignoring the warnings of attacks by German submarines. The grinning figure in the kiosk, selling the tickets, is Death.



Replica of Goetz Medal, 1915
detail