

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

# DEAD WAKE

THE LAST CROSSING OF THE  
LUSITANIA



ERIK  
LARSON

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF  
IN THE GARDEN OF BEASTS

## MORE PRAISE FOR ERIK LARSON'S

# DEAD WAKE

“Larson is one of the modern masters of popular narrative nonfiction ... a resourceful reporter and a subtle stylist who understands the tricky art of Edward Scissorhands-ing narrative strands into a pleasing story.... An entertaining book about a great subject, and it will do much to make this seismic event resonate for new generations of readers.”

—*NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW*

“Larson is an old hand at treating nonfiction like high drama.... He knows how to pick details that have maximum soapy potential and then churn them down until they foam [, and he] has an eye for haunting, unexploited detail.”

—*NEW YORK TIMES*

“In his gripping new examination of the last days of what was then the fastest cruise ship in the world, Larson brings the past stingingly alive.... He draws upon telegrams, war logs, love letters and survivor depositions to provide the intriguing details, things I didn't know I wanted to know.... Thrilling, dramatic and powerful.”

—NPR

“Larson is a journalist who writes nonfiction books that read like novels, real page-turners. This one is no exception. I had known a lot about the *Titanic* but little about the *Lusitania*. This filled in those gaps ... this one is pretty damned good. Thoroughly engrossing.”

—GEORGE R. R. MARTIN

“This enthralling and richly detailed account demonstrates that there was far more going on beneath the surface than is generally known.... Larson’s account [of the *Lusitania*’s sinking] is the most lucid and suspenseful yet written, and he finds genuine emotional power in the unlucky confluences of forces, ‘large and achingly small,’ that set the stage for the ship’s agonizing final moments.”

—*WASHINGTON POST*

“Utterly engrossing ... expertly ratcheting up the tension ... Larson puts us on board with these people; it’s page-turning history, breathing with life.”

—*SEATTLE TIMES*

“Larson has a gift for transforming historical re-creations into popular recreations, and *Dead Wake* is no exception.... [He] provides first-rate suspense, a remarkable achievement given that we already know how this is going to turn out.... The tension, in the reader’s easy chair, is unbearable.”

—*BOSTON GLOBE*

“Both terrifying and enthralling. As the two vessels stumble upon each other, the story almost takes on the narrative pulse of *Jaws*—the sinking was impossible and inevitable at the same time. At no point do you root for the shark, but Larson’s incredible detail pulls you under and never lets you go.”

—*ENTERTAINMENT WEEKLY*

“Erik Larson [has] made a career out of turning history into best sellers that read as urgently as thrillers.... A meticulous master of non-fiction suspense.”

—*USA TODAY*

“[Larson] vividly captures the disaster and the ship’s microcosm, in which the second class seems more appealing than the first.”

—*THE NEW YORKER*

“[Larson is] a superb storyteller and a relentless research hound.”

—LEV GROSSMAN, *TIME*

“[Larson] proves his mettle again as a weaver of tales of naïveté, calumny and intrigue. He engagingly sketches life aboard the liner and amply describes the powers’ political situations.... The panorama Mr. Larson surveys is impressive, as is the breadth of his research and the length of his bibliography. He can’t miss engaging readers with the curious cast of characters, this ship of fools, and his accounting of the sinking itself and the survivors’ ordeals are the stuff of nightmares.”

—*WASHINGTON TIMES*

“Readers looking for a swift, emotionally engaging account of one of history’s great sea disasters will find *Dead Wake* grimly exhilarating. Larson is an exceptionally skilled storyteller, and his tick-tock narrative, which cuts between the *Lusitania*, U-20 and the political powers behind them, is pitch-perfect.”

—*RICHMOND TIMES-DISPATCH*

“Larson so brilliantly elucidates [the *Lusitania*’s fate] in *Dead Wake*, his detailed forensic and utterly engrossing account of the *Lusitania*’s last voyage.... Yes, we know how the story of the *Lusitania* ends, but there’s still plenty of white-knuckle tension. In *Dead Wake*, he delivers such a marvelously thorough investigation of the ship’s last week that it practically begs Hollywood blockbuster treatment.”

—*TORONTO GLOBE AND MAIL*

“Larson’s nimble, exquisitely researched tale puts you dead center ... Larson deftly pulls off the near-magical feat of taking a foregone conclusion and conjuring a tale that’s suspenseful, moving and altogether riveting.”

—*DALLAS MORNING NEWS*

“With each revelation from Britain and America, with each tense, claustrophobic scene aboard U-20, the German sub that torpedoed the ship, with each vignette from the *Lusitania*, Larson’s well-paced narrative ratchets the suspense. His eye for the ironic detail keen, his sense of this time period perceptive, Larson spins a sweeping tale that gives the *Lusitania* its due attention. His book may well send Leonardo DiCaprio chasing its film rights.”

—*SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE*

“An expertly crafted tale of individual and corporate hubris, governmental intrigue and cover-up, highlighting a stunning series of coincidences and miscalculations that ultimately placed the *Lusitania* in the direct path of the catastrophic strike.... [Larson’s] pacing is impeccable.”

—*MIAMI HERALD*

“[Larson] has a gift for finding the small, personal details that bring history to life.... His depiction of the sinking of the ship, and the horrific 18 minutes between the time it was hit and the time it disappeared, is masterly, moving between strange, touching details.”

—*COLUMBUS DISPATCH*

“In the hands of a lesser craftsman, the fascinating story of the last crossing of the *Lusitania* might risk being bogged down by dull character portraits, painstaking technical analyses of submarine tactics or the minutiae of WWI-era global politics. Not so with Erik Larson.... Larson wrestles these disparate narratives into a unified, coherent story and so creates a riveting account of the *Lusitania*’s ending and the beginnings of the U.S.’s involvement in the war.”

—*PITTSBURGH POST-GAZETTE*

“In your mind, the sinking of the luxury liner *Lusitania* may be filed in a cubbyhole.... After reading Erik Larson’s impressive reconstruction of the *Lusitania*’s demise, you’re going to need a much bigger cubbyhole.... Larson’s book is a work of carefully sourced nonfiction, not a

novelization, but it has a narrative sweep and miniseries pacing that make it highly entertaining as well as informative.”

—MILWAUKEE JOURNAL SENTINEL

“Larson breathes life into narrative history like few writers working today.”

—MINNEAPOLIS STAR TRIBUNE

“Now the tragic footnote to a global conflagration, the history of the [*Lusitania*’s] final voyage ... is worthy of the pathos and narrative artistry Erik Larson brings to *Dead Wake*.... Readers of Larson’s previous nonfiction page turners ... will not be disappointed. He’s an excellent scene setter and diligent researcher who tells the story with finesse and suspense.”

—NEWSDAY

“The story of the *Lusitania*’s sinking by a German U-boat has been told before, but Larson’s version features new details and the gripping immediacy he’s famous for.”

—PEOPLE

“We can’t wait for the James Cameron version of Erik Larson’s *Dead Wake*.”

—NEW YORK

“Larson ... long ago mastered the art of finding overlooked and faded curiosities and converting them into page-turning popular histories. Here, again, he manages the same trick.”

—THE CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR

“Fans of Erik Larson’s narrative nonfiction have trusted that whatever tale he chooses to tell, they’ll find it compelling. *Dead Wake* proves them right.... History at its harrowing best.”

—NEW YORK DAILY NEWS

“A quickly paced, imminently readable exploration of an old story you may only half-know.”

—*ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE*

“We all know how the story ends, but Larson still makes you want to turn the pages, and turn them quickly. What makes the story is that Larson takes a few main characters—the *Lusitania*’s Captain William Thomas Turner, President Woodrow Wilson, U-boat Captain Walther Schwieger, Boston bookseller Charles Lauriat, architect Theodate Pope, and a few minor ones—and weaves them together towards the inevitable and tragic conclusion. Larson has done his research. The number of details and anecdotes that he has managed to cobble together are fascinating in themselves.”

—*FOREIGN POLICY*

“Larson turns this familiar tale into a finely written elegy on the contingency of war.”

—*MACLEAN’S*

“Larson is a master storyteller and quickens the pace as target and attackers hurtle toward their inevitable, deadly rendezvous. The suspense builds because readers care about his fully formed characters, and it’s not always clear who will live and who will die.”

—*SALON*

“Because Larson has such a sense of story, when he gets to the tragedy itself, the book hums along in vivid form. You feel, viscerally, what it’s like to be on a sinking ship, and the weight of life lost that day. The fact that this is coming through a page-turner history book, where all the figures and details reveal an impeccable eye and thorough research, is just one of the odd pleasures of Larson’s writing.”

—*FLAVORWIRE*

“[Larson] thrillingly chronicles the liner’s last voyage.... He draws upon a wealth of sources for his subject—telegrams, wireless messages, survivor

depositions, secret intelligence ledgers, a submarine captain's war log, love letters, admiralty and university archives, even morgue photos of *Lusitania* victims.... Filled with revealing political, military and social information, Larson's engrossing *Dead Wake* is, at its heart, a benediction for the 1,198 souls lost at sea."

—*TAMPA BAY TIMES*

"Larson, an authority on nonfiction accounts, expounds on our primary education, putting faces to the disaster and crafting an intimate portrait in *Dead Wake*. A lover of history will get so close to the story ... that it is hard not to feel as if you are on board with new friends."

—*FORT WORTH STAR-TELEGRAM*

"In a well-paced narrative, Larson reveals the forces large and small, natural and man-made, coincidental and intentional, that propelled the *Lusitania* to its fatal rendezvous.... Larson's description of the moments and hours that followed the torpedo's explosive impact is riveting.... *Dead Wake* stands on its own as a gripping recounting of an episode that still has the power to haunt a reader 100 years later."

—*BUFFALO NEWS*

"Larson, who was once described as 'an historian with a novelist's soul,' has written a book which combines the absorbing tenor of fiction with the realities of history."

—*TORONTO SUN*

"[Larson] shows that narrative history can let us have it both ways: great drama wedded to rigorous knowledge. The German torpedoing of the great ship 100 years ago was almost as deadly as the *Titanic* sinking, and far more world-changing. Larson makes it feel as immediate and contingent as the present day."

—*VULTURE*



“The bestselling author of *The Devil in the White City* and *Thunderstruck* puts his mastery of penning parallel narratives on display as he tells the tale of the sinking of the *Lusitania* by a German submarine, building an ever-growing sense of dread as the two vessels draw closer to their lethal meeting.... He goes well beyond what’s taught in history classes to offer insights into British intelligence and the dealings that kept the ship from having the military escort so many passengers expected to protect it.... By piecing together how politics, economics, technology, and even the weather combined to produce an event that seemed both unlikely and inevitable, he offers a fresh look at a world-shaking disaster.”

—*THE A.V. CLUB*

“An intriguing, entirely engrossing investigation into a legendary disaster.”

—*KIRKUS REVIEWS*, STARRED REVIEW

“Factual and personal to a high degree, the narrative reads like a grade-A thriller.”

—*BOOKLIST*, STARRED REVIEW

“[Larson] has always shown a brilliant ability to unearth the telling details of a story and has the narrative chops to bring a historical moment vividly alive. But in his new book, Larson simply outdoes himself.... What is most compelling about *Dead Wake* is that, through astonishing research, Larson gives us a strong sense of the individuals—passengers and crew—aboard the *Lusitania*, heightening our sense of anxiety as we realize that some of the people we have come to know will go down with the ship. A story full of ironies and ‘what-ifs,’ *Dead Wake* is a tour de force of narrative history.”

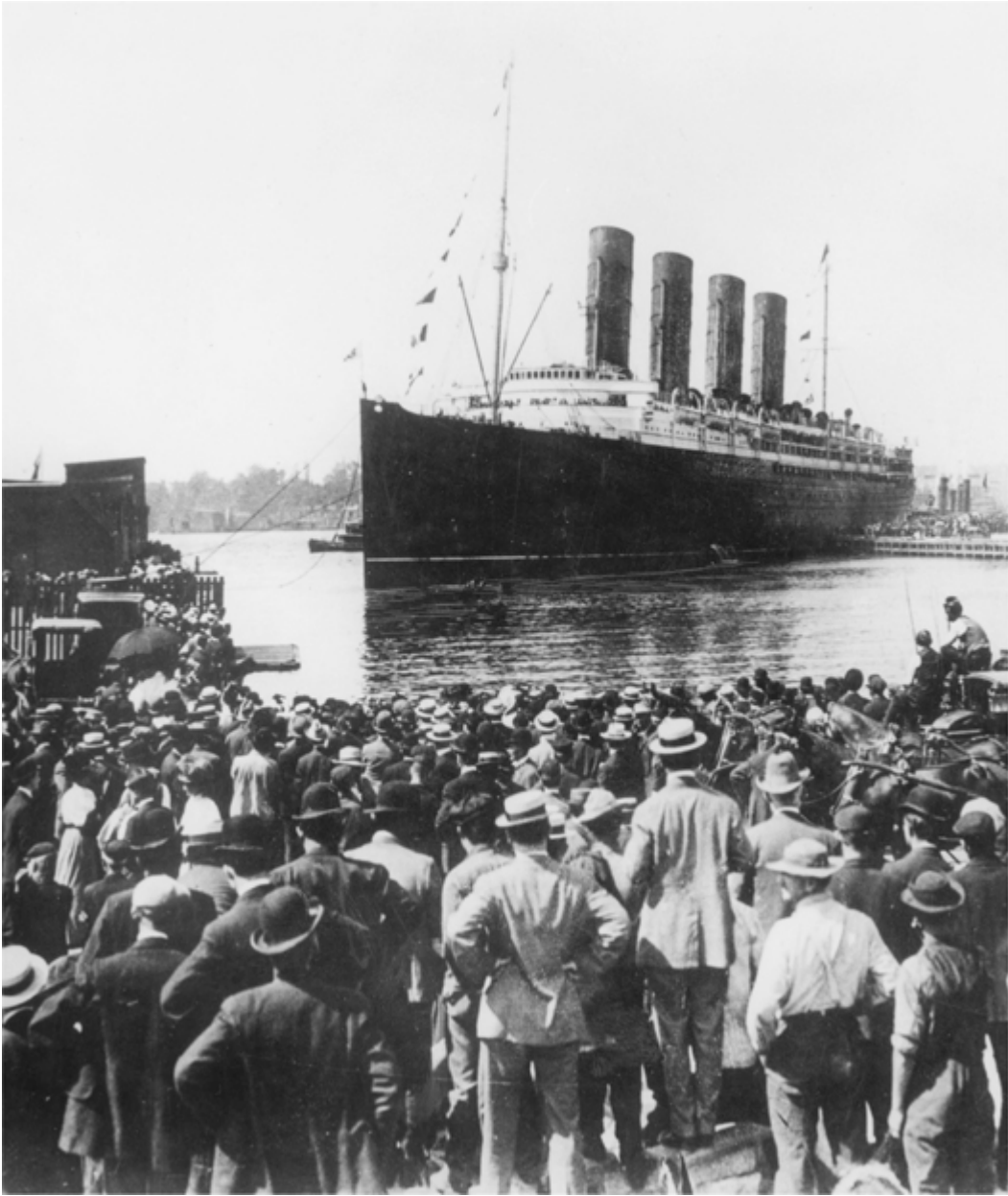
—*BOOKPAGE*, TOP PICK

“With a narrative as smooth as the titular passenger liner, Larson delivers a riveting account of one of the most tragic events of WWI.... A blunt reminder that war is, at its most basic, a matter of life and death.”

—*PUBLISHERS WEEKLY*

“Once again, Larson transforms a complex event into a thrilling human interest story. This suspenseful account will entice readers of military and maritime history along with lovers of popular history.”

—*LIBRARY JOURNAL*



# DEAD WAKE

THE LAST CROSSING OF THE  
LUSITANIA

ERIK LARSON

B \ D \ W \ Y  
BROADWAY BOOKS  
NEW YORK

Copyright © 2015, 2016 by Erik Larson  
Reader's Guide copyright © 2015, 2016 by Penguin Random House LLC  
Excerpt from *The Splendid and the Vile* copyright © 2020 by Erik Larson

All rights reserved.

Published in the United States by Broadway Books, an imprint of the Crown Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House LLC,  
New York.

[www.crownpublishing.com](http://www.crownpublishing.com)

Broadway Books and its logo, B \ D \ W \ Y, are trademarks of Penguin Random House LLC.

Extra Libris and the accompanying colophon are trademarks of Penguin Random House LLC.

Originally published in hardcover in slightly different form in the United States by Crown Publishers, an imprint of the Crown Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York, in 2015.

The Reader's Guide first appeared on [penguinrandomhouse.com](http://penguinrandomhouse.com) in 2015.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Larson, Erik, 1954–

Dead wake : the last crossing of the Lusitania / by Erik Larson.—First edition.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Lusitania (Steamship) 2. World War, 1914–1918—Naval operations, German. 3. Shipping—Government policy—Great Britain—History—20th century. I. Title. II. Title: Last crossing of the Lusitania.

D592.L8L28 2015

940.4'514—dc23 2014034182

ISBN 9780307408877

Ebook ISBN 9780553446753

*Maps: Jeffrey L. Ward*

*Frontispiece: Mary Evans/Epic/Tallandier*

*Cover design: Darren Haggar*

*Cover photography: Stefano Oppo/Getty Images*

rh\_3.1\_c0\_r9

# CONTENTS

*Cover*

*Title Page*

*Copyright*

*Maps*

*Great Britain and Environs, 1914*

*Southwest Great Britain, 1914*

MINING SUSPENSE

*Epigraph*

A WORD FROM THE CAPTAIN

PART I “BLOODY MONKEYS”

Lusitania: The Old Sailor

Washington: The Lonely Place

Lusitania: Sucking Tubes and Thackeray

U-20: The Happiest U-Boat

Lusitania: Menagerie

Room 40: “The Mystery”

Lusitania: A Cavalcade of Passengers

Room 40: Blinker’s Ruse

Washington: Lost

Lusitania: Under Way

U-20: Toward Fair Isle

Lusitania: Rendezvous

Room 40: Cadence

PART II JUMP ROPE AND CAVIAR

U-20: “The Blind Moment”

Lusitania: A Sunday at Sea  
Room 40; Queenstown; London: Protecting Orion  
U-20: A Perilous Line  
Lusitania: Halibut  
U-20: The Trouble With Torpedoes  
Lusitania: Sunshine and Happiness  
Room 40: The Orion Sails  
U-20: Frustration  
London; Berlin; Washington: Comfort Denied  
Lusitania: The Manifest  
U-20: At Last  
Sighting  
Room 40: Schwieger Revealed  
Lusitania: Helpful Young Ladies  
U-20: Spectacle  
Lusitania: Life After Death  
U-20: Change of Plan  
Lusitania: Messages  
London; Washington; Berlin: Tension  
U-20: Fog

### PART III DEAD WAKE

The Irish Sea: Engines Above  
London; Washington: The King's Question  
The Irish Sea: Funnels on The Horizon  
Lusitania: Beauty  
U-20: "Treff!"

### PART IV THE BLACK SOUL

Lusitania: Impact  
First Word  
Lusitania: Decisions  
U-20: Schwieger's View  
Lusitania: The Little Army  
Telegram  
Lusitania: A Queen's End



All Points: Rumor  
Lusitania: Adrift  
U-20: Parting Shot  
Lusitania: Seagulls  
Queenstown: The Lost

## PART V THE SEA OF SECRETS

London: Blame  
Washington; Berlin; London: The Last Blunder

## EPILOGUE: PERSONAL EFFECTS

DEDICATION

SOURCES AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

NOTES

BIBLIOGRAPHY

*Other Books by This Author*

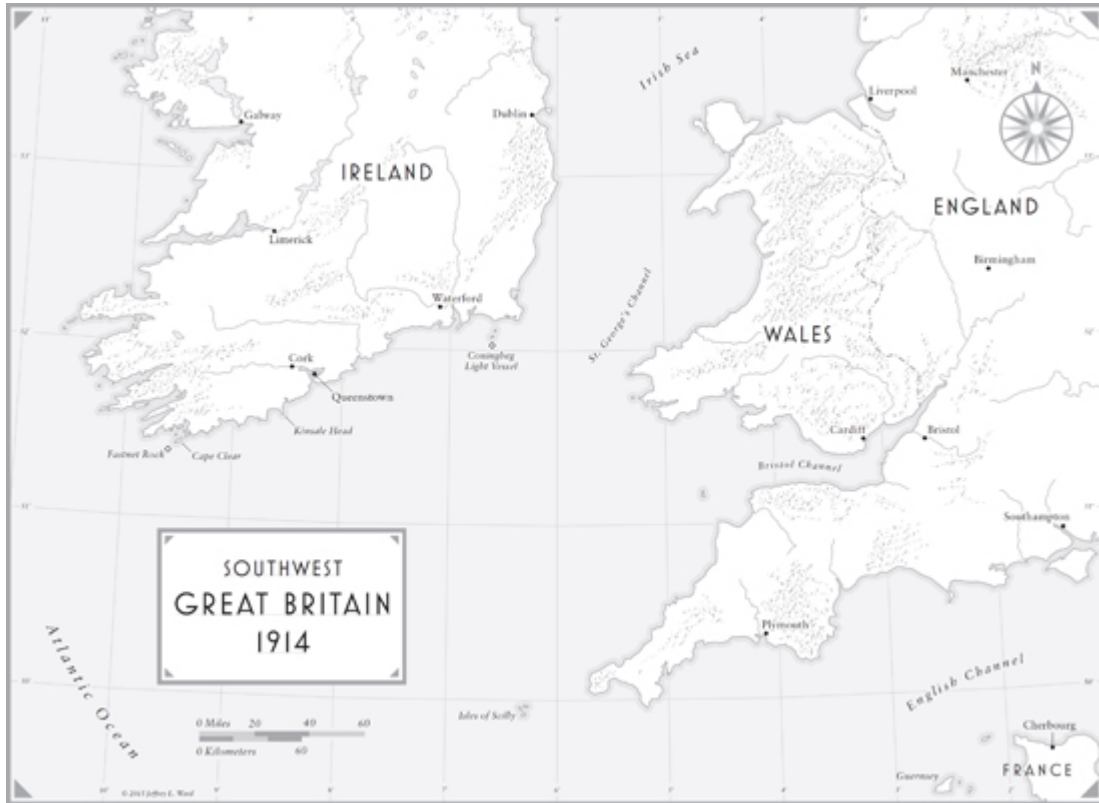
*About the Author*

*Extra Libris*

*Excerpt from The Splendid and the Vile*

# GREAT BRITAIN AND ENVIRONS, 1914







Detail left



Detail right

## MINING SUSPENSE

(A Note to Readers)

I FIRST STARTED READING about the *Lusitania* on a whim, following my between-books strategy of reading voraciously and promiscuously. What I learned both charmed and horrified me. I thought I knew everything there was to know about the incident, but, as so often happens when I do deep research on a subject, I quickly realized how wrong I was. Above all, I discovered that buried in the muddled details of the affair—deliberately muddled, in certain aspects—was something simple and satisfying: a *very* good story.

I hasten to add, as always, that this is a work of nonfiction. Anything between quotation marks comes from a memoir, letter, telegram, or other historical document. My goal was to try to marshal the many nodes of real-life suspense and, yes, romance that marked the *Lusitania* episode, in a manner that would allow readers to experience it as did people who lived through it at the time (although squeamish readers may wish to skip the details of a certain autopsy that appears late in the narrative).

In any event, I give you now the saga of the *Lusitania*, and the myriad forces, large and achingly small, that converged one lovely day in May 1915 to produce a tragedy of monumental scale, whose true character and import have long been obscured in the mists of history.

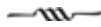
ERIK LARSON  
SEATTLE

A WORD ABOUT TIME: *To avoid confusing myself and readers, I've converted German submarine time to Greenwich Mean Time. Thus an entry in Kptlt. Walther Schwieger's War Log for 3:00 P.M. becomes 2:00 P.M. instead.*

AS FOR BRITAIN'S ADMIRALTY: *It is important always to keep in mind that the Admiralty's top official was the "First Lord," who served as a kind of chief executive officer; his second-in-command was "First Sea Lord," essentially the chief operating officer, in charge of day-to-day naval operations.*

The Captains are to remember that, whilst they are expected to use every diligence to secure a speedy voyage, *they must run no risk which by any possibility might result in accident to their ships. They will ever bear in mind that the safety of the lives and property entrusted to their care is the ruling principle which should govern them in the navigation of their ships, and no supposed gain in expedition, or saving of time on the voyage, is to be purchased at the risk of accident.*

“RULES TO BE OBSERVED IN THE COMPANY’S SERVICE,” THE CUNARD STEAM-SHIP COMPANY  
LIMITED, MARCH 1913



The first consideration is the safety of the U-boat.

ADM. REINHARD SCHEER,  
*Germany’s High Sea Fleet in the World War, 1919*



## A WORD FROM THE CAPTAIN

ON THE NIGHT OF MAY 6, 1915, AS HIS SHIP APPROACHED the coast of Ireland, Capt. William Thomas Turner left the bridge and made his way to the first-class lounge, where passengers were taking part in a concert and talent show, a customary feature of Cunard crossings. The room was large and warm, paneled in mahogany and carpeted in green and yellow, with two fourteen-foot-tall fireplaces in the front and rear walls. Ordinarily Turner avoided events of this kind aboard ship, because he disliked the social obligations of captaincy, but tonight was no ordinary night, and he had news to convey.

There was already a good deal of tension in the room, despite the singing and piano playing and clumsy magic tricks, and this became more pronounced when Turner stepped forward at intermission. His presence had the perverse effect of affirming everything the passengers had been fearing since their departure from New York, in the way that a priest's arrival tends to undermine the cheery smile of a nurse.

It was Turner's intention, however, to provide reassurance. His looks helped. With the physique of a bank safe, he was the embodiment of quiet strength. He had blue eyes and a kind and gentle smile, and his graying hair—he was fifty-eight years old—conveyed wisdom and experience, as did the mere fact of his being a Cunard captain. In accord with Cunard's practice of rotating captains from ship to ship, this was his third stint as the *Lusitania's* master, his first in wartime.

Turner now told his audience that the next day, Friday, May 7, the ship would enter waters off the southern coast of Ireland that were part of a "zone of war" designated by Germany. This in itself was anything but news. On the morning of the ship's departure from New York, a notice had appeared on the shipping pages of New York's newspapers. Placed by the German Embassy in Washington, it reminded readers of the existence of the war zone and cautioned that "vessels flying the flag of Great Britain, or of

any of her allies, are liable to destruction” and that travelers sailing on such ships “do so at their own risk.” Though the warning did not name a particular vessel, it was widely interpreted as being aimed at Turner’s ship, the *Lusitania*, and indeed in at least one prominent newspaper, the *New York World*, it was positioned adjacent to Cunard’s own advertisement for the ship. Ever since, about all the passengers had been doing was “thinking, dreaming, sleeping, and eating submarines,” according to Oliver Bernard, a theater-set designer traveling in first class.

Turner now revealed to the audience that earlier in the evening the ship had received a warning by wireless of fresh submarine activity off the Irish coast. He assured the audience there was no need for alarm.

Coming from another man, this might have sounded like a baseless palliative, but Turner believed it. He was skeptical of the threat posed by German submarines, especially when it came to his ship, one of the great transatlantic “greyhounds,” so named for the speeds they could achieve. His superiors at Cunard shared his skepticism. The company’s New York manager issued an official response to the German warning. “The truth is that the *Lusitania* is the safest boat on the sea. She is too fast for any submarine. No German war vessel can get her or near her.” Turner’s personal experience affirmed this: on two previous occasions, while captain of a different ship, he had encountered what he believed were submarines and had successfully eluded them by ordering full speed ahead.

He said nothing about these incidents to his audience. Now he offered a different sort of reassurance: upon entering the war zone the next day, the ship would be securely in the care of the Royal Navy.

He bade the audience good night and returned to the bridge. The talent show continued. A few passengers slept fully clothed in the dining room, for fear of being trapped below decks in their cabins if an attack were to occur. One especially anxious traveler, a Greek carpet merchant, put on a life jacket and climbed into a lifeboat to spend the night. Another passenger, a New York businessman named Isaac Lehmann, took a certain comfort from the revolver that he carried with him always and that would, all too soon, bring him a measure of fame, and infamy.

With all but a few lights extinguished and all shades pulled and curtains drawn, the great liner slid forward through the sea, at times in fog, at times under a lacework of stars. But even in darkness, in moonlight and mist, the ship stood out. At one o’clock in the morning, Friday, May 7, the officers of

a New York-bound vessel spotted the *Lusitania* and recognized it immediately as it passed some two miles off. “You could see the shape of the four funnels,” said the captain, Thomas M. Taylor; “she was the only ship with four funnels.”

Unmistakable and invulnerable, a floating village in steel, the *Lusitania* glided by in the night as a giant black shadow cast upon the sea.