

NEWS

The Milltown woman who missed the Titanic and found and lost love in America

• In 1912, a beautiful 20-year-old woman stepped off a boat to begin a new life in America. Yorkshire-based journalist Sheron Boyle tells how her Irish grandmother's brush with the infamous Titanic tragedy was followed by a bitter sweet love story in the US and her inspiring tale of coping with adversity.

By Sheron Boyle

MY image of my grandmother, Margaret Boyle née Martin, was of an old lady with her dark, fine hair scraped back in a bun. A widow for many years, she dressed in the regulation black and white of her generation with the occasional navy blue thrown in as a nod to high days and holidays.

When we stayed at the family farm outside Milltown in the 1960s and 1970s, she wore workman-like black boots and I'd stare at them, thinking that back in my Yorkshire home city, I didn't know any women who wore such footwear.

Life halted at 6 pm in her bungalow as the TV played the Angelus. My grandmother stopped whatever she was doing, sat in her high-backed wooden kitchen chair and prayed. Then the TV would be switched off - and covered with a tea towel while we ate our meal.

At night time, I'd quietly watch her silhouette as she knelt at her bedside to pray before she got into bed with me.

Her careworn face was lined and tanned - undoubtedly from years of running the farm, raising



MARGARET Boyle in her final days with her sons at her bedside.

her seven children, caring for a disabled husband and tending the orphaned seven children on the neighbouring farm.

But though the top of her back was stooped as age took hold, her blue eyes always had a twinkle in them.

Today, her story would probably register as shocking. Back then, and in the harsh times of life in the first half of the 1900s, it was replicated across Ireland.

Occasionally, it would be mentioned that my grandmother had been to America as a young woman. And more shockingly, she had been due to sail on the

Titanic, joining the hundreds with a third class ticket hoping it would transport them to a better life across the Atlantic.

It was a story I never, regrettably, asked her about. But it is said that on the April 15 anniversary of the ship's sinking, she would never talk about it and would feel ill.

I have spent years researching my family tree - long before the Internet was in mass use - and my doggedness helped me get quite far back on my mother's Mayo-based Costello, Leitrim-rooted McPartland and Wicklow Keegan lineage.

It's only in the last three



THE young Margaret Martin, front left, photographed in the USA with her sister Celia (Noone). At back are her brother Jim Martin, Della (McHugh) Martin and husband Pat, and Owen Martin.

years that I have tackled the Boyle and Martin (my paternal grandmother's maiden name) side.

But as I garnered information, it made me reassess the old lady staring stoically into the camera in our family photos and see through fresh eyes the once beautiful young woman she was.

Second and third generations of my family settled in northern England, working in the mills, mines and construction industry. My maternal grandfather Patrick Costello recalls the sign "No Irish Need Apply" displayed at several boarding houses in the West Yorkshire city of Wakefield, where he worked down the coal mines.

Over half of my ancestors went to the US. Margaret was the seventh of 12 children born in 1891 to Thomas and Ellen Martin, on a small farmstead Levally Roe in Irishtown, Co Mayo.

When Margaret decided to try for a new life in America, where at least three siblings had already emigrated, she paid £7 for her steerage class

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ticket no 367167 and was booked to sail along with the 120 other Irish folk on April 11, 1912, on the Titanic.

She was due to sail with a cousin, Celia Sheridan of Stripe, Milltown.

Family myth has it that thanks to Celia being late leaving her family home and so possibly unable to buy a ticket, the duo missed the boat - finally leaving 24 hours later on the SS Celtic. My grandmother cancelled her passage and her ticket (which incorrectly has her listed as Mary) simply states "Not boarded".

Though she never discussed her brush with that fateful journey, you do think she must have put herself in the place of those who perished on the ship that night? Her chances

of survival were slim with 44 per cent of steerage passengers dying.

However, when the "unsinkable" Titanic crashed into an iceberg, Margaret was fast asleep in her cabin 700 miles away.

And so as Margaret was among the first passengers to sail into New York on April 20, docking at the very wharf the Titanic should have been, it must have been a gloomy New World she entered.

But she must have thought how lucky she was to have missed the boat, in the very saddest sense.

Margaret went on to a new life - joining her sister and spinster aunt (both named Celia Martin) working as a maid in Hartford, Connecticut, for the