

Love and death on the Titanic

■ New book tells how a Limerick family's hopes were lost at sea



WHEN author Martina Devlin chanced upon a list of names from the Titanic on the internet, little did she know it would unearth a family connection with the tragedy. She talks to AINE FRIZGERALD about how it inspired her latest novel, *Ship of Dreams*

A NOVEL inspired by the tragic sinking of the Titanic has been penned by award winning writer Martina Devlin who, three years ago, discovered that her great-grand-uncle, Thomas O'Brien of Bonavie, County Limerick, perished on that cold night in April, 1912.

"Like most people, I knew the Titanic story as a gripping mosaic of disaster and survival—a toll call of what ifs and might have beens, told and retold in film and book form for almost 100 years. What I didn't know is that I have a family connection with the Titanic," explained Martina who is well-known for her fictional novels and her journalist work with the Irish Independent and Ireland on Sunday.

Three years ago, quite by chance, Martina discovered that her great-grand-uncle was a passenger on the Titanic.

She was researching on the internet for a different book, and stumbled across the passenger list for the ship's maiden voyage. Idly running her eye down it, a name and address leapt out at her: Thomas O'Brien of Bonavie, County Limerick.

"My mum was Eddie English of Oola before she was lured north to Tyrone. My grandmother Josie English was O'Brien. I came from Bonavie, it's such a small townland in the county. I was always aware of the connection between the two and sure enough, while investigating, I discovered that Thomas O'Brien was her uncle."

On discovery of the family connection, Martina had, what she described as the "strange sense of

blood calling to blood".

"I discovered his (Thomas) photograph and gazed at it, mesmerised. I'd always heard it said writers need look no further than their own families for stories—and here was the proof. I fancied, staring at that grainy black and white image, that I could detect a family resemblance on my mother's side. He reminded me of uncles and cousins. I could hear his voice speaking with their rich Munster intonation. I tried to read the expression in his eyes and decipher what manner of man he was—gentle, impulsive, lighthearted," she explained.

Soon Martina learned how Thomas had eloped with a local girl, Hannah Godfrey from near Doon, with both taking passage on the Titanic. The O'Brien family in Ireland only knew that Thomas was emigrating to his sisters in Chicago.

"No one knew he was bringing a wife with him. An iceberg intervened, and Tom went down with the ship while Hannah survived—and had a baby girl seven months later in New York."

Through her research, Martina discovered that Tom O'Brien, from the townland of Bonavie, worked in a creamery. He was one of a family of eight, the son of a tenant farmer, and in 1912 at the age of 26, he decided to emigrate.

"It wasn't an unusual decision: all the young and able-bodied were bailing out; it was said of the Irish that we reared our children for the export market," Martina explained.

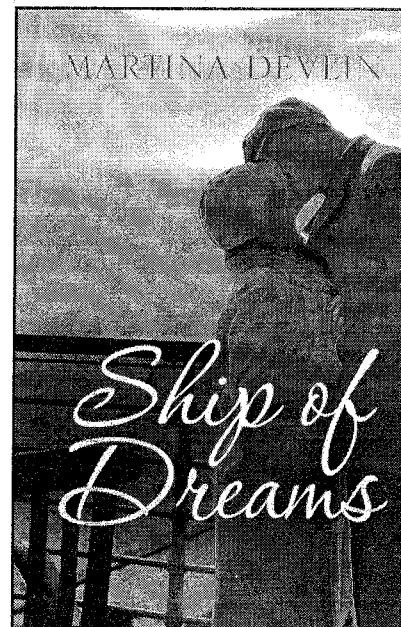
Thomas had four sisters in Chicago and one of them, Martina's great-grandmother, was eagerly looking forward to his arrival, but he neglected to mention that he would be travelling alone.

Whether it was a spur of the moment decision or had been planned for



Above, Hannah Godfrey, Doon, pictured with a friend, survived the Titanic disaster, the late Thomas O'Brien, top right, from Bonavie, the great-grand-uncle of author Martina Devlin, died in the tragedy

Far right, Author Martina Devlin in the restored railway station in Cobh which was used by Titanic passengers, and, right, her new book, *Ship of Dreams*



some time, we don't know, but he eloped with a girl from the next townland. Together they made their way to Cobh, then known as Queenstown, and bought a steamship ticket to New York for £15/10s.

"And here's where chance or fate or just plain bad luck intervened. The liner Tom and Hannah were due to travel on had its sailing called off. It was a time of cancelled crossings because the steamships were reliant on coal and the Welsh miners were striking for minimum pay. The couple had their tickets transferred to the next available crossing. And

the ship that was to take them on their journey to the New World was the Titanic."

Aside from Tom's story, there were two other people's stories that Martina wanted to set down: Hannah Godfrey, the woman with whom Thomas eloped, and Marion O'Brien, their baby.

"She was present on the Titanic in embryo form. But she grew up without a father because a ship dubbed unsinkable steamed too fast through the iceberg region on her maiden voyage, without even posting extra look-outs to take account of ice warnings."

Continuing her research, the next question that was posed for Martina was: did Tom and Hannah ever, indeed, marry?

"Did granny have a relation on the Titanic?" I asked my mother. Her forehead pleaded, "That's ringing a vague bell," she admitted. "I don't know anything much about it, just that there's a family connection. We knew never to talk about it as children. It upset your granny too much."

"Why was he never mentioned? No record of a ceremony was found in Ireland, but surely this wasn't enough to explain

the silence."

Then Martina got her hands on her Irish Independent colleague Senan Molony's non-fiction book *The Irish Aboard Titanic*. It told how Tom's sisters had offered Hannah a home in Chicago, but she had refused to leave New York, saying she'd be reminded all the time of Tom.

What struck Martina most during research was how, the more she read about the sinking, the more it became clear how little the aftermath figured in fiction or film.

"And then I set aside the hunt to trace Hannah and Marion's story, because

by now I had embarked on the novel and wanted to write the version of events my imagination suggested. Where I knew facts, I'd be obliged to use them. Not knowing gave me freedom. I took as my starting point a pregnancy, an elopement and a death from drowning aboard the world's most famous ship.

"It began to interest me increasingly if you survived the Titanic sinking, what then? Would your glass be half-full or half-empty? Would you feel blessed or blighted?"

Ship of Dreams, Martina Devlin is published by Poolbeg at €17.99.

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Management and Staff at the Mid-Western Regional Maternity Hospital, Ennis Road, Limerick wish to inform you that there will be a change in visiting times from October 15th 2007.

The new times are
 13:30hrs – 15:30hrs
 and 18:30hrs – 20:30hrs.

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 Visiting times for partners or support person remain 9am – 9pm

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