

‘Drowned like rats’ The torpedoing of *Arandora Star* off the Donegal Coast, 2 July 1940

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This paper is a revised version of ‘Men that came in with the sea’ which appeared in *History Ireland* in 2008. The torpedoing of the Blue Star Line’s 15,000-ton luxury liner *Arandora Star* off Bloody Foreland, Donegal on 2 July 1940 is one of the hidden histories of Second World War Ireland. Though the sinking was reported in the local press in Mayo and Donegal, where it is still remembered, it never made it into the national consciousness due to wartime censorship.

So too in Britain, but for different reasons. The sinking calls up unpleasant memories of Britain’s wartime domestic security policies. How by the middle of June 1940 all 8,000 male Germans, Austrians and Italians in Britain between the ages of 16 and 70 had been interned on orders of the war cabinet. The internees were portrayed as a security threat because of their ethnic backgrounds and British fear of a ‘Fifth Column’. They were herded into internment camps such as ‘Warner’s’, a former holiday camp at Seaton on the Devon coast. ‘Collar the lot’ Churchill had ordered. *Arandora Star* was carrying 1,300 of these internees bound for Canada when she was torpedoed. Almost seventy years later, the subsequent drowning of over 800 of these internees still arouses anger in the Italian community in Britain. Amongst the variety of web material on the sinking of the ship is a campaign demanding ‘an official apology from the British Prime Minister and to seek compensation for the many Italian families who suffered grave personal and financial loss due to the Government's policy of internment’.ⁱ

In Ireland, the story of the sinking of the *Lusitania* off the Old Head of Kinsale and the *Leinster* off the Kish Lightship, both during the First World War, are well known, but there are no second world war equivalents. A fierce submarine war took place off the coast of Ireland during both world wars. The *Lusitania*, *Leinster* and *Arandora Star* were all sunk by German U-boats, but might it be that *Arandora Star* was conveniently forgotten because she carried an awkward human cargo? Might the amnesia be because the internees were carried in conditions which ensured their survival was hampered once the ship began to founder? Official statements said she had sunk 250 miles west of the coast of Northern Ireland; in fact she was only seventy five miles off Bloody Foreland, Donegal. Though neutral, Ireland could not avoid the sinking of the ship as events within a month of the sinking were to prove.

On the 6 August 1940 Garda William Cullen of Belmullet station received a phone call from coastwatchers at the nearby Annagh Head Look Out Post (LOP). He learned that

the Atlantic currents had washed ashore the dead body of a British soldier. Cullen cycled to Annagh Head to investigate. With the coastwatchers he searched the body. Among the dead man's few possessions they found an English half-penny piece, a lead toy soldier, letters and photographs. From his Army pay book Cullen identified 21-year-old Private Donald Domican of the Welsh Regiment. On the evening of 6 August Domican's body was brought to Belmullet Hospital. An autopsy concluded that he had died from asphyxia due to drowning.

The following day, as Domican was buried in the Church of Ireland cemetery in the town, Belmullet Gardaí received a further call from Annagh Head - another body had been found. From a service book on the body Garda Sergeant Burns identified 27-year-old Trooper Frank Carter of the Royal Dragoons, a career soldier and a married man, from Kilburn in London. Domican and Carter were guards from *Arandora Star*.

Alongside their graves in Belmullet is the grave of Private William Frederick Chick of the Dorsetshire Regiment. Nineteen year old Fred Chick, as he was known to his family, was a butcher in civilian life and was from the village of Martinstown in Dorsetshire. He had enlisted in the Territorial Army in April 1939 and later saw service in France with the British Expeditionary Force. Like Carter and Domican, there is absolutely no reason why you should ever have heard of Fred Chick. When I was researching the history of the coast watching service LOPs on Erris Head and Annagh Head close to Belmullet I came across the details of the discovery of Chick's body at Annagh Head on the morning of 9 August 1940. The Mayo press recounted how three local men had waded into rough seas to tie a rope to his body and bring him ashore and how on finding a photograph of Chick's girlfriend in his wallet they were reduced to tears.

The sea began to give up its dead from *Arandora Star* through August 1940. From the reports from Annagh Head LOP and from LOPs north to Tory Island in Donegal the Defence Forces knew that twenty-one bodies had been recovered along the coast of Ireland in the first ten days of August. Set up as an anti-invasion watch, the recovery and identification of the dead of war was fast becoming a routine task for the men of the Coast Watching Service.

From 1939 to 1945 the coastwatchers kept an unbroken watch along Ireland's marine frontline in the Battle of the Atlantic. They were Ireland's frontline troops. Seventy years later their reports are the most comprehensive source of the Second World War as it happened close to and on Irish territory. These reports were analysed and circulated as the 'Daily Reports Summary', a top-secret document sent to key Defence Forces officers, senior civil servants and a restricted group of government ministers.

The Daily Reports for August 1940 made grim reading as more corpses were washed ashore along the northwest coast. Coastwatchers from Blacksod Bay to Malin Head reported the silent arrival of these ‘men that came in with the sea’. The dead – Italians, Germans, Austrians and British - all came from *Arandora Star*. 100 dead bodies were reported by local papers in Mayo to be floating in the sea off the Iniskea Islands. The sea was so rough that the bodies could not be recovered.

In finding these bodies, communities along the west coast were taking part in the final chapter of a story that began at 4.00am on 1 July when *Arandora Star* left Liverpool for St John’s, Newfoundland. Designed to carry 500 passengers, the liner was crammed with 1,300 German and Italian internees and their military guards. They were men like the tall dapper 28-year-old Hans Moeller, a Jewish refugee from Nazi Germany. He had lived in Bremen and was now a student in Britain. He was interned on grounds of national security as an alleged Nazi sympathiser and became prisoner 43206 at Warner’s, Seaton Doon.ⁱⁱ With Moeller was 60-year-old Italian Ernesto Moruzzi, a sweet shop owner from Neath, Glamorgan. Standing on the dockside at Liverpool on 30 June 1940 they expected a short trip to the Isle of Man. Unwanted in Britain they were instead bound for Canada. Within forty-eight hours both men would be dead, along with over 800 of their fellow internees.

Arandora Star began her Atlantic crossing during what U-boat crews called ‘The Happy Time’, when U-boats sank Allied ships with impunity off the Irish coast. Sailing without escort through the North Channel and past Malin Head at cruise speed of 15 knots, painted battleship grey and with her upper decks and twelve lifeboats festooned with barbed-wire *Arandora Star* zig-zagged to avoid U-boats. Captain Edward Moulton knew his ship was a death trap. If it were to sink ‘we shall be drowned like rats’ he protested before setting sail.

At 6.15am on 2 July, 75 miles northwest of Bloody Foreland, Donegal, without notice by the watch, a torpedo from Gunther Prien’s U-47 hit *Arandora Star* on the starboard side. When Intelligence Office Captain C.M.C. Lee made it to the deck he found the Military Officer in command of the ship, Major Christopher Bethell of the Royal Tank Regiment and Captain Goddard already on deck. Lee asked Bethell for instructions, but Bethell gave none. The ship was listing and Lee departed to search for spare lifebelts and, as he put it gently ‘was occupied in controlling internees’. In fact ‘indescribable chaos’, as one survivor put it, now reigned on board.ⁱⁱⁱ

Below decks the ships lights failed, glass shattered and ruptured pipes spewed out noxious fumes. Those rushing to the deck found their escape barred by the barbed wire the

guards had secured in place to keep the internees below decks. Internee Ludwig Baruch heard recalled ‘panic, muffled cries, an urgent, wailing alarm and hurried steps along the corridor.’^{iv} Leading cabin mates along a corridor Baruch found a soldier with bayonet fixed to his rifle still on guard. Like his superior officers, he was shocked and confused and though the ship was sinking would not leave his post and ignore his orders.

Arandora Star sank stern first just after 0640. As she went down Captain Lee ‘could no longer stand on deck owing to the angle she had taken ... [he] ... jumped overboard and swam away from the ship to avoid the suction.’^v Sergeant Norman Price of the Worcestershire Regiment saw the end of the liner from the water: ‘the ship went up at one end and slid rapidly down, taking the men with her.’^{vi}

Malin Head radio picked up distress signals from the *Arandora Star* and retransmitted then to Land’s End and Portpatrick, but Britain did not immediately announce the loss of the ship. Prien had no idea he was attacking his fellow countrymen and their Italian allies. *Arandora Star* looked like a troopship and had no Red Cross markings. 470 Italians and 243 Germans drowned, as did 37 guards, including Domican, Carter and Chick. The descriptions were stark, Gunner Bell of the Royal Artillery reported seeing Gunner Leslie Dawson ‘standing on the deck ... right up to the time the vessel sank ... he does not consider there was much hope of his being saved.’^{vii} Dawson’s wife, Jane, was, even by November 1940, still holding out hope that her twenty-six year old husband was still alive, writing to the military that ‘I may yet receive word from the Red Cross’.^{viii} His body was never found. Captain Goddard also went down with the ship. He was seen ‘on the first deck with no lifebelt, he was quite calm’. In an act of chivalry, he had ‘given his lifebelt to an internee.’^{ix} The total death toll was 805. Almost half of those on board perished, the majority being Italian internees. There had been no instruction in emergency drill.

The Canadian Destroyer the *St Laurent* picked up the survivors after they had spent seven hours in the water. Moeller and Moruzzi were not amongst them. When Moeller’s badly decomposed body was found on 29 July at Maghery, Dungloe, Donegal, Gardaí found in his wallet on a slip of headed notepaper from Jermyn Street shirtmakers ‘Turnbull & Asser’. They also found in the wallet a songbook, ironically titled ‘Holiday Songs’ and inscribed ‘In memory of many a sing song whilst making nets in hut D21, Warner’s Camp, Seaton Doon, 7.4.1940.’

Through the London Metropolitan Police Gardaí discovered that Moeller’s fiancée Dora Lucas worked at the Jermyn Street shop. Lucas explained that she and Moeller had lived together in Hammersmith before Moeller was interned in November 1939. Lucas’

statement to the London police suggested that Moeller had fled Germany to escape the Nazis: he had no next of kin in Britain and she asked for his effects to be returned to her. It was only on Lucas's statement that Moeller's body was firmly identified. He was buried in the remote graveyard at Termon, Maghery, Donegal. The Department of External Affairs did not honour Lucas' request, they instead sent Moeller's few possessions to the German Minister to Ireland, Edouard Hempel. Moeller was, after all, a German national and External Affairs cared little about his personal life. In a strange twist of fate his body was removed to the German War Cemetery at Glencree near Enniskerry in the 1950s and he lies buried alongside his fellow countrymen, supporters of the regime he fled Germany from.

Moruzzi's body was found on 30 July 1940 at Cloughglass, Burtonport, Donegal. A small stout man with thinning grey hair and a dark moustache, he was identified by his political leanings - the receipt for his yearly subscription to the Neath Constitutional Club. It was the only item in his wallet, save five religious medals and a small crucifix. Such 'Pathetic Relics', as a coroner's report called them, were more than many had in their possession and Moruzzi was lucky to be identified. He was buried with others from *Arandora Star* in the graveyard on Cruit Island, Donegal.

Survivors recalled how many older men like Moruzzi or those who were infirm found their situation unendurable. Some stood waiting on the decks for the sea to take them as *Arandora Star* sank, others knelt in prayer and one hanged himself.

Nationality did not matter in the icy waters of the Atlantic, a poignant illustration being the graves of Luigi Tapparo, a 42-year-old Italian internee, a cook from Edinburgh, and one of his guards on the *Arandora Star*, 21-year-old John Connelly, from Oban in Argyleshire, a Trooper in the Lovat Scouts. They died on the same day and are buried side by side in Termoncarragh graveyard outside Belmullet.

Moeller and Moruzzi were symbolic of the two types of internees on the ship. Those like Moruzzi had come to Britain in the early 1900s from poor regions of Italy as economic migrants seeking to make a new life and integrated into British society. His political leanings show how he identified with British politics and presumably saw himself as being British and Italian. Many of the internees saw themselves as simply British and did not expect to be treated this way by their adopted country. Refugees like Moeller sought haven in democratic Britain after fleeing Nazi Germany. Neither man had any rights in wartime Britain.

Blown by a north-westerly gale it took almost a month for all bodies of the dead from *Arandora Star* to reach land. The bodies were washed up along a six hundred mile stretch of coast from the western isles of Scotland to North Mayo. Moeller, Moruzzi, Carter and

Dominican were amongst the first to be found in Ireland. The last body known to be from *Arandora Star* found in Ireland was of 21-year-old Private Edward Lane of the 7th Battalion, the Devon Regiment, recovered from the sea at Ballycastle, Mayo on 21 August. His watch had stopped at two minutes past eight, forty-seven minutes after *Arandora Star* rolled over and sank.

The five men above were the lucky ones. Forty-eight hours before Dominican's body had come ashore coastwatchers at Annagh Head retrieved the body of a white European male from the sea, most likely an internee from *Arandora Star*. Aged about 40 years he was wearing black trousers and a well-worn green woollen shirt. The only property found on the body was two shillings and three and a half pence. Not surprising as the internees had their possessions removed when they boarded *Arandora Star*. The body was never identified and is buried in Termoncarragh cemetery, outside Belmullet, in an unmarked grave. Forty-four unidentifiable bodies, including the man buried at Termoncarragh, were found on the Irish coast in the two months after the sinking of *Arandora Star*. Frederick Boland at External Affairs could only write that 'there would appear to be very little hope of ever establishing the identity of the deceased'.^x

British official opinion blamed the high loss of life in the sinking on fighting onboard and panic and cowardice amongst the internees as *Arandora Star* began to sink. A report to the Admiralty sent soon after the sinking explained that 'Aliens had appeared on the upper deck and greatly hampered the crew in the launching' of the lifeboats.^{xi} The *London Times* carried the headline 'Germans and Italians fight for lifeboats – Ship's officers on bridge to end', the propaganda value of portraying the brave British against the cowardly enemy was clear.^{xii} But an Admiralty report referred to the lack of panic on deck, instead castigating the internees for refusing to jump overboard, a point surviving internees also made.

Parliamentary questions soon brought to light the real story. The conditions the internees were kept in had contributed to the high death toll. Italians, mostly older men, on the lower decks were unable to make their way to the deck. The Germans and Austrians on the upper decks had a much higher survival rate; Moeller's body, for example, had been found with a lifebelt on. However the lifebelts of the time were to be worn only after the wearer was in the water. If one jumped into the sea wearing one the jolt of the water pushed the lifebelt upwards and broke the wearer's neck.

The distress caused by the loss of life on *Arandora Star* was amplified when it was discovered that there was no accurate list of passengers and embarkation papers had been swapped amongst internees.

A personal and confidential letter from Lieutenant J.F. Constable, the only surviving officer of the Ship's Guard, to the War Office made unpleasant reading for the authorities investigating the sinking of *Arandora Star*. He prefaced the letter 'do you wish me to give you a complete recital of the stark FACTS which will enable you to give absolute reasons why the percentage of military casualties was 39%, a statement which would make informative but unpleasant reading, or do you wish me to "soft pedal" the whole affair?'^{xiii} Constable was responsible for internal security onboard *Arandora Star*, he was in contact with Captain Moulton and 'saw things and obtained information that no other Officer, either casualty OR survivor had access to.'

The sinking of *Arandora Star* was to be the fourth worst British merchant shipping disaster of the Second World War. The episode was the subject of a private inquiry by Lord Snell. Lieutenant Constable, who knew that the military and internees had no instruction in emergency drill' was the only surviving officer who was not asked to submit a report on the sinking to Snell's inquiry.

Snell's report, completed in October 1940, was a white-wash which absolved the war cabinet from any responsibility and hid the muddle and ineptitude surrounding Britain's internment and deportation policies in 1939 and 1940. In the rush to intern those who 'might constitute a grave danger to security', many harmless individuals were picked up.^{xiv} *Arandora Star* was supposed to carry only known Fascists and Nazis, but selection was at best random. There were many cases of mistaken identity when the prisoners were originally interned. Many of those who died should not have been onboard. The British press and members of parliament alleged that 'interned aliens who are Nazi sympathisers have been persuading other aliens to impersonate them and be deported to Canada in their names.'^{xv} In fact the errors were due to faulty intelligence from the British security services, but MI5 took no responsibility. It was in fact due to the prisoner of war directorate of the War Office which came under the responsibility of Secretary of State for War Anthony Eden. Eden has been distinctly unhappy about Snell's inquiry, but had been compelled to change his mind by Churchill.

Snell 'saw no reason to query question the decision' that those who were deported should have been deported.^{xvi} No one would be blamed fully, no heads would roll and all would agree it was a sad result that arose because of 'the position which then obtained' in the war.^{xvii} However, as a result of his findings British internment policy was relaxed and deportation overseas was abandoned. On the orders of Cabinet Secretary, Snell's report was never published in full.

Later, Constable understood why he was not called to give evidence:- ‘After a Parliamentary enquiry and report, a full statement of FACTS might be misunderstood; therefore, as a good soldier, having kept it “under my hat” for nine months, I can, if necessary, continue to do so, giving you only a “useful” but innocuous story.’^{xviii} Other sources suggest deliberate loss of memory amongst the military. Intelligence Officer, Captain F.J. Robertson, told the War Office that he regretted ‘that at the present moment I can give you no very precise information regarding the fate of the Officers and men missing from the SS *Arandora Star*. I have even forgotten the name of the Officer who commanded the escort company.’^{xix} Ludwig Baruch wrote more openly: ‘the sights I witnessed were not fit for human eyes to see.’^{xx}

It was not until the end of August 1940 that last bodies from the *Arandora Star* washed onto Irish beaches. These ‘men that came in with the sea’ show the rising death toll in the battle of the Atlantic over the summer and autumn of 1940 as the ‘Happy Time’ continued.^{xxi} In August, 12 ships were torpedoed off the Irish coast and 41 lifeboats and 13 rafts put ashore on Irish territory with 132 survivors. On 12 August Malin Head LOP recorded that ‘there are at present four ships boats washed ashore and five floats ashore’; one of the boats being from the *Arandora Star*.^{xxii} Corporal Ted Sweeney at Blacksod LOP recalled how ‘eventually we started to have rafts washed ashore and there were some dead bodies, there were rafts and old lifeboats coming, and, not many came ashore here, but there were quite a lot of bodies’.^{xxiii} From the end of July to the end of December 1940, 213 bodies washed ashore along the Irish coast.

Other than the drama and the human tragedy why should this story be of importance to historians? The sinking and the grim aftermath make a very important point that has been ignored by so many Irish historians when dealing with the second world war. Proclaiming its neutrality in the Second World War, Ireland sought to stay out of the conflict between Axis and Allies, but it could not stay out of the war. Ireland could not remain remote from the conflict or the impact of the horror conflict. The Battle of the Atlantic was fought off Ireland’s shores from September 1939 to May 1945. The almost 350 graves of the dead from that battle, dotted along Ireland’s Atlantic seaboard, military and civilian alike, included thirty-four known casualties from *Arandora Star*. They are a continuing reminder of neutral Ireland’s inability to remove itself completely from the Second World War and also of the intensity of that conflict off Ireland’s shores almost a generation ago.

But there is a second and final point to make. Historians such as Fergus D’Arcy, Clair Wills and myself have written about the sinking of *Arandora Star* as an extraordinary event in

Emergency Ireland. But a conversation I had recently with Sergeant Terry Reilly, the son of Corporal Pat Reilly, who headed the Coastwatchers on Erris Head made me think about the sinking differently and in a longer term perspective. Sergeant Reilly mentioned that his father was the last survivor of the Iniskea tragedy, the October 1927 drowning of twelve young men from the island when their currachs were caught in a hurricane as a deep depression moved north east over the west coast of Ireland. Forty-five men were drowned along the west coast. The deaths from Iniskea broke the spirit of the population of the island and it was evacuated shortly afterwards. The arrival of the bodies from *Arandora Star* was only the latest chapter in the ongoing struggle between the communities of the West of Ireland and the Atlantic Ocean.

That struggle is as old as the communities themselves and is immortalised in Synge's play *Riders to the Sea*. I was reminded of the sinking of *Arandora Star* when reading Synge's character Maurya, whose sons Michael and Bartley have recently drowned, just like her other sons and husband. Men from each generation lost at sea: Maurya tells how 'I've had a husband, and a husband's father, and six sons in this house ... and some of them were found and some of them were not found.' Just like the dead from *Arandora Star*. Michael's body has been found in the sea off the Donegal coast, but Maurya doubts it is he, saying 'There does be a power of young men floating round in the sea, and what way would they know if it was Michael they had, or another man like him, for when a man is nine days in the sea, and the wind blowing, it's hard set his own mother would be to say what man was in it.' The men who found the broken and decomposing bodies of Fred Chick, Hans Moeller and Ernesto Moruzzi and others along the western coast of Ireland during August 1940 knew how these men had perished in the sea during the Battle of the Atlantic as had their own kith and kin in years gone by. Neutrality and censorship could not erode bonds of human tragedy and shared loss. Like Maurya's daughter Cathleen, they knew from personal experience it was 'a bitter thing to think of [them] floating that way to the far north, and no one to keen [them] but the black hags that do be flying on the sea.'

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ⁱ www.arandorastarcampaign.com (accessed 13 Sept. 2008).

ⁱⁱ See TNA HO 213/1834, Home Office Memorandum, 'Chief Constables were given discretion to intern German and Austrians about whom they had grounds for suspicion.' Another point made was that 'the policy was to intern Germans and Austrians unless there were reasons for regarding them as friendly.' Finally,

‘amongst those who claim to be refugees there may be some whose claim is doubtful and others who though in fact refugees are of such character that they cannot properly be left at large’.

ⁱⁱⁱ TNA WO 361/4, Constable to Thorne, 24 Mar. 1941.

^{iv} Quoted in Midge Gillies, *Waiting for Hitler* (London, 2006), p. 176.

^v TNA WO 361/4, Lee to War Office, 22 Apr. 1941.

^{vi} ‘The loss of the *Arandora Star*’, in Ian Hawkins (ed), *Destroyer: an anthology of first-hand accounts of the war at sea 1939-1945* (London, 2005, paperback edition), p. 137.

^{vii} TNA WO 361/4, Ravensworth to OIC, RA Records, 15 Nov. 1940.

^{viii} TNA WO 361/4, Dawson to OIC, Records, 17 Nov. 1940.

^{ix} TNA WO 361/4, Statement by Cpl. Purnell and Cpl. Coombes, 16 Aug. 1940.

^x NAI DFA 241/184, Boland to Antrobus, 2 Dec. 1940.

^{xi} PREM 3/49, FOi/c, Greenock to Admiralty, 4 July 1940.

^{xii} Gillies, Hitler, p. 181.

^{xiii} TNA WO 361/4, Constable to Thorne, 24 Mar. 1941.

^{xiv} TNA KV4/337, Summary of Lord Snell’s Report, p. 2. Cmd. 6238.

^{xv} *News Chronicle*, 1 Aug. 1940.

^{xvi} TNA KV4/337, Summary of Lord Snell’s Report, p. 4. Cmd. 6238.

^{xvii} TNA PREM 3/49, Arandora Star Inquiry (WP(40)432), 24 Oct. 1940.

^{xviii} TNA WO 361/4, Constable to Thorne, 24 Mar. 1941.

^{xix} TNA WO 361/4, Robertson to Under-Secretary of State, 27 Mar. 1941.

^{xx} Gillies, Hitler, p. 182.

^{xxi} NAI DH A116/33 vol. II, Kerrigan to Ruttledge, 23 Sept. 1940.

^{xxii} MA LOP 80, 12 Aug. 1940.

^{xxiii} MA Owen Quinn papers, interview with Ted Sweeney.