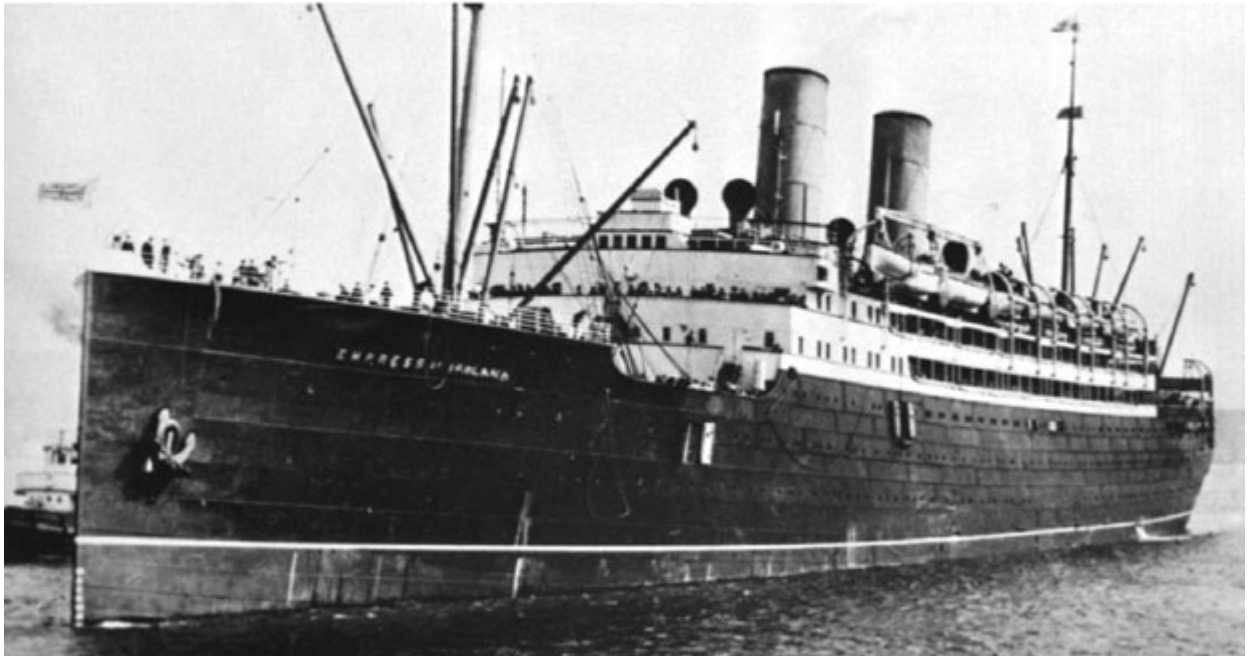


Shipwreck declared national historic site

BY RANDY BOSWELL, CANWEST NEWS SERVICE AUGUST 7, 2009



An undated archival photo of the Empress of Ireland, a 14,000-ton Canadian Pacific ocean liner ship that sank in the St. Lawrence River May 29, 1914 and took the lives of more than 1,000 passengers and crew. The sinking of the Titanic-era ocean liner represents Canada's worst maritime disaster. On Aug. 7, 2009, the site of the wreck was declared a National Historic Site.

Photograph by: Handout, CNS

Nearly a century after the Empress of Ireland sank in the St. Lawrence River and took the lives of more than 1,000 passengers and crew, the wreck of the elegant luxury liner that represents Canada's worst maritime disaster has finally been declared a national historic site.

The mammoth, Titanic-era cruise ship — once lamented as "the orphan of Canadian heritage" because its wreck site near Rimouski, Que., was plundered by divers for decades — is also famous for its role in transporting tens of thousands of immigrants to Canada during a pivotal period in the country's growth.

Today, about one million Canadians are descendants of immigrants who arrived in this country aboard the 174-metre Empress of Ireland, which crossed the Atlantic Ocean regularly for about a decade before colliding with a Norwegian coal freighter in dense fog on May 29, 1914, and sinking in 30 metres of water.

"This sea tragedy marked the memory of an entire generation, and we have to make sure that it is not forgotten," Environment Minister Jim Prentice, who oversees Parks Canada and the Historic Sites and Monuments Board, said in announcing the designation. "It is important to allow every Canadian to know about this page of history and to honour those who lost their lives."

The wreck was discovered in 1964, about four kilometres from the shore of Pointe-au-Pere, Que., where a regional museum commemorates the sinking.

Before restrictions were put in place in 1999, the wreck site was a mecca for scavenging divers who stripped the sunken vessel of hundreds of artifacts that still show up as historic treasures at auctions around the world.

The ship remains a popular but protected dive site, and HSMB executive secretary Julie Dompierre said the board intends to place underwater panels near the wreck — along with a shoreline plaque — to signify its status as a National Historic Site.

The ship is one of just a handful of wreck sites in Canada to be declared a national treasure. Others include the War of 1812 sloops Hamilton and Scourge in Lake Ontario, the remains of 16th-century Basque whaling ships at Red Bay, N.L., and the still-missing Terror and Erebus from the ill-fated 19th-century Arctic Ocean expedition led by Sir John Franklin.

"The RMS Empress of Ireland is still remembered as one of the most prestigious liners to have sailed the St. Lawrence. It is an eloquent example of the beginnings of ocean crossings by luxury liners," Intergovernmental Affairs Minister Josee Verner said in a statement. "The ship wreck is the most remarkable and complete of an early 20th-century liner."

Although overshadowed in history by the sinking of the "unsinkable" Titanic in 1912 and by the outbreak of the First World War in August 1914, the loss of the Empress of Ireland remains Canada's single greatest maritime disaster.

Interest in the vessel — which transported about 117,000 immigrants to Canada, but sent 1,012 people to their deaths when it sank — is expected to build ahead of the 100th anniversary of the tragedy in five years.

Controversies have arisen in recent years over the proposed sale of artifacts taken from the wreck, including the ship's bell and the 25 large, brass letters — EMPRESS OF IRELAND LIVERPOOL — that once adorned its hull.