



Portrait of Hilda Slayter .
(Author's collection)

Slayter, the daughter of a prominent Halifax doctor, had been in Europe shopping for her wedding trousseau. Before sailing back to Canada, she had stopped in Ireland to celebrate her 30th birthday on April 5 at Millgrove House, a vast mansion in Clonmel County, Tipperary, where her sister Margaret Haslam lived. Their mother was also visiting at the time, and it would have been easy for her brothers, William, Howard and Harley, and her sister, Clarina, to attend. Originally, Slayter had planned to return directly to Halifax aboard the *Tunisian*, but because of the coal strike, she was transferred to another ship that would take her, instead, to New York. The ship, of course, was *Titanic*.

Slayter's tantalizing diaries are privately owned, but have been transcribed and are being annotated by Garry Shutlak, senior archivist at the Nova Scotia Public Archives. Their contents were only recently revealed in detail for the first time during the Titanic Memorial Cruise a year ago.

A BRIDE TO BE

Slayter, the 10th in a family of 11 children, was born in Halifax and was related through marriage to shipping magnate Samuel Cunard. She was said to be the first girl to ride a bicycle on the streets of Halifax; one of her childhood friends was Anna Fyshe, granddaughter of Anna Leonowens, (of Anna and the King of Siam fame) who lived in Halifax. One of her older brothers, William, was a naval officer who had served aboard King Edward VII's yacht, and was later captain of the *Oceanic* when it sank in 1914. Her youngest brother, Charles, went to study

A TITANIC SURVIVOR'S DIARY

ALAN HUSTAK LOOKS AT HOW HILDA SLAYTER'S UNDISCOVERED DIARIES SHED NEW LIGHT ON THE SINKING OF THE *TITANIC* MORE THAN A CENTURY AFTER THE SINKING

Hilda Slayter had no idea that she would be sailing aboard *Titanic* until she boarded the tender that took her to the huge ship anchored off shore in Queenstown harbor. "I didn't know anything about her size, maiden voyage, etc.," she confided to her diary, "she loomed prodigious as we approached. It was colossal. It shone from the masthead down. Something to boast about."

architecture in Paris. In 1902, Hilda left Nova Scotia to join him in France, where she studied music. She claims to have met Engelbert Humperdinck (the opera composer, not the singer) and Johannes Brahms, who was a friend of her mother's music teacher, Philipp Wolfrum. For the next ten years, Slayter depended on her brothers to move through the social circles that she did. She had a pleasant voice, gave a number of public and intimate private recitals in some of the stately homes of England, including one aboard the German Kaiser's yacht. But she couldn't project on stage, and her voice was not suited for grand opera. Her career was going nowhere, and nearing the age of 30, she could no longer be choosy about finding a husband. She agreed to marry a Canadian-born, British blue blood, Henry Reginald Dunbar Lacon, the second son of a British baron. The title had been created in 1818. Lacon had been sent by his family to Denman Island, off Vancouver Island in the northwest corner of the Strait of Georgia, a place so remote it took ten days to get to from Halifax. Packed in her trunks as she went aboard *Titanic* was the satin opal and pearl dress she planned to wear at the wedding, as well as gifts from family and friends to start her new life at

Witley Park, their residence on Denman Island. Also in her trousseau were a blue satin silver net dress, silver and blue scarf, silver tissue and osprey and handmade Italian embroidered blouses.

SIGNS OF FOREBODING

Once aboard, Slayter had trouble locating the cabin on D-Deck to which she had been assigned. A steward was not especially helpful. "Lady you know as much about this ship as I do," he told her, "I only came aboard yesterday." She was taken to a cabin, but the paint in the room was still wet, so the steward asked her if she would mind sharing a starboard cabin on E-Deck with Florence "Fannie" Kelly, a widow from Southampton on her way to visit her son in New York. Kelly had witnessed *Titanic's* near collision with the *New York* as the ship left Southampton, and was obviously unsettled by the experience. She was so agitated, that when Slayter asked Kelly whether there was anything she could do to calm her nerves, Kelly replied, "No, no, nothing you can do. But I know this ship is going to the bottom. A voyage badly begun always ends in disaster."

Slayter was not superstitious, but she too became uneasy about the voyage because, as she writes in the diary, "Kelly was a Celt.

Second sight is their due."

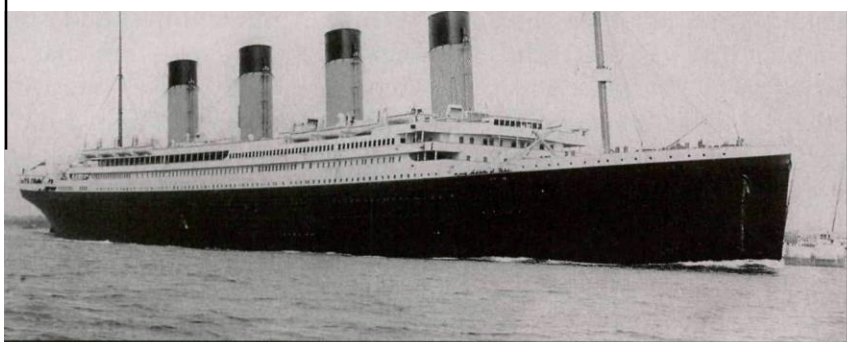
Once they set sail, Slayter complained because the ship's vibrations "buzzed up your neck and head." On Sunday morning, April 14, Slayter attended the hymn sing in the second class dining room where she heard an "elderly clergyman", Ernest Carter (who was 54) preach a sermon on The Promised Land. Carter, she writes, and his wife, Lillian Hughes, the daughter of author Thomas (Tom Brown's Schooldays) Hughes, had been given the holiday trip by his congregation "in appreciation of his & his wife's work".

DISASTER

That evening, Slayter had washed her hair and was in her berth drying it when she heard a dull thump. She thought perhaps *Titanic* had hit a "wooden vessel", but a steward dashed into her cabin and told the women the ship had run into an iceberg. "Can't you smell it. There was a tangy amonania (sic) aroma," Slayter wrote. Assured that the *Olympic* was on its way and that all aboard would be rescued, Slayter left her cabin to go up on deck and left her fur coat behind, because she thought "the damp sea air might harm it". When they went outside, they saw two men "working a 2 handled flat wrench on the floor" where water-tight doors could be dropped from the corridor to seal off F-Deck. "One said, we can't make this one work, we had better try another." Slayter and Kelly went up on deck where "crowds and everyone were very polite & men asked to see if we had our belts adjusted and tied correctly. A stewardess came & told us to go up to B-Deck. We tried to go up the main staircase, but it was packed, so coming out on deck again I said to the stewardess, 'It's too crowded there, we can't get up.' She broke down then

RMS Titanic departing Southampton on April 10, 1912.

(From Wikimedia Commons. Published before 1923 and public domain in the US)



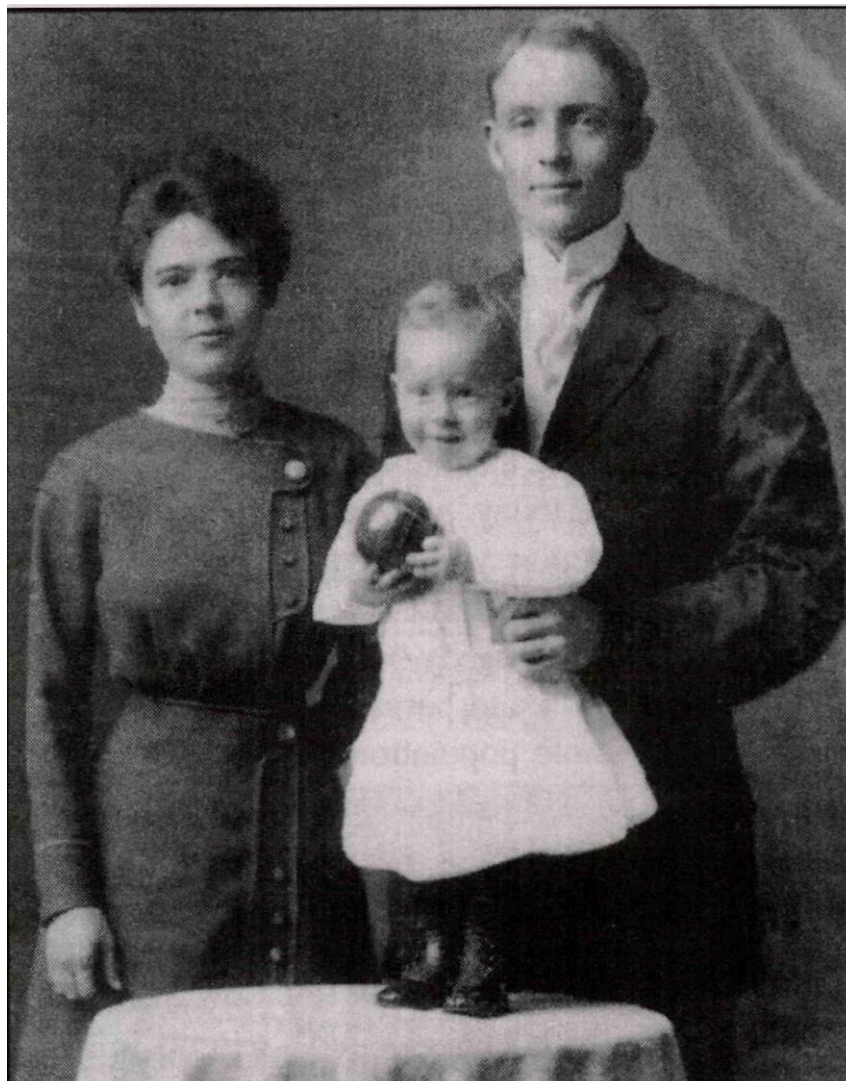
& rung her hands in her apron. 'They must. It's their only chance,' she said."

The two women found themselves near a sailor's ladder bolted to the wall. Someone was already climbing up the ladder. As Kelly hung on to Slayter's arm, Hilda suggested they follow him up the rungs. "Oh but dearie I can't, I haven't any drawers on!" Kelly said. Hilda shoved the stout woman up, and then, leaving Mrs. Kelly, she walked forward the length of D-deck.

"We were listing to starboard badly... I thought all the boats would have gone, and I wanted to be alone," she explained. "They had told us the *Olympic* would be here in eight hours, but would she stay afloat that long? Looking over the side I saw the heavy list and the strangely calm sea." Turning away, she saw Reverend Carter and his wife, "talking quietly". Not wanting to intrude on their privacy, she hurried aft down the deserted D-Deck to where a young petty officer was standing. Just then, she writes, "there was a rattle of a boat being lowered, and the officer cried, 'There goes MY boat, I have got orders to keep the mob back.' He had a revolver, but there was no panic and the lights still burning. The riggings were black with men looking like monkeys silhouetted (sic) against the side climbing up and up."

INTO THE LIFEBOATS

Hilda found herself surrounded by a throng of men, who made way for her to make her way to lifeboat Number 13 and passed her quickly forward, from hand to hand. She was, she says, then thrown into the boat which was already on its way down with 63 other people aboard. She found herself in the stern, "standing, & the boat dipped & heaved - never level. A man next to me (almost



Picture of Albert Francis Caldwell (with parents Sylvia and Alden), the baby who was likely thrown into the boat with Hilda Slayter. (Author's collection)

certainly Percy Oxenham) said, 'You're lucky to be_on.' They called three times, 'Are there any more women?' As there were none, he let me get in". Lifeboat 13 had never been used before and as its falls began sticking, water from the ship's condenser exhaust streamed from *Titanic's* side into the path of its descent. The boat stalled, but another lifeboat, Number 15, was descending on top of them. "We were under another life boat, stuck and creaking," Slayter writes. "We yelled to stop lowering the boat above us. I actually had my raised finger tips touching the bottom & was in a panic. Just then a man crawling along the outside of our boat with

a knife in his mouth - he slashed the ropes that held us, & then we were driven by the flow from the pumps to one side & the other boat with a creak, came down beside us, both afloat. Thanks to our rescuer, some 100 lives (were saved) from drowning." They rowed away from the sinking ship, with its light still ablaze. She then "felt something shuddering against me, a small dark man. I thought he was a foreigner who had lost his nerve. He had on a sketchy stoker's hat, so I took off my fur lined coat & tucked it around him and patted him as one might reassure a child. After a little he got up saying, 'Who does this coat belong to?', 'It's mine, but

you keep it.' He was standing on the deck & beating his chest. 'Oh No - I am all right now, I don't want it.'" Hilda then asked if anyone else aboard wanted her coat. "A muffled call near said, 'Christ I am perished,' so I passed the coat on to one of the Irish girls I had seen by the ladder on C-Deck." A baby (almost certainly 10-month-old Albert Francis Caldwell) was passed down to her from the bow, and it slept as she held it. But Slayter, it appears, was in no mood to cuddle a baby. "A man nearby was shivering with cold" and Slayter suggested if he held the child "the warmth might help him".

Slayter watched as *Titanic's* stern "seemed to heave up" and watched, spellbound, as her stern collapsed "little by little & she slid down into the depths!" As the ship sank, Slayter said she was

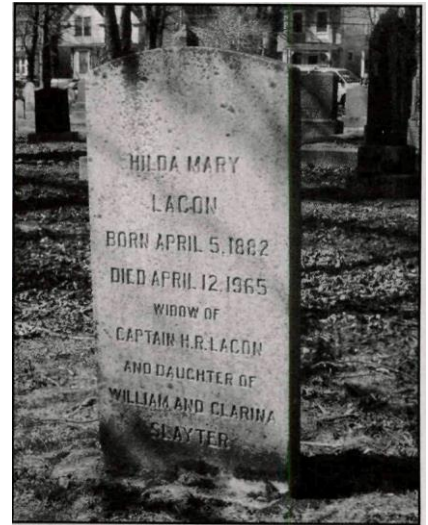
reminded of a painting, *The Soldiers Dream Before the War*, by Edouard Detaille, "the whole atmosphere seemed to be a war-ringing struggle of spirits." Those in Lifeboat 13 "expected a wave to catch us, but there was hardly a lift." Then she writes, "The night was rent with screaming."

"Are they calling for the boats to get together?" she asked.

"Calling miss?" someone on board replied, "That ain't calling. That's drowning."

Hilda survived the sinking and married Henry Lacon on Denman Island on 1 June 1912 where they lived for over fifty years. Their first house on the island, with many antiques and artworks, burned and was rebuilt. Their son, Reginald William Becroft Lacon, distinguished himself in the Royal Navy during World

War II. He later lived in Norris Castle, East Cowes, Isle Of Wight, Hampshire and it was here that Hilda died on 12 April 1965. She is buried in the Slayter family plot in Camp Hill Cemetery, Halifax. ,;e,.,



Hilda's final resting place in the Lacon family grave in Halifax, Nova Scotia. (Author's collection)

TITANIC: APRIL 1912

By Hilda Slayter

Launched - and just completed, "Titanic"

Pride of man's achievement?

Fall? Had no conceivment.

Starts maiden voyage across Atlantic.

Crash! From ice barrier and iceberg

Massive gleaming in the sun.

First class journey begun.

Nightfall pales, its bulk with sea mists merge.

Fates decree: Challenge Leviathans!

Fast spray splashing from the bow.

Slow - scarce a ripple now.

What the issue? Nature or humans?

Ponderous - inexorable - loomed:

Cut through "Titanic's" side,

left sinking in her pride.

Too late, lookout's warning. She is doomed.

ALAN HUSTAK is a Canadian journalist and broadcaster whose byline has appeared in every major Canadian newspaper for the past 30 years. He is the author of more than a dozen books, including *Titanic: The Canadian Story*, *The Ghost of Griffintown: The True Story of the Murder of Mary Gallagher They Were Hanged* (a book on capital punishment), and histories of several Montreal institutions. Born in Saskatchewan, educated in Washington, DC, he began his career with the CTV and CBC networks. He is the recipient of a 1986 National Magazine Award, The Queen's Diamond Jubilee medal, and has twice been nominated for the Quebec Writers Federation's Mavis Gallant Award for non-fiction. Alan's article on the sinking of the *Athenia* appeared in the Feb/Mar 2013 issue of *History Magazine*.

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