

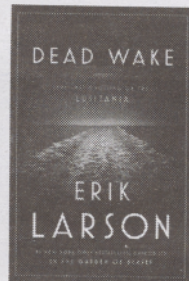
Beneath the waves

Author Erik Larson presents a spectacular narrative of the *Lusitania*, sunk 100 years ago

BY JOE MARTIN
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

In the early stages of the first world war, the efficacy of submarines as powerful tools of war was lost on many, but not all. Shortly before the war's outbreak, Arthur Conan Doyle — the creator of

Sherlock Holmes — penned a fictional tale titled "Danger!" in which he imagined a small country bringing the British Empire to its knees. The tiny nation had submarines which disabled and sank ships bringing munitions and food to England. Doyle's story was unsettling but not taken very seriously. Soon, armed submarines dealing destruction and death would become a



Dead Wake: The Last Crossing of the Lusitania
by Erik Larson

frightful reality.

In "Dead Wake," Erik Larson limns a spectacular narrative of the *Lusitania*, the colossal ship sunk on May 7, 1915, by German submarine U-20 off the Irish coast. More than half of the nearly 2,000 passengers on board did not survive. With an eye to this month's centennial anniversary, Larson was drawn to research the disaster. In an interview, he comments that he was moved to provide a new account: "I felt I could do it in a way that no one else had." The *Lusitania* "was so big, and so fast, it just seemed invulnerable. Plus, the prevailing belief at the time was that no German submarine commander would ever sink a passenger liner. It was unthinkable."

Such was the opinion of then-First Lord of the Admiralty, Winston Churchill. The very notion that a submarine would engage in a surprise attack on an unarmed ship was "abhorrent to the immemorial law and practice of the sea," Churchill wrote. He admitted that attacks on naval targets were



The RMS *Lusitania* arrives in New York on its maiden voyage in 1907.

another matter, but it was a marginal concern. Larson states that "neither (Churchill) nor his German counterparts expected the submarine to play much of a role in deep-ocean battle."

British Admiral Jacky Fisher had no such delusions. He predicted before the war that Germany would indeed sink unarmed merchant ships. The crews of ships so destroyed would be left to fend for themselves. An offending submarine would have no means to render assistance to victims. This new martial strategy was sure to become pervasive.

"The essence of war is violence," Fisher argued, "and moderation in war is imbecility." But he was ignored.

During America's Civil War, a very primitive submarine succeeded in sinking a ship, but at a cost. Confederate submarine H.L. Hunley destroyed the Union frigate USS *Houssatonic*. In the encounter, the *Hunley* sank along with all eight crew members. Years later, the persistent work of John Philip Holland, an Irishman and immigrant to the U.S., led to the prototype of the truly modern submarine. His initial

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efforts were supported by Irish revolutionaries, who saw that a proficient underwater machine could disrupt British power and aid the cause of Irish independence. It was not until the Great War that the deadly consequences of submarine warfare became widely and painfully evident.

The day the *Lusitania* set sail from New York bound for Liverpool, the U.S. was neutral regarding hostilities overwhelming Europe. That morning, the German Embassy in Washington had placed an advertisement in New York papers warning that all passengers aboard any British or

Allied vessel traveled "at their own risk." The majority of those booked for the cruise were undeterred. Of the 1,959 people on board, 189 were American citizens.

Larson's story is replete with fascinating vignettes of various crew members and passengers. Capt. William Turner was a tough, taciturn sailor who eschewed socializing with upper-crust passengers. He left that task to Staff Capt. James Anderson, who, according to Turner, was more "clubbable." Boston bookman Charles Lauriat carried a rare copy of Charles Dickens' "A Christmas Carol" and 118 drawings by author William Makepeace Thackeray, precious items that would be lost in the Irish Sea. Architect Theodate Pope, an early feminist and spiritualist, was on the ship. Many others bring the pages of this gripping story to life.

The German U-boats demonstrated ferocity, yet they "were fragile vessels, complex and primitive at the same time." Larson does a superb job detailing the procedures and maneuvers required to maintain and protect a submarine and its crew. The world inside U-boats was cramped, claustrophobic and "prone to accident. They were packed with complicated mechanical systems for steering, diving, ascending, and regulating pressure. Amid all this were wedged torpedoes, grenades, and artillery shells. ... In this environment, simple errors could, and did, lead to catastrophe."

Unbeknownst to Germany, Churchill and his circle commandeered a top-secret operation allowing them to decode enemy communications. This has led to speculation that information pertaining to the location of U-20 proximate to the *Lusitania* was deliberately withheld from Capt. Turner. The late respected naval historian Patrick Beesly would state reluctantly that the inner reaches of the British Admiralty allowed the disaster to happen "in order to involve the United States in the war."

There were only 764 survivors. Personally horrified by what had happened, President Woodrow Wilson was nonetheless careful in his public response. He could get Congress to declare war immediately, but he believed the nation was not ready. To his secretary he said, "Were I to advise radical action now, we should have nothing, I am afraid, but regrets and heartbreaks." It would be almost two more years before America would enter Europe's bloody fray.

Larson's book is a dramatic tale told by a writer at the top of his form.

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