

## BACK TO BELFAST, 2016

Ian Walker

When I left Belfast after my visit in 2007, I wasn't sure if I would ever be back. And when the recession hit with full force a year later, I did wonder how it would affect the Titanic Quarter plans; an article in *The Guardian* on January 26, 2009 asked the same question, though the Quarter's chief executive was making positive noises about the financing all being in place to move ahead. The first aim, he said, was to get the central feature, the 'signature project' museum and visitor centre, in place for the centenary of the sinking on April 15, 2012.

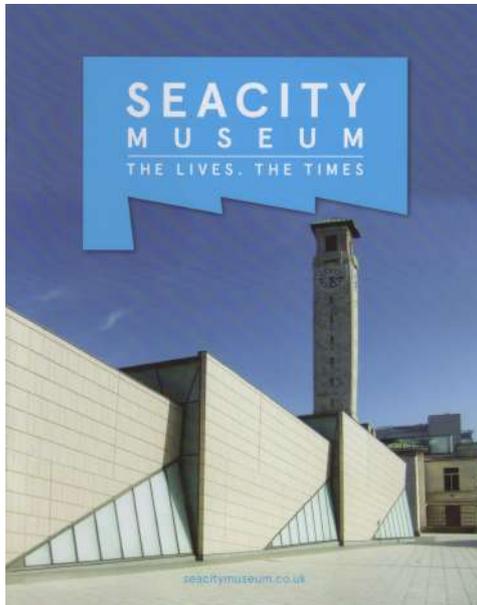
And indeed, 'Titanic Belfast' duly opened a fortnight early on March 31. I was actually in Southampton, Belfast's rival as the 'home' of the *Titanic*, on the centenary itself. I had gone there to see an exhibition at the City Art Gallery of work by the English surrealist Roland Penrose, but when I spotted a group of people in Edwardian clothes wandering round a small exhibition of *Titanic* related paintings by local amateur artists, I realized what day it was.



Southampton had just opened its own *Titanic*-centred museum named Seacity, but I preferred to walk up to the two original *Titanic* memorials at the top of Watts Park: the very grand Engineers' Memorial and, on the other side of the road, the small, awkward but strangely moving Musicians' Memorial. Both had flowers laid across them. As the rain cascaded down (it was a suitably soggy day), I walked between them and the Cenotaph designed by Sir Edwin Lutyens in 1919 to commemorate another, much larger sacrifice.

In fact, I realized on a later visit that I had been unfair on Seacity. This is housed in a wing of the Civic Centre, part new build and part conversion. (It is a building I have photographed before for the 1989 project *Civitas*, included elsewhere on this website, and it is intriguing to see how it has been transformed in the interim.) The emphasis here is naturally very different to that in Belfast, for, if the latter was where the *Titanic* had been built and could, to an extent, be celebrated, then Southampton was

home to most of the crew who worked on her, from firemen to parlourmaids. The enormity of the loss is brought home in one gallery, where the floor is laid out with a map of the city, with the homes of those who died marked by red dots. There are hundreds of them. The final *coup de théâtre* in the display is in the room devoted to the disaster inquiry, which is the old Law Court, its bench and dock left in place.



Seacity and Titanic Belfast are but the two most visible and dramatic sites for the memorialisation of the *Titanic*. There are many others across the country, indeed across the globe, most of them small and easily overlooked, the graves of survivors or plaques for victims. To take just one example, in the small Scottish town of Dalbeattie, on the wall of the town hall, there is a plaque to Lieutenant William McMaster Murdoch, first officer on the ship. It is made of the same grey granite as the rest of the building and I walked past it a couple of time before I saw it. (Murdoch has been a controversial figure, especially after the 1997 James Cameron film depicted him as first shooting a passenger and then himself. Murdoch's family protested and Cameron gave a donation to a charitable prize in Dalbeattie established in Murdoch's name.)

But, despite these encounters, I knew after 2012 that I would need to come back to Belfast to visit the new building and see the changed landscape developing around it. And now, in April 2016, here I am. I have business at the University but have also kept a day free to go out to Queen's Island. When I open the hotel curtains, though, it is snowing! What is going on here? I am booked on the 11.30 tour at Titanic Belfast and, thankfully, by the time I need to leave, the snow has turned to rather fitful squawks of rain. I walk across the bridge, round the mass of the Odyssey building (now apparently called the SSE Arena) and there is my first view of Titanic Belfast, rising abruptly from the flat land and water around it.

It's a circuitous route round the dock to get there, past new blocks of apartments on one side and squads of pleasure craft tied up on the other. Another new building here is the Belfast Met college, which at its entrance has a large mural-sized blow up of that extraordinary photo of the workers streaming out of the shipyard, a photo taken from very near this spot. It's a rather thrilling juxtaposition. (This photo has become

something of an icon in the reinvention of the Titanic Quarter. Later, I found it emblazoned on a tea towel, a curiously domestic context for this image of heavy industry.)

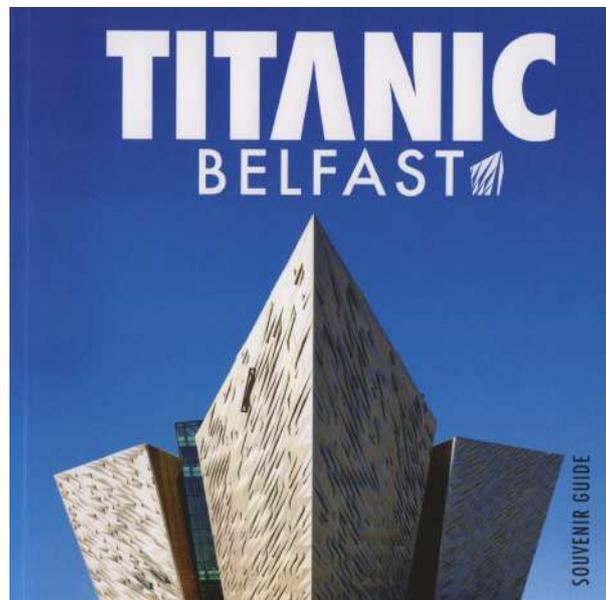


So much round here refers to the heritage of the site. A large model of the *Titanic* hangs stern up on the dockside. Further along, a small ship, the SS *Nomadic*, sits in a dry dock. The last surviving White Star ship, she ferried passengers out to the *Titanic* when the latter was moored off Cherbourg. There's a cut out metal relief of Charlie Chaplin next to it. (He apparently travelled on her once, many years later. Public art sometimes needs only the most tenuous linkage.)

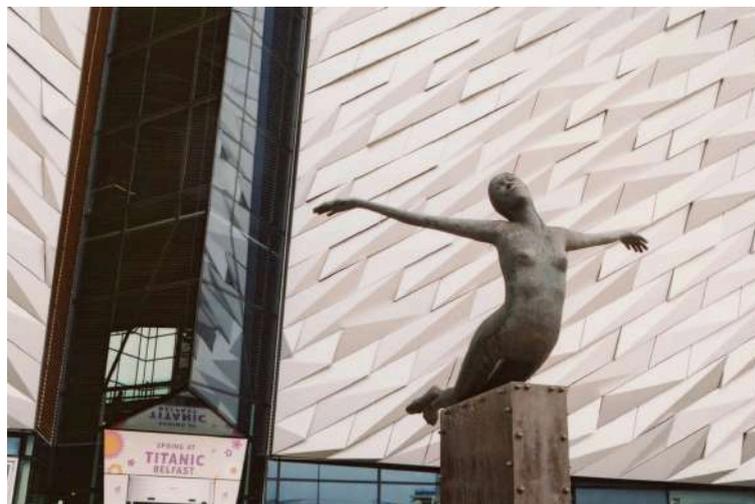


These are side dishes though. As I walk towards it, the Titanic Belfast building starts to rear up and assert itself even more strongly as the central feature of this landscape. It is certainly a dramatic building, with its splintered forms reminiscent of crystals, water or, most inevitably, ice. It is, I have read, the same height as the *Titanic* itself and the large sheet of rusted steel with TITANIC cut out of it, which stands next to the entrance, is the same size as one of the ship's plates. Both this gigantism and

this symbolism is, as we will see, a feature of the place. (That the building should simply be called ‘Titanic Belfast’ as if it were the sole *Titanic*-related site to visit here also summons up the – somewhat familiar – whiff of hubris that always surrounds this subject. I’m going to call it TB from on.)



In front of the building is a sculpture of a young nude woman (‘Titanica’ by Rowan Gillespie) whose swooning lunge forward recalls both Kate Winslet up on the prow of the ship in James Cameron’s film and a more dramatic reworking of the gowned male figure, arms also widespread, on the Titanic Memorial in Washington DC. She is in striking contrast to the largely abstract symbolism of the building itself.



Inside, the atrium is high and dark with stairs and balconies and escalators thrusting this way and that. Down here, at ground level, there is of course the necessary shop and cafés (two of them) as well as the ticket office. I collect my ticket for the ‘Discovery Tour’, am given a pair of (intermittently functioning) headphones and our little group of ten people are led by our guide back out into the chill wind. But at least it’s stopped raining.



The old office block between the TB and the main road is alas closed to visitors. It is (inevitably) being converted into a luxury hotel. This has been one of the elements in the replanning that has been most criticized on the grounds that the building and particularly the marvelous spaces of the Drawing Rooms are the most authentic and evocative remnants of the Harland & Woolf complex. I am glad that I saw them when they were dusty, echoing and haunted. As I write in the summer of 2017, the hotel is due to open in a few months time and the Drawing Rooms are being ‘sympathetically transformed into a function room and bar’. I guess I’ll have to come back again, maybe even to stay - if I can afford it.

Our little ‘Discovery Tour’ group heads off into the area beyond the buildings which remains open and windswept. The two slipways of the *Titanic* and the *Olympic* are still there and thankfully the rough ground around them has been left with the rails sliding through the concrete in a complex pattern. The slipways have been surrounded at their highest end by sheets of glass, which (1) protects them, (2) gives somewhere to inscribe the names of people on the ship that night, and (3) prevents any young children who runs up the slipway from falling off.

The slipways themselves remain moving in their raw simplicity. But around them, this space has been inhabited by a plethora of signifiers. The outlines of the *Titanic* and the *Olympic* have been laid out, with seats placed where they would have been on deck. Tall poles indicate the height of the gantries that surrounded the ships as they were being built. Over to the right is a memorial garden where the numbers of victims and survivors are indicated by alternating rectangles of grass and decking. Around the TB building, there is a map of the globe with the route of the *Titanic* picked out in lights. The arrangement of benches spells out the Morse Code signal that night.

This is all very meaningful but it’s also too much – too much symbolism – and I can’t help but be nostalgic for the desolate wasteland which occupied this space when I came here before. I realize, though, that this would not be a popular position and I accept that the project has on the whole been carried out with decency, sensitivity and a necessary touch of drama. But they do have a problem: how to create a ‘Visitor Attraction’ that is user-friendly, indeed kiddy-friendly, while not betraying the awful loss of life, the sheer tragedy of the sinking of the *Titanic*.

It's raining again, so I head to the café for a sandwich. On the loudspeaker system, Van Morrison is singing 'When I'm Cleaning Windows'; outside the shop is a display of children's models of *Titanic*, most of them wonderfully inaccurate. There are lots of souvenirs, including ducks in a *Titanic* uniform to float (and sink?) in your bath.



When I'm finished, I head to the escalator, past the attendant trying to sell me a souvenir photograph and up to the main exhibition. It's good of its sort, lots of video clips, interactive stuff mashed up with some solid info which puts *Titanic* in the context of the shipyard and the city beyond it. There is one section which is rather splendid in an ersatz kind of way when we board a fairground style carriage and twist and judder our way through the 'Shipyard Ride'. However far removed it may be from actuality, this does at least give some sense of how noisy and hot and dangerous it was to actually build the ship.



Then there is a room devoted to the launch, with a model comparing the size of the ship and the TB building. We can also look out at the open space around the slipways;

this is of course where all those markings on the ground are meant to be read from. Then the sinking, handled quietly, the rescue and a room where we sit to watch video of Robert Ballard's voyage to the wreck itself. Titanic Belfast has made the decision not to exhibit any of the actual salvaged artifacts, a decision that may be admirably principled (though it might also be that they couldn't get hold of any of them), but does add to the feeling of distance between this place and the events of that night, a distance that can hardly be closed however hard they try.



I wander back outside and round the building again, Looking at various signboards, it becomes apparent that it is still the intention of the Titanic Quarter to surround the new building with apartment blocks, which will close off the space around it and shut out the views of the river, the city and the mountains beyond. To be frank, it sounds dreadful, for it is this openness – nakedness even – which is the most memorable feature of this place. The TB erupting as it does now out of next to nothing is indeed powerful. Hedged closely in by a host of anonymous buildings will diminish that power and surely make it feel just like any other dockland regeneration scheme.



The sun is out now so I decide to walk down to the Science Park, a straight and still rather bleak walk; the open spaces between here and the giant Harland & Woolf cranes remain to be developed. The film studio is now entitled 'Titanic Studios' and apparently it is where they film *Game of Thrones*, another big tourist attraction for Northern Ireland (though there is no admission to these studios). The rusty anchor that used to sit by the river is now securely ensconced behind the fence in the corner of the studio car park. On the other side of the road is the 'Titanic Exhibition Centre', a large tent hosting temporary exhibitions; there's an Ulster Craft Show on there now.

As I walk, a little group of Segway riders passes me; billed as 'the ultimate adventure experience', I'd seen them earlier up by the slipways, a curious but no doubt convenient and jolly way to experience this place. I prefer my own walking pace, though, and after a few minutes, I start to see structures familiar from my previous visit: *HMS Caroline* sitting in the Queen Alexandria Dock, the Innovation Centre, White Star House and the ECIT. The Pump House and the Thompson Dock are now fenced off and there is another entrance fee to be paid to get in. A sign proclaims this the 'only authentic *Titanic* landmark' and it is a thrill now to be able to go down into the bowels of the dock, partly because it is indeed authentic and partly because it is such a visceral, overwhelmingly physical experience.



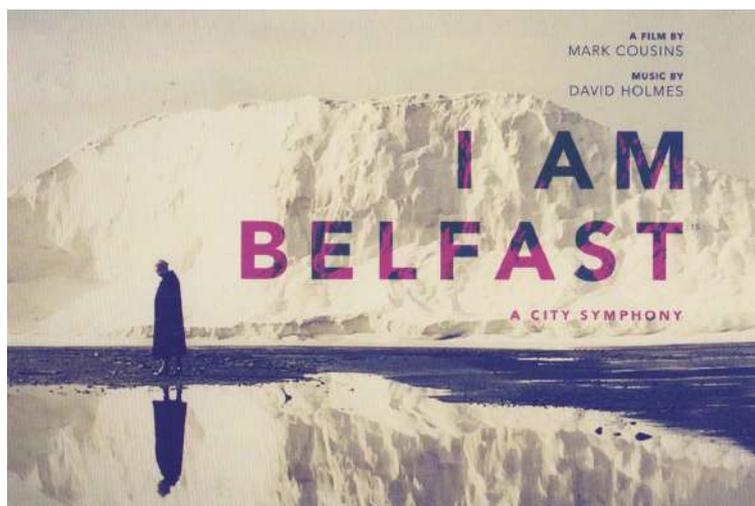
At the far, sea end, new metal steps descend into the Thompson Dock, down past the solid riveted steel walls cracked and turned rust orange by a century's worth of water. One can feel the weight of the sea being held back behind the huge caisson gate. (When James Cameron visited in 2012, he apparently said that touching this was the highpoint of his trip; he was right.) There is a gushing sound from the subterranean pipes and a worrying stream of water escaping from a valve at the bottom of one wall. Walking down in the bottom of the dock, one can fully appreciate the overwhelming scale of the structure, enhanced I am afraid by approaching dark clouds. As the rain starts to come down again and the wind gusts, I climb back out and head for shelter.

That was indeed stupendous but now I am shivering and it's time to leave. I head to the bus stop and luckily the bus comes two minutes later. It's empty when I get on but soon fills up with ladies from the craft show and students from Belfast Met. We head back into the city and I get off by City Hall. For the centenary in 2012, a new *Titanic* memorial garden was constructed here, between the old monument and the statue of Lord Pirrie. It is a low, undemonstrative and sober series of metal plates, giving the names in alphabetical order of all those who perished on 15 April 1912. I look for Captain Smith, but in truth, any individual is subsumed in the mass of names, each mourned individually elsewhere here mourned collectively.



Walking back to the hotel, I see several posters and displays directing the visitor out to the TB. It's a big part of the city's tourist trade and indeed my own visit earlier was shared with people from a wide range of places. It's hard though to know how much this new attention to the *Titanic* is part of the city's actual identity or only one (large) element in its rebranding and regeneration.

Soon after my visit to Northern Ireland, I went to see Mark Cousins' film *I am Belfast*, a 'city symphony' about the home town he left some years before. I was unsure about the central conceit of having Belfast personified as an elderly woman given to long, meaningful gazes, but the film is undoubtedly poetic and full of an unexpected beauty. But what interested me in this context was how it utilised the *Titanic* as a recurring motif.

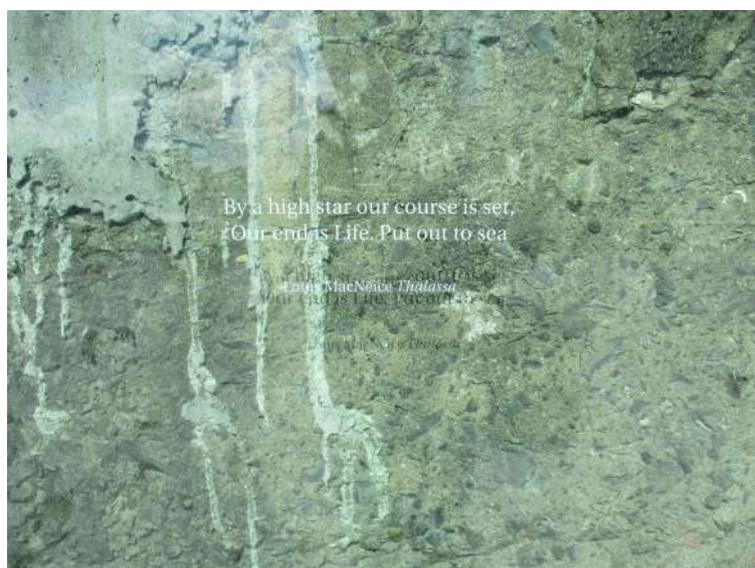


The film opens with the great white bank of what looks like ice; ‘this place could sink a ship’, says Cousins in voiceover. It actually turns out to be a pile of salt for treating the roads. Towards the end of the film, a sequence centres on a wall mural depicting the Giant’s Causeway on the left, the Harland & Woolf cranes on the right and the *Titanic* sailing down the lough between them. Cousins remarks on the ubiquity of the ship in present-day Belfast and comments, ‘Things that are held down come back’. The *Titanic* is thus a metaphor for the return of the repressed, and the film playfully cuts to the B-movie ‘Creature from the Black Lagoon’, coming up from the depths to claim its victims. What the *Titanic* now means in Belfast remains unresolved and to be argued over, but it is indeed back and won’t be going away any time soon.

I want, though, to end on a quieter note. In my previous text, I quoted from a poem by Louis MacNeice, another artist Belfast-born and London-domiciled. It was nice to also find him at Titanic Belfast. On one of the glass panels surrounding the *Titanic* slipway, there is a quotation from MacNeice’s poem *Thalassa*:

‘By a high star our course is set,  
Our end is Life. Put out to sea’

Amidst all the razzmatazz it is a quietly affecting gesture, especially with the etched white text set against the rough-cast stained concrete of the slipway behind.



But I also have in mind another MacNeice poem which more directly references his experience of watching the *Titanic* slipping away out of Belfast Lough in 1912, an experience that haunted his imagination. ‘Death of an Old Lady’ was written in 1958 as a response to the death of his stepmother Georgina MacNeice, ‘who sails toward her own iceberg calm and slow’. But he brings that inevitable event together with his memory of standing at the age of five near his home in Carrickfergus:

At five in the morning there were grey voices  
 Calling three times through the dank fields;  
 The ground fell away beyond the voices  
 Forty long years to the wrinkled lough  
 That had given a child one shining glimpse  
 Of a boat so big it was named Titanic.



#### REFERENCES:

All images are by Ian Walker, 2016, except for the cover of the Seacity souvenir brochure on p. 2, the cover of the Titanic Belfast brochure on p. 4 and the publicity postcard for *I am Belfast* on p. 10.

As well as all the references in my earlier essay ‘Fragments against Ruin’, the following have been used for this text:

The article cited in the first paragraph was by Henry MacDonald, ‘It’s got fancy flats, a hotel. Even a bank. But can the Titanic Quarter stay afloat?’, *The Guardian*, 26 January 2009, pp. 26-7.

Much information was gleaned from the substantial souvenir brochure, *Titanic Belfast*, edited by Dr Claude Costecalde and John Paul Doherty, Belfast: Booklink, 2012.

For a thorough critique and contextualization of the whole project, see the essays in *Relaunching Titanic: Memory and Marketing in the New Belfast*, edited by

William J. V. Neill, Michael Murray and Berna Grist, London and New York: Routledge, 2014. My thanks to John Duncan for alerting me to this book.

The reference to the Harland & Woolf Drawing Rooms being 'sympathetically transformed' is from the article 'Stunning Images reveal Belfast's £28 million Titanic hotel' by James Draper, posted July 5, 2017, in the *Mail Online*: '[http://www.dailymail.co.uk/travel/travel\\_news/article-4667306/Stunning-images-reveal-Belfast-s-28MILLION-Titanic-Hotel.html](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/travel/travel_news/article-4667306/Stunning-images-reveal-Belfast-s-28MILLION-Titanic-Hotel.html)'.

The film *I am Belfast*, written and directed by Mark Cousins, 2015, is available on a DVD produced by the British Film Institute.

A paperback edition of Louis MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, was published by Faber & Faber in 2016. 'Death of an Old Lady' is on p. 517 and 'Thalassa' on p. 783 . (The title of the latter is Greek for 'the sea', famously shouted by Xenophon and his troops when, at the end of a long march, they saw the Black Sea.)