

The Wreck of the Deutschland

by Ron Hansen

ENGLISH JESUIT Gerard Manley Hopkins wakes on the feast of the Immaculate Conception of Mary in 1875 in his cold room at St. Beuno's, a Jesuit school of theology in Wales. Hopkins had studied classics at Balliol College at Oxford, where he became friends with Robert Bridges, a future poet laureate of England. Hopkins had converted from Anglicanism to Catholicism in 1866 and joined the Society of Jesus in 1868.

Hopkins was a poet in his youth and during his university years, but he had put poetry aside, actually burning some of what he had penned, when he became a Jesuit.

What prompts the past and future poet to take up the pen again is news he reads later that day of a shipwreck. The *Deutschland* had run aground in an estuary of the Thames River and had been battered by fierce December weather. Among the 57 who died were five Sisters of Saint Francis who were leaving anti-Catholic foment in Germany and going to the United States to establish their order near St. Louis. Their agony, their bravery, and their faith in the face of death inspires this Jesuit poet's most famous poem.

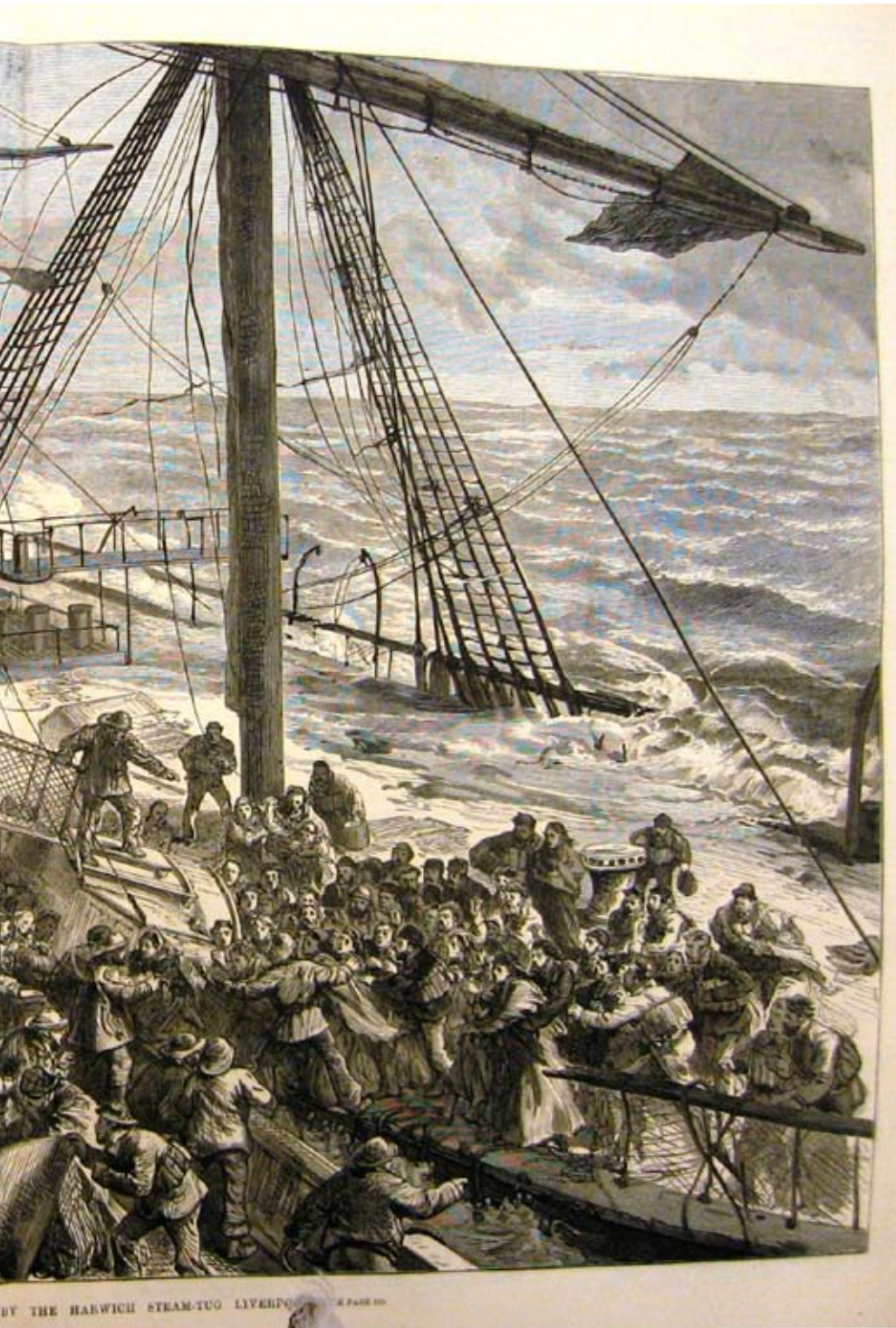
Company offers excerpts from *Exiles*, Ron Hansen's recent novel about a Jesuit, a shipwreck, and a poem:



RESCUE OF THE SURVIVORS OF THE DEUTSCHLAND

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 8, 1875. A soft confetti of snowflakes was fluttering down upon Wales. The higher windowpanes were gardens of frost. His right hand still twined a rosary, its anesthetic routine of prayers his nightly defense against sleeplessness. Lying in bed in his

nightshirt and black woolen stockings, Hopkins recited his Morning Offering, then stood to use the chamberpot. The scuttle contained only a scarcity of coals and he would want those for his studies, so he gashed the fireplace embers with an iron poker and held his hands over their golden, waning heat. He lit and



*Maritime disaster
inspired Jesuit
Gerard Manley
Hopkins's poetic
masterpiece*



The *London Illustrated Times* carried graphic images of the wreck of the *Deutschland*, which foundered off England's coast in 1875. The tragedy prompted Jesuit Gerard Manley Hopkins to take up the poet's pen again.

was still cool from its afternoon journey from Rhyl as Hopkins carried it to a sofa underneath a sconced gas retort. The front page, as always, was filled with three- and four-line advertisements for Newcastle, Silkstone, or Wall's-End coal, Bailey's elastic stockings, ladies' abdominal belts, Pulvermacher's Patent Galvanic Chain Bands, Antakos corn plasters, Iceland Liniment for chilblains, and "Want Places" appeals from wet nurses, scullery maids, and cooks, each willing to supply testimonials about their skills and finer qualities. Other pages reported the meteorological data for the month of November, and news from Berlin about Britain's shrewd purchase of shares in the Suez Canal. Writing from Rome was an "occasional correspondent" who noted Italy's sarcastic response to the contempt for Catholicism of Britain's former Prime Minister, William Gladstone, who'd written that the Jesuits

chimneyed one gas retort on the wall.

Hopkins went to a scholastics' recreation room that was as large and high-ceilinged as some village churches, but furnished like a run-down gentlemen's club, with a variety of Irish Georgian wingback chairs surrounding a great fireplace, two walnut secretaries for writ-

ing, each with something wrong with it, hand-me-down upholstered sofas and library chairs, a green felt billiards table, and card tables for whist or the game that Americans called checkers, the English called draughts, and Albert Wagner called *le jeu plaisant de dames*.

Wednesday morning's *London Times*



Hopkins arrived at St. Beuno's, the Jesuit school of theology in Wales, in 1874, six years after he joined the Society of Jesus.

Today, St. Beuno's Ignatian Spirituality Centre offers retreats and spiritual direction. www.beunos.com

in particular were “the deadliest foes that mental and moral liberty have ever known.” Old news for Hopkins, and he lost interest in the article after the first paragraph. But on page 5, next to a dull column on President Ulysses S. Grant's address to the Congress of the United States, was a headline, LOSS OF THE DEUTSCHLAND.

“Wrecks and Casualties” was a regular department in each issue of the *Times*—sixteen accidents were recorded on December 8th—and among the Victorians there was a general fascination with tales of great tragedies at sea. But more than that, Hopkins' father was the author of *A Handbook of Average* and *A Manual of Marine Insurance*, both standard reference books for negotiating, averaging, and adjusting the liabilities to insurance underwriters of cargo losses and shipwrecks, so Hopkins grew up in a world wet with marine accidents and was especially attentive to them.

Frederick Hopkins, a medical doctor who had entered the Novitiate with Gerard in 1868, and whose suave manner

had earned him the nickname of “the genteel Hop,” sat on the sofa cushion next to his and glanced at the page. “Are you reading about the *Deutschland*?”

“Very sad, isn't it?”

Walking to the main chapel, Hopkins heard a sneering wind outside and he thought of it as sea-roaring *Deutschland* weather, carried there as if by the Royal Mail. But in the darkened chapel it was so silent he could hear the faint sweet sibilance as knuckling flames consumed the wicks of the votive candles.

Casting back on his day in his nightly examination of conscience, Hopkins accused himself of a snorting, sour, unspiritual tone to some of his conversations, prayed for those who'd died, were injured, or lost loved ones in the shipwreck, but thanked God for the beauties and contrarities of nature, the tonic of outdoor exercise, and the cheer and solace of his Jesuit brothers.

Saturday evening, Rector James Jones strolled into the scholastics' recreation

room—an innovation of his governance since the groups of ten ordained professors, seven lay Brothers, and forty-one theologians each had separate dinner tables, housing areas, and recreation rooms in the great three-story mansion, and some considered incursions an insulting act of trespass. But “Father Rector,” as he was called, was a manly, rattling, genial, ever-courteous man from County Sligo, Ireland, a shrewd, scientific professor of moral theology who'd studied at the English College in Rome, served as a Superior in British Guiana and Jamaica, and published two scholarly books on the Athanasian Creed, yet welcomed contradiction in class and the nickname of “the Governor,” delighted in jokes and singing, and so worried about the seminarians' health that he stayed at their bedsides when they were ill, tipping into their mouths his mother's cure-all of hot milk, brandy, and a beaten egg.

Rector Jones joked with the Irish trio of Kelly, Morrogh, and Gavin, and with their laughter left the three and jested in his scratchy Latin with the scholastics

Victor Baudot and Sebastian Sircom, who'd been exiled from France. And then he wandered over to the great fireplace and the half-circle of Irish Georgian wingback chairs where Hopkins was alone with his stare fastened on *The Times*.

"Would it be a discourtesy if I joined you?" the Rector asked.

Hopkins lifted his head and smiled at his fair, tall Superior. "Not at all."

Jones selected the wingback chair next to his. "Don't let me interfere with your reading."

Hopkins held open the newspaper so Jones could see the multiple articles on the *Deutschland* shipwreck. Hopkins told him, "The nuns have been laid out for viewing in the Convent of Jesus and Mary near Stratford. I would guess they'll be interred in St. Patrick's cemetery, just a mile from where I was born."

distinctions, and steerage and first-class passengers were by this time together in the after saloon and cabins. Most of them obeyed the summons at once; others lingered below till it was too late; some of the ill, weak, despairing of life even on deck, resolved to stay in their cabins and meet death without any further struggle to evade it."

"Oh dear," Jones said. "Saddening."

Hopkins continued. "'After three a.m. on Tuesday morning a scene of horror was witnessed. Some passengers clustered for safety within or upon the wheelhouse, and on the top of other slight structures on deck. Most of the crew and many of the emigrants went into the rigging, where they were safe enough as long as they could maintain their hold. But the intense cold and long exposure told a tale.'"

"Cold wind, icy seas," said Jones. "Horrible in combination."

"The purser of the ship, though a

out loud and often "O Christ, come quickly!" till the end came. The shrieks and sobbing of women and children are described by the survivors as agonizing."

Jones sighed, "*Requiescant in pace*," but then glanced over at his underling. Hopkins was so greatly affected by the account that he was close to tears.

Jones kindly considered him and said, "Perhaps someone should write a poem on the subject." And then the Rector gently patted Hopkins' forearm and got up to heartily greet some theologians who'd just entered.

Hopkins touched a handkerchief to each eye and left *The Times* for others on a gleaming library table as he walked out. Although he'd at first intended to visit the main chapel for his nightly prayers in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament, his thoughts were racing, and in the rapture of inspiration he hurried up the stairs to his room in "The Mansions." And though his "hand was out at first," as he later admitted, Hopkins managed by midnight to pen eight lines:

*On Saturday sailed from Bremen,
American-outward-bound,
Take settler and seaman, tell men with
women,
Two hundred souls in the round—
O Father, not under thy feathers nor ever as
guessing
The goal was a shoal, of a fourth the doom to
be drowned;
Yet did the dark side of the bay of thy
blessing
Not vault them, the millions of rounds of thy
mercy not reeve even them in? **C***



Hopkins (far left) and fellow members of the Oxford Catholic Club, 1879, are in front of St. Aloysius, the Jesuit parish in Oxford. Hopkins, an Oxford graduate, had been raised in the Church of England but converted to Catholicism in 1866.

The Rector scanned the headlines. "I heard about it, but haven't kept up." Elm logs in the fireplace sang and popped, spewing sparks.

Hopkins read aloud: "'At two p.m., Captain Brickenstein, knowing that with the rising tide the ship would be waterlogged, ordered all the passengers to come on deck. Danger levels class

strong man, relaxed his grasp, and fell into the sea. Women and children and men were one by one swept away from their shelters on the deck.' And here it's quite moving, Father: 'Five German nuns, whose bodies are now in the dead-house here, clasped hands and were drowned together, the chief sister, a gaunt woman six feet high, calling



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