

# Titanic and the Bedā: Fr Thomas Byles

■ Fergus Mulligan

I balanced all, brought all to mind,  
The years to come seemed waste of breath,  
A waste of breath the years behind  
In balance with this life, this death.

W.B. Yeats, 1919

2012 is the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the sinking of *RMS Titanic*, the most famous maritime disaster of all time. In James Cameron's film *Titanic* as the ship foundered a Catholic priest is seen praying with his fellow passengers and reciting from the Book of Revelation. This man was not a figment of Cameron's imagination: his name was Fr Thomas Byles, 1870-1912, PP of Ongar in Essex, and he trained at the Bedā College and was ordained in Rome in 1902.

Fr Byles was travelling to New York to officiate at the wedding of his brother William. The night before he left for Southampton his friend, Mgr Edward Watson, called in to say goodbye and share a glass of wine. His final words to Fr Byles were unintentionally ominous: 'I hope you'll come back', his fear being that the priest would find more interesting work in the US and decide to stay.

## Thomas Byles' background

Thomas Byles was born Roussel Davids Byles on 26 February 1870 in Shelton, Staffs. He took the name Thomas on entering the Church.<sup>1</sup> He was the son of Rev. Dr Alfred Byles, a Congregational minister and his wife, Louisa Davids. He went to Leamington College and Rossall School, Fleetwood and in 1894 entered Balliol College Oxford to read Maths, History and Theology. There he began to have doubts about Nonconformity and became an Anglican. His brother William, meanwhile had become a Catholic and soon after graduating with a BA in 1894, after various encounters with the Jesuits, Thomas followed him into the Church.



Fr Thomas Byles

<sup>1</sup> Some of this article is based on material in the biography section of the website <http://www.fatherbytes.com/bytes.htm>, used by kind permission of Fr Scott Archer of Fairbury, Illinois. There is also information in the article by Fr Byles' friend, Mgr Edward Watson, 'Reminiscences', *The Edmundian*, vol.X, no.58, July 1912, IIIff.

Thomas went on retreat in Manresa, Roehampton, conducted by Fr Purbrick SJ and after a time in Germany entered Oscott College to study for the priesthood. This didn't work out and he left, some say because he found it intellectually dull. He taught at another seminary for a while, St Edmund's, Ware before arriving at the Beda College in 1899, just reopened after a lapse of over 20 years, its name having changed from the Collegio Pio. The Beda was at this time housed in the Venerable English College, occupying most of the garden wing. The easier training regime for its older students, many of them convert clergymen, kept them separate from the *Venerabile*. As the Collegio Pio it had its own corridor, staircase and common room but shared the chapel, library and refectory; an unsatisfactory arrangement.<sup>2</sup> The student intake included an actor, a lawyer, an army major, an artist and several former Anglican clergymen; a mixed group then as now.

In 1918 the Beda moved out of Via di Monserrato but for all of his time in Rome, Thomas Byles now in his early 30s lived there, sharing the facilities of the *Venerabile* and studying at the Pontifical Gregorian University known to generations of alumni as 'the Greg'. As student no.5987, between 1900 and 1903 Thomas took courses in Theologia moralis, Theologia dogmatica, Theologia dogmatica brevior, Scriptura Sacra, Historia Ecclesiastica, Eloquentia Sacra, Archaeologia Christiana, Lingua Hebraica, Linguae Orientales, receiving a Baccalaureate on 10 July 1901.<sup>3</sup>

N.	NOMEN	Eas scripturas	PRAELECTIONES AUDITAE								
			Theologia moralis	Theologia dogmatica	Theologia dogmatica brevior	Scriptura Sacra	Historia Ecclesiastica	Eloquentia Sacra-	Archaeologia Christiana	Lingua Hebraica	Linguae Orientales
5624	Vicente Davidarius e Coll. Piojo.		1901 1902	1901 1902			1901 1902			1901	
5645	Villegas Clementis e Coll. Piojo.		1901 1902	1901 1902 1903 1904		1903 1904	1901 1902			1901	
5746	Abbas Hubertus e Coll. Bedae		1901	1901 1902 1903		1902 1903	1901	1901			
5757	Byles Ronald Thomas e Coll. Bedae		1900 1901	1901 1902 1903	1900	1902 1903	1901			11	
5765	Chickener Carolus e Coll. Bedae		1901	1901			1901			1901	

Extract from Gregorian University student records showing the courses taken by Thomas Byles. Photo: PUG

<sup>2</sup> A curious rule around this time required any Venerabile student who reached the age of 24 to transfer to the Collegio Pio. Michael Williams, *The Venerable English College, Rome: A History*, Leominster: Gracewing, 2008, 264-5

<sup>3</sup> Extract from the Praelectiones Auditae, Gregorian University Archives, courtesy of Sig. Luigi Allena, Segretario Generale, PUG

Thomas was ordained on 15 June 1902 in the church of Sant' Apollinare in a square just above Piazza Navona.<sup>4</sup> The following February Fr Byles was in Gunnersbury as one of the founding members of the Catholic Missionary Society set up to convert English Protestants. In 1905 he was appointed PP of St Helen's, Ongar, Essex, a poor rural parish with a scattered Catholic community.<sup>5</sup> Essex was then part of Westminster diocese.

William Byles, Thomas' brother, emigrated to the US and became engaged to Katherine Russell in New York. The brothers were close and Fr Byles willingly agreed to conduct the wedding in St Augustine's church, Brooklyn. On 10 April 1912 Thomas took the boat train that left Waterloo at 09.45 for Southampton and sailed on *Titanic* at noon, his 2<sup>nd</sup> class ticket no.244310 costing £13.<sup>6</sup>



The church of Sant' Apollinare near Piazza Navona where Thomas Byles was ordained in 1902. Photo: Lalupa, Wikipedia

Name of Ship <i>Titanic</i>		Date of Departure <i>April 10<sup>th</sup> 1912</i>		Port of Departure <i>Southampton</i>		Steamship Line <i>White</i>							
NAMES AND DESCRIPTIONS OF <u>BRITISH</u> PASSENGERS EMBARKED AT THE PORT													
(3) Contract Ticket Number.	(5) NAMES OF PASSENGERS.	(6) CLASS. (Whether First, Second, and)			(8) Port at which Passengers have contracted to Land.	(9) Profession, Occupation, or Calling of Passengers.  In the case of First Class Passengers this column need not be filled up.	(10) AGES OF PASSENGERS who are not children.				(11) Children under 15 years old.		Total
		Adult	Child	Infant			Adults of 15 years and over.	Children under 15 years old.	Infants under 2 years old.	Male	Female		
239865	✓ Robt. Knight	123	15	1	New York		13	13	58	39	6	9	1
✓ 6	✓ Annie Watson								37				
242847	✓ Sydney Jacobson												
✓ 242850	✓ Amy												
244252	✓ Edith Egan												
✓ 244270	✓ Ernest Cantrill												
244276	✓ Chas. Wilhelm												
✓ 244280	✓ Alfred Bain												
2442658	✓ Geo. J. Thompson												
✓ 244261	✓ Percival Champ												
✓ 244262	✓ Chas. Sedgwick												
244263	✓ Lawrence Bealey												
244264	✓ Mary Hewlett												
✓ 244265	✓ Ralph Allen												
✓ 244266	✓ John Harper												
✓ 244267	✓ Maria Smith												
✓ 244268	✓ Maria Harper			1									6
244269	✓ Chas. Chapman												
✓ 3	✓ Edward Knowles												
✓ 4	✓ H. P. Hodges												
250642	✓ E. Mellinger												
✓ 4	✓ Mary												
250653	✓ Mary												

Board of Trade list of passengers who boarded *Titanic* at Southampton on 10 April 1912. Fr Byles is the 10<sup>th</sup> name on the list.

<sup>4</sup> The church in Piazza Sant' Apollinare is said to be on the site of a temple to Apollo and was the scene of a bizarre episode in May 2012. *Polizia* investigating the 1983 unsolved disappearance of 15 year old Emanuela Orlandi, the daughter of a Vatican employee, opened the tomb of known criminal Renatino De Pedis who is buried in the church. He was the victim of a gangland killing near Campo de' Fiori in 1990: *The Irish Times*, 19 May 2012, 10

<sup>5</sup> Ongar is now an outer suburb of London and was served by the Central Line from Epping until the branch closed in 1994.

<sup>6</sup> £13 was two months' wages for a fireman on board *Titanic*. Board of Trade records in the UK National Archives give Thomas' last address as c/o Mrs Byles, 101 The Ridgeway, Wimbledon, London and his age as 43. See [http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documentsonline/details-result.asp?queryType=1&resultcount=1&Edoc\\_id=8762294](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documentsonline/details-result.asp?queryType=1&resultcount=1&Edoc_id=8762294)

## On board *Titanic*

Facilities for 2<sup>nd</sup> class on *Titanic* were excellent with red carpeted entrances and corridors lined in two tone green carpets. There was a well stocked library with sycamore panelling and comfortable mahogany sofas and armchairs. The Louis XVI style smoking room had oak furniture covered in dark green Morocco and there was a bar and a dedicated promenade deck.<sup>7</sup>



A 2<sup>nd</sup> class cabin on *Titanic* similar to the one Fr Byles occupied.

In a letter posted in Cobh, Co. Cork, *Titanic's* last port of call, Fr Byles wrote to his housekeeper, Miss Field, that all had gone well on the trip so far except he had lost his umbrella at Liverpool St station and did not like the 'throbbing of the screws' on the ship.<sup>8</sup>

His cabin, a comfortable 2 berth with a washbasin and mirror, was at the stern of the ship on either D, E or F deck just above the propellers, a noisy spot. If on D deck he was near the 2<sup>nd</sup> class Dining Saloon and the ship's hospital, on E deck he would have been within earshot of Wallace Hartley's much loved ship's orchestra, the barber's and most 3<sup>rd</sup> class cabins and on F deck right over the propellers, the noisiest location of all, he would have been near the dog kennels.<sup>9</sup>

A fellow passenger but in 1<sup>st</sup> class, Jesuit scholastic Francis Browne, sailed from Southampton to Cobh, courtesy of his uncle, Robert Browne, Bishop of Cloyne whose cathedral dominates the town. Francis Browne took some of the best internal and external photos of *Titanic*, including his own stateroom. Invited by a rich American couple to continue to New York, his Jesuit superiors in Dublin responded to his request for permission in a terse telegram handed to him in Cobh: 'Get off that ship – Provincial'. He was very fortunate.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Tom McCluskie, *Anatomy of the Titanic*, London: PRC Publishing, 1998, 136

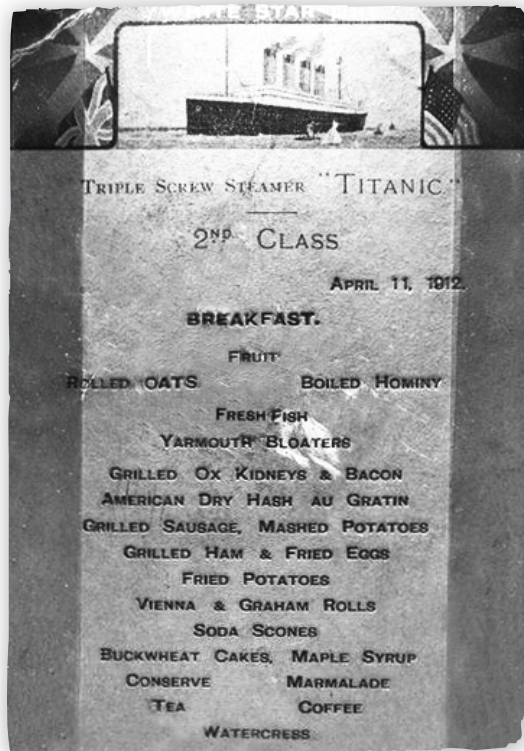
<sup>8</sup> Letter from Fr Byles to Miss Field, 10 April 1912. In it he mentions two other priests on board, a Benedictine from Bavaria and a secular from Lithuania.

<sup>9</sup> Lawrence Beesley, a teacher from Dulwich College, survived the sinking and wrote his version of the story in *The Loss of the SS Titanic*. Like Thomas Byles he paid £13 for his 2<sup>nd</sup> class cabin, D56, near the dining saloon. He said it had two bunks and a washbasin but no window and he had it to himself. It is likely Fr Byles' cabin was similar. Thanks to Ed Coughlan, Chairman of the Irish Titanic Historical Society for this information.

<sup>10</sup> Francis Browne SJ travelled in one of the finest staterooms on *Titanic*, A37, starboard side near the grand staircase. Thomas Andrews who designed *Titanic* occupied its twin, A36 on the port side. Both suites were a late modification to the ship's design and quite removed from the rest of 1<sup>st</sup> class. Given the separation of classes, it is unlikely Fr Byles met Francis Browne on board. Fr Browne later served as chaplain to the Irish Guards during World War I. Wounded five times and gassed, Field Marshal Alexander described him as "the bravest man I ever met". He was awarded the Military Cross and died in 1960. E.E. O'Donnell SJ, *Father Browne's Titanic Album*, Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1998, 12, 29-32, 91. Francis Browne wrote an article about his trip, "At sea on the *Titanic*" which appeared in *The Belvedere*, 1912, the magazine of Belvedere College SJ, Dublin where he was a contemporary of James Joyce. The article is reproduced in the above *Titanic Album*.

Fr Byles took his meals with other 2<sup>nd</sup> class passengers in the bright and airy dining saloon running the full width of the ship's stern on D deck, its oak panelling of 17<sup>th</sup> century design. Passengers could choose to sit at long refectory type tables or those for six diners, both with finely carved swivel dining chairs in mahogany. Photos of the time show generous tablecloths, linen napkins and three sets of cutlery per diner. Second class on board *Titanic* was better than 1<sup>st</sup> class on most other ships at the time.<sup>11</sup>

Meals were lavish and just short of the gargantuan scale of 1<sup>st</sup> class; both were prepared in the same galley. As *Titanic* approached Cobh on the morning of Thursday 11 April 1912, for his first breakfast onboard, Fr Byles could choose from the following.



And finally watercress, to aid digestion.<sup>12</sup> This was heartier than breakfast options in Ongar or presumably at the Beda. Lunch and dinner on board needed even more stamina.

<sup>11</sup> Class segregation was strict on *Titanic* as on other ships, gender separation likewise: single women travelling in 3<sup>rd</sup> class were berthed near the prow on decks E, F and G, single men at the opposite end of the ship close to the stern.

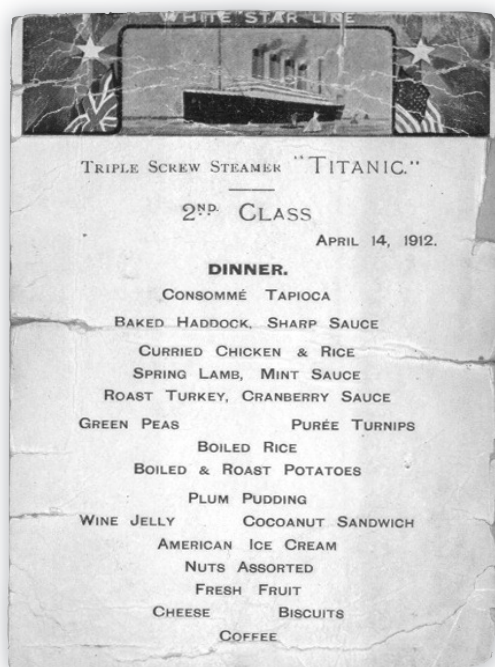
<sup>12</sup> John Eaton and Charles Haas, *Titanic: Triumph and Tragedy*, Yeovil: 1997, 97, 120-2. This is one of the best books on *Titanic* for the detail and accuracy of information on the great ship.



### **'Be calm, my good people'**

*Titanic* did not have a chapel and on Sunday morning, 14 April, Fr Byles said Mass for 2<sup>nd</sup> class passengers in the dining saloon and then for 3<sup>rd</sup> class passengers. He preached in English and French on an apposite maritime theme: the need for a spiritual lifebelt in time of temptation or moral shipwreck. Captain E.J. Smith led the Anglican Sunday service in the 1<sup>st</sup> class saloon.

The options for Fr Byles' last dinner on that fateful night were, as might be expected, substantial:



Despite all the books and films we will never know the full story of what happened on the night of 14-15 April 1912. Captain Smith, for example, was hailed as a hero, allegedly urging people to 'Be British', whereas the evidence indicates he had a breakdown and ceased to function as the commander. Not surprising: he had just steered the largest ship in the world into an iceberg and realised that 1,500 of those on board were going to die that night. Who's to know how any of us would behave in such a situation.

*Titanic* struck the iceberg on her starboard side at 11.40 on Sunday night and reports suggest Fr Byles was walking the 2<sup>nd</sup> class promenade on B or C decks at the time saying his office. He spent the next 2 hours and 40 minutes until the ship sank, praying with passengers, giving absolution and offering them what comfort he could as the awful drama of the ship's destruction unfolded.

Ellen Mockler, a 23 year old from Caltra, Co. Galway, who boarded at Cobh, paying £7 12s 7d for her 3<sup>rd</sup> class ticket, was travelling with friends from her home town to make her fortune in the new world. A *New York Herald* report in 1912 quoted her saying that Fr Byles refused to enter a lifeboat:

When the crash came we were thrown from our berths.... Slightly dressed, we prepared to find out what happened. We saw before us, coming down the passageway with hand uplifted, Fr Byles. We knew him because he had visited us several times on board and celebrated Mass for us that very morning. 'Be calm, my good people', he said, and then he went about the steerage giving absolution and blessings.... After I got in the boat .... and we were slowly going further away from the ship, I could hear distinctly the voice of the priest and the responses of his prayers.<sup>13</sup>

Her account is confirmed by Agnes McCoy from Granard, Co. Longford travelling with her brother and sister to Brooklyn.

I saw Fr Byles when he spoke to us in the steerage; and there was a German priest with him there. I did not see Fr Byles again until we were told to come up and get into the boat. He was reading out of a book and did not pay any attention. He thought, as the rest of us did, that there wasn't really any danger.

Then I saw him put the book in his pocket and hurry around to help women into the boats. We were among the first to get away and I didn't see him any more.

I learn from several passengers that Fr Byles and another priest stayed with the people after the last boat had gone, and that a big crowd, a hundred maybe, knelt about him. They were Catholics, Protestants and Jewish people who were kneeling there. Fr Byles told them to prepare to meet God, and recited the rosary. The others answered him. Fr Byles and the other priest were still standing there praying when the water came over the deck.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> *New York Herald*, April 1912, quoted in Senan Molony, *The Irish Aboard Titanic*, Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 2000, 148-151. Ellen Mockler joined the Sisters of Mercy in New York but for many years refused to talk of her terrible experience, like many other *Titanic* survivors; it was just too painful. She died in Worcester, Mass on 1 April 1984, her 95<sup>th</sup> birthday

<sup>14</sup> *Irish World*, New York, 27 April 1912, quoted in Molony (2000), op.cit., 132. Agnes McCoy worked as a domestic for the wealthy of New York, among them Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford. She never married and died on 14 January 1957.

Bertha Moran from Askeaton, Co. Limerick was travelling back to the US with her husband, Daniel Moran, also from Askeaton, a New York policeman; he did not survive. She said Fr Byles had acted as a chaplain to steerage passengers all through the trip. Barred from reaching the boat deck she related how he helped them to escape: 'Continuing the prayers, he led us to where the boats were being lowered. Helping the women in, he whispered to them words of comfort and encouragement.'<sup>15</sup>

### Nearer my God to thee

Many passengers turned to their faith at this critical time. Col. Archibald Gracie of the US army describes how: 'Prayerful thoughts now began to rise in me that my life might be preserved and I be restored to my loved ones at home. I weighed myself in the balance, doubtful whether I was this deserving of God's mercy and protection.'<sup>16</sup> Walter Lord, who might be accused of starting this great obsession with all things *Titanic* via his 1956 book *A Night to Remember*, makes only a brief mention of Fr Byles: 'A few prayed with the Reverend Thomas R. Byles, a second-class passenger. Others seemed lost in thought.'<sup>17</sup>

Another survivor, Charlotte Collyer from Bishopstoke, Southampton, recalled the horror of the night and seeing Fr Byles when she realised the unsinkable *Titanic* was doomed.

We saw a stoker come climbing up from below. He stopped a few feet away from us. All the fingers of one hand had been cut off. Blood was running from the stumps.... I asked him if there was any danger. 'Danger', he screamed at the top of his voice. 'I should just say so. It's hell down below, look at me. The boat will sink like a stone in ten minutes.' He staggered away and lay down fainting on a coil of rope....

On the boat deck that I had just left perhaps fifty men had come together. In the midst of them was a tall figure. This man had climbed upon a chain or a coil of rope so that he was raised far above the rest, his hands were stretched out as if he were pronouncing a blessing.

<sup>15</sup> Molony (2000), op.cit., 151. Bertha Moran had a difficult life afterwards, as did many survivors. Widowed three times and with five children she lived in Detroit where she went to daily Mass and died on the 49<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Titanic's* sinking, 16 April 1961

<sup>16</sup> Colonel Archibald Gracie, *Titanic*; Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 1998 ed., 35. Col. Gracie survived the sinking but died eight months later from what he endured that night. His book was published posthumously in 1913.

<sup>17</sup> Walter Lord, *A Night to Remember*, London: Penguin, 1988 ed., III



During the day, a priest, a certain Father Byles, had held services in the second cabin saloon and I think it must have been he who stood there leading those doomed men in prayer.<sup>18</sup>

Fifty-eight miles away from the stricken liner, Captain Arthur Rostron of Cunard's *Carpathia*, had stopped his vessel for the night in the icefield when his radio operator woke him with news of the *Titanic* disaster. Rostron, an energetic, prayerful man of 42 from Bolton, leapt into action.

He ordered full steam ahead and even with seven lookouts posted took an enormous risk racing *Carpathia* for four hours at top speed in the dark through a field of virtually invisible icebergs. Rostron himself kept watch on the starboard wing through the night, his uniform cap slightly raised as his lips moved in silent prayer. He ordered his crew to make all preparations to care for an unknown number of frozen, shocked survivors, giving up his and all his officers' cabins for those in bad shape. Unaware of the emergency, his passengers complained there was no hot water and their cabins were freezing as the captain diverted every ounce of steam to gaining more speed. Later Rostron told a friend: 'When day broke, and I saw the ice I had steamed through during the night, I shuddered, and could only think that some other Hand than mine was on that helm during the night.'<sup>19</sup> Sadly he arrived too late for Fr Byles.

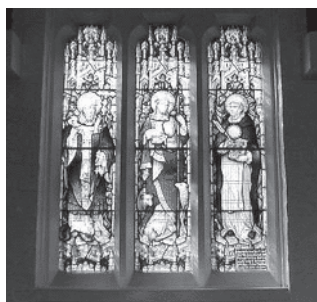
Most *Titanic* victims froze to death within minutes in the icy waters rather than drowned. In the days and weeks that followed various ships combed the area attempting to identify recovered victims before burial at sea. Fr Byles' body was never recovered. About 150 were buried in Halifax, Nova Scotia, half of them unidentified. Fr Byles may have been in one or other group. To this day Cunard, successor to the White Star Line, contributes to the upkeep of those graves in Fairview Cemetery and Mount Olivet Catholic Cemetery, Halifax.

As Thomas' brother William Byles waited in New York for news, a White Star Line official contacted him on the afternoon of 16 April to say all *Titanic* passengers had transferred safely to other ships. Gradually the awful truth filtered through and hopes of Thomas' survival faded. Nonetheless, William constantly checked the lists of survivors even after *Carpathia* docked in New York two days later with just 705 *Titanic* survivors out of around 2,225 souls on board.

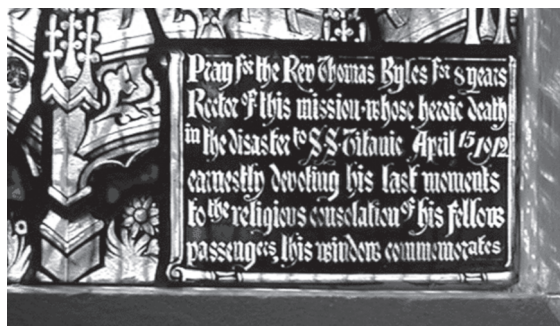
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<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Donald Hyslop, Alastair Forsyth, Sheila Jemima (Editors), *Titanic Voices: Memories from the Fateful Voyage*, Stroud: Sutton Publishing (1998), 134, 136. Charlotte Collyer's husband, Harvey, did not survive the sinking though their daughter Marjorie did. They had planned to settle in Idaho. Overcoming her understandable terror of the sea, Charlotte eventually returned to Bishopstoke where she remarried but died soon after of TB.

<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Walter Lord, *The Night Lives On*, London: Penguin Books, 1998 ed., 159, 160. The heroic Rostron ended his career as Commodore of the Cunard fleet.



The window commemorating Fr Byles in St Helen's church, Ongar



Memorial inscription on the window in St Helen's church, Ongar

Katherine and William Byles' wedding went ahead, a low key ceremony in a different church, St Paul's, Brooklyn. Afterwards the couple went home, changed into mourning and returned to attend a funeral Mass for the repose of Thomas' soul. On 22 April 1912 Westminster Cathedral and Cobh Cathedral both held a requiem Mass for all the victims of *Titanic* while Fr Byles' friend, Mgr Watson, gave the homily at a Mass in St Helen's, Ongar.<sup>20</sup>

A church window in St Helen's portrays St Patrick, the Good Shepherd and St Thomas Aquinas commemorating their brave pastor with this text: 'Pray for the Rev Thomas Byles for 8 years Rector of this mission whose heroic death in the disaster to SS *Titanic* April 15 1912 earnestly devoting his last moments to the religious consolation of his fellow passengers, this window commemorates.'<sup>21</sup>

Fr Thomas Byles is often portrayed as a heroic figure or a martyr. He was without doubt a brave man who seeing the terrible situation of his fellow passengers, acted exactly as a pastor should, doing everything he could to prepare them for their final ordeal. The CMS journal, *Missionary Gazette*, commented that the full story of Fr Byles' actions will never be told: 'All we know is that his end would be all apiece with the rest of his life; and that he would do all that a Catholic priest could in that terrible hour.'<sup>22</sup> We can be certain of one thing: Thomas Byles was a good priest. The Beda had trained him well.



Fr Thomas Byles

<sup>20</sup> For a list of clergy attending see Mgr Daniel Shanahan's article in *Essex Recusant*, no.17, April 1975, 46-8

<sup>21</sup> See [http://www.titanic-titanic.com/titanic\\_memorial-father\\_thomas\\_byles.shtml](http://www.titanic-titanic.com/titanic_memorial-father_thomas_byles.shtml)

<sup>22</sup> *Missionary Gazette*, June 1912, 4-5, courtesy of Fr Nicholas Schofield, Westminster Diocesan Archivist.