

PLUCKY COUNTESS SHEDS LIGHT ON A LINGERING MYSTERY

Which Port-Side Lifeboat Was the First One Launched?

by Samuel Halpern

The story of how a “plucky little countess” helped pull an oar, and took a trick at the tiller of lifeboat No. 8 when it was trying to reach a seemingly unreachable mystery vessel seen on the horizon, is one of those well known heroic stories that took place the night *Titanic* foundered.¹



Fig. 01 – The Countess of Rothes.

The Countess of Rothes, Lady Lucy Noël Martha Leslie, was traveling on *Titanic* with her cousin Gladys Cherry and her maid Roberta Maioni. On the night of April 14th 1912, Lady Rothes and her cousin were awakened in their cabin, C-77, at a quarter to twelve by a slight shock. They soon noticed that the engines had stopped, and steam had started to blow off. Feeling something was wrong, they got quickly dressed and went up to the promenade deck (A deck) to see for themselves what had happened after finding out that the ship had struck some ice. Going to the forward part of the deck, they looked down toward the well deck and saw that it was covered with some ice, but there was no iceberg to be seen. Being cold and dark, they decided to return to their cabin. On the way back they encountered the Purser who directed them and others to put on warmer clothes as well as lifebelts and then come back and

¹ Randy Bryan Bigham, “A Matter of Course: Titanic’s Plucky Countess,” *Encyclopedia Titanica* (2006), <https://www.encyclopedia-titanica.org/countess.html>; and Randy Bryan Bigham, “The Sailor and the Countess: Lifeboat No. 8,” *Encyclopedia Titanica* (2025), <https://www.encyclopedia-titanica.org/sailor-countess-lifeboat-no-8.html>.

go up to the top deck of the ship where the boats were. After putting on warmer clothing and finally finding their lifebelts with the help of a steward, Lady Rothes, along with her cousin and her maid, made their way up to the port side of the boat deck where they found a good many people had gathered and saw women and children being put into lifeboats.

The three of them, Lady Rothes, Gladys Cherry and Roberta Maioni, were put into lifeboat No. 8 along with about 20 other women, and according to Lady Rothes, “one sailor, a steward and a cook.” It was in that boat, lifeboat No. 8, that they managed to get away from the stricken liner. (See Figure 02 below.)

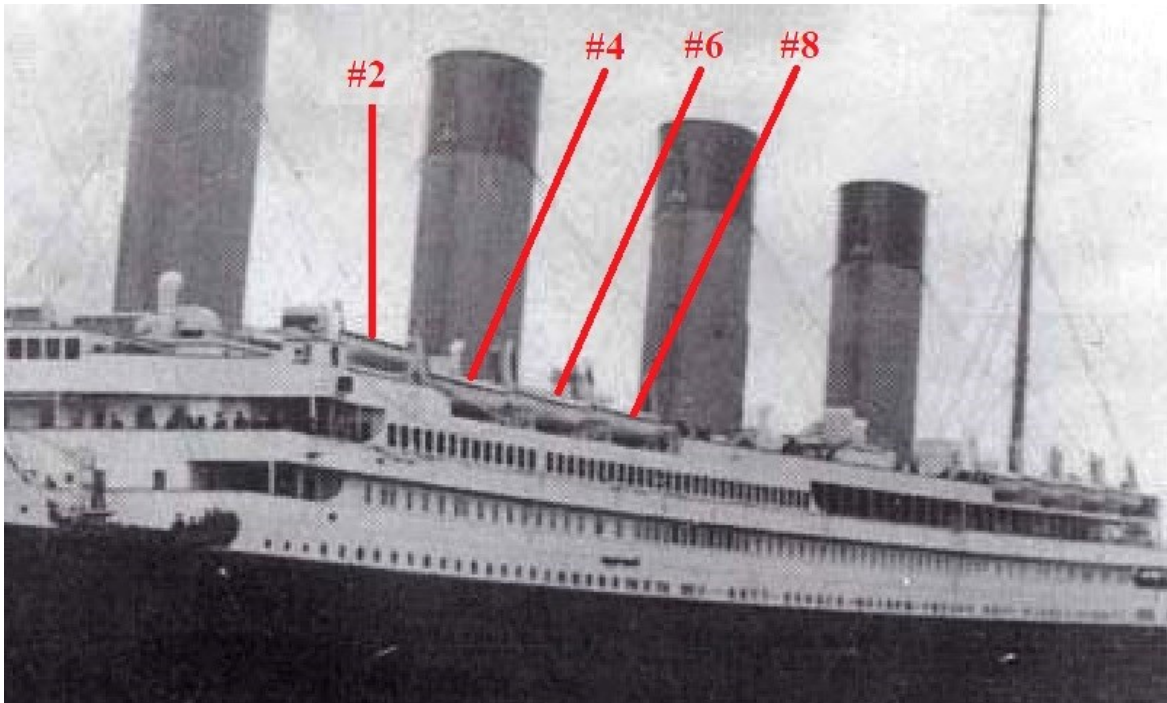


Fig. 02 – *Titanic* lifeboats No. 2, 4, 6 and 8 as she leaves Southampton.

Which Port-side Lifeboat Was the First One Launched?

The first lifeboat that was swung out and lowered for boarding on the port side of *Titanic* was unquestionably lifeboat No. 4. At the time lifeboats were being uncovered, *Titanic* had already taken on a small list to her starboard side, the side where she struck the iceberg. Boats that were swung out on the port side therefore had a tendency to hang fairly close to the vessel's side, and it would have appeared somewhat easier and safer to load passengers into the boats from the promenade space located one deck below, on A deck, rather than from the open boat deck where the boats were actually stored. Additionally, a boat on the forward port side of the ship could be held against the side of the vessel down on A deck using a coaling wire located there in case the list of the ship should happen to swing the other way. However, the problem with such a well intentioned plan was that the forward part of A deck on *Titanic* was actually enclosed by large glass windows that had to be lowered if such a plan was to succeed. Therefore, after being reminded that the windows down on A deck forward were all in their raised position, the initial attempt to load lifeboat No. 4 from A deck was quickly abandoned.²

² Lifeboat No. 4 was not loaded until much later on in the evacuation process, as was also true of the emergency cutter lifeboat No. 2, which was always kept swung out and ready for launching while at sea.

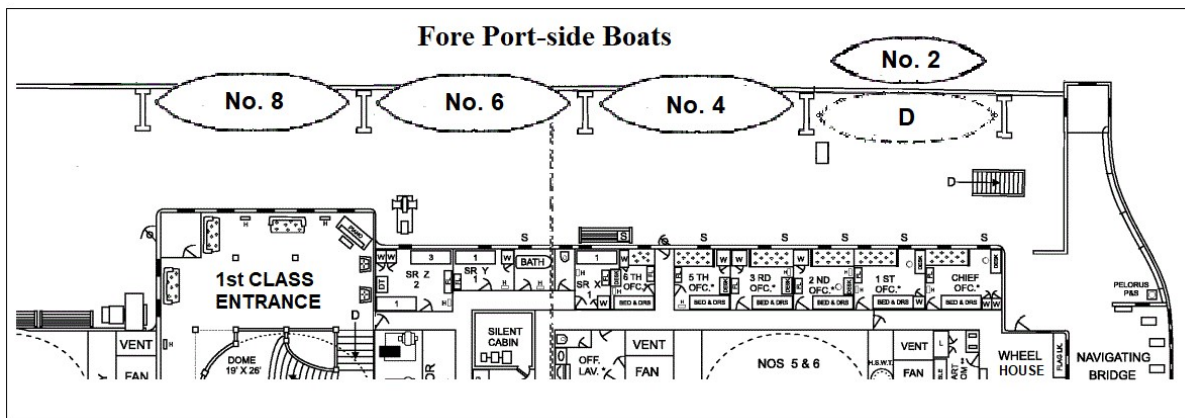


Fig. 03 – Location of *Titanic*'s forward portside lifeboats.

According to Second Officer Charles Lightoller, who was in charge of loading and launching lifeboats on the port side of *Titanic*:³

“Well, you see, if I may give it to you in the order that I was working, I swung out No. 4 with the intention of loading all the boats from A deck, the next deck below the boat deck. I lowered No. 4 down to A deck, and gave orders for the women and children to go down to A deck to be loaded through the windows. My reason for loading the boats through the windows from A deck was that there was a coaling wire, a very strong wire running along A deck, and I thought it would be very useful to trice the boat to in case the ship got a slight list or anything; but as I was going down the ladder after giving the order, someone sung out and said the windows were up. I countermanded the order and told the people to come back on the boat deck and instructed two or three, I think they were stewards, to find the handles and lower the windows. That left No. 4 boat hanging at A deck, so then I went on to No. 6.”

As it turned out, boat No. 4 was left hanging alongside A deck while work shifted to boats No. 6 and No. 8 which were located just aft of No. 4 (see Figure 03 above). Both boats No. 6 and No. 8 were subsequently loaded and lowered from the boat deck, as were all the other boats located on the port side of *Titanic* except for boat No. 4, which was loaded from A deck after they finally got those windows lowered.⁴

Over the years there has been a great deal of uncertainty as to which lifeboat, No. 6 or No. 8, was the first boat launched on the forward port side of *Titanic*. So how does the story of the Countess of Rothes help solve, or at least give further insight into solving, this longstanding issue?

Some New First-hand Evidence

Recently, some new evidence came to light in the form of a sworn statement by the Countess of Rothes, Lady Lucy Noël Martha Leslie, in the form of a deposition that was taken and witnessed by the British Vice-Consul in Los Angeles, California in May of 1912.⁵ (With special thanks to Angela Young, a copy of the full text of that deposition can be found in Appendix–A.) In that 2-page deposition

³ British inquiry, 13834.

⁴ The three aft most boats on the *starboard* side, No. 11, 13 and 15, were all loaded from the A deck promenade later on in the evacuation process. Unlike the window-enclosed fore part of A deck, the after part of A deck was completely open (as was the aftermost area on B deck under boats No. 15 and 16). At the time boats 11, 13 and 15 were being loaded, *Titanic* had started to take on a slight list to port, making the loading of passengers on the aft starboard side from A deck somewhat easier and safer.

⁵ Angela Young, *The Aristocrat and the Able Seamen*, The History Press, 2026, pp. 145-148.

concerning the loss of the SS *Titanic*, Noël said:

“We were returning to my cabin, as it was very cold and dark, when the Purser appeared and directed myself and others to go below and put on life belts and warm clothes and then return to Deck ‘A’. We did so, and returned to Deck ‘A’ with my maid. We went on the Port side. There were a good many people already there, standing quietly talking, and women and children were being put into the boats.

“We walked along the deck to where the Captain was superintending the loading of another boat, which I found was life boat No. 8, into which we got, with about 30 others; all women except one sailer, a steward and a cook.” ...

The the first “we” in the above was in reference to Noël’s cousin Gladys Cherry and herself. The maid that she referred to was Roberta “Cissy” Maioni.

As we can see, Noël described coming up on deck with her cousin and maid and going to the port side where she says they saw a great many people already there, and women and children being put into lifeboats. She then says they walked along to where Captain Smith was superintending the loading of “another boat,” and got into that boat which turned out to be lifeboat No. 8.

Up to this point, it is quite certain that the only boats that could have been loading women and children on the port side of the boat deck at that time had to be No. 6 and No. 8, because we know that boats No. 2 and No. 4, as well as collapsible boat D (which is stored on deck under the same davits used by boat No. 2), were not loaded and launched until much later on that night. But other than mentioning that these boats were being loaded at the same time, she gives no indication as to which of these two boats was lowered first or second.

Noël’s deposition then continued describing many other details about what took place that night. Then, near the end of her statement, she recalled a detail that is pertinent to the issue at hand:

“At dawn we lost sight of the vessel’s lights. I did not see any panic or disorder on the ship before leaving her. I saw her sink and think it was about two o’clock. We were some way off. As far as I know there were no boat drills during the voyage. I saw one boat launched and was informed that several others had been launched before I went on board life boat No. 8.”

In this short paragraph she describes how at dawn those in her lifeboat lost sight of the vessel’s lights that Captain Smith had instructed them to row to during the night, that there was no panic or disorder seen before they left *Titanic*, that she saw *Titanic* sink, and then happened to recall that she had seen “one boat launched and was informed that several others had been launched” before getting into lifeboat No. 8.

That one boat that she herself saw launched had to be lifeboat No. 6. Why? Because earlier she said that they came out on deck on the port side, and saw boats being loaded with women and children. The only boats that could have been loading there at that time were boats No. 6 and No. 8 since boats No. 4 and No. 2 were not loaded until much later on. And of those two boats that were loading, only boat No. 6 could have been the one she saw launched because she left the ship in boat No. 8.

In her signed statement, Noël referred to the deck she was on as deck ‘A’, but it actually was the “top boat-deck” as confirmed in a letter written by her cousin Gladys Cherry to her mother, Lady Emily Cherry, while on board the rescue vessel *Carpathia*.⁶

As we have seen, Noël also mentioned that she was informed that other boats had been launched in addition to the one she herself witnessed before she got into boat No. 8. Although she does not say

⁶ George Behe, *On Board RMS Titanic*, Lulu Press, 2011, p. 149. It should be noted that many others, for example second-class passenger Lawrence Beasley and first-class passenger Ella White, had also mistakenly referred to the boat deck as deck A.

from whom or exactly when she heard that information,⁷ it is quite possible that she and others may have heard that from Steward Alfred Crawford, who was the “steward” that she referred to in her deposition that was sent away with them in lifeboat No. 8 to help row. Crawford, who had originally been assigned to lifeboat No. 8, had testified that he had been over on the forward starboard side of *Titanic* where he saw lifeboat No. 5 being loaded and launched before coming over to the port side after learning that they started to load lifeboats over there.⁸ We also know that boats No. 7 and No. 5, in that order, were the first two boats to actually leave *Titanic* that night, and both of them were loaded and launched on the forward starboard side. So we have two boats launched from the starboard side, and the one boat launched and witnessed by Lady Rothes on the port side, that would have been known about before lifeboat No. 8 was launched.

In that letter written by her cousin Gladys Cherry to her mother we find an interesting little tidbit:

“I did not even know that the order for lifebelts had been given he [a steward] said but he got them for us from under the bed and we were told we had time to dress which we did, and put on life belts and calmly and quietly went to the top boat-deck; you see by this the perfect confidence the people had in that great boat [*Titanic*], no one could believe there was danger – then the boats began to be filled with women, we were about the *fourth to be lowered* [author’s emphasis] 75 feet from the top deck – ...”

The only boats that could have been launched from the port side by the time Miss Cherry and Lady Rothes left were No. 6 and No. 8. So where could the other two boats to make up the four have come from?

The other two boats that would have made up the four that Gladys Cherry wrote about were most likely No. 7 and No. 5 on the starboard side that Alfred Crawford would have known about before going over to boat No. 8 to assist in the loading of his assigned lifeboat. If there were anyone else that had been to the starboard side besides Crawford before the loading of boat No. 8 began, then they too may have seen two boats loaded and launched before going over to the port side.⁹ In either case, two of Miss Cherry’s four boats would have been from the port side, plus the one that Noël herself had seen launched, plus the one that Noël, Gladys and Cissy went away in.

A Few Similar Accounts and Challenges

Differences in lifeboat launch sequences and times can be traced to the numerous ambiguities, inconsistencies, contradictions, lack of clarity and continuity that can be found in the available evidence. Questions concerning eyewitness reliability and credibility also come into play, as well as questions regarding the meaning of words used by eyewitnesses to describe what they saw, especially words that came from second hand accounts such as in newspapers and magazines which may not even have been the actual words stated by the eyewitness. And then there is the blight of confirmation bias that tends to creep in through the selective interpretation of the available evidence, and the assumptions that come along with it.

⁷ There is a slight bit of ambiguity in her statement. Was “before I went on board life boat No. 8” a reference as to when she heard the information about other boats being launched, or simply her way of saying that the other boats were launched before her boat was?

⁸ Steward Crawford was one of the last to get into boat No. 8 when ordered to do so by Captain Smith. (American inquiry, p. 118 and p. 826.)

⁹ Which begs the question, if someone saw that they were putting people in and lowering boats on the starboard side, why leave to go over to the port side where the rule women and children only was being strictly enforced? In the case of Steward Crawford, he went over to the port side because that is where his assigned boat was after learning that they began loading boats on that side of the ship.

Regarding words used, it should be recognized that there can be a lot of ambiguity in words like “first boat” or “second boat,” or even with the word “launched” itself as used by some people if there is no clear explanation of what is being meant by the words themselves. Does “first boat” mean the first boat filled, the first boat lowered to the sea, the first boat lowered to the deck for boarding, the first boat that one comes to when first coming out on deck, the first boat as counted from the forward or aft end on a given side of a vessel, or some other meaning? As pointed out in a recent article about lifeboat launch sequences,¹⁰ “the possibilities for confusion are endless, and we must pay strict attention to context from each eyewitness before drawing conclusions,” a point that I fully agree with, but is easier said than done.

Consider the primary-source evidence given by first-class passenger Ella White at the American inquiry:¹¹

Senator SMITH. Do you recollect what boat you entered?

Mrs. WHITE. Boat 8, the *second boat off*. [author’s emphasis]

Senator SMITH. On which side of the ship?

Mrs. WHITE. I could not tell you. It was the side going this way - the left side, as we were going.

Senator SMITH. That would be the port side?

Mrs. WHITE. Yes. I got in the *second boat that was lowered*. [my emphasis]

At first glance it seems that her testimony directly supports Lady Rothes’ observation in her deposition where she said she saw one boat launched before getting into boat No. 8 herself. The problem that critics have pointed to in White’s testimony is her use of the words, “the second boat that was lowered.” They claim that she could easily have *assumed* that her boat was the second boat lowered since boat No. 4 had previously been lowered down to A deck and would not have been seen unless she leaned over the side of the ship and noticed that it was hanging there empty and not lowered to the sea. They go on to suggest that boat No. 6, which they claim was the second boat launched on the port side, would have blocked the view of people in No. 8 from seeing that boat No. 4 had in fact not been lowered to the sea, but was hanging alongside the ship one deck below the one that they were on. Of course, they don’t point out that once No. 8 started down, there would be no blocking of their view of No. 4 hanging by itself around A deck which would then negate that argument.

Then there is an account published in *The NY Herald* on April 19th 1912, where first-class passenger Margaret Swift, who also was rescued in boat No. 8, was quoted as saying:

“My companion [Dr. Alice Leader] and myself held back until *the first lifeboat had been let down into the water* [author’s emphasis]. At that time absolute quiet prevailed. Indeed, at no time did I observe any traces of panic among the passengers. The men kindly helped the women into the lifeboats, many of them laughing and chatting, and few of them dreaming that there was any immediate danger. When *the second boat* [author’s emphasis] was being filled Captain Smith insisted that we get into it, and as the sailors pulled away from the ship I heard him say, ‘Row for that light,’ and I saw him point to a dim glimmer that must have been three miles distant...”

As written, this account seems to clearly state that the first boat Swift talked about was let down *to the water*, not just let down empty to hang alongside the ship by A deck, and that she and her partner were placed into the second boat, which was lifeboat No. 8, that was then let down to the water with

¹⁰ Published on-line at:

https://wormstedt.com/titanic/TITANIC_THE%20LIFEBOAT%20LAUNCHING%20SEQUENCE_A%20NEW%20STUDY_v.%201.3.pdf.

¹¹ American inquiry, p. 1006.

instructions to row toward a light.

So what do the critics have to say about this account? In this instance they point out that in the same account it was mentioned that Margaret Swift and Alice Leader had occupied a cabin on the starboard side of the vessel, and that they had crossed over to the port side when they came out on deck. They then raised the question, could they have seen one of the forward starboard lifeboats lower away prior to crossing over to boat No. 8 on the port side? In an attempt to back up the proposition that the first boat that Margaret Swift talked about was on the starboard side, not the port side, they cite an account by Swift in *The Brooklyn Times* of April 19th where she was quoted as saying:

“By the time the fourth boat was being lowered I had convinced my friend to enter it, and we were lowered away together.”

According to these critics, this second description only makes sense if Swift and Leader had initially come out onto the starboard side of the boat deck and saw one or more boats lowered there before heading over to the port side. In other words, they had to conjure up a scenario where Swift and Leader saw one or two or even three boats lowered on the starboard side before going over to the port side where a boat had yet to be lowered with people in it.

In light of the information provided by Noël’s deposition, and in the letter written by her cousin Gladys Cherry to her mother while on board *Carpathia*, an alternate explanation would make perfect sense.

Swift’s account as reported in *The NY Herald*, matches what Noël gave in her deposition where she saw one boat launched on the port side before getting into lifeboat No. 8, the second boat launched on the port side. In addition, Swift’s account reported in *The Brooklyn Times* matches what Gladys Cherry wrote to her mother about being in the fourth boat that was lowered from *Titanic*, which in no way conflicts with anything that Lady Rothes’ said in her deposition since Noël also said that she heard that several other boats had been launched besides the one she herself had witnessed before getting into boat No. 8.

Dr. Alice Leader, Margaret Swift’s cabin mate, also implied that boat No. 8 was not the first boat with passengers in it to be lowered from the port side. In that *New York Herald* account of April 19th 1912, Alice Leader was quoted as saying:

“We watched one go down with passengers and noticed that there were no men in it – that is, none except seamen.”

This is certainly an accurate description of the situation at boat No. 6, a port-side boat, when it first began to be let down, before the lowering was halted around C deck to allow first-class passenger Major Peuchen to climb down the falls into the boat.¹²

So what do these critics have to say about Alice Leader’s report of seeing what clearly appears to be a description of boat No. 6 starting down obviously before they got into boat No. 8?

The same critics do not address Leader describing boat No. 6 being launched. Instead they claim that Leader doesn’t describe her lifeboat, No. 8, as being the second boat that was lowered (as Swift did), but instead referred to herself as being one “of the passengers in the fourth lifeboat to be lowered.” They also mention that in an April 25th account in *The Philadelphia Inquire*, Leader was reported to have said,

¹² According to Second Officer Charles Lightoller: “When the boat was half way down some of the women sang out that they had only one man in the boat. This was owing to the fact that this seaman stepped out of the boat, unknown to me, going to the fall. He knew I was short of a man to lower away the fall, and therefore he left his station in the boat to go to the fall. Then Maj. Peuchen who stood right alongside, said that he would go, or offered to. I asked him if he was a seaman, or whether he was sailor enough to go out to the fall from where he was. It was seaman’s work to get out to the fall and then get down to the boat, so I told him if he was sailor enough to get out to the fall and get into the boat to go ahead, and so he did, and he went in the boat.” (American inquiry, p. 433.)

“I was in Boat No. 8, which I think was the fourth boat lowered.”

Sound familiar by now? On the one hand we have someone who saw a boat being lowered that describes lifeboat No. 6, and also saying that they thought that the boat they got away in was the fourth boat lowered from *Titanic*. Critics who believe No. 8 was the first boat launched on the port side acknowledge that there is no question that the boat these people got away in, boat No. 8, was not the fourth boat lowered from the port side of *Titanic*. However, they claim that Leader, Swift and Cherry thought they went away in the fourth boat only makes sense when the forward starboard boats No. 7, No. 5 and No. 3 (or No. 7, No. 5, and No. 4 hanging empty at A Deck) are factored in.

What makes perfect sense too me is that these people, Alice Leader, Margaret Swift and Gladys Cherry, and we can now include The Countess of Rothes, all of whom left in boat No. 8, were there when a boat was previously launched from the port side with people in it, and were also told that other boats had been launched over on the starboard side most likely by someone who, for a fact, had actually been over on that side before coming over to the port side; someone like Steward Alfred Crawford who testified to that.

Conclusion

The recently published deposition from the Countess of Rothes taken in May of 1912 yields valuable first-hand evidence that boat No. 8 was *not* the first boat launched from the port side of *Titanic*. It also provides additional evidence that people who went away in boat No. 8 were told about other boats being launched before their boat was let down, in addition to the one boat that they themselves had seen launched on the port side.

What was presented here is just a small part of the total question concerning which port-side lifeboat was launched first, and certainly should not be viewed as comprehensive. A more complete package addressing this issue, as well as other issues dealing with lifeboat launch sequencing and times, will be addressed in future articles.

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank Angela Young, great-granddaughter to Lady Lucy Noël Martha Leslie, for allowing me to reproduce a copy of the deposition that was taken before the British Vice-Consul in Los Angeles in May 1912. Her book, *The Aristocrat and the Able Seaman*, is a must for any *Titanic* enthusiast. It is a story not only about what happened the night *Titanic* foundered, but also about a long lasting friendship between two people of vastly different backgrounds that unforeseen circumstances brought together on that unforgettable night in April of 1912.

APPENDIX–A

Copy of a sworn statement by Noël Rothes, in the matter of an inquiry into the loss of the S.S. ‘TITANIC’

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA)	In the matter of an inquiry
STATE OF CALIFORNIA)	into the loss of the S.S.
COUNTY OF LOS ANGELES)	‘TITANIC’

Noël Rothes, wife of the Right Honourable Norman Evelyn Leslie, Earl of Rothes, in the Peerage of Scotland, of Leslie House, Fife, Scotland, at present temporarily residing at Altadena, in the County of Los Angeles, State of California, being duly sworn, doth depose and say :

I was a passenger on the Steamship ‘TITANIC’, which sailed from England for the Port of New York on the 10th day of April, 1912: and occupied Cabin No 77 on Deck ‘C’, with my cousin, Miss Cherry.

On the night of the disaster I had retired to my berth and was awakened by a slight shock, and noticing that the engines had stopped, I turned on the light and on looking at my watch, found that the time was 11:45pm.

On opening my cabin door, I saw the steward who attended my cabin, and upon asking him what had occurred, was informed that the ship had been in collision with ice. As we wished to see an iceberg, we went on deck and walked to the forward part where we could see the portion of the boat occupied by steerage passengers. The deck below was covered with ice, but we did not see the iceberg.

There was no disturbance or confusion among the passengers.

We were returning to my cabin, as it was very cold and dark, when the Purser appeared and directed myself and others to go below and put on life belts and warm clothes and then return to Deck ‘A’. We did so, and returned to Deck ‘A’ with my maid. We went on the Port side. There were a good many people already there, standing quietly talking, and women and children were being put into the boats.

We walked along the deck to where the Captain was superintending the loading of another boat, which I found was life boat No 8, into which we got, with about 30 others; all women except one sailor, a steward and a cook.

The Captain called our attention to the lights of a steamer and as the boat was being lowered, he called to the seaman to row to the said steamer, leave the passengers, and come back for another load.

We drifted about 20 yards from the ship, and observing that there were only three men in the boat, I asked the seaman if I could help him by taking the tiller, so that he might row, to which he assented. I took the tiller, and called to my cousin to help me, and the men and some women commenced rowing towards the lights of the steamer.

When we had gone a short distance T. Jones, a sailor who was in charge of the boat, said he wished to go back, as our boat could hold 10 or 12 more easily. Jones was very anxious to return, but the other people in the boat were very strongly against it, saying that the suction would take us down and we would be swamped.

The ship was brilliantly lighted and was going down fast. We could see the lights going out in the rows of portholes.

The firing of the rockets from the steamer and the blowing of her siren was continued almost to the last.

I spoke to one of the passengers and said that I thought that we ought to return. She, however, demurred on the ground that we might be swamped and asked me not to say anything more about it, as it might result in a panic in our boat if the others heard that I advocated returning.

Seaman Jones said: 'Now, Ladies, if we are saved and any questions are asked as to why we did not return, you will please remember that I wanted to go back and would rather be drowned with the others than not return'.

The majority said the Captain's orders were to row for the lights of the ship towards which we were heading, and on that ground we ought not to return.

I saw two lights on the steamer we were heading for and once for a short time I saw a red light on said Steamer.

The only lights on our boat were a lantern, which went out and could not be re-lighted, and a small electric light in a walking-stick. We endeavoured to keep in touch with two of the other life boats whose lights we saw, by showing our lights and shouting.

After steering the boat for a short time, I changed places with a woman who was rowing and continued rowing for the rest of the night and Miss Cherry steered until we reached the Carpathia.

At dawn we lost sight of the vessel's lights. I did not see any panic or disorder on the ship before leaving her. I saw her sink and think it was about two o'clock. We were some way off. As far as I know there were no boat drills during the voyage. I saw one boat launched and was informed that several others had been launched before I went on board life boat No 8.

The sea was very calm until a slight breeze got up at sunrise. We were taken on the Carpathia about 6.30 or 7.00 in the morning.

I do not know of my own knowledge any circumstances attending the casualty, loss of the vessel, loss of life, the measures taken to save life and vessel, or equipment of the vessel, or the extent of the damage caused, save as aforesaid.

Subscribed and sworn at the
City of Los Angeles, in the
State of California, this [not noted]
day of May, 1912, before me,
British Vice-Consul at Los Angeles, California