



Dead Wake, by Erik Larson
Reviewed by Cindy Kennedy, June 2015

Erik Larson, a master of non-fiction, has done it again. Riding on the heels of his blockbusters *In the Garden of Beasts*, *Thunderstruck*, and *The Devil in the White City*, Larson scores another winner with *Dead Wake: The Last Crossing of the Lusitania*.

The publication of *Dead Wake* coincides with the centennial of the Lusitania's tragic sinking. In May 1915, the great ship was making its way across the Atlantic from New York to Liverpool, without a naval escort, when it encountered a German U-boat off the coast of Ireland. What happened next and why intrigues us to this day.

In the second year of World War I, German captains were on the lookout for passenger ships that might be transporting weapons. Germany's policy was to wage unrestricted warfare, without compunction. U-20 Captain Walther Schwieger ordered the firing of a single torpedo into the Lusitania's hull. Thirty seconds later, a second explosion ripped deep inside the ship. Within 18 minutes, the ship sank, taking with it nearly 1,200 victims. The disaster, horrifying the world, led to the United States entering the Great War.

Larson neatly juxtaposes life aboard the luxury liner with the lot of German sailors on the cramped and stifling submarine. Among the victims on the Lusitania were millionaire Alfred Vanderbilt and art collector Hugh Lane, reputed to be carrying rare Rembrandt and Monet paintings.

And Larson broaches compelling questions, including "Why didn't the British Admiralty provide an escort?" and "What was the cause of the second explosion?" Truly, real-life mysteries are stranger than fiction.