

Scottish Review (2012)

Press and Journal/Titanic

It's the most persistent myth in British newspapers and has stuck like a limpet to the *Press and Journal* for a century: "North-east man lost at sea. 1500 perish in Titanic disaster"

Stand by for a lot more coverage of the centenary of the sinking in April – the P and J has already carried a piece on it for its recent relaunch and I've looked at the wider issues [here](#). But neither tells the full story....

It was April 16 before the UK morning papers really had the chance to cover the disaster in detail. The Aberdeen Journal (it only became the *Press and Journal* in 1922 incorporating the Aberdeen *Free Press*), carried a sober and informative account, leading with "Mid- Atlantic Disaster – Titanic sunk by Iceberg – 1683 Lives Lost, 675 Saved –Increasing Race to Rescue."

Not a hint of "North-east man" then. Nor might it have been expected from its editor William (later Sir William) Maxwell.

He had been recruited in 1910 from London and his goal was to make the Journal pre-eminent as the national Scottish newspaper, ahead of the *Scotsman* and *Glasgow Herald*.

Maxwell greatly increased coverage of national stories, rescuing it from being the "mere local newspaper" it was before his arrival.

He may well have drawn this vision from one of the Titanic victims, [WT Stead](#), the great pioneer of UK campaigning journalism, who had led a similar transformation at the *Northern Echo* in Darlington. Maxwell would certainly have known of Stead – they had both worked on the *Pall Mall Gazette* and the London *Evening Standard* albeit in different eras.

So could the headline have been on a bill or hoarding? I doubt it – "North Country" was the preferred term at that time and was used in coverage of the torpedoing of the *Lusitania* three years later.

"North-east" man is a relative newcomer – although his ubiquity is the reason the myth sticks. Every day he's killed in an accident, survives several more, appears in court, or is involved in a stushie somewhere else. Some guy!

Other myths continue to be challenged by media. First Officer William Murdoch's character assassination in the 1996 film triggered a [campaign](#) by Dorothy Grace Elder and the *Galloway News* which resulted in a donation from 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox for an annual prize in Murdoch's honour at Dalbeattie High School.

And Maxwell's vision for the Journal has also been realised 100 years later – as all circulations have sunk, it now comfortably outsells its morning rivals in Edinburgh and Glasgow.

The growth of digital history means you can now look at original sources online. The British Library is digitising millions of newspaper pages with a technical partner, brightsolid, a Dundee-based company owned by DC Thomson, publishers of the P and J.

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