

[PRESS RELEASE]



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Santa Fe Public Library

NEW MEXICO HISTORY MUSEUM
PALACE OF THE GOVERNORS

“TOXIC SECRETS” OF THE *LUSITANIA* AND THE *ESTONIA*

Gregg Bemis, with introduction by Hampton Sides

“Few tales in history are more haunting, more tangled with investigatory mazes or more fraught with toxic secrets than that of the final voyage of the Lusitania”

—Hampton Sides, 2015



Santa Fe—One hundred years ago on May 7, 1915, the Cunard superliner *R.M.S. Lusitania* was sunk in a mere 18 minutes by a German submarine 11.5 miles off the coast of Ireland. The conditions of the sinking—severe damage from a German torpedo, the fact that only six of the 48 lifeboats could be deployed—made survival of the passengers difficult. Nonetheless, heroic action by both passengers and Irish rescuers brought the survival count to 761. Among the dead were Sir Hugh Lane, an Irish art collector who was alleged to have had several important works

of art with him; Elbert Hubbard, an American philosopher and writer and his wife, Alice; and Alfred Vanderbilt, an American sportsman and millionaire. Of the 1,198 passengers and crew who perished in the disaster, 128 were Americans, which turned American opinion decidedly anti-German. Two years later, the United States entered World War I.

Eight decades later, in peacetime, on September 28, 1994, the seagoing ferry *MS Estonia* sank off the coast of Finland while en route from Tallinn, Estonia, to Stockholm. Despite rescue efforts involving other ferries, ships nearby on well-traveled routes, and helicopters, 852 lives were lost, predominantly Swedes, Estonians, Latvians and Finns plus others from 44 different nationalities.

Conspiracy theories, most of them with military overtones, surround the two disasters. In addition, both have been the subject of documentaries and docudramas, works of art and musical compositions. *Lusitania* is the inspiration for or the subject of six books, the most recent being Erik Larson's *Dead Wake: The Last Crossing of the Lusitania*. A second edition of *The Lusitania Story: The Atrocity that Shocked the World*, by Peeke, Jones, and Walsh-Johnson, with a foreword by Gregg Bemis, was published this past March by Pen and Sword Maritime.

"The controlling cause of each sinking has yet to be properly determined" Bemis said. "This makes both of them appropriate targets for further research and exploration."

The remains of the *Lusitania* and many of its passengers constitute the most famous shipwreck lying on the Irish seabed, and the story of the disaster continues to fascinate. On the 100th anniversary of its sinking, a number of memorial and commemorative events are scheduled in Ireland and the United States. The Friends of the Santa Fe Public Libraries are proud to participate in the commemorations by sponsoring a lecture, "'Toxic Secrets' of the *Lusitania* and the *Estonia*," by Gregg Bemis, who has a long association and involvement with the story of the *Lusitania* and the more recent tragedy of the *Estonia*. Best-selling author Hampton Sides will introduce him.



A graduate of Stanford University and the Harvard Business School, Gregg Bemis has been a prominent and involved resident of Santa Fe for 30 years. During his distinguished career, he has been a principal in the founding and management of more than 40 companies, including several in New Mexico. For three decades, he was a director, chairman, and principal owner of The Ocean Corporation, the world's leading educational facility for commercial divers; he also served as chairman of Deep Ocean Engineering, a world leader in the production of ROVs (remotely operated underwater vehicles). Bemis's deep interest in

underwater maritime history has led him to undertake extensive research into two significant

disasters: the sinking of the *R.M.S. Lusitania* and the *MS Estonia*. In 1982, Bemis became sole owner of the *Lusitania*. As owner and possessor of all salvaging rights, he mounted an expedition to explore the shipwreck off the Irish coast during a dive in 2008. That expedition provided the first proof that the ship was carrying armaments in addition to its civilian passengers, something the Germans had claimed after the sinking but the British denied.

Hampton Sides is editor-at-large for *Outside*, a frequent contributor to *National Geographic* and other magazines, and the author of several highly regarded and popular works of nonfiction including *In the Kingdom of Ice*, *Ghost Soldiers*, *Blood and Thunder*, and *Hellhound on his Trail*. His feature writing has been twice nominated for National Magazine Awards. Sides is the 2015 Miller Distinguished Scholar at the Santa Fe Institute. He was a journalist on assignment at Gregg Bemis's 2008 expedition to the wreck of the *Lusitania*.

Calendar editors

What: "Toxic Secrets" of the *Lusitania* and the *Estonia*

Speaker: Gregg Bemis, introduced by Hampton Sides

Where: Auditorium, New Mexico History Museum (enter from Washington Avenue)

When: Sunday, May 24, 2015, at 2 pm

Cost: Free