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# Lost Voices from the Titanic

Nick Barratt

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# About the Book

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On 15 April 1912 the largest, most expensive, most luxurious ship ever built sank beneath the icy waves of the northern Atlantic. Over one thousand five hundred people perished. Award-winning historian Nick Barratt tells the story of the *Titanic* for the first time in the words of those who designed her, built her, sailed her and survived her.

## About the Author

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Dr Nick Barratt obtained a PhD in history from King's College London in 1996. He started work on television whilst working at the BBC as a specialist archive researcher. He is also in demand as a speaker on popular history and genealogy following his work as a presenter, reviewer and commentator on all aspects of history, notably family history for the BBC on *Who Do You Think You Are?* Nick also wrote a weekly column in the *Daily Telegraph* called 'The Family Detective.'

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# LOST VOICES FROM THE TITANIC

*The Definitive Oral History*

Nick Barratt



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## Outline

If you were to ask someone to name a famous ship from any period of history, you would almost certainly receive the instantaneous response ‘*Titanic*.’ And if you then asked why they chose that particular ship, the words ‘iceberg’ and ‘sunk’ would not be far behind. There have been bigger, faster and more beautiful ships, but the story of the *Titanic* has been etched in our collective memory ever since Sunday 14 April 1912, when it collided with an iceberg en route to New York during its maiden voyage. The ship originally described as ‘unsinkable’ by its owners and designers took just over two hours to fill with water, breaking in two and dragging over 1,500 souls to a watery tomb at the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean. What is perhaps most remarkable of all is not that so many died that night, but that over 700 people survived the sub-zero water and lived to tell the tale.

*Lost Voices From the Titanic* provides a definitive narrative of the disaster in the words of those who designed, built and sailed on the ship, as well as contemporary accounts from the resulting inquiry. Also included are articles from newspapers and journals, which took a morbid interest in the tragedy and its aftermath. It is a harrowing tale, combining incredible folly and unimaginable courage in equal measure, where eyewitness accounts from those lucky enough to survive will transport you back to those heartbreaking moments on that fateful Sunday night when families were separated forever, and those left behind were forced to deal with the reality of their approaching death.

## Historiography

The *Titanic* has been extensively written about over the years – there are literally thousands of titles available, ranging from Walter Lord’s widely regarded *A Night to Remember*, published in 1955 and made into a film of the same name three years later, to the more recent *Titanic Voices: Memories from the Fateful Voyage* (1997), which focused on oral testimony and contemporary accounts centred mainly on the experiences of people from Southampton and its environs who were affected by the tragedy, and another anthology of archival material, *The Titanic: Lost Words* (2005). Public perception of the disaster in recent years has been primarily shaped by dramatisations, such as James Cameron’s blockbuster film *Titanic*, released in 1997 and breaking box-office records at the time as further proof of the ship’s continued allure down the ages. The defining image of the *Titanic* is not Kate Winslet and Leonardo DiCaprio standing on the prow of the vessel as it ploughs through the waves. Yet there is danger in combining historical fact with fictional characters to create drama, as it becomes much harder to separate myth from reality in the public mind, a feeling succinctly expressed in David Mitchell’s novel *Cloud Atlas*:

The workings of the actual past and the *virtual* past may be illustrated by an event well known to collective history such as the sinking of the *Titanic*. The disaster as it *actually* occurred descends into obscurity as its eyewitnesses die off, documents perish and the wreck of the ship dissolves in its Atlantic grave. Yet a *virtual* sinking of the *Titanic*, created from reworked memories, papers, hearsay, fiction – in short, belief – grows ever ‘truer’. The actual past is

brittle, ever-dimming and ever more problematic to access and reconstruct: in contrast, the virtual past is malleable, ever-brightening and ever more difficult to circumvent / expose as fraudulent.

The role of the academic historian is to sift through evidence and compile a narrative, timeline thesis. However, an attempt to produce an account as close as possible to what actually happened, no matter how well intentioned, not only becomes harder to achieve as time passes and eyewitnesses either change their views – coloured by subsequent media coverage or influenced by reflecting on other accounts of the event – or die out, but is also affected and shaped by what the historians considered happened: a type of natural bias. On the other hand, when dealing with a topic that is as famous as the *Titanic* it is important to recognise that certain sections of the story are already well known because of previous media attention, and not only retell these passages but also challenge preconceived ideas. Furthermore, the standard narrative account of the *Titanic* starts and ends with the maiden voyage, the iceberg and the rescue operation by the *Carpathia* – because these are the dramatic events that people remember. This is reflected in many of the publications on offer in bookstores, and increasingly online, which focus on April 1912 and the following months – combining pictures and eyewitness accounts of that fateful night. As Walter Lord explained, when writing on 2 June 1955 to Mrs Helen Melville ‘Mel’ Cooke, daughter of the *Titanic*’s Captain Edward John Smith, he saw his role when compiling *A Night To Remember* almost as that of a tour guide to the past: ‘I just want to recreate the night the *Titanic* went down so that anybody can picture exactly what it was like. I want to re-capture all the little incidents and details. I want to preserve all the drama, excitement and courage that blended with the ice and the stars to make this night so utterly unforgettable. People are growing old now, and I want to do all this before the story fades away.’ (LMQ/7/1/18, National Maritime Museum) Yet the legend of the *Titanic* is equally shaped by public expectations of the ship before it set sail. These were based on context and circumstance that needs to be explored to fully understand why the news of its demise created such a reaction; and why the consequences of the disaster were so far-reaching.

## Aims and structure

In many ways this book aims to bridge the gap between yet another forensic examination of how the ship sank – a topic that was tackled on television in a recent Channel 4 documentary *The Unsinkable Titanic* (2008) – and a simple regurgitation of familiar stories of heroism and tragedy from literature in the public domain to provide the human story behind the disaster. It is easy to list the eight or so key factors that combined to create the unique circumstances behind the tragedy, but this is too clinical for a book of this nature. Instead, the people linked to the *Titanic* need to be given prominence when retelling the story, and this approach has largely determined the structure of the book, with the division of the narrative into three main sections.

The context of the conception and construction of the *Titanic* is given real prominence and forms the first section of the book, because it helps to explain just why the tragedy was greeted with such shock at the time. It contains commentary from sources such as newspapers and the people concerned with the project, who went about their business blissfully unaware of the fate of the *Titanic* and the infamy that would carve its place in history. Therefore, the accounts of the construction process from the workers involved and the reports of the events that marked the conclusion of each successful phase

of construction, testing and fitting out were written primarily from the perspective of how impressive the *Titanic* was from a technical point of view. Similarly, the third section of the book examines how the disaster had a profound effect on maritime safety that is often overlooked. So official sources and newspaper accounts once again sit alongside more personal testimonies that trace how the disaster affected the survivors, perhaps none more deeply than J. Bruce Ismay – the driving force behind the *Titanic*, on board when the ship struck the iceberg and vilified afterwards for a variety of reasons. These two sections act as bookends to the main narrative of the maiden voyage, which features the accounts of those who were lucky enough to escape with their lives and give equal prominence to and emphasise the personal trauma suffered by the survivors. The study of contemporary versions of events prior to the sinking is crucial to understanding the *Titanic* story, for the very reason that they are untainted by hindsight and prior knowledge of the ship's fate. However, one problem is that such accounts are rare, and a large amount of information was gathered by the American and British investigative teams for the official inquiry into the sinking when key players were either dead or naturally reticent about some aspects of their role in the tragedy. These official reports still play an important part but in a slightly different way, which is addressed below.

For similar reasons, it is just as vital that a sense of the confusion surrounding the actual sinking be conveyed. The very nature of the disaster meant that events unfolded at great speed, giving rise to conflicting accounts and often irreconcilable narratives of key moments that have led to historic controversy. Free from the judgements of historians, who often seek the 'absolute' truth in an incident such as the sinking of the *Titanic*, you can make up your own mind about some of the mysteries that still remain: the cause of the tragedy, who was to blame for the events of the night of 14 April; whether a member of the crew committed suicide after being forced to shoot men trying to clamber into the overcrowded lifeboats. The eyewitnesses, and boards of inquiry, certainly had their strong opinions.

## The cast

Given that over 1,500 of those on board the ship were unable to give their view of the disaster because they died in the icy waters, the accounts featured in this book provide a version of events dictated by the scars and prejudices of the survivors. However, some of the voices of the lost are also included in the book – letters written about the ship as it was sailing from Southampton to Queenstown, memorabilia handed to loved ones as the ship was sinking, for example. However, the journey begins and as you will see also ends, with the Ismay family who founded the White Star Line shipping company that owned and influenced the design and construction of the *Titanic*. It was their drive and determination, as well as their rivalry with Cunard, which created the circumstances in which a fleet of super-ships could first be imagined, and then with the help of Harland and Wolff, their long-term business partners in Ireland, turned from a dream into reality.

Yet a book of this nature would be incomplete without hearing from the people who not only designed the ship, but actually built and tested it. The dangers of constructing a vessel the size of the *Titanic* are recounted in newspaper reports of accidents, but the pride that the riveters, plate layers and outfitters felt on completion suggests that working on the *Titanic* was more than just another job. Some of the excitement and anticipation that accompanied both the construction process and sea trials can also be recaptured from documents of the time.

Naturally, the most poignant voices are those recounting the events of 14–15 April 1912. One of



the most vivid accounts was provided just days after the disaster by Mrs Charlotte Collyer, who was on board the *Titanic* emigrating to America to start a new life with her husband Harvey and young daughter Marjorie. Although Charlotte managed to scramble aboard a lifeboat clutching her daughter, Harvey was forced to stay behind on the sinking ship and drowned. After rescue by the *Carpathia* and safe arrival in New York, she was left destitute – all their worldly possessions and money were lost with the ship. Despite drawing funds from the charities established to help the victims of the disaster, she decided to sell an account of her story for \$300 to the *Semi-Monthly Magazine*, and used the proceeds to eventually return home to England. Her story is one of a number of accounts; each adds a different perspective to the chaos and growing terror as the realisation dawned that the ship was in serious trouble, transporting the reader to the heart of the unfolding tragedy.

One potentially significant voice that remains silent in this book is that of the man who had ultimate responsibility for the *Titanic*'s safety throughout its maiden voyage, Captain Edward John Smith. His conduct during the hours before the collision and once the ship started to sink attracted a great deal of criticism from both the popular press and the official boards of inquiry convened to investigate the disaster, yet because he perished with his ship, he was unable to defend himself. Much of the controversy surrounding his role is simply due to the confusion which ensued that night, and he remains one of the lost voices who took his thoughts and feelings with him to a watery grave.

## The sources

As indicated earlier, there is so much secondary literature about the *Titanic* that it can be daunting trying to piece together what happened. These days, however, there are online resources to help you through this maze of information that also contain new data and research. Perhaps one of the best is [www.encyclopedia-titanica.org](http://www.encyclopedia-titanica.org), which includes online access to the passenger lists, biographies of the crew and passengers, and articles written by leading experts in the field.

For the preparation of this book, several key record offices and document collections were consulted. First and foremost, the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich has a massive *Titanic* archive, including the business papers of the Ismay family and the Lord McQuitty collection papers used by Walter Lord to create his book *A Night To Remember* published in 1955. These were in turn based largely on the research of and correspondence to and from Walter Lord for his 1955 book. The National Archives in Kew contain official paperwork relating to the British inquiry, which has been placed online alongside the corresponding US material on [www.titanicinquiry.org](http://www.titanicinquiry.org). The final reports of the inquiries form an important narrative within the book, as both provide key technical data relating to the *Titanic*'s construction as well as a running commentary on how the disaster unfolded. It is amazing to consider how quickly the inquiries were convened – the announcement that a US investigation into the disaster would take place was made even before the survivors arrived in New York on board the *Carpathia*. The speed reflects the shock felt when news of the *Titanic*'s fate started to reverberate around the globe.

Newspaper reports on the construction, sinking and aftermath are held primarily at the British Newspaper Library at Colindale, while regional archives hold their own collections, such as the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, where much of the Harland and Wolff archives have been deposited, along with specialist material in the archives of the University of Glasgow, for example. Resources are not restricted to contemporary paperwork; the BBC created its own archive based on

oral testimonies recorded and broadcast over the years, which can be viewed and heard online [www.bbc.co.uk/archive](http://www.bbc.co.uk/archive). And the last survivor, Elizabeth Gladys ‘Millvina’ Dean, kindly granted an interview during the preparation of this volume; some of her comments made nearly a century after the *Titanic* sank are included here. Sadly, she passed away on 31 May 2009, and it is a great regret that she did not see the publication of this volume.

The location of each source quoted in this book is provided at the end of the transcript. Where possible, contemporary spelling and phrases are used, but where time has rendered meaning slightly harder to comprehend, a note has been added to help with interpretation.

# Acknowledgements

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Although I wrote the text and selected the passages, extracts and key characters that feature in the following pages, the book simply could not have been written without the help and support of some very special people. First, thanks must go to my agent Heather Holden Brown and her assistant El James, who worked tirelessly to secure the contract and – as always – showed great faith in my ability to deliver the finished product. Second, I'd like to acknowledge Trevor Dolby, Nicola Taplin and the publication team at Preface Publishing, who were incredibly encouraging, patient and supportive from the development of the initial concept through to the writing and editing of the manuscript. Without their professionalism, which shines through all these pages, it would not have been possible to produce the book you're now reading. Also, I'm very grateful to Charlotte Young, who helped with the transcription process of all the many documents selected for this book.

I must also comment on the role played by the aforementioned Millvina in shaping the final draft of this volume. As a historian, it is always a thrill to meet someone who was an eyewitness to a major historical event, and Millvina Dean kindly permitted me to film her recollections in February 2009. In preparing for the interview, it was impossible not to view her as almost a piece of living history, the final link with an event that for everyone else on the planet is something they have only read about or seen depicted on screen. Yet when I visited her in Hampshire, she was quick to point out that she was an ordinary person made extraordinary by the event that had made her famous, even more so as the number of remaining survivors diminished until only she remained. Millvina was also keen to stress that she was only a few months old when the ship sank, so had no actual memories of the occasion. Indeed, she only found out she had been present when her mother, Eva Georgette Dean, who also survived with Millvina's older brother Bertram Vere Dean, remarried and told her the story. Eva's first husband, Bertram Frank Dean, had perished in the disaster. Yet, despite the second-hand nature of the account told to her by her mother, it was still an electrifying moment when she described how she had been lowered into the lifeboat in a mail sack and about the momentary fear her mother had felt when she lost sight of Vere and thought he'd been drowned too before discovering that he was being looked after by another passenger in the lifeboat. The matter-of-fact tone of her account and the clear sense of loss she still felt about her father – 'such a handsome man, the love of her [mother's] life' – means that you see the tragedy through her eyes and realise that every account contained in this volume was related by real people whose lives were dramatically affected by the events of 14–15 April 1912.

The biggest vote of thanks must go to Laura Berry, senior researcher at Sticks Research Agency, who undertook the vast majority of archival and picture research for this volume and set up the interview with Millvina Dean. Her ability to unearth highly poignant yet little-known contemporary testimony never ceases to amaze, as did her patient and philosophical responses to my demands for more information as the deadline for the delivery of the manuscript for this book loomed on the horizon. It is therefore to her that this book is dedicated.

The Background and Construction of the *Titanic*

## Historical Background

### The World in 1912

I think it is not untrue to say that in these years we are passing through a decisive period in the history of our country. The wonderful century, which followed the battle of Waterloo and the downfall of the Napoleonic domination, which secured to this small island so long and so resplendent a reign, has come to an end. We have arrived at a new time. Let us realize it. And with that new time strange methods, huge forces, larger combinations – a Titanic world – have sprung up around us.

*The Times*, 24 May 1909

BEFORE THE STORY of the *Titanic* can be told, it is important to consider the period of history in which this iconic ship was conceived, simply because the world was so different to the one we know today. What life was like for everyday folk in the year of the disaster, 1912, is very difficult to imagine, especially from a technological point of view given our familiarity with instant means of communicating with one another, access to information at our fingertips via the Internet, and the ability to travel to the other side of the planet in 24 hours. Plans to design a giant, luxury vessel that would transport its passengers across the Atlantic in comfort and record time – the *Titanic* – whose theoretical top speed was 23 knots, little more than 26 miles an hour, and it would have taken 7 days to travel from Southampton to New York via Cherbourg and Queenstown (now Cobh), Ireland – may appear quaint to someone used to the concept of space tourism in the twenty-first century, but it is easy to forget that in the first few decades of the twentieth century long-distance affordable travel was limited to rail or sea, and was not something to be rushed. Motor cars were still very much a novelty on city streets, as large-scale production had only got under way in 1902; and mechanised flight, which was a reality by 1912, was still very much in its infancy and largely restricted to air shows and military applications – the Royal Flying Corps was formed in this year, and a commercial application for airline travel was still a distant dream.

In short, this was a very different age to the one we are used to. Queen Victoria had only been on her grave eleven years and her grandson, George V, was on the throne; Herbert Asquith was the Liberal prime minister; women were not allowed to vote unless they were property owners (indeed many men were also excluded from the democratic process), although the movement to extend the suffrage was gradually gathering pace; and strict class divisions still existed in British society. The Labour party had only been formed in 1900, the result of decades of struggle by working people and trade unions to gain representation in the electoral system. Strikes and riots featured prominently during this period, with coal miners and dockers protesting on the streets. Tensions were also growing in Ireland, with nearly a quarter of a million loyalist men signing the Ulster Covenant (and a similar number of women signing the parallel Declaration) to reject the idea of Irish home rule and a separate Irish parliament. This was also the year in which Captain Robert F. Scott and his team narrowly failed to become the first men to reach the South Pole, only to find posthumous fame when they perished.

their attempt to return to safety. Shadows of the forthcoming global conflict were already being cast across Europe with the outbreak of war in the Balkans in October, with rumblings of discontent being voiced in embassies across the continent and politicians casting worried glances at the texts of the complicated network of international treaties and the perceived implications of maintaining them. In so many ways, 1912 was to prove a monumental year in history.

For ordinary folk living in Britain at the start of the twentieth century, a real sense of change and modernity could be perceived sweeping across the nation. Concerns about the political situation in Europe and the escalating arms race fuelled by the German empire's plan to create an Atlantic fleet to challenge British naval power were felt by all levels of society, but increasingly those outside the political and industrial elite were concerned with the acquisition of wealth and reaping the rewards of Britain's economic success over the previous half-century. Public health reforms, slum clearance and the creation of institutions to care for vulnerable members of society had improved living conditions for thousands of hitherto poor or lower-working-class families, while the regulation of child labour, improving health and safety standards and rising pay had ameliorated some of the worst features of the Industrial Revolution and brought a measure of disposable income to the workers, as well as to the captains of industry. Consequently, there was a new market for consumer goods, and spare money was often spent on trips away – the birth of the holiday. An integral part of this process of material aspiration and economic growth was Britain's status as an island nation, reliant on the ocean as a means of communication with the rest of the world free from borders and other physical barriers to trade.

## Britannia Rules the Waves

In 1877, Mr. Ismay offered to place the whole of the White Star fleet of steamships, then – as now – among the swiftest in existence, at the disposal of Her Majesty's Government for service as cruisers or transports in event of war.

*Liverpool Daily Post*, 1 December 1899

By the start of the twentieth century the British empire stretched around the world, and maritime trade was at the heart of its success. Traditionally, London had dominated trade and continued to play a major role, but the increasing size of vessels required to carry goods to places such as India, the Far East and Africa and the sheer volume of trade meant that the Pool of London and its associated docks were near to capacity. Western provincial ports such as Liverpool enjoyed a boom during the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, based predominantly on transatlantic trade; in 1906, for example, the main goods being traded in and out of Liverpool were raw cotton, meat, corn and cereals, India rubber, wool, live animals, copper and timber. Tobacco was the tenth-largest import in this year, worth only a fraction of the value of the raw cotton that came into the docks for distribution to the hungry mills of Lancashire and beyond, and the resultant cotton-based manufactured products that were then exported around the world. Make no mistake, this was big business: imports in 1906 accounted for just under £147 million, and exports £150 million, making the value of all goods flowing through the port £297 million.

Transatlantic sea freight was not restricted to cargo and goods – it's easy to forget in our age of mobile phones, text messages and emails that written correspondence was the main means of communication, with letters, parcels and packages carried around the world in steamships. Lon

distance messages could be communicated by telegraph, with cables connecting Britain and America since the mid-nineteenth century – ironically, the *Great Eastern*, a predecessor of the *Titanic* for the title of world's greatest steamer and famous for its own construction problems, laid the first successful transatlantic cable in 1865 and 1866 – and telephone technology was still in its infancy. Most people with relatives abroad, or whose business relied upon the transportation of packaged items, were therefore reliant on written communication, and mail packets, as they were known, formed a regular and intricate network of sailing routes across the globe.

Yet not only messages found their way around the world on a regular basis. Transatlantic shipping catered for a burgeoning passenger market, one that had existed since Britain had founded its North American colonies and then repaired its relationship with the United States of America after the War of Independence (1775–1783). Crucial was the formation of companies – such as Cunard in the mid-nineteenth century – that ran regular steamship services across the Atlantic from western and southern ports in Britain and Ireland to America's east coast. Speeds across the ocean gradually increased, cutting the journey time from months to weeks, so that by the end of the century it was possible to reach America in under a fortnight. Many people sought to leave Britain's shores permanently, to start a new life in the land of opportunity. Some were being squeezed out of traditional lines of work in agriculture, for example – while others were more opportunistic, seizing upon the expansion of America into its western states via the growing railroad network to travel to the California goldfields to find their fortune, or simply signing up to one of the construction gangs building the railways, cities and heavy industrial plants springing up all over the continent.

America was also seen as a place to escape hardship and persecution. In the 1840s many thousands of Irish fled the ravages of the Potato Famine in 'coffin ships', so called because of the very real chance they would die during their voyage from disease – cholera and typhus were rife on sailing vessels and steamships – or from drowning when overcrowded ships were lost in storms at sea. Other dangers included fire, starvation and even murder. Many families held 'living wakes' before the ship set sail, certain that they would never see their loved ones again even if they did make it across the ocean to a new life.

By the end of the century, other waves of immigrants were heading for America via British ports. East European Jews, fleeing the pogroms in the Russian empire in the 1880s, often stopped off in Britain, joining the growing transatlantic passenger trade with their few remaining possessions grabbed at the start of their flight months or even years before. The numbers heading to America from Britain and Europe grew so large that in 1892 an immigration station was opened on Ellis Island, New York, to process the hordes of applicants who arrived hoping to take up residency. In 1907 over 1.2 million people passed through the 'Island of Tears'.

The growth of passenger freight between Britain and America was not restricted to people seeking a new home. The globalisation of trade, culture and politics and the close relationship between the two countries saw increasing numbers of wealthy passengers crossing the Atlantic on a regular basis. They desired not only speedy transportation but also comfort and luxury, and were prepared to pay for the privilege. Consequently, shipbuilders focused on providing new ways of transporting passengers from all walks of life as quickly, yet as profitably, as possible, and the ocean-going liner was developed with different standards of accommodation priced according to status and the size of one's wallet.

First-class passengers could expect to enjoy the height of comfort on their journey – a floating top-rated hotel experience – with quality entertainment, spacious cabins and only the best food and drink, while second-class customers could reserve a small berth or cabin, and enjoy a reasonable standard of accommodation. However, for those heading overseas because of poverty or persecution, necessi-

meant the cramped conditions of steerage – rooms situated between the passenger decks and the cargo hold, holding as many bunks as possible, with only the basic requirements for survival, often without heating, light or even proper ventilation. Even on the most luxurious liners, deaths occurred among the poor souls crammed below decks, even though they usually made up the majority of people on board.

In addition to commercial requirements, another darker factor lay behind the development of large-scale vessels during the first decade of the twentieth century – the arms race. Britain's international pre-eminence was largely due to its dominance of the seas through the Royal Navy, which had gone largely unchallenged since Nelson's legendary victory over Bonaparte's fleet at Trafalgar in 1805. A century of ruling the waves, however, had not led to complacency, and the Admiralty was involved in extensive research and development to ensure its ships were at the cutting edge of naval technology. An important relationship had developed between the commercial sector, where shipping magnates had invested vast sums of money building up the merchant marine – as shown by the ever-growing annual publication of British-registered vessels in *Lloyds Shipping Lists* – and the British government.

A navy capable of spanning the globe was incredibly expensive, so the Admiralty needed to be able to command suitable merchant-class vessels to support, and on occasion take part in, its operations during times of war. On occasion, the government was prepared to subsidise the development and commissioning of mercantile vessels capable of adaptation for naval use. The benefits were considerable, for both sides – shipping companies involved were able to afford larger and faster vessels with the capability of armed defence, and the government could point to the tax revenue advantages of supporting a key economic sector, while growing its reserve of ships for use during times of national crisis. Cunard, the main rivals of the White Star Line (which built the *Titanic*), were to benefit from this strategy, as *The Times* reported on 26 February 1903:

#### THE NEW SUBSIDIZED STEAMERS FOR THE CUNARD LINE

It was announced last year that the Government was prepared to advance money on terms advantageous to the Cunard Company if they constructed two large vessels of exceptional speed for the Transatlantic service, and further to add a large annual subsidy, conditional on the designs and tests meeting with the approval of the Admiralty. It was conclusively proved during the Cuban war that fast mail steamers with light armament but of great coal capacity were desirable adjuncts to a fighting fleet; it is possible that further consideration might have caused the vessels that were hired to have been employed during that war on more useful service than cable cutting; but the enormous disparity on the scene of action between two contending fleets is not likely to be reproduced in any coming war between two great European Powers ... The Germans now have several large and fast steamers whose capabilities meet the views of their owners and of their Government, and they are faster over an ocean journey than any owned in this country at the present time. They are vessels of 21,000 tons of displacement, and in moderate weather make Atlantic passages at nearly 23 knots speed with a coal consumption of some 24 tons per hour, burned in producing about 37,000 indicated horse-power; they vary from 663 to 678 feet in length with 67 to 72 feet beam, and the largest of them has 28 feet draught. These would form admirable ocean scouts in war, and if loaded to their utmost coal supply would have an extended range at reasonable speed.

Designs for the new Cunard ships are nearly complete and model experiments have reached finality, but the vessels are so much beyond precedent in size and contemplated speed that an



element of uncertainty causes anxious consideration. They will be approximately 760 feet on the water line with 80 feet in beam ... The engines of the new vessels are contemplated for over 60,000 horse power and are expected to drive the vessels at a sea-speed of some 25 knots on a coal consumption of 46 tons per hour. The vessels will be luxuriously fitted in every way and will carry a whole colony of crew and of passengers, and each vessel will cost about a million and a quarter pounds sterling. Few existing firms of shipbuilders have plant adequate for constructing vessels of such unprecedented dimensions.'

*The Times*, 26 February 1903, National Maritime Museum TRNISM/6/1 (618) folder 5

Subsidising the construction of merchant vessels to supplement the fleet freed up money to develop a new category of ship that would change the world. The first decade of the twentieth century was a time of escalating tension between Germany and Britain, particularly regarding competing colonial interests in Africa. Germany had been fiercely critical of Britain's handling of the Boer War and to protect and expand its own influence on the continent needed a fleet to rival Britain's. This resulted in the first arms race of the twentieth century, fought in the offices of naval architects and realised in shipyards across the British Isles. In 1905 the Admiralty confidently announced that it would take only a year and a day to commission and construct a new super-ship, and – true to its word – HM *Dreadnought* was ready to set sail at the end of 1906.

This was the first in a new class of battleships that transformed naval warfare and led directly to the escalation in weaponry that would prove so devastating when global conflict finally broke out in August 1914. Having studied the 1904–5 Russo-Japanese War, in particular the way long-range guns had decimated the Russian fleet, the British opted for an all-big-gun battleship with a top speed of 21 knots – faster than any other contemporary military ship of comparable size, with screw shafts driven by steam turbines as opposed to conventional screw propellers – and thick armour plating covering the entire external structure, providing protection against similar weaponry. This made every other large military vessel obsolete overnight. The race was on to construct a new generation of warships, and as a result the high seas had suddenly become more dangerous.

## The History of the White Star Line

The White Star Line at once leaped to a foremost place in Atlantic enterprise, and other companies, in their own interest, promptly imitated them in regard to that luxurious and complete comfort which to-day marks the Atlantic liner.

*Liverpool Daily Post*, 1 December 1899

These were the main political, social and military circumstances in which the *Titanic* was conceived. It is easy to view the struggles taking place for control of world trade as essentially nation against nation, but this is an oversimplification given the fierce rivalry that existed between the three leading British shipping companies that had emerged in the nineteenth century. The most venerable of the three was the Cunard Steamship Company, whose origins can be traced to the business founded when Samuel Cunard was awarded the first British contract to carry mail via steamship across the Atlantic in 1839 – the British and North American Royal Mail Steam-Packet Company. It held the Blue Riband for the fastest transatlantic voyage for the best part of 30 years, then fell behind its rivals, reformed

the Cunard Steamship Company Limited to raise capital funds, and embraced the emerging technology to regain its position of prominence. Two lines in particular rivalled Cunard in terms of size and ambition. The Inman Line (which traded under a variety of names such as the Liverpool Philadelphia and New York Steamship Company and latterly the Inman and International Steamship Company) operated from 1850. Inman outperformed Cunard in the 1860s with the construction of faster ships, and began to win mail contracts from its elder rival. By the 1870s, Inman ships were carrying more passengers to New York than Cunard, offering quicker journey times and winning the Blue Riband on several occasions.

However, the key player for the story of the *Titanic* was the White Star Line, a company which had originally been founded in Liverpool by John Pilkington and Henry Threlfall Wilson but went bankrupt in 1867. A certain Thomas Henry Ismay then entered the scene, and bought the name and flag of the failed company for £1,000 the following year, with the express intention of creating a fleet of ocean-going vessels to challenge the dominant position of Cunard and Inman. Thomas Ismay was born in Maryport, Cumberland on 7 January 1837 and came from a shipbuilding family – both his grandfather and father had constructed wooden vessels in their own shipyards – and Ismay joined the family profession, working an apprenticeship in Liverpool with a company of shipbrokers before spending time at sea. He went into partnership with a friend of his father, Philip Nelson, though the business did not last, and married Margaret Bruce on 7 April 1859, daughter of shipowner Luke Bruce. He established himself in Liverpool, where he contrived to make his own way in the world. The capture of the White Star Line showed his driving ambition to succeed was wedded to his belief that big was better and iron was best.

As the inspiration behind the revived company, Ismay coupled his experience as director of a shipping line with his long-standing relationship with the financiers and merchants of Liverpool. One of his main supporters was the German-born Gustav Christian Schwabe, a remarkable character whose interests extended beyond maritime trade into the construction of ships. Indeed, Schwabe was instrumental in facilitating the partnership between his nephew Gustav Wilhelm Wolff and one of Schwabe's protégés, Edward James Harland, who had gained employment on the recommendation of Schwabe in the firm of marine engineers Robert Stephenson and Company in Newcastle upon Tyne. In 1858 Schwabe helped Harland purchase Robert Hickson's shipyard at Queen's Island, Belfast, the cornerstone for the company Harland and Wolff, founded in 1861. In 1869, over a game of billiards Schwabe persuaded Ismay to assign the construction contract for his proposed fleet of White Star Line ships to Harland and Wolff; in return Schwabe would provide the necessary funds to make Ismay's vision come true. Shortly afterwards, in 1870, Ismay invited an old friend from his days as an apprentice, William Imrie, to join the management of the company, and the main planks of the resurrected White Star Line were in place.

Ismay died on 30 November 1899, and his obituary in the *Liverpool Daily Post* the following day contains a brief history of the company he'd run for so many years. It clearly shows that the large scale commercial shipping companies operated under the shadow of government intervention and the constant threat of war, but also demonstrates the influence Ismay wielded over the company, and how highly he was rated by his contemporaries.

DEATH OF MR. T. H. ISMAY  
A Remarkable Career  
Revolution in Atlantic Enterprise

The announcement which we have to make to-day with profound regret, that Mr. Thomas H. Ismay, the founder of the White Star Line, expired at twenty minutes to seven last evening, at his residence, Dawpool, Cheshire, will be received in Liverpool with unqualified sorrow. The immediate cause of Mr. Ismay's death was failure of the heart's action after operations for an internal trouble. By this untimely death commerce is deprived of a giant leader, whose enterprises have conferred upon Liverpool in particular, and the country at large, benefits which are at first view difficult to appreciate. Mr. Ismay was not only an extraordinary genius in mercantile affairs, but a genial and popular man, personally esteemed by all the world, whose character, both personally and commercially, stood, through a great and long career, high above reproach ...

Mr. Thomas Henry Ismay was a son of Mr. Joseph Ismay, shipowner, of Maryport, Cumberland. He was born in 1837, the year of the Queen's Accession. In 1853, at the age of sixteen, he came to Liverpool, and served an apprenticeship with Messrs. Imrie and Tomlinson, shipowners and shipbrokers. He was the architect of his own fortune, for, although his father carried on with some success the business of a shipbuilder at Maryport, of which place he is a native, he came to Liverpool having little capital except his own natural and acquired qualities. These, however, soon won for him a place as a business man of acknowledged value ... In 1867 he acquired the business of the White Star Line of Australian clippers.

The history of the White Star Line takes us back to the old style of small sailing vessels, in which there had been little appreciable change for centuries past, and includes the transition from these to the magnificent sailing clippers which carried Her Majesty's Australian mails, and further to the new order of leviathan steamships such as now fly the White Star flag. It is unnecessary to describe at length the revolution effected in the Australian trade by the clipper-ships, which in the course of seven years conveyed half-a-million adventurers to the goldfields, and were until quite recently almost the exclusive carriers of the steadily increasing commerce between the Colonies and the Mother Country.

In 1867 the managing owner of the White Star Line retired, and an important change took place in the destinies of the line. Mr. Thomas Henry Ismay took over the flag, and very shortly signalled the change of ownership by introducing iron ships instead of the wooden vessels formerly employed. But the great event in the history of the flag came two years later, in 1869, when Mr. Ismay, deeming the moment ripe for the introduction into the Liverpool and New York trade of a high-class passenger service, induced some friends to join him in the formation of the Oceanic Steam Navigation Company.

The new company was initiated with boldness and judgment, and the shares of £1,000 each, fully paid, were at once privately taken up by Mr. Ismay's firm and their friends, including some of the most substantial names in England. In the year following the foundation of the Oceanic Steam Navigation Company, Mr. Ismay was joined in the management by Mr. William Imrie, of the late firm Imrie, Tomlinson, and Co., in whose office he and Mr. Imrie had been fellow-apprentices. The firm now became Ismay, Imrie, and Co ...

In forming the new company, he had resolved, as already mentioned, to compete for a share of the passenger traffic between Liverpool and the United States. This lucrative business, including a huge and steady emigration, was then shared between the Cunard, Guion, and Inman Companies. The project of establishing a new company was, however, well planned. Mr. Ismay saw that finality in the Atlantic trade was far from having been reached in 1870. He

perceived, indeed, not only that great changes were ahead, but that fortune waited upon initiative. ~~With that policy he began, and in that policy he continued.~~ Thoroughly acquainted with the construction and management of ships, and with a remarkable power of organisation and method, he introduced a new style of steamer, more economical than any yet in use, but swift and elegant. This vessel, the first *Oceanic*, was built by Messrs. Harland and Wolff, who have since built steamers for Messrs. Ismay, Imrie, and Co., at a cost of some seven million sterling.

The points of departure on the part of the new company may thus be summarised: First, by increasing the length of their vessels in proportion to breadth, they enlarged the cargo capacity without adding expenses; secondly, they increased the engine power to ensure greater steadiness; thirdly, they introduced the midship staterooms and saloon. Atlantic liners which preceded the first *Oceanic* had saloon and staterooms in the after-part where the noise of the screws and the motion of the ship were at a maximum. The change to midships was so universally appreciated that the White Star Line at once leaped to a foremost place in Atlantic enterprise, and other companies, in their own interest, promptly imitated them in regard to that luxurious and complete comfort which to-day marks the Atlantic liner. Mr. Ismay was, in truth, the inventor of luxurious ocean travel. The result has been a development of traffic which thirty years ago would have exceeded the most sanguine dreams, and a knitting together of England and America in bonds of mutual interest and knowledge which must profoundly affect the history and well-being of the world.

The first *Oceanic* was launched on the 27th August, 1870, and sailed for New York on her first voyage under the White Star flag on the 2nd March 1871. She was followed in quick succession by the *Baltic*, *Republic*, *Adriatic*, and *Celtic*, forming a complete service of steamships equalling in speed and surpassing in accommodation any ships then afloat. The White Star Line is now one of the great shipping enterprises of the world ...

In 1877, Mr. Ismay offered to place the whole of the White Star fleet of steamships, then – as now – among the swiftest in existence, at the disposal of Her Majesty's Government for service as cruisers or transports in event of war, the outcome of his proposals being the arrangement since made with some of the great steamship lines for securing the services of their vessels in time of national emergency. In 1889 and 1890 were introduced the celebrated twin-screw mercantile armed cruisers *Teutonic* and *Majestic*, each 10,000 tons, which have since made for themselves so great a reputation in the New York mail and passenger service ... At the end of 1891 Mr. Ismay retired from the partnership with Ismay, Imrie, and Co., leaving the business of the firm to be carried on by Mr. Bruce Ismay ...

In politics Mr. Ismay was a Liberal Unionist, and a member of the Reform Club, but he steadily declined to seek Parliamentary honours. He nevertheless found time to serve the public in other ways, having been appointed on several Royal and Departmental Commissions, including ... (the) Board of Trade Life-Saving Appliance Committee (of which he was a chairman in 1889), concerning which Sir M. Hicks Beach afterwards said, in a speech to the Associated Chambers of Commerce: 'It was presided over most ably by a man whose name is a household word among shipping men' ...

The close and lucrative association between the White Star Line and the shipbuilding industry of Belfast was marked by the presentation to Mr. Ismay, on the 20th July last, of the honorary freedom of that town. The name of the Right Hon. W. J. Pirrie, head of Messrs. Harland and Wolff, the famous shipbuilding firm, who have constructed the entire White Star

fleet, was the first to be inscribed on the roll of Belfast's honorary freemen. Mr. Ismay's name was the second to be written on that distinguished roll, because as chief of the White Star Company he had contributed substantially to the prosperity of Belfast. The orders carried out by the Queen's Island firm for Mr. Ismay represented 300,000 tons of shipping, and involved an aggregate payment of £7,000,000. The disbursement of this enormous sum was spread over a period of thirty-five years, or practically the lifetime of the White Star Line up to 1899. To Mr. Ismay, therefore, Belfast was much indebted, and the ceremony of enrolling him as an honorary citizen was made the occasion of general rejoicing. The working men of the borough felt a tribute was due from them, and with the sanction of the Lord Mayor their several thousand modest subscriptions purchased the beautiful golden casket in which the scroll of citizenship was presented to Mr. Ismay. Such spontaneity from these artisans touched Mr. Ismay deeply, and drew from him a heartfelt acknowledgement ...

Mr. Ismay said that during the long connection, extending over thirty-five years, between Messrs. Harland and Wolff and his firm, many difficult problems had presented themselves, involving much anxious thought; but he did not know that there had ever been any monetary dispute between them, nor could he recall an unfriendly word in the course of a unique business relationship ... These remarks were received with enthusiasm. And well they might be. Was there ever such a business connection before? Those who knew Mr. Ismay will say that such commercial relationship was natural with a man of his broad mind and generous instincts.

*Liverpool Daily Post* 1 December 1899, from the National Maritime Museum

This article was written shortly after Ismay's final act in control of White Star – commissioning *Oceanic (II)* – which was to have profound consequences for the direction the company would take over the next decade, and would ultimately create the circumstances in which the *Titanic* was envisaged and commissioned. Since establishing White Star as a major player on the commercial shipping stage, Ismay had raised the stakes for the whole industry and his competitors, in particular the Cunard liners, with whom White Star vied for control of the lucrative North American market using the speed, size and luxury of their respective fleets. After the decision to commission the second *Oceanic* in 1899, White Star Line made a conscious effort to focus on the quality of experience its passengers would enjoy, rather than speed, which meant that subsequent ships had to be even bigger and more impressive to not only attract first- and second-class passengers, but also to retain the capacity to take large numbers of poorer third-class passengers heading for a new life in Canada or the USA. The sheer cost of constructing such fleets meant that it became harder to remain competitive and during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries many of the smaller or less competitive shipping lines were bought up or amalgamated into larger companies, increasingly financed abroad. As profits fell in the face of growing competition, the Inman Line ran into financial difficulties and declared voluntary liquidation so that it could be bought out by its largest creditor, the International Navigation Company, in 1886. The new venture was eventually consolidated into the American Line, subsidiary of the International Navigation Company, in 1893.

The obituary of Thomas Ismay showed the importance of relationships at boardroom level between White Star and Harland and Wolff; yet the 1890s saw a changing of the guard during this critical time for the industry. Thomas Ismay was succeeded as managing director by his son Joseph Bruce Ismay, who was to play a central role in the *Titanic* story. Equally, Harland and Wolff lost its

main founder Sir Edward Harland in 1895, and William James Pirrie – later Lord Pirrie – assumed control of the venture as chairman. Nevertheless, despite the continuity within the two companies' boards it became increasingly difficult for family-founded shipping lines to remain afloat without international finance. The passing of Thomas Ismay forced the White Star Line to enter into negotiations behind the scenes with major international financiers to secure the future of the company in an increasingly uncertain climate.

The new money was to come from America, with the creation in 1902 of the International Mercantile Marine Company. This was a trust fund established by Clement Griscom, who controlled the American Line and Red Star Line under the International Navigation Company banner, John Ellerman of the Leyland Line and Bernard Baker of the Atlantic Transport Line. Also purchased at the same time was the British-based Dominion Line. Bankrolling the venture was the considerable fortune of financier John Pierpoint Morgan, whose business acumen was behind General Electric and the United States Steel Corporation, as well as the powerful J. P. Morgan and Company financial house. To the shock of the shipping world, the final player in the partnership was revealed to be the White Star Line and J. Bruce Ismay. Although Griscom initially assumed the presidency of the new company, Ismay was appointed to the position in 1904 after pressure from White Star Line shareholders. Although the White Star vessels continued to fly the British flag, the government was so concerned by the appearance of this essentially American shipping giant that it granted the subsidy to Cunard to create its two superliners, described earlier in *The Times* in 1903.

The reason for Cunard's concerns – and those of the government – soon became clear. With funding from J. P. Morgan, White Star had real hopes that it would be able to rebuild its dominance under the International Mercantile Marine Company banner, and between 1901 and 1907 sent out a clear demonstration of intent with the construction of the so-called Big Four ships, *Celtic*, *Cedric*, *Baltic* and *Adriatic*. These were truly giant vessels of 24,000 tons, with the ability to carry up to 2,000 passengers in third class as well as 400 or so in first and second class. While speed had been sacrificed to sheer size, the numbers the ships could ferry across the Atlantic continued to create a profit for White Star, even though other lines within the International Mercantile Marine Company group failed to prove as successful, leading to fears that the ambitious venture might fail within a few years of its conception.

British dominance of the Atlantic sea trade was a source of great national pride, and even three years after the creation of the new group, there were still doubts that the International Mercantile Marine Company would benefit British interests. Concerns for the future of White Star were expressed in *Fairplay* magazine in May 1905:

What most people do feel is the keenest regret that such a magnificent line as the White Star, not to mention the other great lines associated with it, aggregating nearly one million tons of our best shipping, should have passed from British to American ownership, and from British to American control. The Combine fleets are American to the backbone; Americans found the capital, and it is Americans who appoint and pay the managers on this side. It is nothing but a mere pretence to say that through the technical wording of the Company's Act they are in any sense British, though through this technicality they are allowed to fly the British flag, a fact which most people regard as nothing less than a public scandal.

*Fairplay* 25 May 1905 National Maritime Museum TRNISM/6/1 folder 8

Concerns over control of a key British company were also shared by long-standing partners Harland and Wolff, whose contracts to build White Star Line vessels had depended on agreements made through personal connections forged in the 1850s and 1860s. Although Harland and Wolff had constructed the Big Four, J Bruce Ismay still felt the need to write to Lord Pirrie to reassure the shipbuilder that their special relationship was safe, outlining his own position as president of the new company in the process:

March 2nd, '04  
(off Queenstown)

My dear Pirrie,

Your kind messages reading as follows:

*'Our most sincere congratulations. We all look forward to many years pleasant work with you, and assure you of our hearty and full cooperation,'* reached me on board of the 'Cedric' the day I left New York, and it is hardly necessary for me to say how very much I appreciate the kind thought that prompted you to send same, and how grateful I was to receive the assurance of your hearty and full co-operation.

You will readily understand I did not accept the position of President of the I.M.M. Co. without giving the matter earnest and careful consideration, and had I purely considered my own feeling would, without hesitation, have declined same, but finding Mr. Morgan, Mr. Steele, Mr. Griscom and many other friends interested in the I.M.M. Co. with very strong views as to what I should do, eventually acceded to their request. I may say that in coming to this decision I was largely influenced by personal feelings and also by the fact that I felt I should receive the hearty, loyal and active co-operation of all connected with the I.M.M. Co., for without this it would be quite impossible to hope to achieve any measure of success.

We must all realise that the fortunes of the I.M.M. Co. are at an extremely low ebb, and it means a great deal of anxious and hard work to pull it through, and although I am not at all sanguine as to the future of the Company, believe if we all work together, and do all possible in the years to come we may possibly see some slight return for our efforts, but the immediate future is surrounded with serious difficulties.

The most pressing one, to my mind, is the question of finance, and it is in this respect that you can give us much assistance and relief. I know the Company is largely indebted to your Firm, and we must do all possible to reduce this liability; all I ask is that you should make it as easy as possible, and not press us unduly. I do not think there is the least ground for any uneasiness on your part, as no doubt in time the indebtedness will be wiped out, and no one is more alive to the present position than Messrs. Morgan and Steele, who are quite prepared to allow your claims on the I.M.M. Co. to be considered as a prior indebtedness to that of the Company to their Firm.

It was most pleasing to me to see the evident determination on the part of Mr. Morgan to make the I.M.M. Co. a success, if possible, and he is, I am sure, willing and anxious to do all in his power to attain this end ...

In the meantime, things generally are as bad as they can be, and the outlook gloomy in the extreme. We are in a state of war in the Mediterranean trade, in the Atlantic trade both passengers and freight (the Provision rate being 3/- per ton), and much fear from my latest advices that we are in for a serious upheaval in Australia and New Zealand, but shall do

*everything possible to avert the latter ...*

~~*Well, I have undertaken a big job, and look to you to help me all you can, and feel sure I can rely on your loyal and hearty help and support. Again thanking you for your kind cable, and trusting Mrs. Pirrie and you are well, and with my kindest remembrances to both,*~~

*Believe me,*

*Yours very sincerely,*

*(Ismay)*

*The Right Hon. W. J. Pirrie, LL.D., D.Sc.,*

*Queen's Island,*

*Belfast*

National Maritime Museum TRNISM/2/2

Clearly, the new venture needed to win over public hearts and minds, and coupled with their long rivalry with Cunard – especially given the British-government-backed plans to build the two super liners – it is easy to understand the background to White Star's grand schemes to take on and beat its domestic and international rivals to a degree never seen before. By 1907 Ismay and his backers at the International Mercantile Marine Company were ready to raise the stakes once again.



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