

Titanic:

A Review of the Literature

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Abstract

This literature review presents the argument that the historiography of the *Titanic* started in 1955 with Walter Lord's book that sparked a growing interest in the topic. From that point forward, the works on the *Titanic* have been published regularly and have built on each other. Each new study broadens the spectrum of what is discussed about the event and uses the changes in society since 1912 to interpret the lasting effects. This essay looks at six key sources published over the years since Lord's work and shows how they connect and contribute to the field. These sources encompass the changing historiography and the different ways in which historians and scholars write about the *Titanic*.

In 1908, the *Titanic* began construction in an Irish shipyard owned by Harland & Wolff. The ship was 882 feet long and 92 feet wide and weighed over 46,000 tons. It was the largest and most luxurious ocean liner built up to 1912. With sixteen watertight compartments and the most up-to-date maritime technology, the *Titanic* was advertised by British White Star Line as unsinkable. On April 12, 1912, the day of its maiden voyage from Southampton to New York, the ship held 2,206 passengers and was equipped with only twenty lifeboats that could hold a maximum of 1,178 passengers. The passengers came from every social class and from very different walks of life, however, all would meet the same fate.

On April 14, 1912, an iceberg was spotted by Captain Edward Smith twenty minutes before midnight. The *Titanic* had received multiple warnings of icebergs from other passing ships, however, the wireless communication operator was overrun with other messages due to the testing of the new technology. Despite these warnings, the iceberg was spotted too late and dragged across the starboard side of the liner, flooding six compartments and two boiler rooms. Upon impact, the third-class passengers on the lower level felt something like a severe earthquake and panicked, while the first-class travelers on the upper deck barely felt a shudder. When the captain declared that the ship was going to sink, crew members began loading the lifeboats in an attempt to remain organized. First-class women and children were instructed to board the lifeboats first, which caused a panicked rush of passengers. Crew members began sending off the first few boats only half full amidst the chaos and disregard for lower class passengers. The captain ordered the crew to abandon ship at midnight, and the final lifeboat left with 1,507 passengers still on board. The ship broke in half due to the pressure of the water, and

submerged completely at 2:20 a.m., resulting in 1,517 deaths. By the next morning, the *Carpathia* was able to make it to the scene and rescue 705 survivors from lifeboats.

Over the past century, there have been many works on the *Titanic*. Scholars studying it write from a variety of different angles and expertise. This has resulted in a very extensive coverage of the *Titanic* and its engineering, the people involved, social consequences, and the event's role in media and society. As the years passed, more information about the shipwreck has been uncovered and the body of literature expands. There was little scholarly work on the *Titanic* until the 1950s, when interest in the subject began to flourish. Each new monograph used previous findings and research to build upon and write from a different angle. As new primary sources were uncovered and studies offered new theories, scholars were able to consider more evidence and better see the event as a whole. The key monographs published by scholars at the forefront of the field were released fairly consistently. Each bring a new way of thinking and analyzing to the historiographical timeline.¹

The first major work on the *Titanic* is Walter Lord's *A Night to Remember* published in 1955. Before it, the tragedy had not been written about by scholars, and the public interest was low. Lord's best-selling monograph gives a compelling narrative of the last night aboard the *Titanic*. He uses interviews from survivors to pull together a complete and detailed telling of the tragedy, with pictures showing the crew, passengers, and other surviving evidence. Lord brings the reader to the last night aboard, going from the boiler rooms to the first-class lounge and the

¹ There are also key primary sources that add to the research on the *Titanic*. See Lawrence Beesley, *The Loss of the SS Titanic: Its Story and Its Lessons* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1912). This book was written almost immediately after the disaster by one of the survivors. It gives one of the first factual accounts of the shipwreck. See also John Bernard Walker, *An Unsinkable Titanic: Every Ship its Own Lifeboat* (New York: Mead and Company, 1912).

activity of the captain and crew. Lord focused mainly on the people involved and the dynamic between the social classes and how they all ended up in the same doomed situation. The impact on readers was emotional and powerful, and it sparked a massive national interest practically overnight. The book was made into a 1958 British movie as well as an audio tape, and had a widespread reaction that relieved some of the public's anxieties about the Cold War and transferred that attention to a one-of-a-kind story of heroism and loss. Lord's background as an American historian and professional researcher allows him to convey one of America's most iconic stories in a compelling and groundbreaking manner. Lord's book is the first of its kind and influences the course of almost every important *Titanic* study. He provides the first secondary scholarly source that gives both a factual telling of the story and insight into the lives of survivors. In doing this, Lord sets the stage for other historians to build on the newfound interest.²

Robert Ballard's book *The Discovery of the Titanic* is a major piece in the *Titanic* literature that uses Lord's initial work to build upon with a breakthrough study. Ballard is a retired professor of oceanography and Navy officer who discovered the *Titanic* wreckage with a Franco-American expedition in 1985. Published in 1987, *The Discovery of the Titanic* is a primary source based portrayal of his initial discovery of the ship wreckage and his re-visit a year later by submarine.³ Ballard gives a detailed account of how the *Titanic* sank based on his study, as well as how he and his team were able to locate it in the vast North Atlantic. Scholars view this work as a necessary source that uses high quality images of the ship underwater,

² Walter Lord, *A Night to Remember* (New York: Holt, 1955).

³ Robert Ballard, *The Discovery of the Titanic* (New York: Warner Books, 1987).

comparing it to images taken in 1912. Ballard was able to use his extensive expertise in oceanography and marine technology to find and piece together information that was not available previously. His discovery of the ship and how it sank changed the way scholars were able to study and write about the *Titanic*. There was a brief gap in literature written between Lord and Ballard because there was little information on the event outside of the interviews Lord wrote about. Writers finally had access to the facts related to what actually happened that night; therefore, the historiography expanded greatly from this point forward, and every source published after Ballard's finding connect directly to his research.

After the discovery of the shipwreck, Lord re-entered the scene to write a sequel to *A Night to Remember*. In *The Night Lives On*, published in 1986, Lord continues his well-researched narrative, this time with Ballard's findings to explore deeper content.⁴ Instead of focusing just on the night of the wreck, he is able to also cover the events leading up to the maiden voyage, and what happened afterwards. Like in the first book, Lord is careful to tell all sides of the story objectively while still writing in a readable and attention-grabbing manner. He analyzes in detail the ship's safety policies, what could have been avoided, and the impact of the iceberg, using Ballard's discoveries and putting meaning to them in a story-like account of the event. He also goes into detail about the political and social repercussions of the event, and how it changed regulations entirely. Once again, Lord sets a baseline for *Titanic* literature by bringing new angles of scholarly discussion and by adding the new information to the previously known story.

⁴ Walter Lord, *The Night Lives On* (New York: Morrow, 1986).

After the discovery of the wreckage and Ballard's analyzation of his findings, scholars were able to shift their focus to more abstract angles. Paul Heyer. A professor at Simon Fraser University, published his 1995 book *Titanic Legacy: Disaster as Media Event and Myth* that takes a closer look at the story of the *Titanic* in media and culture.⁵ Heyer argues that the *Titanic* started a new era of media and communication that changed the way information was dispersed nationally and that was affected by the disaster on different levels. He also emphasizes that information was spreading through mass media at unprecedented speeds, creating a shock wave effect and changing mass communication globally. He discusses different types of media (newspapers, films, magazines) and how they worked together to create a continuous flow of information to the public. He supports his argument by showing the media coverage at different stages of the *Titanic* story. He starts by discussing the plan to build the liner and the implications of creating and advertising this monumental feat. He then analyzes the technological aspects of the ship's communication and how those aspects of shipbuilding changed after the *Titanic* sank. He writes about the event's appearance in media and the new ways communication and newsgathering were used to convey messages to the public. Lastly, he covers how the tragedy is remembered in American culture. Unlike the previous two sources that focus on the people and the sinking, Heyer adds the constant repercussions to society and media to the historiography of the *Titanic*. Heyer's background as a professor of communication allows him to provide this angle of study and discuss the *Titanic* as a legacy that continues to be introduced in different ways. His focus on the media is the beginning of a new way of thinking about the disaster and is expanded in later works.

⁵ Paul Heyer, *Titanic Legacy: Disasters as Media Event and Myth* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1995).

In yet another different approach to the history of the *Titanic*, Steven Biel tackles the vibrancy of the legend in society in his 1996 monograph *Down with the Old Canoe*.⁶ He argues that the story is so vastly popular because it caters to the interests and needs of different groups of people and ties to some of the most prominent social and political issues in the years after the Progressive Era. Unlike other historians, he focuses on the “deep and wide resonance” of the *Titanic* disaster throughout America. The first part of his book talks about the aftermath of the shipwreck in society at the end of the Progressive era. He specifically discusses how different groups, most prominently feminists, use the story of the *Titanic* for different purposes such as class, gender beliefs, and women’s rights. The *Titanic* “myth” discussed by Biel is full of class struggle that could be seen as first class superiority or third class heroism, as well as views of feminism shown when women give up their seats on lifeboats to save others. Because these issues are persistent in society, Biel argues that the *Titanic* will remain as one of the most iconic American stories. Biel’s main sources are newspapers, periodicals, and editorial columns that emphasize the use of the *Titanic* story to benefit different social stances. His work emphasizes how the changing times in American society directly affect how the story of the *Titanic* is received as well as how scholars write about the event’s repercussions.

These four sources show the transformation of the *Titanic* historiography from a position of obscurity to expansion of different analysis and ideas. Lord’s book is used as a starting point that launched scholars into a field of interest that resulted in multiple major works. At this point in the timeline of *Titanic* literature, it is clear that as time passed after the discovery of the

⁶ Steven Biel, *Down with the Old Canoe: A Cultural history of the Titanic Disaster* (New York: Norton & Company, 1996).

shipwreck, writers were able to look at the disaster as a bigger picture event. Biel's work is a prime example of the broadening scope of discussion about the tragedy. Each new source uses the approaches of others to open up a new way of thinking, which grows scholarly and public interest in the field.

Another big picture secondary source is the official documentation of the disaster published by the Southampton City Council. This book, published in 1997, is composed mostly of primary sources such as letters and photographs from the time of the sinking and from the wreckage itself. The authors use these sources to link events and tell a factual, all-encompassing story. This book adds to the historiography of the *Titanic* by using obscure and hard to obtain primary sources that may have otherwise not been found or analyzed. This allowed the authors to provide a more personal telling of individual stories and details in the narration while still completing its informative and legal purposes. This book tells the *Titanic* story from the perspective of Southampton, the final destination of the maiden voyage and a port greatly affected by the deaths of crew members. The *Titanic* disaster, as shown by this source, was a global event that deeply affected communities and nations. As more information becomes accessible, secondary sources are able to encapsulate more details and better tell what really happened the night of April 14.⁷

Daniel Allen Butler published a book in 1998 in which he analyzes the *Titanic* not as an isolated event, but as a “chain of events and decisions that began years before the *Titanic* was even built.” In “*Unsinkable*”: *The Full Story of the RMS Titanic*, he argues that if there had been

⁷ Donald Hyslop, Alastair Forsyth, and Sheila Jemima, *Titanic Voices: Memories from the Fateful Voyage* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997).

a change in any aspect of the story, whether it involved the construction, the people involved, technology, or even sea conditions, the end result would have been different.⁸ He uses primary sources and reliable secondary sources to tell the story from beginning to end, bringing to light controversial issues in an objective manner. His extensive thirty-year study of the *Titanic* allows him to give all of the necessary details and angles he considers when forming his argument. Some reviewers write that though the book is well-researched and factual, Butler brings little new information to the literature. While this may be true, he succeeds in creating an overall picture that ties each detail to the next. In his domino-effect approach, he adds an even broader viewpoint to the historiography of the *Titanic*.

After Butler's book, there was a shift in what was focused on in scholarly works about the *Titanic*. Rod Green is the first scholarly author to write a monograph focused entirely on the design and construction of the ship, which brings an entirely new area of study to the discussion. As shown in the previous sources, much was written and analyzed about the *Titanic's* voyage and sinking and the social and political implications. In *Building the Titanic: An Epic Tale of the Creation of History's Most Famous Ocean Liner* published in 2005, Green adds a key piece to the literature by giving a detailed description of the stages of construction, the Irish work force building the ship, and the designers themselves. In doing this he explains what made the *Titanic* the most technologically advanced ship of its time, including further discussion of the size, wireless communication and radio, advanced electricity usage, and unprecedented maritime additions such as elevators and a swimming pool. He offers in-depth details on who was

⁸ Daniel Butler, *"Unsinkable": The Full Story of the RMS Titanic* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1998).

involved in the design of the ship, including chief naval architect Thomas Andrews, who died the night of the disaster. Green also writes about the company Harland & Wolff that was in charge of all aspects of the construction, and British White Star Line, the company that advertised and sailed the *Titanic*. In addition to providing the facts on the construction, engineering, and dimensions of the liner, Green analyzes how the shipbuilding techniques used were standard to those of earlier maritime construction despite the massive size and innovation of the *Titanic*. This lack of specialized technique, Green argues, resulted in tragically inadequate safety measures. Green uses over a hundred original pictures and diagrams to support his claims and provide visuals of unique attributes on the *Titanic*. His work branches off from the previous studies on this subject, therefore continuing to add to the historiography. His book is one of the more recent publications that shows how the wreckage of the ship continues to provide new information that allow for a deeper analysis of the event.⁹

The *Titanic* literature is rich with many key scholarly works that cover a variety of angles. There appears to be a gap in major publications between Walter Lord's 1955 book and Robert Ballard's 1987 book. This is most likely because there was a lack of information to base study beyond Lord's narrative on. After 1985, when Ballard discovered the *Titanic* wreckage, scholars began consistently publishing new approaches and ideas in their works. The timeline of this literature shows how each work is connected to the next, and how over time, the accumulation of new information about the *Titanic* allows scholars to consider a broader perspective in their individual analysis. The *Titanic* historiography is made complete in its

⁹ Rod Green, *Building the Titanic: An Epic Tale of the Creation of History's Most Famous Ocean Liner* (Pleasantville, N.Y: Reader's Digest, 2005).

variety of focuses, and the literature is able to continue scholarly and public interest. As previously stated, there has been so much written on this subject that there may not be new, historiography-altering works being published at the same rate they have been in the past. However, the study of the *Titanic* seems to be deeply imbedded in American culture, from the movie “Titanic” directed by James Cameron, to the centennial of the sinking. The works written on this American tragedy will remain relevant for years to come.

I Pledge that I have not given nor received unauthorized help on this work.

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