

Titanic Literature Review

On the frigid night of April 14, 1912, the R.M.S. *Titanic* struck an iceberg and sunk to the bottom of the North Atlantic Ocean, which claimed the lives 1,500 passengers and crew. In a decade filled with infamous disasters such as the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire and the 1915 *Lusitania* disaster, the *Titanic* sinking made headlines around the world and the reaction led to significant changes to maritime travel. Due to the massive loss of life in the sinking and the large amount of public outcry, the U.S. Senate began an official inquiry into the tragedy and the transcript became an important primary source relating to the *Titanic* disaster that authors and historians used for their studies. While there were numerous primary and secondary sources published the century following the disaster, the 1912 U.S. Senate Hearing transcripts and Walter Lord's 1955 monograph *A Night to Remember* help set up the foundation for the historiography on the *Titanic* sinking and its immediate aftermath.

Ever since the *Titanic* sunk beneath the waves, interest in the subject has been up-and-down due to several important events such as centennials or important historical discoveries. In the weeks following the sinking, primary sources consisted of survivor interviews published in newspapers and transcripts of official inquiries on both sides of the Atlantic with no monographs published on the subject. Once the tragedy became part of history and the only major primary source on the *Titanic* subject being the 1912 U.S. Senate hearing transcripts, it was not until Walter Lord published his 1955 monograph *A Night to Remember* that interest in the *Titanic* disaster was renewed and historians and authors proceeded to publish monographs on different subjects (e.g., how the ship was constructed) relating to the "unsinkable" ship. Between significant events such as Robert Ballard's 1985 rediscovery of the wreck and the 1997 James Cameron film *Titanic*, more secondary sources related to the *Titanic* sinking were released and new information on the sinking helped educate new generations of readers. When the centennial

of the disaster occurred in 2012, authors and historians (e.g., Daniel Butler Allen and Wyn Craig Wade) used the opportunity to update and revise their monographs while publishers saw marketing ploys or cash grabs.

A week after the *Titanic* sinking, the U.S. Senate started an official inquiry into the disaster and the transcripts of the hearing provide the best primary source material relating to the *Titanic* sinking. With Senator William Alden Smith leading the investigation and asking the tough questions, the transcript of the inquiry provided 82 interviews with surviving passengers and crew and gives an in-depth chronological account of the disaster.¹ While White Star executive Bruce Ismay gets most of the attention, other notable people interviewed during the inquiry include Guglielmo Marconi (inventor of the Marconi radio used in the disaster) and George Otis Smith (director of the United States Geological Survey). Since the transcripts are public records and stored in the U.S. Senate archives (transcripts also exist at the *Titanic* Inquiry Project), numerous historians and authors (e.g., Walter Lord and Daniel Allen Butler) list the primary source in their book's bibliography and use the transcripts as a starting point in their research.

When it comes to primary sources about survivor testimony during the *Titanic* disaster, *A Survivor's Story & the Sinking of the S.S. Titanic* combines separate testimonies of two first-class passengers: Jack Thayer and Archibald Gracie IV.² While both primary sources were jotted down in the months following the tragedy (Jack Thayer's account was private and not publicly released until after his tragic suicide), each survivor's account provides a different perspective on

¹ "U.S. Senate: Titanic Disaster Hearings: The Official Transcripts of the 1912 Senate Investigation." accessed September 18, 2019. https://www.senate.gov/reference/reference_item/titanic.htm.

² Colonel Archibald Gracie and John B. Thayer, *Titanic: A Survivor's Story & the Sinking of the S.S. Titanic* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2005). Accessed October 29, 2019. ProQuest Ebook Central.

their experiences onboard the *Titanic* and how they survived the disaster. When historians and authors analyze 17-year old Jack Thayer's *The Sinking of the S.S. Titanic*, his account explores how he was turned away from the lifeboats due to the "women and children" rule along with his survival when the lifeboat (Collapsible B) overturned into the ocean. In the aftermath of the disaster, Jack Thayer also illustrated six images of the *Titanic* disappearing beneath the waves and rarely discussed his travel aboard the ship before his suicide in 1945. In the second part of *A Survivor's Story & the Sinking of the S.S. Titanic*, Archibald Gracie IV's account *A Survivor's Story* (originally published as *The Truth About the Titanic*) showcases how the first-class passenger survived the disaster and selfishly saved lives in the process. After the sinking, Gracie interviewed other survivors in the disaster's aftermath and attended and testified during Day 11 of the U.S. Senate hearings. Although Gracie passed away in December 1912 and his account was published the following year, his book was later used by Walter Lord in *A Night to Remember* and Lord called Gracie a "defatigable detective" for being "invaluable for chasing down who went in what boat." After Lord brought Gracie's *The Truth About the Titanic* to light, additional researchers such as Daniel Allen Butler and co-authors Charles A. Haas and John P. Eaton have used both survivor testimonies in their research and cited them in the bibliographies of their respective monographs.

Out of all the secondary sources published on the *Titanic*, the most detailed and comprehensive monogram published on the subject is Walter Lord's 1955 *A Night to Remember* and its importance helped established the historiography of the *Titanic*. With a background as a narrative historian hailing from Princeton University and Yale Law School, Walter Lord had a childhood interest in the sinking of the *Titanic* and he interviewed 63 survivors for the testimony

of the sinking.³ Once Lord had finishing recording and interviewing the survivors, he gathered further information from the U.S. Senate's inquiry transcripts, letters from the survivors, and magazine articles (e.g., *Harper's* and *Illustrated London*) published after the sinking. Even though the *New York Times* and other major newspapers published articles that provide decent coverage of the sinking, Walter Lord was not "satisfied" with the articles since they were "unreliable" and he preferred local newspapers where the survivors lived. Upon its publication in 1955, *A Night to Remember* became a commercial success and has since been praised by historians and authors as being the definite resource for the sinking of the *Titanic*.

Due to the popularity and success of *A Night to Remember* along with the discovery of the wreck in 1985, Walter Lord was able to write a 1986 sequel titled *The Night Lives On*. Unlike its predecessor, *The Night Lives On* builds on the content from *A Night to Remember* by providing updates on information learned after 1955 (e.g., how the *Titanic* broke apart during the sinking) and separates popular *Titanic* myths from fiction (e.g., what songs the *Titanic* band played) along with exploring the aftermath of the disaster (e.g., the U.S. Senate inquiry).⁴ **Error! Bookmark not defined.** Unlike his original book where Lord has access to the original survivors, the majority of the survivors were deceased, and Lord had to track down the survivors' descendants to find additional primary sources (a letter from survivor George Rheims written to his nephew provides insight on the ship's final moments). In addition to primary sources, Walter Lord enlisted the help of the *Titanic* Historical Society (specifically authors Charles A. Haas and John P. Eaton) and Robert Ballard to provide additional information on the

³ Walter Lord, *A Night to Remember* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1955), 205-06.

⁴ Walter Lord, *The Night Lives On* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1986), 182-85

wreck along with combing obituaries and discovering interviews from the *Californian* crew about their role in the sinking.⁵

While news of Robert Ballard's discovery of *Titanic*'s wreck was making international headlines in 1985, *Titanic* International Society historians Charles A. Haas and John P. Eaton published their comprehensive book *Titanic: Triumph and Tragedy* in 1986 and proceeded to publish revised and updated editions in 1995 and 2012.⁶ Having co-wrote and published four additional books on the *Titanic*, both historians were intrigued in the disaster at a young age and joined the *Titanic* International Society in 1989.⁷ Even though the book covers the events that led to the sinking of the *Titanic*, *Titanic: Triumph and Tragedy* mainly follows the international aftermath of the disaster such as the U.S Senate *Titanic* hearing transcripts and formation of the Ice Patrol.⁸ In addition to accessing resources from the *Titanic* International Society and the U.S. Senate Inquiry transcripts, Haas and Eaton used Walter Lord's *A Night to Remember* for research and constantly praises Lord for establishing the historiography. *Titanic: Triumph and Tragedy*'s coverage of the disaster's aftermath makes the book an important part of the historiography and later historians and author will cite the book within their respective bibliographies.

Around the time the 1997 film was released in theaters and became a worldwide phenomenon, historians and authors were publishing books and articles to educate and inform readers about the *Titanic*'s sinking. To coincidence with the worldwide interest in the film,

⁵ Ibid., 187-88.

⁶ Charles A. Haas is a former high school teacher who holds a master's degree in journalism from William Paterson University. At a young age, his grandfather gave Haas a copy of *A Night to Remember* and he studied microfilm of newspapers covering the disaster throughout high school and college. When he co-founded the *Titanic* Historical Society with John P. Eaton, he became president of the organization ("About Our Trustees").

⁷ John P. Eaton is a retired admitting officer for Roosevelt Hospital and he is the co-founder of the *Titanic* Historical Society with his official role begin an historian. Having an interest in the *Titanic*'s crew, Eaton serves as an historical consultant on diving expeditions along with working on artifacts ("About Our Trustees").

⁸ John P. Eaton and Charles A. Haas, *Titanic: Triumph and Tragedy* (New York: Norton, 1986).

Daniel Allen Butler published his 1998 book *Unsinkable: The Full Story of the RMS Titanic* which explores the entire history of the RMS *Titanic* from a historical context using primary sources such as survivor interviews along with drawing material from Walter Lord's monographs along with John P. Eaton's and Charles A. Haas's *Titanic: Triumph and Tragedy*.⁹ With his background being a maritime and military historian from Hope College and Grand Valley State University, Butler previously published books on numerous topics around World War I (ranging from the sinking of the *Lusitania* to the end of the Ottoman Empire) and he studied the history of the *Titanic* for over thirty years. Once the book was published, Butler's work was used by authors Andrew Wilson and historian Richard Davenport-Hines for their research for their books that were published for the ship's centennial.

Although author and clinical psychologist Wyn Craig Wade passed away in 2006, his 1979 book *The Titanic: End of a Dream* was posthumously updated into *The Titanic: Disaster of a Century* in time of the disaster's centennial.¹⁰ Having graduated from the University of Wisconsin, Wyn Craig Wade published *The Titanic: End of a Dream* by analyzing analyzed material from the U.S. Senate hearings along with Walter Lord's *A Night to Remember* and survivor testimonies. Once the book released with an updated edition in 2012, it used additional resources such as Daniel Allen Butler's *Unsinkable*, John P. Eaton and Charles A. Haas' *Titanic: Triumph and Tragedy*. Regardless of the primary and secondary sources used in the research of both editions, *The Titanic: End of a Dream* explores the inadequate safety measures (e.g., lack of lifeboats) and the negligence of the administration and crew during the disaster (e.g., ignorance

⁹ Daniel Allen Butler, *Unsinkable: The Full Story of RMS Titanic* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1998) 336-41.

¹⁰ Wyn Craig Wade, *The Titanic: Disaster of a Century* (New York: Allworth, 2012).

of icebergs warnings). Upon the book's initial publication in 1976, Wade's work was later cited by Daniel Allen Butler and Richard Davenport-Hines in their respective books about the *Titanic*.

Following a running theme of books and articles published around the *Titanic*'s centennial, Australian author Robert J. Strange wrote his monograph *Who Sank the Titanic?: The Final Verdict*.¹¹ Having a background in being a crime reporter and executive producer on documentaries on National Geographic and Discovery Channel, Strange explores the *Titanic* sinking as a criminal investigation and starts at the very beginning when the ship was being constructed in the Belfast shipyards. Upon Strange's analysis of the brittle steel onboard the *Titanic*, he blames everyone related to the sinking (the crew, builders, and even government officials) for negligence and even proclaims the disaster as a "mass-homicide". **Error! Bookmark not defined.** At the end of his book, Strange organizes his bibliography into four sections (books, periodicals, government reports, and websites) and combines primary and secondary sources from the last century (ranging from the U.S. Senate transcripts to Butler's *Unsinkable*).¹²

Although his book was released months before the centennial, Andrew Wilson published his 2011 book *Shadow of the Titanic: The Extraordinary Stories of Those Who Survive* to show historians and readers what happened to the survivors in the aftermath of the sinking. With his background being an award-winning journalist for the *Guardian* and *Washington Post* in addition to publishing four biographies, Andrew Wilson uses primary sources such as diaries, memoirs and interviews from the survivors along with drawing material from Walter Lord's *A*

¹¹ Robert J. Strange, *Who Sank the Titanic? The Final Verdict* (Barnsley, England: Pen & Sword Maritime, 2012).

¹² *Ibid*, 205-8.

Night to Remember and Daniel Butler Allen's *Unsinkable* to explore their stories.¹³ In his book, Wilson uses his research to illustrate to readers how survivors coped with the aftermath wherever it was a steerage passenger committing suicide at a young age or the scandals and public disgraces following first class survivors such as Lady Duff Gordon (who is accused of voting against her lifeboat picking up survivors in the water). In a January 23rd, 2012 book review published in *Publisher's Weekly*, a reviewer writes that Wilson "manufactures Freudian complexes" and "soap operas" on the *Titanic* survivors and blames any unfortunate disasters on the sinking itself (one survivor died of high blood pressure *three* decades after the sinking) despite giving a "gripping account" of the sinking.¹⁴

While Andrew Wilson focuses his book on the survivors, British historian Richard Davenport-Hines uses his 2012 book *Voyagers of the Titanic* to explore the background and lives of the passengers and crewmen aboard the infamous vessel. Having been educated at Selwyn College in Cambridge, Davenport-Hines published books on various subjects ranging from historical to philosophical and he wrote an additional 2012 book on the subject titled *Titanic Lives: Migrants and Millionaires, Conmen and Crew*.¹⁵ Using primary sources in the form of news articles and survivor testimonies from the U.S Senate *Titanic* Disaster Hearing, Davenport-Hines used the material to explore the crewman and architects of the ship such as Bruce Ismay or Captain Edward Smith.¹⁶ Along with the primary sources, the endnotes and acknowledgments

¹³ Andrew Wilson, *Shadow of the Titanic: The Extraordinary Stories of Those Who Survived* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2011), 401-03.

¹⁴ Review of *Shadow of the Titanic: The Extraordinary Stories of Those Who Survived* by Andrew Wilson. *Publishers Weekly* 259, no. 4 (January 23, 2012): 155–56.

¹⁵ Richard Davenport-Hines, *Titanic Lives: Migrants and Millionaires, Conmen and Crew* (London: HarperPress, 2012).

¹⁶ Richard Davenport-Hines, *Voyagers of the Titanic: Passengers, Sailors, Shipbuilders, Aristocrats, and the Worlds They Came From* (New York: William Morrow, 2012).

note the usage of additional information from Walter Lord's *A Night to Remember* and Daniel Allen Butler's *Unsinkable*. In her 2012 book review of *Voyagers of the Titanic* in the *Library Journal*, Meghan Hahn Frasier praises Wilson for exploring the motivations passengers had for coming to the United States and describing the living conditions aboard the first-class liner while she nitpicks minor historical inaccuracies (e.g. the meaning of the SOS signal).¹⁷

Upon closer examination of the historiography of the *Titanic*, the one thing historians and authors have in common is that they use Walter Lord's *A Night to Remember* and the U.S. Senate *Titanic* inquiry transcripts as their starting point for their research. Although the U.S. Senate *Titanic* inquiry transcripts are the best primary source on the disaster of the *Titanic*, Walter Lord's research and preparation into writing *A Night to Remember* had profound effect on the historiography of the *Titanic* and influenced historians and author to publish their own monographs on different subjects. For example, authors Charles A. Haas and John P. Eaton were influenced at a young age by reading *A Night to Remember* and they joined the *Titanic* Historical Society in 1989 along with co-publishing *Titanic: Triumph and Tragedy*. For other authors like Daniel Allen Butler and Andrew Wilson, they use Wade's *The Titanic: Disaster of a Century* and Haas and Eaton's *Titanic: Triumph and Tragedy* as research material along with writing books to add and build on the topics published in previous books.

When it comes to examining the historiography of the *Titanic*, there is a massive range of books and articles written by authors and historians that cover the sinking and its immediate aftermath. While there are numerous book and articles published in the century following the sinking, authors and historians use Walter Lord's monographs and the U.S. Senate *Titanic* transcripts for their research. Once the initial books are published, other historians and authors then proceed to build their research for their books and articles like if the subject was coming full

¹⁷ Megan Hahn Fraser, "A Night Remembered." *Library Journal* 137, no. 4 (April 2012): 108–9.

circle. Even though the sinking of the RMS *Titanic* occurred over a century, the memory of the disaster is remembered by the numerous literature published by historians and authors along with the public's massive interest in the subject.

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