

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 64

“A Night to Remember”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

She was the largest and most luxurious ocean liner ever built, the epitome of modern technology.

But after her tragic maiden voyage, she would come to epitomize something more: greed, shortsightedness, unthinking class distinctions, and above all, the hubris of a society that is not so advanced as it thinks it is.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 64. A Night to Remember.

Back in episode 41, when we talked about dreadnoughts and the naval race between Britain and Germany, I mentioned in passing the construction of the British passenger steamship *Lusitania* in 1906. That was the same year that *Dreadnought* was launched. *Lusitania* and her sister ship *Mauretania* were, at the time they were launched, the fastest and most luxurious passenger ships afloat, taking advantage of design innovations that had been pioneered by the Royal Navy for *Dreadnought*.

But there's more to this story. At this time, the transatlantic passenger trade was booming. By the late 19th century, the wealthy elites of Europe and America were accustomed to being able to travel across the Atlantic in comfort aboard a steamship in less than ten days. As you are no doubt aware, there was also a great deal of emigration from Europe to North America during this period, particularly to the United States. These passengers tended to be of a much more modest means and traveled in “steerage,” basically in converted cargo holds, with minimal accommodations. Privacy was nonexistent, the food was terrible, if they fed you at all, and the rest room was a bucket. But at least it was fast.

Britannia rules the waves, of course, and Britain has not only the largest navy, but the largest merchant fleet, and the best passenger liners. In the nineteenth century, Britain dominated passenger service across the Atlantic. By the beginning of the twentieth century, Cunard Line

and White Star Line were the dominant British passenger lines. But the Americans were in the game too, and by this time, Germany is a rising naval power, and two German companies, Hamburg Amerika and Norddeutscher Lloyd, are claiming ever larger shares of the market in transatlantic travel.

As a spinoff of the German naval buildup during this period, German shipbuilding is getting better and better all the time. These two German firms are now operating passenger liners to America that are larger and faster than their British competition. The Germans have gotten the transatlantic run down to under six days. Now, this slight to British pride has not gone unnoticed. The Germans also have the advantage of departing for America from Hamburg, which is easier to reach for European emigrants of modest means. The fancy first-class accommodations on the top deck may get most of the attention, but you know, it's not the first-class passengers who are your profit margin, it's the miserable people down in the bowels of the ship, just like on the passenger airliners in our day. So the bottom line is, the Germans are getting ever larger shares of the more lucrative passengers, and shipping them across the ocean faster.

Meanwhile, remember the trusts of the early twentieth century in the United States? Our old friend J.P. Morgan has put together a trust called the International Navigation Company, which combines many of the American passenger lines as well as the British White Star Line. And Morgan's trust did deals with the German companies to divvy up the transatlantic trade in a mutually profitable way.

If you've been keeping track of your companies here, you will have noticed that this leaves the Cunard Line out in the cold. Cunard is now the only major British passenger line that's still really British.

The British government viewed this situation with alarm, and responded with subsidies to help keep Cunard in the business and competitive with these foreign-owned companies that are claiming ever larger shares of the transatlantic trade. And so, in episode 41 we saw the construction of *Lusitania*, a new breed of passenger liner, for the Cunard Line. Besides benefiting from the advances in ship construction that led to dreadnought battleships, she also benefited from those British subsidies intended to keep Cunard competitive.

At the time of her launch, *Lusitania* was the largest and most luxurious passenger liner in the world, superseding the German liner *Kaiser Wilhelm der Grosse*. She was also the fastest, reclaiming that title from the Germans as well. All this did much to ease the hurt to Britain's pride. She was joined a year later by her sister ship, *Mauretania*, which was even bigger and even faster.

So, good for British morale, but it puts the White Star Line in an awkward place. Her ships are now inferior to her competition. So it was time for White Star to up its game. The company commissioned three new ships, state of the art, to respond to this challenge. They would be come to be called: *Olympic*, *Titanic*, and *Britannic*.

Now you may have noticed it has become company tradition that Cunard ships would be given names ending in –ia, while White Star ships got names that ended in –ic. White Star’s new ships would be larger than *Mauretania*, but the company decided that it was too much to try to beat that ship on size and speed both, so they settled for winning on size. To make up for the fact that the *Olympic*-class ships would be slower, White Star was determined to make them the most comfortable and luxurious passenger liners afloat.

Ships for the White Star Line were constructed at the Harland and Wolff shipyard in Belfast, Ireland. The two companies had an arrangement where Harland and Wolff built all of White Star’s ships, on a cost plus five percent basis. Harland and Wolff had to demolish three of their drydocks and build two new, larger ones to accommodate this project. The first two hulls, for *Olympic* and *Titanic*, were laid down just three months apart, and these first two ships were built almost in parallel. Construction of the third ship in the project, *Britannic*, would begin only when these two were completed.

The first-class accommodations on these ships reached new levels of luxury. The goal here was nothing less than to provide an environment in which the passengers could all but forget they were even on a ship. It would be more like spending a week at an exclusive resort. The cabins were paneled in carved wood. Some even had private baths. There were restaurants, a gym, a Turkish bath, a lending library, a smoking room, a café decorated with live palm trees, and more. Most famously, these ships had a grand staircase seven stories high, with a skylight above, to allow the stairs to be illuminated in natural light.

Even the passengers down in third class got comforts not seen before. The White Star Line kept its single men passengers in the forward part of the ship, and single women and families in the aft. This did a lot to address the chronic problem of sexual assault of women in third class, a scandal that had plagued passenger liners for decades until White Star finally decided to do something about it. Additionally, third class passengers, instead of living in dormitory-style accommodations, got rooms, albeit rooms they would have to share with several other passengers.

The *Olympic*-class ships also were constructed with sixteen watertight compartments that could be closed in an emergency. The ships could stay afloat with any three of the sixteen compartments flooded, and in most cases, with four or even five compartments flooded. It is sometimes said that these ships were advertised as “unsinkable.” I can’t actually find any historical evidence that any such claim was ever made, although you can find claims along the lines of “practically unsinkable” or “virtually unsinkable.” Ships like these were so large and sturdy that the possibility of one of them being lost at sea was all but dismissed. Cue dramatic music.

[music: Dramatic Music]

This brings us to the matter of lifeboats. These ships did not carry enough lifeboats to evacuate everyone on board. The British Board of Trade regulations did not require enough lifeboats to evacuate everyone on board. This is because no one was envisioning a scenario in which the ship would have to be completely evacuated while at sea. Lifeboats were for shuttling passengers and crew off a helpless ship and onto a different ship, and it was thought that there would be plenty of time for the lifeboats to take multiple trips. For example, in 1909, the White Star liner *Republic* was involved in a collision with another ship in fog off the coast of Massachusetts and sank. But although two passengers aboard *Republic* were killed immediately in the collision, the Marconi Wireless operator was able to signal for help, and the other 740 people aboard were safely evacuated to other ships before *Republic* went down.

Olympic began her maiden voyage on June 14, 1911. Her captain was Edward Smith, who would later captain *Titanic* on her maiden voyage. Also aboard was Thomas Andrews, the designer. He, too, would be aboard *Titanic* on her maiden voyage.

Olympic made four Atlantic crossings without incident. But as she left Southampton on her fifth voyage, on September 20, 1911, she was involved in a collision with a Royal Navy cruiser, *HMS Hawke*. *Hawke* had a reinforced bow, intended to ram enemy ships, and she struck *Olympic*'s starboard hull, tearing large holes both above and below the water line. Two of *Olympic*'s 16 watertight compartments were flooded and a propeller shaft damaged, but in spite of this, *Olympic* remained afloat, no one was killed or seriously injured, and the ship was able to return to Southampton under her own power. That *Olympic* managed to cope as well as she did, in spite of such a serious collision by a ship that, after all, was *designed* to sink other ships, only served to vindicate the claim that modern ocean liners like *Olympic* were just plain too large and too sturdy to be at risk of actually sinking.

Olympic had to return to the shipyard at Belfast for repairs, and the need to get her back into service as quickly as possible meant delaying the completion of *Titanic* by a few weeks. Ironically, although the collision between *Olympic* and *Hawke* had cost no lives directly, it forced rescheduling of *Titanic*'s maiden voyage, which would be indirectly responsible for terrible loss of life.

Titanic would begin her maiden voyage out of Southampton at noon on April 10, 1912. She was capable of carrying over 3,300 passengers and crew, and under normal circumstances the maiden voyage of a brand new luxury ocean liner, the pride of her line, could be expected to sell out. But this was not the case with *Titanic*. You'll recall there was a lot of labor strife in Britain at this time, and the country had just experienced a serious coal strike. The resulting shortage of coal was causing rail and steamship cancellations.

Titanic's own departure from Southampton was almost postponed because of the strike, but her owners requisitioned coal from every other White Star and American ship in port to enable

Titanic to make her scheduled run. Which, in hindsight, is tragic, since a delay would have prevented a terrible loss of life.

Still, because of the coal strike, *Titanic* was only carrying about 1,300 passengers, about 55% of capacity, which, in hindsight, is fortunate, given what is about to happen. *Titanic* also carried a crew of almost 900. That sounds like a lot, but bear in mind that most of this crew are engineers and firemen, who look after the engines, and stewards and galley workers, who look after the passengers. There were only six officers and 39 seamen aboard.

It was standard practice at this time for ships headed for New York not to take the most direct great circle route—that would have had the ship virtually brush up against Newfoundland along the way—but rather to make for a designated point, called “the corner,” about 1200 miles almost due east of New York City, thus keeping a good distance south of Newfoundland, and then turning west for the final run to New York.

The reason for steering around the corner is to avoid the Labrador Current, which carries icebergs south from Greenland and delivers them into the North Atlantic. The glaciers along the west coast of Greenland deposit tens of thousands of chunks of ice into Baffin Bay and the Labrador Sea every spring. Most of these icebergs meander around until they melt, but a small percentage of them are carried south, past Labrador and Newfoundland and into the Atlantic. When the Labrador Current reaches the warmer waters of the North Atlantic, fog often forms, and the combination of fog and icebergs makes for tricky navigation. For centuries, mariners have avoided this region, known as “iceberg alley.”

So far, the year 1912 has seen an exceptional number of icebergs reaching the North Atlantic shipping lanes. Exceptional, but not unheard of. The years 1904 and 1896 had also seen a lot of icebergs.

[music: Overture to *Oberon*]

Titanic's voyage was without incident until Sunday, April 14. She had turned the corner that day, and was now headed directly west toward New York City. She was also sending and receiving a lot of radio traffic.

We've already talked about radio. In this period, it was primitive, capable only of sending and receiving in Morse code. Still, it was great for ships at sea. Wireless services for *Titanic* were provided by Marconi Wireless. *Titanic*'s transmitter was five kilowatts, with a 350-mile range, and she had not one, but two radio operators, Jack Philips, who would celebrate his 25th birthday during *Titanic*'s voyage, and his assistant, 24-year old Harold Bride. Bride would survive the coming *Titanic* disaster, Philips would not. Having two wireless operators meant that *Titanic* could keep its radio going 24 hours a day, unlike most ships, which had only one operator, and would shut down their radios at night, while the radio operator was sleeping.

That same day, April 14, the Cunard ship *Carmania* arrived in New York. Her captain reported encountering icebergs in numbers and sizes greater than anything he had seen before. More than twenty-five of them, and each one more than 400 feet tall. It was like navigating through a mountain range. There was so much ice that it was producing its own fog banks, forcing *Carmania* periodically to cut her engines when visibility got too low.

There was a field of icebergs flowing south from Iceberg Alley, perhaps 60 nautical miles from east to west and almost 200 nautical miles from north to south. *Carmania* had just grazed it. One of her passengers described the sight as “beautiful, but scary.” *Titanic* was now headed at full speed right into the middle of it.

She was not alone in that regard; there were other ships making the crossing through this region, and they were using their Marconi Wirelasses to warn each other of the hazard. At 9:00 that morning, the Cunard ship *Caronia* sent Jack Philips a message warning of ice ahead. Philips relayed the message to Captain Smith. At 11:20 AM, *Titanic* received a warning from Hamburg-Amerika’s *Amerika*. Two other ships, including *Baltic*, another White Star ship, added their warnings shortly thereafter.

Shortly after 12:00 noon, *Titanic*’s wireless failed, a horrifying thought for those of us who know what fate awaits her. It took Philips and Bride seven hours to locate the fault and repair it. Happily, they *were* able to repair it; otherwise the disaster to come could have been far worse. Bride’s shift in the radio shack was midnight to eight, so the repair work ate into his sleep time. Philips sent him off to bed after the radio was repaired, with instructions to come back and relieve Philips whenever he could.

Titanic was within radio range of Cape Race, Newfoundland, but unable to send messages during this time. The passengers were still *submitting* telegraph messages, of course, so Philips had quite a backlog to get through right after finishing his repair work. Bride was sleeping in their shared bunkroom, which was right next to the radio shack.

As the sun set that evening, the sea was calm and the air was clear and still and very, very cold. Up on the Promenade, passengers marveled at the chilly, moonless night. The stars were impossibly bright, filling the sky like dazzling jewels. But no one lingered too long at the view; it was much too cold to stay out for long, especially not when you had a heated cabin waiting for you below. As midnight drew near, most everyone aboard had retired for the night.

But not Sparks. Jack Philips had had a bad day; no doubt about that, and he no doubt longed for midnight, when Harold Bride was supposed to come relieve him and he could finally get some sleep. Meanwhile, there were all these passengers’ telegrams to get through. At 7:30 that evening, a nearby ship of the Leyland Line, *Californian*, signaled that she had seen icebergs. At 9:40 that evening, a ship named *Mesaba* signaled heavy ice. Philips, perhaps preoccupied with finishing up his backlog of telegrams, had by this time stopped bothering to forward these messages to the bridge. Yeah, yeah, ice. We get it.

Captain Smith responded to the information about icebergs by ordering extra lookouts, but took no other action. In hindsight, his allowing *Titanic* to continue to drive ahead at full speed into a field of icebergs seems reckless. The charge is sometimes made that *Titanic* was trying to set a new speed record, but this is flat out untrue. No one expected *Titanic* to be faster than *Lusitania* or *Mauretania*; no one was even trying to beat their records. Still, passengers don't like to be late, and it was common practice at the time for passenger liners to operate at full speed round the clock. A collision with an iceberg was certainly something to be avoided. It could cause expensive damage, delay the arrival in New York, possibly even cause injuries and death aboard the ship.

But just at this moment, no one aboard *Titanic* would have envisioned the possibility that such a collision would actually sink the ship. Surely striking an iceberg was less serious than, let's say, being rammed by a Royal Navy cruiser with a reinforced bow, and *Titanic*'s sister ship had survived that encounter with nothing worse than a hefty repair bill. Similarly, seven years ago, in 1907, the Norddeutscher Lloyd liner *Kronprinz Wilhelm* had actually rammed an iceberg head on, and had been able to complete her voyage in spite of the mishap.

A few miles away, the captain of the smaller and older *Californian* was responding to the ice in a very different way. Stanley Lord had been captain of his ship for three years now. He was an experienced seaman, but he had never seen so much ice so far south into the Atlantic before. A few minutes after 10:00 that night, Captain Lord made the prudent decision to stop his ship and shut her engines down for the night, rather than risk a collision. Of course, *Californian* had no passengers aboard just then, so that must have made the decision easier. Cargo doesn't mind waiting.

Californian's radio operator signaled *Titanic* at about 10:30 to say, "We are stopped and surrounded by ice."

The harried and fatigued Philips, aboard *Titanic*, had been listening to his headphone intently for the faint dots and dashes of a radiotelegram coming in from Cape Race, when *Californian*'s much louder message blared, drowning out the incoming telegram. A testy Philips responded, "Shut up. Shut up. You are jamming my signal. I am working Cape Race."

Californian's radio operator decided to call it a night about an hour later. He was the ship's only radio operator, so he shut down the equipment and went to bed.

There was no moon that night. The only light available was the light coming from *Titanic* herself. The sea was calm. Both of these factors make it very difficult to see icebergs. At 11:30 PM, the lookouts noticed what they first took to be a mist on the horizon ahead of them. By 11:39, they realized it was an iceberg. They telephoned the bridge. The first officer was in command at the time. He ordered hard astarboard, which means turning the rudder far to the right, which turns the ship to the left, or port. He also ordered the engines reversed.

Some argue that *Titanic* would have been better off ramming the iceberg head on. Others argue that the ship's rudder was too small, making her turn radius too wide. Others still argue that *Titanic* could have turned more sharply and perhaps missed the iceberg had the order to reverse the engines not been given. In fact, ordering a hard turn and reversal of engines at the same time are in some sense contradictory, since the engine reversal increases the turn radius of the ship. This combination of orders has about it the distinct whiff of panic.

In any case, what happened was that the iceberg grazed *Titanic's* starboard hull. A spur of ice under the surface scraped the hull for seven seconds. For many years, it was believed the ice tore a 300-foot gash in the hull, but modern examination of the wreck shows instead a series of smaller holes along the hull. Some believe the iron rivets used to hold the hull plates together became too brittle in the frigid water, and that most of the holes are hull plate separation. The total surface area of the holes is only about twelve square feet—a small number, considering the size of the ship—but it was spread out over six watertight compartments. *Titanic* could have survived her first four compartments flooded; five spelled her doom.

Sea water was flowing into the ship at about ten times the rate the pumps could pump it back out again. Captain Smith called for Thomas Andrews, the designer of the *Titanic*, and asked his evaluation. With the forward compartments filling with water, and *Titanic's* bow dropping, water would flow over the top of each compartment and on into the next. Andrews estimated the ship had two hours left. Smith gave the order to begin loading the lifeboats.

Harold Bride, the assistant radio operator, got up at midnight to relieve Philips. At this point, neither of them knew that anything was wrong. Bride hadn't even put on his clothes yet; he had just stuck his head through the doorway to say that Philips could go to bed now when Captain Smith stuck *his* head through the other door to tell them that the ship had struck an iceberg. Bride got dressed. Fifteen minutes later, Smith returned and ordered Philips to send out the distress call CQD.

After about five minutes of CQD signals, Harold Bride, still not aware of the severity of the situation, joked to Philips that he might try sending the new distress signal—SOS—as this might be his only chance to use it.

Several ships picked up *Titanic's* distress call and began heading for her position. Some of them were too far away. Others would find themselves blocked by ice. The closest responding ship was the Cunard liner *Carpathia*, 58 miles away. *Carpathia* apparently missed *Titanic's* initial distress call. At 12:25 AM, ten minutes after Philips had begun signaling CQD, *Carpathia* signaled *Titanic* to notify Philips that Cape Race was trying to reach him with more radiotelegrams.

Philips replied, "Come at once. We have struck a berg. It's a CQD, OM."

Carpathia's radio operator signaled back, "Do you require assistance?"

“Yes. Come quick.”

As it would turn out, *Carpathia* is the only ship we need pay attention to, as *Carpathia* will be the only ship to pick up *Titanic* survivors. She began headed toward *Titanic* at full speed, but she would need four hours to get there. *Titanic* doesn't have four hours.

There was one ship that was closer than *Carpathia*, though; that was *Californian*. The crew of *Titanic* didn't know her name, but they could see her, off in the distance, less than ten miles away, tantalizingly close, but unresponsive. Jack Philips was sending out CQDs for all he was worth, but that ship over there did not reply. One of *Titanic*'s officers got out an Aldis lamp and tried signaling the other ship that way, but it was too far away to see the flashes. They tried sending up distress rockets. Nothing.

Let us glide across ten miles of dark, freezing cold Atlantic waters, under those impossibly bright stars, and check out what's going on aboard *Californian*. Remember that *Californian*'s radio operator tried to warn *Titanic* about ice, and was told to shut up. The radio operator shut down his equipment and went to bed at about 11:30 Sunday night, just minutes before *Titanic* struck the iceberg. *Californian* had another officer on board who was interested in learning radio, and when the radio operator went to bed, this officer asked for, and got, permission to fiddle with the equipment himself. Even an amateur radio enthusiast of the time would probably have heard and understood a CQD from a nearby ship with a powerful transmitter, like *Titanic*, but, sad to say, the officer couldn't figure out how to switch the apparatus on, could hear nothing, and gave up.

In fact, *Titanic* was less than ten miles away, and *Californian*'s officer of the watch saw her in the distance, and saw her turn to avoid the iceberg. At midnight, he was relieved, and he pointed out the brightly lit liner in the distance to the officer relieving him. At 12:45 AM, the officer of the watch noticed that the other ship was firing white rockets. They woke their captain, whose only order was to attempt to communicate with the other ship with an Aldis lamp, and “let me know what happens.” Then the captain went back to sleep.

Now, firing white rockets was an acknowledged distress signal at the time. Aldis lamps—those handheld lamps used to flash Morse code at another ship—were in common use at the time, but these two ships were too far apart for that to work reliably. The officer of the watch aboard *Californian* would try to use his own Aldis lamp to signal *Titanic* and would also fail. He would then look at *Titanic* through his binoculars, and notice that she seemed tilted; not riding level in the water.

Alas, the penny never dropped. *Californian* made no other attempts to figure out what was going on; most notably, no one woke up the radio operator to have him check into it. It would not be until after dawn, long after it was too late to do any good, that the radio operator would wake up, switch on his set, and learn what everyone else in the North Atlantic already knew.

The great expert on the *Titanic* disaster, Walter Lord, would be asked, decades from now, if he had access to some sort of time machine and could go back to *Titanic* that night, what would he do to help? What warning would he give them? Lord answered that he would want to use the machine not to go to *Titanic*, but to visit *Californian*, where he would go below, grab hold of her captain, and drag him topside and demand he set his ship toward *Titanic* at once. Hundreds, perhaps more than a thousand, lives could have been saved, if only *Californian's* captain and crew had been a little more curious.

But let us leave *Californian* for now, and return to *Titanic*. *Titanic's* own captain is hardly coping with the emergency any better than *Californian's* is. He must have known before anyone else, except possibly Thomas Andrews, that the ship was going down before anyone could get there. The temperature of the sea water was 28 degrees Fahrenheit, or minus two Celsius. For a human being to plunge into water at that temperature means instant death for most, from cardiac arrest. For the lucky ones who survive the initial shock, death from hypothermia is minutes away.

The only hope of survival is the life boats, and Captain Smith ordered that the passengers be brought on deck and the lifeboats prepared. *Titanic* had only sixteen regular lifeboats, along with four collapsible canvas boats. These boats varied in their capacity; collectively, they had room for 1,178 people, meaning that even under ideal conditions, half of those aboard *Titanic* are going to die. The shock of this realization appears to have left the captain unable to cope. He is described as standing in the bridge, staring out to sea, speaking only when spoken to. He gave vague orders to fill the lifeboats, women and children first, and did not supervise the lifeboat operations. Some of the ship's officers were unaware that *Titanic* was in trouble until after more than 90 minutes had passed.

All right, so there are 20 lifeboats altogether, and the ship will sink in two hours. Do the math. *Titanic* needs to launch a lifeboat every six minutes.

Stewards went below to send the passengers topside. How this worked was heavily dependent on which class you're talking about. The first-class passengers were closest to the lifeboats and had the most stewards available to assist them. Second-class were farther away. The third-class stewards mostly just threw open the doors to the rooms and ordered everyone up on deck. And bear in mind here that many of the third-class passengers do not speak English. Remember, too, that third class is deepest in the ship; the first place where water is going to appear.

The third-class sections of the ship were also blocked off from the first and second by locked gates. This wasn't just for class reasons; American immigration law required that the third-class passengers debark separately for processing at Ellis Island; they were not supposed to be allowed to mingle with first and second class, and possibly slip off the ship at the pier. Some crew members were sent below to unlock the gates and were never seen again, presumably trapped and drowned by the inrushing water. Third-class passengers had to navigate a maze, never quite

sure which passages might be locked, which might be opened, which might be flooded, to find their way to the lifeboats.

The ship was new, they had few actual crewmen, and they had had only minimal lifeboat training. Many didn't know how many people to put in each boat. Passengers were slow to report to the boats. Many were reluctant to leave their warm and comfortable quarters for the freezing cold top deck. Some had trouble believing the ship was really in danger; to others, the ship seemed safer than the lifeboats, and they didn't want to leave. It has to be said that, given the urgency of the situation, the lack of training, the disorganization, and the lack of leadership from the captain, it seems very unlikely everyone could have been saved, even if *Titanic* had had enough lifeboats to save them.

Different crew members interpreted the "women and children" order differently. Some of the boats were loaded with every woman and child available, and then men invited in to fill them out. In other cases, men were refused seats even when there were vacant seats available on the boat. The first two lifeboats lowered had 28 people in each, less than half their capacity.

[music: "Alexander's Ragtime Band"]

Captain Smith had ordered the ship's band to play as the lifeboats were loaded, in an attempt to boost morale. They played upbeat tunes of the day, like the then-brand new "Alexander's Ragtime Band." It is an enduring myth of this tragedy that the band played "Nearer My God to Thee" toward the end, although this actually seems unlikely. At least one survivor vigorously disputed this, saying it would have been "tactless" to play a funeral hymn while people are boarding lifeboats. The assistant radio operator, Harold Bride, who survived the disaster, recalls the last tune the band played before the ship went under was "Autumn Dream," a popular waltz of the time.

The last lifeboat was launched at 2:05 AM. Captain Smith was walking the deck, telling everyone "now it is every man for himself." By 2:15, the ship's bow was underwater. Now seawater was pouring into the ship not just through the holes but also over the top of the hull. A wave of seawater crashed over the top deck, washing many people overboard, along with the last two collapsible boats. A lucky few managed to reach these boats and survive, including Harold Bride. The bow dropped rapidly. Number one funnel broke loose and fell onto the deck, killing a few and narrowly missing a lifeboat. As the ship reached an angle of 45 degrees, she broke in two. The forward section slid into the water and was gone. The stern section, about a third of the ship, turned almost vertical, floating a couple of minutes longer on the air trapped inside, likely with hundreds of people still clinging to it, before it, too, slipped below the surface.

About 700 people survived that night, meaning over 400 lifeboat spaces went unused. The lifeboats lacked food, or water, or sources of light, meaning the wait there in the dark, in the cold, must have been agonizing. The people on some of the lifeboats debated going back to look

for more survivors, but only a couple of boats tried. A handful were pulled out of the water, and most of these did not make it.

[music: “Eternal Father, Strong to Save”]

Carpathia arrived on the scene at about 4:00 AM. Her passengers and crew were astonished at the huge fields of ice with pointed bergs towering above them that made the scene look more like a winter landscape than an ocean.

Among the passengers were some of the wealthiest and most prominent people of this age. A few booked passage on *Titanic* but never boarded her for one reason or another. Among these were Guglielmo Marconi, the inventor of radio and the owner of the company that provided wireless services for the ship. You have to credit Marconi’s invention for some of the lives that were saved that night; it would have been a bitter irony had his been one of those lost. Among the other cancels were the author Theodore Dreiser, chocolate magnate Milton Hershey, and J.P. Morgan himself, the guy who controlled the trust that ultimately owned *Titanic*.

Among the most famous survivors were the silent film star Dorothy Gibson, writer and feminist Helen Churchill Candee, and millionaire Margaret Brown. I’ll come back to her later. Most controversially, the chair of the White Star Line, J. Bruce Ismay, was among the survivors. Ismay was pilloried in the press as a coward, and it was widely assumed he used his position to save himself at the expense of women and children. He has been portrayed that way ever since, as recently as the 1997 *Titanic* film, although the record shows that he was instrumental in helping others board the lifeboats, and only jumped into the last boat as it was being lowered, claiming a seat that otherwise would have gone empty. Nevertheless, he remained a villain in the eyes of the public for the rest of his life, and for decades beyond.

Among those who died that night, we should remember William Thomas Stead, the British journalist whom we met in episode 30, President Taft’s aide Archibald Butt and his companion, Francis Davis Millet, whose deaths I mentioned last week, and Thomas Andrews, *Titanic*’s designer, whom we met earlier in this episode. There was also the 47-year old heir John Jacob Astor IV, who held the distinction of being one of the richest men aboard and one of the first bodies recovered afterward. His pregnant 18-year old wife was a survivor, but Astor himself was one of the men who was barred by the crew from boarding the boat with his wife, even though the boat was sent off with empty places. Astor apparently died when the number one funnel collapsed on him in the final moments. There was also the millionaire Benjamin Guggenheim, last seen in formal attire with a rose in his lapel, descending the Grand Stair, and Isador Straus, co-owner of Macy’s Department Store in New York City and former Member of Congress, along with his wife, Ida. Reportedly, Isador refused to take a place in a lifeboat before all the women and children were evacuated, and Ida refused to leave without her husband.

All in all, about 90% of the women and children in first and second class and in the crew were saved. About half those lost were men from third class or in the crew.

The public reaction to the sinking of *Titanic* was shock and outrage, especially in the United States. Most of those aboard *Titanic* were Americans, or people with friends and family in America. Many found it hard to believe such a tragedy was possible in these modern times. The outrage was in many cases fanned by grief-stricken survivors, who banded together to form organizations to lobby for safety improvements aboard ocean liners, in a manner reminiscent of more recent times. There were investigations in the United States and in Britain, both of which concluded that, while everyone aboard had followed accepted procedures, the disaster proved that those procedures were outdated and needed to be improved.

As a result, the regulations requiring lifeboats would be changed to require more of them. Ships would now be required to keep their radios on and monitored 24 hours a day, and ice patrols would be organized to track icebergs in the North Atlantic shipping lanes.

Beyond that, of course, no one at sea is ever going to look at an iceberg the same way again. No one is ever again going to be so cavalier about charging into a field full of ice at top speed. The awful memory of the disaster was as powerful an inducement to modernize safety as any Board of Trade regulation.

The cultural impact of the *Titanic* was more powerful than any comparable event. A flood of poems were written, prompting a *New York Times* critic to remark that “a poem worth printing requires that the author should have something more than paper, pencil, and a strong feeling that the disaster was a terrible one.”

Tin Pan Alley produced over a hundred songs about *Titanic* in the year following the disaster, and there were British songs as well. *Titanic* has been a topic of more books than anyone can name, I suspect. *Titanic* has also been a popular subject in the field of science fiction, including stories about time travel to the time of the disaster, stories about the discovery and salvaging of the wreck, and many stories that retell the *Titanic* disaster in a science fiction setting, such as a gigantic spaceship.

But *Titanic* would most memorably be depicted in motion pictures. The first film about the sinking, *Saved from the Titanic*, a silent short written by and starring *Titanic* survivor Dorothy Gibson, was released less than a month after the event itself.

The outbreak of the Great War, with its own made-made horrors that dwarfed the loss of life aboard *Titanic*, caused the disaster to slip away from public consciousness for a time. In 1943, a film about *Titanic* was released in Germany. The film used the disaster as a metaphor to offer criticism of British society, but was withdrawn shortly after its release because its scenes of confusion and death were deemed harmful to German wartime morale. In 1953, *Titanic* was used as the backdrop for an MGM film that focused on a fictional romance aboard the ship.

In 1955, Walter Lord published the definitive book on the disaster, *A Night to Remember*, which was made into a British film of the same title in 1958. That film was a big-budget, all-star special

effects extravaganza, at least by the standards of British films of the 1950s, and it is told with careful attention to authenticity.

A Night to Remember, the book and the film, brought the story of *Titanic* to a new generation who were too young to remember the original event, and it marks the return of *Titanic* to the popular consciousness, where it has remained ever since. Some argue that the popularity of disaster films, beginning with 1972's *The Poseidon Adventure*, which was also about an ocean liner, can be traced back to *A Night to Remember*.

1979 saw a TV movie, *SOS Titanic*. 1980 saw the release of *Raise the Titanic!* a film depicting an attempt to, yes, raise the *Titanic*. The possibility of finding and raising the wrecked ship had been a staple of science fiction stories as well as the subject of serious discussion. But the wreck was more than two miles deep in the ocean, and no one knew exactly where it lay, which frustrated numerous salvage attempts. The wreck was finally discovered in 1985, when it was also learned for the first time that the ship had broken into two pieces while sinking. This, as well as the deteriorated condition of the wreck, made raising the ship impossible. Since then, however, many artifacts have been recovered from the site, and the ongoing attention to *Titanic* keeps her in the public mind.

And then there is Canadian filmmaker James Cameron's 1997 film *Titanic*, a film that borrowed many elements from earlier *Titanic* films, combined them with a modern understanding of the wreck and state of the art CGI, coupled with carefully crafted practical sets, that was breathtakingly successful in bringing *Titanic* back to life on screen. The film would surprise many by becoming a huge cultural phenomenon in its own right, setting a new record for highest-grossing film, and winning a record-tying 14 Academy Award nominations, and eleven wins, and insuring that the story of *Titanic* will be with us always.

The story of *Titanic* presents a powerful metaphor—some would say an inescapable metaphor—for the civilization that produced her. Larger and more powerful than anything the world had seen before, the culmination of centuries of scientific and technological advancement, appointed with comforts and conveniences undreamed of even a few years earlier. And riven by class distinctions that allowed a powerful few to enjoy most of the comforts up top, while the masses of ordinary people were trapped underneath. Strong, mighty, well-nigh indestructible, she steams proudly toward the setting sun, scarcely able to imagine the doom that lurks so near. Just as the civilization that produced her was lurching toward a catastrophe. The sinking of *Titanic* is in some sense the first warning that all is not well—the call from the lookout, as it were, that icebergs lie ahead. But alas, it is already too late to change course.

We'll have to stop there for today. Thanks to all of you for listening. I'm feeling a little bit behind on my research and writing, so I'm going to have to ask your indulgence for a week of study time. And so, there will be no new episode next week, but I hope you will all join me in two weeks' time, as *The History of the Twentieth Century* turns its attention to the Ottoman

Empire. Back in episode 51, when I told the story of the annexation of Bosnia by the Austrian Empire, I mentioned that the act was driven in part by a liberal revolution in the Ottoman Empire, and I want to go back and pick up that thread, because, spoiler alert, this is the beginning of the long downhill slide toward world war. That's in two weeks' time, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. Before I go, I promised you more about the Denver millionaire Margaret Brown, who is in our day perhaps the most famous survivor of the *Titanic* disaster. Brown was born in Missouri, to a humble family of Irish immigrants. She eventually married Colorado mining engineer J.J. Brown. J.J. struck it rich, and his wife made a name for herself as a philanthropist and a campaigner for women's issues and also helped inaugurate the first juvenile court in America. She ran unsuccessfully for the United States Senate in 1914, and later would be awarded the French Legion of Honor for her fundraising efforts in the US for French relief during the Great War. She died in 1932, at the age of 65.

Brown was known for never having shed the tough, no-nonsense tomboy attitude she had developed while growing up in poverty. The well-to-do of her day found her abrasive and looked down on her and her "new money," but she was a hero to ordinary people. Not only did she survive the *Titanic* sinking, she tried to organize a mutiny among the other women in her lifeboat to get it to turn around and pick up more survivors. When the *Titanic* officer on board refused and told her to shut up, she threatened to throw him overboard, though the officer had his way in the end, and the lifeboat did not turn back, despite her effort.

But her survival, and the story of her attempt to get her boat to turn back, sealed her reputation as a common person's hero among the snooty elites. Although her friends called her "Maggie" during her lifetime, after her death she would come to be known best to the public as *The Unsinkable Molly Brown*, after her life was celebrated in a 1960 American stage musical, with music and lyrics by Meredith Willson, and starring Tammy Grimes. A film version was released by MGM in 1964, starring Debbie Reynolds.

[music: Closing Theme]