

Marshall Everett, *Story of the Wreck of the Titanic: The Ocean's Greatest Disaster* (London: Conway Classics, 1998). Reprint of 1912 first edition by Homewood Press (Chicago); L.H. Walter, publisher.

[This is a slightly revised version of a book review that appeared in the Fall 1999 issue of *The Northern Mariner/Le marin du nord*]

Few events exemplify the adage, "Never let the facts get in the way of a good story," like the sinking of the *Titanic*. Close on the heels of contemporary newspapers, subscription book publishers based in Illinois and Pennsylvania shamelessly exploited the disaster, producing half a dozen instant books that were sold door-to-door in the tens of thousands across North America.

Primarily aimed at young readers, one of the most common instant books was *Story of the Wreck of the Titanic*, attributed to "Marshall Everett," a nom de plume for Chicago journalist Henry Neil. Recently reissued by Conway Classics in a facsimile edition, this book will appeal to so-called "rivet counters" who must read absolutely everything they can about the doomed liner.

*Story of the Wreck of the Titanic* and its ilk form the basis for much of the lore about what happened that memorable night. Readers concerned about authenticity should go elsewhere for answers to the difficult or contentious questions, of which there are too many to address here. But to acquire a sense of contemporary media responses to the disaster, albeit mostly from an American perspective, the Everett book is an instructive if flawed primary source. Its value increases if examined as cultural artifact rather than strict historical narrative.

Indeed, the most unsettling aspect of the *Titanic* instant book reprints — nearly all have been reissued in recent years — is the utter lack of historical context. Why is there no introduction analyzing the strengths and weaknesses of the text, which is obviously (sometimes painfully so) cobbled together from various newspaper reports of questionable veracity? Is it because the publishers feel that the story is so well known that no explanatory note is required, or is it because no authoritative voice could be found to express a critical opinion? Is it simply a matter of cashing in on public interest aroused by James Cameron's 1997 film?

One probable explanation is that serious *Titanic*

historians have never really paid much attention to the instant books, even though Marshall Everett *et. al.* did more to promote the mythical aspects of the disaster than any other source. In his cultural history of the *Titanic*, *Down with the Old Canoe*, Steven Biel barely mentions them; neither does Richard Howells in his new book, *The Myth of the Titanic*. No one, it seems, is interested in the fact that the instant books (Everett being the most prominent, alongside another by Logan Marshall) were responsible for propagating the myth about "Nearer my God to Thee" being played as the ship went down (pp. 94-95); or the myth of "women and children first" (p. 47) — when in fact more men than women survived the sinking. These journalistic embellishments became so powerfully embedded within the *Titanic* narrative that even today, many who consider themselves experts on the subject believe them to be true.

In a recent lecture in Halifax, Professor Howells offered an explanation for why "Nearer my God to Thee" became a part of the *Titanic* myth. He noted that it was Vera Dick, a survivor quoted in the New York press, who first reported to have heard it as the ship sank. Howells surmises that the young Canadian from Alberta, finding herself in a lifeboat in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, recalled another widely reported shipwreck on the B.C. coast a few years earlier, in which passengers were said to have sung the well-known hymn. Howells argues that Miss Dick was influenced by "social memory" rather than real-time experience at that traumatic moment in her life. In similar fashion, we believe that "Nearer my God to Thee" was played on *Titanic* because it confirms what we think ought to have occurred at the time. In that context, the truth of the matter seems irrelevant.

The remarkable persistence of *Titanic* as myth and metaphor suggests that it has indeed entered our "social memory" in ways that we are only now beginning to understand. For anyone wishing to examine seminal sources in that process, *Story of the Wreck of the Titanic* is as useful a starting point as any. It is a shame, however, that modern readers of these hasty memorials will be no more aware of their flaws and nuances than their counterparts in 1912.

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