

"God's Ark": Subscription Book Publishing and the Titanic

Jay White

Volume 28, Number 2, Spring 1999

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad28_2rn02

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Department of History at the University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0044-5851 (print)

1712-7432 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this note

White, J. (1999). "God's Ark": Subscription Book Publishing and the Titanic. *Acadiensis*, 28(2), 93–118.

“God’s Ark”: Subscription Book Publishing and the *Titanic*

“One touch of nature makes the whole world kin”.
—William Shakespeare, *Troilus and Cressida*, III, 3

PERHAPS NO EVENT OF THE PAST has achieved legendary status so quickly, and has remained there so enduringly, as the sinking of the *Titanic*. It has become, in the words of Michael McCaughan, a “root metaphor” of late-20th-century cultural consciousness, the “essence of modernity” and “a signifier of the civilized world”.¹ George Orwell once wrote that nothing related to the First World War “moved me so deeply as the loss of the *Titanic*”. Teaching at a British university in the 1970s, Jeremy Hawthorn found that his students knew more about the *Titanic* than the Holocaust.² Irish literary critic and cultural historian John Wilson Foster interprets the universal fascination with the *Titanic* myth as a symptom of post-modern malaise. “We choose to see in the ship and the human tragedy of its sinking”, he writes, “meanings that derive from our sense of an ending, our sense that the ship symbolizes our culture in crisis”.³ In popular culture on both sides of the Atlantic, and to some extent elsewhere too, the ship has “survived the transit from tragedy to legend to timeless myth, and her position as a symbol of human fallibility, frailty, hubris and heroism has proved to be both unassailable and highly salable”.⁴

Long before the release of James Cameron’s remarkably successful film in 1997, the *Titanic* exercised its almost magical appeal. Year after year, the most popular artefact at the Maritime Museum of the Atlantic in Halifax has been the deck chair from the *Titanic*.⁵ Articles salvaged from the wreck site by American and French diving expeditions in the late 1980s drew record-breaking crowds; in the summer of 1995, the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich, England extended its exhibition of *Titanic* artefacts by six months to accoma similar exhibit in Memphis, Tennessee

- 1 Michael McCaughan, “*Titanic* and *The Wreck of the Titanic* Exhibit”, *Material History Review*, 43 (Spring 1996), pp. 68, 70. McCaughan is the curator of the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, Belfast. The author wishes to thank David Frank, Ian McKay and Dan Conlin for commenting on an earlier draft of this paper. I am also grateful to antiquarian book dealer John Townsend for permitting me to mine his collection of salesman’s sample books for relevant sources. Garry Shutlak of Nova Scotia Archives and Records Management and Alan Ruffman of Geomarine also freely shared their expertise and sources.
- 2 Jeremy Hawthorn, *Cunning Passages: New Historicism, Cultural Materialism and Marxism in the Contemporary Literary Debate* (London, 1996), p. 87.
- 3 <http://www.arts.ubc.ca/~jwfoster/TITANBK.HTM>.
- 4 *Washington Post*, 27 March 1998, p. N06.
- 5 Dan Conlin, personal communication, 30 November 1998.
- 6 Dr. M.H. Evans, Marine History Information Exchange newsgroup (MARHST-L), 3 June 1995.

attracted almost as many visitors as the venue's inaugural exhibition.⁷ Notwithstanding the power of Hollywood marketing, the fact remains that this was a story that did not require promotion in the traditional sense. The plot was so well-known, and so often told — in literature, films and popular music — that it almost seemed foolhardy to think that moviegoers could be lured into theatres to watch it unfold yet one more time.

What follows is an attempt to broaden our understanding of how the loss of the *Titanic* became such a defining moment in 20th-century popular culture⁸ by analyzing the so-called “instant books” sold in great numbers in the weeks following the disaster. The *Titanic* instant books played a crucial role in shaping public perceptions of this tragic event; they belonged to a well-established and distinctive disaster narrative form that had evolved over several decades from the 1870s to the 1910s. This study also addresses how subsequent literary interpretations and cultural meanings of the *Titanic* myth both modified and reinforced the messages codified in the first books to appear about the tragedy.⁹

7 *Titanic* artefacts outdrew exhibitions on Napoleon, Catherine the Great and the Imperial Tombs of China, but not a “47-ton, 25-foot-tall statue of Ramesses the Great” imported from Egypt for the opening of the “Pyramid” theme museum in Memphis. [<http://www.wonders.org/index.html>].

8 A useful starting point for researching the extensive literature on “critical incident analysis” is the online bibliography prepared by the Disaster Research Center [DRC] at the University of Delaware [<http://www.udel.edu/DRC>]. A pioneer in this field was New Brunswick-born Samuel Henry Prince, whose Ph.D. dissertation, *Catastrophe and Social Change, based upon a sociological study of the Halifax disaster*, was published by Columbia University in 1920. It was reissued in 1968 by AMS Press, New York. Joe Scanlon, Director of the Emergency Communications Research Unit at Carleton University, includes a chapter on S.H. Prince in his forthcoming book on the 1917 Halifax Explosion, to be published by Mellen Press. See also Russell R. Dynes and E.L. Quarantelli, “The Place of the Explosion in the History of Disaster Research: The Work of Samuel H. Prince”, in Alan Ruffman and Colin Howell, eds., *Ground Zero: A Reassessment of the 1917 Explosion in Halifax Harbour* (Halifax, 1994), pp. 55-68, 431-2. General scholarly and popular studies of disasters include L. Walters, L. Wilkins and T. Walters, eds., *Bad Tidings: Communication and Catastrophe* (Hillsdale, 1989); Gary Kreps, ed., *Social Structure and Disaster* (Newark, 1989); George W. Baker and Dwight W. Chapman, eds., *Man and Society in Disaster* (New York, 1962); Donald B. Robinson, *The Face of Disaster* (Garden City, 1959); Adolph A. Hoehling, *Disaster: Major American Catastrophes* (New York, 1973); Barry A. Turner, *Man-made Disasters* (New York, 1978); Kenneth Hewitt and Ian Burton, *The Hazardousness of a Place: A Regional Ecology of Damaging Events* (Toronto, 1971); Dennis S. Mileti, *Human Systems in Extreme Environments: A Sociological Perspective* (Boulder, 1975); Diana H. Manning, *Disaster Technology: An Annotated Bibliography* (London, 1973); Pitirim A. Sorokin, *Man and Society in Calamity: the Effects of War, Revolution, Famine, Pestilence upon Human Mind, Behavior, Social Organization and Cultural Life* (New York, 1942). Site-specific studies of mostly natural disasters include Allen H. Barton, *Communities In Disaster: A Sociological Analysis of Collective Stress Situations* (London, 1969); Kai T. Erikson, *Everything in its Path: Destruction of Community in the Buffalo Creek Flood* (New York, 1976); Stewart E. Perry, Earle Silber and Donald A. Bloch, *The Child and his Family in Disaster; a Study of the 1953 Vicksburg Tornado* (Washington, D.C., 1956); James B. Taylor, Louis A. Zurcher and William H. Key, *Tornado: A Community Responds to Disaster* (Seattle, 1970).

9 Limited attention will be paid to the numerous popular works released since the discovery of the wreck in 1985. *The Los Angeles Times*, 31 May 1998 reported that more than 70 books on the *Titanic* were released after the opening of the James Cameron film in December 1997. Most were reprints of books published since the discovery of the wreck in 1985. In September 1998, Véhicule Press of Montréal published *Titanic: The Canadian Story* by Alan Hustak, a reporter for the *Montreal Gazette*. The book profiles the 150-odd passengers on the *Titanic* who were bound for Canada. *Titanic*

The “instant books” sold door-to-door in most parts of North America in 1912 were the most widely distributed and accessible sources of information about the *Titanic* disaster. Although newspapers covered the story initially, readers who wanted a fuller, more detailed account of what happened could read one of four books: Logan Marshall, *The Sinking of the Titanic and Other Great Sea Disasters*, Marshall Everett, *The Story of the Wreck and Sinking of the Titanic*, Thomas H. Russell, *Sinking of the Titanic and Sinking of the Titanic* by Jay Henry Mowbray. All four provided survivor reports, newspaper stories gathered from a variety of sources, the findings of the two investigations (one American, the other British) into the causes of the disaster and, significantly, better-quality photographs.¹⁰ Owners of these books today often assume they are rare. In fact they are quite common and frequently turn up at flea markets, auctions and used bookstores for about \$10 to \$40 (U.S.). Predictably, asking prices soared after the release of Cameron’s film in December 1997.¹¹ Examining the role these books may have played in popularizing the *Titanic* story requires closer examination of the nature of 19th- and early 20th- century book publishing in the United States and Canada. The *Titanic* books occupied a small niche within a much larger industry that marketed hardbacks by subscription — sold door-to-door on a vast scale from about 1850 to 1950.¹² Keith Arbour’s recent catalogue of the Michael Zinman collection at the University of Pennsylvania, possibly the richest inventory yet assembled of subscription publishing material, represents a significant breakthrough in the study of this trade.¹³ By cross-referencing the holdings of this collection with online used book databases, as well as the holdings of selected academic libraries in the United States and Canada, it was found that instant disaster books were being produced in the Maritime Provinces, just as they were elsewhere in

Remembered, a book by Alan Ruffman on Halifax’s role in the disaster, is expected in 1999. Three recent academic treatments of the disaster merit recognition for thoughtful analyses of the *Titanic*’s cultural significance. They are Steven Biel, *Down with the Old Canoe: A Cultural History of the Titanic Disaster* (New York, 1996), Paul Heyer, *Titanic Legacy: Disaster as Media Event and Myth* (Westport, Conn., 1995) and John Wilson Foster, *Titanic Complex: A Cultural Manifest* (Vancouver, 1997). Although each author approaches the subject from a different perspective, together they provide a useful framework for placing the *Titanic* story within a broader context.

- 10 A fifth instant book, *The Tragic Story of the Titanic* (Philadelphia, International Bible Press, 1912) by Henry Fredericks, is much less common. It shares the same copyright holder, L.T. Myers, as the Logan Marshall book, and has similar contents.
- 11 Numerous copies of the Everett, Marshall, Russell and Mowbray instant books attracted bids in the range of \$50 to \$100 (U.S.) on eBay, the Internet’s leading online auction house, in the spring and summer of 1998. Some in especially fine condition attracted considerably more. In September 1997, I purchased a reading copy of Marshall’s *Sinking of the Titanic* in a Halifax bookstore for \$25 (Cdn.). A year later, I found Everett’s *Story of the Wreck of the Titanic* in good condition in a Hantsport, N.S. bookshop for \$40 (Cdn.). These are typical asking prices for these books in Atlantic Canada.
- 12 G. Thomas Tanselle, “The Historiography of American Literary Publishing”, *Studies in Bibliography*, 18 (1965), pp. 3-39 [available online at <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/bsuva/sb/>]. Tanselle credits graduate student scholarship at the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana Library School for early research in this area.
- 13 In 1997, the University of Pennsylvania Library acquired the largest single collection of American and Canadian salesman’s sample books known to exist. It includes 1,800 titles listed in Keith Arbour, *Canvassing Books, Sample Books, and Subscription Publishers’ Ephemera, 1833-1951, in the Collection of Michael Zinman* (Ardsley, N.Y., 1996), as well as 500 additional titles. See University of Pennsylvania Library newsletter E-Friends (January 1998).

eastern North America, as early as the 1870s, and that such books were still being produced in the region as late as 1904.¹⁴

Subscription books, also known as “dollar books” because of the average cost for the cloth-bound edition (deluxe, leather-bound editions cost slightly more), were mass-produced and sold by travelling salesmen and women who knocked on doors “with their collections of sample books, trying to sign up customers”. Itinerant bookselling, using publishers’ prospectuses, can be traced at least as far back as early 17th-century England, but the North American version of the trade probably started in Connecticut in the 1830s.¹⁵ Peddling non-subscription religious tracts was also prevalent in the early colonial period, encouraged by Puritan leaders such as Cotton Mather, and evolving in tandem with evangelical missionary work that is still carried on by Jehovah’s Witnesses and Mormons to this day.¹⁶ Book hawkers sold Bibles and other devotional literature door-to-door throughout North America in the 19th century — a practice known as *colportage*. One such person was New Brunswick native Sarah Emma Edmonds, who — disguised as a man — sold Bibles for a Hartford, Connecticut company in the 1850s. When the Civil War broke out, she served in the Union army, again in male dress, and wrote a best-selling autobiography about her exploits.¹⁷ Indeed, the Civil War appears to have fostered the door-to-door trade: books about war heroes such as General Ulysses S. Grant sold well in the 1870s, and many war veterans became agents for subscription book companies.¹⁸ Colporteurs from New England were peddling devotional literature in Nova Scotia in the 1860s.¹⁹ Keith Arbour cites several first-hand accounts of what it was like to be a book agent

14 Methodology consisted of checking and cross-checking the holdings of major American and Canadian libraries, including the Library of Congress, Harvard University, Cornell University, the University of Pennsylvania, the ILLINET Library system (University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana), the University of Toronto, the University of New Brunswick, Dalhousie University (NOVANET), the Metro Toronto Reference Library and the New York Public Library. Keyword searches of online used bookstore catalogues, mainly Bibliofind [<http://www.bibliofind.com>] and Bookfinder [<http://www.bookfinder.com>] also proved extremely useful in locating detailed descriptions of obscure titles. This was also true of eBay [<http://www.ebay.com>], where many of the books discussed in this paper were frequently up for auction.

15 Arbour, *Canvassing Books*, p. xviii. According to John Feather the earliest known instance of subscription bookselling in England is 1610: *English Book Prospectuses: An Illustrated History* (Newtown, Pa., 1984). However, John Tebbel claims that it is “nearly five centuries old”: Tebbel, *A History of Book Publishing in the United States*, vol. II (New York, 1975), p. 511.

16 Frank Luther Mott, *Golden Multitudes: The Story of Best Sellers in the United States* (New York, 1960), p. 156.

17 Edmonds’ autobiography, *Nurse and Spy in the Union Army* (Hartford, Conn., 1865) was published by her employer and reportedly sold 175,000 copies by subscription. See Sylvia Dannett, *She Rode with the Generals: The True and Incredible Story of Sara Emma Seelye, alias Franklin Thompson* (New York, 1960). See also “Edmonds, Sarah Emma Evelyn (1841-1898), soldier” in *Encyclopædia Britannica* (1998).

18 Stephen Railton, *Mark Twain in His Times* (Electronic Text Center, University of Virginia, 1996-8) [<http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/railton/marketin/soldxsub.html>].

19 *Colportage* retains its original French meaning — an itinerant peddler of generic goods — in that language. *The Concise Oxford English Dictionary* (1934 edition) defines colporteur as a “bookhawker, esp. one employed . . . to distribute Bibles”. See American Tract Society, *Toils and Triumphs of Union Missionary Colportage* (New York, 1866), p. 66 for an amusing account of a New England colporteur soliciting orders among Roman Catholics in Nova Scotia.

in the United States, many of them authored by women.²⁰ An online essay at the University of Virginia details how Mark Twain exploited door-to-door sales and includes “Adventures of a Woman Book Agent” in California in the 1870s.²¹ One subscription book publisher unabashedly targeted “farmers’ sons, students, teachers, ministers, and women” as potential agents, apparently believing that they would “find canvassing a way of supplementing their incomes”.²²

By the end of the 19th century, the same distribution methods were being used to market secular publications concerning a wide variety of topics and produced in several languages.²³ They covered diverse subjects such as African-Americana, women’s health and etiquette, juvenile adventure, the Civil War, election campaigns, polar exploration, world travel and religion. Military topics in this age of imperialism were also popular.²⁴ Well-known authors whose works were sold by subscription included Rudyard Kipling, Stephen Leacock, Harriet Beecher Stowe and especially Mark Twain, who refused to sell his books any other way.²⁵ The Zinman Collection includes approximately 2,300 titles produced between 1833 and 1951 by more than 700 authors and publishing firms in 33 American states and four Canadian provinces.²⁶ Relatively few books sold by subscription could be classified as “instant” books designed to cash in on the notoriety of a recent event, but wars, politics, economic and social issues, and even British royalty furnished opportunities for the instant book trade.²⁷ The Lincoln, Garfield and McKinley assassinations all spawned

20 Arbour, *Canvassing Books*, p. xv. Citations in Arbour include: Audrey Allison, *Adventures of a Book Agent* (Boston, 1925), Elizabeth Lindley, *The Diary of a Book-Agent* (New York, 1912), Annie Nelles, *The Life of a Book Agent* (St. Louis, 1892). Nor were male book agents uncommon; a notable albeit fictionalized account cited by Arbour is Horatio Alger, Jr., *The Young Book Agent; or, Frank Hardy’s Road to Success* (New York, 1905).

21 Stephen Railton, “Marketing Twain” [<http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/railton/marketin/mrktph.html>].

22 Arbour, *Canvassing Books*, p. xiii.

23 The Zinman Collection includes titles in Danish, French, German, Norwegian and Swedish — a reflection of turn-of-the-century immigration patterns. There are German and Swedish editions of the *Titanic* instant books.

24 Murat Halstead, *Our Country At War And Relations With All Nations: A History of War Times And American Heroes On Land And Sea* (United Subscription Books, 1898). Halstead was billed as “Official Historian to the War Department”, and the profusely illustrated book, “Containing a Vivid Description of Our Present Foreign Complications”, weighed in at more than 700 pages. Another example was Trumbull White’s *Pictorial History of Our War With Spain for Cuba’s Freedom . . . Cuban Patriots Against Spanish Tyranny* (Chicago, J.S. Ziegler & Co, 1898).

25 For example, Stephen Leacock, *Six Chapters From the Chronicles of Canada* (Toronto, Glasgow, Brook & Company [1915]).

26 Publisher’s press release for Arbour, *Canvassing Books*, posted to the ExLibris mailing list [exlibris@library.berkeley.edu] by Everett Wilkie, 7 January 1997. The following Canadian places of publication are listed in Arbour (p. 479): Nova Scotia (Halifax and Yarmouth); New Brunswick (Saint John); Ontario (Brantford, London, Prescott, Toronto and Windsor); and Quebec (Montréal).

27 For example, Edward S. Ellis and Charles Morris, *The Voters Guide For The Campaign Of 1900. Great Issues And National Leaders . . . Imperialism, Expansionism . . .* (Philadelphia, John C. Winston Co., 1900). The death of Queen Victoria gave rise to several instant books, including John Rusk, *The Beautiful Life and Illustrious Reign of Queen Victoria* (Chicago, J.S. Ziegler & Co., 1901); Arthur Lawrence Merrill, *Life and Times of Queen Victoria. Containing a Full Account of the Most Illustrious Reign of Any Sovereign* (Memorial Edition, Philadelphia. World Bible House, 1901), also published in Boston by B.B. Russell; Murat Halstead and A.J. Munson, *Life and Reign of Queen Victoria . . . Her Diamond Jubilee Celebration* (Chicago, International Publishing Society, 1901);

instant books — including one by Russell H. Conwell, already the author of two “instant” accounts of major fires.²⁸

The peak years for door-to-door bookselling were between 1870 and 1900. Thus the *Titanic* instant books appeared at a time when the subscription trade as a whole was showing signs of decline. A new copyright law passed in the United States in 1891 closed loopholes previously exploited by enterprising door-to-door publishers, many of whom were Canadian. Meanwhile, as plying their trade became more and more difficult, book agents gained a reputation for being aggressive and unscrupulous.²⁹ Whereas earlier subscription titles were often elaborate and even garish in appearance (one suspects because the books were put on display as much as they were actually read), the *Titanic* book publishers eschewed frills such as gilt-edged pages or marbled endpapers. Clearly, the primary objective was getting the product quickly to market while memories of the event were still fresh.³⁰ The books are replete with unconfirmed reports, exaggerated eyewitness accounts and suspect photographs. For instance, most of the exterior and interior shots of the *Titanic* reproduced in the instant books were actually those of her sister ship, the *Olympic*.

Though far from being definitive accounts of the disaster, the *Titanic* instant books sold well. One publisher’s promotional material claimed an initial press run of 400,000 copies, the “largest sale on record of any book in so short a time”.³¹ Compiling national statistics on book sales was relatively new in 1912, and no *Titanic* instant books were listed among the non-fiction best-sellers for that year.³² This is not surprising, since publishers at the time were notoriously secretive about sales figures, so that leading authors seldom knew precisely how many of their books had been sold.³³ The retail book trade disparaged subscription selling in any event, and

Robert C.V. Meyers, *Victoria Queen and Empress: The Story Of Britain’s Golden Era* (Philadelphia & Chicago, P.W. Ziegler & Co., 1901); and John Coulter, *Queen Victoria: Her Grand Life and Glorious Reign* (Guelph, World, 1901). Contemporary social and economic issues were addressed in John Mitchell, *Organized Labor: Its Problems, Purposes & Ideals; & the Present & Future of American Wage Earners* (Philadelphia, American Book & Bible House, 1903); W.S. Harris, *Capital and Labor* (Harrisburg, The Minter Campus, 1907); Clifford Roe, *The Great War or White Slavery* (Philadelphia, International Bible House, 1911).

28 P.A. Hanaford, (Mrs.), *Our Martyred President* (Boston, B.B. Russell, 1865) [also published under the title *Abraham Lincoln: His Life And Public Services*]; Russell H. Conwell, *The Life, Speeches, and Public Services of James A. Garfield Including an Account of His Assassination* (Boston, B.B. Russell, 1881); Murat Halstead, *The Illustrious Life of William McKinley: Our Martyred President* (Chicago, M.A. Donohue and Company, 1901) [also published by “Memorial Association” (Chicago?); some editions may have been self-published by Halstead].

29 Arbour, *Canvassing Books*, pp. xii-xiv.

30 Jerry Revis, compiler of an impressive online bibliography of publications on the *Titanic*, includes a brief article about “door-to-door” books, as he calls them. See *Bibliotheca Titanic* [<http://pw2.netcom.com/~jrev/dtdb.htm>].

31 Edward and Karen Kamuda, “The Sinking of the *Titanic*, etc.”, *The Titanic Commutator*, 16, 1 (May-July 1992), p. 23.

32 1912 was one of the four years before 1920 when non-fiction best-sellers were tabulated. Though published in New York, the lists were based on reports submitted by bookstores in “some thirty cities in the United States and Canada”: Mott, *Golden Multitudes*, pp. 204-5.

33 See Alice Payne Hackett and James Henry Burke, *80 Years of Best Sellers, 1895-1975* (New York, 1977), p. 76; Mott, *Golden Multitudes*, p. 196. According to historian James D. Hart, the most widely-read American novelist in 1912, Harold Bell Wright, published in the 100,000 to 175,000 range for

therefore lacked both the means and desire to track sales in this sector of the business.³⁴ While exact figures remain elusive, current circumstantial evidence supports claims of large sales. In 1992, the Massachusetts-based Titanic Historical Society reported fielding more questions about them than any other *Titanic*-related collectible. After the Cameron film’s release, the Maritime Museum of the Atlantic received so many inquiries from people with *Titanic* instant books in their possession that a form letter was prepared to respond to them all.³⁵ On eBay, the largest online auction house on the Internet, dozens of copies of the books continue to be put up for bid by sellers across North America.

The *Titanic* instant books most frequently seen in the Atlantic Region are the two most common titles: Logan Marshall’s *The Sinking of the Titanic and Other Great Sea Disasters* and Marshall Everett’s *The Story of the Wreck of the Titanic*. Another fairly common edition was the red-covered *Sinking of the Titanic —The World’s Greatest Sea Disaster*. Usually attributed to Thomas H. Russell, versions also exist with Marshall Everett as editor. Confusion reigns among collectors about the number of Marshall Everett editions because of anomalies such as the cover and title page having different titles and versions of the book with Everett’s name on the spine and Thomas Russell’s name on the title page. These are all indications of the haste with which the books were manufactured. Everett was the pseudonym for Henry Neil, a journalist who earned his spurs in the “memorial” trade by writing books on assassinated U.S. President William McKinley (1901), the tragic fire at the Iroquois theatre in Chicago (1904) and the San Francisco earthquake (1906).³⁶ Although Everett’s publishing record seems to place him in Chicago, one edition of his *Great Chicago Theater Disaster* (1904) was actually published in Halifax, Nova Scotia.³⁷ Among other

first printings — and his books were sold through mail order in addition to retail channels — so it seems extraordinarily optimistic to have an inaugural press run of 400,000 for an instant book: *The Popular Book* (New York, 1950), p. 216. Wright’s novels were priced slightly higher than “dollar” books and purchased by “a public [who were] not generally buyers of books” — arguably the same general audience targeted by instant book publishers. Perhaps extraordinary public interest and demand from agents was sufficient to warrant such huge production figures. Additionally, the heavy-handed religious content in the *Titanic* books may have been a means of hedging bets, since some of the most successful non-fiction titles of the previous decade had religious themes. Jesse Hurlbut’s *The Story of the Bible*, for example, published in 1904 by John C. Winston, eventually went on to sell three million copies. On the other hand, best-sellers in this period rarely achieved “instant” popularity, and the most successful could take years to build up sizable sales figures. This strategy would obviously not have applied to the *Titanic* disaster. See Hackett and Burke, *80 Years*, pp. 56, 75.

34 For an extended analysis of subscription book publishing up to 1927, see Tebbel, *A History of Book Publishing in the United States*, vol. 2, pp. 511-34. Tebbel focuses on encyclopedia publishers such as Collier, Compton and Grolier who established reputations during this period. Although he does mention John C. Winston and Laird & Lee, the other *Titanic* instant book publishers are nowhere to be found. See esp. pp. 423, 452-3.

35 *Chronicle-Herald* (Halifax), 23 January 1998.

36 Marshall Everett, *The Complete Life of William McKinley & the Story of His Assassination* (Chicago, Monroe Book Co., 1901); *The Great Chicago Theater Disaster* (Chicago, Publishers Union, 1904); *Complete Story of the San Francisco Earthquake: the Eruption of Mount Vesuvius and Other Volcanic Outbursts and Earthquakes* (Chicago, Bible House, 1906).

37 Salesman’s sample of Marshall Everett’s *Story of the Wreck of the Titanic* on loan to the Maritime Museum of the Atlantic; copy of Everett book inscribed “Scribner’s P.O., Kings Co., N.B., June 20th/12” in author’s possession.

things, Henry Neil authored, under his real name, photographic studies of the Holy Land and a how-to encyclopedia.³⁸ Logan Marshall was less prolific, having published only a biography of Teddy Roosevelt. In promotional literature for *The Sinking of the Titanic and Other Great Sea Disasters*, however, his publisher styled Marshall as “an experienced writer” whose version of the *Titanic* story would be superior to “catchpenny books hastily prepared from newspaper clippings”. Interestingly, this pitch was directed not at the general public but to sales agents: “See that the books you deliver have the name Logan Marshall on the title page”, read one prospectus.³⁹ The fourth *Titanic* book frequently seen in Atlantic Canada is the blue-covered edition by Jay Henry Mowbray, which seems to be both scarcer and less prone to sloppy editing. Mowbray had at least two “instant” titles to his credit before compiling his collection of *Titanic* survivors’ stories.⁴⁰ He was the only one among the four leading authors of *Titanic* instant books who did not go on to write other disaster books after 1912.⁴¹

One of the rarest instant books is the paperback edition issued by Laird & Lee of Chicago entitled *The Great Titanic Disaster*. The editor was Thomas H. Russell, but the text is identical to the hardback Everett.⁴² A German version of the same book also appeared under the title *Das Ende der Titanic*. Laird & Lee produced a wide range of popular titles, from how-to books on fortune-telling, astrology and hypnotism to classics by Hawthorne, Dostoyevsky and Jules Verne. They also published children’s adventure stories (at least two of which were set in Nova Scotia)⁴³ and popular fiction with western or detective themes. The company had a long track record of publishing

38 Henry Neil, *The World Photographed* (1892), *Encyclopedia Of Mother’s Advice* (Chicago, Encyclopedia Co., 1905), *Neil’s Photographs of the Holy Land* (Philadelphia, n.d.). One reference describes the author of *Europe at War* (Chicago, Bible House, 1914) as “Judge Henry Neil.” It is not clear whether this is the same Henry Neil.

39 “Warning to Agents” in salesman’s sample book advertised for sale on eBay in late December 1998.

40 Jay Henry Mowbray, *Italy’s Great Horror of Earthquake and Tidal Wave* (Harrisburg, The Minter Company, 1909); *Discovery of North Pole by Cook and Peary and Wonders of the Polar World* (Washington, D.C., G.W. Bertron, 1909). The latter title is described by an online bookseller as a “lurid account of polar explorations issued as ‘instant book’ after Cook’s and Peary’s voyages. More than 100 illustrations spectacularly graphic, gruesome and inaccurate”. MX Bookfinder, 28 May 1998 [<http://www.bookfinder.com>]. The Minter Company was also responsible for *The Tragedy of the Lusitania* by Captain Frederick D. Ellis (1915). There is a connection via Mowbray with the G.W. Bertron company of Washington, D.C., which also published or registered the copyright for the blue-covered *Sinking of the Titanic*.

41 Marshall Everett, *Tragic Story Of America’s Greatest Disaster* (Chicago, J.W. Ziegler, 1913). The “greatest disaster” was a particularly stormy spring which brought tornadoes, floods and fires to many parts of the Midwest and Mississippi Valley. John C. Winston published a similar book, *The True Story of the Great American Calamity*, under Logan Marshall’s name. Marshall was also the editor for *Hindenburg’s March into London* (John C. Winston, 1916) in which a German army invades England and captures London after a series of air battles over the city. It had been a best-seller in its original German edition the year before. Thomas H. Russell was the author of Laird and Lee’s *Swept By Mighty Waters* (1913), also about the floods and fires in the Midwest. He was credited as well with *Panama Canal Glimpses*, for Laird & Lee in the same year.

42 Copy in author’s possession.

43 B. Freeman Ashley, *Tan Pile Jim, or A Yankee Waif Among the Bluenoses* (Chicago, Laird & Lee, 1894); *Dick & Jack’s Adventures on Sable Island* (Chicago, Laird & Lee, n.d.).

“God’s Ark”: Subscription Book Publishing and the *Titanic* 101

both picture books (1893 Chicago World’s Fair; 1904 St. Louis Exposition)⁴⁴ and disaster books on the Johnstown Flood, the Chicago Iroquois Theater fire and the San Francisco earthquake.⁴⁵ A whole chapter in the Everett/Russell *Titanic* text was devoted to one of Laird & Lee’s most successful writers, the British journalist William T. Stead, who lost his life on the *Titanic*.⁴⁶

The *Titanic* instant hardbacks have enjoyed remarkable longevity considering how hastily they were produced. Not only are the originals sought after as collectibles, but three of the four have been reissued.⁴⁷ In 1997, a Seattle company reprinted Logan Marshall’s *The Sinking of the Titanic*, followed by Nimbus Publishing of Halifax in 1998.⁴⁸ Dover Publications of Mineola, New York has reissued Mowbray’s *Sinking of the Titanic* (1998), and publishers on both sides of the Atlantic have released versions of Everett’s *Story of the Wreck and Sinking of the Titanic*.⁴⁹ These reprints do not appear to provide critical commentary identifying errors in their content. For example, promotional literature issued by Nimbus Publishing refers to their reprint of the Logan Marshall book as “the original 1912 classic account” that “contains all the vital facts and information concerning . . . the famous vessel”.⁵⁰ There is no hint that this was just one of many “quickie” titles produced to cash in on a public obsession. At least the California entrepreneur reissuing the Marshall Everett book admitted that publishing a century ago was “exactly like today”, and that the *Titanic* instant books were “a flash in the pan: ‘Let’s get this out and make some money on it’”.⁵¹

44 *Glimpses of the World’s Fair: A Selection of Gems of the White City Seen Through a Camera* (Chicago, Laird & Lee, 1893); William H. Lee, *Glimpses of the Louisiana Purchase Exposition* (Chicago, Laird & Lee, 1904). In 1906, Laird & Lee released a picture book about the San Francisco earthquake: *Glimpses of the San Francisco Disaster Graphically Depicting the Great California Earthquake and Fire*.

45 Duke Bailie, *Through Mighty Waters Saved, a Romance of the Johnstown Destruction, May 31, 1889* (Chicago, Laird and Lee, 1889); Frank Thompson Searight, *The Doomed City: A Thrilling History of San Francisco’s Destruction* (Chicago, Laird & Lee, 1906); Wesley A. Stanger, *Rescued From Death* (Chicago, Laird & Lee, 1904).

46 See Tebbel, *A History of Book Publishing in the United States*, vol. 2, p. 453.

47 Other instant books besides those on the *Titanic* have been reissued; see for example the reprint of George Stewart’s book *The Story of the Great Fire in St. John* (1877) by Print’N Press for Non-entury Press (St. Stephen, N.B. 1980), and Charles Morris, *The San Francisco Calamity By Earthquake And Fire - A Facsimile Edition Of A 1906 Account* (Secaucus, N.J., Citadel Press, 1986).

48 Nimbus employed century-old marketing practices in its rush to capture the summertime tourist trade. The complete text of the Logan Marshall book is available online from Project Gutenberg [look for Etext #781, filenames ttnic10.txt or ttnic10.zip]. Photos, unfortunately, are not included.

49 Paragon Agency of Los Angeles decided to reproduce the original Everett paste-on cover graphic in red and yellow “to give it some color”, and the “List of the Dead” — which was far from complete at just more than 900 names — was moved from the back of the book to the front “as a tribute”. Dennis McLellan “The Inking of *Titanic*”, *Los Angeles Times*, 31 May 1998. Conway Maritime Press has reissued the Everett book as a “Conway Classic” reprint. An abridged facsimile of the Marshall Everett book has also been published in Britain: Marin Breese, ed., *The Titanic Story: The Ocean’s Greatest Disaster* (London, Breese Books, 1998). See Jerry Revis, *Bibliotheca Titanic* for details.

50 Nimbus Publishing, press release ca. May 1998, courtesy Dan Conlin, Maritime Museum of the Atlantic.

51 McLellan “The Inking of *Titanic*”, *Los Angeles Times*, 31 May 1998. Several other books appeared within a year of the disaster but do not seem to have been sold door-to-door: John Bernard Walker, *The Unsinkable Titanic: Every Ship its own Lifeboat* (New York, 1912) was a critique of British shipping practices by the editor of *Scientific American*. Philip Mauro, *The Titanic Catastrophe and its*

Since many editions have no place of publication or publisher, determining the provenance of *Titanic* instant books is no simple task. The Titanic Historical Society reports there were at least nine different binding colours, giving the impression that many different publishers were involved in their production; however, the similarity in content and interchangeability of editors belies this notion. In fact, the instant books on the *Titanic* all originated with a few firms situated in or near Chicago and Philadelphia, the two centres of the subscription book trade. The John C. Winston Company (head offices in Philadelphia with branches, at various times, in Chicago, Toronto and New York) was probably the largest firm involved. Founded in 1884, it specialized in juvenile and popular literature, although the company had originally intended to publish mainly photographic albums. Upon acquiring the International Bible Agency in 1892, John C. Winston also became one of the largest Bible producers in North America.⁵²

An obvious link exists between the red-covered Russell, the green-covered Everett and the Laird & Lee paperback because they all shared the same copyright holder, L. H. Walter.⁵³ When specified, the publisher of the Everett book was Homewood Press of Chicago, whose catalogue embraced a wide range of topics, including the Oliver Optic boys' adventure series, Victorian travel narratives and a rare study of African-American servicemen in the First World War.⁵⁴ Some editions of the Russell book were published by the National Bible House of Chicago, suggesting another link between the *Titanic* books and *colportage*. A similar connection was evident in the Minter Company of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, which focused almost exclusively on Christian fundamentalist literature, publishing titles such as *The Devil's Bride: A Present Day Arrangement of Formalism and Doubt in the Church and in Society* (ca. 1900), *Mr. World and Miss Church Member — A 20th Century Allegory* (1903) and *Sermons by the Devil* (1904). Jay Mowbray's blue-covered *Sinking of the Titanic* might appear to be an odd addition to the Minter catalogue; however, three years earlier the firm had published his book on the Messina earthquake, and three years before that *San Francisco's Great Disaster* by Sydney Tyler, both instant disaster narratives.⁵⁵ Publishers of religious material clearly saw potential in promoting such

Lessons (London, 1912) was written by a passenger on the rescue ship *Carpathia*. Filson Young, a British journalist who usually wrote about sensational trials in London, produced a "quickie" book entitled *Titanic* (London, 1912). Only one popular work published in 1912 was written by a survivor. Lawrence Beesley, an English schoolmaster, wrote an eyewitness account called *The Loss of RMS Titanic: Its Story and Its Lessons* (London, William Heinemann, 1912). It is considered one of the standard primary sources on the subject.

- 52 Tebbel, *A History of Book Publishing in the United States*, vol. 2, p. 423. This helps explain why the *Titanic* books by Logan Marshall, published by J.C. Winston, and Henry Fredericks, published by International Bible House, both had the same copyright holder, L.T. Myers.
- 53 Other titles attributed to Walter as publisher or copyright holder include: Thomas H. Russell, *America's War for Humanity: Pictorial History of the World War* (1919); Thomas H. Russell, *Life and Work of Theodore Roosevelt* (1919); Ernest A. Bell, *Fighting the Traffic In Young Girls, or War On the White Slave Trade* (1911). The latter is a good example of how subscription books were aimed at readers on both sides of the Canada-U.S. border, as it contains chapters on "Canada's War on the White Slave Trade" and "Conditions in Toronto".
- 54 Oliver Optic was a pseudonym for William Taylor Adams (1822-1897): Emmett Scott, *Scott's Official History of the American Negro in World War* (Chicago, Homewood Press, 1919).
- 55 The Patrick Power Library at St. Mary's University, Halifax has a copy of the Tyler book published by P.W. Ziegler of Philadelphia.

“God’s Ark”: Subscription Book Publishing and the Titanic 103

events as allegorical homilies long before the *Titanic* made its fateful voyage. Indeed, apocalyptic interpretations of the disaster nearly identical to Alma White’s *The Titanic Tragedy: God Speaking to the Nations* (1912) continue to be published in the 1990s.⁵⁶

Selling books by subscription presented significant advantages to the publisher. Production runs could be planned more precisely, thus reducing warehousing and overhead costs. Agents could pitch the product before it was ready to ship — this worked especially well for instant books seeking to capitalize on a recent news story. Guidelines included in the prospectus for *The Tragic Story of the Empress of Ireland* (1914), for example, advised salesmen to “strike hard while the interest in the subject is at fever heat” in order to “secure the greatest results”. Soliciting orders in advance ensured a sale even after the novelty of the story had worn off. One *Titanic* prospectus assured readers that the final product would be more elaborate, more accurate and more complete than the salesman’s sample, which had been rushed into print due to “demand by our agents for canvassing outfits at [the] earliest possible moment”.⁵⁷ In this way, disasters, wars and other high profile news events made ideal fodder for instant books, not only because consumer interest was high but also because the publisher minimized advertising costs.

In the case of the *Titanic*, all that was necessary was a small notice such as the one published in the *Halifax Morning Chronicle*, barely two weeks after the disaster:

Agents — Fastest selling book of the century; destruction of the steamship TITANIC, the Ocean’s greatest tragedy; over 1600 souls to watery graves; don’t depend upon newspaper reports; get facts; duty paid; best terms; outfit free. J.S. ZIEGLER Co., Chicago.⁵⁸

Curiously, none of the *Titanic* instant books were published by J.S. Ziegler, but several pre-1912 titles of similar type were.⁵⁹ Since Marshall Everett was the editor of one, it is probable that the book referred to in the above advertisement was *Story of the Wreck and Sinking of the Titanic*.⁶⁰ Free copies of the Everett book were being offered in

56 Alma White, *The Titanic Tragedy: God Speaking to the Nations* (Bound Brook, N.J., Pentecostal Union [Pillar of Fire], 1912). The Pentecostal Union was based in Denver, Colorado. A few recent publications of a similar nature are John Norman Murray, *The Titanic: A Sign Prophecy to England, the United States, and the New International Order* (Wilkes-Barre, Pa., J. Murray, 1993), and Casey Sabella, *Titanic Warning: Hearing the Voice of God in this Modern Age* (Green Forest, Ariz., New Leaf Press, 1994).

57 Marshall Everett, *The Story of the Wreck of the Titanic* (Chicago, Homewood Press, 1912), salesman’s sample.

58 *Morning Chronicle* (Halifax), 1 May 1912, p. 9. I am grateful to Alan Ruffman for this reference.

59 Trumbull White, editor of an instant book on the San Francisco earthquake had also produced one on the Spanish-American War for the J.S. Ziegler company in 1898. Henry Neil, as Marshall Everett, also edited *Exciting Experiences in our Wars with Spain and the Filipinos* (Chicago, Book Publishers Union, 1899), described as an “Official Autograph Edition” with photographs, illustrations and cartoons, and *Startling Experiences: War in China, War in The Philippines, War in South Africa* (Chicago, Educational Co., 1900). The similarities among all these books and their creators are numerous, and point to a highly-specialized genre with distinctive characteristics which long predate the *Titanic* disaster.

60 Marshall Everett, *Exciting Experiences in the Japanese-Russian War* (Chicago, J.S. Ziegler & Co., 1904).

Chicago a month after the disaster as premiums to “everyone who will send . . . \$2.00 (Canada \$2.50) for a year’s subscription to the *Saturday Blade* and *Chicago Ledger*”.⁶¹ By the middle of June 1912, copies of Everett were in the hands of customers in southern New Brunswick.⁶² Another advertisement, published in a Newfoundland weekly in late May 1912, was also probably referring to the Everett book:

TITANIC Wreck of “Titanic” largest best written, best illustrated and most attractive book ever offered public for \$1.00 Agent wanted. Biggest commission ever. Freight prepaid. Outfit free. Send 10cts. Cost mailing. Rush to day to Maritime Publishing Co., Box 94 St. John, N.B.⁶³

Similar notices appeared in newspapers elsewhere. Keith Arbour states that they were “particularly effective in attracting first-time agents”. In at least one instance, a 12-year-old boy was selling copies of the Everett instant book in Glace Bay, Nova Scotia.⁶⁴

The campaign to publicize and sell *Titanic* books was extremely ambitious and highly successful, but the books were certainly not unique; accounts of disasters are commonplace in the Western literary tradition. One of the earliest examples in North America was *An Account of the Great Fire in Newburyport* [Massachusetts], published in 1811. The pamphlet contained three defining characteristics of the genre. There was journalistic reportage (the title page reads “taken principally from the statements which have appeared in the public newspapers”). It included sensational imagery (the cover engraving depicts a suitably dramatic scene of “people fleeing in the street and a hand pump crew working the fire”). And there was overt sentimentality, often verging on the maudlin (a poem about the disaster). The publication date of 1811 for this “second edition, improved” demonstrated how soon after the event (31 May) it went to press.⁶⁵

Disastrous fires were so much a part of 19th-century life that producing a pamphlet memorializing the event could hardly be considered novel.⁶⁶ Indeed, large fires were almost always memorialized in some way, most often in poetry and folk ballads.⁶⁷ A truly

61 *Chicago Ledger*, 20 May 1912. The advertisement carried an artist’s sketch of the picture that eventually appeared on the cover of the Marshall Everett book. The same graphic appears on the sheet music to “Just As The Ship Went Down”, published by the Harold Rossiter Music Company in 1912. On the latter document, the picture is credited to the *Chicago Record-Herald*.

62 The author’s grandmother, Mary DeMille Dann, inscribed the date in a copy of the Marshall Everett book received on her 17th birthday, 20 June 1912.

63 *The Western Star* (Corner Brook), 22 May 1912, p. 2. I am grateful to Alan Ruffman and Art Kidston, Jr. for this reference.

64 Information courtesy of Dan Conlin and Ron McPherson of Halifax, whose father (born in 1900) was the agent in question.

65 Reprint (1973) of *An Account of the Great Fire of Newburyport* (Newburyport, Mass., W. & J. Gilman, 1811).

66 A representative example would be C.W. Austin and H.S. Scott, *Great Seattle Fire of June 6, 1889 Containing a Succinct and Complete Account of the Greatest Conflagration on the Pacific Coast* (Shorey Publications reprint of 1889 edition). For a secondary survey of the Canadian urban experience with major fires, see Peter DeLottinville and John Weaver, “The Conflagration and the City: Disaster and Progress in Nineteenth-Century British North America”, *Histoire sociale/Social History*, XXXVIII (November 1979), pp. 417-49.

67 Examples from the Maritimes include Alfred O. Pritchard, *The City of Saint John on Fire, June 20th, 1877: a poem in six cantos* (Saint, John, N.B., 1877) [CIHM microfiche no. 94492] and John Jardine’s ballad about the 1825 Miramichi fire. Shipwrecks commemorated in ballad form are too numerous to

extraordinary disaster was required to trigger instant book publishing. The great Chicago fire of 1871 was such an event. It inspired a torrent of instant literature ranging from gilt-edged, hardcover accounts to sensational, cheaply-made paperbacks.⁶⁸ Some of these publications originated in Canada.⁶⁹ Most emphasized visual content and were attentive to historical detail. Sheahan and Upton’s 1871 book *The Great Conflagration*, for example, included “a condensed history of Chicago, its population, growth and great public works. And a statement of all the great fires of the world”.⁷⁰ In the prefatory statement to his book on the 1872 Boston fire, Russell H. Conwell expressed a desire to “place before the present generation a readable and trustworthy account” that will also serve “future demands” of writers and scholars. The result was methodical to the point of tedium, from “Boston’s first settler” to separate chapters on the Militia, Fire and Police Departments.⁷¹ Conwell repeated the formula a few years later in his book on the Great Saint John Fire, as did virtually all instant disaster narratives that came after.

Several instant books were rushed into print in the wake of the 1889 Johnstown flood,⁷² but it was the 1900 Galveston hurricane — still the deadliest natural disaster

mention; see Edith Fowke, “Disaster Songs”, in Helmut Kallmann, ed., *Encyclopedia of Music in Canada* (second edition, Toronto, 1992), p. 369. In 1837, Arthur Slader composed two poems, “The Burning Boat” and “The Burning City”, about recent incidents related to Saint John; they were self published under the collective title *The Conflagrations*. [CIHM microfiche no. 62460]. In 1980 “The Burning City” was reprinted by Loyal Colonies Press, Kingston, Ontario in a limited edition of 200 copies, one of which is deposited in Harriet Irving Library Special Collections, University of New Brunswick.

68 Frank Luzerne, edited by John Wells, *The Lost City! Drama of the Fire-Fiend! Or Chicago, As It Was, and As It Is! and its Glorious Future* (New York, Wells & Co, 1872); James W. Sheahan and George P. Upton, *The Great Conflagration: Chicago, Its Past, Present and Future* (Chicago, Union Publishing, 1871); Elias Colbert and Everett Chamberlain, *Chicago and the Great Conflagration* (Cincinnati and New York, C. F. Vent, 1871); Alfred L. Sewall, “*The Great Calamity!*” *Scenes, Incidents, and Lessons of the Great Chicago Fire of the 8th and 9th of October, 1871* (Chicago, n.p., 1871); E.J Goodspeed (Rev.), *History of the Great Fires in Chicago and the West* (New York, H.S. Goodspeed, 1871). The Sewall and Goodspeed books are noteworthy because they also deal with the Peshtigo fire, which devastated a huge area of the state of Wisconsin at precisely the same time as the fire in Chicago and caused greater loss of life than any fire in U.S. history (1,200 fatalities) yet remains virtually forgotten today. See Rev. Peter Pernin, *The Great Peshtigo Fire: An Eyewitness Account* (Madison, 1971) and Jay Robert Nash, *Darkest Hours* (New York, 1977), pp. 437-9. Further information on the Peshtigo fire may be found at [<http://www.crh.noaa.gov/grb/PeshtigoFire.html>] and [<http://www.iswonline.com/archives/eclectic/peshtigo.html>].

69 See the outstanding Great Chicago Fire website [<http://www.chicagohs.org/fire/media/pic0266.html>] co-produced by the Chicago Historical Society and Northwestern University for cover images of two instant paperbacks, *Burning Chicago* (Toronto, Richardson & Punchar 1871), and *The Doomed City* (Detroit, Michigan News Company 1871). The latter is attributed to Canadian journalist Charles Herbert Mackintosh in the CIHM microfiche collection, [no. 37847].

70 Sheahan and Upton, *The Great Conflagration*.

71 Russell H. Conwell, *History of the Great Fire in Boston* (Boston, B.B. Russell, 1873). Conwell went on to become a best-selling author in the inspirational vein, and was also the founder of Temple University in Philadelphia. The inspirational book continues to be one of the most successful genres in non-fiction publishing. For example, *The Road Less Traveled* by M. Scott Peck, M.D., went through 79 printings by June 1995 and had been on the *New York Times* bestseller list for nearly two years: *Sentinel* (Keene, N.H.), 24 June 1995. Conwell’s own inspirational lecture *Acres of Diamonds* has been reissued several times, and the full text is available on the Internet.

72 In addition to books by Ferris and Johnson discussed elsewhere in this study, Herman Dieck’s *The Johnstown Flood* was also sold door-to-door in 1889. See also David McCullough, *The Johnstown Flood* (New York, 1968).

in United States history — that spawned the prototype for subsequent disaster narratives.⁷³ *The Great Galveston Disaster* by Paul Lester contained first-hand survivors' accounts and "many photographs taken immediately after the disaster".⁷⁴ Editions of Lester's book were published in several U.S. cities, and in Saint John, N.B. by Robert A.H. Morrow.⁷⁵ In fact, Morrow seems to have made a career of sorts producing disaster narratives: he published an edition of George Stewart's account of the 1877 Saint John fire, as well as James Herbert Walker's sensational account of the 1889 Johnstown flood. Morrow also wrote a self-published book on the Springhill mine disaster of 1891 under the pseudonym "Ishmael". It later appeared in a second edition under his real name.⁷⁶

The instant books about the Galveston disaster adopted a style and format that was replicated again and again. Catastrophes were no more frequent in the first decade of the 20th century than at any other time, yet several titles appeared in quick succession on the Mont Pelee volcanic eruption in Martinique (1902), the 1903 Iroquois Theater fire in Chicago, the Baltimore fire in 1904, the burning of the steamboat *General Slocum* on the Hudson River (also in 1904), the San Francisco earthquake in 1906 and the 1908 earthquake in Messina, Italy.⁷⁷ By the time the *Titanic* books arrived, the pattern was well established: covers featured a paste-down graphic, content was a pastiche of newspaper articles, first-hand accounts and moralistic sermons, leavened with photographs, sketches, maps and other illustrations accenting the sensational and often gruesome aspects of the event. Illustrations were all-important, appealing as they did not only to children, but also to recent immigrants still grappling with the intricacies of the English language.⁷⁸ The books were so similar in form that many

73 Paul Lester, *The True Story of the Galveston Flood As Told by the Survivors* (American Book and Bible House, 1900); Paul Lester, *The Great Galveston Disaster* (Philadelphia, H. W. Kelley, 1900); John Coulter, ed., *The Complete Story of the Galveston Horror, Written by the Survivors* (New York, United Publishers Of America, 1900). Murat Halstead authored a similar work entitled *Galveston: The Horrors Of A Stricken City. Portraying by Pen and Picture the Awful Calamity That Befell the Queen City on the Gulf and the Terrible Scenes That Followed the Disaster* (American Publishers Association, 1900); another was Nathan C. Green, ed., *Story of the Galveston Flood* (Baltimore, R.H. Woodward Co., 1900).

74 The Galveston hurricane and attendant storm surge claimed 6,000 lives, not including those who perished in other areas along the Gulf coast. See John Weems, *A Weekend in September: The Galveston Hurricane of 1900* (College Station, Tex., 1993) originally published by Holt in 1957; Herbert Mason, Jr., *Death from the Sea: Our Greatest Natural Disaster* (New York, 1972).

75 World Bible House (Philadelphia); American Publishing Company (Beaver Springs, Pa.); Providence Publishing Co. and C.W. Stanton (both of Chicago); and the Topeka Book Company (Kansas City).

76 The George Stewart book is reproduced in the CIHM microfiche collection, no. 13975; James Herbert Walker, *The Johnstown Horror!!! or, Valley of Death* (Saint John, N.B., R.A.H. Morrow, 1889), copy in CIHM collection, no. 35016; Robert A. H. Morrow, *Story of the Springhill Disaster: Comprising a Full and Authentic Account of the Great Coal Mining Explosion at Springhill Mines, Nova Scotia, February 21st, 1891, including a History of Springhill and its Collieries* (second edition, Saint John, N.B., R.A.H. Morrow, 1891). A copy of the first edition (under Morrow's pen-name, "Ishmael") is in CIHM, no. 11080.

77 The 1906 Trumbull White book on the San Francisco earthquake bears more than a passing resemblance to *Chicago's Awful Theatre Horror* (n.p., Memorial Publishing Co., 1904), from sharing a common cover design to an introduction by the same Bishop Samuel Fallows.

78 Probably the largest production run of instant disaster books before the *Titanic* dealt with the San Francisco earthquake: Charles Morris, ed., *The San Francisco Calamity by Earthquake and Fire* (n.p., copyright W.E. Scull, 1906), salesman's sample; Trumbull White, *Complete Story of the San Francisco Horror* (n.p., copyright Hubert D. Russell, 1906) salesman's sample; Charles Eugene

“God’s Ark”: Subscription Book Publishing and the Titanic 107

even used the same frontispiece: an image of a weeping angel, with the words “In Memoriam” and sufficient white space to allow insertion of the latest disaster.

Effective though they were, most instant disaster books are viewed as unreliable primary source documents. *The Complete History of the Johnstown and Conemaugh Valley Flood* by George T. Ferris appeared “but one month” after the “catastrophe of destruction” claimed at least 2,500 lives in May 1889. The book’s author attempted to distance it from similar publications by pointing out that it “has not been hurriedly compiled from newspaper reports”, but instead drew from “on the spot” interviews with survivors and press reports by journalists “who were first on the scene”. Instead of photographs, the Ferris book contained “Forty-Eight Full-Page Engravings, Made Expressly for the Work”. Presumably the publisher’s specialty in Biblical subjects provided little incentive to invest in photographic reproduction equipment.⁷⁹ Willis Fletcher Johnson’s *History of the Johnstown Flood*, available by subscription for \$1.50, was cheaper than the Ferris book, but it promised readers a “well illustrated” account “from maps, photographs, etc. so that these terrible experiences are made vividly life-like”.⁸⁰ Two points are worth making here. First, photographs undermined, to some extent, authors’ control over the narrative, as it had to be adapted to suit the content of the images. Second, a distinction needs to be made between accounts written by single authors, which typified late-19th-century disaster books, and those produced by editors, the norm after 1900. The latter process was by far the quickest, but it led to uneven, disjointed narratives. Publishers often claimed to provide “comprehensive and connected” accounts after 1900, but increasingly they relied on already published material in order to speed up the production process.⁸¹

A few instant book authors openly admitted the difficulties of producing an accurate chronicle of events on such short notice. “My book has many imperfections”, wrote George Stewart in his 1877 account of the Saint John Fire. “It was necessary that it should be hastily prepared [because] my publishers . . . gave me a fortnight to write it in”.⁸² The publishers of *History of the Johnstown Flood* promised “A Timely Book and a Book for All Time”, but as time went on, it became clear that the former took precedence over the latter as publishers intensified their exploitation of the subscription method to sell cheap publications to a mass audience.

By the turn of the century, photographs were supplanting text as the means to achieve quality, accuracy and visual impact. One such example on the San Francisco earthquake warned against purchasing “cheap trashy books with so-called pictures

Banks and Opie Read, *History of the San Francisco Disaster & Mount Vesuvius Horror* (Beaver Springs, Pa., American Publishing, 1906). One *Titanic* instant book author, Jay Henry Mowbray, was responsible for *Italy’s Great Horror of Earthquake and Tidal Wave* (Washington, D.C., G.W. Bertron, 1909) and another, Marshall Everett (i.e. Henry Neil), had at least two disaster books to his credit prior to 1912: Marshall Everett, ed., *The Great Chicago Theater Disaster: The Complete Story Told by the Survivors* (Chicago, Publishers Union of America, 1904), and *Complete Story of the San Francisco Earthquake, Eruption of Mount Vesuvius and Other Volcanic Outbursts* (Chicago, The Bible House, 1906).

79 George T. Ferris, *The Complete History of the Johnstown and Conemaugh Valley Flood* (New York, H.S. Goodspeed & Co., 1889). Goodspeed specialized in pictorial versions of the New Testament, “Commentaries” on biblical subjects, and temperance tracts, although it did publish a book on the Chicago fire in 1871. Titles were distributed mainly through mail orders, but endpaper advertisements stating “best terms ever offered to agents” intimate door-to-door sales as well.

drawn by artists who never saw San Francisco”.⁸³ Another promised “nearly 100 half-tone engravings of photographs, maps and portraits”.⁸⁴ The Lester book on the Galveston hurricane contained 66 photographs; the *Titanic* hardbacks contained about the same number. By 1914, the Bradley-Garretson Company of Brantford, Ontario promised “an astonishing array of photographs” in *The Tragic Story of the Empress of Ireland* by *Titanic* book author Logan Marshall. Salesmen were encouraged to “give plenty of time to the pictures” because they would “go a great ways toward securing the order”.⁸⁵

Several instant disaster books appeared in 1913. This strongly suggests that the *Titanic* books were popular. The prospectus for Logan Marshall’s *Empress of Ireland* claimed that his books “had a sale of over a million copies during the past two years”, an entirely plausible assertion given his long list of titles.⁸⁶ The sinking of the *Lusitania* in 1915 was also the subject of an instant book, in which the perfidy of German militarism was added to the now-familiar themes of upper class heroism and self-sacrifice.⁸⁷ However, this appears to be the last disaster-related title of this type to have been produced and sold by subscription.

Although instant books about disasters virtually disappeared after 1915, subscription selling was still employed as late as the 1940s. One of the last such books was marketed as a “Memorial History of World War II” to returning veterans.⁸⁸ Separate editions of this book were produced for the American and Canadian markets. Meanwhile, mail-order book clubs (invented by evangelist Dwight L. Moody in the 1890s) as well as magazines gradually supplanted books sold by subscription. Though no longer sold door-to-door, instant books continue to capitalize on the public’s insatiable appetite for scandal, violent conflict and sensationalism. Disasters, on the

80 Willis Fletcher Johnson, *History of the Johnstown Flood* (Boston, James H. Earle, 1889), salesman’s sample.

81 See for example, title page to Trumbull White, *Complete Story of the San Francisco Horror*, salesman’s sample.

82 George Stewart, *The Story of the Great Fire in St. John, N.B. June 20th, 1877* (Toronto, Belford Brothers, 1877), p. 269.

83 *Complete Story of the San Francisco Horror*, salesman’s sample, ca. 1906.

84 Charles Morris, ed. *The San Francisco Calamity by Earthquake and Fire*, salesman’s sample, ca. 1906.

85 Like the *Titanic* instant books, this one exists in a modern reprint as well — in a 1972 edition jointly published by Patrick Stevens in England and Seven C’s Press, Connecticut. Two other recent books have been written on the *Empress of Ireland* and the wreck is well-known in recreational diving circles, so the charges that the wreck — Canada’s worst-ever marine disaster — is “forgotten” seem somewhat specious. See Herbert P. Wood, *Till We Meet Again* (Toronto, 1982); James Croall, *Fourteen Minutes: the Last Voyage of the Empress of Ireland* (New York, 1979); Frank Rasky, *Great Canadian Disasters* (Toronto, 1961), pp. 1-26.

86 *The Story of The Panama Canal* (Philadelphia, Universal Book & Bible House, 1913); *The Story of Polar Conquest: The Complete History of Arctic and Antarctic Exploration* (L.T. Myers, 1913); *The True Story of our National Calamity of Flood, Fire and Tornado* (L.T. Myers, 1913); *The Story of Europe and the Nations at War* (Philadelphia, International Press, 1914); *Happy Half Hours with the Bible* (Philadelphia, Uplift Publishing Company, 1915).

87 Frederick D. Ellis, *The Tragedy of the Lusitania* (Harrisburg, Pa., The Minter Company, 1915), salesman’s sample.

88 Francis Trevelyan Miller, *History of World War II: Armed Services* (Philadelphia, Universal Book and Bible House, 1946). It was also published in Toronto by the Dominion Book and Bible House. The same author had produced *General Douglas MacArthur: Fighter for Freedom* for Universal Book and Bible House in 1942.

“God’s Ark”: Subscription Book Publishing and the *Titanic* 109

other hand, do not seem to generate the same degree of interest today, perhaps because they are so meticulously covered by other media like television.⁸⁹

If instant books are still with us, and can be traced back to the early 19th century, was there anything noteworthy about the *Titanic* instant books? Were they simply mass-market novelties of dubious quality and fleeting popularity? What is most fascinating is the number of people, not just in the Maritimes but across the continent, who still have these mementos tucked away in closets, trunks and attics after so many years. According to museum curator Dan Conlin, many have been brought into the Maritime Museum in Halifax with covers missing and tattered pages, yet they remain in the family’s possession, surviving where other books of similar age and condition would long ago have been discarded.

Perhaps people purchased the *Titanic* instant books because they wanted a tangible and affordable link to the historic event. The persistence of the *Titanic* legend through memorabilia suggests that the disaster elicited the same kind of universal emotional outpouring as did the assassination of John F. Kennedy or the death of Diana Spencer, former Princess of Wales. In this respect, the *Titanic* door-to-door books can be seen as early precursors of modern mass-market merchandise, like videos of a royal funeral or retrospectives of a recently-deceased performing artist. To be sure, public interest in the *Titanic* story has intensified periodically, as with Walter Lord’s 1955 book and Robert Ballard’s discovery of the wreck 30 years later, but it is the *extent* of commemoration, in the form of memorials, monuments, observation of important dates, ceremonies, anniversaries, societies, and so on, that truly sets the *Titanic* apart from other disasters.⁹⁰

Why are there so many *Titanic* instant books in the Maritime Provinces? First of all, the disaster struck relatively close to Maritime shores, as evidenced by the recovery and burial of victims in Halifax. Newfoundland felt a certain connection to the tragedy for similar reasons. Second, the *Titanic* story linked — in real terms and metaphorically — two cultural foci familiar to Maritimers: Great Britain and New England. That it was a marine disaster would have only added to feelings of identification and sympathy in a region where such occurrences were a part of everyday life (albeit on a much smaller scale). Third, the door-to-door books provided detailed coverage of the sinking that would not have been easily accessible locally in the first instance, aside from the occasional article reprinted in local newspapers. These three factors: geographic proximity, cultural affinity and untapped demand, no doubt motivated American publishers to include the region in their overall marketing

89 A leader in the field is Montréal-based Quebecor, which produced about one-quarter of all the books published in the United States in 1995. Recent instant book subjects include the Persian Gulf War, the O.J. Simpson case, the death of the Princess of Wales and the Clinton investigation (Starr Report). Politics and politicians are also popular topics — just as they were at the turn of the century. In the summer of 1996, Bill Clinton’s “election-year musings” were published under the title *Between Hope and History*. The book was on store shelves nine days after its publication was announced. In January 1995, a Quebecor plant in Brattleboro, Vermont set a record of sorts by turning out 165,000 copies of *Raging Heart*, an O.J. Simpson-related book by Sheila Weller, just four days after receiving the manuscript: *Sentinel* (Keene, N.H.), 24 June 1995 [<http://www.ambbook.org/news/btw/251.html>]. This record may well have been eclipsed by the publication of the Starr Report in September 1998.

90 Steven Biel, *Down with the Old Canoe*, and to a lesser degree John Wilson Foster, *Titanic Complex* contain useful analyses on this point, although both are somewhat limited in their geographic scope.

strategy, and led to brisk sales in Maritime households. A fourth contributing factor that should not be overlooked is the strong evangelical content, emphasizing Biblical themes and conservative values, that would have resonated with a sizable percentage of the Maritime population. Indeed, if anecdotal reports can be taken at face value, the *Titanic* story was seen almost as a topical “supplement” to the family Bible — a morality tale for modern times.

The disaster narrative in its mature form evoked complex and sometimes contradictory emotions: of reverence, religious contemplation, sympathy for the misfortunes of others and at the same time morbid fascination with death and destruction. Clearly the books were influenced by the sensationalism so prevalent at that time in the popular press. Publishers emblazoned phrases such as “Death! Death! Everywhere!” and “Most Appalling Calamity of Modern Times” across title pages.⁹¹ But death in the early 20th century was in some ways more real than it is today. Life spans were shorter, and even young readers of instant books would have seen death up close, since most people died at home rather than in a hospital. If anything, modern communication advances serve to psychologically distance observers from the consequences of calamity: scenes of human suffering and death which would be extremely unsettling or traumatic to witness first hand are regularly seen on television. In a pre-television age, audiences sought out the most realistic depictions of death and destruction that they could find. Jeffrey Stanton’s exhaustive research on Coney Island turned up a dozen or so elaborate spectacles between 1902 and 1914 re-creating the disasters mentioned in this study: Galveston, Johnstown, San Francisco, Martinique, Messina and of course the *Titanic*. In 1909-10 Coney Island had reenactments of the “Sinking of the *Republic*” (a White Star liner that foundered off New York with all passengers rescued) and a “town saved from flood by telegraph operator” — exactly what did not happen in Johnstown in 1889. The *Titanic* was the last major disaster to be re-created at Coney Island.⁹²

Did the proliferation of disaster books and the popularity of disaster-related dramatizations in the first decade of the 20th century signify heightened concern about society’s collective future? Or were these merely early examples of the kind of high-impact entertainment to which late-20th-century audiences have grown accustomed? While the “thrill factor” was certainly important, the classic disaster narratives also attempted to memorialize the event and provide the reader with moral and religious lessons. Modern disasters are rarely depicted in this way; the causes, explanations and solutions are often attributed to human rather than divine agency,

91 The “Death” phrase appeared on the title pages of both John Coulter’s *The Complete Story of the Galveston Horror* (1900) and William A. Garesche, *Complete Story of the Martinique and St. Vincent Horrors* (n.p., copyright L.G. Stahl, 1902), salesman’s sample.

92 Jeffrey Stanton, *Coney Island History Web Site* [<http://naid.sppsr.ucla.edu/coneyisland/>]. See esp. “Disasters, Spectacles & Cycloramas” and “Rides & Shows List”. The *Titanic* show was mounted in 1914 and used “miniature counterparts of *Titanic* and *Carpathia* to portray principal events”. Another show in 1912 depicted “a western town at height of activity actually destroyed by fire”. Some of these productions were immensely ambitious: one 1905 re-enactment employed a cast of 1,000 to stage the end of the Boer War. Most of the actors were British and Boer war veterans, and even included the Boer General, Piet Cronje, who had surrendered to the British three years before. Also see “History of Amusement Parks”, National Amusement Park Historical Association [<http://www.napha.org/history.html>].

“God’s Ark”: Subscription Book Publishing and the Titanic 111

and the questions raised are not moral but practical in terms of assigning liability and developing appropriate responses to similar occurrences in the future.

The rapid evolution of manufacturing processes involving popular book publishing during the last half of the 19th century is also crucial in understanding the timing and popularity of the disaster narrative genre. Keith Arbour notes that “as early as the 1830s” subscription book publishers “generally included a higher percentage of illustrations [in salesmen’s samples] than accurately represented the complete book’s make-up”.⁹³ The introduction of linotype in the 1880s made mass-market book publishing economically feasible, and the halftone process developed around the same time permitted higher quality photographic reproduction. The scarcity of instant disaster narratives after 1920 may have been related to improvements in the quality of photographic reproduction on newsprint — particularly the advent of clay-coated paper for “glossy” mass circulation magazines. Readers could now obtain cheaper and more graphic accounts of sensational or historic events. The same shift in popular taste may help explain the disappearance of historical pageants at amusement parks. Furthermore, new media such as radio were beginning to encroach on the printed word’s monopoly on news; for example, in the case of the Hindenburg airship disaster, a radio announcer’s realtime description indelibly fixed the event in the public mind.

Why was no instant book ever produced on the 1917 explosion in Halifax Harbour? One of the first published accounts, *Heart Throbs of the Halifax Horror*, certainly had a title reminiscent of previous instant disaster books. The author was Stanley K. Smith, a “correspondent” who was, according to Judith Dudar, “only in Halifax for a limited time”.⁹⁴ Other publications appeared locally soon after the disaster; however, there is no evidence that U.S.-based subscription book publishers were interested, even though the explosion was reported extensively in the New England press. Its Canadian locale may have been a factor, although instant books on several foreign disasters had previously found a market in the United States, notably the fire in Saint John in 1877, as well as Martinique in 1902 and Italy in 1908. Conversely, an edition of Henry Davenport Northrop’s book on the *General Slocum* disaster in New York had been published in Halifax in 1904.⁹⁵

Perhaps the verbose and moralistic tone of disaster narratives was no longer

93 Arbour, *Canvassing Books*, p. xxii.

94 Stanley K. Smith, *Heart Throbs of the Halifax Horror* (Halifax, G.E. Weir, 1918); Judith Dudar, “The Halifax Harbour Explosion: Fact, Fiction, and Focal Point”, in Ruffman and Howell, eds., *Ground Zero*, p. 114. A 32-page pamphlet was also produced soon after the disaster: Joseph Sheldon, *A Bolt from the Blue, A vivid story and description of the Halifax explosion, by an eye witness* (Halifax, Cox Bros., 1918).

95 Henry Davenport Northrop, *New York’s Awful Steamboat Horror* (Halifax, Globe Publishing Co., 1904). Versions of this book also exist with Globe Publishing Co., Philadelphia. The New York Public Library has a copy attributed to Memorial Publishing House of New York, no author given. Northrop was a prolific author of popular histories, travelogues, war stories, devotional literature and biographies whose books were also published by the Globe Bible Publishing Co. of Chicago, to which the similarly-named Halifax and Philadelphia companies were possibly connected. Other titles by him include Gonzalo de Quesada & Henry Davenport Northrop, *Cuba’s Great Struggle For Freedom* (Harrisburg, Pa., The Minter Co., 1898). In this case, the publisher’s name and address were rubber stamped on the title page, suggesting that the books were not actually manufactured by Minter. A second instant book on the *General Slocum* disaster was John Wesley Hanson, Jr., *Awful Excursion Boat Horror, told by the survivors and rescuers* (New York, John W. Hanson, 1904).

fashionable by 1917. This does not imply that the Halifax disaster was completely ignored; the Underwood & Underwood Company of New York, a leading publisher of stereographic images,⁹⁶ obtained the rights to 16 photographs of scenes of devastation in Halifax, which were published in postcard form by the Novelty Manufacturing and Art Company of Montreal. According to Bernard Kline, these postcards “began to appear within weeks of the event”.⁹⁷ This company also owned copyrights for the most widely distributed photographs related to the *Titanic* disaster, especially those taken on the *Carpathia* rescue ship.⁹⁸ At least two “instant” viewbooks of the devastation at Halifax were also produced locally within a few weeks of the event.⁹⁹

Could the preponderance of photographic studies on the Halifax disaster indicate growing public preference for visual rather than written accounts of disasters? Another possible explanation is that leading American writers in the instant narrative field were not familiar enough with the subject to produce a satisfactory account. Or perhaps it was simply a question of timing — the war in Europe diverted the attention of subscription book publishers. If the disaster books that followed the *Titanic* did not sell as well, this would have been a disincentive to produce others. Furthermore, the war may have altered popular and philosophical notions about the meaning of disaster, raising unsettling questions about why such events occur. It was clearly easier to blame the carnage of the First World War on human greed, envy and stupidity than divine retribution. Natural disasters seemed to pale in comparison to trench warfare. And the *Titanic* sinking, after all, was attributable to natural causes as much as to a spectacular technological failure. The Halifax disaster by contrast, like the conflict that caused it, was entirely human in origin and thus more difficult to explain in religious or moralistic terms.

Understanding the full cultural significance of early-20th-century disaster narratives requires further study of the reasons why they seem to fall out of fashion after 1912. Had the *Titanic* foundered a decade later than it did, it is unlikely that the instant books published in 1912 would have been produced at all. Had the sinking occurred a decade earlier, however, the books would have looked the same because the formula had been established by 1900, if not earlier. Instant book publishers responded to the *Titanic* disaster by mobilizing marketing techniques developed decades before to sell everything from Bibles to guides on sexual hygiene.

The few instant disaster narratives to appear after the *Titanic* continued to replicate the Galveston model, such as the two books on the sinkings of the *Empress of Ireland* (1914) and *Lusitania* (1915). This was true as well of a Japanese account of the great

96 See Edward W. Earle, ed., *Points of View: The Stereograph in America: A Cultural History* (Rochester, 1979). Most of the surviving Underwood & Underwood stereographs are held in the Keystone-Mast Stereograph Collection at the California Museum of Photography (University of California, Riverside). [<http://www.lainet.com/gravenimages/press.htm>; <http://www.lainet.com/gravenimages/keystone.htm>].

97 Bernard G. Kline, “Post Cards of the 1917 Explosion”, in Ruffman and Howell, eds. *Ground Zero*, pp. 140, 152-4.

98 See, for example, Everett, *The Story of the Wreck of the Titanic*, and Marshall, *The Sinking of the Titanic*, passim.

99 *The Halifax Catastrophe: Forty views showing extent of damage in Canada's historic city* (Halifax, Royal Print & Litho, 1917); *Views of the Halifax disaster: December 6th 1917* (Halifax, n.p., 1917).

“God’s Ark”: Subscription Book Publishing and the Titanic 113

1923 Kwanto earthquake.¹⁰⁰ Herbert P. Wood’s 1982 book on the *Empress of Ireland* tragedy returned to the pre-First World War disaster narrative format. It even included a poem about the disaster by the author, and commentary by Joseph Conrad, published at the time in the *London Illustrated News*.¹⁰¹

How did the *Titanic* instant books contribute to the mythmaking process? A logical starting point is the hero motif, probably the most prominent aspect of the *Titanic* narratives and certainly characteristic of the genre. One sees it in Russell Conwell’s account of the Boston fire, in Johnson’s narrative of the Johnstown flood, in which a woman telegraph operator, Mrs. Ogle, remains at her post sending out warning messages to the last, and in an unpublished account by Archibald MacMechan of the Halifax disaster in a chapter entitled “The City Heroic”.¹⁰² The hero motif was present not only in disaster narratives but also in the dime novels that were popular at the turn of the century. James D. Hart suggests that “readers who had to conform to anonymous urban life and the confining efficiency of a mechanized age” were attracted to the notion of individual achievement in “trying times”.¹⁰³ In the case of dime novels, the setting was usually historical, but it could just as easily have been the deck of the *Titanic*. In our own time, news media continue to highlight heroic individuals in accounts of catastrophes. Despite similarities with other disaster narratives, the persistence of the *Titanic* story sets it apart. Indeed, the ship has served as a backdrop for fiction by writers as diverse as Toronto wine critic Tony Aspler, Clive Cussler, Danielle Steel and Beryl Bainbridge. One could even argue, as Paul Heyer does in *Titanic Legacy*, that it is a touchstone myth in Western culture. Heyer sees the *Titanic* story as a Biblical morality tale applied in a modern context — a kind of updated version of the story of Noah’s Ark, except that a microcosm of humanity is destroyed, rather than saved, through divine intervention.¹⁰⁴ The power of the hero motif resists contradiction by facts. Henry Van Dyke, the prominent Presbyterian minister and academic who, by virtue of his contribution to the Logan Marshall instant book, was one of the first American religious leaders to comment publicly on the disaster, seized on the phrase “Women and Children First” to emphasize male self-sacrifice, even though the actual gender distribution of survivors tells quite a different story:

TITANIC SURVIVORS	Men	Women	Children
First class	57	140	6
Second class	14	80	24
Third Class	75	76	27
Crew	192	20	
<i>Total</i>	<i>338</i>	<i>316</i>	<i>57</i>

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

100 Morigiko Fujisawa, *The Great Earthquake of 1923* in Japan (Tokyo, Bureau of Social Affairs, 1926). It is more than 600 pages in length and profusely illustrated with black and white photos. Its contents include: Imperial edict on Reconstruction; the Crown Prince’s message; relief work, supplies, foreign sympathy and assistance; survey of earthquake damage, loss of works of art and objects of historical interest; ordinances and laws incidental to the disaster. Jay Robert Nash, *Darkest Hours*, p. 288 reports that Koreans and left-wing activists, who were made scapegoats of the disaster, were imprisoned and many executed.

101 Herbert P. Wood, *Till We Meet Again* (Toronto, Image Publishing, 1982). Wood was a retired Salvation Army officer who wrote the book as a tribute to the 150 Salvationists — on their way to a

Van Dyke's distortion of the facts became the most enduring moral lesson of the *Titanic* tragedy because the 900 crew on board — of whom fewer than 25 were women — were almost completely ignored in the media coverage of the event.¹⁰⁵

The political subtext of this morality tale, as Steven Biel points out in *Down with the Old Canoe*, is that the theme of male stoicism and self-sacrifice on the *Titanic* was used to challenge the burgeoning women's suffrage movement. This reactionary reading of the disaster was particularly evident in Henry Van Dyke's "message of spiritual consolation" which opens the Logan Marshall instant book. In a poem he published a few years later, Van Dyke revisits the phrase he helped make famous:¹⁰⁶

"Women and children first," —
 Ah, strong and tender cry!
 The sons whom women had borne and nursed,
 Remembered, — and dared to die.¹⁰⁷

Foremost among the "sons who remembered" was the "brave and seasoned commander" Captain Edward J. Smith, who allegedly told his crew to "be British" and went gallantly down with the ship. Van Dyke pursued the theme of self-sacrifice in language that makes the modern reader cringe:

a man is stronger than a woman, he is worth more than a woman, he has a
 longer prospect of life than a woman. There is no reason in all the range of

convention in England — who perished in the disaster. Conrad had also commented publicly, and disapprovingly, on media sensationalism surrounding the *Titanic* tragedy. See Foster, *Titanic Complex*, pp. 12-13; Heyer, *Titanic Legacy*, pp. 108-10.

102 Graham Metson, ed., *The Halifax Explosion, December 6, 1917* (Toronto, 1978), p. 11.

103 Hart, *The Popular Book*, p. 153.

104 Heyer, *Titanic Legacy*, pp. 153-9

105 "Report on the Loss of the '*Titanic*' (S.S.)" [British Board of Trade Inquiry Report] (Gloucester, U.K., Allan Sutton Publishing, 1990), p. 42. This is a reprint of the original report. In the spring of 1998, the HMSO announced a reprint of the entire 10 volumes, including appendices. See <http://www.national-publishing.co.uk/searchat.html> (enter keyword "*Titanic*"). Logan Marshall's casualty list, like those provided in all of the instant books, was incomplete as well. We still do not know precisely how many people perished on the *Titanic*, and we probably never will. It did, however, inspire one academic statistician to develop a greater appreciation of the importance of knowing the origin of data sets. Many years later, this error found its way into a widely-used exercise in college-level statistics courses, in which students were asked to analyze the *Titanic*'s casualty rates. One day, a student at St. Mary's University in Halifax noted the discrepancy between the numbers quoted in Logan Marshall's *Sinking of the Titanic* and the casualty figures cited in the exercise. The solution, as the puzzled professor discovered after a little basic historical research, lay in the omission of the crew. Here was an uncommon instance of a source being used to undo the very misconception it had helped to create! See Robert J. MacG. Dawson, "The 'Unusual Episode' Data Revisited", *Journal of Statistics Education*, 3, 3 (1995), available online at [<http://www.stat.ncsu.edu/info/jse/v3n3/datasets.dawson.html>].

106 Professor of English at Princeton University, Van Dyke wrote "more than fifty books of stories, essays, and verse". His Christmas story *The Other Wise Man* was an international best seller, translated into many languages, and two books about the outdoors, *Little Rivers* and *Fisherman's Luck*, also sold well. He himself considered *The Book of Common Worship of the Presbyterian Church*, produced in 1906 by a committee which he headed, and revised in 1932 under his direction, his most important contribution". See Alexander Leitch, *A Princeton Companion* (Princeton, 1978).

107 Henry Van Dyke, "Heroes of the *Titanic*", *Grand Canyon and other poems* (Toronto, Copp Clark, 1914), copy in Killam Library Special Collections, Dalhousie University.

“God’s Ark”: Subscription Book Publishing and the *Titanic* 115

physical and economic science, no reason in all the philosophy of the Superman, why he should give his place in the life-boat to a woman.

But, Van Dyke concluded, it was the “Christian” thing to do. Opponents of women’s suffrage embraced the message “that manhood would endure, because both men and women had learned from the *Titanic* that sexual difference was natural and permanent”.¹⁰⁸ Watching the Cameron film, journalist Charles Krauthammer wondered if other members of the audience found the plot’s faithfulness to the original scenario cobbled together in the popular press a “raging anachronism”. Probably not, Krauthammer concluded, because “when blood starts to flow or ships start to sink”, women are still grouped with the children.¹⁰⁹

As time went on, cultural interpreters of the *Titanic* disaster elaborated on the initial themes of male dominance, Anglo-Saxon racial superiority and Christian self-sacrifice. In the 1930s, two major poetic works on the *Titanic* emerged from disparate yet oddly parallel standpoints. Newfoundland expatriate E.J. Pratt published *The Titanic* (1935),¹¹⁰ and the Rumanian-born *philosophe* and poet Benjamin Fondane published *Titanic: poèmes* in French (1937). To Benjamin Fondane, the iceberg becomes a double metaphor signifying the fascist menace looming over Europe in the 1930s and death itself.¹¹¹ Pratt’s *Titanic* was a straightforward account in the epic style that reflected both the author’s east coast roots and his debt to Anglo-Saxon literary tradition.¹¹² Recently the Shaw Festival mounted a performance of Pratt’s *Titanic* in which “the voices of 12 actors combined with subtle sound effects and carefully chosen music”. It was later broadcast on CBC Radio.¹¹³

A much better-known *Titanic* poem is Thomas Hardy’s “The Convergence of the Twain”. Unlike Pratt’s linear narrative, in which the ordinary is tragically interrupted by the unthinkable, Hardy’s “Convergence of the Twain” suggests that the mid-ocean meeting of the titans is somehow inevitable. Hardy’s elastic chronology (iceberg and ship seem to take shape simultaneously) and psycho-sexual imagery (the collision of ship and ice is a “consummation”) continue to provoke critical analysis because they evoke ideological cross-currents prevalent not only in his time but in our own. Ice and steel are merely surrogates for the inevitable clashes between humanity and nature, tradition and modernity, man and woman. Hardy’s poem also articulated theological questions that were no doubt shared by many contemporary observers. Consider for example what American journalist Fred S. Miller (writing at virtually the same time

108 Biel, *Down with the Old Canoe*, p. 32.

109 Charles Krauthammer, “The Titanic Riddle: Should a good feminist accept priority seating on a lifeboat?” *Time*, 30 March 1998.

110 E.J. Pratt, *The Titanic* (Toronto, 1935).

111 Born Benjamin Wechsler in 1898, Fondane was a leading member of the modernist avant-garde in Bucharest. He changed his name after emigrating to France in 1923, and died in Auschwitz concentration camp in 1944. See Chantal Désilets, “Benjamin Fondane, un visage d’homme, une voix prophétique”, M.A. thesis, Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières, 1989. Fondane’s 1937 *Titanic: poèmes* is long out of print, but a recent compendium of his published work, *Le mal des fantômes* (Paris, 1996) includes the poem. I am indebted to Professor Ricardo Nirenberg, State University of New York at Albany, for this information.

112 Paul Heyer is much kinder in his extended commentary than Jeremy Hawthorn, who dismisses it as an “inferior work”. See Heyer, *Titanic Legacy*, pp. 114-6; Hawthorn, *Cunning Passages*, p. 157.

113 See *Gazette* (Montreal), 1 February 1998.

as Hardy) wrote in the Marshall Everett instant book:

Does Providence directly govern everything that is? And did the Power who preordained the utmost second of each planet's journey, rouse up the mountain from its sleep of snow and send it down to drift, deliberately direct, into the exact moment in the sea of time, into the exact station in the sea of waters, where danced a gleaming speck – the tiny Titanic – to be touched and overborne?¹¹⁴

Here lies the fundamental question invariably posed whenever disasters challenge our faith in the existence of a higher power. It was particularly meaningful in 1912, “an age in which a belief that God foresees and ordains everything comes into conflict with a widespread secularism which assumes that certain events are purely fortuitous and can neither be predicted nor prevented”.¹¹⁵ “Computer simulations [are] . . . the key to a ‘preventative medicine’” for future natural catastrophes, argues one late-20th-century scientist. “If we learn enough about nonlinear mechanisms [in nature] to stabilize climate”, he claims, we can “keep civilization from unraveling”.¹¹⁶

Thus, from the outset the story of the *Titanic* was laden with symbolic meanings which continue to resonate down to the present. As the years passed, new meanings and interpretations have been added, as the ship became a setting for acting out the decline of the British empire (in Noel Coward's 1933 *Cavalcade*) and a vehicle for anti-British propaganda during the Nazi regime (in Herbert Selpin's 1943 film *Titanic*).¹¹⁷ Sensitivity about the disaster became so acute in the 1930s that the British Chamber of Shipping took steps to prevent Alfred Hitchcock from making a film about the *Titanic*.¹¹⁸

Literary interest in *Titanic* resurfaced in the post-Second World War era, fueled in part by two feature films, one American (*Titanic*, 1953) and the other British (*A Night to Remember*, 1958). The latter was based on Walter Lord's book of the same name. The Irish poet Anthony Cronin was clearly indebted to Lord in his lengthy 1960 treatment. Two American poets, E. Merrill Root (“When Man's Great Ship Went Down”) and Richard Ball also turned their hand to *Titanic* verse in the 1960s.¹¹⁹ The impact of the *Titanic* tragedy internationally is also striking: in Scandinavia, Germany, Mexico and Chile, the story continues to engage writers. *Titanic* poetry appeared in German almost as quickly as in English.¹²⁰ In the 1970s, the Spanish poet José Ruiz Sánchez was inspired to write about the *Titanic* as was Gabriel Trujillo

114 As quoted in Hawthorn, *Cunning Passages*, p. 120.

115 Hawthorn, *Cunning Passages*, p. 120.

116 William H. Calvin, theoretical neurophysiologist, University of Washington School of Medicine, quoted in WHAT IS THE MOST IMPORTANT INVENTION IN THE PAST TWO THOUSAND YEARS? [<http://www.edge.org/documents/Invention.html>].

117 Hawthorn gives detailed attention to *Cavalcade* in *Cunning Passages*, pp. 125-31; Mary Costello, *Titanic Town: Memoirs of Belfast Girlhood* (London, 1993). Foster also examines Irish connections in “Bringing It All Back Home”, part two of *Titanic Complex*, pp. 69-89. The Herbert Selpin film is discussed in Heyer, *Titanic Legacy*, pp. 125-7.

118 “Shipping Magnates Lobbied against Films”, *Irish Times*, 10 April 1998 [<http://www.irish-times.com/irish%2Dtimes/paper/1998/0410/wor2.html>].

119 Richard Ball, *The Last Voyage of the Titanic* (Milton, Ind., 1968); Anthony Cronin, *R.M.S. Titanic* (Dublin, Ireland, 1981); E. Merrill Root, *Of Perilous Seas* (Francestown, N.H., 1964).

120 Max Dauthendey, *Die Untergangsstunde der “Titanic”* (zum Jahrestag 16. April 1913) (Berlin, Meyer, 1913) [copy in New York Public Library]. It would appear that this was published on the occasion of the sinking's first anniversary.

Munoz, a Mexican poet, essayist and “cultural journalist”.¹²¹ The German poet Hans Magnus Enzensberger reworked the epic format adopted by Pratt, with markedly different results.¹²² Detailed analysis of these cross-cultural connections with the *Titanic* myth could yield insights into why certain key historical events transcend national, linguistic and continental boundaries.¹²³

Among the multiplicity of meanings derived from the *Titanic* story, Paul Heyer identifies communications as the dominant theme — not just the tragic failure to transmit crucial information, but also the triumph of communications technology in summoning aid to the survivors. John Wilson Foster, and to some extent Steven Biel as well, do acknowledge the trans-national universality of meanings and memorializations engendered by the *Titanic* tragedy. Foster even admits to being influenced by the “unavoidable Canadian engagement with cultural diversity” in developing his analysis.¹²⁴ Jeremy Hawthorn, commenting on the complex relationship between ideology, myth and history, posits the notion that “the establishment of what one can legitimately term a disaster *genre* is very much a modern phenomenon”. He argues that the commodification of calamity, though motivated by profit, produces “ideological raw material” that has been worked and reworked ever since, “as if the *Titanic*’s loss were a highly coded Renaissance painting or piece of medieval church architecture”.¹²⁵ Fires in the late 19th century, according to a recent study by Paulette Kilmer, were also depicted as events that somehow served a spiritual purpose and restated “ancient narrative patterns, such as the Judgement Day archetype”.¹²⁶ Just as the victims of the *Titanic* sinking came from all walks of life, so too did fire act as a “great equalizer” when whole towns or city blocks were laid waste. Kilmer’s argument hinges on the Gilded Age preoccupation with material success and the misgivings engendered by it. Surely the *Titanic* story can be seen in the same way, emphasizing the apocalyptic, the heroic and the sacrificial — essentially humanistic, democratic themes — in an age when capitalism had produced a society fractured by incredible disparities of wealth and status.

Whatever its mythic and ideological resonances, calamity as a subject has not appealed to historians, perhaps because of the singularity of calamitous events. Disasters seem to lack cumulative effect on the collective psyche — hence the requirement in disaster narratives to refresh the reader’s memory with a roster of prior incidents. Natural disasters are especially susceptible to a kind of self-imposed amnesia. Each time we hear the trite phrase “storm of the century”, we ought to be

121 José Ruiz Sánchez, *Hundimiento del Titanic* (León, Spain, 1975) [copy in New York Public Library]; Gabriel Trujillo Muñoz, *Permanent Work: Poems 1981-1992* (San Diego, 1993).

122 See “A Modernist *Titanic*”, in Hawthorn, *Cunning Passages*, pp. 138-52.

123 One hesitates to use the term “global” without supporting evidence of cultural and literary influences originating in other parts of the world, such as Africa, Asia and India.

124 Foster, *Titanic Complex*, p. 16.

125 Hawthorn employs the latter phrase to describe a more recent work than those produced in 1912, but the heavy investment in symbolic meaning (and the sense of ideological crisis) so characteristic of the *Titanic* instant books is a recurring and provocative theme in his analysis: *Cunning Passages*, pp. 94, 108 and passim.

126 Paulette D. Kilmer, *The Fear of Sinking: The American Success Formula in the Gilded Age* (Knoxville, 1996), p. 131.

reminded of Galveston, Texas in 1900. But of course, we are not. The worst disaster is always the one that has just occurred. Thus the *Titanic* still is, for many people, the “world’s greatest marine disaster”, despite other greater disasters.¹²⁷

The *Titanic* instant books could not be expected to provide a complete and comprehensive account of the disaster. Even the definitive book on the disaster, Walter Lord’s *A Night to Remember*, was as reflective of his time as the accounts compiled by Everett, Marshall, Mowbray et al. were of theirs.¹²⁸ The *Titanic* instant books captured the mood of the moment, and successive writers, including Lord, would rely on them. The *Titanic* instant books continue to transmit the essential details of the story — both mythic and factual — to succeeding generations of readers. In the preface to his new book, *Titanic: The Canadian Story*, Alan Hustak describes how an instant book sparked his interest:

. . . almost fifty years ago . . . my grandfather took me to an estate auction and I bought . . . Logan Marshall’s classic, *The Sinking of the Titanic and Great Sea Disasters* published in 1912. I still have it. I read it and was captivated. Then I saw the movie with Barbara Stanwyck and Clifton Webb in 1953. I was hooked.¹²⁹

The *Titanic* instant books typify the period in which they were produced, combining as they do elements of yellow journalism, devotional literature, dime novel escapism and mass-market sales techniques no longer practised on such a wide scale. Just as a period piece of film footage has historical value as a primary source, even though a Heritage Minute re-enactment may be more coherent, the instant books are fine examples of historical memorabilia that reveal the public’s unending demand for both minutiae and meaning when calamity strikes.

JAY WHITE

127 For example, consider the *Atlantic* (1873) and *Birkenhead* (1852) disasters (Nash, *Darkest Hours*, pp. 33-4, 53-4). Or the *Wilhelm Gustloff* disaster: see Christopher Dobson, John Miller and Ronald Payne, *The Cruellest Night* (Boston, 1979); Charles W. Koburger, Jr., *Steel Ships, Iron Crosses, and Refugees: The German Navy in the Baltic, 1939-1945* (New York, 1989); Arthur V. Sellwood, *The Damned Don’t Drown: The Sinking of the Wilhelm Gustloff* (New York, 1973) reprinted by Bluejacket Books, 1996. Although the reported death toll fluctuates between 5,500 and 7,700 in various accounts, and some sources claim another liner torpedoed in 1945, the *Goya*, resulted in more fatalities, it is generally believed that the *Wilhelm Gustloff* sinking caused the greatest loss of life in a single vessel in history. Regrettably, this incident has been appropriated by right-wing and anti-Semitic propagandists on the Internet to serve their own purposes. [See for example: http://ihr.org/jhr/v17/v17n2p22_Weber.html] Another German liner, the *Cap Arcona*, was sunk by British bombers four days before the war ended with appalling loss of life; see J.L. Isherwood, “Steamers of the Past: The Hamburg-South American Liner *Cap Arcona*”, *Sea Breezes* (May 1976), cited in the Nizkor Project website [<http://www1.us.nizkor.org/features/dentist/appendix-a.html>].

128 Lord’s vitae displays the unerring instincts of a popular historian: *Day of Infamy: The Whole Story of Pearl Harbor!* (New York, 1958), *The Good Years, That Remarkable Period When Men and Women Lived with Confidence* (New York, 1960), *Peary To The Pole* (New York, 1963), *A Time To Stand, The Epic of the Alamo* (New York, 1963), *The Past That Would Not Die* (New York, 1965) [the Civil Rights movement], *Midway! Incredible Victory* (New York, 1968), *The Dawn’s Early Light: Events of 1814 in Washington, London, and Baltimore* (New York, 1972), *Lonely Vigil: Coastwatchers of the Solomons* (New York, 1977), *The Miracle of Dunkirk* (New York, 1982).

129 Publisher’s prospectus for Alan Hustak, *Titanic: The Canadian Story* (Montréal, 1998), p. 4.