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True Manhood and Manly Boys: Boys' Adventure Stories, Imperialism, and the Titanic

Alison Reynolds '07

Many of the boys on the Titanic, ages eight through nineteen, were trapped in a limbo between childhood and adulthood, making it unclear which role they should assume as the ship sank. Some were placed on the lifeboats by their parents, some decided to stay with their fathers as the ship sank, and others found that the crew made it difficult for them to get on lifeboats because of contrasting class concepts of childhood. In more than one instance, the sailors and crew refused to let boys as young as eleven on the lifeboats, and it was only through the intervention of their fathers or by being disguised as females that these boys were allowed on. Many of the boys who did survive describe their experiences in terms that make them sound more adult-like and courageous. Those who did not survive are honored by their families and by newspapers for their heroism, bravery, and manly actions.

By assuming these adult roles, the boys were attempting to fulfill the codes of behavior encouraged by popular boys' stories and novels printed in magazines and newspapers of the time. These codes of behavior worked to decrease the growing problem of "Britain's imperial power and British masculinity in equal decline" (Hugill 326). In fulfilling these codes, the boys showed a kind of bravery, loyalty, and manliness that signified the superiority of Western countries, encouraging militarism and support for imperialism and averting the global dominance. The use of this rhetoric shows that there was an increasing need for young boys to be perceived as more adult-like so they could grow up to become brave, strong, ultra-masculine men who would continue to support imperialism and assert the moral and physical superiority of Western countries and races during a time when support for these foreign wars was declining.

During the Edwardian period and for several years leading up to it, a genre of juvenile novels and stories aimed at an audience of boys were very popular throughout England and America. These stories depicted young boys, teenagers, and young men performing heroic acts and encouraged boys to adhere to specific codes of behavior in order to be good citizens. According to Robert H. MacDonald in the article, "Reproducing the Middle-class Boy: From Purity to Patriotism in the Boys' Magazines, 1892-1914," "The newspaper [*Pall Mall Gazette*] interprets the function of *The Captain* [a boys' magazine] and its rivals as educative and social; their role [is] to promote morality and patriotism, [and] to 'help make good lads and brave lads' of their readers," suggesting that these stories played a large role in influencing codes of behavior for boys (519). In this

morally-based code, "the manly boy was pure, courageous and unselfish; he never sneaked, he told the truth," and also had "physical pluck" and "moral courage" (MacDonald 522). During the sinking of the Titanic, each of these virtues is illustrated through the actions of a Western boy, suggesting that these values had become culturally ingrained and accepted in Edwardian society.

By the early twentieth century, the most important virtues for boys to uphold included being "manly and polite, [protecting] the weak, [being] kind to dumb animals, [abstaining] from bad language and smoking, and '[striving] to be a bright British boy: always a patriot and lover of his country,'" along with the previously stressed codes of morality (MacDonald 525). By displaying these moral qualities and civic duties, the boys showed their patriotism and loyalty to their countries. These concepts in boys' stories soon acquired imperialist rhetoric, encouraging boys to enlist in the military when they were old enough and to support imperialistic wars as a display of their citizenship and manliness. According to MacDonald, the pictures on the magazine covers reflected these changing attitudes. He writes,

The heading of each number, behind a drawing of a boy reading and a boy with a sports kit, showed a Union Jack; in March 1908, the flag was replaced with a mounted boy bugler sounding the alarm. The illustrations on the title-pages... also dramatized the empire, particularly the excitement and adventure of the frontier. These title-pages also made the progression towards more explicit imperialist ideology from, in the early years, heroic rescues by firemen and Indian attacks on the US mailcoach, to, by the turn of the century, imperial frontiersman in Africa, big game hunters in India, soldiers dynamiting the gates of a fort, or scenes from a military tattoo. (529)

These changes on magazine covers virtues reflect a more militant turn that suggests a need for a more masculine younger generation of boys who will be prepared to step into the roles of soldiers, roles that will help their countries maintain global dominance over those with "inferior" sets of morals and social behaviors.

By 1912, the year of the Titanic disaster, these magazines focused largely on depicting Western nations as militant countries who were far stronger, both morally and physically, than the countries they had under imperialist control. In the article "Imperialism and Manliness in Edwardian Boys' Novels," Peter J. Hugill writes, "the theme of Britain and America together in an Anglo-Saxon compact against those who would destroy their trade and reputation in the world is consistent across much of the work of... imperial romance." This union of the Western Anglo-Saxon countries against non-Western cultures is an idea that is consistent with the heroic behaviors of the white, Western boys on the Titanic (333). Additionally,

some boys on the Titanic displayed militaristic qualities through the sacrifice of their lives and through their physical dexterity, mimicking the actions of a soldier in the battlefield.

Even though these ideas of morality and good citizenship were based on traditionally middle-class values, many magazines had an audience of both upper and lower-classes, although a few focused only on upper and middle-classes. Those that had only an audience of upper and middle-class boys "praised the gentleman, truth and honour, perseverance, friendship, courage, loyalty, duty, glory, [and] resolution," while at the same time insinuating that working class boys were inferior for not fulfilling these virtues (MacDonald 524-525). On the other hand, magazines aimed at lower-class boys still depicted the same set of middle-class morals, however, they also suggested that by following the described codes of behavior, along with "hard work, persistence, and luck," lower-class boys could climb the social ladder and join the middle-class (MacDonald 525). This belief might have been a factor in the large number of lower-class boys on the Titanic who opted to remain on the sinking ship even when offered a chance to get on a lifeboat.

Imperialism also played a large role in increasing a lower-class boy's chances at climbing the social ladder. Huggill writes, "The origin of the boys' adventure story and its close linkage to the romance of individual advancement in Britain lies in its imperialism... A plucky lad could always 'rise' through hard work and devotion to the imperial cause," devotion that was shown through bravery and loyalty to the Western ideals emphasized by these stories (320). Through this lens, the behavior of the lower-class boys on the Titanic can be seen as an attempt to jump social classes through a show of middle-class morality and adherence to civic duty that would make them seem more masculine, and thus of a superior social class.

In addition to an increasing emphasis on militarism, stories and adventures of the Boys Scouts became very popular during the Edwardian period. These Scouts were depicted as "little soldiers," and "became members of a national organization working with the authorities... [They] were more than good citizens, they were agents of law and order (MacDonald 531). Many of their actions became highly militarized, encouraging boys to become physically stronger, more patriotic, and join in support of imperialism as a way to show loyalty and pride and display themselves as courageous representatives for their entire country. In these stories, the ideal Boy Scout would perform actions unrealistic for boys of any age, single-handedly "catching spies, thwarting invasions and preparing to take up arms to save their country" (MacDonald 534). With role models such as these to live up to, it becomes easier to understand why the boys on the Titanic described their actions in such heroic terms.

One such account comes from Marshall Drew, an eight-year-old English boy traveling in second-class. While recalling his story, he said, "It isn't likely I shall ever forget the screams of those people as they perished in

the water said to be 28 degrees," but he himself did not show fear. He continued, "at this point in my life I was being brought up as a typical British kid. You were not allowed to cry. You were a 'little man.' So as a cool kid I lay down in the bottom of the lifeboat and went to sleep" (Tibballs 132). By not crying or showing fear, even in a perilous situation, Drew fulfilled the role of the honorable, resolute manly boy who would grow up into a loyal and patriotic citizen. Although a seemingly small act, Drew's lack of fear was representative of the ideal brave boy who stood as a symbol of future Western superiority because of his composure and emotional strength.

A similar situation occurred in the account of eight-year-old Arthur Olsen, a Norwegian boy who traveled in third-class. Olsen was placed in a lifeboat by his father, who did not survive the accident. In his account, Olsen says, "In our boat everybody was crying and sighing. I kept very quiet. One man got very crazy, then cried just like a little baby. Another man jumped right into the sea and he was gone" (Tibballs 275). Like Drew, he presents himself as brave, calm, and in control of his emotions, showing his adherence to the principles of being a "manly boy." Through Olsen's perspective, it is himself who acts more adult-like, displaying his own courage and composure compared to the weaknesses of the men who cried and jumped off the lifeboats. This suggests that his perception of masculinity does not revolve around age, but behavior. Because his behavior was manlier, according to teachings and depictions of manliness from boys' stories, he saw his own behavior as more adult-like and, therefore, superior to the older men.

Olsen's bravery and poise represented the increased masculinity of the next generation of Western boys, and worked to decrease fears of a widespread loss of masculinity. As a member of this generation, Olsen and the youths he represented were taught to be patriotic and to promote the superiority of the Western races through moral and physical strength, which were directly connected to a single idealized code of behavior. By following these codes of behavior, boys became representatives of their entire culture and helped assist in the preservation of the west as the globally dominant region.

Another boy who was saved by entering a lifeboat was Cervine Swensen, a fourteen-year-old third-class passenger from Sweden. According to an article in the *Boston Post*, "His mother... had told him when he kissed her goodbye in Sweden that if anything happened to run to the boats" (Tibballs 150). To this first statement, Swensen added that, "he hoped he didn't prevent some woman from being saved for he knew his mother would want to do that first in spite of what she had told him" (Tibballs 150). By citing obedience to his mother as his reason for getting on a lifeboat, Swensen fulfilled the role of the manly boy. According to boys' magazines, "'True Manhood' lay in hard work, protecting the weak, pleasing Mother and avoiding bad thoughts," suggesting that although boys were supposed to act like men, their mothers still had the ultimate authority. As long as the

boys remained in a state of childhood, their mothers remained in control of their lives, highly influential through their roles as nurturing parents. Once the boys grew into adults, they became independent from their mothers. Swensen was caught in a phase between childhood and adulthood in which he obeyed his mother as a child, but leaned toward the adult role by acknowledging that it would have been wrong for him to knowingly take a woman's seat on a lifeboat. By saying this, Swensen shows his belief in the ideal of "protecting the weak," in addition to obeying his mother. This emphasis on the importance of honor shows a move toward the independence of adulthood and displays the values of an upstanding Western boy whose respect and system of values work together to assert the superiority of the next generation of Westerners.

Not all survivors found their place on the lifeboat so easily, as described in an account from Edward Dorking, a nineteen-year-old English boy traveling third-class. Dorking jumped off the ship while it was sinking and was able to swim to a lifeboat. Before jumping, he explains how he and two other boys "knelt and prayed, then together... mounted the rail and plunged over," all acts of moral courage endorsed by boys' magazines as signs of a manly boy ("Boy's Prayer for Life Answered"). Dorking's survival, accomplished by swimming through freezing water, displayed physical prowess, making him a symbol of strength for the youth of Western countries. According to the rhetoric of these stories, his physical dexterity on the Titanic should be matched by all boys and later modeled on the battlefield in order to prove the superior strength and military power of Western countries. Additionally, his faith in Christianity displays another superior facet of Western culture. Since Christianity was the dominant religion of Western culture, it was believed that "inferior" cultures could benefit from its teachings, an example of "the white man's burden; which advanced the idea that territorial imperialism was justified if it resulted in improving the lost of less fortunate races" (Hugill 330). Thus, something as simple as saying a prayer could be used publicly as a way to proclaim Western superiority and justification of imperialism through the heroic actions of one boy.

Although many boys were able to get onto lifeboats, there are several instances of crew members refusing to let some boys enter. John Ryerson, a thirteen-year-old American first-class passenger, started to get on a lifeboat, but the officer at the boat (who in some accounts was Lightoller) refused to let him on. It was not until the boy's father said, "Of course that boy goes with his mother. He is only thirteen," that Ryerson was allowed on the boat (Tibballs 171). William Carter II, an eleven-year-old American first-class passenger, tried to get on the same boat, but was refused until his mother put a woman's hat on his head ("Master William Thornton Carter II"). There is also an account that says that John Jacob Astor placed an anonymous boy in a lifeboat wearing a woman's hat and called him a girl

after one of the crew refused to let the boy on the boat ("Astor Put Boy By Wife's Side").

Although there are no accounts from these boys about their reactions to these occurrences, the events do point towards certain beliefs of the crew members regarding childhood. Because the majority of the crew members were of a lower class than the first-class boys, their concepts of childhood and when it should end were different from the upper-class passengers. For the first and second-class passengers, adulthood began at a much later age than it did for the lower-class crew members, who were often forced to work or go to sea as young teenagers. Lightoller himself began his sea career at the age of thirteen, which helps to explain why he viewed Ryerson and Carter, as adults while their parents still believed them to be children. In terms of the empire, the majority of the foot soldiers were lower-class men who probably entered the wars at a very young age. Upper-class men, on the other hand, most likely entered war much older as officers. In the eyes of the crew, these boys were probably near the age to fight or begin working, so they would be expected to act as men, whereas in upper-class concepts of childhood, the boys were still in training towards becoming adults. The crewmen may have viewed the boys' actions of getting onto the lifeboats as weaknesses, contributing to the problem rather than helping to alleviate fears about declining masculinity.

The idea of lower-class boys having shorter childhoods is exemplified by the Asplund family of three Swedish brothers: Filip, fourteen, Clarence, ten, and Carl, eight. These third-class boys who refused to leave their father in an attempt to fulfill a more adult-like role and perished with their father during the disaster. In their mother's account, she recalled that the "three older boys clung to their father," and called them, "my three grown boys... [who smiled] sweetly at me to the last" (Tibballs 149). Being lower-class, the boys may have preferred to identify themselves with their father, emphasizing their manliness and their status as adults, than remain with their mother, under whom they would remain in a state of childhood. Selma Asplund's description of her sons as grown because they stayed on the sinking ship with their father suggests that she valued the same virtues of courage, honor, and sacrifice that were depicted in the boys' stories. Her behavior also suggests that the virtues taught in boys' magazines were cultural values that were not only learned by boys, but by much of the culture as well, creating a more widespread and prominent recognition of these values and the promotion of their importance to the younger generations. Exemplifying this idea, the Asplund brothers were praised for courageously acting as men by their mother and by newspapers, turning them into a symbol for the strength, moral courage, and manliness of young boys in the empire.

A similar tragedy occurred in the van Billiard family. Two English brothers traveling in third-class, James van Billiard, twelve, and Walter van Billiard, nine, were said to have "refused to leave their father on the doomed

ship and remained with him to the last" ("Van Billiard Boys May Have Stuck to Father"). By remaining with their father, it is possible that the boys were trying to fulfill an adult role, strengthened by following the example of their father. The general public respected the brothers for their bravery, again suggesting that not only boys, but much of the culture had adopted these codes of behavior as normal and acceptable. Both sets of brothers acted within the codes of "True Manhood" and encouraged boys of all classes to adopt these concepts of sacrifice and selflessness as soon as possible in order to be good representatives of their race.

William Johnson, a nineteen-year-old American is eulogized as a hero by his local newspaper for his role throughout the disaster. According to an article originally printed in the *Paterson Morning Call*, Johnson was fourth quartermaster on the S.S. Philadelphia and was originally supposed to sail home on the Olympic, but missed it and had his ticket changed to the Titanic ("Met Death Like a Hero").

As the ship was sinking, he quickly came to duty, assisting women and children with getting into the lifeboats. According to steward Frank Turnquist, Captain Smith told Johnson to get into the lifeboat, but Johnson replied, "I'll wait until the women and children are all off and other officers go," showing his courage and willingness to sacrifice himself to fulfill his moral and civic duty. His fearlessness on the Titanic was representative of how males of all Western races should behave, according to the magazines, and the strength and courage he displayed on the sinking ship could be compared to the strength and courage displayed on the battlefield. Because he aided in the rescue of women and children, Johnson acted as the ideal boy, a model of the Boy Scout who goes above and beyond others to achieve a heroic triumph for the glory of his country and his race.

Concerning Johnson's heroism, Turnquist also says, "some of those older officers could have saved him, as they all knew he deserved to have his life by the courage he showed when put to the test. In my eyes and in the eyes of others who saw the affair, Johnson was a hero" ("Met Death Like a Hero"). Turnquist's comment suggests that as a boy perfectly adhering to the ideals of "True Manhood," Johnson, had he survived, would have been a patriotic and loyal citizen who would promote this manliness to other boys, working to increase the strength and superiority of his race. His father is reported to have said, "he was sure his son had gone to his death as a true man should," and his sister, "I know Willie would be a man in a case like that and as mother has said, she knows he would not leave the vessel if there were still women and children aboard" ("Met Death Like a Hero"). He is represented as a perfect, virtuous hero by the newspaper and is praised for acting as a grown man by his family, both examples of how this rhetoric convinced not only boys, but those around them that the codes of behavior they promoted should be universal. His actions were admirable and suggest a masculinity and strength of character that all Western boys should strive for in order to show the superiority and the capability of the next generation,

who were expected to continue the empire's legacy. His generosity in giving up his life for women and children is comparable to a soldier giving up his life for his country in a war, showing how both were seen as acts of bravery and selflessness that would represent the strength of the race as a whole, providing evidence of Western countries' superiority and masculinity, justifying their global dominance.

Although it is unlikely that every boy on the Titanic read these magazines, the ideas promoted by them transcended the written word to become a part of the cultural values concerning manliness in young boys. The behavior of many of the boys on the Titanic acts as a model for how boys should behave in all facets of life. Those who survived and those who did not both acted bravely in whatever capacity they could. The boys who died, no matter what their age, are characterized as being grown-up and manly and are turned into heroes by newspapers and their families for their acts of bravery. By behaving in this way, the boys were doing their civic and patriotic duty to their country and to their race as a whole. In showing the world the strength, courage, sense of morality, and adherence to manly, adult-like roles characterized by boys' novels and stories, the boys managed to act as symbols of the power of the younger generation. Taught to follow in the footsteps of the Boy Scouts they read about, it was hoped that these boys would grow up to be strong, militant soldiers, increasing their loyalty, duty, and patriotism as they grew older. In a way, the boys represent the rise in power of the younger generations, promising to continue to maintain Western countries' status as the most powerful culture and asserting and promising continued global dominance of their race.

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