

Media Review

Compte rendu de média

Recent Media Treatments of the *Titanic* Tragedy

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Titanic: Class and Culture

It is reported that a South African company intends to build a replica of R.M.S. *Titanic* that in late December 1999 will duplicate the great liner's maiden voyage from Southampton. Thanks to the most up-to-date detection equipment on board that will remove the threat of ice, duplication will cease at the fiftieth meridian (which *Titanic* had just crossed when she had her fatal rendezvous with an iceberg), and the replica will finish the trip to New York, having in some fanciful sense become the original vessel in the first hours of what most of us will wrongly regard as the first year of the third millennium. In April 2002 the feat — or stunt — will apparently be repeated by another replica *Titanic*, built this time by a Swiss-American business alliance calling itself — with appropriate mimicry — White Star Line.

These projects will go one better than the Japanese company's plan to build a full-scale *Titanic* — but sans engines and other innards — to function at its mooring as a conference centre and "floating hotel," as the promotion has it, echoing contemporary praise and criticism of R.M.S. *Titanic*.

Tickets for the millennial voyage will no doubt be themselves replicas, and the cheapest will probably cost rather more in equivalence than a second-class transatlantic passage on board a luxury liner in 1912. Thereafter, one can suppose, tourism will provide the customers, and Alexander Wilson in *The Culture of Nature: North American Landscape from Disney to the Exxon Valdez* (1992) has wittily defined tourism as "the mass circulation of the middle classes around the globe." It is the middle classes, in their touring and conferencing guises, who are the chief consumers of "theme park" culture, the commercial reconstructions of our material history for leisure purposes, of which the two projected replicas of *Titanic* will be floating

examples. This is ironic since the middle class is rarely depicted as a participant in the *Titanic* affair and no longer sees itself reflected in it. *Titanic* "2" and *Titanic* "3" will be the ultimate cruise ships, a now ubiquitous class of vessel that both mimicked (in a rudimentary postmodern fashion) and superseded the working luxury liner when jumbo jets rendered it obsolete.

The middle class, like the wealthy, are assumed to want their anachronistic creature comforts when they re-live history, and so the cabins of the Japanese replica will be brought up to modern standards: "none will be third-class," we are assured; there must be no echoes of steerage and poor emigrants. If this is achieved on *Titanic* 2 and 3, it will not only be because of shipboard regulations: it will also be because unpleasant historical reality must be discountenanced.

There is some hypocrisy at work in these revisions of material history. We affect distaste at the rigid class inequities practised on board *Titanic* and other liners of the time, and the Pre-First World War English class system generally. Yet we are comfortable with the identical three-class system on transatlantic jets, and those in "hospitality" or "world traveller" class (the lower the class the more extravagant the euphemism) wait patiently while first and business class passengers board and deplane ahead of them. And like the ship's contemporaries, we are interested chiefly in the rich and famous on board *Titanic*: to this day we fasten on the names Guggenheim, Astor, Widener, Straus, Rothschild, Dodge, Rothes, and even Vanderbilt and Morgan (who cancelled their plans to make the maiden voyage). We indulge the imagery of a luxuriant first class: jewels, tuxedos, brandy-snifters, cigars, evening gowns, and feather boas. In our own era of belt-tightening, downsizing, and retrenchment, we have begun to daydream once more of sumptuousness and

glamorous wealth, and *Titanic*, first class, is such stuff as these dreams are made on.

We lump steerage, as the aggregate form implies, into anonymous victimhood, but sweeten our perception of them as jolly, musical, venturesome, bibulous. This is how, even in 1997, James Cameron depicts steerage in his movie, *Titanic*; in his screenplay, the "third class general room" is described as "rowdy and rollicking." He is following *Titanic* cinematic tradition in this, but he is more economical with the truth than his predecessors by omitting second class entirely, rendering his two depicted classes, first and third, crudely emblematic, and his class "analysis" of the ship's tragedy crudely unhistorical.

For it is the presence of the second class — that is, of the middle class — that is the buffer between warring simplifications, and a measure of our ability to see pre First World War life steadily and to see it whole. I borrow Arnold's dictum because it was repeated verbatim by the advanced figures at the time — T. S. Eliot, Lytton Strachey, E. M. Forster, and Virginia Woolf. Woolf and her husband attended the British inquiry into the loss of *Titanic* and the tragedy reinforced — if it did not initiate — the imagery of water and drowning that pervades Woolf's novels; the fate of *Titanic* and her passengers were incorporated into Woolf's painstakingly steady and whole vision of life. I lose respect for any treatment of the tragedy that sees it chiefly and at second hand as the predation of an idle first class (with a complicit officer class) upon a corralled and transported peasantry.

Social class has always been central to our interest in *Titanic* and still is, in an increasingly lazy and shorthand way. The first wave of *Titanic* fever preceded the sailing, rose with rumours of disaster, and peaked between confirmation and the official hearings; it was generated by shock, grief, anger, and disbelief. The chief cultural reaction took the diverse form of memorial and the narrower form of inquiry. The first revival began in the 1950s and lasted a decade, and it was stimulated by Walter Lord's marvellously readable book, *A Night to Remember* (1955), and boosted by the film of the same name released three years later. The earlier memorial culture of *Titanic* was replaced by a commemorative culture (though Lord also updated the earlier inquiries), but social class remained as important to him as it had been in 1912 when the presence on board of so many grandees and industrial captains gave boost to the American and British investigations.

Although fast-paced (a "rattling good story," a "gripping yarn," as the outmoded phrases had it), Lord's book is also elegiac and if there is a thesis in it, it is this: "The *Titanic* somehow lowered the curtain on this way of living. It was never the same again. First the war, then the income tax, made sure of that." *A Night to Remember* commemorates the Edwardian way of life. Lord pays attention to second-class passengers, and he is disturbed that no one, reporters or inquiry members, were interested in what third-class survivors had to say, but one senses that to Lord what matters is the end of *noblesse oblige* and masculine chivalry and courage that for him the tragedy spelled. First class for Lord is an honorific, not just a socio-economic category.

We are wholly impatient now with the English upper class, but it still makes good costume drama to which we are addicted; and it is an easy ethnic (as well as class) target, which political correctness and multiculturalism give us permission to attack. Lord's anglophile elegy has given way to Cameron's anglophobe caricature. It is virtually a tradition in American *Titanic* representation to turn wealthy Americans in first class into honorary English upper crust: the hated Old World hereditary wealth and position. It is true that there was an internationalism to the Euro-American industrial elite and financier class, which Lord draws attention to and Beryl Bainbridge exploits in her recent novel (see below); according to Lord, "*Titanic's* trip was more like a reunion than an ocean passage." Still, this has often been given an anti-English twist. In Herbert Selpin's film *Titanic* (1943), John Jacob Astor becomes Lord Astor, albeit for purposes of German wartime anti-British propaganda. In Cameron's movie, Caledon Hockley, the cartoonish villain, is as close as Cameron can get him to an effete, swinish English gentleman, while still being an American. (Molly Brown is the "true" American and of course is goodhearted, brave, anti-establishment — a frontier rough diamond and very definitely "New World" and "New Money.")

I will say more about Cameron's movie later; my points here are, one, that erasure of the middle class reduces history to easily depictable and politically correct simplicity and, two, that the concept of culture that the real middle class consumes — culture as easily packageable self-representation — are major features of the second revival of *Titanic* enthusiasm ignited by Robert Ballard's discovery of the wreck in 1985 through technical wizardry. In short, *Titanic* is

now commonly doctored history and "lab-bred" culture. As for the second of these features, it is, after all, a short step from Cameron's impressive special effects and set-construction, stopping just short of a full-scale rebuilt ship, to the project of total, functioning re-construction. We have passed from memorial to commemoration to what I want to call "rememoration" (I am adapting the dictionary — Oxford English — of *to remember*: "to put together again"). We want to enact the past; even exhibitions now aspire to go beyond mere display into replication and virtual experience; the exhibit may be the type form of our cultural reaction to *Titanic* today, and Cameron's movie in its art of ostentation betrays the influence of exhibition.

I could hastily add other major features. One, the debunking of received wisdom about the ship and its fate dating from 1912 and the 1950s (including, with some ambivalence on our part, Lord's nostalgia). Two, the insistence on secrets still to be revealed, questions still to be answered, mysteries still to be solved. Three, our renewed *emulative* fascination with the technology of *Titanic*. The first suggests that the ship means something different to each generation; the second that (besides those of us who are intrigued and curious), there are those who profit from the ship and require the phenomenon to be unfinished business; the third that we wish to re-create, by discovery, salvage, or replication, the ship and its milieu since many of us now believe this is what culture is: recovery of the already accomplished and the already occurred; our technology may be advancing with vigour, but many of use have a tired sense of culture, it seems, and are lazily and literally (that is, without imagination) turning back upon our past.

Cultural History: Biel and Beyond

The two millennium replication projects will keep the engines fired in this astonishing phenomenon until we spy on the horizon the coastline of the *Titanic* centenary. In the meantime, there is much material to be going on with, a good deal of it produced since 1985. "Jim's *Titanic* Bibliography" and "Bibliotheca *Titanic*," both available on the internet, list hundreds of books, videos and CDs, and in the remainder of this article, I can treat only a fraction of the more interesting among the newcomers.

There are scores of book-length discussions of the *Titanic* affair, including survivors' accounts. An important recent book, Steven

Biel's *Down with the Old Canoe: A Cultural History of the Titanic Disaster* (1966), joins Wyn Craig Wade's *The Titanic: End of a Dream* (1979) to furnish in tandem a comprehensive American cultural history of the tragedy. Wade analyses the American hearings, and though he ends with a chapter that discusses the contemporary women's suffrage movement and Black street reaction to *Titanic* (he subscribes to Lord's idea that the sinking was the end of a complacent, caste-structured, and materialistic era), Wade stays close to the nautical and technical realities of the tragedy and the narrow political context in which they were investigated at the American inquiries.

Almost half of the Biel's book (the first part is entitled "Meanings") is devoted to rejection of the end-of-an-era proposition: "In my opinion the disaster changed nothing except shipping regulations...the *Titanic* seared itself into American memory not because it was timeless but because it was timely." The meanings of the tragedy, like the era itself, was he insists "contested terrain." Biel is at pains to dispute what he regards as our shallow notion of what happened: "In the conventional narrative the story of the *Titanic* functioned as a parable of the natural goodness of class, racial, ethnic, and gender hierarchies." Drawing on contemporary newspaper accounts and concurrent events, he deals with each hierarchy in turn, first the received conservative or establishment notions of the time, then the contemporary reality. In Biel's loosely Marxist revisionism, either the value system enacted on board the ship was one of damaging and discriminatory stereotypes of the powerless groups, or the fine-sounding values apparently enacted on board were not in fact so enacted. Clearly it is Lord's elegiac account he wishes to revise (while paying tribute to its modernist vitality), but though he wishes to rescue *Titanic* from "popular history" and retrieve it for academic history (the author teaches writing at Harvard), he can't himself resist seeing the *Titanic* affair as "an event of deep and wide resonance in Edwardian England and Progressive Era America...one of the great mythic events of the twentieth century." Surely this loose use of "myth" implies the very timelessness he repudiates, and it is hard to accept that this mythic event had no issue other than shipping regulations. If nothing else, this event has been variously interpreted down the century. Besides, *Down with the Old Canoe* is itself popular history, as its journalist style, range of subject-matter, and success in the marketplace show.

In its amassed data, however, Biel's book (with its forty pages of endnotes) will be extremely useful to popular and academic historians alike, and Biel's workaday, even slack prose keeps portentousness at bay. He shines a useful light on the position of black, female, and working-class Americans in 1912 society, and on Protestantism and its uneasy relations with capitalism. One way or another, *Titanic* was in the thick of it, and reaction to the tragedy implicated the fundamental questions of race, gender, class, religion, and economics.

The rest of Biel's book (the second part is entitled "Memories") is no less instructive, and he is particularly good on 1950s America and why *Titanic* appealed to it — "it provided a nostalgic alternative to a world in 'rude transition' to the atomic age," and chimed with the disaster research begun after the Second World War, and continued into the most frigid years of the Cold War. He is entertaining as well as instructive on the motives of *Titanic* societies, seeing buffs as mostly white male conservatives who cleave to the values Biel believes did not exist on board — or if they did, they oughtn't to have, being right-wing. If he is correct, then in a sense *Titanic* indeed changed nothing for her generations of enthusiasts, who have preserved in the amber of commemoration the value system they perceive her as representing.

After dealing with the buffs, I'm not sure how welcome Biel would be in their earnest company. In his book he rather resembles a sheriff sent into town to clean it up before riding off to his next assignment; he doesn't appear to be particularly interested in *Titanic* other than as a remarkable social history case study. His discussion of the enthusiasts is a reminder to me that *Titanic* studies, *Titanic* memorial societies, and the *Titanic* salvage-and-exhibition industry are uneasy allies and also overlap. Sometimes roles are ambiguous. And in the bustling and fractious *Titanic* fraternity there are individuals and societies whose names recur and who seem to act as culture-givers or gatekeepers, something of a Praetorian Guard; they crop up time and again in television documentaries and newspaper interviews, and some of them wield real power in a scene in which serious money can be made.

Biel has occasion to mention briefly the countless cartoons, posters, model kits, video games, books, movies and television programs inspired (though this is usually not the mot juste) by *Titanic*. He is to be commended on his lingering attention to *Titanic* songs (over a hundred were published before the end of 1913),

many of them shamelessly sentimental, some presumably heartfelt, others tin-pan alley exploitations. Most interesting were the Christian, Black, and worker songs that used the fate of the ship as a vehicle for grievances and recriminations.

Biel is not much interested in the contribution of *Titanic* to "high" culture, and the novelists Joseph Conrad and Virginia Woolf, the poets Thomas Hardy, E. J. Pratt, Anthony Cronin, Derek Mahon, and Hans Magnus Enzensberger, the playwrights St John Ervine and Stewart Parker, the choreographers Cornelius Fischer-Credo and Plan K Company, and the painters Max Beckmann and Charles Dixon, are absent from his index. This is partly because the American context is Biel's focus, and in my own book, *The Titanic Complex* (1997), I have sketched in the British context, to which the writers H. G. Wells, George Bernard Shaw, E. M. Forster, Arthur Conan Doyle, as well as Conrad and Woolf, contributed.

In any case, two recent novels, *Psalm at Journey's End* by Erik Fosnes Hansen and *Every Man for Himself* by Beryl Bainbridge, both 1996 (Hansen's originally appeared in Norwegian in 1990), appeared too late for Biel. So too did a couple of serious musical compositions. None of these works is kitsch or replication, but are genuine artistic attempts to realize their inspiration. Biel mentions the Englishman Gavin Bryars' 1969 work, *The Sinking of the Titanic*. This composition was transformed into a performing version in 1972, reworked and re-recorded in 1990, and released on a CD in a composite form in 1994; the executive producer is Philip Glass, whose minimalism it is tempting to hear as an influence on this eleven-part work for instruments, keyboard, and choir. But Bryars has been called a Romantic and mystic (any mysticism of Glass's — for example, his recent *Kundun* — is altogether more severe) and indeed *The Sinking of the Titanic* is a ghostly subaqueous music, through which appears and reappears the Protestant hymn "Autumn," said by some to be the last tune played by Wallace Hartley's band on board.

I cannot imagine the work would improve in live performance, since the experience of the listener at home better honours the stimulus of the composition. We are told that Bryars

borrows a theory from Marconi, the inventor of electromagnetic waves: that sounds never completely die but merely grow fainter and fainter. What if the music of the Titanic's band might still be playing 2,500 fathoms under the sea? Using underwater recordings, hymn tunes,

morse code messages, recorded reminiscences of survivors and a child's musical box, Bryars' realisation of this theory has become one of the legendary events of twentieth-century musical experimentalism.

In one haunting section of what he called on a recent CBC radio interview "a mysterious collage piece of music," Bryars exploits the fact of there having been a Scottish bagpiper on board by writing what he calls a "Titanic lament," a "pibroch piece" for bass clarinet. We hear a muffled voice, as though one of the drowned were giving testimony from beneath the waves, and the swaying music of the water, and at the section's end the ominous drips as of water that magnify into depth-soundings, the voice now silent or merged into ocean, abyss, the underwater echoes of our fate.

Bryars has said he needs his music to be referential (that is, programmatic) but this is satisfactorily disguised by his resistance to melodrama, climax or crescendo, and we have instead the flat seabed of impersonal lament that begins with the weird sound effect of the ship's halves dropping to the ocean floor and ends with two elongate "amens," leaving only dying echoes, as if we leave the wreck in peace as one might depart a graveyard. (There is mild irony, then, in Bryars' thanks to R.M.S. *Titanic* Inc., salvors in possession of the ships' remains who have been bringing objects from the ship and debris field to the surface.) *The Sinking of the Titanic* is an unforgettable work.

Music from the Motion Picture Titanic (1997) by James Horner is a fair example of music composed as a score for a Hollywood megamovie. Some of the spacious open-arm choral passages (e.g. "Southampton") echo Morricone's score for *The Mission* (itself sometimes echoing Carl Orff). There is a recurring and infuriatingly hummable "love theme" ("My Heart Will Go On") that is varied throughout the score before climaxing in Celine Dion's "inspirational" rendition — High Sentimentality to the Low Sentimentality of those songs in 1912 provoked by the sinking that were in the Edwardian parlour tear-jerker tradition. Like the script, the score appropriates *Titanic* for a kitsch Irishness: melodies for penny whistle or pipes are "identikit" Celtic revivalism, with a recurring line that echoes the first line of "The Cliffs of Dooneen." The fifteen sections have programmatic titles ("Leaving Port," "Take Her to Sea, Mr. Murdoch," and so on) but the reference in music is a tenuous swirl that uncommonly tries to do other than capture the movement of a ship, as the theme music of

the television program *The Onedin Line* did years ago.

One of the sections, "Hard to Starboard," is of genuine worth, a richly textured and dramatic seven-minute piece that re-lives the collision and is mercifully un-Irish. If Horner was writing to Cameron's script, then this successful piece suggests that Horner's musical talent was constricted by Cameron's weak dramatic vision as a script-writer. Anyway, those who loved the film almost certainly loved the music, so here it is; musically it is to my taste mostly decaffeinated and de-alcoholized Irish coffee.

Ronan Magill, a one-time student of Benjamin Bitten's, is a Sheffield man of Irish extraction, but there is no facile Irishness in his *Titanic 10th–15th April 1912: An Atmospheric Poem in Five Pictures for Piano Solo* (1997). Its twenty sections are grouped under the five pictures entitled "Lamentation for the Sea Dead," "The Departure," "The Voyage," "The Iceberg" and "Return to the Sea." The music ranges from the fairly programmatic (treble repetition in "The Wireless Room," bass massiveness and treble highlights in "The Iceberg," for example) to the open-endedly suggestive. Only a musician could properly assess the technical achievement of composition and execution (I am reminded occasionally of Satie and tone-poetry), but the work impresses me greatly. There is a charming original waltz in memory of Wallace Hartley and his band, and Magill's arrangement of the Irish melody "The Lass of Aughrim," which is fitting in a way Magill may not realize: it is the song Gretta Conroy hears Bartell D'Arcy sing in James Joyce's great Edwardian story, "The Dead" (1907); listening to it she is lost in the memory of the dead young man who courted her; unheard by the reader, it becomes the "distant music" of a vanished past, and distant music is what Magill has essayed here.

Picture Five also includes renditions of "Remembrance" (1908) and "Songe D'Automne" (1909), both by Joyce's contemporary and namesake, Archibald Joyce, and the latter a contender for Last Song Played on *Titanic*. The fifth Picture concludes with a larger version of the waltz for Hartley and his band, and the whole Picture raises middlebrow music of the *Titanic* era to art, at once softening and strengthening it in Magill's versatile tonalities.

It is that contemporary music that the English-born, Californian-based composer Ian Whitcomb has given us in *Titanic: Music as Heard on the Fateful Voyage* (1997), re-arranged and performed by the White Star Orchestra (a five-piece nonce ensemble, I assume). The tunes are

those of songs played either by Hartley's band for first and second class passengers or by the steerage passengers for their own amusement. They range from Elgar's "Salut d'Amour" through "The Merry Widow Waltz" to "Waiting for the Robert E. Lee," "Alexander's Ragtime Band," "Frankie and Johnny" and, of course, "Songe d'Automne" — over a score of tunes in all, together with Whitcomb's fine reading of Hardy's chilling poem, "The Convergence of the Twain" above an ominous bass line and piano notes like glints of oncoming danger. There are medleys of marches and waltzes and a selection from *The Arcadians*, a musical comedy of the time.

In composing the soundtrack of an era, the compilation is larger than the sum of its parts, and is ideal for the unstoppable *Titanic* gatherings (dinner, dance, party) — or home listening, since there is a diversity of colour in the assemblage, sentimentality vying with an oblivious glee that is to us ironic, elegy with carefree insouciance. There is a musical attentiveness that allows the enterprise to escape the charge of opportunism. The music is played with confident verve: the delightful produce of research by the author of *Irving Berlin and Ragtime America*, and highly recommended.

Celluloid *Titanic*

One artistic challenge in responding to *Titanic*, whether in music, literature, or film, is to acknowledge the program composed by its extraordinary career and yet achieve art *through* it, not *around* it. In this ongoing choice between historical fidelity to the given and creative fidelity to the imaginable, the artist does not want literalism, mere transcript or imitation (the equivalent in art's "software" to the "hardware" of the ship's replication), but neither does he want to substitute egregiously his own stories for the stories we know so well or the stories that still lie on the seabed of both history and the imagination, waiting to be told; if he does they had better be good. I myself — in the teeth of our contemporary reflex egalitarianism — believe a great *Titanic* story remains to be told that would place John Jacob Astor (inheritor of vast wealth, American of German immigrant stock, decorated soldier, suitor of technology, writer of science fiction) at its epicentre, as at the heart of an Edwardian Europe and America soon to feel the earthquake of the Great War.

Hansen in his novel has met the challenge in his own impressive way. He substitutes his own fictional members of Hartley's band but

with such integrity and high seriousness that he honours the band and the ship more in the breach than another novelist might in the observance.

Movie-makers face an additional challenge: what we might call titanism, the problem of depicting a gigantic ship and its sinking. This is a problem of effects and set-construction, of course, but because it tempts the maker towards literalism, it is a problem too of directorial imagination. I have seen six full-length screen narratives of the *Titanic* tragedy: *Titanic* (Germany, 1943); *Titanic* (USA, 1953); *A Night to Remember* (UK, 1958); *S.O.S. Titanic* (USA, 1979); *Titanic* (USA-Canada, 1996); *Titanic* (USA, 1997). (There was a lost 1912 movie in which the surviving film actress, Dorothy Gibson, starred: *Saved from the Titanic*; and I have heard tell of a 1929 British movie.) They have all met the challenge of titanic representation within the limits of contemporary film technology, of the medium itself, and of their budget. A television movie such as *Titanic* (1996) — shown in two parts, each almost two hours long, the whole therefore somewhat longer than James Cameron's epic — compensates for small-screen limitations remarkably well, with a moving and imaginative depiction of the sinking through a series of muted, overlapping, slow-motion vignettes with a choral accompaniment. Directed by Robert Lieberman, this film has George C. Scott as a suitably troubled and thoughtful Captain Edward Smith.

The films for cinema, from Jean Negulesco's *Titanic* of 1953 to Cameron's, all depict the catastrophe creditably, Cameron's perhaps too creditably. Films for the American market require a love interest, the shipboard romance, and this narrative temptation to infidelity (sometimes in both senses, as it turns out) is hard to resist. *S.O.S. Titanic* is rather chaste in this regard, and Lawrence Beesley's potential relationship with an American teacher is realistic and inoffensive. Beesley, played by David Warner (who survives the film to sail again on *Titanic* as the odious Lovejoy in Cameron's movie), was a second-class passenger who survived to write a fine book on the subject, and this somehow calms the fever in which shipboard romance in other movies is portrayed. *A Night to Remember* stays close to Lord's account and manages its drama without a foregrounded love story, and seems the better for it.

Titanic (1953) offers a blossoming young love, and an unravelling mature one, both in first class; *Titanic* (1996) offers a steerage love story and a first class love story (of infidelity) —

again, the missing second class; while *Titanic* (1997) assails the class barriers by insisting on a young steerage hero literally leaping them — the young heroine reverses his direction and ‘descends’ to the lower class for sexual and romantic fulfilment (like a pale Lady Chatterley), and when she survives without her young lover, she does so as a classless (that is, middle-class ‘bohemian’) woman which, really, her young lost lover was in embryo. Cameron therefore economically combines the love and class themes associated with *Titanic*.

I think it worthwhile to draw attention to two thematic cultural motifs that recur. One is the notion of redemption: the tragedy offers selected characters the chance to redeem themselves — the vindictive husband (Clifton Webb) in the 1953 movie, for example, or the young steerage thief in the 1996 television movie.

In the latter, the adulteress is ‘redeemed’ into a moral life when her lover is lost and her husband and daughter greet her at New York. In all the film treatments, J. Bruce Ismay, President of the White Star Line, is the Great Unredeemed, and alone among artists, Derek Mahon has extended compassion to this reviled figure, in his poem “Bruce Ismay’s Soliloquy.” In the midst of so much loss, it is not surprising that redemption should appeal to artists who approach *Titanic*, especially those required by the marketplace to have a reasonably happy ending up their sleeves, for redemption is a way of snatching a measure of victory from the jaws of historical loss.

The married woman in *Titanic* (1996) reveals to her lover before the ship goes down that he is the father of her daughter; revelations of one kind or another are a firm formula in *Titanic* retellings. Barbara Stanwyck tells her husband (Clifton Webb) that their son is not his, which launches his vindictiveness and rivets their marriage (heading for the rocks) to the sinking vessel; but his bravery at the end symbolically saves the marriage and salvages the husband’s character. The American playwright Christopher Durang took the Stanwyck-Webb situation as a starting point for his absurdist, one-act play *Titanic* (1974) and reduces it to disturbing and comic nonsense as if the children in the 1953 film were to wreak revenge on their parents amidst an ocean of revealed identities: the Captain’s daughter Lidia reveals herself as Harriet, the Stanwyck figure’s lover, and therefore the mother of the non-existent daughter Annabella, and so on.

Titanic as a venue for the revelation of secrets among passengers, under the pressure of its

unusual circumstances — on this floating island, thrown together in peculiar intimacy, passengers must ‘face themselves’ and the truth — extends to the perception of the sunken ship as a repository of secrets it is reluctant to ‘yield up.’ The wreck itself was a secret, of course, until Ballard’s location of it, and the documentary video *Secrets of the Titanic* (1997), is subtitled *A Legend Surrenders Her Mysteries*. Exterior footage of the ship quickly gave way to the irresistible temptation to penetrate her, and ‘secrets’ in the least contentious sense meant the first views of the interior in seventy-three years and after the ravages of time. Quickly, too, in the wake of Ballard, ‘secrets’ came to mean objects and ship’s pieces (mementos and souvenirs dignified as “artifacts”), and, better still, closed suitcases and bags and, best of all, locked safes (the tabernacle, as it were, of the sacred “building” the wreck constituted).

‘Secrets’ also means solutions to questions, and one such question is posed in the television documentary, *Titanic: Secrets Revealed* (1998): could Captain Smith have prolonged the life of the ship by re-opening the bulkhead doors and letting the ship flood evenly? The answer after a test with a model is “no”; Smith is exonerated, but poor Ismay is hammered mercilessly, still the incontrovertible culprit: “While Ismay sat in his self-made hell, others raised themselves to their finest hour.” (This possibly unwitting allusion to Milton’s *Paradise Lost* — Satan carries his self-made hell within him — has the effect of demonizing the White Star President. Really, this vilification has gone too far.)

But the real secrets in this post-Cameron, “spin-off” program, narrated by Bernard Hill who, not coincidentally, plays Captain Smith in the movie, are the artifacts either already brought to the surface by R.M.S. *Titanic* Inc. (paid respectful tribute by the script-writer) or awaiting their robot hands. May I say that the spin-off is a side-kick in theme-park culture; and so Cameron’s movie has been accompanied by the best-selling book, *James Cameron’s Titanic* (1997), which tells us, of course, how to get the soundtrack as well: the synergy of capitalist sellerdom. And we can extend the notion of spin-off to include the “book-making” phenomenon in publishing; it is brought to a fine art by Rick Archbold and Dana McCauley in their bestselling *Last Dinner on the Titanic: Menus and Recipes from the Great Liner* (1997, Foreword by Walter Lord), which is reprehensibly enjoyable despite being an arrant act of cultural “salvaging” from the tragedy. The small discography reveals that the authors are not

aware, alas, of Whitcomb's album, which would be ideal for the chapter entitled "Choreographing a First-Class *Titanic* Dinner."

A locked safe and treasures (a diamond necklace, a drawing) feature prominently in Cameron's *Titanic*, and the depiction of their retrieval resembles footage from either Stephen Low's remarkable IMAX® Corporation film *Titanica* (1993) or Ballard's *Secrets of the Titanic*; the retrieval is the frame story around the inner story, one of human "secrets" — that a centenarian woman in California was a *Titanic* survivor, that Rose Dawson was Rose DeWitt Bukater, that she loved a lost lover on *Titanic*, that she has the necklace and precious stone in her possession.

There are impressive scenes in Cameron's movie though the special effects are triumphal rather than triumphant — scenes in the engine-room, the scene of the stern rising from the water with its three immense dripping propellers (shot 266 in the script), the scene with Fifth Officer Lowe's lifeboat cruising the instant cemetery of the sunk ship's vicinity looking for survivors. But these cannot rescue the movie, about which I remembered Dr Johnson's comment on *Paradise Lost*: "sir, no man ever wished it longer." If James Cameron is too literal with the ship, he is too liberal with the characters. The fascinating historical characters are stunted and few in the audience can recall them afterwards. Nor do the replacement characters have anything memorable to say: the script is flat and Cameron should have hired a writer. In *Titanic* (1953), we at least get alive lines like "It's a brand new day that's never been touched" and "If you get a good omelette, who cares whether the chicken likes you or not?" (a cheeky young Robert Wagner gets that one). And we are treated to A. E. Housman's lovely poem, "When I Was One-and-Twenty." Instead, Cameron's movie is *Romeo and Juliet* without the language, a melancholy prospect.

Some of Cameron's language is anachronistic — "squat" (from diddlysquat), "horseshit," "like we forget," which is current ironic syntax for "as if we could forget," "to take a shit," not to mention Rose's middle-finger salute. Most of the cast strike me as physically anachronistic; they don't come across as Edwardian types: they are stooges for the ship that looks real enough though in deck scenes it struck me as suggesting weightlessness; I never quite believed in it except in its sinking. The script borrows from previous scripts: the ashtray sliding off Thomas Andrews' table or the runaway trolley, both from *A Night to Remember*, as is Wallace

Hartley's release of his band and then starting up "Nearer My God to Thee" by himself, only to see the band-members return to join him, a liberty to which Walter Lord objected in 1958. (Or are these borrowings meant to be quotes and therefore tributes?)

Other liberties are more serious — Ismay demanding that *Titanic* make headlines by breaking the speed record, the young steerage hero and the heroine free to cavort around the prow of the ship, and First Officer Murdoch shooting the Irish steerage passenger Tommy Ryan point blank before shooting himself. It is less important that Murdoch's suicide is "contested terrain": Wade believes it probably happened, but passenger Archibald Gracie, researching his own book after the disaster, could find no direct evidence for it. More important is the irresponsibility against the background of Northern Ireland of showing an effete English officer shooting a broth of an Irish boy. (This is libel — or in a film is it slander? — of the dead.) The Irish in the film are oppressed but happy-go-lucky — and see, they got rhythm! — whose condition is symbolically explained when the "limey bastard" shoots Ryan.

James Cameron appears to know little about Ireland. Thomas Andrews speaks with a southern Irish accent, when of course he was an Ulsterman. In *S.O.S. Titanic*, his home town of Comber, Co. Down is acknowledged, and Andrews, like Helen Mirren as a Belfast maid, speaks with a plausible northern accent. It is unlikely that in 1912, in the midst of the Home Rule crisis — during which *Titanic* was launched in Belfast — a southern working-class youth would proudly claim *Titanic* for Ireland, as the script has him do, when the ship as everyone knew was designed and built by northern anti-Home Rule Protestants. As an Ulsterman, I resent the air-brushing out of historical depiction of the northern, Protestant, unionist, industrial culture out of which came all the great White Star liners and much else of interest to the material historian. This is common practice in movies about the Irish Troubles, past and present, but to find it happening in the re-creation of an historical time and place in which this culture played a key role, when Ulster Protestants can be shown accomplishing something fine, is especially reprehensible. I have tried a measure of redress in my book, *The Titanic Complex*.

The easy *Titanic* questions are briskly if dubiously handled in the film — the Speed Question, the Breaking in Two Question

(Cameron shows the ship fracturing in half well above the surface, in which case there would have been no question), the Officer Murdoch Question, the Last Song Played Question, and the Lifeboat Question (young Rose presciently spots the shortfall and informs Andrews; Caledon Hockley of course *approves* the shortage of lifeboats). The notorious "God Himself couldn't sink this ship" line (which a passenger overheard an anonymous crewman say) is given to Hockley, as an extra burden of hubris for his well-tailored but cowardly shoulders to bear.

The tough social and race questions are either evaded — in 1997! — or solved in risk-free, politically correct, infantile equations: English bad, Irish and Other Europeans good; old money and Old World bad, New World and new money good (not only Molly Brown's, but also Jack Dawson's: Jack wins his ticket aboard by gambling); first class bad, steerage good. In each case, "bad" means sexually repressed, authoritarian, smug, effete, cruel, undeserving, "good" their polar opposite. If James Cameron had really cared about class, he would have avoided caricature of steerage and also — first among film-makers, an opportunity wasted — told some of the stories of the brave engineers, firemen, trimmers, and greasers. It is an irony that the grave of J. Dawson in Halifax, Nova Scotia is the destination of misguided pilgrimages by young girls enamoured of Leonardo DiCaprio's Jack Dawson. The real Dawson was a trimmer (whose job it was to arrange cargo in the hold,

I believe), from Britain Street (now Parnell Street) in Dublin; he did not desert and he died unsung; apparently some pilgrims, hearing of his nonentity, turn away in disgust.

In his script, Cameron's direction for a scene in the first-class smoking room reads "the usual fatcats are playing cards, drinking and talking." (Steerage passengers were no doubt engaged in more edifying activities.) This is rich coming from a man who has made millions and will make millions more, courtesy of *Titanic*, film, ship, and tragedy. (But of course, it is new money and therefore all right.) Hockley, we are told, "never tires of the effect of money on the unwashed masses" — another irony, since "the stupendous power of money" (that Pip learns in *Great Expectations*) not only made the film possible, but muted criticism, few critics daring to tell the emperor he has no clothes. In the frame story, the "money guy" (as the script phrases it), representing the limited company subsidizing Brock Lovett's dive to the wreck, complains that "we're running thirty thousand a day, and we're six days over." Several fold, this is the real-life story with the making of *Titanic*. It is choice that the most expensive movie in history, one that demonstrates its own opulence by replicating the opulence of *Titanic*, should be an attack on money and an exaltation of love across social and ship's barriers. In the immortal words of Jack Dawson, finding himself handcuffed to a pipe below decks on a sinking ship: "This could be bad."

RECENT MEDIA TREATMENTS REVIEWED

BOOKS

- Down with the Old Canoe: A Cultural History of the Titanic Disaster.* Steven Biel. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1996. Cloth CDN\$25, ISBN 0-393-03965-X.
- Every Man for Himself: A Novel.* Beryl Bainbridge. New York: Carroll & Graf Inc., 1996. 224 pp. Cloth CDN\$29.50, ISBN 0-7867-0349-0.
- James Cameron's Titanic.* Edward W. Marsh. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1997. 178 pp., illus. Cloth CDN\$28.50, ISBN 0-00-649060-3.
- Last Dinner on the Titanic: Menus and Recipes from the Great Liner.* Rick Archbold and Dana McCauley. Toronto: Madison Press Books, 1997. 144 pp., illus. \$33.95, ISBN 0-7868-6303-X.
- Psalm at Journey's End.* Erik Fosnes Hansen. Translated by Joan Tate. New York: Harvest Book, Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1996. Originally published in Norwegian in 1990. 371 pp. Paper CDN\$18, ISBN 0-15-600527-1.

CDS

- The Sinking of the Titanic.* Composed by Gavin Bryars. Markham, Ont.: Point Music. Dist., PolyGram Group Canada Inc., 1994.
- Titanic: Music as Heard on the Fateful Voyage.* Ian Whitcomb and The White Star Orchestra. Santa Monica: Rhino, 1997. CDN\$18, ISBN 1-56826-833-5.
- Titanic: Music from the Motion Picture.* Composed and conducted by James Horner. North York: Sony Music Entertainment (Canada), 1997.
- Titanic 10th-15th April 1912: An Atmospheric Poem in Five Pictures for Piano Solo.* Composed by Ronan Magill. Albany, New York: Athene Records, 1997.

MOTION PICTURES

- Titanic.* Directed by James Cameron. Beverly Hills and Hollywood: Paramount Pictures and Twentieth Century Fox, 1997.
- Titanica.* Directed by Stephen Low. Markham: IMAX® Corporation; distributed by David Keighley Productions Ltd., 1993.

TELEVISION

Titanic. Directed by Robert Lieberman. n.p.: White Star Productions Ltd., with executive producers Frank Konigsberg and Larry Sanitsky, 1996. Made-for-TV movie broadcast on CBC, November 1996.

"Titanic": Secrets Revealed. 1998. Narrator Bernard Hill. New York: WPIX Television, 1998. Television documentary broadcast 4 April 1998.

VIDEO

Secrets of the Titanic. Written, produced and directed by Nicolas Noxon (Robert D. Ballard, co-director). Washington, DC: National Geographic Society, dist. Warner Home Video, 1997. ISBN 0-7806-1859-9.