

A QUIET SEA  
RMS TITANIC



CAPTAIN SMITH

## THE TITANIC'S CAPTAIN



Edward John Smith  
Credit: Wiki Fandom

Edward J. Smith was born in 1850 in Staffordshire, England, to a working-class family that owned a pottery shop. At the Etruria British School, a Methodist school established by the local pottery industry, he was considered a quiet and genial student. He stayed until the age of 15, leaving to operate a steam forging hammer at the Etruria Forge Company. However, drawn to the sea, he left the forge to become an apprentice on the full-rigged ship Senator Weber, commanded by his half-brother, Joseph Hancock.



Senator Weber  
Credit: Titanic Officers

## SEAGOING CAREER

At age 18, Smith was promoted to third mate and rose through the ranks to become Master of the wooden sailing ship Lizzie Fennell in 1875. Impressed with the White Star Line, he gave up his captaincy and joined the company in 1880, serving as Fourth, then Third Officer on the emigrant ship, SS Celtic. Transferred to the cattle carrier SS Coptic as Second Officer, he was on the New Zealand–South America run. He then joined SS Britannic as Second Officer in 1884. At one time the fastest liner afloat, it was this premier ship that inspired him to join White Star.



SS Britannic  
Credit: Wikipedia

In 1888, Smith sat for his Extra Master's Certificate, the highest and most difficult test offered by the British Board of Trade. He failed one section of the examination, retaking and passing it three days later. Having the required credentials, Smith joined the Royal Naval Reserve (RNR) the same year.



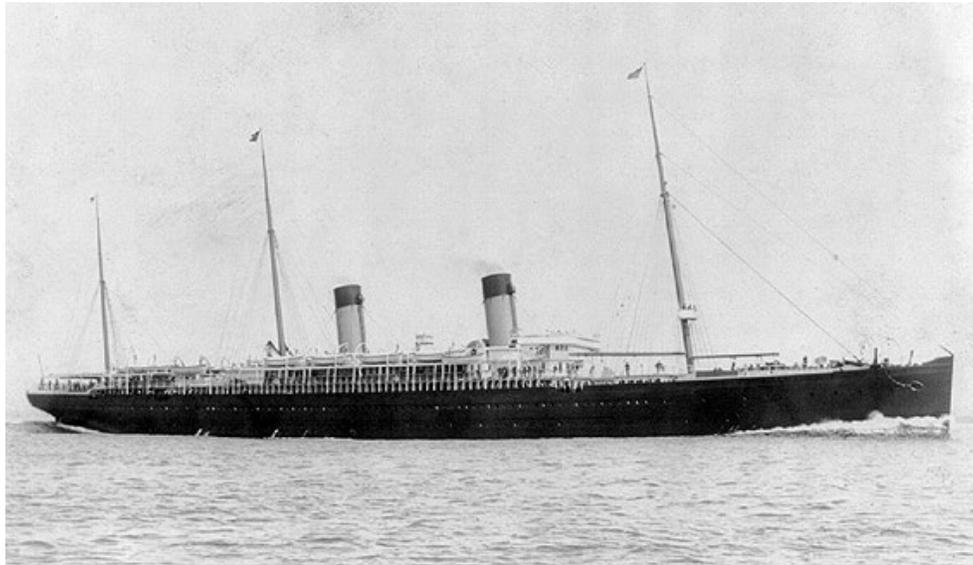
Captain Smith's Extra Master Certificate  
Credit: Titanic Officers



SS Baltic, Smith's first White Star liner  
Credit: Wikipedia

With his Extra Master Certificate in hand, Smith was given command of the aging SS Baltic for two trips before advancing to the command of the SS Britannic. He then reported for the maiden voyage of the Liverpool-to-New York cattle ship SS Cufic, where he caught the eye of White Star heir Bruce Ismay, who would play an outsized

role in Smith's future with the company. Commanding a series of White Star ships, Smith was given charge of the SS Majestic in 1895, the largest, fastest and finest liner of her day.



SS Majestic  
Credit: Wikipedia

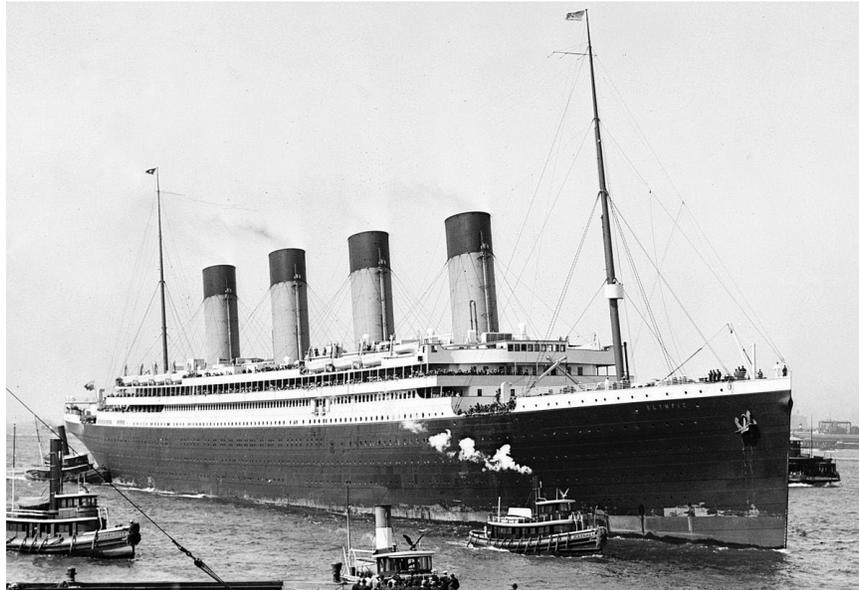
Fellow Majestic officer Charles Lightoller said of Smith: "Here's a typical Western Ocean Captain. Bluff, hearty and I'll bet he's got a voice like a foghorn. As a matter of fact, he had a pleasant quiet voice and invariable smile." Lightoller goes on: "I had been with him many years, off and on, in the mail boats, mainly, and it was an education to see him con his own ship through the intricate channels entering New York."

Smith carried troops on Majestic during the 1899 Boer War. As Commander, he was permitted to fly the Blue Duster to denote his naval status. In 1901, White Star began delivering a quartet of large transatlantic liners known as the 'Big Four;" each ship larger than the last. Smith commanded two of the four liners, Baltic and Adriatic. Awarded monetary bonuses for safe and punctual passages, passengers dubbed him the "millionaire's captain." By 1904, White Star had such confidence in Smith, he was chosen to command their biggest ships on their maiden voyages. In 1907, he was put in command of the world's largest ship, RMS Adriatic. Upon her maiden voyage to New York, Smith remarked, "I cannot imagine any condition which would cause a ship to founder. I cannot conceive of any vital disaster happening to this vessel. Modern shipbuilding has gone beyond that." In four years, he was given command of a ship twice as big and twice as safe, RMS Olympic, the first of a class of three giant liners.



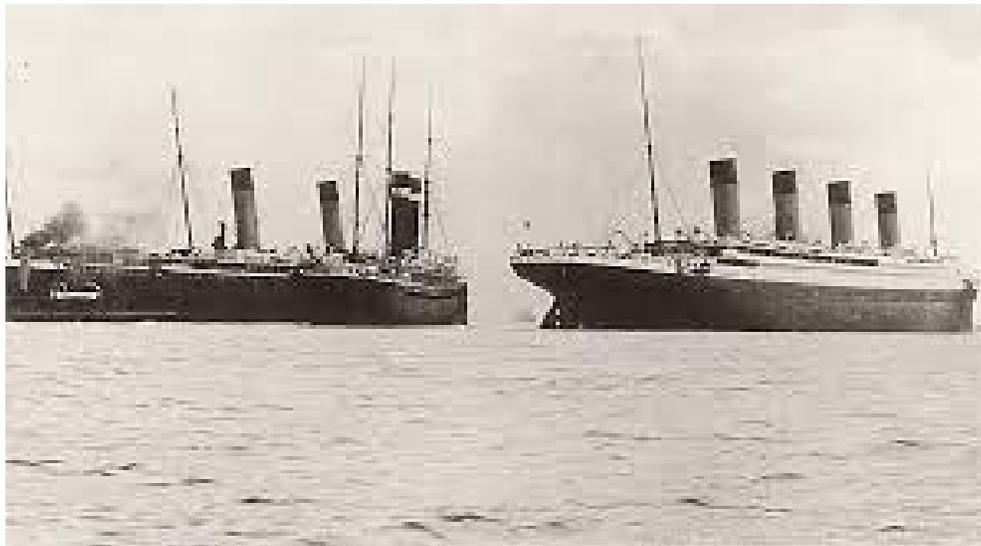
Smith on board Adriatic  
Credit: Titanic Officers

After successful sea trials, Smith delivered Olympic to the newly constructed landing dock in Southampton, where White Star opened their latest maritime wonder to the public. Taking full advantage of good publicity, they scheduled Olympic's maiden departure on the same day her sister, Titanic, was launched. Olympic encountered rough seas on her maiden passage but showed herself to be an excellent sea boat. She was greeted with great fanfare in New York, where visitors thronged aboard. Thousands watched her first eastbound departure. White Star's great rival, Cunard, secretly dispatched their people on board to gain ideas for their own superliner.



Olympic entering her berth in New York, June 1911  
Credit: Wikipedia

In 1911, Smith was in command when Olympic collided with the Royal Navy cruiser Hawke. Although the courts deemed the liner at fault, she was under command of the pilot; Smith's record remained clean. To repair Olympic, parts from Titanic were used, delaying her maiden passage. Smith was appointed to Titanic in 1912. He relieved Captain Haddock, who was to command the new ship but only brought her from Belfast to Southampton. When departing Southampton, Titanic passed two berthed liners. The suction caused by her passing drew one of the liners, the New York, off the dock, parting her dock lines. Quick action by pilot George Bowyer and Captain Smith avoided a collision, and Titanic proceeded to sea.



Oceanic (L), New York (M), Titanic (R)  
Credit: Wiki Commons

(One wonders how subsequent events might have been different if Olympic had not collided with Hawke, if Olympic's repairs had not delayed Titanic's maiden departure, if New York and Titanic had collided, or if Captain Haddock had remained in command.)

## THE MAIDEN VOYAGE

Titanic departed on her maiden passage on April 10, 1912. After proceeding down Southampton waters, she stopped at Cherbourg, France, and Queenstown, Ireland, to board passengers before heading for the Atlantic. The voyage progressed smoothly; conditions were excellent—a flat sea and light airs. On April 14, Titanic received five ice messages, keeping Smith apprised of conditions ahead. An ice field was known to be in his path, so he continued his southwesterly course to avoid it. His orders were to change to a more easterly course for New York at 6pm. However, the time he chose was too soon, and the advantage obtained by holding course and clearing the ice field was lost.

At about 9pm, Smith had a lengthy conversation with Second Officer Lightoller about the windless, flat calm conditions and the lack of wavelets breaking against an iceberg, which would make spotting it easier. They reckoned that reflected starlight from an iceberg would give sufficient warning to avoid collision; reducing speed was not considered. Smith went to the chart room before 10pm to confirm their position with Fourth Officer Boxhall, telling Lightoller, "If it becomes at all doubtful let me know at once; I will be just inside." A sixth ice warning received less than an hour before the collision told of large icebergs in the ship's path. However, this message never reached Smith or the officers in charge. Sea and air temperatures, recorded every two hours, were dropping, another sign that Titanic was entering the ice region.

Without the vital sixth ice warning, and unheeding of the dropping temperatures, Smith left the bridge and retired to his cabin. When Titanic collided with the iceberg at 11:40pm, Smith rushed to the bridge, asking what happened. First Officer Murdoch, in charge of the watch since 10pm, told Smith they had hit an iceberg and described his engine orders and maneuvers to avoid it. While Titanic glided to a stop, both went to the starboard bridge wing and caught a glimpse of the iceberg as it drifted astern into the night. Returning to the bridge, Smith sent junior officers on an inspection and ordered half speed ahead. Titanic was underway for a few minutes before Smith stopped the engines for good.

Smith and shipbuilder Thomas Andrews then conducted their own inspection. The findings were grim; Andrews confirmed that Titanic would sink. Knowing the lifeboat capacity, Smith grasped the magnitude of the looming disaster: at least half on board would perish. He gave orders to prepare the boats and evacuate the ship, send wireless calls for assistance, fire distress rockets, and myriad other commands. In the turmoil, rumors spread. Smith was said to have committed suicide; given orders through his megaphone to the very end and retired to the bridge minutes before the ship went under; leapt overboard from the starboard bridge wing; struggled in the water to hand off a baby to the men on one overturned boat; cheered on his crew to "be British." Some later said that perhaps the enormity of the collision had affected his senses. However, testimony from junior wireless operator Harold Bride described a composed Captain Smith entering the radio shack and releasing the operators from duty only a few minutes before the end, saying quietly, "That's the way of it at this kind of time." His body was never recovered.

Many memorials were erected in Britain, as was one in The Seamen's Church Institute in New York City. It reads: "He sailed the sea for forty years, Faithful in duty. Friendly in spirit. Firm in command. Fearless in disaster. He saved women and children and went down with his ship."

During his career, Captain Smith commanded 18 White Star vessels. Upon the maiden arrival of RMS Adriatic in 1907, the most famous captain on the North Atlantic told The New York Times: "When anyone asks how I can best describe my experience in nearly 40 years at sea, I merely say, uneventful. Of course there have been winter gales and storms and fog and the like, but in all my experience, I have never been in any accident of any sort worth speaking about. I have seen but one vessel in distress in all my years at sea – a brig, the crew of which were taken off in a small boat in charge of my third officer. I never saw a wreck and never have been wrecked, nor was I ever in any predicament that threatened to end in a disaster of any sort. You see, I am not very good material for a story."

Sources: Wikipedia / Wiki Fandom; A Night to Remember by Walter Lord; Crew of the Titanic by Gunter Babler; Titanic Officers; The Only Way to Cross by John Maxtone-Graham; Titanic and Other Ships by Charles Lightoller; Captain Smith letters, Mystic Seaport Museum