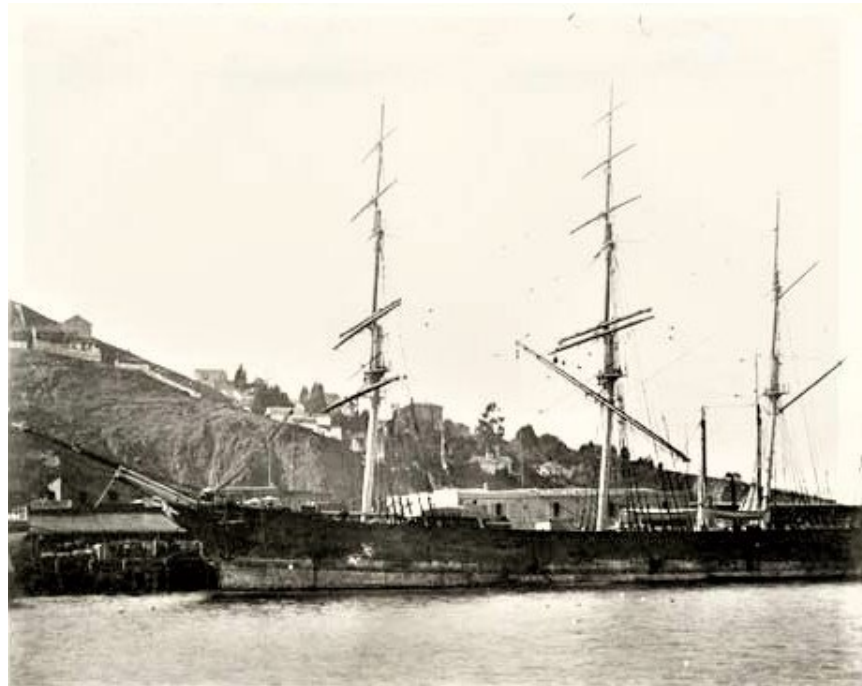


TITANIC'S FIRST OFFICER



William McMaster Murdoch
Credit: Wikipedia

William M. Murdoch was born in Dalbeattie, Scotland, in 1873 to a seafaring family; his father, grandfather and four of his brothers were master mariners. His grandfather, James Murdoch, had the extraordinary experience of being swept off his ship by one wave and deposited back on board by the next. James survived, and lived until 1900, after which the sea instead claimed the lives of five family members: his grandson John and John's wife in April 1901; his son William in April 1906, his son John in April 1907, and his grandson William M. Murdoch on April 15, 1912 aboard Titanic.

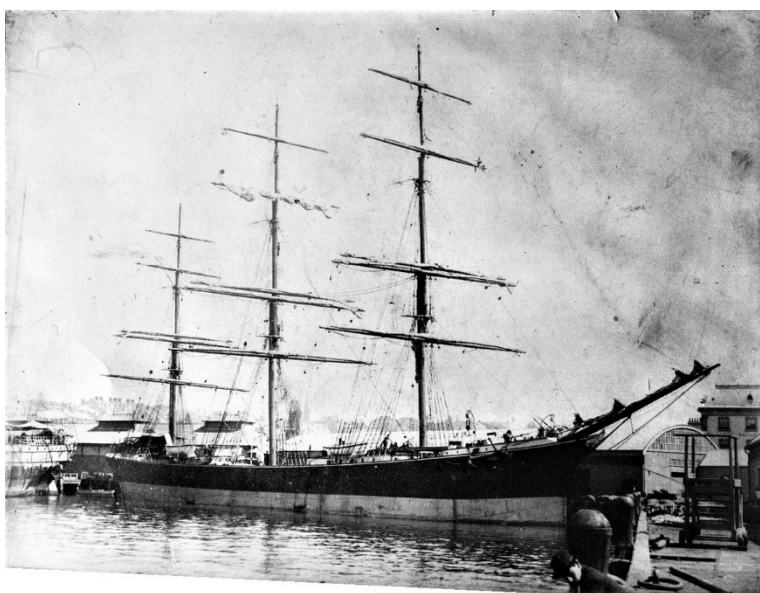


Charles Cotesworth
Credit: Calisphere

SEAFARING CAREER

After graduating high school at age 15, Murdoch entered his apprenticeship aboard the bark Charles Cotesworth, trading around Cape Horn to South America and San Francisco. He

advanced quickly, earning his Second Mate's certificate after 4 years aboard the bark. He then signed on for 18 months aboard the Iquique, commanded by his father.



Iquique
Credit: Wiki Commons

Murdoch served on a number of windjammers trading around the world. He joined the Royal Naval Reserve, training as a lieutenant in the Boer War (1899-1902). He rapidly earned his Master's certificate and joined the White Star Line in 1900, serving as Fourth Officer aboard the new liner SS Medic, which inaugurated the line's Australian service, where he met and married a schoolteacher from New Zealand.



SS Medic
Credit: Wiki Commons

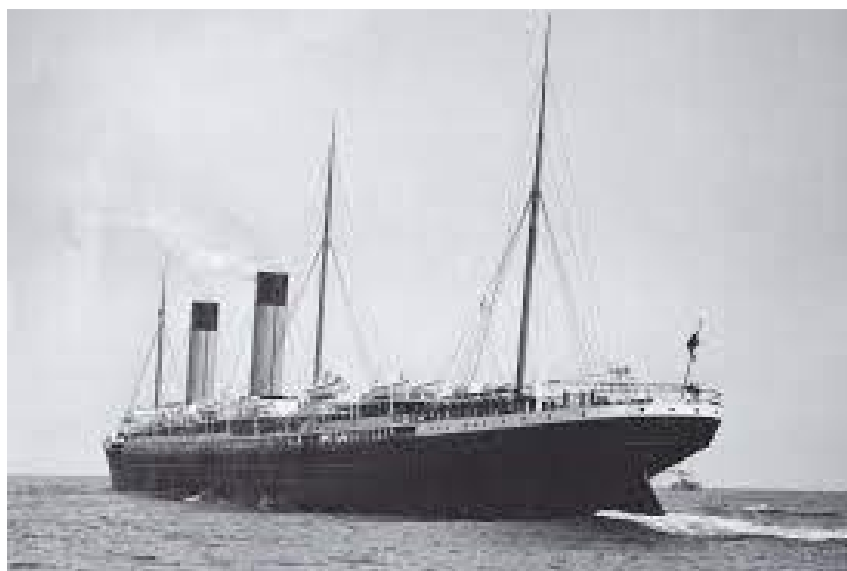
In 1903, Murdoch joined the prestigious North Atlantic run, advancing in rank on a succession of White Star liners. He was on board the RMS Arabic when she departed Liverpool at night for New York, on her maiden voyage. Another vessel was seen bearing down on Arabic, when the officer on watch gave an order to steer hard to port. Murdoch's fast thinking and clear judgment averted collision when he ran to the bridge and took control of the wheel from the quartermaster.

Overriding his superior's order, he kept Arabic on course, narrowly avoiding what would have been a calamity. Arabic's Captain Jones, impressed with Murdoch's actions, later stated, "There never was a better officer. Cool, capable, on his toes always – and smart toes they were."



SS Arabic
Credit: Norwegian Heritage

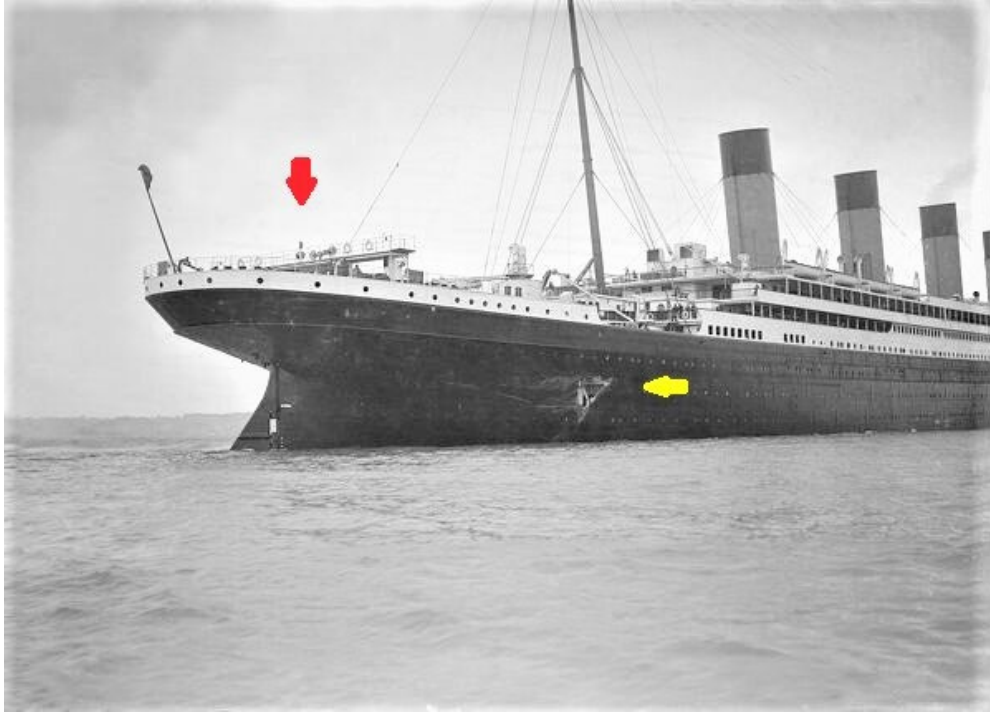
Murdoch was transferred to RMS Celtic, first of a class of four large liners, as Second Officer, then promoted to First Officer in 1904. He went on to serve as Second Officer aboard RMS Oceanic, the fastest and most prestigious ship in White Star's fleet, where he was involved in quelling a mutiny among 35 stokers, agitated over working conditions and poor accommodations. They were arrested when the liner arrived in Liverpool.



Oceanic
Credit: Wiki Commons

After some Royal Naval Reserve training. Murdoch joined Adriatic, the company's largest vessel, where he established a good relationship with Captain Edward J. Smith. In May 1911, Smith was given command of White Star's first superliner, the 45,000 ton Olympic, and assembled the best officers he could muster. Murdoch was assigned as First Officer. After settling in to her New York service, Olympic was proceeding to sea from Southampton on September 11, 1911, when she collided with the Royal Navy cruiser Hawke. Murdoch was on duty in the after steering station in

the stern and witnessed the collision. Not directly involved with Olympic's navigation (the after steering station was engaged in the event of a mechanical steering failure), he could only watch as the cruiser ploughed into the liner.



RMS Olympic: Aft steering station (red arrow), collision damage (yellow arrow)
Credit: Heritage Images

Murdoch rejoined Olympic after her repairs were completed in December, and in March 1912, he was assigned as Chief Officer to Titanic. However, Captain Smith brought on Henry Wilde. Murdoch became First Officer but was to regain the Chief Officer's position, as Wilde was scheduled to leave after the maiden voyage. The remaining officers reported to Murdoch and prepared Titanic for her sea trials on April 2. Before Titanic departed, Murdoch's wife, Ada, paid a visit to the ship while he was testing the lifeboats. Murdoch wrote his sister, Elizabeth, on April 8: "I am still Chief Offr [Officer] until sailing day & then it looks as though I will have to step back, [to First Officer] so I am hoping that it will not be for long. The head Marine Supt. [Superintendent] from L'pool [Liverpool] seemed to be very favourably impressed & satisfied that everything went on A.1 [OK] & as much as promised that when Wilde goes I am to go up again."

MAIDEN VOYAGE

Murdoch assumed the watch at 10pm on the night of April 14. The state of sea and weather were deceptively calm and confusing. A dazzling, star-filled sky greeted Murdoch and his three watch mates. A message from another ship, confirming the ice region in Titanic's path, was received just a few minutes before Murdoch took control of Titanic. Then, about an hour later, another message warned of large icebergs ahead. However, this message never reached the bridge. In the crystal clear and moonless night, Murdoch kept Titanic at her brisk pace. Approaching the ice region, atmospheric conditions toyed with the lookouts. Warm air overtopping cold air above the ice field created an illusion of brightness and was confused as haze by the lookouts. Acting like a lens, this atmospheric condition refracted the visible light, distorting visibility and making it difficult to judge distance and the horizon. Just before 11:40pm, the lookouts caught sight of a dim mass obscuring the stars. They rang their bell three times for danger and phoned, warning

of an iceberg directly ahead. Murdoch immediately ordered the watertight doors closed and took evasive action. He got the stem clear, but Titanic's starboard side forward brushed the iceberg. Shifting the rudder, he was able to maneuver the ship around, clearing the stern and avoiding opening the entire hull. His evasive maneuvers have been questioned, but Titanic was just too close. As the responsible officer of the watch, his duty was to avoid collision.

Once Captain Smith decided to evacuate Titanic, Murdoch took charge of lowering the starboard side lifeboats. By 1am, officers were given revolvers, if necessary to keep order; Murdoch put one in his pocket. He then went to lower one lifeboat on the portside, rushing in the women and tossing children to crew assigned to man the boat. Murdoch turned his attention to getting passengers into the last boats. Collapsible C was positioned to be lowered when Murdoch dragged some men out and ordered a ship's pantry man holding two lost babies into the boat. Just as the boat was ready to be sent down, Bruce Ismay, Director of White Star, stepped aboard; Murdoch lowered away. With time rapidly running out, he began his last desperate act to get people off the dying ship. Engulfed by the sea, his body was never recovered.

Sources: British and American Wreck Inquiries; Wikipedia; William Murdoch letters: A Night to Remember by Walter Lord; Titanic Officers; Of Ships and Men by Alan Villiers; Titanic and other ships by Charles Lightoller; Joseph Boxhall letters; NY Times.