

A QUIET SEA  
RMS TITANIC



THE METRIC OF WORTH

# TITANIC – THE METRIC OF WORTH

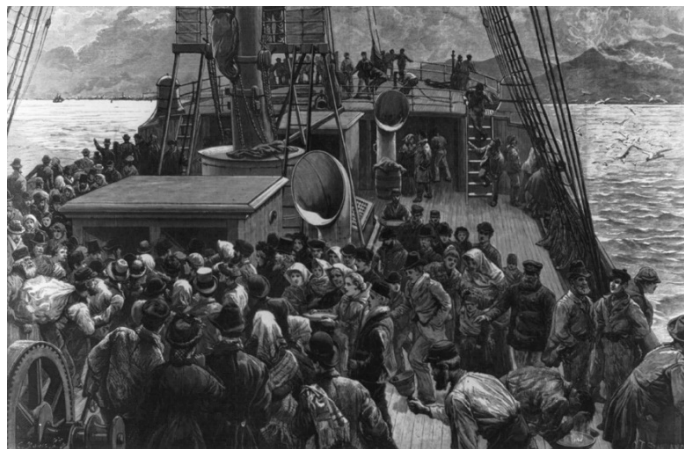
## INTRODUCTION

“We are a company of the rejected; the drunken, the incompetent, the weak, the prodigal, all who had been unable to prevail against circumstances in the one land, were now fleeing pitifully to another and though one or two might succeed, all had already failed. We were a shipful of failures, the broken men of England. Through the thin partition you can hear steerage passengers being sick, the rattle of tin dishes as they sit at meals, the varied accents as they converse, the crying of their children terrified by this new experience, or the clean flat smack of the parental hand in chastisement. To descend into steerage was an adventure that required some nerve. The stench was atrocious; each respiration tasted in the throat like some horrible kind of cheese.”



Robert Louis Stevenson  
Credit: Wiki Commons

Robert Louis Stevenson portrayed this forlorn image in his book, “The Amateur Emigrant.” Traveling in an unidentified ship while on passage to America in 1879, Stevenson was on the first leg of his journey from Scotland to California to be married. He booked passage in Second Class but spent much of his time in steerage to see how the poorest and most desperate people lived.



Emigrant ship – the breakfast bell  
Credit: Creative Commons

First-Class passengers sometimes descended into steerage to entertain themselves by gawking at the passengers there. Continuing his observations, Stevenson wrote, “Picking their way with little gracious titters of indulgence, and a lady-bountiful air about nothing which galled me to the quick... They seemed to throw their clothes in our faces. Their eyes searched us all over for tatters

and incongruities, a laugh was ready at their lips; but they were too well-mannered to indulge it in our hearing. Wait a bit, till they were back in the saloon, then hear how wittily they would depict the manners of the steerage.”



Whispers  
Credit: Irish Mirror

Yet, it was not beyond those in First Class to arrange, through a discreet crew member, laundry and other services from women in steerage. In contrast to his depressing observations, Stevenson describes an air of optimism, fiddle music, dancing, games and singing in various languages. Undoubtedly anxious about what to expect in their new country, poverty concealed the fortitude of those housed in the fetid holds, eager to become American citizens.

To fill their large, new liners and earn a profit, steamship companies, including White Star Line, needed emigrants to buy tickets. They frequently colluded with central European government immigration agents, who could supply them with passengers. Steamship companies set up shop in countries eager to dispose of their poorest, least desirable citizens, aggressively advertising the notion of a new world of milk and honey that could be had by simply crossing the Atlantic.

## THE VICTORIAN ERA (1837-1901)



Queen Victoria  
Credit: Wikipedia

Wealthy, Victorian-era contemporaries of Stevenson widely believed that the poor had no one to blame for their lot but themselves, and that wealth was synonymous with courage and moral

superiority. This opinion justified the failure to address the conditions that afflicted destitute children. Safe play areas were unknown. Orphaned children subsisted on pity and food scraps and made do with the street, easy prey for criminals and predators. Sanitation was nonexistent; infestations of vermin were part of daily life, and overcrowding ensured the spread of infectious diseases, killing thousands. In the slums, properly equipped kitchens were rare; most food was consumed cold. Treated like criminals, the poor feared being condemned to the workhouse.

As early as the Tudor period (1485-1603), concerns about brewing social unrest led to feeble attempts at reforms to address poverty. The Acts of Parliament, ratified in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century, exempted direct government involvement and placed the care of the destitute upon local communities. Taxes were levied on parishioners to address the problem. The feeble and old, along with indigent children, were forced into the dreaded workhouses. Those who earned meager wages received some relief to purchase basic food and clothing. But by the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, the surging numbers of poor overburdened the inadequate tax system. Corruption and the bad management of funds led to increased taxes, and taxpayer impatience fueled anger that reached a breaking point. Violence broke out in the 1830s, highlighting the need for government participation. Still, members of Parliament turned a blind eye and decided it was not the government's responsibility to help alleviate the problems of the poor.

The wealthy in Victorian England earned a minimum of about £1,000 pounds sterling per year (about \$105,000 in 2023 dollars). The gentry lived well, on revenue from inherited rental properties, investments and titles bestowed on men who controlled the economy. Gender dictated one's role in society. Men were strong, women weak. Men ran the world; women ran the household and raised the children (whose rights went unrecognized). Men believed that women existed on a higher moral plane, unaffected by the same roving eye that led their husbands astray. Upper class young women who wished to work could be governesses or music teachers. Lower class women worked as laundresses and seamstresses and cared for upper class households. Men were considered superior regardless of their social station, and religion reinforced this notion. Their queen, paradoxically, was head of the Church of England.

## EDWARDIAN ERA (1901-1914)



King Edward VII  
Credit: Wikipedia

Considered a shiftless lothario, little was expected of Edward VII, formerly the Prince of Wales. Continuing Victorian-era hubris, the Edwardian Era rationalized British complacency, arrogance, and sense of superiority. Still, Edward VII was aware of conditions affecting the poor and initiated long-overdue social reforms. Along with Lloyd George, the Liberal Party prime minister, the king placed a limit on working hours and began a form of health insurance for workers. Although there was wide inter-party support for women's suffrage, it wasn't enough to overcome the no vote in the Liberal party, and women were denied the right to vote. When Edward VII died in 1910, the social reforms he supported continued with Lloyd George, who led the country through World War 1.

The British Empire, under the crown of King Edward VII, was the largest Empire in history. Other nations held a grudging admiration of British maritime prowess but were resentful of her constant and, in some cases, infuriating presence around the world. Rather than consider the negative international ramifications, it bolstered Britons' sense of self. Convinced of her ability to influence global political conditions to her advantage through military might, her prodigious merchant marine complemented her naval juggernaut by fully engaging in the highly competitive Atlantic ferry service. Although all major nations participated in transatlantic competition, Britain took the lead with the concept of efficient transportation, building fewer but larger and faster vessels. The goal was a weekly service between America and Europe with the fewest ships possible.

## THE PROGRESSIVE ERA

Few of the wealthy in the 19<sup>th</sup> century considered that something could or should be done to relieve the crushing burden poverty through philanthropy. However, the reform movements in England and America offered some hope. The decades between 1896 and 1920 marked the progressive period, which had a dedicated anti-war element. Illuminating corrupt political influence and monopolies, progressives focused on unjust labor practices that contributed to widespread poverty. They strove for legitimate business competition, voting rights for women, incorporating scientific solutions and establishing public compulsory education to remove children from the exploitation of labor. Progressive ideas in both countries developed more or less along parallel lines.

In 1834, the Poor Law was enacted by the British Parliament to provide some relief against poverty. Prior to the Poor Law, attempts were made regarding compulsory education for children working in factories. The 1802 Factory Act made businesses and factory owners provide at least some education and apprentice programs for children. But the law was not applied uniformly, and evasion by owners was rife. Popular with the voting public, the Factory Act and its educational component was harshly criticized by some members of Parliament who feared that acknowledging the poor's rights would cause social unrest. Naysayers considered it unaffordable, taking away personal freedoms (by contributing to a National Health Program) and interfering with the free market. At the very least, the Poor Law provided some relief to women and children; it was felt that men were able to secure work anyway. The Old Age Pensions Act of 1908 provided a meager pension for the destitute elderly or those who earned a paltry annual wage. Liberal members of Parliament focused on the Pension Act. Qualifications were arduous. Individuals had to prove they had sober habits, had lived in the UK for more than 20 years and had never been incarcerated. Fifty-five was the life expectancy during this period, and timing was everything to get a pension. The National Health Care plan never went far enough and was not available to all.

The Boys' Home Industrial School was established in 1858 to teach destitute, law-abiding boys a trade. The schools attempted to instill high moral values, and the boys lived at the schools to separate them from bad habits. The schools applied all-too-common corporal punishment. Straps and canes, freely used for discipline, were not prohibited until 1987.



Boys' Home Industrial School  
Credit: National Archives UK

William Forster, an English Liberal Party statesman and Chief Secretary for Ireland, was involved with relief for the Great Famine of 1845 (also known as the Potato Famine). Forster played a key role in passage of the Education Acts of 1870, which provided free and compulsory schools for all children, including (finally) girls.



Co-education Y Weir School, Llanbryn-mair, 1890  
Credit: Picryl, John Thomas Whales photographer

Application to schools of higher learning for women was sporadic, and political resistance curtailed opportunity. Women's colleges were considered unimportant, and providing girls with schooling past early education was a challenge. Although the foundation for basic education for girls was established in the 1830s, it advanced at a snail's pace into higher education throughout the remainder of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The subjects taught were traditional "women's" work: cooking, sewing, child care and other domestic labors. Science, languages and teacher training (thought

to be a woman's job) were also part of the curriculum, although patronizingly; these subjects were considered difficult for women to master. Pioneering women's colleges like Cambridge-Girton sought to change attitudes about women's higher education, employing headmistresses who made it their goal to do so.

Women who entered fields traditionally occupied by men suffered cruel jokes and harassment. Grudging respect was hard-earned. When the University of London began awarding advanced degrees to women, Sophie Willock Bryant was a pioneer. She first earned a Bachelor of Science, then a Doctorate of Science in 1881, the first woman in Britain to do so. She helped formulate higher education in Britain and played a vital role in establishing the Cambridge Training College for Women. Bryant saw little connection between living a moral life and religion and was an advocate of secular humanism, embracing human reason and ethics. She was restrained in her support of women's suffrage, however, believing that education was key before casting a vote.



Sophie Bryant  
Credit: Wikimedia Commons

Upper-class women did not generally attend schools of higher learning. Most found themselves restricted to roles requiring traditional social skills and a veneer of polished sophistication. By the 1890s, however, opportunities for education were advancing. Publicly funded technical and even special schools for blind and deaf children were established to bolster the public education system in Britain.

Progressive politicians, eager to align themselves with the working class, expanded education in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century through the Education Act, which also incorporated local community control of schools and raised funds for libraries. Subsequent additions to the act provided school meals and medical examinations for early intervention to prevent childhood diseases, and even regulate toxic materials in everyday life. Politicians reasoned that if Britain was to maintain her lead in a world of ever-increasing technologies, it needed mass education, and the Liberal Party strove to provide these opportunities for poor children.

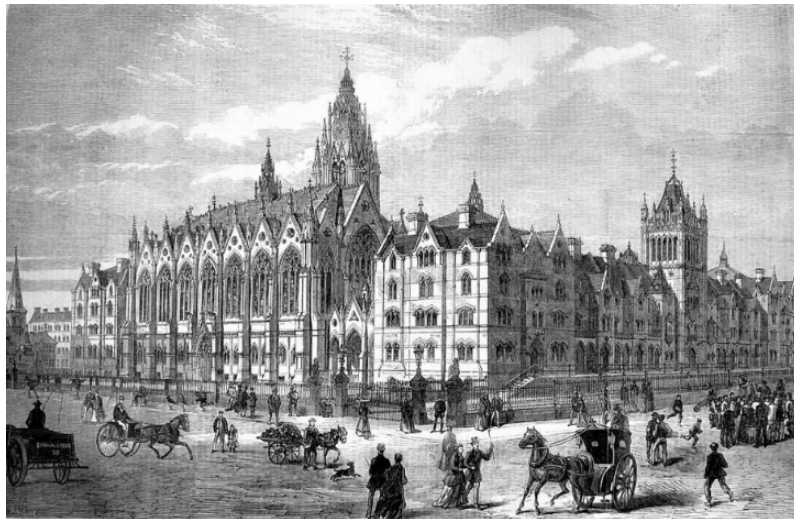
## QUEEN OF THE POOR

While many of the upper class were reluctant to aid the poor, there were exceptions. One shining example was Angela Burdett-Coutts. Born into a wealthy banking empire in 1814, Burdett-Coutts was highly refined and had connections to politicians and captains of industry. When only 23 years old, she inherited her grandfather's estate when his second wife died. Finding herself with vast bank holdings and numerous properties (where she entertained Queen Victoria and the future Queen Mary), she became one of the richest women in Britain. There was no shortage of suitors, but she lived alone with the governess who raised her, causing a stir when, at 67, she married 29-year-old William Bartlett, a member of Parliament.



Angela Burdett-Coutts (1814-1906)  
Credit: Wikipedia

Burdett-Coutts's desire to see people live in decent housing started small. She created Holly Village for her homemakers and staff. She learned the value of providing good housing and went on to improve the poorest slum areas of East London, not something genteel women of the day were drawn to. Reasoning that along with good housing, a good market was needed, she financed the construction of Columbia Market in 1868 to rejuvenate the local slum, Devil's Acre, so named by Charles Dickens. Her father, William Burdett-Coutts, owned a fishing fleet and stocked the market with fish.



Columbia Market 1868 Illustrated London News  
Credit: Wikipedia



Zealous about her charity work, Burdett-Coutts teamed up with Charles Dickens to fund social housing for prostitutes and criminals who wanted to improve their lives. She built hospitals; supported war widows, veterans and nurses; created scholarships and organizations to prevent cruelty to animals; and funded new infrastructure to provide clean drinking water. Her other work included societies to address the deplorable conditions of child labor and provide education for and prevent cruelty to children. Her housing projects included gardens, which she felt were vital to instill peace of mind. She was warned about her work with prostitutes. With no appreciation for her passion for social decency, critics said it was unsavory and demeaning for a woman of her social stature to be involved with such people. Her reach extended to Jerusalem, where she provided money to search and locate an important water supply. In 1871, in recognition of her philanthropic work, Queen Victoria awarded Burdett-Coutts the title of Baroness. She died in 1906. King Edward VII said, "After my mother, she is the most remarkable woman in the kingdom." Many who she helped in the slums attended her funeral.

## TITANIC

The United Kingdom dominated the globe during the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This wealthy island nation controlled 25% of the world's land surface through colonization and military power, including countries tightly linked to Great Britain through trade. With world-girdling commercial enterprises and nearly two centuries of intense scientific exploration, there were few places around the globe where British colors did not fly. Britons had unbounded confidence in their country, and Titanic was lauded as its next great accomplishment.



Class distinction: First Class being shown into the boats, steerage waiting  
Credit: Wikimedia Commons. Artist: Fortunino Matania

Safety regulations established by the British Board of Trade for evacuating passengers from a ship in distress mirrored long-held attitudes of class in British society. The hierarchy was clear: first the affluent, then the middle class, then the poor. But that would clash with the unwritten law of the sea: women and children first, presumably regardless of social standing.

On Titanic, which did not have enough lifeboats, confusion reigned. The evacuation plan depended on the luxury of time for those not at the head of the line, but time usually is not on the side of those needing to escape a vessel in distress. At the British Inquiry, the representative of Third Class, Mr. W. D. Harbinson, insisted that steerage passengers were not in any way hampered in reaching the lifeboats. However, this startling statement was contradicted by a young

steerage passenger named Daniel Buckley, who testified that women and children in steerage were kept below at the beginning of the evacuation. (Buckley survived Titanic, because a woman covered him in a shawl and smuggled him onto a lifeboat. He was killed by a German sniper in WW1 while rescuing fellow soldiers.)



Daniel Buckley (1890-1918)  
Credit: Irish Central

In steerage, small groups were taken to the boat deck by stewards. John Hart shepherded his 58 steerage passengers to the boat deck, then was ordered by First Officer Murdoch to man a lifeboat. Another steerage passenger, Olaus Abelseth, was traveling with his brother, other relatives and a 16-year-old girl, Karen Marie Abelseth (no relation) in his care. Karen was allowed on the boat deck, but Olaus was not until the very last. He survived, but his relatives did not. With the gates between classes shut, some steerage passengers climbed railings and cranes to get to the boat deck. Second-Class passenger Lawrence Beesley, a teacher, described a similar experience. Two Second-Class women were passing through First Class to get to the lifeboats when stopped by an officer. They were told that their lifeboats were on their own deck. Neither the British nor American inquiries confirmed these claims.

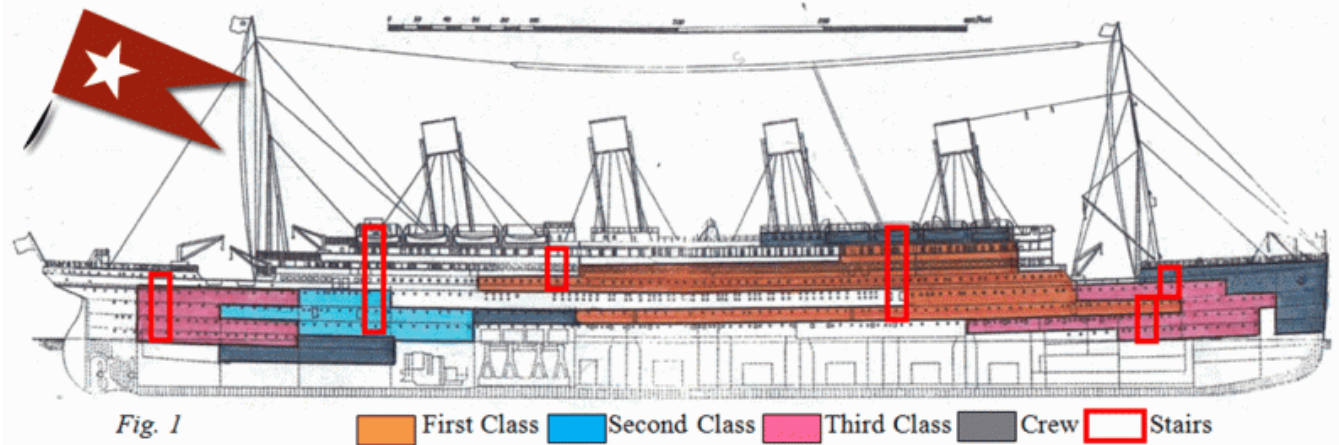


Olaus Abelseth  
Credit: Wiki tree

After the collision on April 14 at 11:40pm, the crew had only 2 hours and 40 minutes to evacuate the ship. The first lifeboat left 1 hour after the collision with 28 people, far short of its 65-person

capacity. While time was needed to evaluate the damage and avoid a needless evacuation in the middle of a dark ocean, disbelief led to a vacuum of command and contributed to the delay in lowering the remaining 19 boats. Every minute became precious, and many were lost by the reluctance of First-Class female passengers to leave their husbands – and what they thought was the safety of the ship. Only 60% of the available lifeboat capacity was used, resulting in 500 more deaths. Some officers feared that fully loaded boats would buckle and dump the passengers. This led to an ill-conceived plan to load passengers from a lower gangway door. As minutes ticked away, confused passengers milled about between the upper and lower decks. The last boat left at 2:05am, 15 minutes before Titanic foundered. The few remaining boats floated off the ship. Crew not assigned to man the lifeboats looked out for themselves. All 30 engineers who remained below to keep lights and pumps working perished.

Escape also depended on location. Finding one’s way around took time. Second Officer Lightoller said it took him 2 weeks to become familiar with the ship’s layout. Only First- and Second-Class passengers had direct access to the lifeboats. One young Irish woman in Third Class, Katie Gilnagh, made her way to the boat deck by circumventing the rules, arriving at lifeboat #16. Kept from boarding, she said her sister was already in the boat. She was then allowed to enter. Her sister was in New York and, hearing of the disaster, was arranging a memorial service when Katie arrived at her door.



Passenger location by class. First and Second Classes have direct access to the boat deck.  
 Credit: Encyclopedia Titanica



Steerage poop deck, view aft from boat deck  
 Credit: Wikimedia Commons

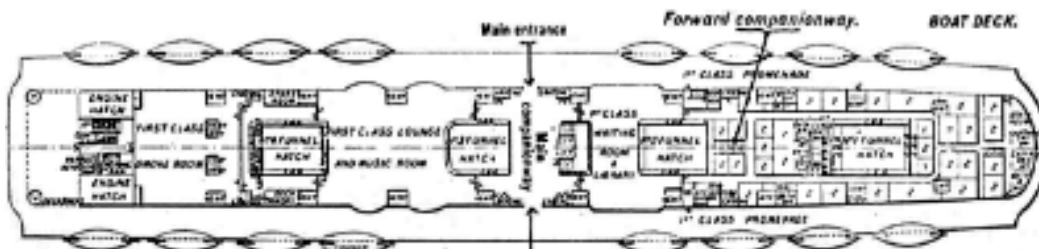


Steerage forecastle, view forward from boat deck (Olympic) Credit: PICRYL

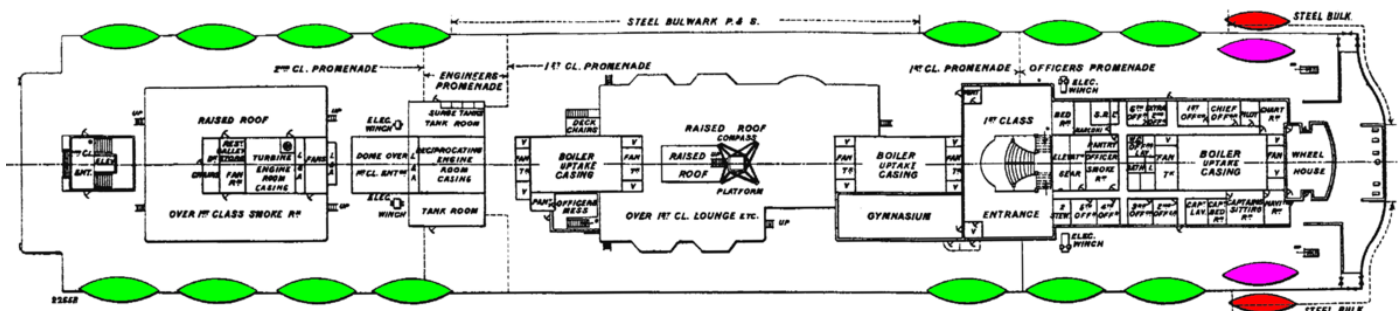


The desired objective: Titanic's boat deck, portside view forward (note similarity to Matania illustration)  
 Credit: Wikimedia Commons

Although Titanic is infamous for her lack of lifeboats, no large passenger liner of the day carried enough boats to evacuate all on board. Several years before Titanic, the Cunard ships Lusitania and Mauretania had the same basic layout on their maiden voyages: four sets of four lifeboats each. Again, this was the work of the British Board of Trade, using outdated methods for calculating the number of lifeboats for ships of no more than 10,000 gross tons. Both the Titanic and her sister ship, Olympic, were nearly five times that regulatory tonnage. This is the same Board of Trade that appointed Harbison to represent Third Class (who denied that there were any restrictions to boarding the lifeboats) and conducted the post-disaster hearings. (The other was conducted in America by Senator William Smith of Michigan.)



Lusitania boat deck plan from Engineering 1907  
 Credit: Wikipedia



Titanic boat deck plan  
 Credit: Wikipedia

Before the loss of Titanic, British Government authorities acquiesced to steamship companies who refused to provide more lifeboats because of cost, even though previous disasters had provided harsh evidence for the need for lifeboats for all. The Board of Trade's stupor in requiring lifeboats for all only ended when Titanic struck an iceberg.

## EPILOGUE

Witnesses in the post disaster hearings, most from First Class, regaled the committees by lauding their own for facing death with courage and honor (qualities not accorded those in steerage). One notable exception was fellow First-Class passenger J. Bruce Ismay, Director of the White Star Line. Ismay, who escaped in a lifeboat, was excoriated in the press as responsible for the loss of Titanic and so many lives. Steerage and even Second-Class passengers received short shrift. Newspaper articles conflated steerage with cowardice and claimed that lifeboat stowaways were Chinese, Japanese and southern European emigrants. A piece in the "New York Sun" coldly noted that perhaps some immigrants had been lost who might have done the country some good.<sup>1</sup>

Sources: Prof. Kellie Carter Jackson: Untold Stories of the Titanic; The Amateur Emigrant by Robert Louis Stevenson; A Night to Remember by Walter Lord; The Only Way to Cross by John Maxtone-Graham; Research in Maritime History No. 31, The Rescue of the Third Class on Titanic by David Gleicher; Wikipedia; Cambridge University, The Progressive Movement in England; JSTOR, Boy Labor in late Victorian and early Edwardian England & Philanthropy in Edwardian Britain; Intriguing History, Women's Roles in Edwardian England; The National (British) Archives, How We Were Taught; Victorian Era.org; Edwardian Promenade, The Education of Girls and Women; History is Now Magazine, Philanthropy in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Britain; Britannica, Victorian Era; Measuring Worth (Currency Exchange rates by era); The Titanic Historical Society, Miss Louise Laroche; Nation-CLA-2019, John Locke's Social Contract: Is It Legitimate?;

Footnote <sup>1</sup> Pg. 88, A Night to Remember