

A QUIET SEA
RMS TITANIC

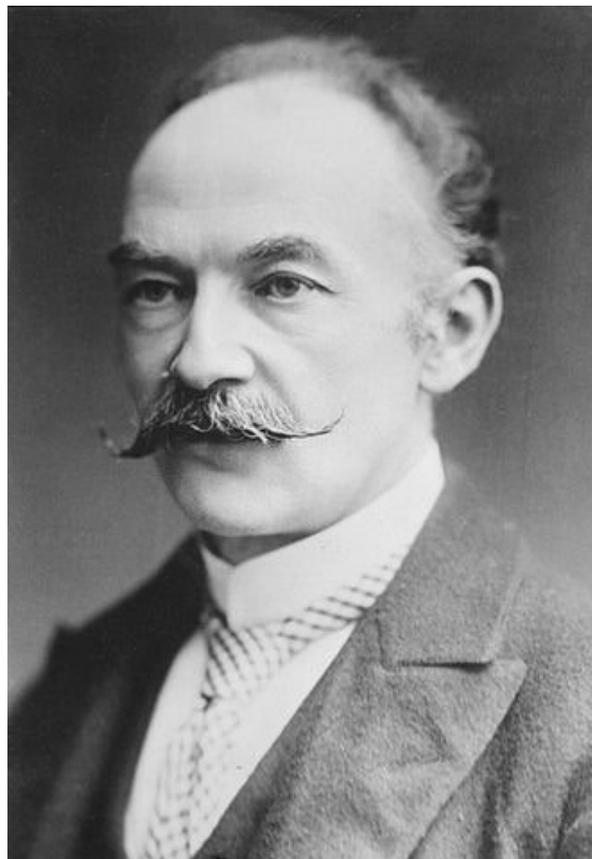


POETS AND OTHER WRITERS

TITANIC, POETS AND OTHER WRITERS

INTRODUCTION

Practically from the time the sea closed over Titanic, the disaster was the source of countless articles, books, plays and films. "Saved From the Titanic," a silent short starring actress and survivor Dorothy Gibson, was released a month after the tragedy. Works by unknown as well as prominent writers were solicited and published.



Thomas Hardy
Credit: Wikipedia

One of these was famous English novelist and poet Thomas Hardy (1840-1928), author of such classics as "Far From the Madding Crowd" and "Return of the Native." Hardy had been born in a small town in Dorset, England, to a family too poor to send him to university. However, he was able to study with a local architect and eventually enrolled in King's College in London. Winning architectural competitions, he became an assistant architect in 1862. Over time, depressed by class divisions and drawn to liberal and progressive ideals, he gravitated toward writing. After losing two friends in the tragedy, including renowned British reformer William Stead, Hardy wrote "Convergence of the Twain" published in June 1912 to help raise funds for the survivors.

CONVERGENCE OF THE TWAIN
(Lines on the loss of the "Titanic")

1

In a solitude of the sea
Deep from human vanity,
And the Pride of Life that planned her, stilly
couches she

3

Over the mirrors meant
To glass the opulent
The sea-worm crawls — grotesque, slimed, dumb,
indifferent.

5

Dim moon-eyed fishes near
Gaze at the gilded gear
And query: "What does this vaingloriousness down
here?"

7

Prepared a sinister mate
For her — so gaily great —
A Shape of Ice, for the time far and dissociate.

9

Alien they seemed to be;
No mortal eye could see
The intimate welding of their later history,

11

Till the Spinner of the Years
Said "Now!" And each one hears,
And consummation comes, and jars two hemispheres.

2

Steel chambers, late the pyres
Of her salamandrine fires,
Cold currents thrid, and turn to rhythmic tidal
lyres.

4

Jewels in joy designed
To ravish the sensuous mind
Lie lightless, all their sparkles bleared and black
and blind.

6

Well: while was fashioning
This creature of cleaving wing,
The Immanent Will that stirs and urges
everything

8

And as the smart ship grew
In stature, grace, and hue,
In shadowy silent distance grew the Iceberg too.

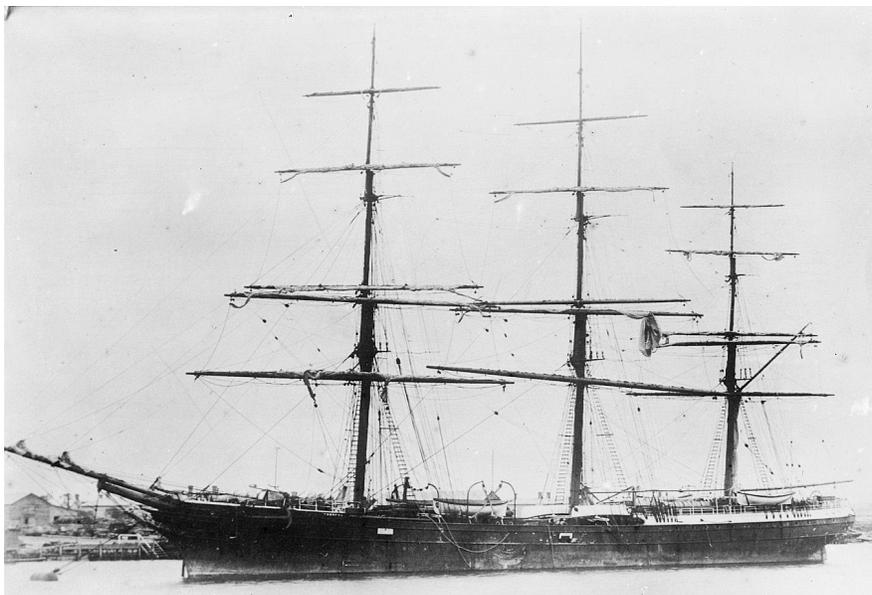
10

Or sign that they were bent
By paths coincident
On being anon twin halves of one august event,



Joseph Conrad (b. Józef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski)
Credit: Wikipedia

Novelist Joseph Conrad (1857-1924; “Lord Jim,” “Heart of Darkness”) was born in Ukraine when the country was under Russian rule, after being part of the Kingdom of Poland. His father, a writer and activist, was part of the Polish nobility and was imprisoned for his political activities for Polish independence. After his release from jail, the family was exiled to northeast Ukraine. Two years later (1865), Conrad’s mother died of tuberculosis. Home schooled, Conrad was a poor student but an avid reader. While his uncle thought he might become a marine businessman, at age 13, Conrad declared that he was going to be a sailor. When he turned 15, his uncle sent him to France to become a merchant seaman, but Russia wouldn’t provide the necessary documents, and Conrad fell into despair and attempted suicide. Learning English, Conrad joined the British Merchant Marine and spent the next 15 years working a variety of jobs, earning his mate’s and then his Master’s Certificate. He served as First Mate aboard the ship *Torrens* and Master in the bark *Otago*.



Full-rigged ship *Torrens*
Credit: Wikipedia

Conrad spent nearly 20 years in the merchant service, holding a variety of positions, from steward to Master. He began writing seriously after he left the sea in 1884, influenced by what he saw on his travels.

His experience gave him a seaman's perspective on Titanic's loss. Critical about the ever-increasing size and clumsiness of ships, his comments were unrestrained. Conrad cast a wide net of displeasure and spared few, including so-called experts, the US Senate and British Boards of Inquiry. The US Senate Board was a special target for his anger because of their questioning of Titanic's Second Officer Lightoller, a British national. (The disaster occurred in international waters, but the US Senate Inquiry was held because Titanic was 60% American-owned by J. P. Morgan.) The Senate's lack of maritime knowledge galled Conrad. He accused the British Board of Trade of years of inaction on lifeboat regulations while ships became ever larger. (Titanic had the lifeboat outfit for a ship a fifth of her passenger capacity.) He believed that no ship could ever be made unsinkable. Shiphandling was another sore point. Some said that if Titanic had hit the iceberg head on, she would have survived (there is merit in this), as her flank would not have been open to the sea. Conrad sarcastically expounded on this assertion and took it a step further – when an iceberg is dead ahead, just hit it. In the end, Conrad found little to console him regarding the tragedy. He felt the heroics far too focused on a few, without knowing how the many behaved. He claimed that drowning in the world's largest ship was not any more heroic than dying from eating bad fish.

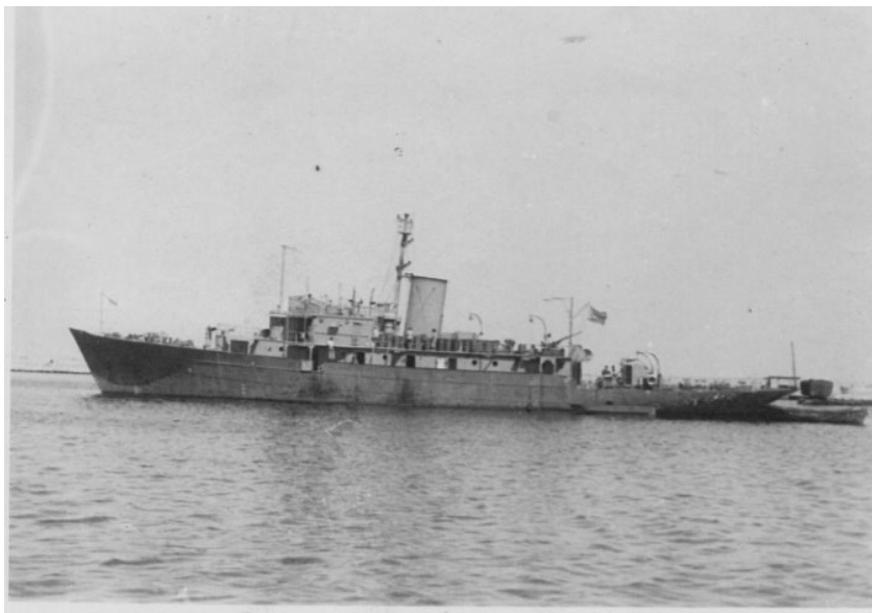


Ben Hecht
Credit: wiki commons

Writer Ben Hecht (1894-1964) was born in New York City to Russian immigrants. His father worked in the garment industry. Eventually, the family moved to Racine, Wisconsin. As a boy, Hecht studied violin and performed as an acrobat. He briefly attended college, but with a budding passion for journalism got a job with a paper in Chicago, where he attracted the attention of publisher John Eastman. He became a reporter for the "Chicago Daily News" and covered events overseas, including conditions in Berlin after World War I.

Hecht reveled in the rough and tumble world of journalism. "I haunted streets, warehouses, police stations, courtrooms, theater stages, jails, saloons, slums, madhouses, fires, murders, riots, banquet halls, and bookshops. I ran everywhere in the city like a fly buzzing in the works of a clock, tasted more than any fit belly could hold, learned not to sleep, and buried myself in a tick-tock of whirling hours that still echo in me." One of his articles led to the conviction and execution of a decorated World War I veteran who murdered his pregnant wife. Hecht also wrote novels and screenplays, including for the 1939 film *Wuthering Heights*, which was awarded an Oscar for best writing. Lured to Hollywood, Hecht became a famous screenwriter.

An early advocate of civil rights, Hecht organized fellow writers and strenuously campaigned against lynching and acts of terror by the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s. Later, he supported the Jewish State and wrote anonymously against the British administration. In recognition of his support, an ex-German yacht, converted to a Zionist merchant ship and manned by an international crew of volunteers, was named in his honor.



S. S. Ben Hecht
Credit: Wikipedia

In 1912, the loss of life on *Titanic* and the survival of J. Bruce Ismay, the Managing Director of White Star Line, drew Hecht's attention. On April 17, 1912, just 2 days after the disaster, Hecht wrote "Master and Man." The poem compared the courage of Captain Smith, who perished with his ship, with Ismay's escape. A number of rumors circulated about the relationship between Captain Smith and Ismay. It is a myth that Ismay dictated *Titanic*'s speed during the passage, urging Smith to increase speed for an early arrival in New York. On the evening of the disaster, Ismay showed a message about ice to fellow passengers and ridiculed its warning. The message was retrieved by Captain Smith and posted in the wheelhouse. Captain Smith conducted himself as did other transatlantic liner captains: he kept up speed in clear weather and depended on lookouts to give timely warning of icebergs. This was normal operating procedure for transatlantic liners; only after *Titanic* was it considered an act of negligence.



J. Bruce Ismay
Credit: wiki commons

J. Bruce Ismay (1862-1937) was widely attacked for his role in the disaster and for saving himself while women and children perished. (To compound his shame, his valet, John Fry, father of two, was lost.) The US Senate wanted him to face criminal charges. Ismay was blamed for not providing enough lifeboats, but Titanic had complied with Board of Trade regulations. It did not matter that Ismay had assisted many women and children into lifeboats and had left Titanic only 20 minutes before she foundered. He was vilified as a coward and given the moniker, J. "Brute" Ismay. Practically every film version of the sinking, including a 1943 Nazi propaganda piece, depicts Ismay as a cowardly villain. Marked forever by the disaster, Ismay descended into a lifelong depression. He ended up working for an insurance firm in London and dedicating himself to ensuring that the relatives of those lost were compensated through insurance claims. He did not break his silence about Titanic until shortly before his death: "Yes, I was once in a ship which was believed to be unsinkable."

Master and Man

By Ben Hecht, 1912

The Captain stood where a
Captain should
For the Law of the Sea is grim;
The Owner romped while the ship was swamped
And no law bothered him.
The Captain stood where the Captain should
When a Captain's ship goes down
But the Owner led when the women fled,
For an Owner must not drown.
The Captain sank as a man of Rank,
While his Owner turned away;
The Captain's grave was his bridge and brave,
He earned his seaman's pay.
To hold your place in the ghastly face of Death on the Sea at Night
Is a Seaman's job, but to flee with the mob
Is an Owner's Noble Right.

EPILOGUE

Titanic was the greatest maritime disaster during peacetime. Here was an engineering achievement, lost on her maiden passage in waters as still as a mill pond. In hindsight, the human failings leading to the disaster were basic: If the prevailing weather conditions had been heeded, and good judgement not clouded by complacency, it is probable that Titanic would have avoided the iceberg. The myth of unsinkability, the status of the ship's captain, the mix of passengers—an amalgam of rich and poor seen as a microcosm of society—and the seeming futility of it all became fertile ground for the pens of the day.

Sources: The Poetry foundation, Wikipedia, The Thomas Hardy Society, Pa Rock's Ramble, The New York Times (TimesMachine), Democratic Underground, The Gale Review, IMDb Film Source, Berfrois (Literature, Ideas, Tea), Old Salt Blog (article by Mr. Rick Spilman, Naval Architect), Conrad First, GG Archives, gCaptain