

Defending Ernest Gill

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ET Research

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One night in 1994, at the tender age of 14, I sat glued to the TV watching the superb A&E documentary about the *Titanic* disaster.

Having read and heard little of the Lordite claims about the SS *Californian*, however, save for a brief mention on the old *In Search Of ...* episode on the disaster that I had also watched, I had no idea to just what great lengths some had gone to try to justify the *Californian's* failure to act.

Thus I was in for a surprise when the second part of the A&E program, *Titanic: The Legend Lives On*, dealt with the matter in a very pro-*Californian* way. With the documentary's narration introducing the subject like this:

"But the quintessential villain of the *Titanic* disaster was about to be named by Ernest Gill. A crewman aboard the *Californian*. The cargo steamer that had stopped on the other side of the ice field where the *Titanic* went down."



Quotes from Gill were then read aloud after this statement:

"On the night of April 14th I came on deck. I saw the lights of a very large steamer about ten miles away. And I saw a white rocket. I said to myself 'That must be a vessel in distress.' Why the devil didn't they wake the wireless man up? The entire crew would be talking about the disregard of the rockets. I personally urged several to join me in protesting the conduct of the captain. But they refused. Because they fear to lose their jobs."¹

After recounting the *Californian's* rendezvous with the *Carpathia* and her subsequent fruitless search for further survivors, historian Edward S. Kamuda had this to say about Gill:

"Well when they [the *Californian*] got to Boston the press was all there and everybody wants to know 'What happened'? Gill was an individual who was not paid very much money. Let's face it they got something, like, five pounds a month. Which is very little money. And, uh, suddenly a newspaper reporter comes up to you and says 'You know I'll give you five hundred dollars for a story.' Well you're going to make a good tall story. And, uh, of course the newspapermen too can, uh, add to it to sell newspapers as well."²

With Gill's credibility thus shredded, the documentary proceeded to paint a fully sympathetic portrait of the *Californian's* participation in the disaster.

Subsequent study of the evidence related to this fascinating aspect of the *Titanic* disaster, however, led me to question Kamuda's discrediting of Gill. Which has led to the writing of this article.

Gill's tale: an invention for personal financial gain?

Here is the statement Gill made before he testified at the American *Titanic* inquiry:

I, the undersigned, Ernest Gill, being employed as second donkey man on the steamer *Californian*, Capt. Lord, give the following statement of the incidents of the night of Sunday, April 14:

I am 29 years of age, native of Yorkshire, single. I was making my first voyage on the *Californian*.

On the night of April 14 I was on duty from 8 p.m. until 12 in the engine room. At 11:56 I came on deck. The stars were shining brightly. It was very clear and I could see for a long distance. The ship's engines had been stopped since 10:30 and she was drifting amid floe ice. I looked over the rail on the starboard side and saw the lights of a very large steamer about 10 miles away. I could see her broadside lights. I watched her fully for a minute. They could not have helped but see her from the bridge and lookout.

It was now 12 o'clock and I went to my cabin. I woke my mate, William Thomas. He heard the ice crunching alongside the ship and asked, "Are we in the ice?" I replied, "Yes, but it must be clear off to starboard, for I saw a big vessel going along full speed. She looked as if she might be a big German."

I turned in, but could not sleep. In half an hour I turned out, thinking to smoke a cigarette. Because of the cargo, I could not smoke 'tween decks, so I went on deck again.

I had been on deck about 10 minutes when I saw a white rocket about 10 miles away on the starboard side. I thought it must be a shooting star. In seven or eight minutes I saw distinctly a second rocket in the same place, and I said to myself, "That must be a vessel in distress."

It was not my business to notify the bridge of the lookouts; but they could not have helped but see them.

I turned in immediately after, supposing that the ship would pay attention to the rockets.

I knew no more until I was awakened at 6:40 by the chief engineer, who said, "Turn out to render assistance. The *Titanic* has gone down."

I exclaimed and leaped from my bunk. I went on deck and found the vessel under way and proceeding full speed. She was clear of the field ice, but there were plenty of bergs about.

I went down on watch and heard the second and fourth engineers in conversation. Mr. J. C. Evans is the second and Mr. Wooten is the fourth. The second was telling the fourth that the third officer had reported rockets had gone up in his watch. I knew then that it must have been the *Titanic* I had seen.

The second engineer added that the captain had been notified by the apprentice officer, whose name, I think, is Gibson, of the rockets. The skipper had told him to Morse to the vessel in distress. Mr. Stone, the second navigating officer, was on the bridge at the time, said Mr. Evans.

I overheard Mr. Evans say that more lights had been shown and more rockets went up. Then, according to Mr. Evans, Mr. Gibson went to the captain again and reported more rockets. The skipper told him to continue to Morse until he got a reply. No reply was received.

The next remark I heard the second pass was, "Why in the devil didn't they wake the wireless man up?" The entire crew of the steamer have been talking among themselves about the disregard of the rockets. I personally urged several to join me in protesting against the conduct of the captain, but they refused, because they feared to lose their jobs. A day or two before the ship reached port, the skipper called the quartermaster who was on duty at the time the rockets were discharged, into his cabin. They were in conversation three-quarters of an hour. The quartermaster declared he did not see the rockets.

I am quite sure the *Californian* was less than 20 miles from the *Titanic*, which the officers report to have been our position. I could not have seen her if she had been more than 10 miles distant, and I saw her very plainly.

I have no ill will toward the captain or any officer of the ship, and I am losing a profitable berth by making this statement. I am actuated by the desire that no captain who refuses or neglects to give aid

to a vessel in distress should be able to hush up the men.³

Ernest Gill

Sworn and subscribed to before me this 24th day of April, 1912.
Samuel Putnam, Notary Public

This was given full-play in the Boston press the next day, April 25th.

One of these papers, the *Boston American*, included in it's write-up the following interesting tidbit about the affidavit:

"These charges are made in affidavits [sic] by Ernest Gill, second donkey man on board, who is on his way to Washington to testify before the Senate Investigating Committee. They were repeated in the presence of four members of the crew and a notary public, and by an officer of the ship, who affirmed them in a confidential communication to the *Boston American*."

Genesis of the money accusation

It was insinuated by other members of the *Californian's* company that Gill did it all for money. An article in the *Boston Herald* the day after Gill's statement was printed claimed:

"It was said by several members of the [*Californian's*] crew that fore-castle talk was to the effect that Gill received a good round sum for his affidavit."

But where did Mr. Kamuda get the figure of five-hundred dollars?

It can be found in the evidence given by the *Californian's* wireless operator, Cyril Evans, before the Senate committee:

Senator BURTON. Has anyone told you that he was to receive \$500 for a story in regard to these rockets - anyone on your boat?

Mr. EVANS. I think the donkey man mentioned it.

Senator BURTON. What did he say ?

Mr. EVANS. He said "I think I will make about \$500 on this."

Senator BURTON. Did he say that to you?

Mr. EVANS. Yes, sir.

Senator BURTON. That is the man who was a witness here this morning?

Mr. EVANS. Gill, the second donkey man.

Senator BURTON. He said he thought he would make \$500?

Mr. EVANS. Yes.

Senator BURTON. When was that said ?

Mr. EVANS. The night before last.

Senator BURTON. Did you hear him say that at any other time ?

Mr. EVANS. No, sir.

Senator BURTON. He said that to you night before last?

Mr. EVANS. Yes, sir.

Senator BURTON. Where were you then?

Mr. EVANS. I had gone ashore, and I was outside the station, I think. I do not remember whether it was the north station or the south station.

Senator BURTON. It was after you had landed ?

Mr. EVANS. It was after I had landed; yes, sir; he asked if I was not going back any more. He said he had been up and told the newspaper about the accident.

Senator BURTON. And he said that he would make about \$500 out of it?

Mr. EVANS. He said, "I think we will make about \$500 out of it."

It should be obvious from the two different ways Evans remembered Gill's alleged words that Evans word

is not holy writ. Nor did Evans recount anything of the sort at the British Inquiry. Was not even asked about it during his time on the stand by Mr. Robertson Dunlop. The solicitor representing the Leyland Line with the sole purpose of arguing the *Californian* did *not* see the *Titanic*. Making him by default the first Lordite.

Dunlop had access to all the American testimony related to the *Californian*, even quoted a bit of Evans' to him when Evans was on the stand.

Dunlop thus means and opportunity to have brought up the matter of Gill and the money Evans claimed Gill told him about. Which makes his not doing so all the more curious, given how it would have allowed him to subtly cast doubt upon Gill's account in the presence of Lord Mersey and his assessors before Gill took the stand himself.

He did, however, obliquely approach the matter of money after a fashion at one point during his cross-examination of Gill:

18196. And it was not till after you had heard of the loss of the "Titanic" that it occurred to you that this signal that you had seen might have been of some importance?

- Yes.

18197. And until then you did not mention this signal to anyone on board the ship, did you?

- I did not have the chance.

The Attorney-General:

I do not quite follow. Is it suggested that signals were not sent up?

18198. (*Mr. Dunlop.*) No, I am not suggesting that. (*To the witness.*) What I am suggesting is that neither you nor anyone who saw those signals attached at the time any importance to them?

- I do not know whether anybody else did who saw them, but I did not.

The Attorney-General:

What he said was, "It was nothing to do with me."

The Commissioner:

He is a donkey man, working in the engine room.

18199. (*Mr. Dunlop.*) Yes; and I suppose interested in rendering assistance. (*To the witness.*) If there was any chance of earning salvage you, as a donkey man, would be one of the persons interested?

- Yes, Sir; but that is not the question; we are not talking about salvage.

18200. (*The Commissioner.*) Have you ever benefited by a salvage action?

- No, Sir.

The Commissioner:

You are living in hopes, I suppose.

18201. (*Mr. Dunlop.*) You have not taken part in one?

- No.

18202. But I suppose, like all seamen, you are on the outlook to get a bit out of a salvage service if you can render assistance to a vessel in distress?

- In the first place, we have to render the assistance, and what is coming to us afterwards - well, we get it.

Perhaps Dunlop was shrewdly probing Gill's scruples about money to see whether or not he ought to bring up Evans American inquiry claim. However, Dunlop let the matter lie when Gill was on the stand too.

In the end, Gill's alleged \$500 payment, presented by Kamuda as a documented fact on the A&E program, is an allegation backed up by the flimsiest of evidence.

Lacking an actual receipt from a newspaper to Gill for the sum paid, or Gill's own word on the matter, it is debatable if Gill was paid any money at all.

Gill's veracity

Did Gill's story change at all during his appearances before the American and British inquiries?

The key points of his affidavit shall now be compared to his later evidence given from the stand:

1. Gill sees an ocean liner

At the American Inquiry:

Senator FLETCHER. When did you first see her?

Mr. GILL. At four minutes to 12, exactly.

Senator FLETCHER. How do you know that?

Mr. GILL. Because at five minutes to 12 I was working with the fourth engineer at a pump that kicked, that would not work, and while we were interested in our work we forgot the time, and I looked up and I said, "It is five minutes to 12. I haven't called my mate, Mr. Wooten. I will go call him." And I got to the ladder to climb out of the engine room and get on deck. That taken me one minute, to get up there.

Senator FLETCHER. Was this ship moving at that time?

Mr. GILL. I did not take particular notice of it, sir, with the rushing to call my mate. I went along the deck. It taken me about a minute, going along the deck, to get to the hatch I had to go down, and I could see her as I walked along the deck. Suppose I am going forward, now; I could see her over there [indicating], a big ship, and a couple of rows of lights; so that I knew it was not any small craft. It was n tramp. I did not suppose it would be a "Star" boat. I reckoned she must be a German boat. So I dived down the hatch, and as I turned around in the hatch I could not see her, so you can guess the latitude she was in. As I stood on the hatch, with my back turned, I could not see the ship. Then I went and called my mate, and that is the last I saw of it.

And later affirmed:

Senator FLETCHER.

As I understand, you never did see the ship, did you?

Mr. GILL.

No, sir; not without the one I seen, the big ship, that I told my mate was a German boat - not without that was the ship in question, the *Titanic*.

Senator FLETCHER.

You think it may have been the *Titanic*?

Mr. GILL.

Yes; sir. I am of the general opinion that the crew is, that she was the *Titanic*.

Senator FLETCHER.

When did you first see her?

Mr. GILL.

At four minutes after 12, exactly.

Senator FLETCHER.

How do you know that?

Mr. GILL.

Because at five minutes to 12 I was working with the fourth engineer at a pump that kicked, that would not work, and while we were interested in our work we forgot the time; and I looked up, and I said, "It is five minutes to 12. I haven't called my mate, Mr. Wooten. I will go call him." And I got to the ladder to climb out of the engine room and get on deck. That taken me one minute, to get up there.

Senator FLETCHER.

Was this ship moving at that time?

Mr. GILL.

I did not take particular notice of it, sir, with the rushing to call my mate. I went along the deck. It taken me about a minute going along the deck, to get to the hatch I had to go down, and I could see her as I walked along the deck. Suppose I am going forward, now; I could see her over there (*indicating*), a big ship, and a couple of rows of lights; so that I knew it was not any small craft. It was no tramp. I did not suppose it would be a "Star" boat. I reckoned she must be a German boat. So I dived down the hatch, and as I turned around in the hatch I could not see her, so you can guess the latitude she was in. As I stood on the hatch, with my back turned, I could not see the ship. Then I went and called my mate, and that is the last I saw of it.

Senator FLETCHER.

How long after that was it before you saw the rockets go up?

Mr. GILL.

About 35 minutes, sir; a little over half an hour.

And at the British Inquiry, when asked by the Attorney General:

18135. Before you went off watch did you see a steamer?--Yes.

18136. Just tell us what you saw?--I was coming along this deck to call my mate and I looked over the starboard rail and saw a large steamer. It could not have been anything but a passenger boat--she was too large. I could see two rows of lights which I took to be porthole lights, and several groups of lights which I took to be saloon and deck lights. I knew it was a passenger boat. That is all I saw of the ship.

18137. How far off did you judge she was?--She was a good distance off; I should say not more than 10 miles, and probably less.

18138. Did you notice whether she appeared to be moving?--I did not stand to look at the ship, but I suppose she would be moving. I did not expect a ship to be lit up like she was and stationary, and nothing to stop her, because I could see the edge of the ice flow, the edge of the field of ice; it appeared to be 4 or 5 miles away.

18139. Could you see the edge?--Yes.

18140. Between you and the ship?--Yes, what appeared to be the edge.

And when questioned by Mr. Robertson Dunlop:

18175. After you went off duty at midnight I understand you went forward to your cabin?

- Yes.

18176. And on your way forward you saw the lights that you have described?

- Yes.

18177. Then did you go to your cabin?

- Yes.

18178. And remain there for some time?

- Yes.

And when asked yet again by Sir Robert Finlay:

18205. You saw the lights of this vessel, if I followed you rightly, on your starboard side?

- Yes, on the starboard side.

18206. When you first saw these lights on your starboard side you had two masthead lights?

- Yes.

18207. Not a sidelight?

- Not steaming lights, not red or green lights, but plenty of sidelights, if you call them sidelights; I mean for illumination.

18208. Was the vessel that carried these lights moving?

- Well, I did not stay long enough to see whether she was moving or in what direction she was going. She was there; she was a ship passing; and I had no interest in her, Merely that she was a ship. She was a big ship, I could see that at a glance; in fact, I did not think she was a British ship; I thought probably she would be a German boat, and I made that remark to my mate as I woke him up.

18209. You could not make out whether she was moving or not?

- No.

18210. (*Mr. Dunlop.*) There is one question I should have asked, if your Lordship will allow me. (*To the witness.*) When you saw the lights of this steamer, how was she heading with reference to you; was she heading in the same direction as you were at that time?

- That I could not say; I did not stay long enough to observe which way she was going. No doubt if I had stayed another minute I could have been sure of the direction.

18211. But you have, have you not, stated what the heading of this vessel was when you first saw her?

- Yes, but, of course, they said was she moving. I did not think the ship would be standing still with nothing to stop her.

18212. Have you ever stated that the vessel you saw was heading in the same direction as the "Californian"?

- Yes, I have made that remark.

18213. Is that right or wrong? Do you want to correct it?

- Well, I am not sure whether she was going in that direction or not. On second thoughts I cannot be sure.

18214. On second thoughts you appreciate now that if that other vessel was heading in the same direction as you were she was heading towards Europe?

- Well, I do not know.

18215. Do you think she was heading towards Europe or towards New York?

- I do not know about that. I am not a sailor. I do not know anything about the latitude or longitude. My compass is the steam gauge.

2. Gill Sees Rockets

From his American inquiry testimony:

Senator FLETCHER.

In what direction were the rockets from the *Californian* when you first saw them?

Mr. GILL.

On the starboard side, forward.

And later affirmed:

Senator FLETCHER.

And you saw the rockets along about 2 o'clock, or before 2?

Mr. GILL.

About 12.30; at one bell, sir.

Senator FLETCHER.

About 12.30 you began first to see the rockets?

Mr. GILL.

Yes, sir; at first, when I saw it was not very plain.

Senator FLETCHER.

Off on your starboard bow?

Mr. GILL.

Yea [sic], sir.

Senator FLETCHER.

What kind of rockets were they? What did they look like?

Mr. GILL.

They looked to me to be pale blue, or white.

Senator FLETCHER.

Which, pale blue or white?

Mr. GILL.

It would be apt to be a very clear blue; I would catch it when it was dying. I did not catch the exact tint, but I reckon it was white.

Senator FLETCHER.

Did it look as if the rocket had been sent up and the explosion had taken place in the air and the stars spangled out?

Mr. GILL.

Yes, sir; the stars spangled out. I could not say about the stars. I say, I caught the tail end of the rocket.

Senator FLETCHER.

Did you see any lights on the steamer where the rockets were sent up?

Mr. GILL.

No, sir; no sign of the steamer at the time.

And later, when asked about it again:

Senator FLETCHER.

Did you observe the rockets go up in the direction this ship was as you first saw her, from where the *Californian* was?

Mr. GILL.

It was more abeam, sir; more broadside of the ship.

Senator FLETCHER.

In the meantime the *Californian*, as I understand, was drifting?

Mr. GILL.

Yes, sir.

Senator FLETCHER.

She was not under way at all?

Mr. GILL.

No, sir.

Senator FLETCHER.

Was the ship too far away when you saw the rockets going up, for you to see the lights on her?

Mr. GILL.

Yes, sir; no sign of the ship. 4

And at the British inquiry when questioned by the Attorney General:

18150. (*Mr. Rowlatt - To the witness.*) You went and called your mate?

- Yes.

18151. Did you take him up on deck?

- No.

18152. You only talked to him about it?

- Yes.

18153. I do not think it is important to get what you said to him, but shortly after that did you go up on deck again?

- Yes.

18154. And smoked a cigarette?

- Yes.

18155. Did you see the steamer then?

- No, I could not see anything of the steamer at all. She had disappeared. She had either steamed away, or I do not know what she had done. She was not there.

18156. (*The Commissioner.*) What time was this?

- After one bell.

Mr. Rowlatt:

Between half-past 12 and 1.

The Commissioner:

I do not understand that.

18157. (*Mr. Rowlatt.*) Did you see anything in the direction where the steamer had been?

- I had pretty nearly finished my smoke and was looking around, and I saw what I took to be a falling star. It descended and then disappeared. That is how a star does fall. I did not pay any attention to that. A few minutes after, probably five minutes, I threw my cigarette away and looked over, and I could see from the water's edge - what appeared to be the water's edge - a great distance away, well, it was unmistakably a rocket; you could make no mistake about it. Whether it was a distress signal or a signal rocket I could not say, but it was a rocket.

18158. Now can you tell me whether that was in the same direction from you as the steamer had been that you had seen?

- It was slightly astern of where I had seen the steamer. The steamer was more than ahead of us, just on our quarter, as we say, and the light was more astern. It was more abeam of our ship.

18159. Do you know whether your ship was lying in the same position on both occasions?

- We were lying there.

18160. Stopped, I know, but do you know whether she had swung at all?

- I could not say; I do not suppose she would stop in the same position all the time; a current was running.

18161. Was the rocket in the same direction as what you thought to be a falling star?

- Yes, in the same direction.

18162. Did you watch for any more?

- I stayed for about 3 or 4 minutes after that, but it was extremely cold, and I was just dressed in a thin flannel suit and I did not care to stay any longer on deck. I went below.

18163. You did not see any more?

- No, no more.

And when asked again by Robertson Dunlop:

18166. And then you came on deck?

- Yes.

18187. To smoke a cigarette?

- Yes.

18188. And it was while you were smoking a cigarette that you saw what you took to be a rocket?

- Yes, I was certain of it.

3. Gill On The Ice Surrounding The *Californian*

At The British Inquiry (Gill was not asked about this point before the Senate inquiry) when questioned by the Attorney General:

18146. And you thought that [the edge of the ice field] was five miles away?

- About that, yes.

18147. So that the ice that you were in - you were in the ice-field at this time?

- Yes.

18148. So that the ice that you were in extended for about five miles on your starboard side?

- About that.

18149. And in the direction of this steamer that you were looking at?

- Yes; the port side, too; there was ice on the port side.

And when asked by Robertson Dunlop:

18179. While you were in your cabin did you hear the noise of ice?

- Yes.

18180. What kind of noise was it?

- A grinding noise.

18181. Grinding against your ship's side?

- Yes, I was as close to the ship's side as I am to you; it kept me awake; I could not sleep for it.

18182. Was it a noise of thick field ice?

- No, just a grinding, rubbing noise.

18183. Of field ice that was surrounding you?

- Yes. Supposing somebody was taking a barrel along the road where I was sleeping, and it scraped along the side - that was just the noise. It was not very loud, but just a grinding noise.

18184. Was it thick ice which was around you?

- No.

18185. The ice was sufficient to make a noise to prevent you from sleeping, apparently?

- Yes.

Analysis

As the excerpts quoted here demonstrate, Gill stuck to his story throughout both inquiries. Save for his waffling while being questioned by Mr. Dunlop. Which is not surprising, for, remember, Dunlop was present at the British Inquiry at the behest of the Leyland Line in the name of arguing the *Californian* did not see the *Titanic*.

He had the power to make Gill's life potentially very miserable.

Thus Gill's "second thought" on the ship's direction clearly was hedging on the stand in the face of a biased interrogator.

The direction he thought the ship was moving is corroborated by Third Officer Charles Groves of the *Californian*. Who said while on the stand:

8144. When do you think you began to pay particular attention to her?--About 11.15.

8145. About five minutes after you first saw her?--About five minutes after I first saw her.

8146. Did you then see more lights than one?--About 11.25 I made out two lights--two white lights.

8147. Two masthead lights?--Two white masthead lights.

8148. Did you make out any other lights then?--Not at the time, no.

8149. You said that she was a little abaft your starboard beam?--Yes.

8150. How were you heading?--At that time we would be heading N.E. when I saw that steamer first, but we were swinging all the time because when we stopped the order was given for the helm to be put hard-a-port, we were swinging, but very, very slowly.

8151. You say you were heading about N.E.?--We were heading N.E.

8152. Did you notice that at the time?--Yes.

8153. Was that with a view to see in what direction the steamer was bearing?--No, for my own information.

8154. But it was at that time?--At that time, yes.

8155. Now, how did she bear, how many points abaft the beam did she bear?--Do you mean when I first noticed her?

8156. Yes?--I should think about 3 1/2 points, but I took no actual bearing of her.

8157. That would leave her S. by W.?--We were heading N.E. and she was three points abaft the beam.

8158. Your beam would be?--S.E.

8159. That would bring her about 7?--S. or S. by W.--S. 1/2 W.

8160. Could you form any judgement how far off she was?--When I saw her first light I should think she would be about 10 or 12 miles.

In the end, Gill's testimony matches his affidavit's account.

Did Gill alone say it was the *Titanic* the *Californian* saw?

The A&E program gives the uneducated viewer the impression that it was only Ernest Gill that claimed the mystery ship was a passenger steamer he thought turned out to be the *Titanic*.

However, there are two *other* members of her crew that thought so too.

The first was the aforementioned Third Officer, Mr. Groves, who said at the British Inquiry:

8172. (*Mr. Rowlatt.*) Did you say what sort of a steamer you thought she was?

- Captain Lord said to me, "Can you make anything out of her lights?" I said, "Yes, she is evidently a passenger steamer coming up on us."

8173. (*The Commissioner.*) "Could you make anything out of her lights?"

- Yes.

8174. "I said, 'She is evidently a passenger steamer'?"

- Yes, my Lord.

8175. You added something to that answer?

- "Coming up on the starboard quarter."

8176. (*Mr. Rowlatt.*) Did you say why you thought she was a passenger steamer?

- Yes. I told him that I could see her deck lights and that made me pass the remark that she was evidently a passenger steamer.

8177. (*The Commissioner.*) "I said I could see her deck lights"; was that true?

- Certainly, my Lord.

8178. (*Mr. Rowlatt.*) How many deck lights had she? Had she much light?

- Yes, a lot of light. There was absolutely no doubt her being a passenger steamer, at least in my mind.

And later:

8440. If this vessel which you did see was only some 4 or 5 miles to the southward of you, do you think she could have been the "Titanic"?

8441. (*The Commissioner.*) That is a question I want this Witness to answer. (*To the Witness.*) Speaking as an experienced seaman and knowing what you do know now, do you think that steamer that you know was throwing up rockets, and that you say was a passenger steamer, was the "Titanic"?

- Do I think it?

8442. Yes?

- From what I have heard subsequently?

8443. Yes?

- Most decidedly I do, but I do not put myself as being an experienced man.

8444. But that is your opinion as far as your experience goes?

- Yes it is my Lord.

The second was another crewman aboard the *Californian*. James McGregor, a ship's carpenter who, on April 21st, 1912, told his cousin, Mr. John Frazier, during a visit ashore in Clinton, Massachusetts that the *Californian* had seen the *Titanic*'s rockets but failed to act.

The Clinton *Daily Item* had a reporter present whodid a piece on the carpenter's story, saying specifically on the matter of the rockets:

"It was shortly after the *California* [sic] had gone by the ice field that the watch saw the rockets which were sent up by the *Titanic* as signals of distress. The officer on watch, it is said, reported this to the boat, but he failed to pay any attention to the signals excepting to tell the watch to keep his eye on the boat. At this time the two boats were about 10 miles apart. It being in the night the wireless operator on board the *California* was asleep at the time.

It is said that those on board the *California* could see the lights of the *Titanic* very plainly, and it is also reported that those on the *Titanic* saw the *California*."

This news item appeared on April 23rd. One day before Gill made out his affidavit and two days before it appeared in the Boston papers.

It is interesting to note that Cyril Evans let slip a fact at the American Inquiry that also backs up Gill's affidavit assertion as to the crew talking about what was seen:

Senator FLETCHER.

Did Gill, the donkey man, ever talk to you about a story he was telling about the sending up of the rockets by a ship that night?

Mr. EVANS.

I think he may have mentioned it to me.

Senator FLETCHER.

When?

Mr. EVANS.

Everybody on board has been speaking about it amongst themselves.

Senator FLETCHER.

The captain, too?

Mr. EVANS.

No, sir. I have never spoken to the captain about the matter of rockets, at all.

Senator FLETCHER.

None of this talk you have heard on the ship was in the presence of the captain?

Mr. EVANS.

No, sir.

There is also Gill's interesting tidbit in his American testimony as to how the whole crew's opinion was that the ship seen had been the *Titanic*

In light of the above facts, it should be obvious to even the most obtuse student that Gill was not alone in talking about what had happened that night. And was one of *three* aboard the *Californian* who expressed publically their opinion that the ship they saw was the *Titanic*.⁴

Conclusion

The A&E documentary's assertion that Gill alone claimed the *Californian* saw the *Titanic* is one that is, when viewed in light of the evidence presented here, manifestly false.

The assertion that Gill made up his story for money is also highly questionable, given the flimsy evidence in that regard. Evidence which is rank hearsay, and vague hearsay at that.

Why would the A&E documentary have presented the facts about Gill -and the *Californian* as a whole- in such a slanted light?

By shredding the credibility of Gill and sweeping Groves and McGregor under the rug, uneducated viewers such as this writer was at the time as to the full facts of the incident could be given second thoughts on the official verdict on the *Californian*, if not doubt them entirely.

However, in light of the full facts, this documentary, while a splendid one, and, in my estimation, the very best one on the *Titanic* disaster, does not have a leg to stand on when it comes to its accusations against Ernest Gill.

Footnotes

1. This quotation seems to be a mish-mash of sentences plucked at random from his affidavit with an eye to making Gill look like a lone eye witness to the rockets seen by his ship. Glossing over the fact that the *Californian*'s Second officer, Herbert Stone, and an apprentice, James Gibson, also saw rockets being sent up.

2. The pertinent portion of the documentary as pertains to this article can be viewed at the end and the beginning of these two segments: [One](#) | [Two](#)

3. Incidentally enough, Gill did not lose his berth aboard ship due to his affidavit. Though he did have take passage on another ship to return to England because he missed the sailing of the *Californian* for home due to going to Washington, D.C. to testify.

4. The reason Gill could not see the *Titanic* firing rockets was perhaps because of the fact the *Titanic* was facing directly *at* the *Californian* as she went down. Which decreased the number of lights that would have been visible to casual onlookers on nearby vessels.

For a fascinating examination of this little-known aspect of the disaster, see George Behe's paper "[She Shut Her Lights Out, My Lord](#)"

5. There may have even been a *fourth* to say so.

Unless he was a fabrication, there is the mystery officer named in the Boston *American* article.

Could he have been Second Officer Stone, or Chief Officer Stewart? Men who either saw or heard first-hand about the rockets?

It remains a tantalizing question.

Sources and Acknowledgements

Dave Billnitzer [*The Titanic and the Mystery Ship*](#)

George Behe [*Titanic Titbits*](#)

[*Titanic Inquiry Project*](#)

Mr. Billnitzer's website was especially helpful in that it features the three newspaper articles quoted here. Along with a wealth of other *Californian*-related material, for his site is devoted entirely to it.

I also am indebted to Dr. Paul Lee. Who replied to two questions I posted related to this article on the Encyclopedia-Titanica message board.

Courtesy of [Richard A. Krebs](#)

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