

## AN ECHO OF A PAST TRAGEDY

April 1912

### The Diary of Frederick Hamilton (Cable Engineer: MacKay Bennett)

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1912. April 17th At 6.50.p.m. Having taken in a supply of ice and a large number of coffins, cast off from the Wharf en route for the position of the "Titanic" disaster. The Reverend Canon Hind of "All Saints" Cathedral, Halifax is accompanying the expedition, we also have an expert Embalmer on board. Cold and clear weather.

April 19th The fine weather which has prevailed until now, has turned to rain and fog. We spoke to the "Royal Edward" by wireless to-day, she lay east of us, and reported icebergs, and growlers (lumps of ice, some of considerable size). At 6.p.m. the fog very dense, lowered cutter and picked up an Allan Line lifebelt.

April 20th Strong south-westily breeze, beam swell and lumpy sea. French liner "Rochambeau" near us last night, reported icebergs, and the "Royal Edward" reported one thirty miles east of the "Titanic"s" position. The "Rhine" passed us this afternoon, and reported having seen icebergs, wreckage and bodies, at 5.50.p.m. The "Bremen" passed near us, she reported having seen, one hour and a half before, bodies etc. This means about twenty five miles to the east. 7.p.m. A large iceberg, faintly discernible to our north, we are now very near the area were lie the ruins of so many human hopes and prayers. The Embalmer becomes more and more cheerful as we approach the scene of his future professional activities, to-morrow will be a good day for him. The temperature of the sea at noon today was 57N, by 4.p.m. it was 32N.

April 21st Two icebergs now clearly in sight, the nearest is over a hundred feet high at the tallest peak, and an impressive sight, a solid mass of ice, against which the sea dashes furiously, throwing up geyser like columns of foam, high over the topmost summit, smothering the great mass at times completely in a cascade of spume as it pours over the snow and breaks into feathery crests on the polished surface of the berg, causing the whole ice-mountain, which glints like a fairy building, to oscillate twenty to thirty feet from the vertical. The ocean is strewn with a litter of woodwork, chairs, and bodies, and there are several growlers about, all more or less dangerous, as they are often hidden in the swell. The cutter lowered, and work commenced and kept up continuously all day, picking up bodies. Hauling the soaked remains in saturated clothing over the side of the cutter is no light task. Fifty one we have taken on board today, two children, three women, and forty-six men, and still the sea seems strewn. With the exception of ourselves, the bosum bird is the only living creature here. 5.p.m. The two bergs are now in transit, the heavy swell has been rolling all day, must be a gale somewhere. 8.p.m. The tolling of the bell summoned all hands to the forecandle where thirty bodies are ready to be committed to the deep, each carefully weighed and carefully sewn up in canvas. It is a weird scene, this gathering. The crescent moon is shedding a faint light on us, as the ship lays wallowing in the great rollers. The funeral service is conducted by the Reverend Canon Hind, for nearly an hour the words For as must as it hath pleased - - '

we therefore commit his body to the deep@ are repeated and at each interval comes, splash! as the weighted body plunges into the sea, there to sink to a depth of about two miles. Splash, splash, splash.

22nd April We steamed close past the iceberg today, and endeavoured to photograph it, but rain is falling and we do not think the results will be satisfactory. We are now standing eastwards amongst great quantities of wreckage. Cutter lowered to examine a lifeboat, but it is too smashed to tell anything, even the name is not visible. All round is splintered woodwork, cabin fittings, mahogany fronts of drawers, carvings, all wrenched away from their fastenings, deck chairs, and then more bodies. Some of these are fifteen miles distant from those picked up yesterday. 8.p.m. Another burial service. April 23rd Icebergs and growlers still in sight. Both cutters busy all day recovering bodies, rain and fog all the afternoon, fog at times very dense. 7.p.m. The "Allen Line" boat "Sardinia" stopped near us and took despatches from our cutter. The fog had lifted slightly, but shut down denser than ever, soon after she had signalled 'good-night' on her flash light.

April 24th Still dense fog prevailing, rendering further operations with the boats almost impossible. We hear that the "Sardinia" is waiting some thirty miles away. Noon. Another burial service held, and seventy seven bodies follow the other. The hoarse tone of the steam whistle reverberating through the mist, the dripping rigging, and the ghostly sea, the heaps of dead, and the hard weather-beaten faces of the crew, whose harsh voices join sympathetically in the hymn tunefully rendered by Canon Hind, all combine to make a strange task stranger. Cold, wet, miserable and comfortless, all hands balance themselves against the heavy rolling of the ship as she lurches to the Atlantic swell, and even the most hardened must reflect on the hopes and fears, the dismay and despair, of those whose nearest and dearest, support and pride, have been wrenched from them by this tragedy.

April 26th The "Minea" joined us today in the work of recovery, and lays two miles westwards of us. Her first find, was we hear, the body of Mr. Hayes, the President of the Grand Trunk. At noon we steamed up to her, and sent the cutter over for material, and soon after set our course for Halifax. The total number of bodies picked up by us is three hundred and five, one hundred and sixteen have been buried at sea. A large amount of money and jewels has been recovered, the identification of most of the bodies has been established, and details set out for publication. It has been an arduous task for those who have had to overhaul and attend to the remains, the searching, numbering, and identifying of each body, depositing the property found on each in a bag marked with a number corresponding to that attached to the corpse, the sewing up in canvas and securing of weights, entailed prolonged and patient labour. The Embalmer is the only man to whom the work is pleasant, I might add without undue exaggeration, enjoyable, for to him it is a labour of love, and the pride of doing a job well.

April 30th 8.25.a.m. Took Pilot on board off Devils Island, and are now proceeding up Halifax Harbour. Crowds of people throng the wharves, tops of houses, and the streets. Flags on ships and buildings all half mast. Quarantine and other officials came on board near Georges Island, after which ship stood in to the Navy Yard, and hauled in alongside. Elaborate arrangement have been made for the reception of the bodies now ready for landing. 10.a.m. Transferring of remains to shore has begun. A continuous procession of hearses conveys the bodies to the Mayflower Rink. It is a curious reflection, that when on February 12th, we picked up the waterlogged schooner "Caledonia" and returned to Halifax to land her crew of six, these men walked ashore unnoticed, and two lines in the Daily Paper was sufficient to note the fact that they had been saved. While today with not one life to show, thousands come to see the landing, and the papers burst out into blazing headlines.

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## Acknowledgements

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