

The Titanic and the Indifferent Stranger

by Paul Rogers

ET Reviews

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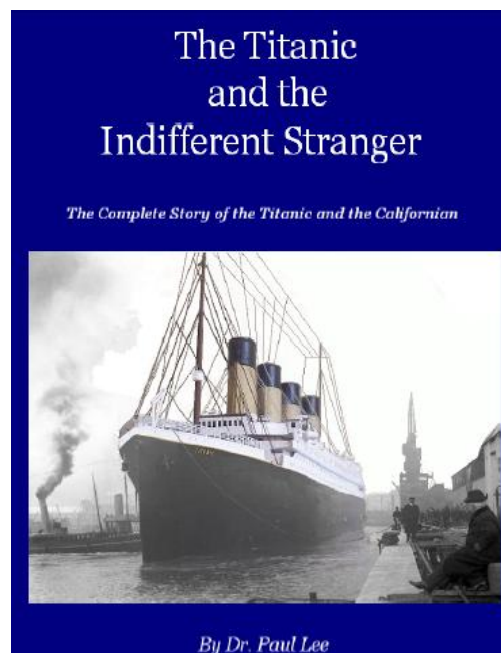
The “Californian Incident” has been crying out for a final, authoritative dissertation that can take all the conflicting evidence, stories and motivations and then, in the manner of Sherlock Holmes at the end of a case, lay out and explain precisely how and why those events occurred as they did, over 97 years ago – preferably with lots and lots of diagrams! Many people will come to believe that “The Indifferent Stranger”, written by Paul Lee, is precisely that book for which we have all been waiting for so long.

This reviewer has only had access to a PDF version of the manuscript, so I am unable to comment on such things as font size, print quality, etc. The PDF file runs to 439 pages, including a thorough index and five appendices. As one might gather from the size of the book, Lee does not limit himself to just focusing on the events of April 14th/15th 1912 but instead reviews the entire history of the “*Californian Incident*”, including the background behind the various books written by researchers on the topic, from “A Night To Remember” right up to the present day. He does this by narrating the story in chronological order, so the reader always knows where he or she is in the timeline of events.

“The Indifferent Stranger” commences its narrative on 18th April 1912, with the survivors of the *Titanic* disaster arriving in New York. The first five chapters explore the story of how the *Californian* became *Titanic*’s “Mystery Ship” by reference to the two Inquiries and associated evidence. The next six chapters examine how Captain Lord struggled to clear his name following the publication of “A Night To Remember” and how various authors and researchers have become polarised on opposite sides of the argument. There is also a thorough summary (entitled “Epilogue”) and five appendices covering various sub-topics, such as distress signals at sea and a possible solution to the locations of the *Titanic* and the *Californian*.

So, what’s not to like? Actually, not a great deal. Sometimes I got the impression that Lee’s thoughts were running ahead of his word processor: occasionally he draws conclusions from the evidence which left me wondering “how did he get there?” and I was required to re-read large sections of text to understand his thought processes. This is not to criticise the conclusions themselves but I did feel that a good editor may have been able to improve the flow of the story. Similarly, some of the diagrams used are simplistic and could easily be improved visually but, at the end of the day, they illustrate the points being made in an adequate manner and so they serve their purpose.

There are numerous occasions when one really wants (actually, needs) to have a map of the North Atlantic in front of them, together with lines of latitude and longitude; and small boat models, which one could then move around to see visually the points that Lee is making in the text. As you may gather, this is not a book for the casual reader. Instead, this is a researcher’s tool that presents all the evidence and invites the reader to draw their own conclusions. One has to read this book with full attention and one’s brain firing on all



cylinders. It is, in short, extremely heavy going at times – and thank heavens for that!

Lee's book is, quite simply, the most comprehensive presentation of evidence in relation to Captain Lord and his infamous ship that I have read to date. Rather than relying on footnotes and references, Lee presents, within the text itself, the full transcripts from the American and British Inquiries that relate to the *Californian* and the other ships implicated in the *Titanic* disaster. There is no bias whatsoever that I could perceive and Lee treats all those involved with scrupulous fairness. Fanatical pro- and anti-Lordites will both find themselves disappointed at times, as evidence is presented which firstly supports one side and then the other. This is, of course, how it should be: if the evidence had overwhelmingly supported one viewpoint over another, then the "*Californian Incident*" could never have generated the millions of words and the hours of heated debates that it has.

Equally as fascinating as the *Californian*'s story itself are the histories of and the backgrounds to the many books written over the years that have promoted either a pro- or an anti-Lordite viewpoint. Lee spends six chapters walking the reader through the motivations behind the writing of these books, including the feuds and Machiavellian plotting that has taken place over the years. It is at this point where Lee gives full rein to his scorn for specific authors who have chosen (in his eyes) to "spin" the evidence to support their own agendas. Although Lee does not hold back in his destructive analysis of their work, he again shows no favouritism, as authors from both sides of the argument are criticised for showing bias. As usual, Lee respects his readers enough to present all the evidence to them, to support his conclusions. Lee also takes the opportunity to praise those authors who, he believes, have genuinely tried to find answers to the "Mystery Ship" conundrum.

Readers who are looking for a simple explanation to the "Californian Incident" may find themselves disappointed by this book, for no such explanation exists. Lee uses the evidence to conclude that the *Titanic* and the *Californian* were visible to each other and were approximately 14 miles apart at the time of the sinking itself. Unfortunately, the reasons behind the inaction of the *Californian* are more difficult to interpret and will probably never be known. As Lee himself notes:

"To summarise, the physics and geometry of the *Titanic-Californian* are, for the most part, quite simple, and the two ships could be seen. But the bigger mystery is that of the inaction of the *Californian*. What we can't do is psychoanalyse the men on the *Californian*, their relationships with each other, and their ability to take the initiative in unusual situations. If we could, we would finally know just why the whole mess was allowed to happen. Of course, clues exist in the evidence and from other correspondents, but dead men can tell no tales."

In summary, "*The Indifferent Stranger*" is an obvious labour of love, written by an author who has been prepared to put in the research, time and effort required to find out the facts behind the "Californian Incident". Although not always an easy book to read, it is without doubt a superbly researched and truly unbiased account of the *Titanic*'s "Mystery Ship" story. Lee respects his readers by presenting them with all the evidence he has gathered and, because of this, his conclusions are compelling. I would strongly recommend this book to all those who have an interest in Captain Lord and the *Californian*.

The *Titanic* and the Indifferent Stranger by Paul Lee
