

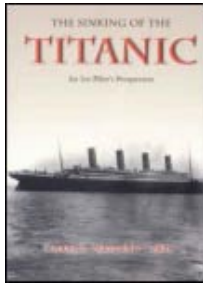
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Compelling Titanic Thoughts from the Rock

by Gavin Murphy



It is often not an easy task, nor a popular enterprise, to be a revisionist of ocean liner history. Proof of this is found, for example, in Colin Simpson's *Lusitania*, first published in 1972, which implicates Britain's First Lord of the Admiralty, Winston Churchill, in the ship's 1915 torpedoing by a German U-boat, and in the 1995 Dan van der Vat/Robin Gardiner book *The Riddle of the Titanic*, which alleges that *Titanic* and its sister ship *Olympic* may have been switched in an elaborate insurance scam.

Nevertheless, Duke Collins' recent book from Newfoundland, Canada entitled *The Sinking of the Titanic: An Ice Pilot's Perspective* may buck the trend. At a minimum, his effort does provide some compelling food for thought.

Collins, a master mariner from Newfoundland¹ who retired in 1995, suggests that it was not an iceberg but pack ice that sank the ill-fated luxury liner on its maiden voyage from England to New York in the early morning hours of 15 April 1912. From a close examination of the evidence presented at both the American and British inquiries into the ship's loss, he concludes that it was not haze that the lookouts Fred Fleet and Reginald Lee observed from high atop the crow's nest, as they claimed, in the crucial 10 minutes before impact, but hard pack ice.²

Born into a seafaring family, Collins has extensive experience in navigating vessels around Newfoundland's ice-infested waters, and thus views the question with a specialist's practical knowledge. He says the pack ice thought to be haze is likely to have stood no more than two metres above the surface. But as the ship steamed ahead, the diffusion of the glow from the masthead light, 145 feet above the waterline and 50 feet over the crow's nest, highlighted the area below and caused the ice in its path to rapidly appear larger, thus taking on the appearance of an iceberg.

Lookouts Fleet and Lee were not trained to detect pack ice and thus would have thought what they saw was haze.³ Furthermore, it was their duty only to report to the bridge any physical objects in the liner's path, rather than immediate atmospheric conditions. As the author states:

In good visibility, pack ice at night is discernible in sufficient time to take evasive action. If Fleet and Lee had informed the bridge that night that they had seen what looked like haze ahead, or if the bridge watch had noticed, almost certainly First Officer Murdoch would have acted. With ten minutes to spare before the ship entered the ice, there would have been ample time to avert the disaster.⁴

¹ Colloquially referred to in Canada as "the Rock."

² Pack ice is formed when the sea's surface freezes and large pieces of floating ice are driven together into a mass.

³ Nor did they have the benefit of the use of binoculars.

⁴ Collins, p. 43.

While his pack ice theory is the main argument of *The Sinking of the Titanic: An Ice Pilot's Perspective*, Collins also provides some observations on other *Titanic*-related issues, including the *Californian* controversy and the alleged breaking-up of the vessel before it sank.

Californian was the Leyland Line freighter that, some claim,⁵ was within sight of *Titanic* at the time of the disaster but failed to render assistance. From his analysis of the evidence provided at the two inquiries and his knowledge of nautical matters, Collins reasons that *Californian*, under the command of Stanley Lord, was 19.5 miles from the disaster and thus could not have provided effective help before *Titanic* foundered. His conclusion essentially mirrors those of Lord himself and the unfortunate captain's greatest defender, the late Leslie Harrison of Liverpool. Surprisingly, Collins makes no reference to Harrison's research⁶ in his rather slender bibliography.

Collins also offers an explanation for the 13-mile discrepancy between the position of the ship's discovery in 1985 by Dr. Robert Ballard and the CQD coordinates given by Fourth Officer Joseph Boxhall following the collision. He suggests that the wreck of *Titanic* may have shifted over time.⁷ The author also claims there is no conclusive proof that the ship broke in two before it sank, contrary to the conclusions of several well-known *Titanic* historians.⁸

For his main theory, the author holds that fundamental misinterpretations of the evidence given at the two inquiries have perpetuated the myth that *Titanic* collided with an iceberg. He has attempted to disprove this historical inaccuracy and uncover the truth. Collins is aware that his book will raise a few eyebrows, but he feels compelled to add his comments to the *Titanic* debate in this his first book. He is confident his analysis will withstand scrutiny and help to re-write maritime history. Several grammatical and factual errors mar the text,⁹ but in the final analysis *The Sinking of the Titanic: An Ice Pilot's Perspective* is a rich and important addition to the ongoing saga of that "night to remember."

⁵ In particular Lord Mersey, the wreck commissioner chairing the British inquiry into the loss of *Titanic*.

⁶ For example Harrison's 1986 book *A Titanic Myth: The Californian Incident*.

⁷ While the author provides nautical and historical evidence to suggest the wreck may have moved over time, Leslie Harrison dismissed this notion in a letter to the reviewer on 18 May 1988.

⁸ But consistent with statements made by surviving Second Officer Charles Lightoller and surviving Third Officer Herbert Pitman. For a recent examination of this subject, see in particular "The Break-up of the Titanic: Viewpoints and Evidence," by David Gleicher, http://www.encyclopedia-titanica.org/articles/break_up_gleicher.pdf

⁹ For example, spelling "Fastnet" wrong and claiming that Lord resigned from Leyland Line when he was, in fact, sacked within months of the *Titanic* disaster.