

The Other Side Of The Night

ET Reviews

Tuesday 16 June 2009

Paul Rogers reviews a new book exploring the mystery of the "Californian Incident"

The *Carpathia*, the *Californian*, and the Night the *Titanic* Was Lost

The "Californian Incident", as it has become known, has probably generated more debate, destroyed more friendships and polarised opinion to a greater degree than any other *Titanic*-related topic. Even those with little more than a passing knowledge of *Titanic*'s final hours (assuming such knowledge does not come solely from the 1997 movie) will hold an opinion on the actions – or inactions – of Captain Lord and his ship on the night of the 15th April 1912.

Of course, there exists a potentially huge audience who have only James Cameron's film on which to base their knowledge of *Titanic*'s story; and few of those will have discovered that a 'mystery ship' sat motionless, possibly less than 10 miles to the north, while the doomed liner slowly foundered over a period of two and a half hours. The story is a dramatic one and Daniel Butler's book appears designed to make it accessible to this wider audience.

The book in question is attractively and professionally bound, running to 254 pages including appendices and the typeface is (thankfully) large enough for those approaching middle age to read without resorting to a magnifying glass and a spotlight. In the centre can be found 17 pages of illustrations, none of which appear unique but all at least seem to have accurate captions. The illustrations focus, understandably, on the individuals and ships concerned and include most of those that one would expect to find in a book of this type.

Butler begins his story by briefly setting the scene regarding the perils faced by travellers crossing the North Atlantic in the 19th Century and how safety and conditions slowly improved into the early 1900's. He discusses the background of Arthur Rostron and the *Carpathia*, followed by a similar review of the history of Stanley Lord and the *Californian*. The story then shifts to the events of the 14th-15th April 1912 and its aftermath. Butler concludes by reviewing the American and British Inquiries (focusing solely on the *Californian*'s involvement) before delivering his personal, and controversial, verdict on Stanley Lord. The final chapter closes the story by examining what happened to the significant parties involved in the years following the *Titanic* disaster, up to and including their deaths.

There are some obvious faults within Butler's work. Possibly the greatest failing for the serious researcher is the lack of references or footnotes. Even the appendices provide no further information as they comprise merely the two inquiries' initial Resolutions and an extract from the British Wreck Commissioner's Inquiry Report relating to the *Californian*. There is a useful index and a list of sources but the latter is not cross-referenced to the book itself. So this book is emphatically not a researcher's tool and one is left wondering if Butler's work will eventually be judged as just another salvo in the apparently unending battle between Captain Lord's supporters and detractors.

When reading the book, it soon becomes apparent that Butler has a habit of imposing emotion, motives and sometimes even undocumented words, into the speech and actions of those involved. Whilst some readers may feel that his writing style is, at times, unnecessarily

sensationalist (who can truly say what various individuals were thinking and feeling that night?), many others will find it engaging. Whatever one's personal views, Butler manages to succeed in getting the reader to identify and empathise with the characters involved.

As with most *Titanic* books, there are omissions, lapses in logic and the odd out-of-date fact. For example, Butler doesn't explore the differences in 'ship's time' that existed on the *Titanic* and the *Californian*. The reader is left with the impression that the apparent time on both ships was identical and so an opportunity to investigate how those time differences could impact on our understanding of what happened that night is missed. One could provide many more examples of perceived faults as well as bemoaning the dearth of new research contained within this book but to do so would be to miss the point...

...And the point is that this book is both reasonably informative and (most importantly) entertaining. There is no doubt that Butler can write and he knows very well how to keep his reader entranced. The story is fast-paced and very little jargon is used. Although some may feel that the narrative has been over-dramatised, Butler's writing style will keep a reader who is new to the *Californian* story on the edge of their seat, eager to learn what happens next. In other words, it does what it sets out to do: it lays out the facts (with some bias, admittedly) for those who may have an interest in this aspect of the *Titanic* story and who want to learn more. Readers will be spared the need to wade through reams of Inquiry references but will still be provided with more information than can be found in any of the myriad *Titanic* coffee table books.

So what is Butler's verdict on Stanley Lord? It does not take the reader very long to establish that this book condemns Captain Lord as thoroughly, if not more so, than any that have gone before. Butler pulls no punches when expressing his opinion of Lord's character flaws and, near the end of the book, he baldly states his views as to the reasons behind Lord's inactivity when faced with obvious signals of distress from another vessel:

"The answer lies ... in the realm of medical science, for Stanley Lord was a man with a deep-seated flaw in his character, one which may never have revealed itself had the *Californian* not been in that particular expanse of the North Atlantic on the night of April 14-15, 1912. Instead, circumstances unconsciously conspired to reveal that Stanley Lord was a man without conscience: Stanley Lord was a sociopath."

This conclusion may be considered by some to be extreme and unjustified. Not for the first time in the book, Butler expresses his opinion of another's mental state as a hard fact and, although he does a workmanlike job of justifying his theory, the supporters of Stanley Lord are not likely to forgive him for attempting such a thorough character assassination. It is a jarring verdict, juxtaposed as it is with Butler's extreme generosity towards almost everyone else involved in the *Titanic* disaster – including Senator Smith, Lord Mersey and all of *Titanic's* officers. Captain Rostron, of course, is depicted as a virtual saint and the polar opposite of the demonic Stanley Lord.

In summary, Butler's book is a fundamentally accurate overview of the events in relation to the actions of the *Californian* and the *Carpathia*, although it adds little in terms of new research on the subject. Anyone without prior knowledge of those events will come away from reading it utterly convinced of Captain Lord's culpability but they may also be encouraged to look further into the detailed facts surrounding the "*Californian Incident*". One thing I can say is that readers of this book will be entertained and it can certainly be recommended on that basis.

Courtesy of Paul Rogers

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#10904)

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