

Titanic Scandal: The Trial of the Mount Temple

by Charles A. Haas

ET Reviews

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Few aspects of *Titanic*'s story have aroused such passionate debate as the identity of the "mystery ship" which approached the sinking liner sometime after 1 a.m. on April 15. Two official investigations declared her to have been the Leyland freighter *Californian*.

A 1992 re-examination by Britain's Marine Accident Investigation Branch partially exonerated *Californian*, finding that her officers likely saw *Titanic*'s distress rockets, but declaring *Californian* could not have arrived in time to save lives — though she should have made an attempt to do so. Recent books have thus focused on clearing or condemning the actions and inactions of *Californian*'s Captain Stanley Lord and her watch officers.

Senan Molony — himself the author of two previous volumes focusing on *Californian* — has introduced a welcome new direction to the debate: If it wasn't *Californian*, then who was the "mystery ship" seen from *Titanic*? His latest book provides an intriguing candidate: the Canadian-Pacific liner *Mount Temple*, under the command of Captain James H. Moore.

Molony structures his book as a court case: The first 14 chapters present the prosecution's case against Moore. They examine inconsistencies in the captain's testimony before the U.S. Senate and British Board of Trade inquiries regarding positions, times, sightings and actions. They include "testimony" from "witnesses," including passenger Friedrich Quitzrau, whose published allegations broke the story, but essentially were dismissed by both official inquiries. No fewer than eight others, *Mount Temple* passengers and crew alike, add their charges and observations. To help the reader judge their testimony's credibility, the author provides the results of remarkable research into the witnesses' backgrounds and subsequent lives.

Molony examines *Mount Temple*'s log — mysteriously devoid of any mention of *Titanic*; the impossibility of Moore's testimonies about his ship's position, speed and course, and the irreconcilable conflict between the ship's wireless procès verbal records and Moore's avowals. The author argues that having found their man in *Californian*'s Stanley Lord, both inquiries' questioning of *Mount Temple*'s master was perfunctory and at times nearly sycophantic.

He offers evidence of alteration of the ship's log and her wireless procès verbal. He suggests that the "tramp steamer" allegedly encountered by *Mount Temple* as it made for *Titanic*'s sinking site was Moore's fabrication to send investigators on a wild-goose chase to divert attention from his own actions. Why, the author asks, did so many of *Mount Temple*'s crew desert upon their arrival in Canada, some voicing their concerns to local reporters?

There is discussion of Moore's blind obedience to Canadian-Pacific rules, despite an obvious emergency requiring "outside-the-box" thinking. Moore testified, "My instructions from my company are that I must not enter field ice, no matter if it seems only light. Those are the explicit instructions from my company. If I was to go through ice and my ship was damaged, I would have pointed out to me that those were the instructions, that I was not to go into any ice, no matter how thin." Are these the words of a cautious "company man," or one afraid of taking a risk to become a hero in rescuing 2,200 souls?

As prosecutor, Molony poses interesting questions right from the first page; his prologue concludes, "It

took Captain Moore a quarter hour to turn around from the time he was told of the emergency, according to his own vessel's wireless log. Was his vessel a reluctant rescuer from the start?"

As in a real trial, following each witness, the author assumes the role of a defense lawyer, pointing out the omissions, flaws and inconsistencies of the "prosecution's" case. A 13-page chapter for the defense cogently summarizes the circumstantial nature of the case against Moore. As any debater knows, one can strengthen a case by presenting the opposing side, then finding fault with its arguments. Following a chapter of closing arguments, the reader becomes the jury in evaluating Molony's case. He offers no conclusions per se, but leaves us to consider the verdict on Moore.

The case this book weaves is fascinating, and like nothing else this reviewer has seen. Photographs, many previously unpublished, of people and ships involved in the story complement his effective use of extensive primary and secondary sources. He takes pity on non-nautically minded people, carefully explaining terminology as needed. I would have welcomed the addition of several position charts to help readers visualize the author's assertions regarding the ships, their positions and courses. The book's text is set in a small, dense font that conserves space but is tiring on older eyes.

Undoubtedly, some will find this book controversial, others may reject it out-of-hand, while others still may object to some unsupported suppositions or re-created conversations. But in presenting questions and doubts about a vessel whose role, until now, has been almost totally unexamined, Molony has performed a valuable service that history requires: Re-examination of preconceived assumptions in the face of new material, extricated after a century of neglect or oversight from a formidable array of known and until-now-obscure sources. The book is highly recommended.

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