

Chapter 6. A Night Best Forgotten?

1955-1958

In 1955, a Manhattan copy editor, with a degree in law from Yale, decided that his lifelong interest in the *Titanic* had been gestating long enough, and resolved to write a book on the last night of the floating city. Tracing as many survivors as he could, he entered into correspondence with over 60 of them, many of whom he maintained contact with for decades.

His name was Walter Lord (no relation to the Captain) and his book would become “*A Night To Remember*.”



Illustration 27: Walter Lord, 1917 - 2002

Lord the author was blessed with many valuable sources and correspondents, from officers on the *Titanic* to 3rd class emigrants. But Lord was determined to tell not only the last night of the White Star leviathan, but peripheral vessels too. Alas, he had little luck finding sources from the *Carpathia*, and found fewer from the *Californian*. Despite contacting UK shipping unions, he was unable to contact Captain Lord; nor did the Captain see any of Walter's adverts in the UK press appealing for those connected with the *Titanic* disaster to get in contact. He later admitted that had he been able to contact Captain Lord, he would not have changed his mind about the validity of the 1912 inquiries.

The *Californian* incident had lain dormant since 1913, when Captain Lord had given up his appeal, and apart from an interview in the Savannah Evening News in 1914, the only references to him and his ex-ship were in the 1935 autobiography of the *Titanic*'s 2nd Officer, Charles Herbert Lightoller, (where he reversed the 1912 goodwill he extended towards Lord and now held the opinion that the *Californian* had indeed ignored their call for help) and in a 1943 Nazi propaganda film, where Lord is actually shown, in an apocryphal scene, coming to the bridge and telling his watch-keepers, “...those are white rockets. Not emergency signals. You should know better than to wake me up for that ... that must be the *Titanic* on her maiden voyage, from her position. Maybe they are having a party to celebrate their early arrival in New York tomorrow. Let them have their fun. We are staying on course. Now, good night.”

There were a few TV dramatisations in which the *Californian* affair was mentioned: both

US and German television networks produced dramatisations of the sleepy rocket ignoring vessel; these were written by a certain Leslie Reade, of whom more later. And other than these, there was nothing. The *Titanic* had been forgotten. Walter Lord's book would reignite interest in the disaster and, unwittingly, stimulate the debate about Captain Lord's conduct from dormancy into vibrant life.

Among Walter Lord's many correspondents was Mr. A. Brian Mainwaring¹³¹. Mainwaring related his working life on the sea, including 3 years on *Titanic*'s sister, *Olympic* and 4 years on another White Star line vessel, the *Majestic*. He personally knew many of the individuals involved in the tragedy, including Herbert Stone, who he had met once during World War 1. Mainwaring wrote, "It was a well-known fact and quoted by him to his friends that Captain Lord of the *Californian* was an insufferable SOB. That after Stone had tried to get him to come up on the bridge, he turned to the Apprentice and said, 'Well, let the bastard sleep.'"

George Thomas Rowe was also forthcoming. As one of the Quartermasters, and one who assisted in the firing the rockets, his information was particularly interesting. One point he notes was that, while Collapsible lifeboat C was being readied (i.e. before 2.00 a.m.) he saw a light on the *Titanic*'s starboard quarter and thought it was a ship. But Captain Smith, looking at the light through binoculars reassured Rowe that it was merely a planet¹³². Using an astronomical programme¹³³ it can be shown that the only planet that had risen at the time was Jupiter, and she would be in the SSE. Since the starboard quarter is the rear right of a vessel, this implies a northward pointing *Titanic*¹³⁴.

The most noteworthy correspondent was Captain Charles Groves. He wrote that he stood by his testimony in London.

With regard to the other ship "coming up on [his] starboard quarter in a blaze of deck lights" and dousing her lamps at 11.40pm, Groves informed Lord that "What however had actually happened was that the iceberg had been sighted on the liner's starboard bow and she had immediately turned to port and then foreshortened her view and accordingly shut out most if not all of her deck lights." There are problems with this interpretation, and although Walter Lord initially accepted this explanation, he later on questioned it.

In 1958, Groves wrote a short memoir of his time on the *Californian* for Walter Lord, entitled "The Middle Watch"¹³⁵ Although this document is interesting, the first-hand details from Groves read like a simple repeat, almost verbatim, of his evidence in London. Perhaps he had refreshed his memory before writing it? There are a few interesting details: Captain Lord is described as "an austere type, utterly devoid of humour and even more reserved than is usual with those who occupy similar positions." Stone was "a stolid, unimaginative type and possessed little self confidence." The rockets are described as commencing "at 1.10 am", or about half an hour too late. When Groves asked Stone about the rockets upon waking, he was told "Yes, I saw her firing rockets in my watch" - "her" being the *Titanic*.

131 Not Brian Manning, as he is called in Dr. Charles Pellegrino's book "Ghosts of the *Titanic*". Manning was another Walter Lord correspondent, but he has no connection with the *Californian*.

132 Rowe also confirmed this detail to Leslie Harrison in 1963. While it is true that some of Rowe's accounts mention a "star or a planet", his earliest account, to Walter Lord in 1955, merely mentions a planet.

133 <http://www.fourmilab.ch/yoursky/>

134 <http://users.senet.com.au/~gittins/stars.html> includes an anecdote from Rowe's grandson. It seems that Rowe was adamant that what he had seen was the light of a ship receding from the *Titanic*. Since Jupiter was well above the horizon, it seems impossible to believe that Rowe could mistake this for a ship.

135 <http://home.earthlink.net/~dnitzer/9Testimony/Midwatch.html>

As she was leaving the wrecksite, Groves writes that “The *Californian* now made one complete turn to starboard followed by one to port and then resumed her passage to Boston passing the Canadian Pacific steamship *Mount Temple*, and another steamship of unknown nationality,” a detail that is inaccurate.

Of most interest are the following lines, “All that middle watch the *Californian* remained stationary for news of the rockets being seen did not stir her Captain into action, Mr. Stone lacked the necessary initiative to insist upon his coming to the bridge to investigate things for himself, and it did not occur to him to call the Chief Officer when he realised the apathy of the Captain, who apparently slept peacefully whilst this drama was being enacted about them ... Mr. Stone knew without a shadow of a doubt that there was trouble aboard the vessel from which the distress signals had been fired, but he failed to convince his Captain. But did Captain Lord need any convincing? Was Mr. Stone afraid that if he was too insistent he would arouse the wrath of his superior? Why did Captain Lord take no efficient steps to render assistance before 6 o'clock? Did he consider problematical damage to his ship was of more importance than the saving of lives? ... Does an experienced shipmaster lay down fully-clothed and in such circumstances sleep so heavily as he said he did on that night? Surely, surely, that is open to the very gravest of doubts.”

“The whole unfortunate occurrence was a combination of circumstances the like of which may never again be seen, and a middle watch which will not soon be forgotten,” the document concludes.

The previous year, Lord had interviewed Groves and the notes of that meeting show that some of the ex-3rd Officer's unprompted, spontaneous remarks nicely supplement his comments in “The Middle Watch”, but others contradict his 1912 statements: Stone “was always prompt but otherwise he was hopeless: lazy, fat, afraid of Lord. A man who never did anything with living, except lie in his cabin snoozing between watches. How did he get this far in the company? Well, he was from Devon, and they always looked after Devon men.” Captain Lord was described as being “a stern, domineering man with a high opinion of himself, a man who hardly will speak to anybody even when spoken to.” Evans is described as “a nice enough fellow who'll never set the Thames on fire.”

Groves remarked to author Lord that Captain Lord was scared to go the rescue, and Stone was too weak to force the issues.

Most of the interview is similar to “The Middle Watch” and his 1912 recollections, and only significant differences are mentioned here.

After stopping his ship, Lord asks the Quartermaster to bring up some coal. The Q.M. is incredulous and is asked again. Groves nods the Q.M. on, who returns with some coal. Lord takes it and throws it over the side to see how thick the ice is. Satisfied that its too thick to run through, he decides to stop for the night. Groves reveals how, soon after 11 o'clock, he saw a large ship coming up from the east, south of him. He called the Captain who takes a look saying “That'll be the *Titanic* on its maiden voyage,” and leaves the bridge again. At 11.40 the ship stops. Groves calls Lord again, who reappears, takes a look at the vessel and says that its not the same ship. Groves said that it was.

This is a gross contradiction of Groves' earlier comments, which has Lord leaving the bridge at 10.35, and only coming back after being told about the other ship coming up astern (not “from the east and south”), which was after she had allegedly stopped at 11.40. If Groves earlier version is true, this was Lord's first view of the stranger. How then could he comment that “it was not the same ship”?

Upon waking, Groves goes to Stone's cabin, who now says either, “The *Titanic* has sunk – I saw her go down” or just simply later in the interview, when asked about the *Titanic*, “I saw her go down.”

After coming up to the bridge, Groves tells Author Lord that the Captain is now reported as being so upset he tells the 3rd Officer to “shoot the sun” (a term referring to obtaining data from a solar observation using a sextant to gather navigational data) before the sun was up. The *Californian* finally gets to the wrecksite around 8.15-8.30 just as the *Carpathia* is picking up the last two boats. Groves is the only one who can read the *Carpathia*'s semaphore signals. The *Carpathia* leaves shortly afterwards, and within 15 minutes is gone, “disappeared behind the ice.” The *Californian* performs a “perfunctory search – a sort of figure 8,” consistent with his 'complete turn to starboard, then a turn to port' in his written account '*The Middle Watch*.'

When Walter Lord suggested to Groves that Captain Lord should have reacted to the news of the rockets immediately, he was told “not necessarily.” Stone, Groves stressed, “was the man on the spot. It was up to him to drive home the urgency of the moment to a Captain below. If the Captain seemed reluctant to act, it was up to the man on the bridge to drive all the harder – to make him do something.” To Groves, Stone was just as culpable as Lord.

One very important point not covered in the interview, but mentioned to Walter Lord in subsequent letters, was that, sometime during the post-*Titanic* voyage of the *Californian*, Groves' rough calculations on the position of the his ship had been stolen from his bureau drawer. This was not mentioned in “*The Middle Watch*” and one can only wonder why. From the time the *Californian* stopped on April 14th till going off duty shortly after 12am, apart from a brief visit to the Chart room, Groves was on the bridge, before briefly visiting Evans, and then retiring for the night. By the time he woke, the ship's position was already calculated and the *Californian* was en route to the disaster site. So, when did Groves calculate the ship's overnight position? Groves had been asked the following in London:

8506. Who would make a dead reckoning and find out where she was at 10.20?

Well, the Captain; he would work it. I never work it.

If Groves did do any calculations of his own, it must have been after Lord's determination of 50 07 W, 42 05 N; that is, at some point after Stewart had wakened him. One can speculate that, if it did happen, Groves did not mention this “theft” as it might have been one accusation too much for the Inquiry. Another alternative is that the “rough calculation” refer to the noon position of the *Californian* on April 15th.

Walter Lord did not use any of this interview material in his *Titanic* books. Why? It may be because he trusted Groves' 1912 testimony rather than his recollections from 40+ years after. Walter Lord must have evidently known that there were significant differences between the stories imparted by the former 3rd Officer. So, why was Groves' story in “*The Middle Watch*” a recap of his 1912 information? Groves may have simply wanted to refresh his memory. On the other hand, he now had a professional status and had sat as an assessor on some 25 inquiries. He may have wanted to protect his reputation by repudiating, or correcting any erroneous information he had given to Lord in 1957. Whatever, Groves' interview, full of interesting contradictions, was not seen again until this author found it in the late Walter Lord's cache of bequeathed papers in 2005.

“A Night To Remember” was published by R & W Holt in December 1955 and was a

success; a British edition was released by Longman's the following year. Captain Lord's 'guilt' is taken for granted, but on the whole, the book follows the transcripts of the 1912 enquiries very closely. Ironically, the book was serialized in a local Liverpool newspaper, but Captain Lord had neither been impressed by a quick scan through the editions, nor did he notice any references to the *Californian*.

With the success of the book, and following a two hour live adaptation of the book in America by the Kraft Television Theater, a film seemed inevitable, and this was a task allotted to the British J. Arthur Rank Organisation. They allocated a budget of some \$1.7 million for the film, and secured Kenneth More as its top billing artist, portraying 2nd Officer Lightoller. Advance publicity for the film consisted of the customary theatre lobby displays, photographs and pamphlets¹³⁶. This latter item mentioned the *Californian* thus: "The Ship That Watched – Ten miles away, the crew of the cargo ship *Californian* saw the lights of Titanic. They saw her stop -'for safety', they thought, for *Californian* herself had stopped because of field ice ahead. They watched the distress rockets arc into the sky. 'Company signals,' they decided. Her Captain [sic] tried to contact the liner with lamp signals. There was no reply. And so, throughout the night, *Californian* watched, unknowing, the greatest peace-time sea disaster of the century. It was not until dawn that she knew, and then it was too late to help."

The 2 hour long black and white film was released on July 3rd, 1958. At its London première was Walter Lord, William MacQuitty (the producer), and various *Titanic* survivors including 3rd Officer Pitman and 4th Officer Boxhall, the latter of whom had served as a technical advisor to the producers. The film would later win a US Golden Globe award, for the Best English Language Foreign Film. It is still regarded today as the most historically accurate¹³⁷ of the various *Titanic* films.

Captain Lord was oblivious to all this. Attending screenings of films did not seem to accord with his interests. It must therefore have been something of a shock when he opened his weekend quota of his favourite newspapers, *The Sunday Times*, *The Observer* and *The Sunday Express*. For, contained within were reviews of an ambitious black and white British film that featured a sinking Leviathan while another ship watched her vainly sending up rockets. 'The other ship' being the *Californian*, commanded by an aloof and cold Captain, who had expressed more interested in extra sugar in his tea, than in attending to distress rockets being sent aloft later on that day.

Lord endeavoured to act. The next day, and without telling his son, he took the ferry over to Liverpool, and then walked the short distance to Nautilus House, the home of the M.M.S.A., a union of which he been a member without interruption since 1897.

And so it was, that on July 7th, 1958, Stanley Lord entered the office of Leslie Harrison, the General Secretary of the M.M.S.A., and introduced himself.

"I'm Lord, of the *Californian*."

136 See "Titanic Memories – the making of A Night To Remember" by William MacQuitty

137 The only major errors in the film, as regards the *Californian*, are that it depicts Captain Lord tucked up in bed with the lights off; a reference to non-existent passengers on the ship; and the *Californian* watch keepers viewing the Titanic's broadside, whereas from the Titanic's viewpoint, the *Californian's* light (seen, incorrectly, amongst a sea of churning, choppy water) is visible off the bow.