

Chapter 9. “A Guilt-Ridden Incompetent Coward”

1968-1987

Since Beesley's death on February 14th, 1967, his “new and important evidence” could now be included in a re-submitted petition. Harrison had agreed not to include this evidence during Beesley's life; now, he could. Cynics could argue that, with Beesley dead, the method of obtaining this “evidence” could no longer be questioned, or the methods used to extract it. This would prove to be of significant importance in the forthcoming decades.

The second petition was formally delivered to the Board of Trade on March 4th, 1968.

Once again, Lord's navigation is regarded as accurate; there is no mention of drift, or the *Carpathia's* rockets being seen from the *Californian*. Harrison is now under the impression that, when first seen, the ships seen from the *Californian* and *Titanic* were showing their red lights – an utterly untrue statement. There is mention of the timing and frequency of the rockets by *Titanic* crewmen Pitman, Lowe, Bright, Symons and Lightoller, but it is Beesley's evidence that is definitive: “The significance of Mr. Beesley's evidence is that in his view the sending up of distress rockets from the *Titanic* had ceased by about 12.45am.” This time is from Beesley's 1912 book, and relevant sections of it were included in the petition. Harrison considers that the first rocket was fired at 12.35am¹⁸⁷.

So, in ten minutes, the *Titanic* had fired eight rockets and Boxhall et al. had decided that it was no use sending up any more. What Boxhall and Rowe did in the next hour before they were sent away in lifeboats 4 and C respectively is anyone's guess. It also means that their 1912 testimonies were fabrications. After all, they both described sending up rockets until they were ordered to evacuate the *Titanic*. It also meant that Boxhall's description of “the other ship” turning around “slowly” was also wrong. In ten minutes, she had gone from showing her green (or as Harrison would put it, her red) light, to showing her stern light. Without knowing the other ship's exact orientation, due to the fact that navigation and steaming lights covered a range of angles, it is difficult to quantify the rate of revolution, but it is possible that she turned a maximum angle of 112.5° in ten minutes. Hardly a “slow” turn.

It would not be incorrect to say that Harrison would rely on any information, no matter how dubious or bogus in his moral crusade to clear Captain Lord.

The files at the Public Records Office¹⁸⁸ reveal surprisingly little about the internal deliberations of the Board of Trade. The most salient document is dated March 19th and states, “...little, if any, new evidence of importance” had been unearthed, and that the experience of those who investigate casualties show that “evidence in regard to the time of events is frequently unreliable.” However, the memorandum did mention the retardation of clocks and that “this makes comparison of times difficult ... a comparison of times indicate that the times [regarding the firing of rockets] do not appear to vary by more than about 20 minutes.”

The memo concluded “It is interesting to see on page 25 of the petition that Mr. Beesley's book says 'Anybody knows what rockets at sea mean'.”

The petition was, like its predecessor three years previously, rejected, and one feels that

187 “A Titanic Myth” page 171

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there was a sense of *ennui* within the Board. Leslie Harrison writes, “[The President of the Board of Trade, Anthony Crossland's] decision was given to Parliament in a way which clearly indicated the [Board's] intention to do everything possible to sweep the whole *Californian* business under the carpet. Crossland's statement was made in the form of a written reply to a question, on which a minister cannot be pressed to comment in the House of Commons. That question had been tabled by Hugh D. Brown, member of Parliament for Glasgow, Provan, who could not be traced then – or afterwards – as ever having displayed the slightest interest in the *Californian* case. The reply was issued on a Friday afternoon, on the very last day of a session, just as Parliament rose for the long summer recess. As a final dismissive gesture, the Board of Trade's official confirmation of the reply, first noted in press reports, was sent by the way of the normal postal service, which meant that it was not received in the M.M.S.A.'s head office until the following Monday. All too obviously the Board of Trade hoped that the lapse of time before Parliament re-assembled, and pressure of business as the new session began, would ensure that little, if anything, more would be heard of that petition in the House of Commons. It was a measure of the importance attached by the Board of Captain Lord's case that they should feel compelled to employ a Parliamentary tactic rarely used and only in cases where a government department is extremely apprehensive – and usually with good reason – of public reaction to a minister's decision¹⁸⁹.”

Two submissions of a petition, and two rejections. Matters were looking somewhat bleak, and would prove to deteriorate, for, in 1969, a book written by Geoffrey Jules Marcus, entitled “*The Maiden Voyage*” was released.

The book is segmented into various vignettes, covering different elements of the *Titanic* story, and, naturally, the *Californian* incident is described in lascivious detail. The book is readable and superficially seems well researched, but there are items that are simply untrue, and all to Captain Lord's – and his crew's – detriment. Witness: “It is necessary at this stage to emphasize the fact that, despite all that was afterwards said to the contrary by Captain Lord, Evans should have remained on watch [during the night]. The custom of the Marconi Marine service required an operator to remain at his post when anything like emergency conditions prevailed – as they assuredly did on the night of the 14th – for fear of missing an important message. The ice-report which the Master of the *Californian* had just sent to the *Titanic* proves the point. The huge ice-field which had stopped their own ship was a manifest danger to navigation.”

The source of this information comes from the singularly uninformative phrase, “Private information.” A more reliable source may be found in the regulations of the Postmaster-General, which simply states that “Signals of Distress and Admiralty messages will have precedence over all other traffic.” There is nothing that describes the manning of a station during emergency situations. Another section, entitled, “Duration of Service” relates that the actual hours of service at each station will be found...[in the] International Radiotelegraph Bureau.” Manning requirements are not addressed at all. It is possible that regulations specific to the Leyland, or other IMM vessels may have said differently.

Marcus' next paragraph is also questionable. “It has also been suggested that, since [Captain Lord's] engines were stopped, the Master should have shown 'two red lights vertical and no side lights' (for a steamship not under command), which might conceivably have put other ships in the vicinity on the alert.” The source of this is Captain McMillan in *The Journal of Commerce*, March

189 Indeed, the original annotations and footnotes for Harrison's 1986 book remarks that this “tactic” had also been used when Parliament were debating a hugely unpopular rise in the UK Television license fee. Then, as with the M.M.S.A.'s 1968 petition, debate was left till the last minute to prevent any more publicity on the matter before the summer vacation.

16th, 1968. But the actual requirement, quoted in *Knights Modern Seamanship* and *The Rules of the Road*, state that, “A vessel which from any accident is not under command shall carry ... two red lights, in a vertical line one over the other, not less than 6 feet apart, and of such a character as to be visible all around the horizon at a distance of at least 2 miles; and shall by day carry in a vertical line one over the other, not less than 6 feet apart, where they can best be seen, two black balls or shapes, each 2 feet in diameter.” The operative words here are “from any accident.” This regulation should actually have applied to the disabled *Titanic*, and not the *Californian*!

“*The Maiden Voyage*” laboriously takes the reader through Stone and Gibson's watch, the other strange ship, Evans learning of the disaster (no mention of the *Carpathia's* rockets though) and then resumes in London, where Gill is incorrectly described as being in court during the testimony of his crew mates.

The book proceeds in its description of the British Inquiry: “In court, his officers had done their best for Captain Lord. Outside, in the luncheon interval, however, they were a good deal less reticent about the commander's responsibility for what had happened: and presently, in response to the angry reproaches of the wife of one of the *Titanic's* officer's, they frankly admitted that distress signals had been seen that night from the *Californian*: but they said they had been unable to get Captain Lord to bestir himself; in fact they were unmistakably afraid of him.” The 'wife' is obviously Sylvia Lightoller, who has already been discussed. This section of the book particularly roused Leslie Harrison's ire: he remarks that the 'officers' were so 'afraid' of Lord that Groves had the audacity to dispute major points of his commanding officer's evidence, practically labelling Lord as a liar. This is a valid point. The reference to 'fear' of Lord is new, and may have come from Mrs. Lightoller herself, whom Marcus credits as a source in his acknowledgements section. It is of some note that Marcus did not trouble himself mentioning Mrs. Lightoller's demonstrably false statement in the wake of the 1965 petition.

Marcus expresses severe doubt about Captain Lord's performance after the *Carpathia* left for New York, insinuating a half-hearted rescue effort. He writes, “According to the master of the *Californian*, no bodies could be found and after an hour or so he resumed his voyage [to Boston]. It is to be observed that he could not have searched very effectively; for there were in fact hundreds of corpses, drifting to and fro on the face of the waters.”

While it is true that, days afterwards, the White Star line had chartered vessels to recover bodies, these were some distance from the position at which Captain Lord searched. With one exception, no-one reported seeing any bodies from the *Carpathia* and the *Californian*, the exception being Captain Rostron who gave evidence that he only ever saw one body during the rescue. Major Arthur Peuchen was indeed surprised to see not one of these “floating corpses” as described by Marcus.

But, aside from the evidence of the Captains of the *Carpathia* and *Californian*, is there anything else that supports the notion that, by some mechanism of drift, the bodies and wreckage had become decoupled? Indeed, there is. In the *Worcester Telegram* on April 17th, 1912, it was reported that, “16/4/12 -[SS] *Parisian* steamed through much ice looking for survivors. No life rafts or bodies were spotted among the floating wreckage which covered a wide area.”

The SS *Parisian* missed the initial distress call as her wireless operator, Mr. Sutherland, had retired for the night. He picked up the news at about 8am on April 15th, and the *Parisian* turned around, but sadly the *Parisian's* PV is useless to gather timings on this matter. We do not know

when she arrived at the wrecksite, but given the specifics of the ship¹⁹⁰ the *Parisian* probably arrived at the location of the wreckage in the later part of the afternoon. This is consistent with her docking at Halifax, Nova Scotia at 7pm on April 17th. So, less than a day and a half after the *Titanic* foundered, already the bodies and wreckage were no longer drifting in unison.

On other points, Marcus makes staggering errors. Although this book is limited to a discussion of the *Californian* incident, a matter peripheral to this is relevant for Marcus tells the readers that “Incidentally a rather intriguing point has come to light in connection with the inquiries that were made about 'wireless and other messages received' respecting the proximity of ice in the North Atlantic. The owners of the vessel that had sent the warning by Morse lamp to the *Titanic* shortly before the collision, Messrs. Furness, Withy and Company, actually informed the Board of Trade [during their search for vessels that had been in the area of the *Titanic*]: 'We beg to advise you that we had no vessels in the vicinity when the disaster occurred.'; and the acting Master of this vessel, the *Rappahannock*, who had himself sent the warning of the icefield ahead, was never called to give evidence at the Inquiry. The explanation may possibly lie in one of the *Titanic* files at the Board of Trade which are still inaccessible to the historian.'

No such inaccessible files from 1912 existed at the time Marcus wrote these words. 'The explanation' is familiar: poor research. On 11th April, the *Rappahannock* passed through an ice field, well to the north and east of the wreck location. Research¹⁹¹ has shown that the ice warning transmitted by Morse lamp may have occurred on the 13th April, and not the 14th, consistent with a vessel travelling to the east. By the time of the casualty, the *Rappahannock* would have been well away from the *Titanic*.

Concluding his discussion, Marcus tells his readers that the crucial point are the rockets. “The whole matter of discrepancies regarding bearings and timings, which was perfectly well known at the time of the disaster, pales into insignificance compared with the damning evidence of the distress signals ... if one endeavours conscientiously to follow the deeply involved and complicated reasoning of the pamphlet published by the M.M.S.A., one's head begins to reel. And small wonder. After all, it is only necessary to study the logs of the vessels engaged in certain naval operations of the past to realize how little dependence can sometimes be placed on the accuracy of times, distances and bearings. If ever there was a case of not seeing the wood for trees, of failing to draw the inescapable conclusions from the evidence, of rejecting the essential for the inessential, we have it here. The author of [the 1965 and 1968 petitions] ought to be a Don ... To clear Captain Lord of the heavy charges brought against him many people would have to be proved wrong. That, indeed, is what has been averred. The Official Inquiries were wrong, declare the Lordites¹⁹², so were the Hydrographer of the Navy Department and his staff, so was Captain Rostron, so were Lightoller, Boxhall and Beesley, so was the 3rd Officer of the *Californian*, the Apprentice Gibson, and Gill, the donkeyman and also were Bisset and the other officers of the *Carpathia*. Everyone, it would appear, is out of step but the Master of the *Californian* ...”

This is absurd. Of course the Lordites dispute the findings of the 1912 Inquiries. The US Naval Department, under the command of Captain Knapp, simply presented a hypothesis that the *Californian* was closer to the *Titanic* than had been given in evidence; this is not 'proof'. Captain Rostron was indeed mistaken about the 'splendid' SOS location he had driven his ship towards, although this was indeed misrepresented by Harrison and the M.M.S.A. to push the *Titanic*

190 See <http://www.TitanicInquiry.org/USInq/AmInq17KnappMemo03.php>

191 See <http://users.senet.com.au/~gittins/rappahannock.html>

192 'Lordites' is the term used to describe those sympathetic to Captain Lord's plight; 'Anti-Lordites' take the opposing stance.

wrecksite as far south as possible from Lord et al. Lightoller, although critical of Lord in his autobiography, was full of support in his 1912 letters. Boxhall's testimony actually supports the pro-Lord cause, describing a moving ship. Beesley's book had helped to shape the 1968 petition. And while it is true that aspects of the evidence of Gibson, Groves and Gill, and Bisset's book, did influence public opinion in a way damaging to Lord, there is no mention of what the "other officers of the *Carpathia*" had seen or done. Indeed, Bisset's early sighting of the *Californian* in "*Tramps and Ladies*" is nowhere to be found. Having constructed a 'straw man', Marcus now wastes no time in demolishing it with specious logic.

Regarding a suggestion in a periodical about his officers being somewhat nervous of Captain Lord (an assertion given without proof), Marcus has this to say, "There is always a natural inclination to keep on the right side of an autocratic and overbearing master; and if the Master in question were not both autocratic and overbearing it is to be surmised that his photographs, as well as the evidence, do him a grave injustice. It is possible that Captain Lord never encouraged his subordinates to speak their minds freely and openly," and Marcus also tells the reader that "what Stone would sometimes say in private was very different from what Stone said in public." And no source, or evidence for any of these statements is offered; this latter observation may come from another of his 'acknowledgements', a certain Ivan Thompson.



Illustration 34: Captain Lord on his way to the British Investigation. This is the photograph upon which Marcus based his character assessment.