

Down with the Old Canoe: A Cultural History of the Titanic Disaster. STEVEN BIEL. New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997, 300 p. ISBN 0-393-31676-9 (pbk).

This book is not about the sinking of R.M.S. *Titanic*. For those who wish to review the events of 14–15 April 1912, I recommend Walter Lord's 1955 classic *A Night to Remember* and the beautifully illustrated and well-documented *Titanic: An Illustrated History* (1992). For those who prefer their information in visual form, the best English-language cinematic versions continue to be the 1958 British rendition of Walter Lord's book and the 1992 IMAX film, *Titanica*. James Cameron's 1997 film, *Titanic*, deserves special mention for its faithful attention to detail and its graphic rendering of the "weak steel and rivets" thesis. Of course, by now, the *Titanic* story also includes its discovery and the veritable *Titanic* "industry." For those who are captivated by the continuing power of this event, or for those who wish to understand some of the meanings which the sinking of the *Titanic* came to represent, I can now recommend Biel's *Down with the Old Canoe*.

This book belongs to a growing number of works in the field of history and memory and the role of commemoration and remembering within society. Biel illustrates the shifting meanings of the *Titanic* and the role of remembering by dividing the book into three parts: 1) an examination of the sinking within the context of contemporary American events (selected by Biel); 2) a description of the various attempts to immortalize or dramatize the disaster in literature, song, film, and through the work of historical societies; and 3) a discussion of the meaning of the discovery of the wreck in 1985.

Biel situates the sinking of the *Titanic* not within the history of passenger liners or the fortunes of the White Star Line or even the life of the vessel itself, but in contemporary American history, particularly with reference to the history of the social left. Biel maintains that the disaster was not intrinsically meaningful at all: "the *Titanic* seared itself into American memory not because it was timeless but because it was timely" (pg. 132). The *Titanic*'s demise in the spring of 1912, then, in Biel's interpretation, shares its contemporary stage with Emma Goldman and the plight of the International Workers of the World in San Francisco, lynch mobs in the American south, and the suffragette movement in the northeast. With these as his reference points, Biel examines the meanings made of the *Titanic* at the time of the shipwreck and how different groups adapted these meanings for their own use. Groups on all sides of the volatile issues of gender, class, religion, and race all found in the *Titanic* lessons and judgements to bolster their causes. Anti-suffragettes emphasized the heroic chivalry of the first-class men who stood by the law of the sea, "women and children first," while the suffragettes railed against the lack of emancipation inherent in the very law itself. Depending upon one's perspective, God either saved those who were most able to learn from the

disaster or imposed his moral judgement against greed and luxury. Most of the American labour movement blamed the disaster on “capitalist business” though there were those elements that chose to celebrate the noble workers who went down with the ship.

Not content to look at the sinking of the *Titanic* as an historical event, Biel also catalogues the extensive re-creations and rememberings of the event in American popular culture. His list of folk and blues treatments of the sinking is a wonderful look at how the African-American community found meaning in an event in which there were no historical black characters. In fact, the title of the book derives from a South Carolina song written almost twenty-five years after the sinking:

Many passengers and her crew
went down with the old canoe ...
This great ship was built by man
that is why she could not stand
an iceberg ripped her side
and he cut down all her pride
they found the hand of God was in it all.

Perhaps the best part of the book is the explanation of the sequence of events which surrounded the publication of Walter Lord’s *A Night to Remember* in 1955, placing the subsequent British and American cinematic treatment of the sinking within the context of the anxiety of the Cold War era. His argument that the message of technological hubris struck a cord with Americans living in the atomic age is an interesting proposal regarding why this story was ready to be reborn in the 1950s. Equally compelling is his treatment of the various expeditions to find the wreck in the 1980s, including the successful 1985 expedition led by Robert Ballard. Biel’s interpretation of Ballard as a masculine Reaganite cowboy may be too much for some readers, but they would do well to consider what the effect might have been if another nation had captured the glory of finding the wreck.

Less satisfactory, however, are the chapters on the *Titanic* “enthusiasts” or “buffs.” Biel’s admiration and grudging respect for people who make the *Titanic* their vocation is clear, but he cannot provide a framework for why these people spend so much of their lives collecting memorabilia or providing information on the *Titanic* to others.

Just as there was “something for everyone” in the sinking of the *Titanic*, so too will archivists find much to ponder at various points. The book raises some interesting questions about appraisal theory, acquisition policy, the benefits of “total archives,” and the role of “enthusiasts” as creators and users of archives. Biel’s creation of various meanings of the *Titanic* are a useful tonic to archivists now accustomed to thinking of records solely as “evidence of

transactions.” The book relies heavily on published sources such as newspapers, sermons, and magazines for much of its material, but archivists who deal with non-textual records will be pleased with Biel’s wide-ranging use of photographs, oral history, folk songs, and ephemera such as postcards and menus as documentary evidence. For those who share Biel’s interest in “Titanica,” the footnotes alone are worth the price of the book. For those whose interests include reference and public programming, Biel’s portrayal of *Titanic* enthusiasts who do solid research and willingly assist like-minded researchers provides a positive spin on a class of researcher often considered to be the scourge of the reference desk.

While Biel does an excellent job of explaining the meanings which he has uncovered within the context he has defined (women, class, race, and labour), the book is less adroit at uncovering the “why” of our fascination with this particular event. Biel’s insistence on creating a “timely” context in which to reflect the events of 1912 denies the fact that there are elements of timeless, universal themes such as man versus nature, faith in technology, and epic sadness inherent in the story. In addition, Biel’s interpretation of the wealth of documentary material might have benefited from some readings in material culture – a field of scholarship that has long grappled with the issue of the power of the artifact.

More seriously, Biel’s narrow definition of culture as American popular culture denies the *Titanic* its place within other contexts, most notably that of the world of the passenger liner trade or maritime disasters in general. For in some ways, the story of the sinking of the *Titanic* (and our enduring fascination with it) is merely the most famous saga in an international lineage of maritime disasters, from the capsizing of the Swedish ship *Vasa* (also on her maiden voyage) and the crushing of Franklin’s *Erebus* and *Terror* in the Arctic ice, to the loss by collision of the Italian passenger liner, *Andrea Doria*. In the absence of other contexts and the acknowledgement that the events of 1912 speak to universal questions about the human condition, American popular culture becomes a poor mirror in which to reflect such a momentous event.

Still, this book provides an accessible entrée into the world of the shifting interpretations of history and the social role of collective memory without much of the methodological baggage that often accompanies works in this field. Archivists whose shelves lack a work that examines the roles and meanings of popular culture would do well to have this one to round out their collections.

Ann Martin

National Archives of Canada