

Bob Chaulk. *Atlantic's Last Stop: Courage, Folly, and Lies in the White Star Line's Worst Disaster Before Titanic*. Halifax, N.S.: Nimbus Publishing, www.nimbus.ca, 2021. 266 pp., illustrations, appendices, notes. CDN \$29.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-77471-010-4.

The dramatic wreck of the modern and successful White Star Liner *Atlantic* in April 1873 was the worst in the history of North Atlantic steamers until the sinking of *Titanic* in 1912, but it has failed to attract the interest and scrutiny of researchers, writers, and filmmakers given to the latter disaster. Two of the three volumes in the last half-century examining the story of SS *Atlantic* are both from the pen of Halifax-based historian and diver Bob Chaulk. The first book, *S.S. Atlantic. The White Star Line's First Disaster at Sea*, co-written with Greg Cochkanoff, was favourably reviewed in *The Northern Mariner* in 2010. As the two books cover the same incident, one might wonder why (aside from the earlier book being out of print) a second was warranted.

Although *Atlantic's Last Stop* does, as one might expect, overlap on the earlier volume, there is enough new material and a shift in focus to make this volume an interesting, readable, and useful addition to the literature. Both books give very good coverage of the context of the competitive North Atlantic steamship business and the often-overlooked importance of the immigrant trade. As well, both books make use of the actual events of the wreck, gleaned, primarily from newspaper accounts and interviews of surviving passengers and crew and from rescuers, to tell the same story of inattention and mismanagement of the vessel which led to it being dangerously off-course as it approached port.

One difference between the two volumes is the inclusion of extensive information from a British enquiry held after the event which supplements a somewhat cursory official inquiry in Halifax. The British hearings looked specifically at the design of the vessel and the allegations of a shortage of coal aboard which led to *Atlantic's* destination being tragically changed from New York to Halifax, a port with which the officers of the ship had no experience. Unfortunately, Chaulk incorrectly identifies this as a report of the Canadian House of Commons rather than of the parliament of the United Kingdom.

While the story of the wreck is gripping, Chaulk further explores what transpired after *Atlantic* crashed into the granite of the Nova Scotia shore. The response of the fisherfolk from isolated houses and tiny villages of the Prospect area resulted in a large proportion of those who survived the immediate aftermath of the wreck being rescued from surf-bound rocks and the remains of *Atlantic* as it quickly broke up. The design of the ship had placed accommodation for women and families with children in the stern of the vessel which rapidly filled with water and sank. Not a single one of the 184 women aboard could be rescued and only one of the 117 children survived. While confusion in records makes

an exact count impossible, after carefully assessing conflicting documentation, Chaulk concludes that there were 952 passengers and crew aboard the ship and that about 550, more than half, were lost. In the aftermath of the wreck, the search by the media and the public for heroes centred on Rev. William J. Ancient, who was lauded for his efforts to remove the last of the survivors clinging to the shrouds and masts of the vessel as it finally broke up. The author notes, however, that this dramatic rescue of one or two individuals was lauded, while the work of the boat crews from the nearby hamlets in saving hundreds of survivors was almost completely ignored.

One aspect of the wreck seldom mentioned in shipwreck narratives, the salvage of the valuable cargo, is covered in some detail in this volume. In addition to the recovery of flotsam from the wreck as it went to pieces, salvage companies engaged by the insurers used divers to scour the bottom and the hulk for anything that could be raised. When this harvest began to slow, the wreck was blown up to provide access to the holds, even though there were scores of bodies still trapped in the ship. Bodies that could be recovered were added to those thrown up by the sea or brought ashore by the fishermen searching for those still living. While a few bodies were dispatched to families in the United States or the United Kingdom, more than 425 bodies, most unidentified, were buried in two mass graves in communities near the wreck site.

Unlike the *Titanic* disaster, which led to significant changes in communication and life-saving requirements for trans-Atlantic passenger vessels, there seems to have been a willful decision at all levels to continue business as usual for the major firms engaged in the passenger trade in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. While *Atlantic's* story may have served as a cautionary tale for liner officers and the companies involved there were no new legislative or regulatory demands placed on those companies. In an epilogue, Chaulk attempts to link the *Atlantic* wreck to the need for a lightship in the Halifax approaches but also concedes that this was a want that had been known for some time and that an order for a lightship had been placed by the Canadian government four months before the disaster and so is not a result but a coincidence.

Despite an unfortunate title which suggests that the book is about a suburban metro line, *Atlantic's Last Stop* is a well-written and interesting story of an important aspect of Atlantic Canada's maritime history. A cut above many shipwreck narratives, Chaulk manages to combine the usual personal stories of the passengers and members of the crew with insightful analysis of the disaster – scrutinizing both the how and why of the event, and the reasons why it has been forgotten for much of the past century and a half.

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