

It was approaching 2:00 am on April 15th, 1912.

Nearly all of *Titanic*'s lifeboats had been launched from the foundering vessel, which would shortly make her final plunge.

Chief Officer Henry Wilde, once described by Officer Lightoller as "a big, powerful chap", was assisting in the launch of Collapsible C, one of the last boats to be successfully launched from the ship.

He approached a tall, willowy man dressed in striped pajamas, slippers, and an overcoat, who had been assisting passengers into the boats.

"There are no more women on board the ship," he said.

The man in his pajamas appeared to shuffle back, away from the Englehardt style collapsible boat. He and Officer Wilde exchanged some words. Then, quite suddenly, Officer Wilde bundled the man up into his great arms, threw him into the lifeboat, and began lowering away. It would be the last time either of them would lay eyes on one another. Officer Wilde would be dead within the hour.

Once Collapsible C was lowered into the water, J. Bruce Ismay, dressed only in his nightclothes and a coat, began assisting with the rowing.

With his back to the dying ship, the crown jewel of the White Star Line, Ismay pulled away. Never looking back, he pulled away. The sounds of explosions, of decks breaking apart and collapsing, lapped at his backside. The screams of the dying raked at the nape of his neck. He never turned around. To do so, he would have lost cadence with the other rowers. So he kept at his work: pulling away, pulling away, pulling away...

And so, to J. Bruce Ismay, *Titanic*'s final breaths were experienced as a horrifying soundscape. He did not see her lights flicker out, nor did he see her stern rise like a great finger pointing at the sky. The Ship of Dreams, now an incomprehensible nightmare, shuddered and moaned, just out of his periphery.

He kept pulling away.

These desperate, chaotic, traumatizing few minutes would come to define the rest of his life.

He never looked back. He kept pulling away...

My name is Amanda Hootman, and in this episode I want to take a closer look at Joseph Bruce Ismay. Who was he? How responsible was he, if at all, for the great loss of life aboard *Titanic*? And what happened to him, "after *Titanic*"?

Collapsible C reached *Carpathia* at about 5:45 am.

Among those saved with Bruce Ismay were several of the Lebanese Third Class families who survived the sinking, including the Nakids, the Yusefs, and the Baqlinis, as well as 9 year old Frank Goldsmith Jr. and his mother, Emily. The Goldsmiths were a British family that were emigrating to join Emily's family in the United States. Frank Sr. never made it to a lifeboat. It took little Frank years to come to terms with the fact that his father was never coming to join them in their new home in Detroit, Michigan. Even as a young man, he half expected his father to suddenly walk through the front door one day: "hello, Frankie."

Frank and Emily settled near Detroit's Navin Field, home of the Detroit Tigers. Every time the crowd cheered for a home run, Frank was reminded of the screams of the dying in the water on April 15, 1912. That roar of sound. Like screaming locusts. When he grew up and became a father himself, he never took his children to baseball games.

When Bruce Ismay boarded Collapsible C, he was under the impression that the 30 or so women and children in his boat were the last that had been on the ship. When he learned that *Titanic* went down with women still aboard, he was nearly catatonic with grief and shame.

Ismay climbed the Jacob's ladder to *Carpathia*'s boat deck. Silently, he watched the tragedy unfolding before him. Survivors tearfully reunited with loved ones... or, more often than not, waiting for a reunion that never came. He edged slowly away from the railing of the decks until his back was pressed up against *Carpathia*'s bulkheads. Someone asked if he would like to go into the saloon for some soup or a drink. He refused. Again, he was implored to go have a hot meal and he responded that he would rather not. He would rather be left alone in some quiet room.

The ship's chief surgeon, Francis McGee, led Ismay to his own quarters.

Not long after, Dr. McGee brought in another survivor, 17-year old Jack Thayer. Jack had leapt from *Titanic* in her final moments and spent the night clinging to the overturned Collapsible B. Jack's father, First Class passenger John Thayer II, perished in the sinking. The Thayers had been fairly well acquainted with Bruce Ismay while aboard *Titanic* and Dr. McGee hoped that a familiar face like Jack's might encourage Ismay to start talking again.

It didn't.

Jack later described Ismay as being seated on his bunk, still in his pajamas, staring straight ahead and shaking like a leaf. His hair, once black with streaks of grey, had turned completely white.

As Jack spoke to him, desperately trying to bring about any response, Ismay continued to look ahead with a fixed stare. He was still staring, utterly inert, when Jack left the room.

Ismay spent the journey to New York sequestered in the Doctor's cabin and sedated with heavy doses of either opium or laudanum. When he did eat, it was only of a little consommé, and when he did speak, it was almost entirely of his singular new obsession: that he should have gone down with the ship.

J. Bruce Ismay had been the chairman and managing director of the White Star Line and the president of its parent company, the International Mercantile Marine. Officially, he was aboard *Titanic* as a passenger, not as her shipowner, and certainly not as a member of her crew. But he was the highest ranking White Star employee to survive the disaster. And that would be his undoing.

Joseph Bruce Ismay - Bruce - came from a long line of shipowners and shipbuilders, stretching back to the 18th century.

Bruce's father, Thomas Henry Ismay, had been perhaps the greatest shipowner of Victorian England. Young Thomas grew up in the early years following Victoria's accession, carving model boats with a pen knife, and dreaming of the day that all ships would resemble the newest fleets of iron built ships. By the time he was 30, Thomas was a director of the National Line and purchased ownership of the then-failing White Star Line. Under Thomas Ismay's leadership, White Star developed its years' long partnership with Harland & Wolfe shipbuilders, and he saw to the company's association with luxury and comfort for all of its passengers.

Upon hearing of complaints among steerage passengers on White Star's transatlantic shipping routes in 1872, Thomas Ismay arranged for one of his own members of staff to travel steerage to New York aboard the SS *Oceanic*, as a sort of undercover boss situation. Once he received the final report of the less-than-ideal conditions in *Oceanic*'s cheapest accommodations, Thomas and his partners at Ismay, Imrie & Co., overhauled White Stars staterooms and amenities, especially for its steerage passengers. Which also translated to soaring profits for White Star Line, as more than 12 million people relocated to the United States from abroad from 1870 to 1900 alone, the vast majority of them through New York. Working class immigrant families could now make the transatlantic journey in relative comfort – it's no wonder they chose White Star.

As Victoria entered her Golden Jubilee, and Thomas Ismay neared the age of 50, he decided to mark the Queen's Jubilee by establishing a pension fund for Liverpool's seamen. He established the fund with an initial contribution of £20,000 (around £2 million in today's Stirling) from which Liverpool's older and disabled sailors could withdraw an annual pension of about £20 (about £2,300 in today's money). Not the biggest sum in the world, but probably a significant gesture to a disabled sailor in 1887.

Shortly after Thomas's death in 1899, White Star Line was absorbed into the International Mercantile Marine: JP Morgan's attempt at monopolizing the shipping industry. And Thomas's son, Bruce was made chairman.

Bruce had been a terribly sensitive, shy lad his entire life. When he was only 9, his older sister, Mary, with whom he was very close, contracted scarlet fever and died. Not long after that, his younger brother, Henry, also passed away, and Bruce struggled to recover from the loss of his siblings.

Though his parents were very devoted to one another and Thomas's financial success meant that Bruce and his surviving siblings would grow up never wanting for anything, Bruce seemed to wilt somewhat under the stern discipline of a Victorian father.

In *Understanding J. Bruce Ismay*, Clifford Ismay recalls an anecdote of Bruce taking his father's favorite horse out riding one night along the River Dee without asking permission. At some point during this ride, the horse stumbled on the sand and broke its leg. Somewhat understandably furious now that he had no choice but to euthanize his favorite horse, Thomas chewed Bruce out for borrowing a horse without his permission. Bruce was so horrified by the entire situation that he rarely ever rode again.

He seemed to be, at all times, terribly affected by a deep-seated sense of shame and insecurity. Perhaps he was afraid of disappointing his well-respected and exacting father with whom he often butted heads. Where Thomas would carefully consider every angle of a problem before acting, the quick-thinking and impulsive Bruce would act immediately – often to Thomas's frustration and chagrin.

At some point during his school days, Bruce tried to counteract his innate shyness by putting on a defensive, brusque façade, which caused him to be disliked by most of his peers, save for those who knew him well. Childhood and school days were a lonely period for Bruce.

As a young man, he began his apprenticeship at White Star Line. On his first day, Bruce hung his coat and hat up next to his father's in Thomas's office, just as he always had when visiting the White Star offices, many times before. But now he was there as an employee, not Thomas's son and guest. Thomas called in a clerk and said "please inform the new office boy that he is not to leave his coat and hat laying about in my office." Which – listen, we all get what you're trying to do here. You want to make it crystal clear that *your* little nepo baby isn't gonna have any special privileges in the office. But Bruce was utterly humiliated in front of his new co-workers. Thomas was a bit of an asshole, Bruce took everything a little too personally. This was a terrible combination of personalities. The result was J. Bruce Ismay growing from an insecure and anxious little boy into an insecure and neurotic young man with a massive inferiority complex.

He also just grew into a massive man. He was 6'4, and an athlete - allegedly an excellent tennis player - even on that late 19th century nutrition plan.

Between the ages of 21 and 23, he jettisoned off on a Grand Tour of sorts, mostly spending his time in Australia and East Asia, and shortly after his return to England, he left once again for New York, where he would take a position at White Star's New York office.

Getting out from under Thomas's thumb was one of the best things to happen to Bruce and, it seems, one of the best things to happen to Bruce's relationship with his parents. He flourished in New York, as a young man out on his own for the first time.

In New York he would meet two very important people: his future wife, Julia Florence Schieffelin, and William Randolph Hearst.

Hearst moved in New York's elite social circles. The same ones that Bruce quickly fell into when he moved to the United States. Circles that included Harold Sanderson, a future head of the White Star Line, and father of the man who would go on to marry Bruce's daughter, Evelyn.

After making their brief acquaintance, Hearst asked Bruce to go into business with him. Bruce declined citing his distaste for Hearst's brand of "yellow journalism". Hearst took the slight very personally.

Allegedly, following the sinking, the Hearst-owned newspapers were the most critical of J. Bruce Ismay, coining the nickname "The Coward of *Titanic*" and describing him as "yellow livered". I couldn't find any contemporary articles specifically from Hearst papers to compare to other contemporary headlines, so I can't personally confirm that this truism is even true.

But we do know that most of the press had it out for Bruce in the aftermath of the sinking, with many surviving papers featuring headlines that highlighted the inconvenient fact of his survival. He was an easy target - a millionaire, a man, and a high ranking White Star employee. He also hadn't made any friends in the media in the years leading up to the disaster.

He was as unpopular with the press as he had been with his school peers. He wasn't a terribly eloquent speaker, and so rarely gave interviews. Before 1912, when asked for comment, he would annoyingly remind the reporters that White Star Line had a publicity department. This hesitance to be forthright made him, in the eyes of the press, first a pain and later an enemy.

In early 1887, J. Bruce Ismay met Florence Schieffelin, while staying with a friend at their weekend home in Long Island. Florence, the daughter of a high powered lawyer and a mainstay of New York high society, boasted the nickname "The Belle of New York". She was beautiful and bright and Bruce fell for her instantly. Naturally, he put her off at their first acquaintance with the arrogant, ostentatious affect that still lingered from his school days. But eventually Florence's opinion of Bruce softened, and the pair began spending increasing time with one another.

On Thanksgiving, Bruce asked Florence to marry him, and they were wed by December of the following year. Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Bruce Ismay spent their first Christmas at Bruce's family home in the North of England, where Bruce's sisters - raised to adhere to Victorian ideals of femininity - were utterly besotted with their lively chatterbox of an American sister-in-law.

A little over a year after their marriage, Florence gave birth to their first child, a daughter named Margaret. And in April of 1891, Florence and Bruce welcomed their son, Henry into the world.

Around this same time, the Ismays were making plans to move back to England. Thomas had offered to make Bruce and his younger brother, James, partners at his firm, Ismay, Imrie & Co., and to place Bruce as its head. And so, in September of 1891, the family boarded a ship bound for England.

Little Henry had been terribly ill in the lead up to the journey, but the family's doctor in New York thought that the sea air on the transatlantic journey might help the five month old. But he grew weaker still.

When the family arrived on British soil and Thomas and Margaret Ismay saw the condition of their grandson, they telephoned a doctor immediately. But it was no use. The infant Henry passed away on the morning of October 1, 1891.

Bruce never quite recovered from the loss. As a child himself, he'd lost his two closest siblings, and now he'd lost a child of his own. For the rest of his life, Bruce allegedly kept his distance from children, including his own. He even went so far as to build an entire wing of his home, Sandheys, to sequester the later children Florence would bear him in.

In 1899, Thomas Ismay passed away, and the following year Bruce's youngest brother, Charles, married Florence's younger sister, Constance. Change was on the wind.

In 1901, Bruce's brother James quietly retired from the family business, Ismay, Imrie & Co, followed quickly by partners William Imrie and William Samuel Graves. This left Bruce and Harold Sanderson in sole charge of the company, and White Star Line. Seizing upon this, John Pierpont Morgan finalized his plans to buy the majority shares of White Star's parent company, Oceanic Steam Navigation Company.

JP Morgan was like the anti-William Alden Smith. He made his career monopolizing and exploiting American railroads and became a millionaire in the process. Now, he wished to do the same with shipping companies.

The sale of 75 percent of the shares of the Oceanic Steam Navigation company was completed in 1902. Thomas's widow, Margaret, commented on the sale in her diary:

"This ends the White Star Line in which so much interest, thought and care was bestowed and which was my dearest one's life's work."

White Star Line became one of the chief operating companies under JP Morgan's new conglomerate, the International Mercantile Marine, and Bruce was offered the job of managing director and then president of this remnant of his father's "life's work."

Legend has it that the decision to build the *Olympic* class liners was made over one fateful dinner in 1907, at the home of Lord William Pirrie. Lord Pirrie was the chairman of Harland & Wolff shipbuilders. Over the course of this fabled (and perhaps apocryphal) evening, as Bruce and Florence chatted and dined with Lord Pirrie and his wife, Margaret, the two men formulated White Star Line's response to the Cunard Line's newest ships, the *Lusitania* and the *Mauretania*. Lord Pirrie's nephew, Thomas Andrews, would be brought in to design this new class of ships, which would be unrivaled in terms of luxury.

The keel for *Olympic* would be laid in December of 1908, and the keel for *Titanic* was laid a few short months later. The sister ships were constructed and completed nearly as twins. Construction on *Olympic* was completed by the end of 1910 and she completed her sea trials at the end of May 1911, departing for her maiden voyage the following month. *Titanic* completed her sea trials by April 2, 1912, and was ready for her maiden voyage just a few short days later, on April 10th.

J. Bruce Ismay occasionally accompanied White Star's ships on their maiden voyages, as was the case with *Titanic*. Florence and their four children, however, would not accompany him, choosing to stay in England and enjoy their Easter holiday.

Bruce took the First Class parlor suite that was originally intended for JP Morgan. The two most expensive parlor suites, the "Deluxe Parlor Suites", were the most luxurious accommodations on the ship and featured two expansive private promenade decks. If you've seen the 1997 film, Rose and Ruth Dewitt-Bukater and Cal stayed in a Deluxe Parlor Suite. That really distressing tea scene where Cal slaps Rose happens on the private promenade.

JP Morgan canceled his plans to travel aboard *Titanic*'s maiden voyage due to a change in French export laws. Basically, France was trying to limit how much art wealthy Americans could take back to the United States, so JP Morgan had to take an unexpected trip back to Paris to ensure that all of the expensive souvenirs he bought on his European vacation got out of the country before the law went into effect. So, JP Morgan canceled his fancy passage and J. Bruce Ismay got an upgrade.

The US Inquiry into the sinking of the *Titanic* concluded that while J. Bruce Ismay did not explicitly order the captain to increase her speed, his presence and Thomas Andrews' presence on board may have influenced Captain EJ Smith to drive the ship faster than he otherwise would have. At the Limitation of Liability hearings held in New York in late 1913, First Class passenger Elizabeth L. Lines claimed to overhear a conversation between Captain Smith and Bruce Ismay, wherein Bruce seemed to urge the Captain to increase speed, allegedly saying "we will beat the *Olympic* and get in to New York on Tuesday".

But in the days leading up to *Titanic*'s launch there had been a coal strike, and when she left Belfast the ship was carrying only about 6,000 tons of coal, which was considered to be just enough coal to make her transatlantic crossing a few days later. To exacerbate this coal shortage, a small coal fire broke out while she was en route from Belfast to Southampton. Coal

fires were not uncommon on ships at the time, but given the shortage, it's likely that if Bruce Ismay had any opinion at all on the speed of the ship, that opinion was directly related to conservation of the coal supply.

I feel a complicated way about the Limitation of Liability hearings. On the one hand, they were White Star Line's attempt to cap payouts to survivors and victims' families at around \$92,000 total – a sum equivalent to the scrap value of the salvaged lifeboats and paid fares aboard a ship that was sitting at the bottom of the Atlantic and was insured for \$5 million. If White Star was found responsible for the sinking, they'd have to pony up more compensation for the victims. But under limitation of liability laws at the time, the only way to prove that White Star was at fault was to prove that a White Star employee - and not a member of the ship's crew - was liable. This essentially meant Ismay's head *had* to be the one on the chopping block to get any justice for the victims. And there is just no evidence that J. Bruce Ismay did anything that led to the events of April 14th and April 15th, 1912.

During her cross-examination, it was revealed that Elizabeth Lines couldn't be sure that the men she claimed to hear talking about "beating the *Olympic*" were even Captain Smith and Bruce Ismay. When asked if either man was bearded, mustachioed, or clean shaven, she couldn't say. When asked about how tall the man she identified as Bruce Ismay was, she said she couldn't say. When asked what color his hair was, she said she couldn't say. When asked if he was bald or even had hair, she still said she couldn't say. Once again, the actual man was 6'4" with a nice, thick head of salt and pepper hair and a big handlebar mustache. When asked again how tall he was, Elizabeth Lines replied "Ordinary height, I should say." The "ordinary height" for men in 1912 was about 5' 8".

Again, my feelings are complicated. White Star Line is ultimately the villain here and Ismay, as the face of the company, is complicit in cheating so many victims out of just compensation after the fact. But I also want to defend him from accusations of causing or contributing to the disaster or that he behaved with cowardice at any point during the evacuation because those claims simply don't stand up to scrutiny. Even the (poorly-aged) Edwardian expectation that he failed to lay down his life raises some questions... that he was one of only a few passengers who never donned a lifebelt that night, and that, in official testimony, Officer Lightoller described him as being "bundled up" into a lifeboat by Chief Officer Wilde seem to imply that J. Bruce Ismay actually had every intention of going down with the ship. It's impossible to really ever know. What we do know is that Bruce expressed a deep sense of guilt and shock following the sinking, and that after the official inquiries he refused to ever speak of *Titanic* again.

Before his ill-fated journey aboard *Titanic*, J. Bruce Ismay had been negotiating his retirement from White Star Line. Following the sinking, he stuck around long enough to oversee the massive overhauls to White Star's fleet - safety improvements that included the addition of davits that could hold more lifeboats and the construction of more watertight doors. Bruce officially retired from the presidency of IMM and thereby his position as chairman of White Star on June 30, 1913.

After retirement, Bruce and Florence purchased a lodge, Costelloe, sight unseen, in Casla, Ireland, a quiet village on the River Cashla in County Galway. Costelloe was intended to be a summer home, but the Ismays also often spent Christmases there, preferring it to the hustle and bustle of their main residence in Mayfair. The first Costelloe Lodge burnt down in 1922 during the Irish Civil War, and a new one was built in 1925.

Bruce and Florence loved the community in the small fishing village, and Florence would make annual visits to the national school, leaving boxes of sweets in each classroom for each of the school children.

By 1932, Bruce's health was beginning to fail. He began experiencing pains in his legs that ultimately led to his needing to have the lower part of his right leg completely amputated. Newly disabled and unable to adequately care for himself, Bruce asked his former butler, John Smith, if he would return to service from retirement and John obliged.

It was John who discovered Bruce, on the evening of October 14th, 1937, unconscious in his armchair after suffering a massive stroke. It was John who moved Bruce from the chair to his bed, in which he would remain for the next three days, without ever regaining consciousness. Florence sat at Bruce's bedside until he slipped away around midday on October 17th.

Bruce never spoke of *Titanic* in the 25 years following the disaster. Florence banned any mention of the topic in Bruce's presence. But on the occasion of Bruce's final Christmas, in 1936, he suddenly broke his quarter century of silence. Upon learning that his grandfather had once worked in the shipping industry, one of Bruce's grandsons asked him if he'd ever been shipwrecked. One can imagine a chill settling into the room, the adults tense and disquieted by such an innocent yet painful question. And then J. Bruce Ismay replied: "Yes, I was once in a ship which was believed to be unsinkable."

"After *Titanic*" is a podcast by Bash Back Productions. Written, recorded, and edited by Amanda Hootman. Music by Neilly Farrell. Artwork by Paul Scott Canavan. Full cast list, transcripts and sources are available on [aftertitanic.com](https://aftertitanic.com). "After *Titanic*" is supported by our generous Indiegogo backers and patrons. Help support the podcast by heading to [Patreon.com/AfterTitanic](https://Patreon.com/AfterTitanic) where you'll get exclusive access to our Discord server, and join an entire community of fellow Titanophiles to hang out with between episodes. I've been your host, Amanda Hootman. Thanks for listening.

*Understanding J. Bruce Ismay*, Clifford Ismay, The History Press, 2022.

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