

“...practically unsinkable...”

CHAPTER 1

Birth of a Dream

Transatlantic passenger travel burgeoned in the mid-1860s. Much of this was the result of the westward expansion to the Great Plains and beyond, which in turn prompted the United States government to offer almost unlimited freedom to immigrate to America. In order to escape war, poverty and religious persecution, well over one million immigrants were entering the United States every year from European countries.

The only practical way to cross the North Atlantic in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries, before the invention of the airplane, was to travel by steamship. There were few considerations a passenger had to make in deciding which ship to take: cost, speed or luxury, (or a combination of all three).



In 1867 British shipping line owner Thomas H. Ismay purchased the White Star Line, a fleet of sailing vessels providing service to the Australian emigrant trade. Ismay believed there were more profits to be made servicing the business and emigrant trade from Europe to North America after the American Civil War than there was serving Australia.

Financing for Ismay's plans was guaranteed by financier Gustav Schwabe, whose nephew, Gustav Wolff, was part owner of a shipbuilding company. Ismay could have the financing he needed as long as his ships continued to be built at a shipyard owned by Wolff.



Thomas Ismay reorganized the White Star Line into a new company called the Oceanic Steam Navigation Company but he retained the White Star Line name.

There were dozens of steamship lines providing transatlantic passenger service and each steamship company had its own marketing angle. White Star Line advertised that their ships would be both fast and far more luxurious than any other ship in service. However, when balancing the two demands, White Star Line always built its ships for luxury over speed.



The average transatlantic voyage took about six- and one-half days to complete at 22 knots (or just over 25 miles per hour.) A ship steaming at 25 knots reduced the trip by almost a full day, which theoretically allowed for a faster turnaround and ultimately more trips. However, because passenger ships always left a given port on the same day of the week, steaming faster didn't allow for more trips, only more time in port and a greater consumption of fuel. But six- and one-half days was a lot of time to spend crossing the ocean on a liner. As Ismay saw it, if he was planning to attract wealthy travelers, he needed something better than your competition: unsurpassed luxury and service.



Steamship companies carried First Class passengers and catered to them to make their voyage worth the cost. Although some First Class passengers paid extraordinary amounts to travel on the best steamships, the fare paid by most First Class passengers covered the costs and provided the profits. It was the Third Class passengers who actually generated the revenue to keep most of the liners running. In theory, steamship companies wanted to carry a good mix of First and Second Class passengers for the prestige they generated, but plenty of Third Class passengers were needed to make a profit. Fares paid by Second and Third Class passengers covered the overhead while fares paid by First Class passengers generated the profit.



In 1870 Thomas Ismay asked his friend William Imrie to join the White Star Line, and Ismay created a new management company. Ismay, Imrie and Company was formed to manage the White Star Line.



Earlier, in 1840, Hickson and Company, Ltd. was organized as a shipbuilding company on the River Lagan in Belfast, Ireland. Fourteen years later in 1854 Edward J. Harland became general manager, and in 1859 Harland bought the company.

Harland was an engineer who made several significant contributions to the art of shipbuilding, primarily the replacement of wooden decks and frames with iron and steel. This method of construction made a ship structurally much stronger and allowed for the building of larger ships with more than three or four decks.

In 1861 Gustav Wolff joined up with Edward J. Harland and in 1862 Hickson and Company was renamed Harland and Wolff. That same year fifteen-year-old William Pirrie joined the

company as a draftsman; thirty years later, in 1902, Pirrie was named the managing director of Harland and Wolff.

With the purchase of the White Star Line by Thomas H. Ismay in 1867, and Ismay's agreement to have ships built at Gustav Wolff's company, Harland and Wolff became the sole provider of ships for the White Star Line. As the company grew, Harland and Wolff agreed not to build any ships for White Star Line competitors.



In August 1870, the steamship *Oceanic*, the first ship built by Harland and Wolff for the White Star Line, was launched in Belfast, Ireland. Later, additional ships joined *Oceanic*, including *Atlantic*, *Baltic*, *Republic*, *Celtic* and *Adriatic* (White Star Line ships had names ending with "ic", including *Olympic*, *Titanic* and *Britannic*.)

Harland and Wolff was considered to be the best and highest priced shipbuilding company in Europe. All work performed for White Star Line was done on a cost-plus basis, and no expenses were spared. The two companies worked so closely that Harland and Wolfe invoices were paid without question. No compromise on the quality of material was allowed—only the best material was used on White Star Line ships built by Harland and Wolff.



In 1882 Joseph Bruce Ismay, eldest son of Thomas H. Ismay, joined the White Star Line and ten years later, in 1892, Thomas Ismay retired. When Thomas Ismay died in 1898, Joseph, (known by his middle name Bruce), became the managing director of White Star Line, a position he still held in 1912. Under the direction of Bruce Ismay and utilizing the talents of the extremely capable staff at Harland and Wolff, by 1910 White Star Line and Harland and Wolff were building the most modern and luxurious fleet of all the North Atlantic liners.

The first large and modern steamship built for the White Star Line was *Oceanic II*, completed in 1899. This ship was the first attempt by White Star Line to provide quality service, luxury and comfort instead of trying to compete with its competitors for speed.



American millionaire and financier J. Pierpont (J.P.) Morgan created the International Navigation Company of New Jersey in 1893 with the purchase of several smaller shipping lines. In 1902, Morgan changed the name of the company to the International Mercantile Marine Company (IMM).

In late 1902 the stockholders approved the sale of the White Star Line to the IMM. The sale was opposed by Bruce Ismay. The stockholders, however, with some influence from William Pirrie of Harland and Wolff, approved the sale and the ownership of the White Star Line passed to the International Mercantile Marine on the last day of 1902.

Bruce Ismay was still president of the White Star Line, and in 1904 J. P. Morgan offered him the job of president and managing director of the International Mercantile Marine. Ismay's acceptance gave him unlimited control of both the IMM and White Star Line.

Although the IMM was an American owned company, any ship owned or managed by the White Star Line would continue to have its home port in Britain, carry the British flag, be served by British crewmembers, follow the shipbuilding guidelines, and be governed by the regulations of the British Board of Trade.

By 1912 the International Mercantile Marine owned 120 ships with a total gross tonnage of over 1.1 million tons, which made it one of the three largest ship owners in the world. White Star Line produced a significant portion of IMM's income and profits.