

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Robin Gardiner, Dan van der Vat. *The Riddle of the Titanic*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1995. xv + 312 pp. (cloth), ISBN 978-0-297-81528-0.

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Conspiracy theories make good media, and a theory so bold as to claim that the *Titanic* never sank was bound to catch any lively news editor's eye. It is hardly surprising, therefore that *The Riddle of the Titanic* proved controversial even before it reached the bookshops.

Now that it has been more widely read, however, the controversy has considerably abated. This is not because the volume has proved its point: rather, it is because the conspiracy theory which it advocates turns out to be so thinly argued that it has proved impossible to take it seriously.

Gardiner and van der Vat's theory runs like so: The *Titanic* did not sink. Rather, her damaged and almost identical sister-ship the *Olympic* was substituted and deliberately sunk in her place as part of a gigantic insurance fraud.

The *Olympic*, as the authors correctly point out, was the slightly elder of the two ships, and was damaged in collision with the Royal Navy's HMS *Hawke* near Southampton, England, in the autumn of 1911. The owners, it is argued, discovered that the damage was far greater than they had feared, and so they decided to write off the *Olympic* on the *Titanic*'s insurance.

This, the theory continues, was accomplished with a simple switch. To the untrained eye, the *Olympic* and the *Titanic* were almost identical, and so a clandestine slight-of-hand was accomplished while the two ships were in dock together at the Harland and Wolff yard at Belfast in March, 1912. Name-plates, life-belts and so forth were secretly swapped. The *Olympic* now disguised as the *Titanic*, was patched up and deliberately sailed into a known ice-field...

The authors stress that this is not a mass murder conspiracy, but "an insurance fraud which went horribly wrong." The plan, they speculate, was that the "Olympic/Titanic" would indeed hit an iceberg, but that her water-tight compartments would keep her afloat for long enough for other ships of the same line safely to take off all the passengers and crew before the great ship went down. Unfortunately for all concerned, they claim, the liner's "ever-impetuous" Captain Smith got it "wrong" and hit the ice-field early, resulting in massive and terrible loss of life.

This is the theory which, understandably, caused such a furor in the British press as the publisher's publicity machine went into action. On reading the actual book, however, two things become immediately clear. First, the conspiracy theory advocated by Gardiner and van der Vat is at best thin and at worst untenable. Second, one discovers, quickly, that the actual conspiracy theory occupies only a very small proportion of the book, the majority of which simply re-tells a story which has already been adequately told elsewhere. Admittedly, the authors do take a more anti-establishment tone than is usually taken with the *Titanic* saga, but the conspiracy theory itself is neither advanced nor defended with anything like the depth or the rigor required if it is to be taken seriously.

If this is so, then is this book of any interest at all to the scholar of popular culture? This reviewer would argue that in spite—and possibly even, because—of its shortcomings, it is indeed worthy of some attention. This is because it touches upon two phenomena: the *Titanic* and the "conspiracy" phenomena. First, this book, for all its faults, is indicative of a growing fascination with the *Titanic* in contemporary popular culture. The audience for

Titanic books, films, articles and exhibits is large, and *Titanic* historical societies flourish world-wide. Why is this? Why did Gardiner and van Der Vat's book on an Edwardian ship-wreck create such interest among news editors and the general public today? Why indeed, is the *Titanic* still news over eighty years after the event?

Second, this book is also indicative of the "conspiracy" phenomenon in which contemporary popular culture seems determined to believe that nothing we are told today is true. It is a phenomenon which can be noted from assassinated Presidents to dead rock-and-roll stars. The "authorities" (who come in for particular and

sustained suspicion in all conspiracy theories) are even believed by some to have conspired to conceal the existence of extra-terrestrial life. This, too, should be of interest to the scholar of popular culture: What are the features, what are the characteristics, what indeed, are the underlying causes and concerns of the "conspiracy" phenomenon?

An exploration of these issues is not the duty of this review. This is a review which seeks, rather, to suggest that the deeply flawed volume under consideration is still worthy of our attention due to the fascinating genres which it—unwittingly, perhaps—so eloquently represents.

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