



Erik Larson. *Dead Wake: The Last Crossing of the Lusitania.* New York: Random House Publishing, 2015. 430 pp. \$28.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-307-40886-0.

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

Since its sinking over a century ago, the *Lusitania* has become fodder for many conspiracy theories and a like number of published works. *Dead Wake*, by Erik Larson, is one of the most recent and well researched. The *Lusitania* went into service five years before the *Titanic* and was smaller, but because they sank only three years apart, comparisons are regularly made between these two luxury liners. While White Star could afford to build the latter on its own, Cunard had to seek loans and promises from the British Admiralty for the construction of the *Lusitania*. This contributed to flawed design specifications for the ship and one of the theories for its destruction: the Germans thought it was an armed vessel.

Larson is a popular historian and journalist who has published a series of nonfiction texts over the past twenty-four years on topics that often involve violent events in the past. He knows how to tell a good story without over-sensationalizing events. He subtly lays out each conspiracy theory, leaving bread crumbs of information, and then destroys the argument before the reader realizes it. This nonchalant manner can, however, be frustrating at times. Like many British ships leaving the “neutral” United States, the *Lusitania* had two manifests. One was presented before departure and a second more accurate one once the ship was underway. For years, the second mani-

fest from the *Lusitania* was missing. This allowed the British to deny German claims that there were munitions on board until divers on the wreck found proof in the 1960s. The second manifest did not surface until this century; it is in the FDR Presidential Library where it had been kept since 1940. Larson gives three pages to this document but fails to ask any hard questions. There is not even a full discussion in his notes.

Where Larson is at his finest is in recreating the lives of many of the passengers and crew on that fateful voyage in 1915. Here his research really shines. The suspense continues to build as the text gets closer to May 7 and the sinking. He is careful to hide who will survive. The ability to bring humanity to the individuals involved in this maritime disaster also extends to the sailors who ultimately caused it. Not only does Larson make the German submariners human, but his descriptions of their living conditions also make them almost sympathetic.

As with any good story where the ending is known, the last few chapters of *Dead Wake* are anticlimactic. Larson works his way through the theories that the Royal Navy wanted the ship to be sunk, and while not completely dismissing all of them, he demonstrates the lack of evidence to support each one. He also importantly shows that the speed of the sinking (less than twenty min-

utes) and the loss of life were the result of the ship's design and a lack of lifeboat drills and not the German torpedo. In his careful use of Woodrow Wilson and the president's romance with Edith Bolling Galt, Larson also helps destroy the biggest myth of all: that the sinking of the *Lusitania* led to the United States' direct entry into World War I. *Dead Wake* is a balanced and well-researched text and thus worth reading.

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