1 A Brief History of the Titanic

There can be no such thing as a definitive history, and this single chapter does not attempt to be one. Inasmuch, however, as facts can ever be established, here follows a brief history of the Titanic. It is, of course, a history of only the physical Titanic. Its purpose is simply to set the stage for my analysis of the much more important mythical Titanic; to provide a background – a perspective – against which that mythical Titanic can be better understood.

By the turn of the twentieth century, Atlantic crossings were very big business indeed. Western Europe and North America were social and economic power-houses, divided by a large and inhospitable ocean. The Atlantic liners provided, quite literally, ‘the only way to cross’. If we think of the incalculable importance of international airlines in trans-Atlantic travel and communication today, we can begin to imagine the crucial position which the passenger liners held in the culture and economy of 1912. Between 1840 and 1890, trade between Britain and the United States had increased by 700 per cent.\(^1\) Those crossing the Atlantic were not only the business and social élite; the ‘huddled masses’ in their millions were also making their way, inevitably by sea, from the reality of one continent to the hope of another. In 1907 alone, 1,285,349 immigrants had entered the United States. Although the great liners of the period are best remembered for their ‘luxury’ and their wealthy passengers, it is important to underline that immigrant traffic was in fact their greatest single source of income. In this way the Titanic, for all its reputation for opulence, was both economically and officially an emigrant ship.\(^2\) All the major steamship companies competed energetically to win the trade of both wealthy and emigrant passengers.\(^3\) Just because emigrant passengers were typically poor, this did not mean that they were not selective in choosing the ships in which they were to cross. Competition in terms of accommodation and price both resulted from and further contributed to the emigrant passengers’ power to choose, and this further added to the competitive atmosphere among rival carriers in this potentially hugely lucrative trade.\(^4\) For the shipping companies, the answer was size. This was true not only in terms of economies of
scale, but also in terms of competition for passengers: passengers of all classes were attracted to the idea of big ships and spacious accommodation for what was still typically a 5–7 day passage over stormy seas.

It is in this competitive atmosphere that bigger and yet bigger passenger ships were planned and constructed by the rival companies. The size of Cunard liners, for example, grew from the Umbria (8,127 tons) in 1884 and the Campania (12,500 tons) in 1893 to the Lusitania and Mauretania (both approaching 32,000 tons) in 1907. The rival White Star line competed with their ‘big four’ liners: the Celtic (20,904 tons) of 1901, the Cedric (21,035 tons) of 1903, the Baltic (23,884 tons) of 1904, and the Adriatic (24,541 tons) of 1907. The Germans, too, were strong competitors in the trans-Atlantic market. They were building increasingly large ships from the North German Lloyd line’s Kaiser Wilhelm der Grosse (14,350 tons) of 1897 to the Kaiserin Auguste Victoria (24,581 tons) of 1906. It can easily be seen, however, from this that the ships ‘to beat’ in this increasingly competitive field were the enormous (by 1907 standards) Cunarders, Lusitania and Mauretania. The problem for their competitors, and especially the White Star Line, was not only that the Cunard duo were considerably larger than anything else afloat, they were also faster. The Mauretania, in particular, was not only the largest liner in the world but also held the Blue Riband Atlantic speed record for 22 years. Realizing that they were unlikely to beat the Cunard line for speed, White Star made the strategic decision to overtake them in size and luxury. In this way, White Star’s opulence would not only counter Cunard’s alacrity, but they would also have the all important financial advantage in payload. Fuel costs would be cheaper, too, for high speeds demanded a disproportionate quantity of coal to be consumed in the boilers of the Atlantic ‘greyhounds’. A final advantage would be that the slower cruising speed of the new White Star ships would lessen vibration. Although the White Star liners would take one half-day longer from Southampton to New York than the Cunard pair, the passage, it was reasoned, would be considerably more comfortable.

In 1907, the Liverpool-based White Star Line took the decision to build not one but three such Atlantic liners, each of which would be more than one and a half times bigger than the rival Lusitania or Mauretania, and carry twice as many passengers. By having three as opposed to two identical ships on the Atlantic run, White Star reasoned that they would be able to provide a regular, reliable, seamless, weekly service in both directions. The plan was agreed between the