

As with 9/11, the magnitude of the Titanic tragedy cannot be overstated. Both the Twin Towers and the Titanic were unprecedented testimonials to their respective eras' wealth and power. Both were conceived in a period of supreme national self-confidence. And both disasters, followed by real wars abroad, triggered cultural polarization at home.

One of the more fascinating spin-offs produced by the Titanic — which sank 100 years ago this weekend — was the public debate over women's rights. Most of the survivors, it was almost immediately learned, were women and children: 75% of women and almost all the children were saved, as opposed to just 20% of the men.

At the time, women's suffrage was a hot issue. In his 1965 book, *Down with the Old Canoe: A cultural history of the Titanic disaster*, Steven Biel, citing reports of wealthy men in first class sacrificing their lives for women and children, suggested "that women were better served by male chivalry than by the vote." A popular refrain, "votes or boats," illustrated the stark dichotomy of perceived choice between equality and existential entitlements. A letter to the editor of the *St. Louis Post-Despatch* of the time advises that "henceforth, when a woman talks women's rights, she be answered with the word Titanic, nothing more, just Titanic."

The "women and children first" narrative, once sheathed in a seamless theme of chivalric heroism (mostly male, but some married women aboard refused to leave their husbands) has, like everything else associated with the wreck, undergone intense academic and ideological scrutiny over the decades.

Was it really spontaneous gallantry that overcame so many men's natural urge to save themselves? Frances Wilson's 2011 book, *How to survive the Titanic, or the sinking of J Bruce Ismay*, argues that the Titanic men's self-sacrifice was based in cultural indoctrination that made even the appearance of cowardice too shaming to contemplate. Ismay was the chairman of the company that owned the White Star Line. He got into a lifeboat because, he claimed, "the boat was there" and "the deck was empty." No matter. Even though there is no evidence that Ismay replaced a woman in his lifeboat, that physical action ruined him. He was forever after shunned as a man without honour.

McGill University cultural historian Paul Nathanson agrees that the men's self-sacrifice was more coerced than spontaneous, likening the spectre of social shame that awaited Ismay to the humiliation that came with the white feathers women handed out to able-bodied men out of uniform in the First World War.

As Nathanson notes, all of this was reflected in shipping-company policy. Company officials could and did shoot men who tried to get on lifeboats, just as soldiers were executed for desertion in battle a few years later.

Can it be considered true self-sacrifice, then, when men are conscripted to the principle of women-first (and, on one side of the Titanic, women-only) on sinking ships, just as they are conscripted for battle (in those nations that still have a draft) to protect "King and country," which amounts to the same thing? Nathanson says it can't. If the men could have taken seats in lifeboats without being shot or shamed for the rest of their days, they would have. Those who, unlike Ismay, resisted empty lifeboat spaces had simply decided that the social price of survival was too high.

If the men on the Titanic had not had the leisure of a few hours between the fatal iceberg crash and the actual sinking to let culture do its work, their survival instinct would have trumped their sense of honour. On the *Lusitania*, which sank in mere minutes, with no time to think, it was a matter of *saue qui peut*. The young and the fit of both sexes survived in equal numbers, while the slow and vulnerable perished.

A century after the fact, we live in a different world. In 1912, suffragettes believed that women would have to make hard cultural choices. As it turns out, today's women don't have to make any. In 2012, they have both equality and entitlements: votes and boats.

So, henceforth, when a modern woman talks women's rights (to repeat a phrase), let her think of poor J Bruce Ismay and count her modern blessings.

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