Background
In 1985, a joint French and American expedition announced that it had discovered the resting place of the Titanic, renewing interest in the ill-fated luxury liner. Mahon—whose father and grandfather worked at the shipyard where the Titanic was built—responded to the discovery by writing “After the Titanic.” Though never explicitly named in the poem, “After the Titanic” tells the story of the English businessman, Titanic survivor, and controversial figure Joseph Bruce Ismay.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, J. Bruce Ismay served as the chairman of White Star Line, a British shipping company. Eight years after assuming his post, Ismay met with Lord Pirrie, the chairman of Harland & Wolff, to discuss how to compete with a rival ship line. Ismay and Pirrie decided to build three supreme luxury liners. These large ships would boast unheard of amenities, including Turkish baths, swimming pools, and grand staircases. From these lofty dreams, plans for the RMS Olympic, Titanic, and Gigantic (later Britannic) were born. Ismay, who frequently sailed on his ships during their maiden voyages, made the fateful decision to board the Titanic. When the ship struck an iceberg and began to sink, Ismay boarded a lifeboat. Once aboard the rescue ship, the Carpathia, he expressed extreme distress over the ship’s foundering and the loss of life.

Word of Ismay’s survival sparked harsh criticism. The public turned on him, chastising him for taking a spot on a lifeboat when so many women and children remained aboard the sinking Titanic. Newspapers ran articles and cartoons that called Ismay a coward. Even after being cleared of wrongdoing by a British inquiry, the press continued to villainize him. He attempted to steer clear of the public eye following the disaster. For the rest of his life, Ismay was clearly a man with a tortured soul. Though his family would tread lightly on the subject, the Titanic tragedy and his resultant reputation haunted him until his death.