



The poet Derek Mahon presents his poems to an audience in 2010.

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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

J. Bruce Ismay Testifying at the Senate Inquiry.



H. Hollister Mr. Ismay.

Photograph of Joseph Bruce Ismay testifying at a U.S. Senate inquiry into the sinking of the RMS *Titanic*.

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.