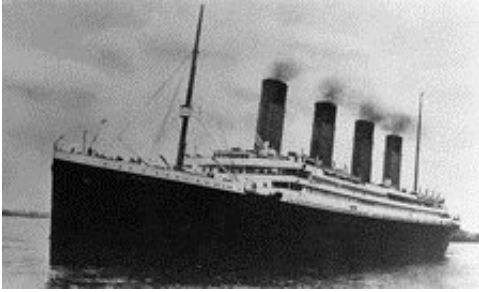


# Sinking the Titanic myth

April 16 2012

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The Titanic

On the centenary anniversary of the sinking of the Titanic, a King's expert says people's knowledge of the notorious liner is based on cultural anecdotes rather than historical and scientific fact.

Dr. Richard Howells, from the Culture, Media and Creative Industries Department, says filmic representations and the manner in which people responded to the disaster in the months and years that immediately followed, have distorted the reality of the event in 1912.

The Titanic hit an iceberg in the Atlantic on its maiden voyage on 14 April 1912, and sank in the early hours of the following day.

Dr. Howells says: "100 years on the [Titanic](#) is still intrinsically interesting. It is a great case study of how attitudes have changed and demonstrates how the way we think about ourselves has changed incredibly over 100 years.

"Can you imagine if Titanic happened today? There would be litigation on a cosmic scale. Not in 1912. The Edwardians turned tragedy into a triumph and it became a celebration of all that was great about being British."

It is for this reason, says Dr. Howells, that so much of what we think we know about the disaster is just myth.

"The most popular misconception of all is that the Titanic was thought to be unsinkable. That just wasn't the case. This is a belief that has grown up in the wake of the disaster. The story about it being unsinkable was essentially invented after it sank to attach mythical significance to, and make sense of, a random historical event.

"It's probably not true that the Captain went down extorting his crew to 'Be British Boys, Be British.' It's also highly unlikely that the orchestra sank beneath the waves playing Nearer My God to Thee."

Dr. Howells says that 100 years on the Titanic still influences our response to similar maritime disasters.

"As the Costa Concordia lay sinking off the coast of Italy it was spoken about as if it were the Titanic. It was continually referred to as 'stricken' – a word often used alongside a doomed ship. People started drawing parallels with Titanic, saying it was the same thing.

"Because it has such an important place in our cultural consciousness, we tend to see all maritime disasters in relation to the Titanic even though the only similarity in this case is that both were vessels. So the Titanic, long since submerged, still lives."

Can the wreck of the Costa Concordia be heard resonating through the steel chambers of the Titanic?

**More information:** Dr. Howells discusses the myths that have grown up around the Titanic in a [podcast](#).

Provided by King's College London

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