

# **TITANIC**

Stephen Brown  
School of Marketing, Strategy & Entrepreneurship  
University of Ulster  
Jordanstown  
Co. Antrim  
BT37 0QB  
Northern Ireland

Tel: 028 9036 6130  
Email: [sfx.brown@ulster.ac.uk](mailto:sfx.brown@ulster.ac.uk)

## TITANIC

*The Olympic and Titanic are not only the largest vessels in the World; they represent the highest attainments in Naval Architecture and Marine Engineering; they stand for the pre-eminence of the Anglo-Saxon race on the Ocean...The White Star Liners Olympic and Titanic – eloquent testimonies to the progress of mankind, as shown in the conquest of mind over matter – will rank high in the achievements of the twentieth century.*

—Advertising flyer, 1911

### Ahoy There

My great-grandfather helped build the *Titanic*. He was a carpenter at the Harland & Wolff shipyard in Belfast, where the ill-starred leviathan was constructed between March 1909 and May 1911. The ornate carving on the grand staircase and in the first-class cabins was his handiwork, though he was only one of approximately 14,000 workers who built the greatest ship of its time. RMS *Titanic* was 882' long, weighed 46,000 tons, carried 2,201 passengers and crew, came equipped with fifteen water-resistant bulkheads, which made the behemoth unsinkable, and thanks to two four-cylinder, triple-expansion, reciprocating steam engines, it was one of the fastest luxury liners afloat. The unsinkable ship was going flat out in a flat calm – during its maiden voyage – when it collided with that fateful iceberg at 11.40 p.m. on 14 April 1912. Less than three hours later, *Titanic* was nestling at the bottom of the North Atlantic. Only 712 passengers survived, mainly women and children, mainly first class rather than steerage, mainly Rose DeWitt Bukaters not Jack Dawsons, as James Cameron's 1997 movie correctly encapsulates.

Incredibly, my great-grandfather's handiwork still survives. Cameron dived to the sunken wreck prior to making his money-spinning blockbuster and he was amazed to discover that much of the ornate woodwork was intact. The grand staircase retains its grandeur, even at a depth of 12,840 feet, even after the best part of a century. My father was thrilled when he heard this titbit, because he had faithfully followed in his grandfather's footsteps. He also worked at Harland and Wolff's Belfast shipyard, albeit as an arc welder, during the 1950s and 1960s (he helped build the *Canberra* and *Sea Quest*, among others). As you can imagine, he is a bit of a *Titanic* buff as well. He buys books about the disaster, watches the documentaries religiously and went to see Cameron's movie about twelve times all told, though unlike the teenage girls whose return visits raised *Titanic* to the top of the box-office takings, he only had eyes for the liner, not Leo. What's more, he was distraught when a rumour circulated that the principal cause of the vessel's cataclysmic failure was substandard rivets installed by slovenly workmen at H&W's Belfast shipyard.

### Man Overboard

I haven't escaped the iconic vessel's influence either. When I was a kid, my dad periodically dragged me to the permanent *Titanic* display at the Ulster Transport

Museum, which includes all manner of melancholy memorabilia, including bits of the wreck. As I recall, the thing that struck me most during these enforced visits, the thing that stays with me to this day, is how thin the ship's hull was. Contrary to the impression conveyed by extant photographs, that the liner was a sort of civilian battleship – huge steel plates, many inches thick, riddled with rivets, a veritable floating monument to the Industrial Revolution, etc. – the outer skin of the *Titanic* was wafer thin. It was a racing shell almost, not the kind of thing that could survive an encounter with an ornery iceberg, irrespective of the workmanship of its riveters.

But that is by the by. Until gathering my thoughts for this essay, I always reckoned I'd long since abandoned the shipbuilding ethos of my working class upbringing. I was the first in my family to pass the 11-plus, go to a grammar school and end up at university. My parents had no conception of what university was, stood for, or represented – neither did I, in truth – and I was repeatedly urged to “get a proper job in the shipyard like your father”. When I went on to postgraduate study, only returning home at weekends, my exasperated mother used to ask with asperity, “when are you going to get that schoolbag off your back?”

I'm still wearing it, mummy. However, I'm also conscious that academics are the proletariat of post-industrial society. My occupation, such as it is, is an information economy version of arc welding. I spend most of my time welding textual tissues together. Sometimes these textual tissues are derived from the raw material of empirical data, most times from the prefabricated panels of prior thinkers and secondary sources. In my more egotistical moments, admittedly, I consider myself a master craftsman, carving ornate sentences on the grand staircase of scholarship. Actually, I'm more like the guy who makes the infamous eponymous deckchairs that are constantly being rearranged. Maybe I'm just a stevedore. Yet, regardless of whether I qualify as a woodworker or welder or winch-operator, I realise that I haven't escaped from the hold of the RMS *Titanic*.

## S.O.S

I guess you can guess where I'm going with this conceit. And I'll try not to disappoint you. It seems to me that the Business School is a latter-day *Titanic*, the pride of the contemporary scholarly fleet. Or the best resourced at least. For my cerebral sins, which are manifold and bounteous, I have spent a bit of time at Ivy League B-Schools and it's hard not to conclude that they're Titanics one and all. Their gleaming hulls rise, leviathan-like from the greensward; they are fitted out to the highest of high specification; their endowment-enriched bulkheads render them all but unsinkable; and their professorial complement is not only honed to intellectual perfection but beribboned with every service quality award imaginable, from Nobel Laureates downward. They are an awesome sight. If ever an institution exemplified Shelley's Ozymandian words, “Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair”, then surely it is the 21<sup>st</sup> century Business School.

What's more, the evidence suggests that just as the *Titanic*'s passengers paid through the nose for the privilege of sailing from Southampton to New York in 1912 – a first-class ticket cost \$3,100, the equivalent of approx. \$124,000 – so too today's B-school seadogs are quite prepared to pay premium-plus prices for their Ivy League education.

They cough up whatever it takes to get on board and sail through corporate life with their Harvard MBA, Wharton doctorate, Columbia short course veteran's medal or what have you. The same is true of the leaky intellectual vessels at the flag-of-convenience end of the B-School fleet, those cerebral tramp steamers-cum-scholarly coffin ships that carry bales of BScs or container loads of part-time postgrads and are crewed, as often as not, by illegal academic immigrants from disciplines that have seen better days (lapsed economists, downsized sociologists, re-engineered anthropologists, et al). Not that I know any universities like that...

## **Emergency Drill**

Yet for all their undeniable majesty, B-schools are very thin-hulled and held together with iffy rivets. When you examine the research output of leading business schools, or any business schools for that matter, you are left with overwhelming feelings of futility, frustration, fatuity. What is the point of this stuff? Who is it written for? Does anyone actually read our dry-as-dust articles, let alone take them on board? I suspect not. On perusing the contents of a typical issue of, say, the *Journal of Marketing Research*, I often wonder whether more than three people in the entire world get beyond the abstracts (or the first paragraph, if they're really determined to push the boat out).

However, lest you infer I'm taking cheap shots at your esteemed colleagues who hail from the quantitative end of the scholarly spectrum – though, God knows, a quick burst from a Gatling gun wouldn't go amiss – I have to confess that critical management research is sometimes just as bad. In certain respects it's worse, because our writings are not only unreadable but hypocritical to boot. It seems to me that we diss the system while pocketing its paycheck and, while the system undoubtedly needs dissing from time to time, I fear we're in danger of scuttling the ship that's transporting us. In such circumstances, I can well understand why mainstream management researchers often refuse to take our "critique" seriously or wish we'd go back to Sociology, or Geography or Politics where we belong.

## **Action Stations**

Yeah, I know, I know. I've got the wrong end of the stick and missed the point completely. Management research isn't about easy reading or real world relevance. It's about pushing back the frontiers of science. It's about standing on the shoulders of giants. It's about developing theories of everything, or nearly everything, or as much of everything as can be squeezed into a fifteen-page paper. It's about professional advancement, earning the esteem of our peers, playing along with the RAE beauty pageant. It's not even about published research as such, because B-Schools are so much more than professorial paper mills. Think teaching. Think pastoral duties. Think committee room kudos. Think thinking.

It follows that, far from heading for the pack ice at a rate of knuckle-headed knots, the good ship B-School is sailing serenely across the pedagogic North Atlantic in a flat calm with excellent visibility. The business school, *pace* our epigraph, represents the

highest attainment in managerial engineering and the pre-eminence of the Anglo-Saxon research tradition.

Now, it would be crass of me to remind you that the “night to remember” was pretty calm as well, with perfect visibility and all pistons firing. But, then, I’m a crass kinda guy. I just don’t buy the “shipshape and Bristol fashion” argument. I’m more of a Cassandra than a Candide. It’s clear to me that the B-School is heading for disaster, an iceberg called “managerial relevance”. Numerous studies show that practising managers get next to nothing from our self-absorbed, pseudo-scientific scribblings, much less our pretentious postmodern posturings. They don’t take our journals (except with a pinch or several of salt); they couldn’t care less about our carefully qualified “recommendations” (that necessary rhetorical convention at the end of every published article); and they look to the management consultancy nexus for inspiration and intellectual succour (as opposed to the insipid internees of the ivy-girt ivory tower). Who can blame them? Not me.

### **The Iceberg Cometh**

In fairness, many of my learned colleagues at the critical management end of the academic spectrum, those washed in the blood of Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault and so forth, have a fairly clear view of the corporate pack ice. They urge us to slow down, take our bearings and, at the very least, steer away from the iceberg of managerial relevance, only a tiny portion of which shows above the surface. When pressed on their mutinous mindset, what is more, the matelots of critical management unfailingly challenge this aspiration to relevance. “Relevant for whom?” they unerringly inquire.

Please don’t misunderstand me, shipmates. Don’t get me wrong, me hearties. I hold no candle for make-a-quick-buck managers. I have no time whatsoever for the management consultancy circus. I refuse to believe that managerial relevance, however understood, is the be all and end all of B-schools. I consider myself a critic of the marketing system, albeit with a very small “c”. I think critique is vitally important. However, I fear that the anti-corporate course recommended by some – not all – critical management thinkers is sadly misdirected. Steering away from managerial relevance is not only the wrong heading it’s wrong-headed. It may seem like the smart manoeuvre – and feel right, as well – but it’s liable to founder for two main reasons. First, it unnecessarily alienates one of the principal constituents of the B-school business, practising managers and aspiring managers. Second, it effectively marginalizes critical thinkers, both large “C” and small, since it cedes a core constituency to the management research mainstream. Some, of course, may retort “and a good thing, too” or “what’s wrong with marginalisation?” which are perfectly legitimate responses. But, I for one believe that failure to deal this perplexing dilemma (who do we do what we do for?) could well come back to haunt us.

A better course of action, then, might be to head straight for the iceberg rather than try to avoid it. Had Captain Smith done so in 1912, apparently, he could have averted the disaster he failed to foresee. It was the tiny glancing blow along the *Titanic*’s starboard side that caused the calamity. The passengers didn’t even feel the impact, it was so faint. It was a whisper, a susurration, a tickle. But the unsinkable ship sank all

the same. The band played “Nearer, My God, to Thee” as the greatest ship afloat slipped beneath the eerily calm waters of the North Atlantic. There weren’t enough lifeboats to accommodate all 2,201 passengers and the few that were lowered were lowered less than full. The remaining men on board were reminded to “Be British!” as the RMS *Titanic* slid into the inky millpond. Some say the captain could have set passengers down on the iceberg itself and saved many more lives than he did.

There’s a lesson here for certain critical thinkers, I think. Perhaps we should steer for the pack ice of managerial relevance instead of trying to circumnavigate it. Perhaps we should clamber on to the ice floe, no matter how fragile the footing and freezing the forecast. Perhaps we have *already* struck the iceberg, a tiny glancing blow that none of us have felt but the implications of which will be apparent soon enough. There aren’t sufficient lifeboats for everyone, remember, especially not for steorage class types like you and me. All together now, “Nearer, My GMAT, to Thee”. Sing up. Be British!

### **Full Steam Ahead**

Rather than end on a negative note, though it’s difficult to do otherwise when *Titanic*’s up for discussion, I’d like to put a positive spin on things. All is not lost, in my view. The B-school, I believe, can be rescued from the cruel sea. It’s still possible to come out of this unscathed, provided we all pull together. Or recalibrate our conceptual compass, at least. It’s time for critical management types to take a critical look at ourselves.

In this regard, we should aspire to the condition of James Cameron’s *Titanic*. If ever a movie were fated to fail, it was Cameron’s *folie de grandeur*. He had no track record with costume drama, let alone love stories. He cast two unknown actors in the lead roles (Leo’s breakthrough movie, *Romeo + Juliet*, hadn’t been released when *Titanic* began) and seriously considered dumping DiCaprio for Billy Crudup at an early stage in the proceedings. He had to build an entire movie studio in Mexico, plus a full-scale replica of the legendary liner, in order to get the shots he wanted. The project was budgeted for \$125 million, but this spiralled to \$200 million, making it by far the most expensive movie ever produced. *Titanic* made *Waterworld* look like a paddling pool. The pressure from the studio was stupendous and he had to fight frantic, cost-conscious executives for every scene and special effect. *Titanic* was originally scheduled for release on July 4, the blockbuster movie equivalent of prime time, but Cameron missed the launch date due to post-production problems, which plunged it into the purportedly problematic pre-Christmas schedules. To cap it all, the trade press kept up a running anti-Cameron campaign – *Variety* even ran a regular “Titanic Watch” column – and just about every reporter expected the movie to go the way of the ill-fated liner. The metaphor was perfect. Cinematic kismet, no less.

But Cameron had the last laugh. *Titanic* earned \$1.8 billion at the worldwide box office, an all-time record. Its soundtrack topped the charts. Its DVD and video releases did likewise. It was nominated for fourteen Academy Awards and won eleven, including Best Picture and Best Director. Quoting Leonardo DiCaprio’s line, Cameron stood on the stage of the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion and shouted, “King of

the World". *Titanic* triumphant. My great-grandfather redeemed. My father delighted. My manifesto over.

And out.