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The Wreck OF THE William Brown



A True Tale of Overcrowded
Lifeboats and Murder at Sea

TOM KOCH

The
WRECK
of the
**WILLIAM
BROWN**

*A True Tale of Overcrowded
Lifeboats and Murder at Sea*

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LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

- Map of the location of the wrecks of the *William Brown* and the *Titanic* 3
- Woodblock print titled *American Goods*, from 1845 4
- Engraving of the sounds and smells of an emigrant ship 9
- Drawing titled *The Battle of the Streets* from *Punch* 13
- Ben Franklin's 1786 map of the Gulf Stream 15
- Engraving of the sinking of the *Northfleet*, titled *The Captain's Farewell* 27
- Woodblock print of the *William Brown's* longboat 30
- Portrait of John Tappan 37
- Portrait of Sarah Tappan 38
- Map of shipwrecks in the North Atlantic, 1830–1842 42
- Map of ice flows in the North Atlantic, 1837–1841 47
- Photograph of a saddle-shaped iceberg 54
- Detail from woodblock print of the *William Brown* longboat 63
- Engraving titled *Shipwreck of the Meduse* 69
- Photograph of a field of ice near Baffin Island 74
- Illustration from *Punch* titled *The Wild Irish in the West* 76
- Newspaper story "Dreadful Shipwreck" from *Journal de Havre* 86
- Early postage stamps 95
- Newspaper story "Dreadful Shipwreck" from *Galignani's Messenger* 96
- Letter to the Editor from the American and British consuls 105
- Seals and signatures of the American and British consuls 108
- Letter from British Consul Gilbert Gordon to Lord Palmerston 112
- Newspaper story "The William Brown" 114
- British Foreign Office order to pay Captain Ball 120
- Newspaper story "The Loss of the William Brown" from the *Times* 121
- Portrait of Lord Palmerston 123
- Note by Lord Palmerston 124
- Engraving of a sinking "coffin ship" 131
- Legal headnotes from the case of *United States v. Holmes* 143
- Title page of *Trial of Alexander William Holmes* 154
- Woodblock print featuring banner "Don't Give Up the Ship" 156
- Title page of *Speech of David Paul Brown in Defence of Alexander William Holmes* 171
- Newspaper story "The Trial of Holmes" 177
- Newspaper story "Interesting Trial of a Shipwrecked Sailor" 179
- Map of ship collisions with icebergs off Newfoundland, 1700–1920 183
- Photograph of the iceberg struck by the *Titanic* 185

LIST OF PEOPLE ON THE *WILLIAM BROWN*

The records are inexact and varied. Some sailors are named in the depositions but are not on any official list. Some passengers may be listed twice under slightly different names, or incorrectly, or not at all. See the note in the introduction on the spelling of names.

Ship's Officers and Crew

George Harris, captain
Francis Rhodes, first mate+
Walter Parker, second mate
Isaac Freeman, sailor+
Alexander William Holmes, sailor+
Joseph Marshall, steward+
John "Jack" Messer, sailor+
William Miller, sailor+
Henry Murray, cook+
James Norton, sailor+
Charles Smith, sailor+
Joseph "Jack" Stetson, sailor+
1 unnamed sailor+
5 to 7 unnamed sailors

+ = in longboat
all others in jolly boat

Passengers Drowned with the *William Brown*

Mrs. Anderson & 3 children
Jane Anderson
Mary Bradley
Nicholas Carr, wife & 5 children
William Luden, wife & 10 children
Martin Morris, wife & child
John Davelin
Mary Connelly
Mary Jane Weil

Jolly Boat Passenger Saved

Eliza Lafferty

Longboat Passengers Saved

James and Ellen Black
Ann Bradley
Owen Carr
Sarah Corr
Mary Corr
Isabella Edgar
Jane Johnston Edgar
Jean Edgar
Margaret Edgar
Mrs. Margaret Edgar
Sarah Edgar
Susannah Edgar
Julie McCadden
Bridget McGee
Bridget "Biddy" Nugent
James and Matilda Patrick and child

Longboat Passengers Drowned

Ellen Askin
Francis "Frank" Askin
Mary Askin
Charles Conlin
George Duffy
James Goeld
Robert Hunter
Hugh Keigham
James MacAvoy
Martin MacAvoy
George Nugent
John Nugent
Owen Riley
James Smith
James Todd
John Welsh
John Wilson

CONTENTS



List of Illustrations	viii
List of People on the <i>William Brown</i>	ix
Introduction	i
The Second Strike	7
The Last Watch	20
Alone in the North Atlantic	36
At Sea	50
The <i>Crescent</i>	73
The Story	94
A Melancholy Affair	109
The Charge	126
The Trial	146
The Defence of Necessity	161
The Legacy	182
Endnotes	191
Bibliography	201
Acknowledgments	207
Index	209

INTRODUCTION



IN 1841 A SHIP SAILED at maximum speed into waters where danger of icebergs was known to exist. It did this because speed meant profit and profit was the goal of the maritime trade, even when it endangered lives. As a result of its course and its speed, the ship struck an iceberg and sank. Because the ship, the *William Brown*, did not carry sufficient auxiliary craft, half of its passengers went down with the ship. At least fourteen, some say sixteen, persons saved to the ship's longboat were thrown overboard twenty-four hours later by sailors acting upon their superior's orders. One of those seamen was convicted a year later. The irony is that the man convicted, Alexander William Holmes, was the one hero of the whole sorry affair, the only crewman or passenger to risk his life in a selfless attempt to save another's.

That is what we know. The why and how and what might have been is the story this book tells. Its importance extends beyond the tale of nineteenth-century legal chicanery or the rehabilitation of the reputation of a long-dead sailor. The story of the *William Brown* is the story of how people get caught up in and destroyed by social systems that are supposed to protect them. It is also about how we construct ideals like "justice" and then accept constructions like "scarcity" that pervert those ideals in a way that is—or should be—indefensible. Finally, it is another example, if one is needed, of how complex events are reduced to simplistic tales, and how those tales are turned into clever but misleading metaphors. The result is that the lessons of history are turned into popular myths that are very different from the facts of the events themselves.

The story of the *William Brown* is important because what occurred in April 1841 was not an isolated event. It had happened before and it would happen again and again, the tragedy of one century presaging those of the next. It happens still today.

SEVENTY-ONE YEARS AFTER the *William Brown*'s demise, the luxury ship *Titanic* sank in the same waters in a similar fashion. Both ships went down in April after striking at maximum speed an iceberg on the edge of the Gulf Stream. The captains of both vessels were experienced; they knew the waters they sailed and the potential dangers those waters held. Both vessels carried emigrants seeking a better life in North America. Neither carried sufficient auxiliary craft to permit the salvation of more than half the passengers on board. As a direct result, at least half the passengers—mostly poor emigrants—drowned.

In the nineteenth century, the very idea of scarcity's choice that today we know as "lifeboat ethics"—what to do and who to choose when critical resources are insufficient for all—was shocking, almost blasphemous. But by the first decades of the twentieth century, the fact of scarcity was so accepted that "rearranging deck chairs on the *Titanic*" became an almost instant synonym for futility in the face of limited resources. In both cases, early public reaction ranged from outrage to fatalism, the former mostly from working people and the latter typically from more moneyed folk, those who were the most likely to be saved when there was not enough for all.

From the *William Brown* to the *Titanic* and into our own time, the questions have been the same: who dies and who survives at what cost? When hard choices must be made, would we, could we do the same? Would we be so callous? Would we be so bold?

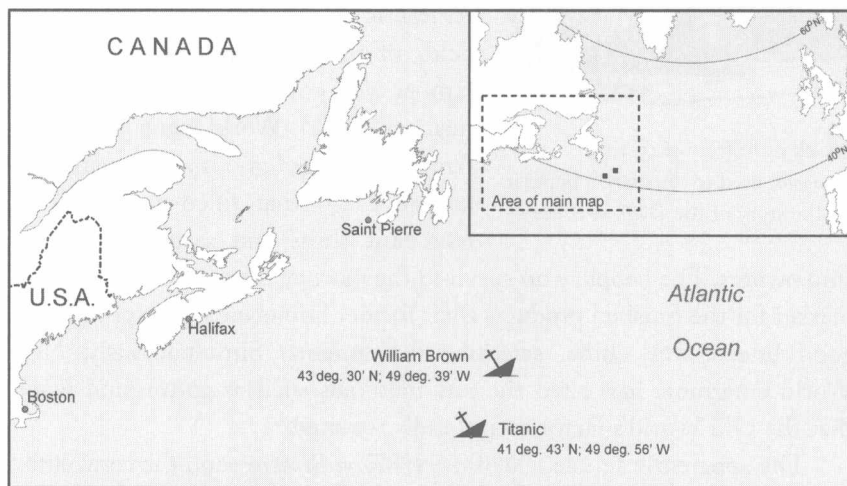
That ships sank with passengers aboard was a fact of nineteenth-century life, an accepted risk of the North Atlantic crossing. Nobody asked if these deaths were avoidable. Nobody questioned the myriad decisions by ship masters and owners that directly contributed to these disasters.

But to be saved from a sinking ship only to be killed by its crewmen was . . . exceptional. In the end, only one sailor, Alexander Holmes, was charged with one count of manslaughter on the high seas. Known to historians as *United States v. Holmes*, the story of his trial is a minor if recurrent

footnote in the annals of law and moral philosophy, the first case to argue the “defence of necessity” and to examine the means by which people choose among themselves when scarcity reigns in their midst.

At one level, the story of the *William Brown*—of its survivors and its dead—is a simple narrative of shipwreck and eventual rescue that became a legal case with continuing resonance. At another, the saga is an overture to our times replete with the odour of politics and political cover-up. A nineteenth-century international *cause célèbre*, it was perhaps the first case in which political officials openly manipulated both journalists and legalists to assure that justice would seem to be done and yet in actuality would not *be* done. From the start, Alexander Holmes’s conviction for “manslaughter on the high seas” was a foregone conclusion, a necessity of politics and commerce but not of justice before the law.

From this perspective, Alexander William Holmes was less a culprit or a tragic figure than a scapegoat whose conviction was required if the profitable nineteenth-century trade in goods and emigrants was to continue unhindered. His trial was not just an act of conscious justice or pioneering law but a carefully constructed morality play staged to reassure the thousands of emigrants then streaming from Europe to the Americas.



The location of the sinking of the *William Brown* in 1841, in relation to that of the *Titanic* in 1912.

What was trumpeted as justice's attempt to right a grievous wrong (and as an exercise in moral philosophy) was actually an action taken to protect the enormously profitable transatlantic shipping trade that knit together Old and New Worlds.

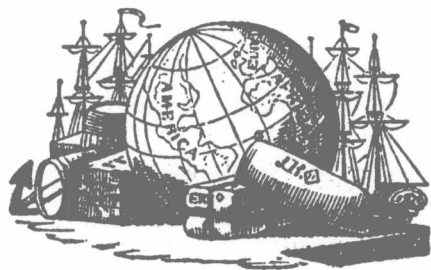
History's simple narrative is revealed as a complex story of a pivotal decade in the nineteenth century and the internationalism it bequeathed us all. In the 1840s the first postage stamps were issued. Newspapers were becoming a widespread and popular source of information that, mailed around the world, tied distant countries together. Steam was poised to replace wind and animal power as the force that moved goods and people around nations and the globe. The Industrial Revolution was in full advance as millions of Britons and Europeans left their homes and farms for work in the cities and factories of North America. The principal forces that defined the 1840s remained in place at least into the days of the *Titanic*: America's need for Europe's, and especially Britain's, cast-off

emigrants; the conditions of the ships they travelled in; and the spirit of commerce that propelled modernity's first period of rampant globalization.

Raw materials flowed from the Americas to Europe, from the cotton fields of the American South and the lumber-rich colonies of Canada. In its turn, the Old World sent to North America finished goods and expatriates, human cargo that filled the holds of merchant ships and assured profit to

ship owners. The people who survived the journey then became a primary market for the finished products their former homelands were producing: good linens, fine china, scientific instruments. Simultaneously, New World emigrants harvested the raw materials such as cotton and wood that the Old World's factories and mills required.

The apparently simple tale of the *William Brown*—and the convoluted story of the cover-up that followed—is therefore also the story of the Great Migration in which more than 5 million people left Europe for the Americas. It is the story of new industry and the new attitudes that drove



A woodblock print from 1845, titled *American Goods*, used to illustrate a popular version of the story of the *William Brown*.

robber barons and staid, landed worthies as ferociously as they drove poor tenant farmers and lowly seamen. Ultimately, however, the heart of this story lies with the emigrants and the emigrant trade, with men and women who against stupendous odds braved the Atlantic crossing in leaking, wooden boats. Many died along the way; more died in the slums of North America. Those who survived the trip, and then the hard challenges that awaited them at journey's end, fashioned a new life for themselves and ultimately for us, we who inherited the world they made.

THE STORY TOLD HERE offers a historical reconstruction put together from a range of resources: old files stored in official archives, period newspapers, legal depositions, court documents, and the works of those who have written previously about this era and its events.

The surviving records suffer from the cavalier approach of nineteenth-century writers to spelling and to numbers. For instance, throughout both the official sources (depositions, legal records) and newspaper stories, the name MacAvoy is also spelled McAvoy and MacVoie; Sarah Corr is sometimes referred to as Sarah Carr; and was it Susanna, Susannah or Suzanne Edgar? For the convenience of modern readers, spellings are standardized throughout the text, except, of course, where a name is presented in an official document. There, the variant stands as written originally.

Similarly, British Foreign Office files name thirty-three persons saved to the longboat while the American trial record puts the count at thirty-two. More confusing, different sources variously record the number of persons drowned in the longboat. "Before they ended," the official trial record, *United States v. Holmes*, states, "14 male passengers and also two women" were drowned. But only six drownings are described in that record. Some European stories of the day, on the other hand, listed thirteen men and two women murdered. And while all agreed that just two women died in the longboat, whether they were thrown overboard or drowned themselves was a point of some debate. The details that history leaves us are typically contradictory and incomplete.

At this remove, there is no way to know for certain exactly how many people were drowned. Nor in the end does it matter. That so many were drowned (fourteen, fifteen, sixteen souls) was horrific to the Victorians and remains shocking today.

Our ignorance about the *William Brown* extends to the facts of the ship itself. Although we know a great deal about sailing ships of the 1840s, we know little for sure about *this* ship. No pictures of it survive. Nor are there any detailed descriptions of its rigging. Was it a brig, a barque or a brigantine? In the same vein, we have no likenesses of the survivors or the drowned, no portraits of the captain or his crew. Alas, illustrated newspapers were still a decade in the future when the ship sank in 1841.

Because the record is incomplete and sometimes contradictory, the whole hangs on my interpretation of these records, my re-creation of what is not quite known based on what is. Those seeking more information or specific references are referred to the endnotes and the bibliography.

The hope is that my guesswork may someday cause someone to realize the importance of a forgotten text, journal, diary or report now buried in a library or in an ancestor's sea trunk sitting forgotten in a corner of some attic. If that occurs, we will know with certainty the events that appear here as informed conjecture.

THE SECOND STRIKE



ON THE EVENING OF 19 APRIL 1841, the American sailing ship *William Brown* was making ten knots under full sail when at around 8:45 P.M.—survivors disagreed about the exact moment—it scraped a floating pan of ice several hundred miles off the Newfoundland coast. Ten minutes later, maybe fifteen, it struck an iceberg. With that second strike, the ship's world ended, destroyed in a collision that owed everything to the choices that had brought it to that place.

Since departing Liverpool for Philadelphia on 13 March with a complement of seventeen crew and sixty-five passengers (a child died in the first weeks of the journey), the *William Brown* had sailed a mostly westerly heading against seas that fought her every day, the ship's speed reduced by the labour of climbing the high waves that contrary gales produce. "In the fore part of my voyage I had it very stormy for about 22 or 23 days," Captain George Harris later testified.

The emigrant passengers, mostly Irish with a smattering of Scottish, were lodged amidships in a cargo space converted into a communal dormitory with racks of wooden bunks stacked two or three berths high, one berth per family. Single women, strangers at the beginning of the voyage, were put together to save space, sometimes two or three in the same bunk.

The sounds and smells of emigrant quarters on ships like the 650-ton *William Brown* conspired to dull the senses. It was hard to tell sometimes which sense bore the worst assault. It wasn't simply the stink of sixty-four unwashed bodies jammed into an unventilated hold for more than a month. To that was added the stench of the curtained privy, whose bucket

was often upended in heavy swells. Then there was the tang of past cargoes that had worked its way into the very timbers of the ship over its sixteen years on the North Atlantic run. There was as well a whiff of the barnyard from the animals—chickens and pigs—carried as food for the journey. Finally, beneath it all, were the smells of vomit, wet wood, damp clothes and the occasional rotting timber. The only comfort was that what the emigrants had known—cheap overcrowded boarding rooms and sod houses with smoky cook stoves—rarely smelled much better.

In a storm, however, the horrendous *sound* of the ship against the sea, and of the wind itself, dominated every other sense. “Thunder is no more than a dog’s bark compared with the tremendous roar of the wind and sea,” a nineteenth-century North Atlantic traveller wrote. “We had scarcely turned in when a sea struck her, making her reel most awfully. It came down the scuttle like a millstream, washing some of us nearly out of our beds. Two of our boxes broke from their lashings and rolled about from side to side, strewing their contents as they went.” The chaos was absolute, the fear as close and chilling as the water that came through the hatches and rippled along the deck. “It was an anxious time: females shrieking, the water almost floating our things and the pails, can, etc, knocking about. It is impossible to convey an idea of such an awful sight. We had very little sleep this night.”

For the *William Brown*, it had been like that for weeks until, on 19 April, crew and passengers were granted a respite. All that day and into the night, the ship charged forward in a southwesterly direction. For the first time in weeks, she was aided rather than impeded by the strong seas and the brisk winds that characterize the North Atlantic in the last weeks of winter and the first days of spring. When the winds are favourable and the seas kindly, there is on board a ship—any ship—a sense of well-being. The seas seem to invite it and its sailors onward. There was, therefore, little sense of danger among the *William Brown*’s crew or passengers as they entered the ice fields.

Toward 9 P.M., near the end of the first hour of the first watch, the night began to turn hazy. The stars, which moments before had glittered in the chilly air, were gradually obscured by first a light mist and then by almost a fog of moisture rising from ice fields nearby but still not visible. If any aboard were Londoners, they might have experienced a moment of



Crowded conditions of emigrant quarters on a ship similar to the *William Brown*.
From the *Illustrated London News*, 10 May 1861, courtesy British Newspaper Library

nostalgia for those Thames nights when a cold front pulled moisture from the river, holding the supersaturated air over the land. Then, the air turned opaque and vision was even more obscured. It was as if all who sailed upon the ship suddenly had developed cataracts.

One of the crew, Charlie Smith, was working on the foredeck when he heard a seaman at the bow sing out, "Bear off, bear away!" Like Smith, the seaman was a member of the first watch that had come on duty at 8 P.M. when second mate Walter Parker, the watch commander, set his men to repairing some of the havoc that weeks of stormy weather had caused. Torn sails needed mending; worn lines needed to be replaced or respliced. Deck fittings loosened by the storms required attention. There was work enough for them all.

On hearing the warning, Smith looked over and saw a pan of ice almost dead ahead. In his turn, he called to the helmsman, "Bear off, bear away!" Joseph Stetson was at the wheel and maybe he heard the warning, maybe not. Sometimes it is hard to hear words shouted above the sounds of a ship rushing through heavy seas. But if he did not, then Parker did, ordering Stetson to put the helm hard over, the ship away. Stetson tried to change course, but, by then, they were almost upon the ice.

Nineteenth-century sailing ships were not racing vessels built for manoeuvrability. In the best of circumstances, it took time and effort to turn them even a few degrees. There is the inertia of the vessel, its tonnage propelled forward and held in balance by sails trimmed just so. To

change direction means pushing the weight of the vessel against that of the sea through which it is travelling. It is hard enough to change direction when sails are reefed and speed therefore reduced, the motion of mass through the water diminished. With all sails unfurled, the ship heading more generally with the wind than against it, a quick course change requires more than a turn of the wheel. Sailors must be called to loose the lines that hold the sails taut, breaking the balance of tensions that propel the vessel forward, if the rudder is to take full control.

The first blow was glancing, the ship sliding across ice rather than colliding directly against it. It must have felt like scraping over a sandbar near low tide, the keel chafing against but not stalling upon the ground. The hull is slowed by friction as the vessel seeks a way past. In the North Atlantic, hundreds of miles from shore, there are no sandbars, but in April there *are* icebergs riding the cold currents that flow down from cold northern waters to the Gulf Stream. Some ride above the sea, large as tenement buildings. Others are submariners, cruising below the sea with at most their peaks just visible above the waves. The ice pauses, its southern run stalled where the Gulf Stream's relative heat holds them in thrall as it speeds their dissolution. When this happens, the sky is filled with haze or fog, a condition that should have alerted the sailors on watch aboard the *William Brown*.

Decades later, passengers on the *Titanic* described the sound of ice against a ship's hull precisely. What each heard depended on his or her location: amidships and below in steerage, in the crew's forward cabins, or lodged in first-class quarters on the upper decks with a porthole and a view of the sea. George Hander, a honeymooner travelling with his new bride, called it "a sort of rumbling, scraping noise." Lady Cosmo Duff Gordon in first class said there was a sound "as though somebody had drawn a giant finger along the side of the ship." It was, Mrs. J. Stuart White said, as if the ship had rolled over "a thousand marbles."

Aboard the *William Brown*, the sound was less because the impact was light, the sound of rolling over a hundred marbles rather than a thousand. As such, it was just one more odd sound, one more jolt on a voyage that had been filled with the noise of a ship continuously pummelled by early spring storms and their heavy seas. Those who heard or felt the encounter paid scant attention to it. Ships at sea are noisy beasts, wooden

ships the loudest of all. There is the groan of timbers protesting against the push of the sea, the rush of the wake and the sound of the waves themselves; sometimes they brush quietly against the hull, but at others they fall with a loud crash upon the deck. Sails flap loudly until hauled taut by ropes crying through pulley blocks that moan as if the strain of it all were just too much to bear. The rigging creaks as it pulls against the tension of stretched canvas sail.

Amidst all this, the noise of the ship scraping the ice pan would be easy to miss. Only the first mate, Francis Rhodes, later said he noticed it, describing a "violent shock" that roused him from his bunk: "I immediately ran on deck and found the ship had struck an iceberg." The helmsman, Stetson, or Parker, the second mate, told him they had sailed against a pan of ice, not an iceberg, and the danger was already past. Assured there was no immediate problem, Rhodes then returned to his cabin for a change of clothes. The implication was that he intended to return to the bridge and take charge.

The problem of history, of remembered events recalled long past their time, is that people say one thing in the hours or days after a disaster, and say something else months or years later. In reconstructing this story, it has been necessary to navigate the shifting truths of survivors who told and retold their stories to each other and to friends, to officials and to lawyers, and especially to themselves. For example, when talking about that night, Rhodes afterward always insisted he was roused by the first strike and then went below to change into warmer clothes. He presented himself as an able ship's officer who did as much as any man could. But almost surely what he remembered was actually the second strike that *was* violent and universally felt.

If the first blow was as harsh as Rhodes remembered, then the sailors off watch, and probably the passengers, too, would have marked it. As first officer, Rhodes's quarters, and those of the captain, were aft, where the sea's motion is less intrusive and the berths, therefore, more comfortable. The crew's quarters, on the other hand, were a small crowded area between decks in the bow of the ship, where motion is exaggerated: every lift and drop of the hull against the waves is amplified. Had the first strike been a violent shock, the hammocks in which the sailors rested would have swung in an unnatural syncopation rather than the casual sway of a