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Book Review

Robinlynn Stewart

To commemorate the one-hundredth anniversary of the Lusitania tragedy, numerous historical narratives have sought to reexamine the events of May 7, 1915. Greg King and Penny Wilson's narrative, *Lusitania: Triumph, Tragedy, and the End of the Edwardian Age*, seeks to examine this tragedy through the perspective of its passengers and crew. King and Wilson, known for their collaborative works investigating the Russian royal family, provide a fascinating narrative, which examines the final days of the ship that nearly drove the United States into World War I.

Lusitania begins by addressing the circumstances surrounding the Cunard liner's fateful voyage in May 1915. King and Wilson assess the increasing sea threat posed by German U-boats cruising in British waters, as the Great War widened in scope and destructive capability throughout the first months of 1915. As established customs and courtesies of earlier European conflicts fell away and the British failed to abide by long-held carrier rules governing the conduct of ships at war, the German U-boat campaign became increasingly aggressive. On the date of Lusitania's departure from New York City, tensions between Great Britain and Germany in the war at sea had resulted in the German embassy's inclusion of a warning that any British or Allied ships, regardless of their cargo, would be at risk of attack.

This fear of attack resonated heavily with many of Lusitania's passengers as they boarded one of the fastest ships in the Cunard Line. Some were personally advised by the German embassy to forgo their passage on the Lusitania as its departure date neared. King and Wilson skillfully utilize the apprehension of Lusitania's passengers as they begin their biographies of those aboard. Their intense passenger biographies are excellently composed, and allow the narrative to keep readers engaged. The authors' ability to weave vivid and comprehensive biographies of their subjects allows a reader to forge a connection with these vibrant, yet flawed, passengers. Although King and Wilson's designation of Lusitania's passengers as a "Cast of Characters" trivializes their tragic experiences,

it is more of an irritant than a deterrent to the overall narrative.

Wilson and King's character biographies include over sixty first- and second-class passengers, including: millionaire playboy Alfred Vanderbilt, acclaimed theater producer Charles Frohman, renowned actress Rita Jolivet, and American hotelier Albert Bilicke. King and Wilson attempt to utilize this extensive list of wealthy passengers to illustrate the excess and idealism of the Edwardian period as it clashes with the harsh realities of a world at war. In this endeavor, they are largely successful. Unfortunately, this extensive and detailed series of biographies overwhelms the narrative, drastically minimizing the political, diplomatic, and military factors, which result in Lusitania's demise. King and Wilson also fall short in adequately addressing the plight of those third-class passengers aboard ship. While the authors readily acknowledge this deficiency in their prologue, claiming a scarcity of adequate source material, it presents an unbalanced social history of events onboard the liner during that fateful cruise. To try to remedy this deficiency, the narrative utilizes several crew accounts to depict the common man's experience.

As Wilson and King weave together the numerous biographies of their subjects, they place them against the backdrop of one of the last storied luxury liners of the early twentieth century. Considered one of the fastest ships afloat in 1915, Lusitania was the preeminent liner of the period. Lusitania not only held the benefit of speed for the dangerous voyage across the Atlantic, it was outfitted with rich, tasteful architecture, suitable for transporting some of the Edwardian age's most notable passengers.

Against the backdrop of these Palladian lounges and richly outfitted smoking rooms, readers are introduced to Lusitania's captain, William Turner. King and Wilson develop their narrative's thesis around Captain Turner's conduct. The authors claim that the captain's ineffectiveness, duplicity, and negligence were the primary factors in the tragedy. To build this case, King and Wilson utilize several primary sources: witness accounts, logbooks, telegrams, and court testimony. They cite the captain's failure to stage lifeboat drills, his unfamiliarity with a new crew, and his apathy towards passenger inquiries regarding their safety as they entered the war zone. Turner's actions left those aboard Lusitania unprepared when disaster struck. Furthermore, first-hand accounts claim that Turner was duplicitous as he assured several first-class passengers the Lusitania would receive an armed escort as they entered the war zone, despite knowledge to the contrary. Others noted Turner's refusal to give the order to abandon ship, even as seawater rushed upon the decks of the debilitated vessel. King and Wilson go further in their assertion of Turner's culpability, as they describe the captain's

decision to ignore telegrams warning ships of German U-boats lurking off the southern coast of Ireland on May 7, 1915. The Captain's most significant errors may have been his decision to ignore the zigzag maneuvers suggested by the British Admiralty to elude the enemy, his orders to slow the speed of Cunard's fastest liner, and his decision to steer the ship in waters expressly noted as being hazardous.

The narrative's strongest prose can be found in the chapters outlining Lusitania's final eighteen minutes. The authors' diligence in creating the lengthy biographical sketches of passengers is utilized during the disaster as these men, women, and children desperately struggled to survive. These gripping moments address the failures of the crew, as they refused to aide frantic passengers, were unable or unwilling to deploy lifeboats, took lifebelts from passengers, and—as one account alleges—a member of the crew even attacked a passenger with an ax during the chaos. King and Wilson provide a concise account of events as Lusitania sank beneath the waves and its survivors were forced to wait hours for rescue, although the coast was within their sight. As the survivors waited for rescue, *Lusitania: Triumph, Tragedy, and the End of the Edwardian Age* poignantly examines the final moments of those passengers who survived the sinking, but could not survive the frigid waters as they awaited rescue. The author's descriptions of rescue operations are grim, peppered with only the occasional happy ending, such as the tale of a missing child that was reunited with his family.

The narrative is fairly short for such a weighty subject, comprising only 299 pages of text. The writing style is straightforward and designed to address the casual reader. Although designed for a general audience, *Lusitania: Triumph, Tragedy, and the End of the Edwardian Age* provides a detailed notes and bibliography section, immensely useful to those academic historians seeking to further investigate this topic. While the text does attempt to address the implications the Lusitania disaster had for American isolationist sentiment and on the emergence of the preparedness movement, it still lacks the richness of military, diplomatic, and political analysis that readers may find in a strictly academic account. *Lusitania: Triumph, Tragedy, and the End of the Edwardian Age* is a great narrative for admirers of social history works featuring the upper classes of society; however, for more academic readers, the text may be more of a quick recreational read. In this respect, *Lusitania: Triumph, Tragedy, and the End of the Edwardian Age* should be considered for its smooth flow and excellent biographical content.