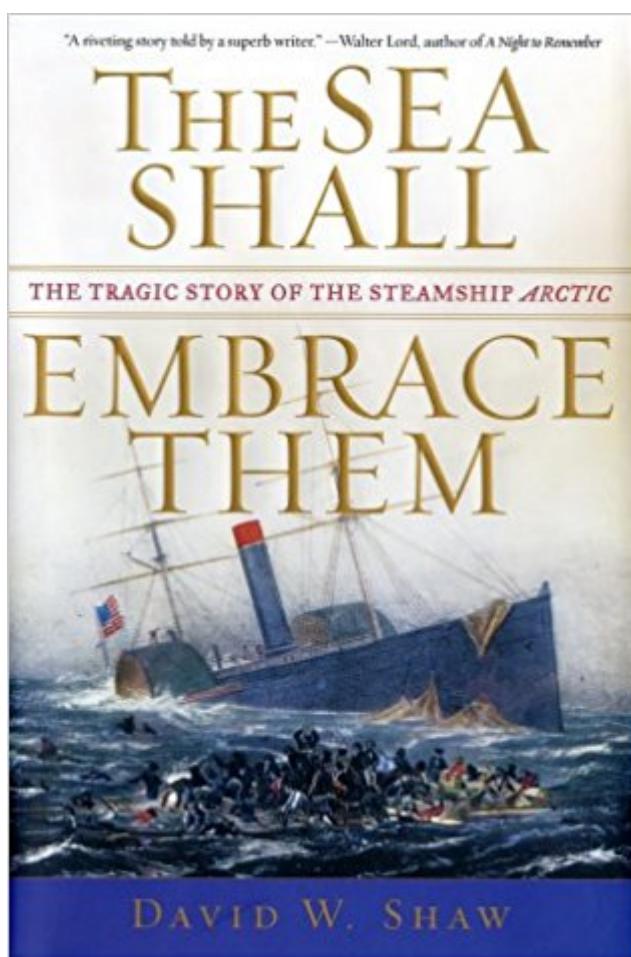


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# The Sea Shall Embrace Them: The Tragic Story Of The Steamship Arctic



## Synopsis

The 1854 collision at sea between the Arctic and the Vesta, a much smaller French steamship, set in motion one of the most harrowing events in maritime history, with enormous and tragic consequences. David W. Shaw, who brings decades of experience as a seaman to his writing, has based this riveting tale on the firsthand testimony of the few who survived the wreck, including its heroic captain, James C. Luce. It is the story of the brave and dutiful Luce fighting his mutinous crew as they take the lifeboats, leaving hundreds of men, women, and children to suffer a cruel and painful death. It is also the story of those who survived the frigid waters and those who perished -- including Luce's own frail son, who died as the grief-stricken captain helplessly watched. Not only did 400 people die by daybreak, the wreck brought to an end the domination of the seas by the American maritime fleet. Utterly compelling, beautifully written, and a fascinating, heretofore little-known slice of American history, "The Sea Shall Embrace Them" is a stirring narrative that puts the reader on the deck as a shipful of men, women, and children do battle both with a mighty ocean and with their own baser instincts to survive.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

By the mid-19th century, steamships were eclipsing traditional sailing ships in the lucrative transatlantic trade. The largest of these, the American Arctic, collided with a smaller vessel in 1854 with a frightful, and unnecessary, loss of life. David W. Shaw's The Sea Shall Embrace Them tells the story of this disaster, eerily similar in many ways to the later sinking of the Titanic. Shaw lays out the immediate and secondary causes of the disaster: bad weather, no established shipping lanes,

the ship's owners' preference for speed rather than prudence, and an appalling lack of safety precautions. As well, he describes the suffering and grotesque deaths of many aboard and dozens of acts of pure cowardice on the part of the crew. The writing for the most part is vivid and effective, though the physical layout of the ship is somewhat murky. The story of the Arctic is not only sad and the tragedy avoidable, but one that, as Shaw points out, would be repeated many times in the decades to follow. --H. O'Billovitch

Maritime writer Shaw (*Inland Passage*) believes that the 1850s were the "glory days" of the American transatlantic steamship trade. However, during that same period, the competition among international steamship lines to achieve the fastest transatlantic passage created a "wicked recklessness of speed" in all weather and circumstances." Shaw suggests that such competition coupled with the common practice of having steamers leave port without enough lifeboats for every person aboard was the overriding cause of disasters like the 1854 wreck of the Collins Line steamship Arctic. Based on firsthand testimony of the few survivors, Shaw's carefully researched account is a vivid portrait of gallantry and cowardice as hundreds of passengers battled for survival in the frigid waters off the coast of Newfoundland; it also provides intriguing insight into an important chapter in the history of the U.S. merchant marine. For Shaw, the collision at sea between the Arctic and the French steamship Vesta is much more than a chronicle of human disaster. The far-reaching consequences of that event foreshadowed the moment in history when, Shaw writes, "Britain, France, and Germany surged ahead in the transatlantic steamship trade" and the United States "turned inward and put her back to the sea." Recommended for all libraries. Robert C. Jones, formerly with Central Missouri State Univ., WarrensburgCopyright 2002 Cahners Business Information, Inc.

Good condition.

This book was a gift for my daughter. She reported back that she enjoyed it.

Interesting and informative. I enjoyed the book but it was not altogether what I expected. Took way too long to get into the "story" for me.

This new book by David Shaw tells the story of the tragic sinking of the United States Steamship 'Arctic' in 1854. The 'Arctic' was one of the new generation of ocean travelling boats offering the

paying public comfort and speed whilst crossing the Atlantic. Involved in a race against the liners of the British owned and operated Cunard Company the 'Arctic' was set to break all records, travelling full steam ahead regardless of weather or any other considerations. Sadly on September 27, 1854, the 'Arctic' collided with a new ironclad vessel, the 'Vesta', off the coast of Newfoundland and then within a short period of time plunged to the bottom of the sea, sparing only 87 of her 408 passengers. The book tells the sad story of this collision, the sinking and the terrible actions of the crew and some of the passengers trying to survive in the cold sea of the Grand Banks. This incident was a foretaste of the epic 'Titanic' sinking which was to occur some fifty years later. The author also tells the story of the competition between the British Cunard Company and the United States Collins Company in the race to provide the best and fastest service in crossing the Atlantic, which led to this terrible tragedy. The account of the boat sinking as the crew fails in their duty and desert, leaving just a few duty bound men, including the Captain with his sickly 11-year-old son is quite harrowing. In the end most of the crew escape with the few lifeboats available, leaving behind the stricken passengers, which resulted in the death of every woman and child aboard. This is great, and at the same time, very sad story and although quite short, only 220 pages of narrative, it is well told and gripping throughout. The author utilises numerous first hand accounts to convey the feelings at the time and also provides a number of black and white photographs. Overall this was a very satisfying book and I am sure anyone who enjoys reading about maritime history will be quite taken with this story.

This book is evocative of the sorrow and loss at sea of which Walt Whitman wrote so emotionally. In contrast to Whitman's poem however, here the vessel - the steamship Arctic - did not make it to port, and rather than a son mourning for his lost father it was the other way around. The Captain of the Arctic, James C Luce, was grief-struck as he helplessly watched his son and the vast majority of the passengers drown in the frigid north Atlantic some fifty miles off Cape Race, Newfoundland. The story has its origins in competition between the UK and the US. In 1840 Britisher Samuel Cunard inaugurated steamship service on his Royal Mail Steamship Line (the Cunard Line). In 1848 he brought the competition to the US by making New York his base for transatlantic crossings. By now Cunard was operating a fleet of ten ships that provided a regular schedule of steamship service between Liverpool and New York. Cunard had also raised the ire of US officialdom. Shaw quotes a US Senator as saying "America will soon become tired of being informed now of British maritime supremacy." Shaw says the response was "a new breed of steamships, stamped with American ingenuity and backed with the might of the US Treasury [whose] sole purpose was to 'cast this man

Cunard from the sea". Three such steamships built for this purpose were the Atlantic, Pacific, and the Arctic. They belonged to the United States Mail Steamship Company or the Collins Line as it was more popularly known - named after its owner Edward Knight Collins. Collins we are told was a man bent on "maintaining schedule and setting records whenever possible." The Arctic was a 3,000 ton, wooden paddle-steamer and was the largest, most luxurious, and fastest of the line. She set a record in 1852 making the New York to Liverpool crossing in ten days. The fateful voyage of the Arctic took place in September 1854. In command was Captain James C Luce. There were over 400 aboard with more than 300 being passengers; the rest comprised the "black gang" (as the stokers for the boilers were called) and the ship's officers. Among the passengers was Luce's son and E.K Collins' wife Mary and two of their children. Everything was routine as the Arctic set off from Liverpool but she shortly ran into a rolling fog bank. Luce maintained his course and speed of thirteen knots, but unknown to him, a French steamer called the Vesta had also entered the fog. The Vesta was a much smaller ship at 250 tons but she had iron cladding and when the two collided bow on, the larger wooden Arctic came off much the worse. This wasn't immediately apparent and Luce, fearing he had crippled and sunk the smaller ship, lowered one of his lifeboats as rescue. What was supposedly a mission of mercy to another ship soon became a desperate attempt to save his own as Luce soon discovered that the Arctic had been pierced in three places and the ship was taking on heavy water through a five-foot gaping hole. Shaw's description of the ensuing events is where the book is at its compelling best and we are caught up in it. As the reality that soon THE SEA SHALL EMBRACE THEM all sank in, the best and worst of humanity emerged. Cowardice and bravery were on display, more of the former than the latter. Captain Luce ordered full speed ahead, but while she was still some twenty miles offshore with land tormentingly just in sight, the ship's paddles stopped as the engines flooded. The Arctic quickly began foundering and Luce gave the order to abandon ship with women and children to be put in the boats first. There were not enough boats for all those remaining and the stokers were not inclined to wait while a raft was hastily built. They mutinied and brushed passengers aside and stormed the lifeboats. One brave officer pulled his pistol but before he could restore order a stoker bashed his head in with a vicious hit from a shovel. Forty-five persons made it into the raft before the Arctic sank and all told only 85 were eventually rescued. Captain Luce lived but was witness to what he described as "a most awful and heart rendering scene" as "men, women, and children were struggling together amidst the pieces of the wreck of every kind calling on each other for help, and imploring God to assist them." Neither Luce's son, nor Collins' wife, only daughter, and youngest son were rescued. Tragically there was not one woman or child among those saved. What became of the survivors? The Vesta made it to

port with minor loss of life. As is usually the case with such tragedies, where blame can not be properly ascribed, it falls on the Captain. Luce received a minor official reprimand and gave up the sea for a job ashore in maritime insurance. Of much greater pain would be the personal anguish of losing his son and the accusatory words of E.K. Collins ringing in his ears. The ships owner said Luce "had practically murdered his family". If you like sea stories, naval history and geography, with a little bit of 18th century US and British industrial and shipping history thrown in then you'll thoroughly enjoy this well written and thrilling tale of a little known maritime tragedy.

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