

Ashes Under Water: The SS Eastland and the Shipwreck That Shook America

Michael McCarthy

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Profiles of the central personalities involved in the career of the SS Eastland help to bring this compelling tale to life.

After more than a decade of research, journalist and Chicago resident Michael McCarthy shares a heartbreaking history in *Ashes Under Water: The SS Eastland and the Shipwreck that Shook America*. McCarthy gives this little-known Lake Michigan tragedy a thorough and compassionate telling and covers the media frenzy and indictments that followed.

The *Eastland* had survived several near disasters in its twelve years in service on the Great Lakes by the summer of 1915, when it was chartered for a pleasure cruise that should have been just one of many that season. Some 2500 passengers boarded the steamer before it rolled over while still at dock in a busy business district of Chicago, with crowds of commuters standing by as horrified witnesses. Hundreds of passengers would be rescued, but 844 would lose their lives. Over the course of the next year, hearings by competing state and federal grand juries and an extradition trial would absorb the nation in the quest for blame. Among the accused were the ship's builders, owners and captains past and present, the chief engineer, investors, and the inspectors who licensed the *Eastland* for service. *Ashes Under Water* details the *Eastland*'s career, the tragedy of 1915, and the trials that followed, as well as a sampling of those who lost their lives. Major players who enliven this tale range from an immigrant engineer lost to history, to Clarence Darrow, who defended that engineer against extradition to Chicago.

McCarthy opens with a personal account of his attraction to this story and his surprise at its lack of notoriety, even in Chicago. From this appealingly personal beginning, he proceeds with convincing diligence in his research. The history unfolds chronologically, beginning with what motivated a small shipping firm to commission a large steamship for shipping and possibly passenger service. Simultaneously, McCarthy follows his star characters, including Darrow and the engineer, Erickson. The pacing and coverage of parallel stories create a reading experience that is absorbing and accessible. McCarthy flirts with drawing a conclusion about the justice served (or not) by the court cases following the *Eastland*'s shipwreck but appears conflicted by sympathies with actors on both sides. This ambiguity is not disagreeable, however, as it is based upon involvement in his research. Plentiful notes and a lengthy bibliography provide opportunity for further study for those interested.

Ashes Under Water is carefully researched yet compelling told and combines the appeal of famous historical figures and places with everyday men and women struggling to survive. In this thoughtful treatment, the *Eastland*'s story will deservedly capture the sympathy and imagination of diverse readers.

JULIA JENKINS (Winter 2015)

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