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The Last Night of a Small Town: child narratives and the Titanic

Locations	Building R19, Room 107, School of Education
Date(s)	Monday 21st May 2012 (17:00-18:30)
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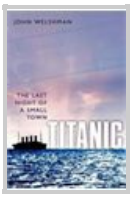
Interdisciplinary Research in Histories of Education and Childhood (DOMUS) Seminar Series 2011-2012



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This paper seeks to engage with the interests of the DOMUS group in schooling, education, and childhood by reflecting on the process of writing my new book **Titanic: The Last Night of a Small Town (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 15 March 2012 (http://www.amazon.co.uk/Titanic-Last-Night-Small-Town/dp/0199595577)** . The book features the stories of three people who were children or teenagers at the time of the disaster: in Second Class, Edith Brown (15) was heading for Seattle with her parents Elizabeth and Thomas; Eva Hart (7), also in Second Class was leaving for a new life in Canada with her parents Benjamin and Esther; while in Third Class we find Frank Goldsmith (9), from Strood in Kent, migrating to Detroit with his parents Emily and Frank. The book draws on their accounts: Goldsmith, Echoes in the Night (1991); Denney, Shadow of the Titanic (1994); and Haisman, Titanic – The Edith Brown Story (2009).

There have probably been too many books about the Titanic. But one of my original premises in writing the book was the belief that in the recent emphasis on myth, and on the causes of the disaster, the focus on individual passengers and crew members, and their stories, had been lost. What seemed to me most interesting were the personal narratives of both passengers and crew, and the light that the human detail of their stories sheds on the worlds that they came from. The book has been conceived as a trade book, a popular narrative that reconstructs the disaster through the personal stories of 12 passengers and crew members. In that respect its approach is similar to that of my previous book Churchill's Children: The Evacuee Experience in Wartime Britain (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010).

Aside from the three people mentioned already, the book covers the stories of both passengers and crew, and documents individual experiences as well as broader social changes. I felt the small town metaphor was helpful in conveying the sense that all aspects of society were on the ship, rich and poor, male and female, old and young, generous and selfish. First, the book seeks to re-balance the narrative, including away from adults, towards children. The book employs a 'life history' approach to uncover the lives of these people before and after the disaster. Second, and reflecting the subtitle, the book aims not just to offer a minute-by-minute depiction of events, but also to explore key themes – the construction of the ship; migration; nationality and place; the wider histories of technology and radio; age and gender; and social class. The paper thus reflects on the methodological challenges involved in weaving biographical or autobiographical accounts of childhood into a popular narrative.

Cost: Free of Charge

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