Review of William MacQuitty's book

TITANIC MEMORIES

The making of

A NIGHT TO REMEMBER

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Despite the undoubted success of James Cameron's epic film *"Titanic"*, many still regard the earlier 1950's black and white masterpiece *"A Night to Remember"* as the definitive film of the tragedy. Some 45 years after that earlier film was made its producer William MacQuitty produced a fascinating account of how he set about his task. The resultant book is remarkable for its precision and detail and indeed in itself serves as an absorbing history of the short life of *Titanic*.

It is clear from the book that Bill MacQuitty has a very particular interest in his subject that goes beyond his role of a very professional film producer. That is doubtless due to the fact that Bill is an Ulsterman who spent his early years in Belfast where the great ship was built. He was, however, a Bangor boy and lived for a period in 69 Princetown Road. Bill well remembers playing football for Bangor against Donaghadee and having swimming races across the bay. In the book he describes how, as a very young boy, he was present at the launch of Titanic and a year later joined the crowds who saw her sailing down Belfast Lough on her way to Southampton and ultimate tragedy. Those events have clearly stuck in his mind and in later life when he read Walter Lord's book on the tragedy he felt that as a film producer he had to convert that book into a film.

The book begins with greetings from James Cameron, the Director of the Academy Award winning film *Titanic*. James thanks Bill MacQuitty for the inspiration which *A Night to Remember* provided for his own production and recognises the impact which the earlier film had on modern culture.

In the preface, Arthur C Clarke provides a humorous quip "for my old friend Bill MacQuitty - "Who, as a boy, witnessed the launch of R.M.S. Titanic, and, forty-five years later, sank her for the second time."

Unusually, for that time, the film was made in black and white. John Davis, Rank's managing director, questioned

Bill as to why he wanted to make a black and white film and not a wide screen colour version.

Titanic survivor Lawrence Beesley was deeply moved by the re-enactment of the deck scenes.

The answer was simple but forthright. Bill's argument began; "To start with, it was an age of arrogance. Stateroom passengers, to establish their wealth paid £875 for the five-day crossing, Southampton to New York. Steerage passengers paid £12. In Belfast the names on the Titanic Memorial are in order of importance, while those on the nearby 1914- 18 War memorial are in alphabetical order. This will be the true story of the sinking. Previous films have only used the disaster as a vehicle for stars, or, as in the German version, for propaganda. In this film the ship will be the star. The tragedy has more human emotion than star actors could ever produce. There were 1503 people who died, 705 were saved. What better reason for making the film?"

Roy Baker who had a great sense of period directed the film. The scriptwriter was Eric Ambler, whose skills were acclaimed in the film version of Nicholas Monsarrat's *The Cruel Sea*.

Equipped with the lynch pins MacQuitty describes how he set about casting the film. There were 49 speaking parts plus the hundreds of extras. His emphasis was to choose actors who could represent real people. Kenneth Moore as Second Officer Charles Herbert Lightholler was undoubtedly a star, but even he had to defer to the fact that the real star was the ship herself. What MacQuitty ended up with was a cast of actors with a wide range of abilities, especially in character roles.

In his book he covers in a most sensitive manner how he dealt with the problem of presenting a film about such a tragedy. In his words he wished to, 'present the facts accurately'.

Once the cast was in place the film location shots were key aspects of the film. MacQuitty states that the "canvas we were working to for our story was vast and delicately woven". Nothing, it appears, was forgotten, even the davits had to be the same as the *Titanic's*.

In the chapter *Truth to Tell*, the author describes his meeting with several of the survivors from the ill-fated Titanic. Each meeting is a small story in itself. To give but one example he tells of Edith Russell, the young woman who owned what she considered to be her good luck charm, a musical pig.

Edith Russell with her musical pig given to her in 1911.

Edith used it in the lifeboat to keep the children amused. During the making of the film *A Night to Remember*, she