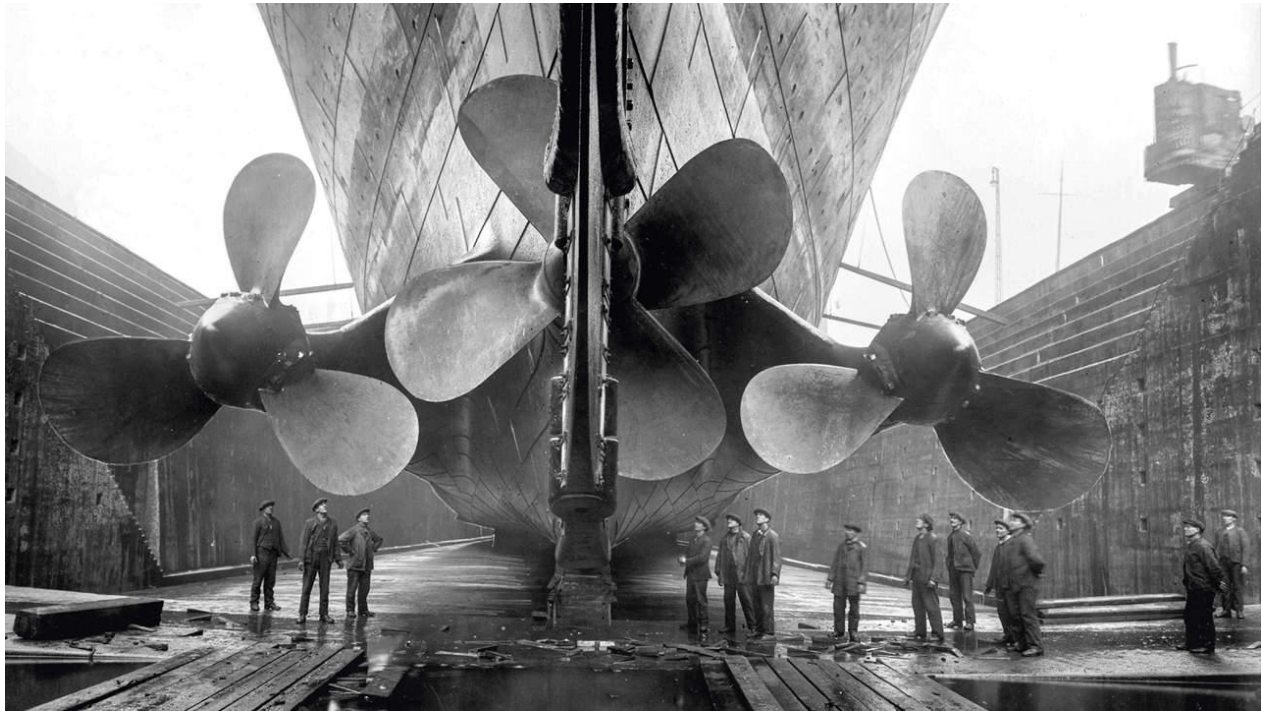


The New York Times: “The Iceberg Was Only Part of It” [C2]

Fatalità o negligenza? Dopo oltre un secolo, la tragedia del Titanic continua a suscitare interesse. Studi recenti dimostrano che, al di là della superbia degli armatori e dell'incompetenza del capitano, una serie di circostanze di carattere naturale congiurarono per provocare il disastro.



What [doomed](#) the Titanic is well known, at least [in outline](#). On a [moonless night](#) in the North Atlantic, the [liner](#) hit an iceberg and disaster [ensued](#), with 1,500 lives lost. Hundreds of books, studies and official inquiries have addressed the deeper question of how a ship that was so costly and so well built — a ship declared to be [unsinkable](#)— could have ended so terribly. The theories vary widely, [placing the blame](#) on everything from inept sailors to [flawed rivets](#). Now, more than a century after the [liner](#) went down in the early hours of April 15, 1912, two new studies argue that rare states of nature played major roles in the catastrophe. The first says Earth's nearness to the Moon and the Sun — a proximity not matched in more than a thousand years — resulted in record [tides](#) that help explain why the Titanic encountered so much ice, including the fatal iceberg. And a second, put forward by a Titanic historian from Britain, [contends](#) that the icy waters

created ideal conditions for an unusual type of [mirage](#) that hid icebergs from [lookouts](#) and confused a nearby ship as to the [liner's](#) identity, [delaying](#) rescue efforts for hours. The author, Tim Maltin, [said](#) his explanation helps remove the [stain](#) of [blunder](#) from what he regards as a tragedy. "There were no heroes, no villains," Maltin [aid](#) in an interview. "Instead, there were a lot of human beings trying to do their best in the situation as they saw it." The title of his book, *Titanic: A Very Deceiving Night*, alludes to how [mirages](#) could have [wrought havoc](#) with human observations. [Scholars](#) of the Titanic, as well as scientists, are debating the new theories. Some question whether natural factors can [outweigh](#) the significance of ineptitude. Others find the [mirage](#) explanation plausible — but only in limited scenarios. Overall, though, many experts are applauding the fresh perspectives. "It's important new information that can help explain some of the old mysteries," [said](#) George M. Behe, author of *On Board RMS Titanic*, a 2010 book that chronicles the letters, postcards and accounts of the ship's [crew](#) and passengers. The Titanic was the largest and most luxurious ship of its time, a glittering icon of the good life. It carried ten millionaires, including Isidor Straus of Macy's, then the world's largest department store. Like hundreds of other passengers, he perished when the ship went down — the water calm and the sky luminous with stars. From the start, news reports and inquiries [aid](#) that the ice in the North Atlantic was unusually bad that year. The New York Times, in an article shortly after the sinking, quoted United States officials as saying that the winter had produced "an enormously large [crop](#) of icebergs." Recently, a team of researchers from Texas State University-San Marcos and *Sky & Telescope* magazine found an apparent explanation in the heavens. They published their findings in the magazine's April issue. The team discovered that Earth had come unusually close to the Sun and Moon that winter, [enhancing](#) their [gravitational pulls](#) on the ocean and producing record [tides](#). The rare orbits took place between December 1911 and February 1912 — about two months before the disaster. The researchers suggest that the high [tides](#) refloated masses of icebergs traditionally stuck along the coastlines of Labrador and [Newfoundland](#) and sent them [adrift](#) into the North Atlantic [shipping lanes](#). "We don't claim that our idea is conclusive," Donald Olson, a physicist at Texas State, [said](#) in an interview. But, he added, the team continues [to gather](#) new supporting

evidence. Olson [said](#) that after the study's publication, "we found there had been remarkable tidal events around the globe — in England and New Zealand." A Sydney newspaper, he noted, had a headline that told of "record [tides](#)." The icy waters that night created ideal conditions for an unusual kind of [mirage](#), according to Maltin, who owns a public relations firm in London and has written three books on the Titanic. Andrew T. Young, an astronomer and [mirage](#) specialist at San Diego State University, helped him refine his theory. Most people know [mirages](#) as natural phenomena caused when hot air near the Earth's surface [bends](#) light rays upward. In a desert, the effect [prompts](#) lost travelers to mistake [patches](#) of blue sky for pools of water. But another kind of [mirage](#) occurs when cold air [bends](#) light rays downward. In that case, observers can see objects and settings far over the horizon. The images often [undergo](#) quick distortions – not unlike the [wavy](#) reflections in a [funhouse](#) mirror. In an interview, Maltin [said](#) he first learned of the possibility of cold [mirages](#) when reading a 1992 British inquiry on the Titanic's sinking. It suggested that the icy waters could have cooled the adjacent air and [warped](#) images that confused the Californian, a ship nearby that could have rushed to the Titanic's [aid](#) but instead did nothing. Fascinated, Maltin, who sailed boats in his youth, [dug into](#) navigational records and found that both the Californian and the Titanic had moved into the icy Labrador Current that night and had encountered conditions ideal for cold [mirages](#). He then [hunted through reams](#) of official and unofficial testimony to see what people saw — or what they thought they saw. A drama of [misperceptions](#) ensues. Maltin's book shows how [mirages](#) could have created false horizons that hid the iceberg from the Titanic's [lookouts](#). By this theory, the intersection of dark sea and starry sky would have looked [blurry](#), reducing the contrast with the [looming](#) iceberg. Maltin cites three [lookouts](#) on the Titanic who, despite the night's remarkable clarity, testified to seeing an unusual [haze](#) on the horizon. George Symons described the distant view as "rather hazy." Frederick Fleet told an official inquiry of a "slight [haze](#)" on the horizon before the Titanic struck the iceberg. He [said](#) it was significant enough to have discussed with a colleague. Reginald Lee, his shipmate, described the iceberg as "a dark mass that came through that [haze](#)." Maltin suggests that the speeding Titanic would have slowed down if its [crew](#) and officers had understood how the cold night was bending light in

confusing ways. As for the failed rescue, Maltin cites testimony that he sees as revealing the role of natural [trickery](#). The Californian — a modest [steamer](#) with a small [smokestack](#) — knew the luxury [liner](#) was nearby but [wrote off](#) sightings of its lights and [distress rockets](#). Maltin calculates that the two ships were about ten miles apart when both stopped and began drifting in the Labrador Current. But cold [mirages](#), he says, let the [crews](#) see the [vessels](#) as much closer — on the order of five miles. One Titanic officer [said](#) he could see the Californian's [porthole](#) lights. This sense of closeness — as well as the [funhouse](#) distortions inherent in the play of [mirages](#) — helped create a disastrous series of false impressions, Maltin argues. For instance, he says the [mirages](#) probably would have altered the Californian's view of the Titanic's overall shape, and illustrates his point with photographs of modern ships seen in [mirage](#) distortions. One series reveals a ship's [hull](#) to be greatly expanded while its masts and superstructure are collapsed to near invisibility. He also cites supporting evidence from the inquiries. "There was nothing at all about it to resemble a passenger boat," James Gibson of the Californian testified. The Californian's captain, Stanley Lord, [said](#) the nearby ship seemed to be a medium-size [steamer](#) rather than a giant passenger [liner](#) bearing four huge [smokestacks](#). "I am [positive](#)," he testified, "it was not the Titanic." Some historians have gone so far as [to posit](#) the presence of a mystery ship — a [needless](#) claim, according to Maltin and his [mirage](#) theory. He says optic [trickery](#) also confused the Californian's view of the Titanic's [distress rockets](#). Ships of the day often used company rockets for identification and signaling. Some of the Californian's [crew](#) testified that the [flares](#) of the nearby ship looked [odd](#). "These rockets did not appear to go very high," recalled Herbert Stone, the ship's second officer. "They were only about half the height of the [steamer's](#) [masthead](#) light." But those perceptions, Maltin says, could have been caused by a [mirage](#): The Titanic's rockets might have indeed [soared](#) high but simply appeared low compared with the [looming](#) vessel. The Californian's captain is often [vilified](#) as irresponsible and criminally negligent. But Maltin says Lord may have genuinely mistaken the giant [liner](#) for a small ship. The title for Maltin's book comes from the concluding remarks the captain made when asked by an inquiry about the causes of the disaster. "It was," he replied, "a

very deceiving night." Published in The New York Times on April 9, 2012.
Reprinted with permission.

Glossary

- **blunder** = errore madornale
- **hull** = carena
- **wrought havoc** = scatenare il caos
- **vilified** = denigrare
- **gravitational pulls** = spinte gravitazionali
- **Newfoundland** = Terranova
- **funhouse** = casa degli specchi
- **to posit** = postulare
- **mirage** = miraggio
- **adrift** = alla deriva
- **bends** = piegare
- **positive** = sicuro
- **patches** = pezzi, aree
- **wavy** = sinuose
- **hunted through** = scartabellare
- **undergo** = essere sottoposto
- **needless** = innecessaria
- **soared** = alzarsi
- **doomed** = condannare
- **lookouts** = vedette
- **Deceiving** = ingannevole
- **warped** = deformare
- **steamer** = imbarcazione a vapore
- **smokestack** = ciminiera
- **placing the blame** = dare la colpa
- **delaying** = ritardare
- **RMS** = ave postale del regno (Royal Mail Ship)
- **liner** = transatlantico
- **unsinkable** = inaffondabile
- **flawed rivets** = rivetti difettosi
- **reams** = pagine e pagine
- **crew** = equipaggio
- **enhancing** = aumentare

- **odd** = strani
- **porthole** = oblò
- **dug into** = indagare
- **blurry** = offuscato
- **looming** = incombente
- **outweigh** = pesare di più
- **crop** = gruppo
- **shipping lanes** = rotte marine
- **prompts** = indurre
- **aid** = aiuto
- **flares** = bengala
- **tides** = maree
- **trickery** = inganno
- **vessels** = imbarcazioni
- **in outline** = in linea di massima
- **moonless night** = notte senza luna
- **ensued** = seguire
- **to gather** = raccogliere
- **misperceptions** = false percezioni
- **wrote off** = ignorare
- **distress rockets** = razzi di soccorso
- **masthead** = testa d'albero
- **contends** = sostenere
- **stain** = macchia
- **Scholars** = studiosi
- **haze** = foschia