



Portrait of Lawrence Beesley (1900) and one of the lifeboats from the Titanic.

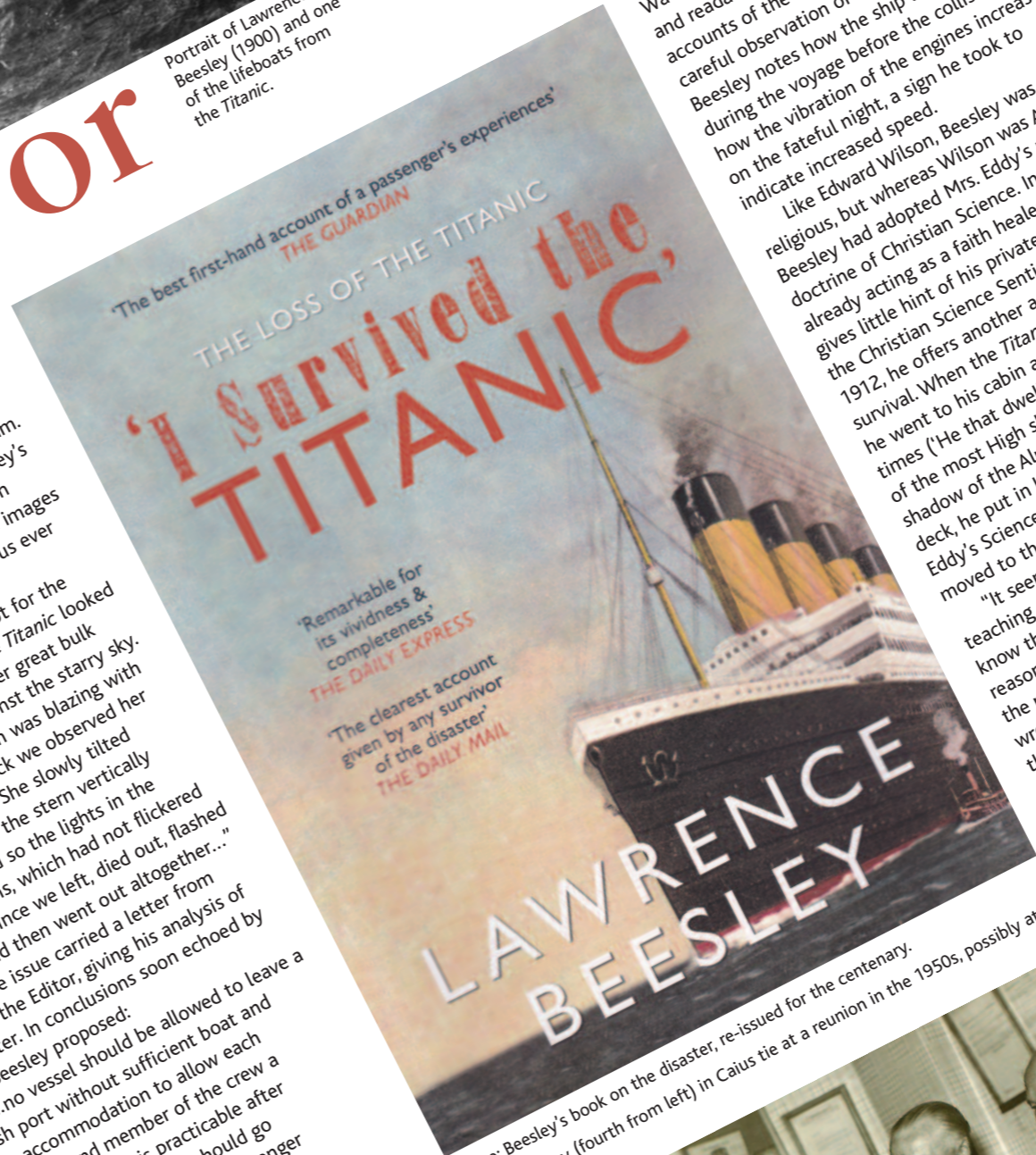
# A Caian Survivor

On 18 April 1912, the Daily Mirror reported the death of a Caian in a tragedy that gripped public imagination. This Caian was not Edward Wilson (1891), whose frozen body already lay with those of Scott and Bowers: it would be months before news of the fate of the Terra Nova expedition reached Britain. The loss reported was that of Lawrence Beesley

top deck. Beesley said there were not and the crewman told him to jump in. Boat 13, captained by a stoker and rowed by cooks, was picked up by RMS Carpathia at 4.45am. On 20 April, The Times carried Beesley's graphic account of the disaster, written from Boat 13 that have been with us ever since:

"It was an ideal night, except for the bitter cold. In the distance the Titanic looked enormous. Her length and her great bulk were outlined in black against the starry sky. Every porthole and saloon was blazing with light... At about 2 o'clock we observed her settling very rapidly... She slowly tilted straight on end with the lights in the cabins and saloons, which had not flickered for a moment since we left, died out, flashed once more, and then went out altogether..."

The same issue carried a letter from Beesley to the Editor, giving his analysis of the disaster. In conclusions soon echoed by many, Beesley proposed:  
"...no vessel should be allowed to leave a British port without sufficient boat and other accommodation to allow each passenger and member of the crew a seat... as soon as is practicable after sailing, each passenger should go through boat drill... each passenger boat engaged in the Transatlantic service should be instructed to slow down to a few knots when in the iceberg region, and should be fitted with an efficient searchlight."  
Within weeks, Beesley developed his initial account of the tragedy into a full-



Above: Beesley's book on the disaster, re-issued for the centenary. Below: Beesley (fourth from left) in Caius tie at a reunion in the 1950s, possibly at the Hawks' Club.

length book. It has been re-issued for the centenary year, with a preface by his grandson, the science journalist, Nicholas Wade. The book is sophisticated, accurate and readable – still one of the finest accounts of the loss of the Titanic. With the careful observation of a natural scientist, Beesley notes how the ship listed to port during the voyage before the collision; and on the fateful night, a sign he took to indicate increased speed.  
Like Edward Wilson, Beesley was strongly religious, but whereas Wilson was Anglican, Beesley had adopted Mrs. Eddy's new doctrine of Christian Science. In 1912, he was already acting as a faith healer. His book gives little hint of his private beliefs, but the Christian Science Sentinel for December 1912, he offers another account of his survival. When the Titanic struck the iceberg, he went to his cabin and read Psalm 91 three times ('He that dwelleth in the secret place of the most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty'). When called on deck, he put in his pocket the Bible – and Mrs Eddy's Science and Health. When most men "It seemed more in harmony with...the teaching of Christian Science, to 'be still, and know that I am God' ... There can be no reasonable doubt that Christian Science was the means by which I escaped from the wreck of the Titanic, and it is equally certain that any knowledge which I had of the material laws of natural science was useless on such an occasion..."

There was a moment of pantomime in 1958, during the filming of A Night to Remember. Beesley and his daughter Laurien were invited to Pinewood. They infiltrated themselves amongst the extras on the set of the Titanic. The director spotted them and used his megaphone to ask Beesley to leave the deck at once. Perhaps he was seeking this time to go down with the ship.  
The tableau that Beesley drew in his 1912 book has passed into our common imagination: 'The mere bulk alone of the ship viewed from the sea nearly a sixth of a mile long... with hundreds of her portholes, all her saloons and other rooms brilliant with light...'  
As a visual scientist, all her saloons been troubled by those lines of unflickering lights, ever blazing as their angle to the horizon increased. Why are they so odd? Because officers on the bridge could see another ship on the horizon, usually held to have been the Californian, which the Titanic tried to summon with a Morse lamp. As experienced mariners know, the dark-adapted eye is extraordinarily sensitive: under optimal conditions we can detect a signal as few as two photons, if those photons fall on the same retinal area within a brief interval. Yet the eye rapidly loses sensitivity if background light is present.  
If all those blazing lights had been dimmed, or if even one section of the ship had been darkened, the Morse signals might well have been visible to the Californian. But then again, why not use the entire ship as a Morse lamp?



by Professor John Mollon (1996)



Just as there are two slightly different accounts of how Lawrence Beesley came to be among the few male survivors from second class, there are two explanations of his trip to America: at the time it was said that he was visiting a brother in Toronto, but he sailed 'in half-hearted pursuit of an American heiress, whom he hoped to persuade to marry him'. There are other curious mysteries: for example, why was so strong a character omitted from the survivor lists transmitted by the Carpathia? Celebrated for a time, Lawrence Beesley spent the rest of a long life in relative obscurity. (When he died in 1967, there was no obituary in The Caian.) In 1919, he married Muriel Greenwood, who already had three daughters. Nicholas Wade suggests that one of them – Nicholas's mother, Laurien – was Beesley's natural daughter. Beesley was a keen golfer, taking part in the British Science practice and in 1934 became Head of a school in Bexhill. As an octogenarian ex-schoolmaster he appears in Julian Barnes' History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters – wearing his Gonville and Caius tie.