

IN REMEMBRANCE: POST DISASTER RITUALS AND SYMBOLS

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Abstract

This paper examines forms of post-disaster rituals and symbols in the United Kingdom, both formal and informal, and highlights the implications of these for those planning and preparing for delivering services and support. Religious and quasi-religious forms of expression covered here include spontaneous expressions of grief, more formally organised official memorial services, anniversary events and permanent memorials. Post-disaster rituals fulfil a number of functions for individuals and communities and these are briefly examined. Since commemorative sites and services can be sites of consensus and conflict, organisers are encouraged to take account of the range of social, religious and political issues surrounding disaster commemoration itself and decisions about where, when and how it takes place and who has the authority to make such decisions.

Introduction

A common feature in the aftermath of many disasters is symbolic forms of ritual expression demonstrating the impact of tragedy, particularly sudden and unexpected events on communities. These are forms of disaster popular culture, an area which has long been of interest to researchers who are now starting to systematically collate and analyse themes in this area of disaster-related behaviour (Note 1). Post-disaster rituals and symbols are a valid and important area of study because they have significant implications for disaster management. These implications are not only in terms of practical, logistical arrangements such as crowd control, but also in terms of managing sensitively and appropriately the range of psychological, social and political issues associated with these aspects of the immediate post-impact and longer term rehabilitative stages of disaster.

This paper examines forms of post-disaster rituals and symbols in the United Kingdom, both formal and informal, and highlights the implications for those planning, and preparing for

delivering services and support. The main focus is on disasters involving sudden, unexpected socio-technical events on a much smaller scale than the sorts of natural disastrous events more typical in, say, Australia and the United States. However, an interesting feature of post-disaster rituals and symbols is the similarity in form and function, and therefore much of the analysis here is also applicable to other post-disaster scenarios.

The ‘Decade of Disaster’

The main forms of post-disaster ritual occur in a chronological sequence; spontaneous, unplanned expression in the first hours and days are followed by funerals, official memorial services and anniversary events. These were all features of the ‘decade of disasters’ in the United Kingdom in the 1980s which was characterised by a series of major incidents happening in relatively quick succession. The disasters included the fires at Bradford Football Club, Kings Cross Underground Station and Manchester Airport as well as the Clapham train crash, the Lockerbie air disaster, the capsizing of the Herald of Free Enterprise, the sinking of the Marchioness Pleasureboat and the Hillsborough Soccer Stadium Disaster.

The decade of UK disasters in the 1980s

Date	Location	Incident	No. of Fatalities
11.05.85	Bradford	Football stadium fire	56
22.08.85	Manchester	Aeroplane fire	54
06.03.87	Zeebrugge	Ferry sinks	193
08.11.87	Enniskillen	Terrorist bomb	11
18.11.87	Kings Cross	Underground fire	31
06.07.88	Piper Alpha	Oil rig explosion	167
21.10.88	Greece	‘Jupiter’ ship sinks	4
12.12.88	Clapham	Train crash	36
21.12.88	Lockerbie	Air crash	270
08.01.89	Kegworth	Air crash	47
15.04.89	Hillsborough	Overcrowded stadium	96

20.08.89

Marchioness

Riverboat sinks

51

Interviews with some of the relatives and survivors from these disasters have been drawn on in this paper, as well as documentary material arising out of the incidents' management. These disasters received high profile media coverage, sometimes in the immediate impact phase (where television cameras happened to be present), and certainly in the first few days and weeks. Such high profile media attention was significant not only in reinforcing the sense of *national* tragedy as well as the local impact of each event, but also in helping to construct and reinforce socially appropriate forms of informal popular expression, even though these were often described as spontaneous and instinctive. These patterns of post-disaster ritualisation included both religious and secular acts. The latter include contributions to disaster funds, a routine media discourse (consisting of interviews with 'heroes', attributions of blame, calls for accountability and for lessons to be learned) and, later on, coverage of inquests and inquiry procedures. Religious and quasi-religious forms of symbolism are often included in spontaneous expressions of grief, more formally organised official memorial services, anniversary events and permanent memorials. It is these that form the basis of this paper.

Spontaneous Expressions of Grief

Sociologists of religion have discussed how religious rituals and symbols are collective representations of social groups and are the means by which individual participants learn, renew and reaffirm shared meanings (Durkheim, 1915). In times of social crisis such as disaster, anthropologists have analysed how funeral rituals provide a way for social groups to regain social balance and morale (Malinowski, 1948). Both individual and collective rituals enable the expression of grief and can be therapeutic in helping communities come to terms with tragedy. Initial informal popular rituals often start within hours of the disaster becoming public knowledge. They include members of the public visiting a disaster site or other significant sites associated with the event, as well as places of worship. At these venues there is the laying of flowers, toys (where children are involved) or other mementos. Also candles are often lit in houses or places of worship. Two examples illustrate this. After the Aberfan Disaster in 1966 (in which 144 people were killed when a coal tip slid down onto a school) 'flowers were sent from all over the world

and the Director of Parks and Cemeteries laid them out in a giant cross on the hillside, 130 feet high with arms 40 feet across' (Miller, 1974:29). Within twenty four hours of the Hillsborough Disaster (in which 96 Liverpool soccer fans were crushed to death in an overcrowded stadium) people had started to bring flowers and other tributes to Liverpool's home ground, Anfield. As the numbers swelled, the ground was opened to accommodate the crowds:

'By five o'clock the Kop end of the ground, where home supporters always stand, had become a shrine bedecked with flowers. The visitors continued to arrive from all over the country over the seven days of official mourning, queuing for hours in silent solemnity. The field of flowers gradually grew towards the centre of the pitch, whilst the concrete steps behind the goal were transformed into a carpet of scarves, pictures and personal messages. Scarves were also hung on the metal barriers, many of which became dedicated to the fans who had stood behind them week after week. School friends penned the names of their lost classmates on the walls outside the stadium. These messages expressed personal and communal grief as much, if not more, than any of the official ceremonies could have. For many people, visiting Anfield - Liverpool's home ground - brought their grief to the surface' (Eyre, 1989).

Although not a 'disaster' by conventional definitions of the term, the sudden death of Princess Diana in 1997 elicited a response not incomparable with the sort of emotional and symbolic ritualism seen in the aftermath of the disasters mentioned here. An appeal fund was set up and immediately attracted generous donations by the public, while personal visits to the Princess' home and floral tributes poured in. When asked why they responded in these ways, members of the public said they felt they wanted to *do something*, to express their sorrow and to acknowledge both their individual and the country's shared sense of grief. This again is similar to post disaster responses, even when participants may not personally know those killed or injured.

In recognition of these various forms of giving - or convergence - in the aftermath of disaster, much has been learned and applied, especially with regard to the careful planning and distribution of disaster funds (Disasters Working Party, 1991:14). One of the continuing ironies of some

giving, however, is that it does not necessarily fulfil the needs or interests of the bereaved. Apart from the disaster fund (which was itself described as the 'second disaster' due to the problems associated with its management and distribution), the large influx of toys was an impressive but inappropriate arrival into the village of Aberfan which had just lost a generation of its children. (Miller, 1974:30-31; Austin, 1967:178)

As well as the signing of official books of condolence, poignant messages accompanying flowers and other gifts also reflect the depth of grief following disaster. Tributes left at key sites express a number of emotions ranging from shock, grief and personal loss to anger and sheer unbelievability. They also have symbolic significance. Walter (1998) has argued that the places where flowers and other gifts are laid are ways of mapping the sacred sites of contemporary culture. He cites examples of flowers being left at town halls, war memorials and in supermarkets after Princess Diana's death.

Personal and/or collective messages from those bereaved by other disasters may be of much comfort to the bereaved through the implicit suggestion that there are others who have some understanding of the pain. An example of this was a floral tribute at the Dryfesdale Cemetery, Scotland, on the tenth anniversary of the Lockerbie Disaster with the simple message: 'To the bereaved families of Lockerbie and Flight 103 from the bereaved families of Dunblane'. Messages from key public figures such as the Queen or Prime Minister may also be heartening in expressing the national sense of grief and emotional solidarity with those directly bereaved.

Attendance at Religious Places

As well as disaster sites themselves becoming a focus for individual commemorative acts, religious places are also often visited more than usual after disaster. Even in generally secular societies a dramatic rise in attendance at places of worship has been noted. Sweden, for example, is regarded as a notoriously secular society, though most people have an implicit relationship with the Church of Sweden. After the Estonia Ferry Disaster in which over 800 people were drowned, many of them Swedes, very large numbers of people attended religious places (Pettersson, 1996).

By the evening of the first day of the disaster, at least 500 churches around the country had been opened for individual prayers, the lighting of candles and special services. Mourning services were also broadcast live on national television and radio.

Sociologists of religion have discussed the role, meaning and nature of alternative, popular or 'implicit' forms of religiosity after disasters (Pettersson, 1996; Gilliat, 1998). They suggest that in such contexts implicit religious needs and sentiments normally latent in society become explicit and expressed. Even among the usually unchurched, local and regional churches and cathedrals can become the locus of solace and support in both secular and religious terms. Regular and extraorganised services are often devoted to commemorating the disaster in the first few days and are a further feature of post-disaster ritual.

It is important to recognise the need to provide opportunities for traditional and non-traditional forms of expression in both religious and non-religious places and ways following disaster. On the day after the Hillsborough disaster, 8000 people attended the Catholic Cathedral in Liverpool, which, in a traditionally strong Catholic community, was as appropriate a symbolic site for the community as Anfield. In Dunblane, too, after the primary school shooting of 16 children and their teacher, local cathedrals were a natural reference point in this ecumenically active local community. Here again, feelings of grief and helplessness were expressed in both traditional and non-traditional ways. Symbolic mementos placed on the altar and in offertories included flowers and wreaths in the shape of secular symbols and teddy bears.

For those of religious persuasion, traditional religious networks and functionaries are a natural focus for support and for expressing the inevitable question 'why?' Some seek theological answers to questions such as 'why does a good God allow suffering?!' (Dynes, 1999: Schmuck, 1999). Davis and Wall highlight how theological interpretations to some extent reflect a hangover from the past when religious explanations were given for the causes and consequences of disaster:

'In *'Serious thoughts occasioned by the earthquake at Lisbon'* (1755), John Wesley suggested the possibility that the earthquake, which left 50,000 people dead, represented

divine retribution for the sins of the Inquisitions. *'Is there indeed a God that judges the world? And is he now making inquisitions for blood? If so, it is not surprising he should begin there, where so much blood has been poured on the ground like water'* (Davis & Wall, 1992:14).

For many, however, a theological interpretation may not be desired or appropriate and this makes it particularly difficult for religious representatives to know how to respond to relatives and others who might address them in the aftermath of tragedy. Reflecting on the decision-making process regarding the form of a memorial to commemorate the Bradford fire, trustee Roger Suddards (1987) recalls:

'We saw the plaque as being also a historic record of a terrible disaster in Bradford's history. Should we ask the Provost to place it in the Cathedral? Would this offend our non-Anglican friends? Walking round the Cathedral we were struck by the number of 'historical' as well as 'religious' monuments. We felt that our non-Anglican friends could not reasonably be offended'.

Formal memorial services

Some weeks after a disaster there is usually a planned official memorial service which, depending on its local, communal or national significance, is usually held in a cathedral or church. Official guidelines on emergency planning in the United Kingdom acknowledge the important functions served by such services and key issues for those planning and conducting such ceremonies. As *Dealing With Disaster* (1998) states:

'A memorial service provides an opportunity for those affected by the disaster to share their grief with others. It often has an important national as well as local role and is likely to be covered extensively by the media. For these reasons the organisation and structure of such events need to be considered very carefully, covering such aspects as timing, invitations and conduct' (para 4.28).

Little further guidance on planning and delivering such services is available however. Given the recentness of the event and the fact that people are still in shock, these are likely to be very emotional occasions. Indeed interviews with relatives and survivors highlight the enduring impact of such events and the sensitive issues surrounding their conduct and organisation. In fact these are important events for various types of victims involved in disaster, including emergency service workers and other helpers, who may be joining together with the bereaved for the first time after the event. One survivor comments thus on the community impact and solidarity she felt:

‘The church was absolutely packed and we were amazed that all these people had turned out on a cold November night to church. And there were the caretakers and the dinner ladies and neighbours, not only, you know, VIPs like the local MP and the mayor. There were so many people and it was absolutely packed’ (Survivor of the sinking of the Jupiter Cruise Ship commenting on the thanksgiving service).

Although these events are often attended by key national figures such as members of the royal family and politicians, the question of which dignitaries do and do not attend can be sensitive. Many of those who attended the official memorial service following the Hillsborough Disaster were upset that a representative of the senior royals did not attend and were also dismayed by the presence of the then Prime Minister, Mrs Thatcher, whose relationship with the City both before and after the Disaster was not warm. Those planning official memorial services need to be sensitive to these community factors and plan accordingly.

As an extension of this it is important to appreciate that the organisation and order of services themselves express implicit assumptions and messages. The Disasters Working Party (set up to examine psycho-social support systems in the aftermath of the decade of disasters) emphasises the importance of considering the feelings of the bereaved and offers the following advice:

‘It is extremely important to give due consideration to those who are personally affected

by the disaster, as well as to any officials or dignitaries, both local and national, who wish to pay their respects... It is important that joint services are held as far as possible, so that relatives do not find themselves attending numerous services in different churches' (1991, Part 2: p66).

In some cases the decision to invite dignitaries and to afford them privileged treatment and priorities over those most deeply affected, may be upsetting for the bereaved. One relative from the Lockerbie Disaster feels memorial services are

'appalling occasions because the most important people at them are the PM and/or the royal people, the local dignitary; they are the ones who get to sit in the front pew, who get to read a lesson or something like that. So my family chose absolutely not to go in the immediate aftermath.'

Statements such as this highlight implicit messages surrounding ownership and impact and show why careful thought is needed in planning the form, content, attendance and broadcasting of such services.

Insensitive language and proceedings, including both what is and is *not* said, can also have an impact on the bereaved. One survivor recalled a thanksgiving service after the Jupiter disaster thus:

'The vicar did not mention the four people who had died and a lot of people were upset that he hadn't mentioned them. The feeling was if *we'd* have died, would *we* not have been mentioned at someone else's thanksgiving service?'

While this interviewee acknowledged the attempt at sensitivity on behalf of the clergy, the sense of upset remained:

'Probably he didn't mention it because he didn't want to upset people, and it was a

thanksgiving service for our lives, and you don't know how he put the service together...but we would have liked a mention of these four people there.'

At a neighbouring school a similar thanksgiving service *had* included prayers for the four who had died and this aspect of ceremony, with candles being lit in remembrance, had been regarded as more appropriate. Some brief preliminary consultation with the bereaved about the service content may have prevented this distress.

The Disasters Working Party states that the clergy, alongside the Director of Social Services or Social Work, should be involved in planning memorial services, including decisions about when and where the event is held and who should be invited. There are obvious implications here for the training of clergy and others involved in planning and delivering such high profile events. Sadly, as with much disaster management, these are seen as sufficiently rare events and are not part of the regular training of religious and other professionals. How many mock exercises and seminars testing disaster plans include consideration of these aspects of the rehabilitative phases of disaster?

Anniversary Events

Psychologists have highlighted the significance of anniversaries and the 'anniversary effect'. Because of the psychological significance given to a certain day, many survivors

'are touched once again by the disaster. A brief but significant later point in time can powerfully evoke and activate the disaster experience' (Echterling, 1998:1).

Sociologists too have highlighted the social significance of disaster anniversaries as marking not only physical time but also 'social time', thereby acknowledging the passing of calendar years as well as enabling collective remembrance and expression of a community memory:

'Disaster anniversaries entail an interactive process in which people share personal

experiences. Public officials make declarative comments while the press and electronic media reconstruct the disaster experience by recording current thoughts and reflections. In short, the disaster anniversary is a process of collective remembering' (Forrest, 1993:448).

The first anniversary is particularly important after disaster but subsequent ones are also significant as high attendance and media coverage shows. On the 30th anniversary of the Aberfan Disaster, more than 100 villagers attended the annual commemoration service led by five ministers from eight churches and chapels (Timewatch BBC TV, 1996). As well as anniversaries being opportunities for relatives and survivors to reunite, bereavement and grief can resurface at this time. For some these events and media coverage may even trigger the beginning of griefwork and the onset of post-traumatic stress:

'Many existing crisis counselling services have received phone calls at times of anniversaries, birthdays, holidays, resolution of court cases and publications of reports about the disaster - all occasions when the memory of the disaster is evoked' (Disasters Working Party Report, 1991: Para 3.5).

Support workers need to be aware of this. Although practical information and support is planned for in the first few weeks and months following disaster, to whom will the distressed turn should the tenth, twentieth or thirtieth anniversary be the occasion of the first feelings of flashback and other symptoms of post-traumatic response? Optional helpline support may be a way of picking up some of these at anniversary and other significant points in the longer term, including the conclusion of inquest and inquiry procedures. As well as their therapeutic potential, planners need to be responsive to the fact that anniversary events themselves can cause resentment. They may reinforce, for example, anger at media intrusion or divisions among or between relatives, survivors and organisers.

The Politics of Anniversaries

For those more actively involved after disasters, for example members of relatives and/or survivors' action groups, anniversaries can be used to raise the public profile of outstanding issues and injustices. Such campaigners may positively use the media to publicise their views and feelings. As an example, the Hillsborough Families Support Group used the tenth anniversary to highlight the 'unfinished business' of the Disaster including the ongoing search for justice through the prosecution of senior police officers in charge on the day (HFSG, 1999).

Elsewhere I have argued that the public and 'complicated' nature of death through disasters has a significant impact on grieving processes and have emphasised the inability of the bereaved to find 'closure' while fundamental questions relating to the deaths of their loved ones remain outstanding (Eyre, 1998). This theme in the aftermath of humanly-caused disasters is a reflection of unsatisfactory and unsympathetic procedures in inquests, inquiries and court cases and their outcome. The persistence of unresolved issues relating to responsibility, accountability and justice can be a source of ongoing trauma for relatives and survivors. For them anniversaries are far from a rite of passage to 'moving on' but a painful reminder of the little that has been achieved after so long. Further distress is sometimes caused when these appropriate feelings of anger are dismissed as 'unresolved grief by the media and others. Rather, grief is just one of the complex emotions experienced after disaster which needs to be understood within the broader psychosocial and legal aftermath of disasters and their unfinished business.

The Functions of Post-Disaster Rituals

It is important to be prepared for and consider the practical organisation of the various forms of post-disaster ritual discussed here, not only because they are likely to have lasting effects on participants, but also because experience has shown that they are predictable features of post-disaster behaviour. This is because they serve important psychological and social functions for individuals and communities. It has been suggested here that in the first few days and week after a disaster, ritual expression can be a healthy opportunity for expressing the sense of shock, anger, disbelief, grief and other emotions associated with the disaster. For those of religious persuasion, post-disaster rituals serve explicit religious functions in terms of spiritual reflection and rites of

passage, particularly funerals. More fundamentally in the early stages (namely the first few days and weeks), acts and services are important for acknowledging the reality and devastation caused by the disaster. Indeed, the involvement of the media and public/political figures functions to define and socially construct incidents as ‘disasters’ in sociological terms by acknowledging their national and even international impact as well as the more direct local effects.

In many cases television coverage can enable the vicarious participation of the broader community by, for example, publicising and broadcasting memorial services. Though it may be short term, social solidarity on a smaller scale can be reinforced through the communal dimensions of services etc which can integrate an event into the identity of a community (particularly where a small geographical area or a particular institution such as a school is involved). At anniversaries, rituals can further function to locate and reinforce a disaster in a community’s social history and identity, marking the links between chronological time and social time (Forrest, 1993). As time passes, anniversary events also provide the opportunity for relatives and survivors to reunite, rebound and update on the progress of disaster-related actions and campaigns.

At the same time, however, it is important to recognise that post-disaster rituals, particularly organised events, may be psychologically and/or socially dysfunctional. As discussed, some may feel marginalised or excluded on grounds such as religion, geographical distance, inability to attend on the basis of disaster-related injury or simply due to the restricted number of places. Of course, on practical grounds, some prioritising of invitations has to take place. Usually families are given a limited number of places, but this may mean that survivors feel left out (often literally in terms of access into a cathedral or church) and left with uncomfortable feelings about a lack of ownership and consultation. More broadly, the dynamics within relatives’ and survivors’ groups, and even the relationships between the two, may reinforce the inappropriate sense of a hierarchy of grief and this, as well as different ways of grieving, may be part of the reason why self-help and support groups experience internal strife, splinters and breakaways.

As stated, in exceptional cases, anniversaries promote dysfunction by triggering the first symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, particularly for those who have not been able to

start grieving previously. Disaster managers need to be aware of, plan for and publicise the extra psychosocial support which may be needed at such times.

In various ways, therefore, post-disaster acts and services may fulfil a number of functions ranging from increasing social solidarity to fostering or reinforcing a sense of social exclusion. It is important to remember that the organisation and impact of such events, as well as the disaster itself, is likely to affect many and varied groups of 'victims' (Taylor, 1989) over a significant length of time. Hence I have also argued that a much longer term approach must be incorporated into the concept of the 'disaster cycle' and its rehabilitative phases (Eyre, 1998). While it would obviously be impossible to consult with all those affected, disaster managers must recognise that those most directly involved will have an emotional interest in post-disaster rituals such as memorials and anniversary services. Where possible in the longer run, involving these interests groups in decision-making may be preferable. An example where such decision-making processes have been applied is in the area of permanent memorials.

Permanent Reminders: Disaster Memorials

Just as war sites and those killed by armed conflict are commemorated at permanent memorials (Note 2), so physical reminders have been constructed as a way of remembering forever particular disasters and their legacy. Those tasked with planning and organising such memorials can learn much from previous experience here. Key questions to be addressed include: what form can and should a permanent memorial take? How will memorials be maintained longer term? Who should make these decisions?

Permanent memorials after disaster take many forms. As well as the personal graves of those who lose their lives, (each in itself a commemoration of a life), collective symbols commemorating the event and its significance are also often constructed and maintained either at or close to the disaster site. In the small community of Aberfan, South Wales, part of the appeal fund was used to construct a formal memorial in the shape of a cross bearing the names of the victims at the place where some of them were buried in a mass funeral. The series of white arches set against the sky

on this hillside cemetery touches all who visit. Also, at the site where the junior school once stood, a garden of remembrance was constructed, its layout reflecting the original layout of the classrooms that had been there. Both memorials are visited regularly by members of the local community and outsiders, testimony to the continuing significance both of the event and its memory.

Suddards (1987) reflected at length on the range of issues surrounding decisions about the permanent Bradford Disaster memorial. His reflections, revealing great sensitivity and forethought, are reproduced below:

‘What form should a memorial take? For my part I would have liked some kind of a garden which could be used as a place of peace for those who suffered. But this has complications: someone has to maintain it. It might not be wanted (the thought of a hall at Aberfan, which is I understand little used, loomed in front of us) or it might be vandalised... We all felt that whatever shape our memorial took, it was important that it commemorated the generosity of people contributing to the fund. So in the end, after some fascinating discussions, we all were happy to suggest a memorial plaque... Although gardens would have been nice, nonetheless here is a plaque which will be in a safe place, a thing of beauty and something which those who are still distressed from that tragic day may come and see in peace, quiet and privacy. We hope that it will give them comfort’.

Conclusions

In all the ways discussed above then, informal and official commemorative events are more than just occasions for remembering those killed or injured and ways of expressing personal and collective grief. Although the first anniversary appears to be of particular significance (Forrest, 1993), subsequent ones are too as their marking shows. Commemorative sites and services can also be political sites of consensus and conflict. It is suggested here that researchers and practitioners may learn more about the longer term psycho-social and political significance of some disasters by examining the issues and expressions surrounding disaster commemoration

after five, ten or even twenty years. Organisers need to take account of the range of social, religious and political issues surrounding disaster commemoration itself which are reflected in decisions about where, when and how it takes place and who has the authority to make such decisions. In the longer term, this is one justification for a community-based commemoration involving relatives and survivors in the planning and designing of such events wherever possible.

Notes

1 Popular culture in disasters forms the focus for study and discussion by researchers at the Annual Natural Hazards Workshop, University of Colorado, Boulder (July 1999), the American Sociological Association AGM, Chicago (August 1999), and the European Sociological Association Annual Conference, Amsterdam (August 1999).

2 The internet is increasingly becoming a resource for commemorating those killed by war (eg <http://www.poppypeal.britishlegion.org.uk>) and disaster (eg the National Network for Child Care: <http://www.exnet.iastate.edu/IPages/families/ncc/Guidance/flood/anniversary.html>) and for highlighting ways to mark anniversaries and disaster-related campaigns.(eg <http://www.hfsg.org> for the ongoing campaign relating to the Hillsborough Disaster).

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