In a letter to his son, written on May 2, 1915, Walter Page, the United States Ambassador to England, expressed concern that America might be drawn into the war in Europe. “The blowing up of a liner with American passengers may be the prelude,” he speculated. “I almost expect such a thing.”

Five days later a German U-boat sank the Lusitania, a luxury ocean liner bound for Liverpool, England. Of the 1959 passengers and crew on the ship, only 764 survived. Among the dead were 123 U.S. citizens.

In “Dead Wake,” Erik Larson, the author of “The Devil in the White City” and “In The Garden of Beasts,” marks the 100th anniversary of the disaster with a compelling narrative that alternates between the crossing of the Lusitania, the search of Unterseeboot 20 (and its captain, Walther Schwieger) for targets, and the attempts by Room 40, a secret British intelligence unit, to track submarine activity near the coast of England.

“Dead Wake” does not provide new interpretations of the role of the sinking of the Lusitania — or of the unrestricted submarine warfare conducted by Germany — on U.S. participation in World War I. Nor does Larson shed new light on allegations that the British government consciously sought to endanger the ship in order to involve the United States in the conflict.

Larson’s goal is more modest: to “marshal the many nodes of real-life suspense and, yes, romance,” surrounding the episode to allow readers to experience it as did the people at the time. With a keen eye for detail, he succeeds admirably.

Larson provides memorable portraits of Capt. Thomas Turner, the Lusitania’s “old fashioned sailorman,” who described his passengers as “a load of bloody monkeys who are constantly chattering” and the good-humored, urbane Capt. Schwieger, “who wouldn’t kill a fly.” Larson reveals that Charles Lauriat Jr. — a handsome, 40-year-old Boston bookseller who considered passenger steamers immune from submarine attack — brought with him dozens of drawings by William Makepeace Thackeray, the author of “Vanity Fair,” to illustrate his own works; and a volume of “A Christmas Carol” that had been owned
(and scribbled in) by Charles Dickens. Lauriat did not insure these items because he deemed the risk “practically nil.”

We learn as well that passengers who wore coats under their life jackets (and insulated their hearts) were more likely to survive than those who stripped down. And that when immersed in a water temperature of 55 degrees, thin people, old people, infants and passengers who drank wine or liquor at lunch were likely to lose body heat and suffer from hypothermia.

Among the survivors, Larson writes, were Cliff and Leslie Morton. Separated from one another when the ship was hit, the brothers wrote telegrams to their father, which arrived five minutes apart, so that Mr. Morton knew that both of his boys were safe before they did. Their story, Larson emphasizes, was one of many, “large and achingly small, that converged on that lovely day to produce a tragedy of monumental scale.”

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