RULE *BRITANNIA*: WHEN CUNARD RULED THE WAVES

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What could be more glamorous and romantic than a voyage across the ocean? Surrounded by the rich and famous for days on end in some of the largest and finest interiors ever designed, such voyages offered every thinkable amenity at your disposal. The Cunard Line summed it up well in the 1950s, claiming “getting there is half the fun.” Despite steam technology existing since the mid eighteenth century, steam-powered ships are a relatively recent invention and were not a viable option until the 1830s. The steamship that people are familiar with today was born out of a decades-long struggle by countries on both sides of the Atlantic. Each had their own claim to the ownership of the first steamship to cross the ocean. The Americans had the *Savannah* in 1819; the Netherlands had the *Curaçao* in 1827 (reportedly traveling all the way from Rotterdam to Suriname); the Canadians had the *Royal William* in 1833; and Britain had the *Great Western* in 1838.¹ Since the early decades of the nineteenth century, Great Britain, whose dominance on the oceans was slipping, and the United States, who was emerging as a global superpower, battled for control of the maritime economy.² Ultimately, it was Samuel Cunard, a Nova Scotian shipowner, who won the race for Britain. His company, the Cunard Line, not only proved the reliability of steamships in crossing the Atlantic safely, but also established the first regularly scheduled service between Europe and America, thereby securing Britain’s place as a naval power.

¹ At least six ships were known to have attempted to cross the Atlantic by steam in the first third of the nineteenth century. However, none are known to have completed the crossing by steam alone. Stephen Fox, *Transatlantic: Samuel Cunard, Isambard Brunel, and the Great Atlantic Steamships* (New York: Harper Collins Ltd, 2003), 73.

² John Bolieau, *Samuel Cunard: Nova Scotia's Master of the North Atlantic* (Halifax, Nova Scotia: Formac Publishing, 2006), 25.

Before 1818, it was customary for shipowners all over the world to advertise an approximate sailing day for their ships. Whether or not the ship sailed on time was a completely different question; it was up to the captain to decide when the ship had accumulated enough passengers or cargo to justify the voyage. This was done to ensure the voyage would be profitable for the owners, although this often led to delays for up to a week and usually caused goods to spoil *en route*, not to mention the creation of unhappy passengers.³ American shipowner Jeremiah Thompson, with the help of several other merchants, established the Black Ball Line, widely considered to be the world's first shipping line, in late 1817. Apart from being the only company to have an organized fleet of ships, the Black Ball Line was also notable for having fixed sailing dates, meaning that one ship would sail from New York and one from Liverpool simultaneously on the first of the month regardless of passenger or cargo compliment. Unfortunately, in the days of the sailing packet, the arrival date was still very much up in the air. A typical eastward voyage to Liverpool from New York took an average of twenty-three days, while it was forty westbound, although voyages lasting a mere fifteen days had been recorded.⁴ The public loved the scheme, and many new merchants quickly established similar lines travelling to ports all over the North Atlantic, giving rise to the new concept of transatlantic travel and setting new standards in ship building.⁵

With the establishment of the Black Ball Line, dominance over the transatlantic shipping industry shifted to the Americas. New England shipyards began building ships at an unprecedented rate. As Atlantic traffic grew, and more companies were established, passengers began demanding their ships be larger, faster, and more luxurious. For a time, solutions were

³ John G. Langley, *Steam Lion: a Biography of Samuel Cunard* (Halifax: Nimbus Pub., 2007), 18.

⁴ Kay Grant, *Pioneer of the Atlantic Steamship* (London: Abelard-Schuman, 1967), 43.

⁵ Fox, 3-6.

found; ships began appearing with flat bottoms, sharp bows and sterns, and longer, narrower hulls, giving rise to the sailing ship silhouette we are familiar with today.⁶ Competition often led to ships being poorly designed and prone to sinking. Later packets were known as “coffin brigs” due to their tendency to roll over in high seas, as design improvements occasionally caused ships to be top heavy, although in the days before inter-ship communication, it appeared that these ships just vanished into thin air.⁷

Oddly enough the British were slow to adopt shipping companies and the new designs, and ship owners and builders seemed to be afraid of new technologies.⁸ It became clear by the 1830s that the United States was winning the Atlantic race. American ships had proven to be superior to British ones. Traffic out of Falmouth, the main British port when sailing to the United States and Canada, had fallen to the point that American ships were carrying most British mail. However, Americans ignored the developments in Europe for too long. Although they initially kept pace, partially thanks to Robert Fulton who helped create their famous riverboats, steam engines were slow to be put on transatlantic ships. The *Savannah*, the first ship to cross the Atlantic with a steam engine, was only outfitted with one shortly before the voyage, and even then it was only to make her travel across the ocean faster and make her more appealing to British buyers.⁹ The first ship to cross the Atlantic entirely under steam to the United States was the Great Western Steam Ship Company’s *Great Western* in April 1838. Built by leading British engineer Isambard Brunel, she is widely considered to be the first purpose-built transatlantic steamship.¹⁰ America was still largely building sailing ships, as most shipbuilders believed that

⁶ Fox, 5-6.

⁷ Ironically, it was the British ships that were more likely to sink. Langley, 18.

⁸ "Ship technologies in Europe and America had been static for 200 years." Fox, 5. See also John R. Hill, *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Royal Navy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 196.

⁹ Fox, 73.

¹⁰ Brian Lavery, *Ship: The Epic Story of Maritime Adventure* (New York: DK Publishing Inc., 2004), 209.

steam power was safer on river networks than on the Atlantic, and despite seeing the success of the *Great Western*, regarded the ship as a passing fad; the Atlantic was still too volatile for steamships to cross safely, since ships now had the added danger of catching fire.¹¹

Also prompted by the *Great Western*'s success, in November 1838 the Admiralty released a statement declaring its intent to finance a regular mail tender between Liverpool and New York starting the following April, with a deadline for submissions set for December 15. It was a lucrative contract at the time letters cost one shilling per page.¹² Some believe that the early deadline was to keep the contract strictly English by severely limiting the number and nationalities of the contenders. Only two companies, the Great Western Steam Ship Company and the St. George Steam Packet Company, ended up submitting proposals, but both were rejected because neither could provide a sufficient number of ships for the starting date.¹³

It was at this point that Samuel Cunard entered the scene. Born in Halifax, Nova Scotia to Loyalist parents, he had been in the shipping business for over 30 years before hearing of the 1838 Admiralty contract. An intensely private man, according to surviving correspondence, Cunard was on a train from Manchester to Liverpool when he became convinced that steamers could cross the North Atlantic with the regularity of steam engines on land, but without the costs involved in building railways.¹⁴ Ironically, December 15 was the day he heard of the Admiralty contract. Unaware of the deadline, Cunard sailed for London in January 1839 to negotiate the contract in person with Admiral William Parry, Comptroller of Steam Machinery and Packet Service, who Cunard also happened to know personally from his days stationed in Halifax when

¹¹ Iron ships were uncommon until the 1860s. Fox, 27.

¹² Grant, 109.

¹³ This company owned the *Sirius*, another ship that historians claim was the first steamship to cross the Atlantic, also in April 1838, simultaneous with the *Great Western*. Fox, 88.

¹⁴ Bolieau, 58.

in the Royal Navy. What happened in the meeting is unknown, but Cunard, who had never owned a steamship before, was granted a bi-weekly service between Liverpool and Halifax (although this was very quickly changed to Liverpool-Halifax-Boston) with four ships. Cunard was backed by Robert Napier, who supplied the engines for the Royal Navy's small steam fleet, thereby establishing the British and North American Royal Mail Steam Packet Company, or Cunard's Line for short.¹⁵

In the summer of 1840, two months behind schedule, Cunard's first ship, the Royal Mail Steamer *Britannia* (the first ship able to carry the designation RMS), departed Liverpool for Boston via Halifax. The date, July 4, had meaningless significance attached to it on both sides of the Atlantic. British newspapers saw it as the aptly named *Britannia* taking control of the seas from the United States on the anniversary of their independence. The Americans saw it as the beginning of a new chapter in their country's history, one that conveniently started on July 4.¹⁶ The *Britannia* herself was hardly an assuming ship. A scaled-down version of the *Great Western* in size, capacity, and luxury, she appeared to be "neither steamship nor sailing ship, but a hybrid of the two."¹⁷ There was little to distinguish *Britannia* from many other ships; at 207 feet long and 1,150 tons, she was 15 per cent smaller than the *Great Western*, *Britannia*'s biggest competitor, but still not the largest ship on the ocean.¹⁸ The *Britannia* could be easily mistaken for an inland mail steamer or ferry; no one even noticed her enter Halifax harbour early in the morning of July 17, although this was also partly due to no one informing the signalman because

¹⁵ The name "Cunard Line" would not be formally adopted until 1879.

¹⁶ Fox, 94. In reality Saturday July 4 was chosen because of Cunard's desire to have one ship leave a port on either side of the Atlantic every Saturday to ensure a continuous run.

¹⁷ Fox, xiii.

¹⁸ That designation went to the British and American Steam Navigation Company's *President*, although she sank in March 1841, hardly six months into her career.

it was after 2am.¹⁹ However, the biggest surprise was not the ship's sudden arrival in Canada. It was the date. The *Britannia* had crossed the Atlantic in 12 days, beating the *Great Western*'s time by just under 48 hours and, more importantly, two days ahead of schedule. Later that morning, the ship departed for Boston, and arrived a little over 36 hours later, still two days ahead of schedule. After a six-day layover, she departed Boston for Halifax and Liverpool again, this time crossing the Atlantic in ten days, a record that would last until 1842.

It is easy to overlook the impact *Britannia*'s arrival in Halifax had on shipping. It marked the first time a ship had an estimated arrival date, which was part of Cunard's proposal and important in itself, but the *Britannia* arrived *ahead* of schedule, and then left Boston after only six days to make a better time on the voyage home to Liverpool. Sailing packets could never achieve such a speed as single crossing could take as long as *Britannia*'s entire round trip, including her stops in Halifax and Boston. This service was taken slightly further in August 1840, when Cunard added its second ship, the *Acadia*, to its roster, followed by the *Caledonia* in October, and finally the *Columbia* in January 1841. The sister ships of the Britannia Class were indistinguishable from the others, but in the good spirit of sibling rivalry, each ship beat the time of the one before it by a matter of hours. With the completion of *Columbia*'s maiden voyage, the significance of Cunard's plan became clear; not only was the Line the fastest across the ocean, but it was the only regular year-round service to Europe. Although the service seems slow today— only one ship departing each city per month in the winter, as the North Atlantic is famously violent in cold weather, and two during the rest of the year—it still represented a continuous link between North America and Europe, something that no other company could boast.

¹⁹ Langley, 69.

With the collapse of the Great Western Company, the Cunard Line's main competitor, in 1846, the company gained a monopoly on the Atlantic trade. However, by 1850, the American Collins Line had appeared with larger, faster, and more luxurious ships. The Inman Line ships even had iron hulls and screw propellers, both considerable technological advancements over Cunard, which quickly fell back into third place. In the United States, as the 1840s progressed, shipowners came to resent the rejuvenation of British shipping. Edward Collins, founder of the Collins Line and one of the most outspoken critics of this trend, claimed that, "whoever commands the sea, commands the trade of the world."²⁰ Britain was doing quite well for herself through its shipping companies. Most passengers and mail were carried by British ships, and when the Cunard Line shifted its American base to New York in 1848, the sailing packet industry was virtually eliminated overnight, thereby signalling the end of American oceanic adventures and dominance.²¹ Americans believed that the Cunard Line was created with the sole purpose to destroy the American industry.²² The Collins Line, more so than the Inman Line, which resulted from a mail contract from the United States Postal Service, was established in response to Cunard. Each new Collins ship was a record breaker in terms of size and speed, which quickly drew passengers on both sides of the Atlantic. However, freak accidents, such as the sinking of the *Arctic* in a collision in 1854 that killed nearly all passengers, over 300 people, including Collins' wife and two of his children, and the complete disappearance of the *Pacific* in early 1856 signalled the end for the Collins Line, which ceased operations in 1858. This collapse

²⁰ Edward K. Collins, *The Supremacy of the Seas: or facts, views, statements, and opinions relating to the American & British steamers between the United States and Liverpool* (Washington DC: Gibson & Co., 1851) <https://archive.org/details/supremacyofseaso00coll>.

²¹ Collins; Langley, 58.

²² Collins.

led passengers back to Cunard, which had lost only one ship since its inception, the *Columbia*, which ran aground in 1843, but all passengers and mailbags were safely unloaded.

Early Cunard ships were never revolutionary. Instead, they were meant to be “expressions of steamship technology, [...] summarizing recent progress, and adding only small, careful improvements.”²³ It was Cunard’s policy to not introduce new technologies onto his ship until they had been thoroughly tested by other lines. Change was incremental, never innovative.²⁴ As a result, each Cunard ship was slightly better than the last, a “consummation of human ingenuity.” Cunard ships were meant to be showcases of modern technology that just so happened to carry passengers and mail, rather than the glamorous pseudo-ocean liners run by Great Western and the British-American Lines. In fact, it was only Cunard’s reputation for safety that kept the line in business. Its policy of incremental change backfired, and its ships soon found themselves outdated almost as soon as they were launched. For example, Cunard’s first iron ship was only built in 1856, six years after its first successful use, its first ship with a screw propeller in 1867, over 20 years after its introduction, and its last ships to carry sails were launched in 1884, in case engines still proved unreliable, and not decommissioned until 1910. But, to Cunard’s benefit, it never lost a passenger—until 1903, when the *Etruria* was hit by a rogue wave that killed one passenger—or a mailbag until the sinking of the *Lusitania* in 1915. The Cunard Line’s conservative policy, although it nearly spelled the company’s downfall in the late 1860s and 1870s, is what allowed the company to survive the early days of the Atlantic race.

A *London Times* article from 1859 stated that, “it is to Mr. Cunard, more than to any other man, that we owe the route across the Atlantic, which has so closely connected the two

²³ Fox, 94; Langley, 66.

²⁴ Grant, 158.

worlds as to leave no room for more complete approximation.”²⁵ Although far from the first shipowner to put a steamship on the ocean, in less than a decade Samuel Cunard turned Atlantic travel from a haphazard affair, in which neither departure nor arrival could be guaranteed, to a regularly scheduled service at speeds never thought possible, a system that countries on both sides envied. The introduction of the Cunard Line in July 1840 revolutionized ocean travel and not only linked continents and people in new ways, but also permanently ensured Britain’s position as the masters of the seas.

²⁵ Langley, 155.

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