



L.M. Otero/AP

The Entrepreneur Sir Samuel Cunard

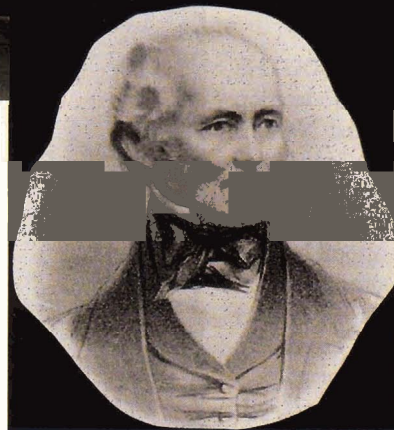
THE WORLD TODAY TAKES EASY TRAVEL and communications for granted, but they are relatively recent phenomena. Until the 1830s, Atlantic crossings were always slow, dependent on the vagaries of wind. But then steam changed ocean travel, just as the railway engine was changing land travel. And the key figure in this process was Nova Scotia businessman Samuel Cunard, the "Steam Lion," who created what was known as "the ocean railway."

Born in Halifax in 1787, the son of a master carpenter, Cunard was a precocious businessman. He was a clerk for the Royal Engineers in Halifax, then joined his father in the timber business and expanded his interests into coal, iron, whaling and shipping. By 1814, Cunard's sailing ships carried the mail between Halifax, Newfoundland and Boston—and by 1819 to Bermuda.

He understood at once the major difficulty of the age of sail: there could be no reliability if speed was dependent on the wind. But what, he said, if ships "might start and arrive at their destination with the punctuality of railway trains on land?" There was money in that idea, and when in 1833 the Quebec-built Royal William, the first steamship to cross the North Atlantic, proved the practicability of oceangoing steamships, Cunard was one of the investors.

Six years later, the British government, interested in fostering the growing commerce between Britain and America and concerned that mail took 30 to 70 days, invited bids for a regular steam mail service from Liverpool to Halifax, Quebec City and Boston. With several Scottish associates, Cunard won the contract for his British and North America Royal Mail Steam Packet Co. by promising to make two return voyages each month all year long—including the stormy winter months—with paddleships of 725 tonnes and 300 horsepower.

The first scheduled Royal Mail Ship, the sidewheeler Britannia, began its maiden crossing on July 4, 1840, and arrived in Boston, after a stop in Halifax, in 14 days, eight



Cunard; Queen Elizabeth 2 in New York: opening the ocean to commerce

hours. Cunard himself was among the 63 passengers as transatlantic service by steam began.

As the business boomed, Cunard expanded into land travel. In 1841, he contracted with the Nova Scotia government to carry passengers and mail by fast stage coach from Halifax to Pictou and points in between in 17 hours, the

service naturally tied to the arrival of his mail ships.

By 1847, the London government wanted faster transatlantic mail service and entered into a new arrangement with Cunard, offering him a greatly increased annual subsidy of 145,000 pounds (up from 55,000 pounds). The contract called for vessels of not less than 400 horsepower to leave Liverpool for New York City and Boston alternately each Saturday. To expand the service, Cunard built four new wood-hulled sidewheelers, America, Canada, Europa and Niagara, each of 1,600 tonnes.

These coal-burning steamers with their 90-man crews could make 10 knots, burning 55 tonnes of coal each day. But they could complete the North Atlantic crossing in 12 days and 22 hours, while carrying 400 tonnes of cargo and 140 first-class passengers. Businessmen, immigrants and tourists increasingly came to rely on the Cunard fleet.

By now, Cunard lived in England, superintending his vast mercantile interests. He moved into iron ships in 1855 and to propeller-driven vessels in 1862. Cunard vessels were the first to use navigation lights, the first to employ electric lighting and wireless. Tough in business matters, Cunard nonetheless put safety ahead of speed and profits. But not too far ahead: his company motto was "Speed, Comfort, Safety." Though there were collisions and mishaps, no Cunard liner was lost at sea until the Lusitania, sunk by a German U-boat on May 7, 1915, early in the First World War. The Cunard seafaring reputation was good as gold.

Knighted in 1859, Cunard, a wealthy man, died six years later at age 77 in London. His company, still in existence today, runs the Queen Elizabeth 2 and cruise-ship and cargo lines. The carpenter's son from Halifax transformed sea communications, bringing Europe and America closer together.

National Archives of Canada/PA-124022