

# THE RISE OF SAMUEL CUNARD

A. MACMECHAN

**T**HE Cunard family is of German origin. In 1683, Thones Kunders emigrated from Crefeld to Philadelphia, where he was granted land by William Penn himself. His great-grandson, Abraham Cunard, came to Halifax from Philadelphia some time before 1785. He was a carpenter by trade, and obtained employment in the Dock Yard. His wife's name was Margaret Murphy. She came with a band of Loyalists from South Carolina, to whom a large tract of land in Nova Scotia was granted in 1784. This township was called Rawdon, in honour of Lord Rawdon, the victor over Gates at Camden, and afterwards Governor-General of India. The settlers of Rawdon seem to have been soldiers who fought under the celebrated general. In a small house, which stood, until recently, behind 257 Brunswick Street, the Cunards' second child was born, November 21st, 1787, and named Samuel for his paternal grandfather. The property running down the steep hill to the harbour was for many years in the possession of the Cunard family; at the foot they built the wharf and warehouse long known by their name.

His father's education was scanty, but Samuel went to school, and proved an apt scholar. He probably attended the Halifax Grammar School, of which Parson George Wright was head master. Wright was missionary to the Germans and rector of Saint George's Church on Brunswick Street, about a stone's throw from the Cunard house. In this church Samuel Cunard's family pew is still pointed out. Local tradition tells how little Sam drove the family cow to and from the pasture, knitting a sock as he walked along, and how he would take his basket after school and gather dandelions. These he would sell for what he could get. With his gains he would attend the nightly auctions, and bid in bargains, to be sold later at a profit.

After leaving school, he obtained a post in the Civil Branch of the Engineering Establishment. His father had risen to the rank of master carpenter in the Dock Yard, a position which involved contracts with Navy and Army officials. It seems probable that Samuel obtained his first job through his father's influence. The inference is that his education must have been good. A clerk who was not neat and accurate, business-like and good at figures would

be valueless in the office of the scientific branch of the Army. There must have been plenty of work—drafting, copying, making plans—in the Engineers' Office in the Lumber Yard, for Britain was at war all through Samuel Cunard's boyhood and young manhood. He must have seen the town illuminated for Nelson's victories, and shared the patriotic thrills at our triumphs in the Peninsula. Halifax was an important naval base, heavily garrisoned, and the Forces were commanded for six years by a Prince of the Blood. Halifax prospered, especially during the closing years of the great struggle. Some time towards the end of the war, presumably between 1809 and 1813, the master carpenter went into partnership with his clever, thrifty, well educated eldest son, who had already established a reputation for reliability. The foundation of the Cunard fortunes is said to have been the purchase of a prize, not a large, vessel but a good bargain. The *Halifax Weekly Chronicle* of July 2, 1813, contains an advertisement of a new firm, A. Cunard and Son. They are agents for the ship *White Oak*, loading for London. The names of father and son also appear in the long list of subscribers to the Royal Acadian Society; they engage to pay a pound apiece annually to support Bromley's new school. Next year the firm advertises the arrival of a cargo of rum and sugar from the West Indies. A very old Halifax lady remembered "Sam" Cunard as a young man, carrying his money in a stocking instead of the long netted purse of the period, and getting up in the morning, when the rest of Halifax was asleep, and buying to advantage schooner loads of fish and potatoes. Thrift and the trading instinct were ingrained in him.

Waterloo year was an important date in Cunard's life. On February 4th, 1815, he married Susan, daughter of William Duffus, and their first child was born on the last day of December. The firm of A. Cunard and Son is so prosperous that it is able to make the handsome donation of thirty pounds to the Waterloo Fund. From this time on, Samuel becomes more and more prominent in the affairs of his native city.

The long war, which ended with Waterloo, was followed by a long period of depression. The year 1816 was the year without a summer. In 1819, the Dock Yard establishment was removed to Bermuda, at the whim of an admiral. In 1820, soup-kitchens were needed in Halifax to tide the poor people through the hard winter. According to Chittick, this local depression lasted twenty years, and ended in a money panic; but, throughout it all, Cunard prospered. He becomes a leading citizen, he administers Lord Dalhousie's bounty to the destitute emigrants; he is appointed Commissioner of Lighthouses; he becomes captain in the fashionable

Second Halifax Regiment of Militia, and eventually rises to command it; he is a Fire Ward of the North Suburbs and a member of the exclusive Sun Fire Company. Cunard's wharf is the centre of the West India trade, and the firm keeps Lyle and Chappell of Dartmouth busy building ships for it and giving employment to hundreds of men. John Cunard is master of one of their vessels.

The year 1820 is another important date in Cunard's career. He bought his parents a huge farm at Rawdon, whither they retired to end their days in peace and comfort. Soon after, the firm changes its name to S. Cunard and Company, and is engaged in the whale fishery. In this year also he opened a house in Chatham, N. B., for the lucrative timber trade, which did "an enormous business" for twenty-eight years. It was conducted by his brothers Joseph and Henry.

This branch built ships, "eight or ten annually"; caught, cured and exported fish; manufactured bricks. Joseph went into the Legislature, and lived in his mansion at Chatham in great state. Samuel Cunard also bought large tracts of land in Prince Edward Island, and he was engaged in the iron works erected at Clements-port. His wide interests did not interfere with civic duties. Along with Michael Tobin, he administered poor relief during the hard winter of 1820-21, when Halifax harbour was frozen over for weeks.

Within the next few years, he has advanced still further. In 1825 his name appears as one of the founders of the Halifax Banking Company. Projects for establishing a local bank had been mooted for years; at last the much needed aid to business came into being. In the same year S. Cunard and Company figure as agents for the Honourable East India Company. The first direct shipment of tea, 6,517 chests, in the *Countess of Harcourt* reached Halifax on May 29th, 1825, in four months from Canton. The arrival of this cargo was hailed with delight. It meant cheaper tea for the multitude. It also made S. Cunard and Co. the distributors of tea for British North America. William J. Stairs, as a boy, remembered Mr. Cunard himself auctioning the lots in the huge iron-stone warehouse built at the head of the wharf specially to contain these importations. He recalled the great man's "brisk step, his quick and ready movements", and his own pleasure at being noticed and identified by the local magnate. The teas were catalogued before the sale.

In 1826 Cunard offered himself for election to the Legislative Assembly, but he was not successful. Politics was not his forte. In this same year he showed his deep interest in the idea with which his name is for ever associated,—steam navigation. A local com-

pany was formed to operate steam vessels between Halifax and Quebec. He was one of the committee to solicit subscriptions, and he himself subscribed a thousand pounds towards the enterprise. It is therefore evident that his great project, which made him world famous, arose from no sudden impulse, but was long in maturing, and grew out of tested experience.

It is difficult to make a complete list of Cunard's interests and activities. For years a plan of linking up the waterways across the province had been under consideration. It was the age of canal building in England. The Shubenacadie Canal Company was formed, and duly incorporated. Its charter is dated June 1st, 1826. Few local undertakings of the period were more ambitious. The canal would be more than fifty-three miles long, and would cost seventy-five thousand pounds. It would tap the resources of the interior; it would link Fundy with the Atlantic; it would prove useful in war. Cunard subscribed one thousand towards the undertaking.

In January, 1828, his wife died; he never married again. He was remembered by the parishioners of the Round Church in his pew Sunday after Sunday, with his motherless children.

In 1830 he was appointed to the Legislative Council, the irresponsible second chamber whose power Howe was destined to overthrow. This means his formal recognition as a leading citizen by the junta of officials and rich merchants who controlled the city and the province. At this time he was estimated at being worth not less than two hundred thousand pounds, and the firm had a fleet of forty sail under their control. Henceforth he is the Honorable Samuel Cunard; but he seems to have taken little interest in politics even when the Reform agitation convulsed Nova Scotia, and it was noted that Howe never attacked him. His continued interest in steam navigation is evinced by his subscribing to the construction of the *Royal William*. The keel of this vessel was laid in 1830, and she was completed the next year. She was designed to ply between Quebec and Halifax. First in the list of the one hundred and forty-four subscribers stands the name of Samuel Cunard. In 1833 she made her famous voyage across the Atlantic, and, despite the rival claims of the *Savannah* and the *Sirius*, was the first to cross the ocean under steam propulsion.

In 1827 the General Mining Association, a powerful English organization, obtained control of large coal areas in Cape Breton, and some time later S. Cunard and Company became the local agents. This was an important and profitable arrangement, like the agency for the East India Company. As long as the Cunard

steamers called at Halifax, inwards and outwards, they filled their bunkers with G. M. A. coal.

The business of Samuel Cunard had spread out in all directions, not only in his native province, but in the West Indies, Prince Edward Island and New Brunswick, with various relationships in Great Britain. The correspondence must have been enormous; indeed, it took three months to burn the firm's papers when the wharf was acquired by the Intercolonial Railway. Communication had to be made without the modern aids of steam, telegraph, cable, wireless. It was slow and most uncertain. Winds might be adverse to the slow sailing packets, or fail them altogether. Regular, punctual exchange of letters was impossible; but regularity and punctuality are of the very essence of business. According to family tradition, Cunard had discussed ocean transport of mail by steam with Richard Brown, the scientific expert of G. M. A., long before, in his office at Sydney. No doubt he discussed it with many persons, who fretted at the same inconveniences. The image in his mind was the regularity of a railway, and he applied the figure to ocean transportation. His two little schooners, the *Lady Ogle* and the *Lady Strange*, were conveying the mails between Halifax, Newfoundland, Boston and Bermuda. With that achievement went the plying of coastal steamers, in which he was interested. His opportunity came in 1839, when he was fifty-two years of age.

The previous year, 1838, is notable in the history of ocean travel. In that year, two vessels crossed the Atlantic and returned under steam propulsion. One was the *Sirius*, an English steamer, plying in coastal waters. Her trip was made as an experiment, in satisfaction of a challenge. On her return trip she overhauled and passed the packet *Tyrian*, conveying the mails from Halifax to Falmouth. The *Tyrian* was lying becalmed, a log upon the sea, with canvas idly flapping and waiting for a breeze. Captain Jennings signalled the new-fangled steam vessel to stop, and he transferred the mail-bags, "portmanteaus", to the hold of the *Sirius*. Soon the odd-looking, little paddle-wheel steamer with the dog and star for figurehead was again under way. Again the paddle-wheels churned the windless sea, and soon her tall smoking "chimney", reaching almost to the cross-trees of her two masts, had vanished beyond the sky-line.

This object lesson on the speedy conveyance of mails was not lost on two of the *Tyrian's* passengers, Joseph Howe, on his first trip to Europe, and Thomas Chandler Haliburton, going to be lionized in London as the creator of Sam Slick. On reaching London, these two staunch friends of Nova Scotia made common

cause with Henry Bliss and William Crane of New Brunswick in urging upon the British Government the importance of rapid communication between the old world and the new by means of steam. Howe addressed an able letter to Lord Glenelg on the subject, which seems to have given a final prod to the Government. That autumn they advertised for tenders for the regular conveyance of mails by steam vessels across the Atlantic. There was only one tender, that of the successful colonial merchant, Samuel Cunard.

At once he "interested" the most prominent steamship owners, and formed a new company, "The British and North American Royal Mail Steam Packet Company", with a capital of £270,000, to which S. Cunard and Company subscribed about one-fifth. The contract called for three steam vessels, of specified size, power and quality, to be delivered at fixed dates. There were to be two sailings each month. The contract was for seven years; it was signed on March 18th, 1839, and next year the first Cunarder made her first voyage.

Certain modifications were made in the original plans of the Government. Instead of starting from Falmouth, near Land's End, thereby avoiding the difficult navigation up Channel, the new vessels were to start from the rising shipping centre, Liverpool. Instead of small vessels to accommodate mails only, they were to be large enough to carry passengers with suitable accommodations. These changes were due to Cunard himself, at the suggestion of Mr. Napier of Glasgow.

In the meantime, terminals had to be built at Boston. In the 1830's, Boston was a small town. Noddle's Island, now East Boston, was just beginning to be reclaimed. In 1835 there were only 600 inhabitants in the whole district. The company built a new wharf and warehouse there, at a cost of £10,000. The coming of this pioneer line of steamers to Boston was an event of prime importance to the city, and their withdrawal in 1868 was felt to be a severe blow.

The first of the line was the *Britannia*. She was a wooden paddle-wheel steamer with three masts, carrying fore-and-aft sails on all three, and crossing two square yards on both the fore, and the main, mast. Her length was only a little over two hundred feet, and she measured one thousand one hundred and fifty-four tons. She could steam at 8.5 knots with an engine of 740 horse-power. Dickens, who came out in her in January, 1842, has immortalized "the far-famed American steamer" in the first two chapters of *American Notes*. A wooden vessel could not be large: the weakness of the material of which it was built and the rough

usage of the sea limited its dimensions. The early marine engines were weak. It was the breakdown of her engines which caused the tragedy of the *London* in a Biscay gale. The paddle-wheel in its paddle-box was easily disabled by a heavy sea; the "floats" could be torn off. After some bad weather, Dickens came on deck to find that "The planking of the paddle-boxes had been torn sheer away. The wheels were exposed and bare; and they whirled and dashed their spray about the decks at random." The life-boat had been crushed by one blow of the sea like a walnut shell, and there it hung dangling in the air: a mere faggot of crazy boards."

The *Britannia* sailed from Liverpool on July 4th, 1840. Cunard himself was on board, and the passenger list included some sixty persons. She reached Halifax very early on the morning of the 17th, made a very short stay at this port, and proceeded to Boston which she reached on the 21st of the month.

The Bostonians celebrated the event with enthusiasm. In front of the new Maverick House a huge pavilion was erected, in which a dinner was given for two thousand persons. Cunard was the guest of honour. The Governor of the State presided; the pavilion was decorated with flags, emblems and the names of the three ports now joined by steam. Long was the list of toasts, speeches and songs. Cunard's health was drunk; but his response was a formal expression of thanks. He never was a speaker. But the gathering included Daniel Webster, the famous orator, and he was called on for a speech. The frank reporter more than suggests that it was commonplace. It ended in a somewhat truculent toast.

But this was not all. The enthusiastic Bostonians subscribed five thousand dollars for a silver vase, and presented it to Samuel Cunard. It is decorated with dolphins, shells, anchors and other marine emblems, and bears on the side a faithful image of the *Britannia* cleaving the waves. It is their tribute to his "enterprise" in establishing the line of British mail steam packets between Liverpool, Halifax and Boston.

So the line was founded, and it flourished for the seven years of the first contract. The British Government paid a subsidy of £150,000 a year. Carrying passengers was profitable. Carrying cargoes of fine, valuable goods was even more profitable. In 1845 the duty paid on the cargoes of the *Cambria* and the *Hibernia* was a hundred thousand dollars each. The benefit to business in the speedy and regular delivery of mails across the Atlantic was quite incalculable, not only to the mercantile interests of Boston, but to Canada. The old Halifax-Quebec route was given up, and mails were sent by rail to Montreal. This led the way to granting the

bonding privilege by which goods of all kinds may be shipped through the United States to Canada without examination for duty; and this privilege was obtained through Cunard's personal exertions at Washington. In 1846 there was some difficulty in renewing the contract with the Government; but Cunard secured it because no other firm would undertake to run steamships on time in the winter. In the same year he was made a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society.

Samuel Cunard's successful career was not without its shadows. In 1848 the branch of the firm at Chatham, N. B., failed. The failure was due to a loose, extravagant way of doing business, according to local critics. Joseph Cunard provided dramatic scenes, spurring his horse through the excited crowd, with pistols in his boots. The firm assigned to Robert McCalmont, Samuel Cunard and Thomas C. Allen, Manager of the Commercial Bank at Newcastle. By 1871, the last claims of the creditors were fully met. For a time, the parent firm S. Cunard and Company were in difficulties, from which they ultimately recovered. Cunard died a rich man.

The year 1848 also dates Cunard's removal to London, where he spent the remainder of his life. In 1854 the Crimean War broke out. After the long peace, the War Department was unprepared for such an emergency, and much confusion resulted in transporting the forces, supplies, etc., to the seat of war. Indeed the Crimean War is almost a synonym for official muddle and mismanagement. Samuel Cunard put all the available steamers of the line at the disposal of the Government, with "no haggle of price, no driving a good bargain for the Company" writes an admiring friend. The same authority adds,—“The Cunard fleet made good work up the Mediterranean, landing men and stores more promptly and with better delivery than the Government transports had done. This brought good pay for the Company.” Official recognition of Cunard's generous and patriotic service took the form of a baronetcy conferred on him through Palmerston in 1859. He was now Sir Samuel Cunard. This title was the crown of his life work; the poor carpenter's son had been admitted to the ranks of the British aristocracy. He died in his London residence, April 28th, 1865, in his seventy-eighth year. Lincoln had been assassinated a fortnight previously; the papers were ringing with the tragedy, and little notice was taken of the quiet demise of Sir Samuel Cunard, Bart.

In person, Samuel Cunard was a little man, well-made, alert and brisk in his movements. The portrait by which he is best

known is of a handsome man, with vigour, decision and ability written on his firm features. A Halifax merchant wrote of him: "He was a skilful diplomatist—I have thought, looking at little Lord John Russell, whom he personally resembled (though of a larger mould) that he was the ablest man of the two. . . . He was a very able man, and, I am happy to say, I believe also a good man. In early life he was somewhat imperious. He believed in himself,—he made both men and things bend to his will." But he mellowed with age. Cunard was not a talker; he was a doer, a man of action; but some of his significant utterances have been preserved.

He held that "steamers properly built and manned might start and arrive at their destination with the punctuality of railway trains on land." Indeed, his favorite figure was "ocean railway"; the underlying idea being regularity of service, in contrast to the maddening irregularity inseparable from the days of sail. To Samuel Cunard belongs all the honour of the daring pioneer who pushes out into unknown regions. It was as if someone had contracted for an air-mail service between London and Paris, immediately after Blériot's flight across the Channel. He was the pioneer of trans-Atlantic steam transportation and travel. He had high hopes for the future of his native city. He predicted that "the day would surely come when an ocean steamer would be signalled from Citadel Hill every day of the year." And it looks as if his dream may yet come true.

He left a lasting impression on the famous line which bears his name. It has an unrivalled reputation for safety. Up to the Great War, it could truly boast that it "never lost a passenger." The phrase became almost a proverb on ship-board, almost a joke; and it would seem that this reputation is traceable to the founder of the line. From the first, it was his steadfast resolve to have "nothing but the best ships, the best officers and the best men." Rules embodying this principle were formed, and have been followed, to the great benefit of those who travel by sea. Their origin was in the character of "the small gray-haired man of quiet manners and not overflowing speech," who began life as a poor boy in Halifax more than a century ago.