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THE CANADIAN FAST LINE ON THE NORTH ATLANTIC, 1851-1915

Few of us today over the age of forty can have forgotten the days of keen competition on the North Atlantic among rival steamship lines for the coveted Blue Riband. With the advent of large-scale trans-oceanic air service over the course of the past quarter-century, competition among the steamship lines had swindled to negligible significance, until today the passenger line is relegated for the most part to the luxury winter cruise in southern seas.

Canada's bid to establish a fast subsidized mail and passenger service on the Liverpool-Quebec route (Halifax or Saint John in winter) in competition with that serving New York, a trade which attracted the fastest ships and most competitive steamship lines, is less well known. First mooted in the House of Assembly, Canada West, in 1851, the long deferred and despaired of Canadian Fast Line service did not materialize until 1907, when the Laurier government realized the goals of its Conservative predecessors; the veteran Allan Line undertook to provide a weekly 17-18 knot service, commencing 1 August 1907. The Allan Line in turn shared its contract with the recently formed Canadian Pacific Railway Atlantic line; the two companies between them operated a bi-weekly service, Liverpool to Quebec, more or less competitive with service on the New York route. In the process, however, the Allan Line, oldest in the Canadian trade, was absorbed by its younger, but better heeled, partner and rival.

An editorial in the *Montreal Gazette* dated 5 June 1851 supported the motion of recent date introduced by William Hamilton Merritt in the House of Assembly, Canada West, that a service fast enough to be competitive with the lines serving New York be establish on the considerably shorter¹ Quebec-Liverpool route, to be subsidized by the Canadian government. As it was, the mails and the first-class passenger trade Canada-bound favoured

strongly the New York route. Many benefits would accrue to the Canadas with the inauguration of such a service:

The Administration ought at once to give encouragement to men of capital, to undertake the enterprise, by offering, as they now can do, to allow a reasonable rate for all letters sent by them, to begin with. Were such a line in operation, merchants instead of ordering goods to arrive in the spring, sufficient to last them until the fall, would divide their orders, so as to obtain fresh assortments every month of the open season, and thus economize capital and interest, at the same time, that their customers would be better and more fashionably suited. Nor should we despair of seeing passengers, for the city of New York itself, making use of Quebec boats, since, they would be as soon in that city, via Quebec, as they are now by sea direct.²

Nor was the prestige conferred by a first-class steamship service to be overlooked. Canada should take advantage of her shorter route to compete with New York, a bustling port pre-eminent on the Atlantic seaboard which had to date attracted the best service.

Keen competition for ever-shorter passages was an old story on the North Atlantic. One has only to recall the Black Ball and Swallow Tail Lines in the days of sail, among others, which offered on the average 23-day passages eastbound and 40-day westbound; not to mention the famous Falmouth packets, speedy brigs manned by naval personnel, subsidized by the British government for carriage of the mails. But with the establishment of Samuel Cunard's steam packet service in 1840, originally known as the British and North American Royal Steam Packet Company, but ever after simply as the Cunard Line, the days of the stately square-riggers were numbered. Cunard's little side-wheelers were subsidized by the British government at the rate of £ 60,000 per annum to operate a monthly mail service between Liverpool and Halifax-Boston. Finding the American trade more lucrative, Cunard dropped Halifax and later transferred his terminal to New York. By 1848 Cunard was operating a weekly service to Boston and New York; the American sailing packets, which had done so well following the War of 1812, found themselves forced into the less demanding freight and immigrant trade, for they could not compete with the punctuality and speed of Cunard's little fleet. Although several other lines entered the New York service in competition, Cunard maintained its primacy.

It is not surprising, therefore, that by mid-century shipping and commercial circles in Canada should wish to take advantage of her shorter route to gain their share of this trade. On 5 June 1851 the *Montreal Gazette* came out strongly in support of the enterprise:

Canada with Quebec as a sea port nearer to England than Philadelphia, or New York, or Boston, and so situated as to have no rival to dispute the local advantage with it, makes no effort to establish a line for herself; but as in everything else, gives a bounty to foreigners to do the business for her. She actually pays away to foreign people, what would be sufficient to establish a complete line of her own. The whole mail matter of Canada goes to a United States port, and for the privilege of sending it there, Great Britain pays that government £ 10,000 a year.³

It was with gratification that the *Gazette* printed a dispatch from Toronto, dated 17 June 1851, reporting that the House of Assembly had passed Merritt's resolution without debate the previous evening. The imperial government was to be approached for a subsidy similar to that held by the Cunard and the short-lived Collins Line.⁴

But alas, over a half-century was to pass before anything like a competitive service could be established on the St. Lawrence-Liverpool route. The imperial government refused to subsidize yet another service on the Atlantic, and the endeavour for many years proved too costly for the fledgling dominion. What many landlubbers did not appreciate, but which governments understood all too well, was that operating costs rose steeply, and at an accelerating rate, with each knot gained in speed. An undated memorandum originating with an official of the Dominion Line makes this plain: a 20-knot ship required well over twice as much coal for a day's run as a 14-knot ship.⁵ Only with improved times beginning in 1896 was any Canadian government in the position to finance such a service on its own. In the interim a long series of abortive attempts bore out the old adage, "hope deferred maketh the heart sick".

There was but one shipping line serving Canadian ports capable of operating such a service: this was the veteran Allan Line, founded by Hugh (later Sir Hugh) Allan in 1853, and known as the Montreal Ocean Steam Ship Company, but popularly called the Allan Line. Their first vessel (in steam, for the company had been operating in sail long before this) was the 1,750 ton *Canadian*, which sailed on her maiden

voyage from Liverpool to Montreal in September 1854. Fitted with a screw propeller rather than paddlewheels, the *Canadian* shares with the Inman Line's *City of Glasgow* the distinction of being the first vessel so equipped to cross the Atlantic. The Allan Line was not the first to take out a mail contract with the Canadian government on the Liverpool-Quebec route; a British firm, the Canadian Steam Navigation Company contracted in 1853 to operate a fortnightly service. There was such disregard of the terms, that a contract was let to the Allan Line in 1856, for £ 25,000 per annum, using Portland as the winter terminal. In 1856 the *North American* and the *Anglo Saxon* joined the fleet, the former inaugurating the mail service on 23 April of that year.

The Allan Line entered upon its contract with gusto, but owing to the poor charting of the coasts and the company's zeal in striving to maintain its schedules under adverse conditions, a series of disasters befell the new company; by 1860 three ships had been lost with all hands, climaxed by the loss of the *Jura* and the *Bohemian* in 1864. The company thereupon brought pressure to bear upon the Canadian government to improve the charting and lighting of its coasts.

The St. Lawrence route had long been noted as a hazardous one, a fact reflected in the high insurance rates for vessels in the Canadian service. Although the mighty river offered a broad channel to the heart of the continent and a shorter route to Britain, nature posed severe handicaps. The icy hand of the long Canadian winter closed the river to navigation from November to April. Ice and fog were the twin hazards which beset the navigator during the opening months of navigation each year, particularly on the northerly Belle Isle route, which offered the shorter run to England. The charting of Canada's coasts and the provision of lighthouses along her shores proceeded apace throughout the nineteenth century. By 1872 Canada's navigational aids, including fog signals and lights, were up to a sufficiently high standard to win the commendation of a visiting committee of Trinity House (the major navigational authority in England). A fast steamship service was manifestly impossible until navigation was freed of the perils which had for so long been the target of underwriters. Apart from the risk to life and limb, the high insurance rates would greatly add to the cost of the service. By the

year 1891, however, Charles Hibbert Tupper, the son of Sir Charles, reported that the admirals on the North American Station commended the provision of well-placed and well maintained lighthouses and light-ships along the shores of the Gulf and River St. Lawrence.⁶

In 1869 the Allan Line contracted to supply a weekly Liverpool-Quebec or Montreal service, with Portland as the winter port, for £54,500 per annum. This contract, however, made concessions to the elements, for the company secured the inclusion of a clause that they should not be penalized for delay or non-delivery by reason of "dangers of the sea or of such as are peculiar to steam navigation".⁷ The 1873 contract stipulated the use of first-class steamers, defined as none of less power or size than the *Hibernian*. Again this contract was for a weekly service, subsidized at the rate of \$126,533.33 per annum, as was the contract of 1884. The queen of the Allan Line fleet in these years was the 5,365 ton *Parisian*, a very comfortable 14-knot vessel built by Robert Napier of Glasgow in 1881.⁸

A 14-knot ship, however, could not compete with the much faster ships operating in and out of New York, even allowing for the shorter passage on the Canadian service. The Cunard Line in 1887, for example, operated the *Etruria* with a top speed of 17 knots, the Guion Line the *Alaska* at over 16 knots, the Anchor Line the *City of Rome* at 17 knots, and the National Line the *America* at a little over 15½ knots.⁹ This was only the beginning; in 1892 and 1893 Cunard introduced the 13,000 ton sister ships *Campania* and *Lucania*, both of which steamed at a little under 22 knots, in turn to be surpassed by North German Lloyd's *Kaiser Wilhelm der Grosse*, launched in 1898, and designed for a speed of 22.5 knots.¹⁰

In the face of these developments Canadian commercial and shipping circles became dissatisfied with the mediocre service available at Canadian ports. New York was skimming off the cream of the trade. Increasingly Canadian politicians became responsive to the clamor for an improved trans-Atlantic passenger and mail service. The rub was that successive Canadian governments were unable to interest the imperial government and at the same time were unable to put up enough money on their own.

We read in the *Quebec Morning Chronicle* of 16 February 1888, for example, the following strictures :

The present service is notoriously inadequate, the vessels are strong and good but their speed is far from being up to the requirements of the present day, while with the exception of the *Parisian* and *Vancouver* the passenger accommodation cannot for a moment compare with that on the New York steamers, as a consequence the cabin passenger trade to and from the St. Lawrence has fallen off lamentably notwithstanding the increase in population, and unless there is an immediate improvement in this respect it will soon disappear altogether.¹¹

The *Canadian Gazette*, an informative publication devoted to Canadian news, brought out in London in January of the same year called for an increased subsidy in order to bring the Canadian service up to the New York standard.¹² This was, of course, the remedy, but times were hard and the money not forthcoming.

The Macdonald government took up the question, but Sir John sounded a note of caution of the grounds of economy:

*That we must get, but we cannot afford to run a race with the great New York lines, or talk of 20 or even 18 knots an hour. Neither the U.S. nor England would agree to pay for that speed, and it would look like recklessness on our part to do so. Nothing would in my opinion so greatly injure the financial credit and status of Canada, as the opinion in commercial circles that the Govt. was reckless and extravagant.*¹³

The Allan Line, in the person of Andrew Allan, one of the directors, pointed up the need for an increased subsidy in a memorandum dated 3 March 1888, addressed to Tupper, Minister of Marine and Fisheries. At 14½ knots the *Parisian* would make the crossing from Moville, in the west coast of Ireland, to Rimouski on the lower St. Lawrence, some hundred miles below Quebec, in 6 days 17 hours; an 18-knot boat would reduce this time over the same passage to 5 days 8 hours. But the construction of such a vessel with more powerful engines, all other things being considered equal, would reduce the freight capacity from 3,500 tons to a mere 750 tons, barely one-quarter the load. This being so, obviously the 18-knot ship would earn less revenue from freight, and so would require a higher subsidy.¹⁴

Since the likelihood of Canada increasing the subsidy substantially was slim, there remained the faint hope that the imperial government would chip in. This however, they were loath to do, for

they were already subsidizing the Cunard Line. In any case, many people in England believed that the Suez Canal and the Cape of Good Hope offered a better route for imperial communications than the Canadian, and this despite the completion of the trans-continental Canadian Pacific in November 1885. This was probably true, the *Canadian Gazette* admitted, for communications with India, but the Canadian route nonetheless offered many advantages, among which was greater security in time of war. The imperial government was of the same opinion, hence the signing of the first of the famous "China Mail" contracts with the Canadian Pacific Railway Company on 15 July 1889. The contract, for five years, provided a subsidy of £60,000 per annum. It applied, however, only to the trans-continental and trans-Pacific service; the C.P. R. had to make its own arrangements for the trans-Atlantic initial phase. The east coast ports were Halifax or Quebec, depending on the season; from Vancouver 16-knot vessels under charter to the C.P.R. completed the service across the Pacific.¹⁵ In 1891 the C.P.R. initiated its celebrated "White Empress" service on the Pacific with three 6,500 ton vessels of surpassing beauty of line, with steaming speed of 16 knots and offering superlative service. The trio of graceful liners with white hulls and superstructures, the *Empress of Japan*, *Empress of India* and *Empress of China*, soon earned the title of "the flying empresses" in the early 1890s. It was to be another sixteen years, however, before the chequered red-and-white house flag appeared on the Atlantic; when this happened the Canadian Fast Line, made up of the Canadian-subsidized Atlantic service and the British-subsidized China Mail contract, became at long last a reality. But there was to be many a false dawn ere the fulfilment of the long-cherished project. The crux of the matter was that the Allan Line, the prime company in the Canadian service, lacked the resources to provide the service envisioned without much heavier subsidies than any Canadian government could hope to provide.

Not everyone in Canada favoured the project, although shipping and commercial circles, as well as the port cities, were strong partisans. The Member for Prince Edward, a rural Ontario constituency, thought the Fast Line an expensive luxury, catering to the well-to-do. Speaking for folk in the ordinary circumstances of life, Platt observed:

Very few of our people comparatively cross and re-cross the ocean, and those few are composed of the wealthiest men of the country. Very few comparatively are interested in having a rapid transit of mails, and they are also composed of the wealthiest men of the country.

Going on to sound a practical note, he said,

I agree in the opinion that we might well be proud of it, if we could afford it; but there are times in the lives of a people, as there are times in the lives of individuals, when they are not able to afford all the luxuries, and all the delicacies and all the ornaments which they might desire and of which, if they had them, they might well be proud. ¹⁶

In these days of easy credit the above lines read almost like the admonitions of an Old Testament prophet. Nor in the 1880s and 1890s did they reflect the views of the more influential elements in the recently formed dominion. It was very much a case of "the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak".

Nonetheless the Macdonald government set about securing the coveted Fast Line. Tenders were called for in July 1886, in November of the same year, and finally the time limit was extended to 4 July 1887. The minimum speed was to be 15 knots and vessels were to be comparable to the *Parisian*. The Allan Line offered to provide a 17-knot service commencing 1 April 1899 for £200 a trip, and a British consortium, known as Anderson and Anderson, made bold to offer a 20-knot service for £104 per trip. The government was not satisfied with either tender. ¹⁷

A series of abortive negotiations ensued, dogging the last years of the Macdonald administration and those of his successors until 1896. The various schemes foundered on lack of capital, although several were of bright promise at the outset. The C.P.R. showed scant interest at this stage. Until 1889 the company had no access to tidewater in the east; even with the completion in that year of their Short Line to Saint John they encountered insurmountable frustration in their protracted attempts to gain running rights over the Intercolonial into Halifax.

Admiral Hopkins, R.N., sounded a note of encouragement during these still-born schemes. He was reported in the *Canadian Gazette* (13 September 1894) as saying that the St. Lawrence route had an

advantage, in round terms, of 400 nautical miles, "practically a day's run for a 17-knot steamer", but the 5½ day crossings to New York were made by 21½-knot boats, soon to be superseded by 23-knot vessels. These would be expensive to operate because of their greatly increased coal consumption and reduced cargo space.¹⁸

The Canadian Fast Line concept received some encouragement from the Ottawa Conference in June 1894, attended by delegates from Great Britain, Queensland, Tasmania, South Australia, New South Wales, Victoria, New Zealand and the Cape of Good Hope. The Canadian project was tied in with what was known as "The All Red Route", embodying a greatly improved steamship service connecting various part of the empire; the Canadian Fast Line would be a component in this far-flung line of imperial communications encircling the globe. Although a resolution was passed commending Canada's initiative, shipping circles in Britain paid little heed. In addressing the House on 11 July 1894 on the results and significance of the Ottawa Conference, Sir George Foster admitted that the government realized that its subsidy of \$500,000 was not enough, and that it had accordingly been increased to \$750,000 per annum.¹⁹

At last in 1895 belated assistance from the Mother Country seemed to be forthcoming. In a dispatch dated 21 November, the imperial government proposed to the Canadian a 20-knot service on the Atlantic and 16 knots on the Pacific, for a total subsidy of £300,000 per annum, of which Canada was to put up £125,000, slightly over 40 per cent of the total. Canada must speed up the trans-continental rail service, and she would retain complete control of the project.²⁰ Tenders were accordingly invited by the Tupper government on 29 February 1896 for a weekly service, with Quebec and Halifax as the Canadian terminals. Four companies submitted tenders, but the only one acceptable was that of the Allan Line. This contract, the culmination of a decade's effort by a series of administrations, awaited only the Governor General's signature, when it shared the fate of the outgoing Tupper ministry in July 1896. Laurier refused to ratify the contract, confident that he could do better.

Several explanations have been advanced for Laurier's throwing up of this contract. Sir Richard Cartwright, Minister of Trade and

Commerce in the new ministry, held that a better contract could be secured from Petersen & Tait of Newcastle, who promised 21-knot vessels in place of the 20-knot under the Allan Line contract abandoned by the new ministry. The Petersen & Tait bid, however, proved to be one in a series of abortive efforts, for in the end they could not raise sufficient capital. Sir Frederick W. Borden, Laurier's Minister of Defence, stated in 1903 that the contract negotiated by the Tupper ministry was rejected because of the reluctance of the Allan Line to commit themselves to maintaining schedules regardless of wind and weather.

Two factors, however, militated in Laurier's favour: one was an upsurge of the economy, which set in train a massive immigration to the dominion; the other was the inauguration of the C.P.R. in the Atlantic service. What the Allan Line could not manage alone the two companies could carry effectively together. Brief mention has been made of the debut of the C.P.R. on the broad expanse of the Pacific. The company's passenger liners established an enviable reputation from the start. Their crews, and particularly their officers, were recruited as much as possible from the Royal Naval Reserve, and were subject to tight discipline comparable to that of the Royal Navy itself. Crews were thoroughly trained and long service men, many of whom spent, in many cases, a lifetime in the company's service. Their ships were designed for passenger comfort and speed at the expense of cargo capacity. Before long the white empresses, flying the red-and-white chequered house flag, ²¹ were known as the finest in the Pacific service. But what of the Atlantic?

As early as January 1899, Sir William Van Horne, colourful and redoubtable builder of the trans-continental, gave forceful utterance to the company's intentions. Not one to mince his words or qualify his statements, Van Horne, addressing a banquet held in his honour at Quebec 14 January 1899, sounded a clarion note:

In my judgment the Canadian Pacific Railway is the only agency that can establish and successfully operate a steamship line capable of doing this, simply because it has the machinery to work with-- a transcontinental route all the way from Vancouver and Winnipeg to Montreal and St. John... I would provide Canada with a better Ocean Service than exists anywhere else in the world. They would be as much ahead of the present United States Atlantic Line as the ones we have on the Pacific are better than the lines the United States have upon the Pacific. They would be the fastest, the most sumptuous, the most comfortable vessels afloat... ²²

This was not mere talk. Van Horne was no mere braggart, and if flamboyant in his utterances, had seldom failed to make good his boasts. In addition to this, the C.P.R. was in an expansive and flourishing financial posture. The *Montreal Gazette* reported on 31 March 1902 that the company's net earnings increased by more than 23 per cent over the past five months.²³ The company's resources were ample for expansion.

And yet when the Canadian Pacific did take to the waters of the "Western Ocean" a little less than a year later (23 February 1903), it was not in any spectacular manner. The Canadian Pacific Atlantic Line did not open service with two new empresses; that had to wait another four years. Instead they purchased for £1,500,000, fourteen vessels of the Elder Dempster Line; these vessels were of modest speed (12-13 knots) in the 5,000-8,000 ton class. This purchase supplied them with the nucleus of their Atlantic fleet.²⁴ At the same time the new line secured the services of D.W. Campbell, for many years manager of the Elder Dempster Line, which operated a service from the Clyde to the pestilential but lucrative west coast of Africa. The Canadian Pacific Atlantic Line opened service on a weekly basis to Liverpool and Bristol, and fortnightly from the port of London. The *Lake Champlain*, a twin-screwed 13-knot vessel of 6,546 tons register, made the first crossing from Liverpool in April 1903, bound for Montreal, but was forced to put in to Halifax on 25 April because of ice in the Gulf.

Although the initial operations of the C.P.R. on the Atlantic were not spectacular, the profits left little to be desired; their net earnings for the first six months amounted to \$200,000. Already the directors were laying plans for the construction of two 18-knot ships,²⁵ which with the two 17-knot near completion for the Allan Line, would initiate the long-anticipated Fast Line Service.

In the meantime the Laurier government went from one temporary expedient to another in a vain effort to improve the service. By the spring of 1902 the House was becoming both discouraged and cynical over the government's repeated failure despite reiterated assurances that success was just over the horizon. Dr. T.S. Sproule, Conservative

member for Grey East, Ontario, painted a graphic picture of the situation:

It reminds me of the story of an ancient lady who gave her age for eleven years in succession as eighteen. When reminded by the assessor that she had given the same age eleven times she replied: "I am not the kind of person who will tell one story today and another tomorrow." The hon. minister thinks that he cannot repeat a good thing too often. He has told us for the last five or six years that we will soon have the fast Atlantic service and he will not tell one story today and another tomorrow.²⁶

In the face of performance to date there seemed some reason for cynicism. Laurier admitted in the House (13 July 1904) that mail steamers on the Canadian route averaged a shade under 13 knots in summer and roughly 10½ knots in winter.²⁷ This modest speed, not to mention weekly service as compared with daily sailing and arrivals at New York, was reflected in the comparative figures for the Anglo-Canadian mails: in 1903 only 147,109 pounds of mail from Canada were carried on Canadian-subsidized mail boats, compared with 564,023 via New York.²⁸ The 1904 contract with the Allan Line called for a weekly service, in which the company's four fastest ships must make 10 round trips per season. At that time the *Bavarian* and *Tunisian* were the fastest ships flying the Allan Line flag, but already the debut of two 17-knot vessels, powered by the new steam turbine engines, and expected to cross in seven days, was anticipated.

The *Victorian* and *Virginian*, two 10,000-ton vessels launched in 1904, were the first ships of any size to be fitted with steam turbine engines, which were more compact and delivered more power than the reciprocating engines in use until that time. The steam turbine was the marine engine of the future, but in 1904 commitment to an as-yet-untried principle in ships of this size was considered by many in shipping circles as a little foolhardy: 520 feet in length and 60 in the beam, the speedy turbiners fully justified the company's faith in them, and each had a long and honorable service. The *Victorian* and the *Virginian* both went down the ways within four months of one another, August to December 1904. Each had triple screws, and were rated at 18 knots, although 17 was their usual speed at sea.²⁹ The 1905 mail contract let by the Canadian government to the Allan Line had the same terms as that of the previous year, with double

the payment for use of the new steam turbiners. Both ships broke records in the Canadian service in the summer of 1905; in June the *Virginian* averaged 17.05 knots for the whole crossing. Each vessel had accommodation for 470 first class, 240 second and 940 steerage, and the first-class accommodation was much superior to anything yet seen in the Canadian service, with many suites comprising bedrooms, bathrooms and sitting rooms. The Allan Line reported a 30 per cent increase in its passenger trade for 1905.

Thus encouraged, on 19 January 1906 the Allan Line signed a 6-year contract for a weekly 17-18 knot service with the Canadian government: 18-knot return voyages were to be subsidized at £3000 each. The vital clause in the 1906 contract, which was about to make the long frustrated dream a reality, was the company's commitment to place in service by 1 August 1907 two vessels of a guaranteed 18-knot speed at sea and capable of a full 20 knots over the measured mile on their run-in trials.³¹

The Allan Line had, therefore, a little over a year and a half, from the signing of this contract, to fulfil its key commitment. But the rising costs of shipbuilding, particularly of ships measuring up to this standard, obviously deterred the veteran company from itself implementing this clause. Instead it turned to a new company in the trade, but one with vastly greater resources to its own, the Canadian Pacific Railway Company.

With the addition of a trans-Atlantic service, the C.P.R. had introduced a rail and steamer service girdling half the globe, or in the words of the dynamic Van Horne, Euston to Hong Kong on one ticket. This fortuitous development coincided with a surge of emigration to the broad and empty lands of the Canadian West. The massive land subsidy granted the C.P.R. for its completion of the trans-continental line put the C.P.R. in a literally roaring land office business, catering directly to the immigrant trade, with its own steamer and rail service offering through service on one ticket from Liverpool (and later from continental ports such as Trieste) to the waiting homesteads on the broad prairies spanned by the company's railway. Small wonder then that a company of such resources should not hesitate to provide the finest in ocean passage yet seen in the Canadian service, and small

wonder too that the Allan Line should be willing to share its subsidy with its newly fledged but powerful contemporary.

The two new empresses, magnificent 14,000-ton ships, were originally to be christened the *Empress of Austria* and *Empress of Germany*,³² but no doubt due to the worsening relations among the European powers the more appropriate titles of *Empress of Britain* and *Empress of Ireland* (see illustration at end of article) were chosen. With passenger accommodation for more than 1,500, the two ships were built to Admiralty specifications with double bottoms, watertight compartmentation and reinforced decks for possible conversion to armed cruisers in time of war: 550 feet in length and with 65-foot beam, the two *Empresses* went into service in the spring and summer of 1906. The *Empress of Britain* sailed down the Mersey on her maiden voyage on 5 May 1906 with a passenger list totaling 1,475 besides £205,000 in specie. The *Montreal Gazette* described her as "the magnificent ocean greyhound" and "a triumph of marine architecture",³³ as indeed she was. Her passage from Liverpool to Quebec in the record time of 6 days 17 hours, in the teeth of a severe gale, was considered highly satisfactory by her owners. She had maintained a steady 18½ knots, with a record run of 452 nautical miles her third day out.³⁴ Her sister ship, not to be outdone on her maiden voyage in July 1906, set a record for a day's run at 460 nautical miles. The C.P.R. thus set a new standard for service in the Canadian mail and passenger trade. The *Empress of Britain* cut the *Virginian's* time between Merville and Rimousky by 2 hours and 50 minutes, a new record for the westbound passage, whereas her sister ship established a record for the eastbound crossing between the same points.³⁵ The components for the long-anticipated Canadian Fast Line were at hand.

C.P.R. returns for the first half of 1907 were most encouraging: passenger returns on the Liverpool service showed an increase of 65 per cent in first class, the same in second, and no less than 72 per cent in third class. These spectacular gains were directly attributed to the *Empress* service. By contrast, the Antwerp route, served by the smaller and slower *Lake* boats, although even this was by no means to be despised, showed a 15 per cent increase over the same period.³⁶ There could be no doubt of the wisdom of introducing the *Empresses*

to the Atlantic. With ships of this calibre, competition with the admittedly faster ships on the New York route was possible. The *Empress of Ireland* (in little more than six years' time to figure in the greatest disaster in Canadian maritime history off Father Point) completed a crossing from Halifax to Liverpool (2,500 nautical miles) on 6 December 1907 in the record-breaking time of 4 days 19 hours and 30 minutes. The Cunarder *Mauretania*, at that time and for more than three decades in the future the fastest ship afloat (24-25 knots), crossed from New York to Liverpool (3,073 nautical miles) in 5 days 8 hours.³⁷ By steaming roughly 500 nautical miles less the *Empress* had cut 12½ hours from the *Mauretania*'s time. It should, of course, be remembered that the traveller disembarking at Halifax faced a 29- to 30-hour train journey to Montreal (870 miles), whereas from New York he could reach Montreal to Toronto overnight. Perhaps even more to the point, daily service was available at New York, whereas from Canadian ports bi-weekly was the best that could be managed for the first few years. All this notwithstanding, the Canadian enthusiasts and business lobbyists had gained the form, if not the solid substance, of what they had so long and vainly sought.

With the debut of the *Lusitania* and *Mauretania* in the Liverpool-New York service in 1907, not to mention a host of slightly less speedy competitors, competition on the "Western Ocean" became ruthless, signalled by the outbreak of a rate war. Rival companies slashed rates on both the New York and Canadian routes in a bid for a greater share of the passenger trade. So threatening had the situation become that on 3 September 1907 management of the various lines in the Canadian trade met in the Liverpool office of the Dominion line to devise counter-measures. Minimum rates for single first-class passages on the two *Empresses*, as well as the Allan Line turbiners, fell from \$80 to \$65, with passages as low as \$50 being offered on the C.P.R.'s slower *Lake Manitoba* and on the *Dominion* of the Dominion Line.³⁸ The lower winter rates, by mutual agreement, were brought into force on 15 September rather than 1 November, as hitherto. The continued heavy bookings on the two *Empresses* assured the C.P.R. that their business was not suffering from the cut-throat ravages of the rate war. In addition to the popularity of the *Empresses* the scenic passage on the St. Lawrence during the summer season attracted a good deal of business. And contrary to expectations, the immigrant trade

gravitated to the faster ships, as did first and second class. Not only did the *Empress* service reduce their passage time but the C.P.R. on these two ships supplied the immigrant with accommodation afloat rarely available previously in third class-- roomier and less crowded cabins, tableware in place of pannikins, better meals, so that some at least must have felt that they had never lived better in their lives.

With the encouraging advent, at long last, of the Atlantic fast line, Sir Wilfrid became a firm protagonist of what was known as the All Red Route concept, a jointly subsidized mail and passenger service linking up Britain with her possessions in the Orient and the Antipodes via Canada. With the opening of the 1907 Colonial Conference on 15 April in London, the time seemed propitious for such a project. Throughout the wining and dining in London the Canadian prime minister remained optimistic on the prospects of his cherished scheme, but the editor of the *Canadian Gazette* was less easily beguiled by the cordial round of festivities in the imperial capital:

Yet we know well enough that the gathering to which these statesmen have come from the four corners of the world will end, for the time at least, in little else than smiles and cigar smoke.³⁹

In the end this prognosis proved only too accurate. Talk proliferated; Laurier wrote home most encouragingly to his acting prime minister, Sir Richard Cartwright; the imperial government was slowly coming round. Laurier's proposals envisaged a shared subsidy over the whole imperial route (the All Red Route, presumably so-called because of the cartographers' convention of colouring the British Empire red on their maps), with hopefully the co-operation of the New Zealand and Australian authorities.

In writing to Cartwright shortly after the opening of the conference, Laurier mentioned a maximum four-day Atlantic service, with a subsidy of \$2,000,000, to be shared by the imperial and his own government. A somewhat slower, but greatly improved, service would be forthcoming on the Pacific.⁴⁰ Nothing came of the scheme. Opposition to it built up in England, despite the setting up of a parliamentary committee to examine the feasibility of the proposal. One member of this committee, David Lloyd George, opposed the scheme on the grounds of expense; he stalled for time by demanding ever more information. On 18 July 1907 Lloyd George wrote to Laurier that "the expert evidence which we have been able to obtain

has been largely of a discouraging nature.”⁴¹ In any case, he continued, opinion was coming round to the viewpoint that speed beyond a certain point was no longer the drawing card it had been; comfort was the key factor now in the passenger trade.

Opposition in England was wide based, and on that the whole project foundered. The General Post Office, for example, preferred the present subsidized service provided by the Peninsular and Orient Line via Suez and the Cape. The British taxpayer was already paying a hefty sum for the Cunard subsidy on the Atlantic, and so why should the service be duplicated? Some British shipowners saw the scheme merely as a device to put more money into the capacious pockets of the C.P.R. In any case monetary and trade considerations took easy precedence over that of imperial sentiment. Far more was to be derived from the lucrative New York trade than in the Canadian service. Laurier was hardly realistic in addressing a group of Toronto manufacturers in 1907, when in comparing the generous imperial subsidy for the Liverpool-New York service, he contended that the Mother Country should do as much for “their own kith and kin as for those who have severed their allegiance”.⁴² Much British shipping circles cared for such lofty sentiments! Although Laurier continued to pursue the chimera of the All Red Route, reports in the British press indicated that the scheme had been to all intents abandoned by the summer of 1909. Canada was left with her 17-18 knot bi-weekly service on the Atlantic.

The following spring, March 1908, the imperial government informed the Canadian that the British Parliament would not be asked for more than £20,000 to subsidize the China Mail contract, a reduction of about 25 per cent. Canada was constrained to make up the rest of the sum. The Allan Line and Canadian Pacific shared the carriage of the trans-Atlantic mail, each using its fastest ships available, and the C.P.R. carried on from that point, as in the past.⁴³

The Allan Line’s partnership with the C.P.R. to secure the coveted mail contract, from one point of view, was bought at a high price, for it spelled the end of the veteran line’s separate entity. On the other hand, with the increasingly keen competition among shipping companies, particularly on the Atlantic, mergers and amalgamations

were becoming the order of the day. Conditions in fact were becoming such that only the strong could survive. Early in 1908 the rate war reached its peak, with third-class tickets from Saint John selling for as low as \$17.50, and second class passages down to \$30. ⁴⁴ In March rates returned to normal, but the rate slashing was symptomatic of the keen competition midst rising costs to which the companies were increasingly subject.

With the introduction of the *Empresses* on the Atlantic it must indeed have appeared to the general public that the stage was now set for a close-hauled rivalry between the two companies, for the growing passenger trade in the Canadian service. As early as 1907, however, rumours were rife in shipping circles of some sort of merger between the two companies. Considering the much stronger hand held by the C.P.R. it is not at all surprising that the days of the Allan Line were numbered. Negotiations were kept a well-guarded secret, and officials of both companies adamantly denied that anything was afoot.

Negotiations leading to the C.P.R. acquisition of the Glasgow holdings of the Allan Line stock (about three-quarters of the total), began behind closed doors in London the summer of 1909, the C.P.R. being represented by a Montreal solicitor, H.V. Meredith. Writing to Sir Montagu Allan on 6 July, Meredith came quickly to the point:

My clients are now ready to carry out the transaction that you have had under discussion with them during the past two or three months, namely, to acquire all the Capital Stock of the Allan Line Steamship Company, Limited, and to take it over as a going concern, free from debt, excepting the ordinary operating liabilities. ⁴⁵

And so the formal agreement between the Allan Line directors and Meredith, acting for the C.P.R. was signed on 8 September 1909, transferring the Glasgow shares and assets of the Allan Line to the C.P.R. ⁴⁶

Both companies maintained a discreet silence throughout the transaction. Although by this agreement capital control of the Glasgow interests of the Allan Line had passed to the C.P.R., the two companies to all intents continued as separate and competing lines. The news, however, began to leak out, with prognostications appearing by the

fall of 1909 in various shipping journals and the press. The *Montreal Witness* reported that the Allan Line had been sold for something in the order of 12 million dollars, but the purchaser was thought to be the Grand Trunk Railway. *Railway and Marine World* for October 1909 foresaw that the Allan Line fleet would shortly be transferred to Canadian registry, and that the head office would accordingly be moved from Glasgow to Montreal.⁴⁷ Two months later the journal confirmed that this had taken place, with the transfer of 30 vessels, aggregating 160,000 tons to Canadian registry. The C.P.R., *Railway and Marine World* continued, had been added "to the list of those credited with the purchase of the company, but the statement was promptly denied by the President."⁴⁸ On 4 December 1909 a leading official of the C.P.R. branded the rumours as "a pure piece of romance".⁴⁹ Less than a week later, however, the *Saint John Daily Telegraph* correctly surmised that the C.P.R. had purchased the Glasgow interests of the Allan Line, and so controlled three-quarters of that company's capital.⁵⁰ The remainder of the Allan Line stock was acquired by the C.P.R. by terms of an agreement dated 8 July 1910, at which point the oldest shipping company in the Canadian trade ceased to have a separate identity except in name.⁵¹

The rest of the story is soon told. In February 1914 the C.P.R. announced the setting up of a London subsidiary, to be known as Canadian Pacific Ocean Service, with offices at 8 Waterloo Place, London. All C.P.R. and Allan Line ocean-going vessels (C.P.R. coastal and Great Lakes vessels were not affected) were to be chartered to this subsidiary, which "shall continue to operate the Canadian Pacific Steamship Lines and the Allan Steamship Line under their respective names."⁵² Ownership and control were to remain with the railway company. The combined fleet to be operated by Canadian Pacific Ocean Services aggregated 41 vessels. In September 1921 the name of the C.P.R. subsidiary was changed to Canadian Pacific Steamship Line, by which it is known to this day.

The demise of the gallant old Allan Line came in February 1930, at an Extraordinary General Meeting of the Allan Line shareholders, held at 62/65 Charing Cross, London, at which the following motion, the death-knell of the illustrious line, was pronounced:

That the company be wound up voluntarily and that Sir Gilbert Garnsey of 3 Frederick Place, Old Jewry, in the City of London, Chartered Account, be and he is hereby appointed Liquidator for the purposes of such winding-up.⁵³

So passed from the scene the red, white and blue house-flag of the oldest and most distinguished steamship line in the Canadian service.

ENDNOTES

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| 1 | ocean mileages |
| New York-Liverpool | 3,073 nautical miles |
| Quebec-Liverpool | 2,680 " " (via Belle Isle) |
| | 2,950 " " (Cabot Strait) |
2. *Montreal Gazette*, 2 June 1851, p. 2.
 3. *Ibid.*
 4. *Ibid.*, 20 June 1851, p. 2.
 5. PAC., Mg 29 *Fleming Papers*, Vol. 103, p file 35.
 6. *Canadian Gazette*, Vol. XVIII, 17 Dec. 1891, p. 267.
 7. PAC., RG 36, 1, Vol. 1, Canadian Maritime Commission, Steamship Subsidies Contracts. These early ones were quoted in sterling although paid by the Canadian government ostensibly because the head offices of the Allan Line were in Glasgow.
 8. James Croil, *Steam Navigation* (Montreal, 1898), p. 205 .
 9. PAC., *Canada House Papers*, Series A-7, Vol. 135, quoting from *The Lighthouse*, 8 Jan. 1887.
 10. Holmes, *Ancient and Modern Ships*. (London, 1906), pp.75-6.
 11. *Quebec Morning Chronicle*, 16 Feb. 1888, in *Canada House Papers*, Series A-7, Vol. 137.
 12. *Canadian Gazette*, Vol. X, 5 Jan. 1888, p. 325.
 13. *Canada House Papers*, Series A-7, Vol, 147, Macdonald to Tupper, 30 July 1888.
 14. *Ibid.*, Andrew Allan to Tupper, 3 March 1888.
 15. *Great Britain: Parliamentary Papers*, Vol. XLV, p. 236.
 16. *Canada: Debates of House of Commons*, Vol. II, 20 April 1889. pp. 1406-7.
 17. *Canadian Gazette*, Vol. XIII, 9 May 1889, p. 131.
 18. *Ibid.*, Vol. XXIII, p. 523.
 19. *Canada: Debates*, Session 1894, Vol. II, pp. 5711-2.