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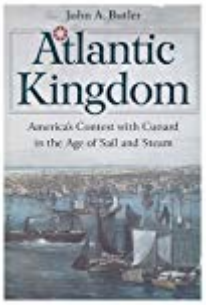
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

John A. Butler. *Atlantic Kingdom: America's Contest with Cunard in the Age of Sail and Steam.* Washington, D.C.: Brassey's, 2001. xx + 280 pp. $26.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-57488-383-1.



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Published on H-Atlantic (May, 2003)

Sail, Steam, and Gods of the High Seas

In *Atlantic Kingdom* popular historian and mariner John A. Butler tells the story of how American shipbuilders, financiers, captains, and entrepreneurs challenged Cunard, the giant British company that dominated shipping on the North Atlantic in the nineteenth century. He concentrates on both sail and steam, but is particularly fascinated by the transition from sail to steam around the middle of the century. Along the way Butler manages to spin quite an interesting sea yarn, as they say.

Butler's cast of characters includes such colorful figures as artist, arms designer, and civil engineer Robert Fulton and his wealthy patriot and politician partner, Robert Livingston; feisty Robert Gibbons, aided by Cornelius Vanderbilt in his bitter rivalry with the Fulton enterprise; William Walker, Vanderbilt's nemesis who died before a firing squad after attempting a coup in Nicaragua; the sanctimonious conniver Daniel Drew, plunderer of Vanderbilt's millions, who died as a broken and despised old man; Junius Smith, the luckless father of commercial transatlantic steam navigation; George Francis Train, the capricious sponsor of clipper ship designer Donald McKay; and Newburyport's little-known team of Willaim Currier and James Townsend, builders of what became known as the "Wild Boat of the Atlantic", Captain Samuel Samuels's fastest ship. Factories, mills, plantations, steerage passengers, and farms built the trade between the continents. But these men, energized by the power of steam and speed, sought to dominate that maritime trade and create the Atlantic Kingdom. Eastbound crossings of the Atlantic could be quite leisurely in the early nineteenth century, taking about three and one-half weeks, New York to Liverpool, and four to seven weeks for the return in contrary winds and currents. Technical breakthroughs such as the side-lever steam engine and iron hulls provided the means for a steady increase in passenger service, and here the Americans trumped the British who put safety over speed. The Cunard Line is still as recognizably British as Harrod's, Rolls-Royce, and Sotheby's, even if the Carnival Corporation of Miami, Florida now owns the line. Founded by Samuel Cunard, the steamships of that line represented the chal-

lenge for the Americans. First E. K. Collins, a mogul of lavish tastes, founded the Collins Line, which surpassed Cunard in terms of speed and comfort. George Francis Train, a Boston Brahmin and founder of the White Diamond Line, made his reputation and fortune despatching fast-moving, McKay-designed Clipper ships to California, one of the last hurrahs for masted sailing ships. Cornelius Vanderbilt offered a shorter route through Nicaragua to the California gold fields. The profitable Vanderbilt Line became known for speed, low fares, and unsafe operation such as the sinking of the *Independence* off the coast of Lower California.

For all three of these American ship operators, the Atlantic Great Circle route "glistened like a scimitar to be wrested from the grip of Cunard, the quiet Briton" (p. 154). Yet a price had to be paid for such competition. The Collins Line lost several ships and the operating costs were exorbitant with the construction of the *Atlantic*, the most luxurious steamship yet built. In the sail verus steam debate, the "Wild Boat" of the Atlantic, the clipper ship *Dreadnought*, captained by crusty Samuel Samuels who pushed his men so hard that he had to suppress a mutiny, sped across the Atlantic in times that put the steamers on edge. The intensity of the struggle for possession of the Atlantic sea lanes and the climax of the struggles between sail and steam came together in 1853-1854. The loss of the Collins Line *Arctic* overshadowed all transatlantic travel. In a chilling portent of the *Titanic* disaster, captains of the Collins Line frequently steamed at full speed through ice fields and heavy fog in pursuit of crossing records. On September 27, 1854, the *Arctic*, moving very fast through a heavy fog, crashed into a smaller French ship and sank as the crew abandoned ship and passengers. While Samuel Samuels established new speed records with the *Dreadnought*, Donald McKay continued to design elegant clippers for the California trade. Yet the age of windjammers was coming to an end. The screw propeller and the business panic of 1857 saw to that. And the end was coming also for the American challenge to Cunard.

The once vibrant transatlantic passenger business reeled from disaster and overexpansion. The Atlantic Vanderbilt Line had a poor reputation for service and living conditions, yet it had obtained a U.S. Government subsidy for the transport of transatlantic mail from the Collins Line, which went bankrupt in 1857. The Civil War further disrupted American maritime trade, and we are only left to ponder the author's assessment of the aftermath of this battle for Atlantic trade: "Like mythical gods battling for domination over an ocean kingdom, the titans of the Atlantic left behind them a tragic wreckage of human lives, lost ships, and squandered fortunes. The Cunard Line, the undiminished survivor, continued to steam prudently over the waves.... A decline in the affairs of America's merchant marine that began with the loss of the Arctic continued for ninety years. It was buoyed only by wartime's temporary needs" (p. 244). The American penchant for speed and greed brought these titans down.

Butler has written a fascinating account of this chapter in American merchant maritime history. And he intends to reach a general, popular audience as evidenced by lavish illustrations, a glossary of nautical terms, a chronology, and no footnotes nor citations of any sort to slow a reader down. All he provides is a "Note on Sources," which really amounts to a practical, critical bibliography. And he employs a technique that more and more authors of nonfiction histories and biographies have used since first made famous by Simon Schama in *Dead Certainties* (or even earlier by Herodotus): the invented narrative or situation. Although no evidence exists that the six principles involved in the contest for the Atlantic ever met, Butler creates a scene in which they have all convened, "say for the transfer of the fastest-passage award away from British hands to Edward Knight Collins, proud owner of the Baltic, in 1851" (p. 181). This is not just an idle digression for But-

ler, but a clear opportunity for the enhancement of historical truth: "Of course, no such meeting of the titans and their consorts ever took place" (p. 183). But how he wishes that it did, because, "[a] ten-year history of ocean conquest might have been encapsulated in the passing of a few hours, and the outlook for the next ten years perhaps made clearer" (p. 183). He pulls back at the last moment from going over the top into pure historical fiction. While he describes the setting and personal reactions based upon the personalities of these men, he stops short of actual invented dialogue, but how delicious must have been the temptation. The imagined conversation would be like a parable of the whole process of historical reconstruction of this particular topic. When imagined narratives are slipped in without acknowledgment, or at least suggested as in this case, the reader is left with an unsettling feeling that other parts of the narrative may have been invented also. But this criticism, or better just an observation, certainly does nothing to derail the author's intent and purpose in writing this book: namely to provide an exciting, lively, biographical narrative for the maritime enthusiast and perhaps those interested in economic or business history, or even imperial history. But he does seem to have an overly deep veneration of and nostalgia for the Cunard Line, which will soon launch the *Queen Mary 2*, the largest and most spacious passenger (cruise) ship in the world. This is not surprising considering the demise of the Atlantic passenger ship, but the *QM2* will be more evocative of the *Love Boat* than the Cunarders of long ago. Really all that remains now of the Cunard name are the original routes across the Atlantic.

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