

# MAILSHIPS OF “THE CAPE RUN”

by Trevor W. Hearl

A sumptuous volume extolling the story of “the Cape run” has joined a growing list of titles relating with unashamed nostalgia those proud traditions which, as this book admits, still inspire the service provided by the RMS *St Helena*. Written by a Cape master-mariner, the late Captain C.J. Harris, and former submarine officer Brian D. Ingpen, *Mailships of the Union-Castle Line* has a South African perspective. Even RMS *St Helena* appears against the background of Table Mountain. The large format (30 x 28 cms) and tabloid layout gives space for prolific illustrations, some in colour including original paintings by Peter Bilas, and an informative, uncrowded text.

Among a dozen references to St Helena is one of the abandonment of the fire-ravaged *Good Hope Castle* after leaving Ascension in 1973 (pp.139-141). It fails to answer serious questions raised by the incident, however, leaving fertile ground for research by postal historians to discover why a Royal Mail Ship sailed unmonitored from one of the most sophisticated communications centres in the world, its mayday signals unavailing, and how St Helena reacted to the non-arrival of its supply ship. And what happened to the mail, ordinary, registered and diplomatic? Did new safeguards result from the catastrophe? Such issues, taboo when Cold War submarines lurked in the South Atlantic, should now be discussed openly in the interests of safety at sea.

Other references to the islands include the maiden voyage of RMS *Dane* in November 1857 (p.15); details of the mail contract in 1857 (p.15); and two less well-known events. In 1888 the mailship *Norham Castle* broke its propeller after leaving Capetown and drifted in a current taking it, not to, but past, St Helena. When it failed to arrive, Jamestown authorities quizzed every vessel that put in until they had enough evidence to send a whaler to the rescue, an initiative in stark contrast to that of ships which actually veered away on sighting its distress signals! The other reference quotes missionary John Moffatt aboard RMS *Norman* in April 1858 meeting “a French Chevalier [...] with his wife and daughter [...] bound to St Helena. But as we did not call there, they had not only the tedious voyage to the Cape, but also the return voyage to their destination [...]. When we had accomplished about two-thirds of our voyage, our engines broke down[.]” (p.16)

The Chevalier, Major Gauthier de Rougemont, “on his way to take possession of the domain” (i.e. Longwood House and the Tomb, *La Domaine Francaise de St Helene*), eventually arrived at the Cape on 18 May, re-embarked on 10 June and arrived at St Helena on the 30th, “accompanied by his wife, lady’s maid and batman,” according to M. Gilbert Martineau (*Napoleon’s Last Journey* [1976] p.164). Had the authors used St Helena evidence they could have quoted the improved service to the Island by 1875: “Twenty years ago St Helena was [...] outside of civi-

lization; five months at a time elapsed without [...] hearing a word of home news or seeing a newspaper but now the great strides of oceanic steam navigation have brought it nearer to England and by mail packet from Southampton it may be reached in from 17 to 21 days.

“The first week of the voyage is occupied in reaching Madeira, by which time the seasick voyagers, about whose sufferings so many accounts have been written, have sufficiently recovered to enjoy the enchanting break afforded by a few hours ashore in that lovely island. The next few days are occupied in steaming down amongst the beautiful islands of the Canarian Archipelago with generally a fair view of the renowned peak of Tenerife towering high above the clouds. A sight of Cape Verde on the coast of Africa and a day or two by way of change of that intolerable damp, steamy, hot atmosphere so inseparably associated with equatorial regions; and then a week or ten days amongst the fresh South-East trade winds, the deep blue seas of the South Atlantic with bright sunny skies and St Helena is reached; the voyager looking back with pleasure to what has been in reality nothing more than an agreeable yachting trip, instead of the much-dreaded long sea voyage.” (J.C. Melliss: *St Helena* [1875] p.36).

The arrival of the English mail at St Helena, “the greatest event of the month,” according to Melliss, “announced with a great display of bunting and firing of guns,” receives no mention here, however. Nor is a mailship pictured at the islands, which the authors perhaps view more as an impediment than an attraction on the mail run.

Postal historians may find some details of significance, such as changes in Union-Castle ships’ departure from Southampton: 4 p.m. every Thursday from 1938 to 1967, then 1 p.m. every Friday (p.134). The boast that one could set a watch by their sailings was certainly upheld by the last of them, the Southampton and Good Hope Castles, known as “two-hour ships” at St Helena from their strict schedule. The book takes both from slipway to scrapyard, though captions do not explain whether they are shown with or without passenger accommodation. They might have used one of Claude Muncaster’s fine oil paintings, commissioned by Sir Nicholas Cayzer, of the Southampton Castle either entering Durban on her maiden voyage or passing the Royal Yacht off Cowes.

At £35, *Mailships of the Union-Castle Line* (United Kingdom publisher Patrick Stephens Ltd., Yeovil) is rather for the enthusiast who wishes to relive “the memory of a time when travel was leisurely and enjoyable and a holiday in itself; when elaborate meals were freshly prepared and brought to the table in a flurry of silver and white napery; when service was polite and efficient, and days were spent lazing under warm sunny skies, making new friends and having fun.” (p.9).

But most readers will probably find their literary needs satisfied by W.H Mitchell & L.A. Sawyer: *The Cape Run* (revised edition, 1987); Alan S. Mallett: *The Union-Castle Line: A Celebration in Photographs and Company Postcards* (1990); and Duncan

Haws: *Merchant Fleets: Union, Castle, and Union-Castle Lines* (1990); to say nothing of Marischal Murray's classic book *Union-Castle Chronicle 1853-1953* (1953).

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