

COLLISION ON THE SAINT LAWRENCE

THIS DISASTROUS ENCOUNTER WOULD BECOME CANADA'S DEADLIEST SHIPWRECK

BY ADAM STANTON



Empress of Ireland departing Liverpool.



Poster advertising Canadian Pacific's Empress liners.



The 27th of January 1906 dawned as a cold and blustery day at Fairfield Shipbuilding and Engineering's berth number four at Glasgow, Scotland. Yet even with the poor weather, officials from Canadian Pacific Steamship Company could not help but feel a warm glow of pride as their gleaming new ocean liner slid down the ways after a flawless christening. The new ship was part of Canadian Pacific's plan to put two liners on the North Atlantic run between Liverpool and Quebec City. The liner was RMS *Empress of Ireland* and the

company expected great things of her.

During the early 1880s, Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) began negotiations with the British government to establish transpacific steamship routes between Vancouver in British Columbia and ports in the Far East. Sir William Cornelius Van Horne was the Canadian-American builder of Canada's vast railroad network and, seeing the market for the Far East, in 1887 he chartered three ships from the Cunard Line after the successful conclusion of negotiations with the British. In many ways, it was a

bold experiment but by chartering the Cunard ships, Sir William would not financially over-extend his company. The three vessels were SS *Abyssinia*, SS *Parthia*, and SS *Batavia*.

Sir William was born during 1843 in a very rural part of Illinois but moved with his family to Joliet when he was eight-years-old. He was the eldest child in the family and as a teenager he developed a drive to move ahead in the world and by age 14 he was working on the railroads and quickly moved up. However, he saw his fortune in the north and in 1882 he was appointed

general manager of Canadian Pacific Railway where he became president in 1888 and chairman of the board in 1899. He went down in the history books for overseeing the major construction of the first Canadian transcontinental railway. Under his leadership, the massive undertaking was completed in half the projected time.

Knowledgeable in every aspect of the railroad industry, Van Horne convinced his company to have the railway be part of an integrated communications and transportation system. He created a telegraph service along with an express freight delivery service as a complement to the railway. As his personal wealth

grew, he became a major investor in the Cuba Railroad Company and built modern railways in that country.

In 1894, Queen Victoria made Van Horne an honorary "Sir" but as an American citizen he was technically not entitled to the prefix of "Sir" but seemed to like being addressed as Sir William. He also built grand hotels, collected art (and was himself a painter), and functioned in a number of other business roles. And then came the idea of expanding into ocean travel.

His venture of leasing the Cunard ships had turned a profit and this set Van Horne on a campaign to expand his maritime interests. During the first year

of operating the Cunard ships, some 33 westbound crossings were completed. During those voyages, the trio of ships carried some 23,400 passengers in third class and most of these were immigrants moving to Canada. Van Horne wanted to offer something more luxurious.

The new liner was designed by Francis Elgar, a consulting naval architect and director of the Fairfield Shipbuilding and Engineering Company. During his time in this position, Elgar designed novel types of vessels including torpedo-boat destroyers and cross-Channel steamers of high speed. Also, steam turbines and water-tube boilers were employed

Empress of Ireland was a rather elegant liner that soon proved to be extremely popular with passengers.