

Tony Ross
Irish Immigrant
Britannic
January 19, 1957



Just Off The Boat

It was 6:19 a.m. when the Cunard M.V. Britannic sailed into Halifax, Nova Scotia on January 19th, 1957. Even the stately vessel herself must have been shocked as her bows sliced into a great plain of blue and white ice for she had been taken off the blue waters of the Mediterranean run to help cope with the ever recurring tides of Irish emigrants and the new waves of Britons shedding wraparound Socialism.

My shipbroker's training and the engineer in Joe obliged us to witness the official arrival in the harbour mouth before the docking, an hour away. The passengers slept on in their dreams of a promised land. They were not to be disappointed. The scene that would greet them would be almost as frontier-like as the Canadian government literature of black and white scenes of snow landscapes and polar bears. Joe and I stared forward into the mists. No sign of a city, only the harbour. The lurid glare of a wraith-like flame lit up a wall of ice. Most of us Irish would have been satisfied with a few polar bears and a Mountie on the shore rather than the flames from Imperial Esso's cracking plant. This was the reality, Canada! Eventually a shore and a dock peered out from the mist. The dock was then merely Pier 21 - a heartless place. Now it throbs with the heartfelt memory of thousands of immigrants. Their memories are being recaptured by the Pier 21 Society.

Now I had to face Halifax in desperate pursuit of a job, my capital having dwindled from one hundred and twenty dollars to eighteen, whatever that might mean. We had been, as the Irish say, 'Flahoulic', very open handed. We cocktailed every night at the Captain's corner of the bar ever since Playboy McMahon, the only one with a dinner jacket, had swept us from the tourist section into the first class saloon, where we all thought we belonged.

The voyage was five nights and we had safe arrival parties for two of them. There was a good excuse for the parties as, although the ocean was normal for January, short wave radio told alarming tales of the Queen Elizabeth, a day ahead of us, having difficulty anchoring in New York, such were the coastal storms. We fortified ourselves against a watery grave with the water of life, "uisge beatha", to the extent that few were the uncles in Toronto or Chicago who received their duty free bottle

of Powers or Jamieson. On the last night Howie, one of the young men we judged to be a Toronto tycoon, approached me, Tony, we have found that you are the only passenger disembarking at Halifax so we want you to join us tonight for dinner.

This in a concerned tone with a sympathetic smile.

I took my scotch and soda to the dinner table which, like many an Irishman, I prefer to Irish Whiskey. There is more in the difference than that e before the y. Doctors, particularly those who partake of neither, will tell you they are equally intoxicating, but it ain't necessarily so. Irish seems to light you up like gasoline on the stubborn embers of a barbecue, whereas scotch glow quietly and steadily, like the embers. My host welcomed me on behalf of his friends, machine gunning their first names, and congratulated me in my choice of Canada as opposed to my compatriots bound as of your for Boston and New York. All assured me of a great future in a great country, Canada. "But why Halifax? People emigrate from there to anywhere, Montreal, Toronto, Vancouver. What field are you in?" Shipping. "Oh well, yeah, shipping eh? But this joint, Halifax, closes down all winter until April, sometimes May." He was amazed to learn that getting off at Halifax cost twenty pounds sterling less, and that this mattered to a young man clad as a gent in a tailored Irish Tweed suit with stovepipe trousers. To perk up my spirit I replied in the lingo of London's Baltic Shipping Exchange, where one broker sought cargo for a ship and another a ship for cargo, yes, I realize F.O.W. St. Lawrence is April, first open water after the ice packs, and that there will be no trade, and so little chance of a job in what I knew shipping but I had to come. You might say I am a latter day remittance man whose family can no longer afford the allowance to keep the black sheep in the colonies. I had run out of credit and they of patience. I sought colder climes, and here we are in an ice pack in the mouth of Halifax harbour. Loud cheers and stories from my new Canadian friends of the days when families could afford remittance men, such as Michael Moley the Magnificent who raised a pack of hounds on the plains of Saskatchewan, and rode after a coyote in his hunting' pink. It was in laughter the night ended for the only man getting off from whence other sailed on to fortune.

After the excitement of the arrival of the ship, there was a feeling of letdown. The Britannic would take four hours to discharge cargo and be ready to sail on for Toronto, so myself, Joe and Playboy decided to set foot in Canada, they for their last few hours, and me? Well, the fates would decide that.

A white to grey light hung over the car-lit city and drivers seemed to glide, somehow under control, down icy streets towards the dock shoreline.

We needed the cure and opted for the first and flashiest restaurant lights announcing "Chicken Villa". A sprightly and comely blond dashed down glasses of ice water before we could speak to order a cold beer. We stared at the ice cubes. Was a cold beer the cure in a cold climate I wondered. Playboy smiled at Miss Canada and asked, "Could you spare us the ice and bring us three Guinness and three short ones? You don't have that? You don't have a license?" No, we did not want to eat. We retreated to the dock again and there was nothing more to do but say goodbye to my fellow seafarers.