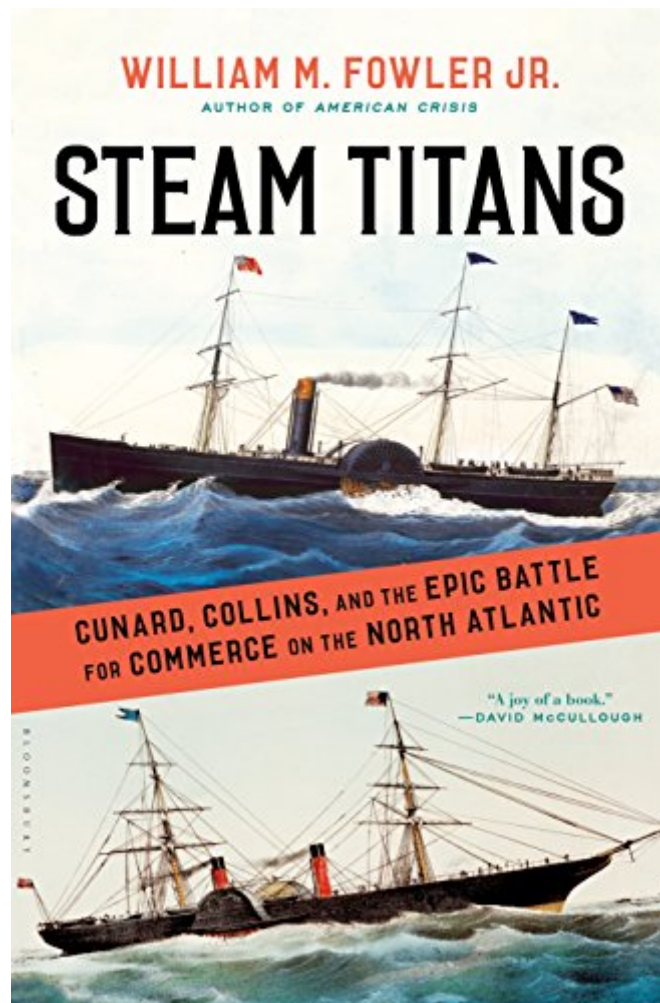




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Steam Titans: Cunard, Collins, And The Epic Battle For Commerce On The North Atlantic



Synopsis

The story of the epic contest between shipping magnates Samuel Cunard and Edward Collins for mid-19th century control of the Atlantic. Between 1815 and the American Civil War, the greatest invention of the Industrial Revolution delivered a sea change in oceanic transportation. Steam travel transformed the Atlantic into a pulsating highway, dominated by ports in Liverpool and New York, as steamships ferried people, supplies, money, and information with astounding speed and regularity. American raw materials flowed eastward, while goods, capital, people, and technology crossed westward. The Anglo-American "partnership" fueled development worldwide; it also gave rise to a particularly intense competition. *Steam Titans* tells the story of a transatlantic fight to wrest control of the globe's most lucrative trade route. Two men--Samuel Cunard and Edward Knight Collins--and two nations wielded the tools of technology, finance, and politics to compete for control of a commercial lifeline that spanned the North Atlantic. The world watched carefully to see which would win. Each competitor sent to sea the fastest, biggest, and most elegant ships in the world, hoping to earn the distinction of being known as "the only way to cross." Historian William M. Fowler brings to life the spectacle of this generation-long struggle for supremacy, during which New York rose to take her place among the greatest ports and cities of the world, and recounts the tale of a competition that was the opening act in the drama of economic globalization, still unfolding today.

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Customer Reviews

For much of the past 250 years or so, the US and Great Britain have been technical and commercial leaders, and so it seems logical that one of the areas where competition would develop would be the ability to transport men and material across the Atlantic Ocean. From Ben Franklin worrying about mail deliveries to the Concorde SST, the two nations have always had a serious, if somewhat friendly, rivalry. In *Steam Titans*, William M. Fowler Jr. examines a key portion of this contest, the rise of the steam-powered ship.=== *The Good Stuff* ===* While Fowler certainly has some impressive academic credentials, fortunately he doesn't write like a professor. The book is written in a light, somewhat informal tone that is easy to read and avoids the 30-letter words and two-page paragraphs of serious academic writing. The book held my interest throughout, and stimulated some thought and day-dreaming.* The book is nominally about the rise of the steam-powered ocean-going vessel, both as a carrier of freight and passengers. But like many new technologies, steam vessels really couldn't compete well with the existing sail technology, and so their growth becomes a story of government contracts, favorable legislation and favors from men in high places. Of course, this leads to years of intrigue, murky deals, improbable justifications and issues of "national pride". It doesn't take a great imagination to see the parallels in other modern businesses---Boeing and Airbus come to mind.* The book spends a great deal of time on the efforts of several men, Edward Knight Collins, Samuel Cunard and Cornelius Vanderbilt as they battled each other for supremacy of the Atlantic steamship routes. The men had very different strategies, different levels of government support, and varying degrees of success in their endeavors.* Fowler also points out the many present-day consequences of what seems like a 19th century story. For example, New York City is blessed with an excellent harbor. That made it very important in the 19th century, when commerce relied heavily on water transport. But New York has kept that dominance into the modern day, even when a large part of the commerce is more about the flow of data than freighters.=== *The Not-So-Good Stuff* ===* Maybe it is just my engineer side, but I would have preferred more details on the technical side of the ships and less concentration on the political machinations of mail subsidies. I understand that without being heavily subsidized,

steam powered ships would have been delayed another 50 years or so, but there were some major engineering advances that provided major increases in efficiency. These got only brief mention and minimal explanation.* Similarly, the author leaves some tantalizing dead-ends. Steamships relied on financing, and forced the development of some large financial institutions in both the United States and Great Britain. Many of these still have relevance today. I would have liked for this part of the book to have been developed further.* Finally, portions of the book got a bit dry. Many of the great 19th century "sea-battles" were really fought on the floor and cloakrooms of Congress and Parliament. Try as you might, it is tough to make 50 years of legislative horse-trading exciting.=== Summary ===I enjoyed the book, and found it a nice look at how technology, commerce, government and personalities all intermixed to change the way men crossed the ocean. Fowler did a nice job of tying the story together and keeping it interesting and relevant to modern-day business. I was surprised at how long it took for steam to be truly competitive with sail technology, both on cost and speed. Also, the difference in business strategies between the various moguls involved (luxury, safety, proven technology) made the narrative more interesting.=== Disclaimer ===I was able to read an advance copy through the courtesy of the publisher and NetGalley.

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