

**THE FIRST TRANS-ATLANTIC STEAMER:  
AN INVESTIGATION OF THE CLAIMS  
PUT FORWARD ON BEHALF OF THE  
CANADIAN STEAMER "ROYAL  
WILLIAM", PP. 5-44, (NOT COMPLETE)**

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**JAMES WALKER**

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TRANS-ATLANTIC STEAMER

AN INVESTIGATION OF THE CLAIMS PUT FORWARD  
ON BEHALF OF THE CANADIAN STEAMER  
"ROYAL WILLIAM"

BY  
JAMES WALKER

With Notes

BY  
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## INTRODUCTION.

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IN a paper read by Mr. Colmer on "The Progress of Canada during the Sixty Years of Her Majesty's Reign," before the Foreign and Colonial section of the Society of Arts, London, on the 16th February, 1897, occurred these words:—"Steam communication across the Atlantic commenced in 1838, but there was no regular service till the Cunard line was started in 1841. . . . There were a few steamboats on some of the rivers and lakes, as already mentioned, but the development of steam was yet in its infancy. Canada, however, enjoyed the proud distinction of having built the first steamer that crossed the Atlantic, the 'Royal William,' launched at Quebec in 1831."

This assertion that the "Royal William" was the first vessel to cross the Western Ocean under steam alone, and hence became the pioneer of Atlantic steam navigation, has of late years been frequently made by Canadians, although it is noteworthy that half a century elapsed before the claim began to be seriously advanced; but the first occasion on which it was made publicly in England was at the meeting of the Society of Arts in London just referred to.

This is very singular, seeing that the origination of such a feat would be an honour to any country.

Hitherto, the honour of being the first steamship to cross the Atlantic under continuous steam has been divided between the "Sirius" and the "Great Western." Both these ships crossed at the same time, and arrived at New York on the

same day, viz., the 23rd April, 1838, but as the "Great Western" left England three days later than the "Sirius," it is to her chiefly that the credit is given, inasmuch as she was the first steamer built expressly for the Atlantic trade, whereas the "Sirius" was a small steamer trading regularly between London and Cork, and was despatched across the Atlantic only as an experiment.

Let us, therefore, see whether or not the recorded facts support the claim now put forth on behalf of the Canadian 'Royal William.'



# THE FIRST TRANS-ATLANTIC STEAMER.

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## PART I.

### STEAM NAVIGATION UP TO 1839.

Now, in order to enable the reader to judge of the possibility or impossibility of either the Canadian "Royal William" or any other steam vessel in existence in 1833 performing a voyage, under steam alone, across the western ocean without stopping, let us consider how far steam navigation had progressed at that time, and in what stage of comparative perfection the marine engine then was. We may learn what was known amongst American engineers up to 1839 from a "Treatise on the Steam Engine," by James Renwick, LL.D. (second edition), published at New York in that year.

1815. "Fulton had planned a vessel which was intended to be used in the Baltic. This vessel was in a state of forwardness at the time of his death.<sup>1</sup> She was (afterwards) placed as a packet between New York and Newport, R.J., in which passage the open sea is navigated for a short distance." (P. 271.)

"In the summer of 1815, the first steam vessel built on the Clyde by Bell made a passage from Glasgow to Liverpool, and during the autumn of the same year (1815) several other vessels also built on the Clyde were sent to different parts of England. During the equinoctial storm in (March) 1816, one of these crossed from Brighton to Havre in a gale which the cutter packets employed at that time on the station were unable to weather." (P. 271.)

<sup>1</sup> Fulton died February 24th, 1815.

"In 1818 a steamship plied from New York to New Orleans as a packet, touching at Charlestown and the Havana." (P. 269.)

(In 1819 the "Savannah" crossed in twenty-six days from New York to Liverpool, and afterwards went to St. Petersburg, using sail only during the greater part of the time. Her voyage is too well known to be further noticed here, except to emphasize the fact that from St. Petersburg she returned to her port of departure in the United States.)

"During the year 1819 a vessel rigged as a ship, but furnished also with a steam-engine, was built at New York for the purpose of plying as a packet between that port and Charlestown, Cuba, and New Orleans. Nothing was wanting except sufficient tonnage to have enabled this vessel to cross the Atlantic in a time as short as that employed by the steamships 'Great Western' and 'Liverpool.'" (P. 272.)

"In 1820 steam packets were established between Holyhead and Dublin. . . . The regularity and safety with which the passages between Holyhead and Dublin were performed, established the fact of the superior safety of steamers in storms and dangerous seas. Communications by lines of packets were speedily established between different points of the British Isles and from Great Britain to the Continent—and have long existed to Hamburg, Rotterdam, Antwerp, Calais, and Havre; and there are numerous steam packets plying between different parts of England and Ireland. The most important line is that between London and Leith, in which the largest steam vessels built before those intended for the navy or crossing the Atlantic were employed." (P. 272.)

"The first voyage to India by steam was performed in 1825, by the 'Enterprise.' This vessel took her departure from Falmouth, and was forty-seven days between the Cape of Good Hope and Calcutta. As in the *passage of the 'Savannah,'* the voyage was performed by the *alternate aid of wind and steam.*" (P. 273.)

"In spite of these experiments, it was seriously maintained, by no mean authority (Dr. Lardner), as late as

August 1838, that the passage of the ocean, as a regular business by steam vessels, was impracticable. The most that could be hoped, it was alleged, would be to pass from the most western ports of Europe to the Azores or Newfoundland, and then take in a fresh supply of fuel. In the face of these discouraging predictions, the direct passage from a Port in Great Britain to New York was made almost simultaneously by two Steamers before the end of the year in which this argument was held. Of these two vessels, one (the 'Great Western') had been built for the express purpose and had tonnage adequate to the great probable consumption of fuel; the other (the 'Sirius') was of the very class which had furnished the basis of the opinion, and yet the fuel which could be carried was not entirely exhausted. It is therefore established, beyond all possibility of doubt, that steam vessels, if they have the capacity of twelve to fourteen hundred tons, may perform the direct passage from England to New York by steam alone." (P. 273).

The above quotations are from the work of Dr. Renwick, who was as eminent authority on this subject as any of his contemporaries, and with as profound a knowledge. In the notice which he takes of the dubious prophecy by Dr. Lardner as to the impossibility of crossing the Atlantic by steam exclusively, Dr. Renwick proves that he knows not only what is required, but also what had been done in Europe and America. He points out that in prolonged ocean voyages under steam there is even a greater necessity than the supply of fuel—viz., an abundant supply of pure fresh water for feeding the boilers to replace that evaporated into steam, and also for removing the deposits of salt left in the boilers by the evaporation of sea water. He says:—

"There is another species of danger which arises from the deposits of solid substances. The constant evaporation is replaced by new supplies of the same impure water and the soluble portion is constantly accumulating. The soluble parts become greater in quantity than the contained water can hold in solution, and these are deposited, along with