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SUPERSHIP

"One turns the pages hypnotised."

—HAMMOND INNES

"When *The New Yorker* featured two long and frightening articles on supertankers by Noël Mostert, they had a stunning impact. But excellent as they were, Mostert's articles only hinted at the eloquence and power of his finished book, *Supership*. With their indictment of tanker safety standards and their warning of the ecological dangers the huge ships pose, the articles interweave the best traditions of Ralph Nader and Rachel Carson. But the book takes this basic exposé and turns it into real literature, a story of ships, sailors and the sea narrated with an unselfconscious skill that Conrad or Melville might have envied."

—*The New York Times*

"Angry, eloquent, deeply informed . . . an epic narrative."

—ROSS MACDONALD



diary loss as the fathom goes is the magnificent nineteenth-century chartwork. The new metric charts look functional and bare by comparison. The old ones were works of art, a delight to handle, often beautifully illustrated, especially when the coast concerned was a wild and largely unfamiliar one and precise delicate drawings were provided of the offshore view to assist the mariner. I often found myself, at moments when I felt a need for diversion, ascending to the bridge and its chartroom section and there browsing among the charts and admiring them in their glory and variety for perhaps the last time. Stored in wide teak drawers and held there in fine white canvas holders, the act of retrieving them alone was a pleasure; I suppose that in another fifteen years they'll be auctioning these same canvas portfolios filled with the old charts at Sotheby's.

What we will not be able to retrieve at Sotheby's will be our living and romantic sense of ships. I was aware of this whenever I was beset by the urge to escape from the sealed-in mood of *Ardshiel's* accommodation and sought brief relief outside from the structural exterior of the ship. Only at the few wooden rails aboard did one touch something of the old fabric of ships. One wandered among high walls of steel, and sometimes the various mathematical compositions of the functional decks piled atop each other held one's interest, but it looked as stripped of all but essential detail as a poster-painted ship.

One of the charms of the sea in our time, and for generations back, has been the continuous individuality of ships. They represented in the age of the ship-owning families, now rapidly expiring, the decorative fancies and often eccentric whims of the owners, who saw their ships as an extension of their own personalities, life styles, dreams, and ideas. Such men headed the North European dynasties modest or large which from the middle of the last century to the middle of this one commanded the bulk of world shipping from their stolid family seats near the Mersey, the Tyne, or the Thames, or at the head of some Norwegian fjord, on an island in the Gulf of Bothnia, or on the southern shores of the Baltic. Many of their fortunes grew from seafaring grandparents who, in the decades following the Napoleonic wars and the collapse of the East India Company monopolies, when the industrial base of Britain and the rest of Europe was rapidly expanding, owned a barque or brigantine and put the profits into a second and third vessel, and whose sons deployed the inheritance into steam.

While it wasn't always easy to identify every one of the hundreds of tramps and minor merchantmen that wandered the seas twenty, thirty, forty years ago, you could usually tell nationality or at least

where a vessel was built, and, if she belonged to a major house, you could almost certainly name her owners by rake, colours, or just by the set of the superstructure, for there lurked in shipowners a strange assortment of memories of ships past, family traditions, and national tastes that always found their way into the look and composition of their ships. Each ship from a big house anyhow always bore the imprint of careful and often painstaking individual consideration because each was a new source of pride and pleasure in its time. And there wasn't a merchantman of consequence that one boarded that didn't somehow convey the whole overlay of shipping as it had been for the past century.

It was not just the lingering Victorianism of many of the interiors, but the many forms in brass and teak, the nooks and crannies that had no rhyme or reason for their existence any more than do the cupolas and alcoves of a garden gazebo, the very resilience of the white planking of the decks, and the look of the windows and scuttles and hull plates as they flowed in sheer, that ravelled together such a comforting presence. What we felt about ships was a mood drawn from the way they were inside and out, the way they sat upon the water, a curious combination of our then sense of distance, the time that it took to cross the seas, of the balance of the world, the way it connected and held together; not immutable, but slow-changing. Above all what one felt was the *soundness* of them, and the impression that they were put together with the best of everything.

Ships after all were, are, the buildings of the water, and they grew in much the same way and with much the same care and faddishness as the buildings of the land, from rough crude wooden structures into the feudal castles of the Armada's galleons, passing to the baronial piles of the East Indiamen, and on to the pleasure palaces of this century. At its finest, the architecture of the sea has often rivalled and exceeded the richness and splendour of the land's, even though perishable and, beyond its time, usually traceless. It is quite astonishing to reflect that in our own day we have seen many of the largest and most sumptuous structures ever built by man but which have had a life often of less than a decade. I am thinking of course of ships like *Conte di Savoia*, *Rex*, *Normandie*, *Bremen*, and *Empress of Britain*, all built in the thirties and which were casualties of the war years.

When the Andalusian caliph 'Abd-ar-rahman III in the tenth century began building what Gerald Brenan in his *Face of Spain* described as possibly the largest and most luxurious palace ever built in any age, the Mediterranean was ransacked for precious materials. In a similar fashion the entire globe was scoured for materials for the great liners, which were stinted nothing. The decorative woods for

