

# ATHENIA

## A Scottish liner in peace and war

*Gordon Turner*

**T**he Second World War had just begun when news of its grim reality reached Scotland. On 3 September 1939, a German U-boat torpedoed the popular Scottish passenger liner *Athenia* about 250 miles west of the Hebrides on a voyage from Glasgow, Belfast and Liverpool to Quebec and Montreal. She sank the next day, with the loss of 93 passengers and 19 crew members. An American cargo ship, a Norwegian tanker, a Swedish yacht and two Royal Navy destroyers rushed to the rescue and picked up some 1,300 survivors.

*Athenia's* story began almost 20 years earlier, when Cunard Line ordered a 13,500-ton ship from Fairfield's yard at Govan, but by the time she was launched on 28 January 1922, Anchor-Donaldson Line had taken over the £1,250,000 building contract. Although Anchor was nominally a Scottish company, it had been a subsidiary of Cunard Line since 1911, and *Athenia* was to all intents a Donaldson Line vessel, operated by the long-established Glasgow firm.

The 526-foot-long *Athenia* was never one of the Atlantic's glamour ships. Externally she gave an impression of sturdiness rather than beauty. Internally she was comfortable with-

out being ostentatious. She was a typical North Atlantic workaday vessel of the 1920s, built to rigorous standards to withstand the stormiest winter crossings. Her 9,000-horsepower engines gave her a speed of 15 knots, or about 17 miles per hour. She had a passenger capacity of 512 in Cabin Class and 1,000 in Third Class. On 21 April 1923 she began her maiden voyage from Glasgow to Montreal.

Donaldson Line faced the opening years of the 1920s optimistically. The First World War had ended and the company expected to benefit from a pent-up demand for Atlantic travel. Canada welcomed Scottish immigrants. In addition, Donaldson's

believed that emigrants who had settled successfully in the dominion before the First World War would want to revisit the land of their birth, likely with their growing families. And there were always business travellers, government officials and military personnel. Moreover, *Athenia's* holds could carry several thousand tons of cargo. The future looked bright, but

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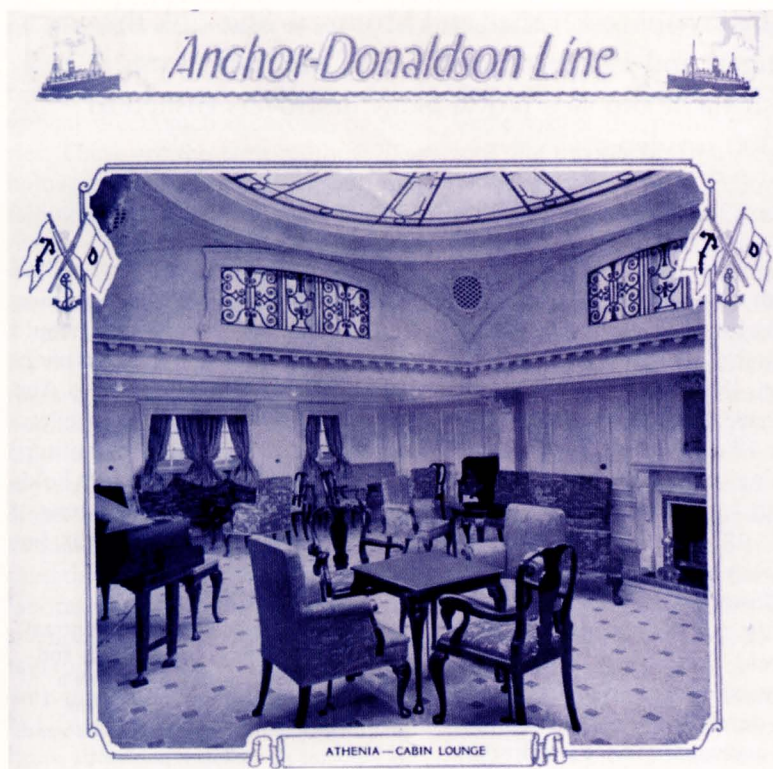
(above) *Athenia*, seen here in Montreal. Many shipping lines in the 1920s and 1930s employed artists to convey a positive image of their vessel. This painting by Norman Howard was used as a poster as well as a postcard.





(above) Cabin class stateroom - has a single cold-water tap on the wash basin. Hot water for a morning shave could be obtained by visiting a communal bathroom or asking a cabin steward to bring it in a jug.

(below) *Athenia's* Cabin Class lounge



before long an economic downturn dimmed Donaldson's prospects. By this time, *Letitia*, a sister to *Athenia*, was on the stocks at Fairfield's, but her construction was intentionally delayed and she did not enter service until April 1925. From then until the Second World War broke out, the two ships maintained a regular link between Princes Dock, Glasgow, and Montreal, at least from spring until late autumn. Service was curtailed during the winter months, when the St. Lawrence River was icebound, and the ships terminated their westerly crossings at Halifax, Nova Scotia, and Saint John, New Brunswick.

Her owners described *Athenia* as "the finest vessel on the run between Glasgow and Canadian ports...with all the comforts of a first class hotel." Donaldson's knew what its passengers expected, and designed the ship accordingly. Cabin Class in most Atlantic liners was still in the "stately country house" era of shipboard decor, but *Athenia* was more restrained than many of her contemporaries. The two-deck-high main lounge contained a cosy fireplace and a grand piano, but the bright paintwork on its walls and the light-coloured floor covering gave the room a sense of space and airiness. By contrast, the smoking room—created as an exclusively male preserve—had dark panelled walls and deep armchairs. The cream-painted dining saloon on C Deck had tables that accommodated from 2 to 12 people. Mirrors and colourful curtains added a bright touch to the surroundings. Cabins had one, two or four berths, with curtains that could be drawn around each to ensure privacy. Every cabin had its own washbasin, with only a cold water tap, but almost all baths and toilets were "down the hall."

Outdoor deck space was generous, at least when compared with Third Class.

*Athenia's* Third Class cabins were superior to those of pre-First World War ships; by this time dormitory accommodation in steerage had gone forever. Each cabin had its own washbasin, mirror and towels, and accommodated two to four people. A Donaldson publicity folder stated, "Comfort for sleep is assured by hygienic hair mattresses, clean linen sheets, warm blankets, feather pillows and bedspreads." The dining saloon offered "good food, cooked by experts [and] served by trained stewards." A kiosk stocked confectionery, stationery, tobacco, clothing and toilet articles, all "at moderate prices." Third Class lounges, though, could seat only a fraction of Third Class passengers. Children had their own nursery, complete with rocking horses, games and toys. A highlight of each voyage was a children's tea party.

The 1926 summer sailing schedule stated that *Athenia* and *Letitia* would call at Belfast and Liverpool after leaving Glasgow. On reaching Canada, Third Class passengers were required to disembark at Quebec City, while Cabin Class had the option of leaving





(above left)

The passenger list for the voyage from Montreal on 26 June 1937, to Glasgow via Belfast and Liverpool, displayed Donaldson Atlantic Line's thistle pennant as well as the Donaldson houseflag.

(above right)

The ship's concert was a North Atlantic institution for many decades. The collection for marine charities helped support retired sailors and their families who had fallen on hard times.

By permission of Captain William Rennie  
Mr. R. Rankin presents 'THE ATHENIANS'  
in a  
**GRAND CONCERT**  
IN THE LOUNGE (A DECK).  
On Thursday, 16th December, 1937  
At 9 p.m.

Collection on behalf of Marine Charities.

R.M.S. Athenia

**PROGRAMME**

**PART I**

Opening Chorus	'Here We Are'	The Athenians
Song	'On a Steamer'	Walter Taylor
Comedy Interlude		Jack & Nigel
Ventriloquist		Jimmy & Partner
Baritone		Eric Adair
Burlesque		The Spanish (B)Onions
Monologue		W. Paterson
Speciality Item		? ? ?
Melodious Moments		The Orchestra

**INTERVAL**

Remarks by Mr S. G. Dixon, K.C.

**PART II**

Sea Shanties		The Nautical Quartet
Light Comedian		Walter Taylor
Cameos (3)	'Honi Soit'	The Marks Brothers
Popular Ballads		P. Blaney
Odd Man Out		The Quavers
Hebrew Comedian		Jack MacKinnon
Baritone		R. Rankin
Piano Accordeon		Nigel McKinnon
Character Ensemble		
'Passed by Your Window'		The Athenians
Finale	'Some Show'	The Company
		National Anthem

at either Quebec City or Montreal. Westbound fares began at £30 Cabin Class, £18 15s. Third Class.

By the early 1930s, Atlantic travel had undergone changes. The Great Depression cast its dismal spell, with fewer passengers and reduced cargoes. *Athenia's* cabins still had to be filled—but how? Donaldson had to find new sources of passengers. The Depression notwithstanding, there were still people who wanted to travel. Thus, in 1933 *Athenia* became a three-class ship, with a capacity of 314 Cabin Class, 310 Tourist and 928 Third. Tourist Class attracted budget-conscious travellers who wished to "do" Britain or Europe without staying at grand hotels or hiring chauffeur-driven cars. Another source of passengers was Canada's many Scottish societies, whose members received reduced fares by travelling as a group.

To reach prospective Tourist passengers, the company advertised that "staterooms and public rooms are...perfectly adapted to your needs...Your welfare is the chief concern of a competent and courteous staff." It added, "These ships are

A bold rendering of *Athenia* shows her cutting her way confidently through choppy seas.

Many shipping lines in the 1920s and 1930s employed artists to convey a positive image of their vessels.



ANCHOR-DONALDSON LINE

T.S.S. "ATHENIA"

noted for their steadiness." Those were the days before Denny-Brown had invented its stabilisers, and passengers who found themselves violently seasick in a full-scale North Atlantic storm might have disagreed.

The link with Anchor Line was

severed in 1935, when Donaldson Atlantic Line was formed to operate *Athenia* and *Letitia*. In the years that followed, the company continued to advertise extensively. "The opportunities for amusement or complete rest, the unfailing cheerfulness and





The Dining Saloon  
is spacious and airy



## DONALDSON ATLANTIC LINE

### BREAKFAST

Orange Juice Grape Fruit Baked Apples Stewed Fruit  
Corn Flakes Shredded Wheat Grape Nuts  
Kellogg's Bran Cream of Wheat Post Toasties  
Porridge Oats Oatmeal Porridge with Milk or Syrup

Fried Haddock Kipperd Herring

Eggs—Fried, Turned or Boiled

To Order—Scrambled Eggs on Toast

Fried Liver and Onions

Mashed Potatoes

### FROM THE GRILL

Breakfast Bacon

Sliced Sausage

### COLD MEATS

Roast Beef

Spiced Beef

Ox Tongue

Celery

Radishes

Cress

Oatcakes and Bannocks

Breakfast Rolls

Hot Cakes and Maple Syrup

Current Scones

Bread

Butter

Marmalade

Tea

Coffee

Cocoa

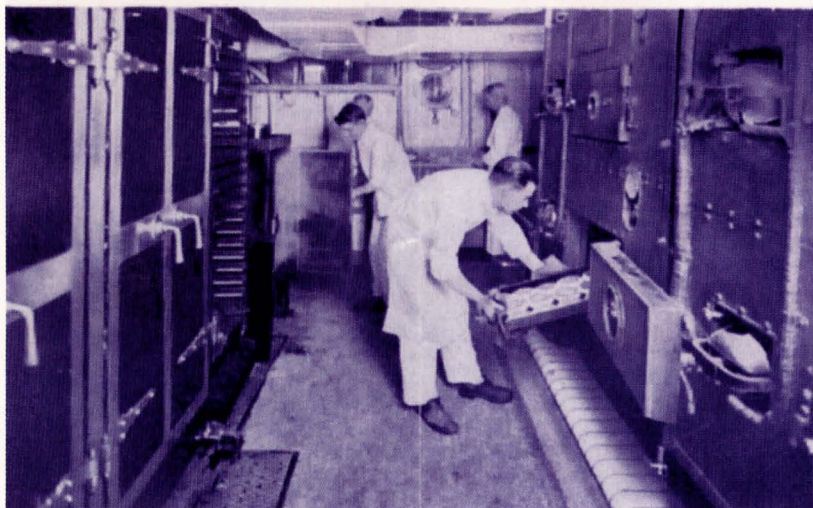
Friday—July 30—1937

T. C.

(above) Tourist class breakfast on 30 July 1937 offered *Athenia*'s passengers a wide variety of dishes that would appeal to both Scottish and Canadian tastes.

(left) The Third Class dining room, photographed in the 1930s, was spacious and airy, and even had some strips of patterned carpets.

## A Great Scotch Kitchen at Sea



(below) The ship's galley had the capacity to produce more than 3,000 meals a day. Machines for slicing, potato peeling, dough mixing and dish washing were among the labour-saving devices.

courteous service of the entire ship's staff have to be experienced to be believed," a brochure immodestly read. Most of the amusement came from the efforts of the passengers themselves. Early in each voyage, an entertainment committee, consisting of volunteer passengers with an assistant purser hovering in the back-

ground to offer guidance, organised morning bridge sessions, afternoon shuffleboard competitions and evening concerts. Concerts invariably drew a full house. From time to time *Athenia*'s passengers included prominent and lesser-known show-business personalities, who needed very little persuasion to appear on stage. But

most performers, including the more talented crew members, were amateurs. Some sang, others delivered monologues, and almost invariably there was a comedian or instrumentalist. Typically, audiences were in an indulgent mood, ready to cheer every act, regardless of its merits. During the interval, a collection would be taken up on behalf of sailors' charities.

Food, then as now, was always a major topic aboard ship. *Athenia* in the 1930s had an astonishingly wide range of dishes. The Tourist Class dinner menu for 14 September 1935 offered 17 kinds of hors d'oeuvres alone. In all, the menu listed more than 50 items. Lunch that day had an even more extensive menu; passengers could choose from 70 items, including Scottish specialities such as haggis and Forfar bridges. The four-page menus, with handsome covers illustrating Glencoe, Fingal's Cave



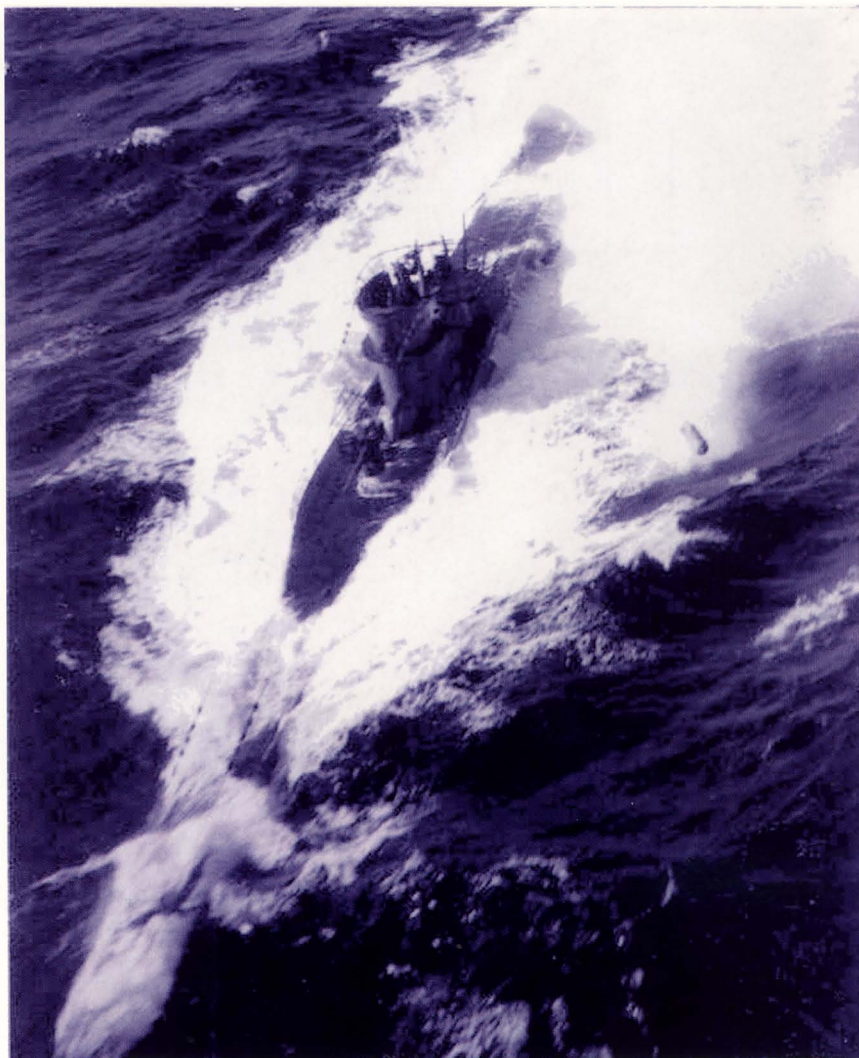
and Princes Street, became popular souvenirs.

On all voyages, everyone received a passenger list, a booklet whose introductory pages provided information on the ship's amenities and services. If passengers bothered to read the fine print—and not everyone did—it would mean fewer queues and queries at the purser's office. The booklet stated that midships on B Deck was a barber's shop where "ladies are attended to by appointment." Bars closed at midnight, although the captain had the discretion to shut them down earlier, which was likely to happen during stormy weather. Passengers were "respectfully advised that the Purser cannot accept private cheques." That same Purser would also attend to "complaints of incivility, carelessness or inattention on the part of any of the ship's staff," which implies that the promised "unfailing cheerfulness and courteous service" of the publicity brochure sometimes failed to measure up. The ship's doctor charged Cabin Class passengers 5/- (25p) for the first consultation, 2/6 (12p) for each subsequent one. For Tourist passengers, his fee was 2/6 per consultation. Good news: if you were felled with seasickness, the doctor made no charge at all.

## Final Voyage

Donaldson Line weathered the 1930s better than many shipping companies, but only when the Second World War became imminent did *Athenia* and *Letitia* sail with a full complement of passengers. A surge in bookings came in late August 1939, caused by people who wanted to escape Europe's deteriorating political situation. *Athenia* left Glasgow on 1 September, called at Belfast later that day, then reached Liverpool on the 2nd, departing at 4:30 in the afternoon. She would, according to the schedule, arrive at Quebec on 10 September then sail upriver to Montreal, arriving the same day. War, although clearly impending, had not yet been declared. *Athenia* sailed alone, without the benefit of naval escort or being part of a convoy. It was a voyage she never completed.

Over the years, *Athenia's* passenger capacity had been whittled down. By the time she left Liverpool, she carried 1,102 passengers, which exceeded the total berths available. To accommo-



German U-boat diving.

date the overflow the ship's gymnasium was converted to a dormitory and makeshift bunks were erected on B Deck. Still, few people complained; their top priority was to set foot on Canadian soil. Most passengers were Canadians and Americans, but some were refugees fleeing their European homelands. The ship's officers and crew numbered 300.

A German submarine, U-30, commanded by Oberleutnant Fritz-Julius Lemp, had been at sea since 22 August, and by 3 September was out on the Atlantic awaiting instructions. In the meantime, *Athenia's* master, Captain James Cook, had been notified by radio of the outbreak of war between Britain and Germany at 11 o'clock that morning. He immediately put emergency instructions into effect—lifeboats to be prepared for quick evacuation, fire-fighting apparatus to be examined, additional lookouts positioned around the ship, a complete blackout to be enforced at

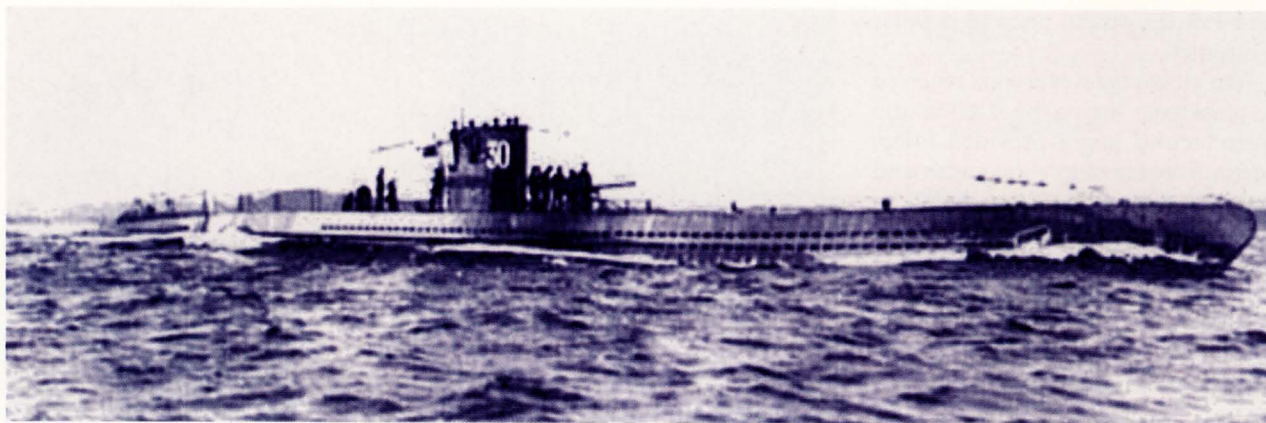
night. A brief notice beside the Purser's office informed everyone that war had been declared. Passengers gathered in small groups, uncertain of how to react to the news.

That evening Captain Cook appeared in the main dining room looking composed, even relaxed. He never finished his meal.

Although Germany in 1936 had signed a protocol prohibiting unrestricted submarine warfare, U-30 gave no warning of its intention. In quick succession she fired four torpedoes. The first two missed, one failed to leave its tube, but the fourth struck *Athenia*, exploding at No. 5 hold, close to the engine room. It was 7:39 p.m. A hurried inspection indicated that *Athenia* would not survive. Captain Cook reluctantly but realistically issued the order, "Abandon ship."

Evacuation began during twilight and continued for several hours. Although a heavy swell was running,





(above)  
The German submarine,  
U-30 which sunk the  
*Athenia*.



(left) Oberleutnant Fritz-  
Julius Lemp, commander of  
the U-30

it was a clear, moonlit night. More than 500 passengers left the ship within 10 minutes of the explosion, and many of those who remained were in the lifeboats after only 20 minutes. Some, though, had been killed outright or badly injured by the explosion. Discipline generally held firm among passengers, and when it did not, the cause was indecision and confusion.

In the meantime, *Athenia*'s radio officer urgently tapped out an SOS, which was picked up by *Knute Nelson*, a Norwegian tanker only 40 miles distant. In the best tradition of the sea, the radio officer remained at his post and kept on sending out SOS messages.

Water continued to rise in *Athenia*, but not until almost 11:00 p.m. did Captain Cook leave his stricken ship. By this time, two other vessels had radioed that they were rushing to the

scene, an American cargo ship, *City of Flint*, and an ocean-going yacht, *Southern Cross*, owned by the Swedish millionaire Axel Wenner-Gren. Even then, the ordeal of *Athenia*'s survivors had not ended. One lifeboat came too close to *Knute Nelson*'s thrashing propellers, which sliced through the woodwork, causing almost 90 people to be thrown into the water. Many drowned. Two Royal Navy destroyers eventually arrived to assist in the rescue operation. *Athenia*'s Chief Officer, Barnet Copland, now safely aboard H.M.S. *Electra*, suddenly realized that a patient in his ship's hospital had not been accounted for. Through a bizarre oversight, nobody had thought to rescue her. When this was discovered, a volunteer boarding party returned by lifeboat to *Athenia*, bundled up the ailing woman while water was lapping the sides of her bed, and carried her unceremoniously to safety.

Fifteen hours after the torpedo struck, *Athenia* slid stern first beneath the frigid waters of the Atlantic. After the final count was taken, it was determined that 112 people had died, but more than 1,300 had survived.

*Athenia*'s sister, *Letitia*, came through the Second World War

unscathed, serving successively as armed merchant cruiser, troop transport and hospital ship. In 1946 Donaldson's sold her to the Ministry of Transport, which renamed her *Empire Brent*. She continued as a troop transport, under Donaldson management, interspersed with voyages that took war brides to North America and settlers to Australia. In 1951 she entered Barclay, Curle's yard at Whiteinch where she was refitted as an emigrant ship and renamed *Captain Cook*. In this role, she carried thousands of Scottish people at subsidised rates to New Zealand. On 29 April 1960 she arrived at Inverkeithing to be broken up T.W. Ward Ltd. Donaldson Line lasted until 1967, although its successor companies held on until 1972.

Gordon Turner is a Member of the  
Travel Media Association of Canada.

## Further reading

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