

## INSIDE INTERVIEW

# INSPIRED BY SHIPS

A conversation with ocean liner historian, author and lecturer, Bill Miller

by

Richard H. Wagner

**B**ill Miller is one of today's most popular shipboard lecturers. The author of some 80 books on ocean liners and cruise ships as well as numerous articles about ocean travel, he has appeared in several television documentaries. Not surprisingly, Mr. Miller's lectures on ocean liner history typically draw large crowds regardless of which ship or cruise line he is sailing on.

History is not everyone's favorite subject so why do so many people want to hear about the history of passenger ships? "I think one of the reasons why people identify with ships is that ships seem to have more of a soul. There is a spirit or embodiment within the steel, a kind of chemistry that, with all do respect, I don't think a commuter bus can give you. They have individual personalities. Even the Queen Mary and the old Queen Elizabeth had individual personalities. They were not the same. Consequently, I think that people feel that chemistry, that engulfing sense of warmth, personality, magic, care, even love."

Miller's lectures are not a dry recital of facts and dates but rather reflect a deep passion for the subject. "I

was very lucky in that I was born in a place called Hoboken, New Jersey, on the banks of the Hudson River where I saw the great liners over 50 years ago sailing back and forth to Europe. And a passion developed. My brother was a year younger and he liked fire engines and Little League baseball; he didn't even look at the river. Why we are drawn, we do not know but thank heavens for me, it happened. It became my little kitchen table hobby with toy boats. It eventually led to me writing articles and then books. 35 years ago, I offered my services to a cruise line -- P&O -- to give my first shipboard lecture and I have been on ships ever since -- over 75 different liners, 415 voyages."

His speaking style is engaging, conversational but with an element of showmanship. "My style of speaking sort of came naturally. I never took public speaking at school. I don't know where that came from -- the ability to get up in front of a group. It just seems as natural talking to 800 as sitting at a table and talking to someone. And I think -- this is going to sound a little bit fairy tale-like -- but the spirit of the ships propels me to do what I do on the stage and do it well because I



am keeping them alive. So there is some kind of energy that is coming around in a circle and that is what makes it work."

"I was a teacher for 32 years. I taught 11 year-olds in sixth grade in Hoboken. I think you have to be entertaining to kids. You can't keep the momentum up from nine to three, that is impossible, but in each class you have to have, we'll call it magic or electricity, going on. I had, in later years, a lot of inner-city kids who had difficulties and problems at home so you had to work a little harder to keep them occupied, to keep them attentive. So I definitely think that was a training ground. However, that being said, I think an audience of 11 year olds and an audience on the Queen Mary 2 are different worlds apart."

#### *A Unique Author*

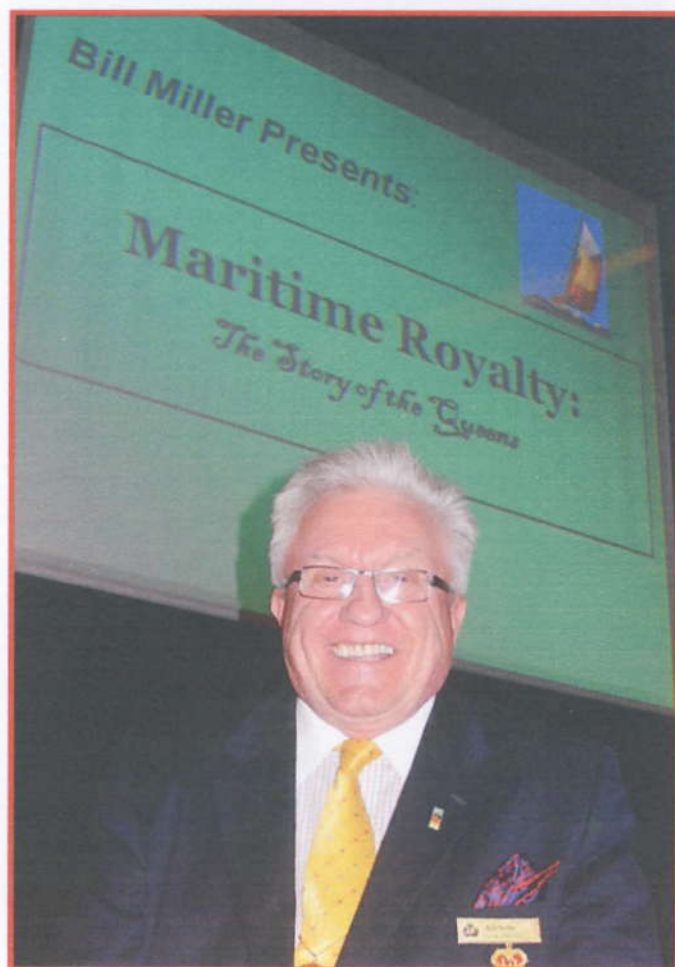
**N**ot many authors have written 80 books. What makes this accomplishment even more impressive is that for much of his career, Mr. Miller was not writing full time but was also teaching and lecturing on ships.

"When I was still teaching, I would come home in the afternoons at three or four o'clock, make myself a little light supper, and then I would write for a couple of hours. I wouldn't say that I would do that five days a week but three out of five. It was a wonderful alternative to teaching where you could be quiet but at the same time creative. I found that to be fascinating and I like the idea of creating something - - developing something like a garden with the photographs, the anecdotes and building it up. I like that sense of creativity."

"In the summers, I would have time to write and on school vacations as well. Now that I am retired, I can do it more on my own. In the age of the laptop, I can do it onboard the ship. I can do writing right here. There is a lot of time here not used for the supermarket, getting the car washed or whatever. You have the freedom, the time, to do a lot more."

At the same time, however, it is becoming increasingly difficult to obtain source material. In writing his books, Miller often relies upon interviews with people who were on the historic ships. The anecdotes that he is able to relate add a personal element to his books as well as to his lectures.

"It is becoming more difficult to find anecdotes about the old liners because the number of people who go back to that period - - the 1930s, even World War II and the 50s - - is getting fewer and fewer. Fortunately, I still do have one great [resource] and that is the ships themselves. You meet people on the ships that actually served on the old liners or who sailed upon them. Because I am a lecturer, they ferret me out or I ferret



*Bill Miller*

them out. For example, when I was on the Rotterdam, there were 400 retired employees from Holland America onboard. So I had a field day chatting with them."

"On the Queen Mary 2, I had a man who came up to me who had been on the St. Louis in June 1939. It was loaded with 900 Jewish passengers [fleeing the Nazis] and it was rejected by Cuba and sent back as a propaganda event - - the voyage of the damned. What are the chances of still meeting anyone who was on a voyage in June 1939? He was there and he gave me a wonderful one hour interview. So my big advantage these days is that I meet people on ships who worked on ships or sailed on them."

As noted earlier, because of his expertise, Mr. Miller has appeared in several documentaries about ocean liners. In addition, it led filmmaker Robert Neal Marshall to make a documentary about Mr. Miller entitled "Mr. Ocean Liner."

"Just recently, I hosted the Ocean Liner Film Festival at Lincoln Center - - five days of films, 25 movies, sponsored by Cunard. The opening night was



devoted to 'Mr. Ocean Liner'. A great thrill for me was to see the glass case marques in front of Lincoln Center that advertised the ballet, the opera, the symphony and 'Mr. Ocean Liner.' So I have played Lincoln Center," Miller says with a smile

### *Passenger Ships Today and Tomorrow*

**I**n addition to his knowledge of the history of ocean liners, Mr. Miller has a unique expertise on today's cruise industry by virtue of all the time that he spends on ships.

He has a deep affection for the more traditional ships, especially those that do transatlantic crossings like Queen Mary 2. "It is always a thrill to be on Cunard because they are so rich in history - - 171 years. To be on the Queen Mary 2 is always a thrill because it is that electric sense of purpose of going from A to B. It is different than a cruise. There is a different feel among the passengers than there are on ordinary voyages."

However, he can also speak with enthusiasm about today's modern cruise ships such as Royal Caribbean's Oasis of the Seas and Allure of the Seas. "It is an experience. It works so well - - the service was so good, the food was wonderful and the entertainment is beyond description. I was aboard in 20 minutes. I was off the ship on the final day in 25 minutes with my bags at the curb. And we had 6,109 passengers onboard."

"You book your shows online before you board. This way you gain entrance to your shows, you don't have to wait for the theater to open up. You have a seat. It really is a magical week of entertainment and being looked after and cared for."

"The incredible ingredient was how the crew members seemed to remember you from day to day. There are a lot of faces coming by with 6,109 people. But they seem to remember you. They take a kind of personal interest in you. That is to the credit of the company that runs those ships, very well done."

"Of course the magic of strolling Central Park between the two tiers of decks as if you were in a real city park - - the sound of cackling birds, waterfalls and

things like that. It is fantastic, just fantastic."

So what does he see as the future for passenger ships? "Passenger ships will continue as cruise ships. I do not say that they are going to get bigger than the Allure and the Oasis of the Seas. No one has anything planned and Carnival Corporation said they are not going to compete. But I do see more ships coming. What you will continue to see is a generation of 100,000 to 150,000 tons."

"There are 24 new cruise ships being built at the moment or at least on order. That is an encouraging sign in this economic climate when business is low. Oddly enough, Muamar Quadaffi's government was building two mega-cruise ships. The shipyard has had to re-claim them and they are going to have to sell them now. They were not completed. It is only basic steel. They'll find homes, somebody will want them".

"The big problem from a marketing point of view is that as you develop new ships, your older ones fall out of step and they become dated. A 10 year old ship now seems like a 20 year old ship because of the strides in the development, the raz-ma-taz, the wow factor in the design and the entertainment [on the new ships]." Thus, when a new ship enters a fleet, it becomes more difficult to sell cruises on the line's pre-existing ships.

Consequently, the pre-existing ships "have to be more seriously discounted or moved to secondary markets and so forth." Alternatively, they can be revitalized so that they have the features of their newer fleetmates. For example, at Royal Caribbean, ships "are now getting Allure and Oasis amenities so they [can] keep in synch with those two big ships."

Despite such problems, Mr. Miller remains optimistic about the future of cruising. "Only 15 percent of the American travel public have ever taken a voyage. There is tremendous potential. It is the best vacation value on earth. Now with a certain amount of discounting because of the economy, more people are getting to try cruising and getting hooked. It is like having one peanut, you want to have more."