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## Joseph Conrad's ship

The famous author's connection with NZ is tenuous, but he once skippered a vessel, the beautiful barque *Otago*.

IT WASN'T THE £10 fee that caused Captain Angus Cameron to refuse the offer of a tow to Port Chalmers on July 22, 1871. His small barque had arrived off the Otago heads that morning, and Cameron, Scots born and a former resident of the port, wished to complete the voyage from Liverpool in style—unassisted and under sail. The weather failed to cooperate, however. A persistent south-westerly gale prevented the barque from entering harbour, and after waiting three days at the mouth Cameron swallowed his pride and “took steam”.

Towed up to her berth by the steam-tug *Geelong*, the vessel discharged explosives at the Quarantine Ground before landing 17 passengers at Port Chalmers. Such was the low-key arrival in New Zealand of the elegant 345-ton barque *Otago*, later famous as the only sea-going command of the author Joseph Conrad.

*Otago* had been hard-driven during the passage out. The shipping correspondent of the *Otago Daily Times* noted that the “handsome clipper barque” had taken just 88 days “land to land”, and in one 24-hour stint had reeled off 306 nm—very fast sailing for such a small vessel. She was also extremely seaworthy, having come unscathed through a two-day cyclone during which the barometer recorded the extraordinarily low pressure of 28 inches of mercury.

Cameron was as resilient as the vessel he both owned and commanded. The son of a ship-builder's labourer, he had left his Argyleshire home for the sea at age 16 and twice served on vessels so menaced by weather that they had come within a hair's breadth of foundering. He had worked in the Victoria goldfields and studied marine architecture in Scotland, and now owned a small fleet of lightering and coastal schooners in New Zealand. His "beautiful barque" was his own creation, built by Alexander Stephen & Sons, of Kelvinhaugh, Glasgow, but to his design and under his personal supervision. A careful man, Cameron had meticulously tested every rivet during the vessel's construction.

*Otago* stayed at Port Chalmers for three weeks. She departed in ballast for Newcastle, Australia, on August 18, 1871, and returned on September 24, with coal consigned to Dunedin merchant John Findlay. The ship's log records that Thomas Julier, a Yarmouth-born ordinary seaman, jumped ship on the 26th having signed articles of employment just 15 days earlier. Tempted by the high wages available in Australasian ports, visiting British sailors, who were invariably poorly paid, deserted their ships with monotonous regularity. Two of *Otago's* 13 seamen had joined the exodus as the vessel lay at Newcastle, and Julier, a replacement, wasted little time in doing likewise. Two other seamen jumped ship in Adelaide in December, when *Otago* called there to load wheat for London.

Angus Cameron was born in Appin, Argyll, Scotland, the son of John Cameron and Agnes McGlashen. He was christened on 11 May 1829. He served an apprenticeship in the shipyard of Alexander Stephen and Sons and went to sea in the ship 'Fleetwood'. He came ashore in Australia at the time of the gold rush and later returned to sea to gain his officer certificates, becoming Master of the schooner 'United Brothers'.

Angus Cameron established himself in lighterage work at Port Chalmers, with Captain Daniel McCallum in the mid 1860s, before returning to Scotland where he commissioned the construction of the barque 'Otago'. He was joint owner of the 'Otago' with Duncan McDougall until she was sold in January 1872. The 'Otago' made two visits to Port Chalmers in 1871 and, under later owners, became the first command of Polish shipmaster and writer Joseph Conrad, at Bangkok in 1887.

Captain Cameron returned to Scotland in the early 1870s and arranged with William Denny and Brothers to build a steamer suitable for trading between Australia and New Zealand. While the ship was under construction, he commanded the sailing ships 'Ben Ledi' and 'Loch Lomond'. The steamer 'Wakatipu' was completed in 1876, with Angus Cameron owning four of the 64 shares in the vessel.

Under Union Steam Ship Company management, the 'Wakatipu' inaugurated the Trans Tasman service of the Union Company in October 1876, with Captain Cameron in command until 1878, when the ship was purchased by the Union Company and he became the Chief Marine Superintendent for the Company.

In later years, Captain Cameron spent much of his time in Glasgow, supervising the construction of new ships for the company and his archives contain a considerable amount of material relating to the new vessels. He returned to Dunedin in 1906 and died in the city on 12 April 1909, and is buried in Dunedin's Northern Cemetery in the family grave.

He had married Jean (Jeanie) Noble in 1856, and she died in childbirth in 1865. He had married his second wife, Annie Cameron, in 1882 and she died on 25 February 1949. Angus Cameron had four sons, John and Angus in Australia, Alexander (a master mariner) and Percival Douglas, a doctor.

Dr Percival Douglas Cameron, was born in Dunedin on 31 January 1883 and gained his MB ChB in Edinburgh in 1907, later studying at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore and working in hospitals in Edinburgh, Dunedin and Wellington, before entering private practice. Percy Cameron died in Wellington on 19 July 1971.

Prepared by Historic Cemeteries Conservation Trust of New Zealand ([www.semteries.org.nz](http://www.semteries.org.nz)) from information in Hocken Library's Hakena catalogue, and a *New Zealand Geographic* article by Charles Clark.