

OCEAN OBSERVER

There's been quite a trend recently for journalists to join merchant vessels and write about the 'hidden world' of seafaring. But Pauline Dowling was doing this well before the current crop of writers. She tells **SARAH ROBINSON** how she came to be at sea in the 1990s...



'Yes, I used to read the NUMAST Telegraph when I was onboard ship – it was always interesting!' Author Pauline Dowling is clearly a person of taste and distinction, so we can expect good things from her new travel book, **Going Bananas**, which draws on her voyages on reefer ships in the 1990s.

Pauline isn't a seafarer, though; she writes from the relatively unusual perspective of travelling as a captain's wife. 'I call them my "trailing" years,' she says. 'Going to sea with your husband is a bit weird, really, and I didn't want to be just a supernumerary, so I was always writing about it, as that was my job.'

Originally from New Zealand, Pauline had been working in London as a freelance journalist and yoga teacher when she met her husband Stuart McCormick Ross at sea in 1989. 'I needed to go home to see my mother, but I was so sick

Above left: **the reefer Avelona Star loading bananas in Moín, Costa Rica**

Above right: **Captain's wife Pauline Dowling helps out in a 1995 New Year spit roast on deck**

of flying,' she remembers. 'I looked into whether there was a way to get there by sea, and eventually got a berth as a passenger on the Blue Star Line containership ACT 7.

'A few people did wonder how I would cope with all these men onboard, and I assured them that I was just going for a rest and the

experience of being at sea. But then – it's quite embarrassing – there was this lovely chief officer, who was so refined and interesting, and the voyage ended up taking weeks longer than expected because the ship lost its steering gear and had to be repaired. No one knew about us, but we had time to get to know each other well and then stayed together.'

After Stuart and Pauline were married, Stuart continued to work deepsea for over a decade, taking his first command on the Almeda Star in 1994. Pauline decided to accompany him on several voyages, and became interested in the process

'I remember the Union getting involved to try to limit British redundancies and get a better deal for the seafarers'

of growing fruit in Central America and transporting it to Europe on reefers. Based mainly on a 1995 voyage on the Avelona Star, **Going Bananas** not only provides a candid insight into shipboard life, but also investigates the working conditions of the plantation workers and the job insecurity of the seafarers.

'Loading palletised food takes longer than containers, so we had time to visit the banana plantations,' notes Pauline. 'I found them to be environmentally-damaging monocultures using a lot of poisonous chemicals and with underpaid workers. I avoid buying such bananas now.'

The captain's wife witnessed the challenges facing the crews, too. 'It was a time of decline in British seafaring. This was not good for anyone but, because this ship had been built in the 1970s with a bigger crew in mind, there were several spare cabins, and I was able to use one as a study. But all the mergers and takeovers and flagging out made things hard for seafarers in the 1990s, and I remember NUMAST [the Nautilus predecessor union] getting involved to try and limit British redundancies and get a better deal for those who were replaced by lower-paid crews from other countries.'

There's so much to say about Pauline's 'trailing' career that **Going Bananas** is just the first volume of the story. The next of four possible books is already written, she reveals, and will focus on her time on another refrigerated fruit carrier, the Scottish Star. Her husband may now have retired from the sea, but the captain's wife is just getting started on her mission to tell the British public about the true cost of transporting their food.

Going Bananas, by Pauline Dowling, is available now in the Nautilus Bookshop at www.marinesocietyshop.org/nautilus-bookshop. It will be reviewed in the Telegraph next month.



IN THEIR OWN WORDS: THE ENTWINING OF A SEAFARING CAREER AND A WRITING CAREER

CAPTAIN STUART ROSS

- I joined Blue Star Ship Management in 1975, having graduated from Glasgow University with an Honours degree in maths. I was among the first intake of graduates to the British Merchant Navy.
- BSSM specialised in refrigerated ships, both conventional and container, and mainly managed ships owned by the Vestey family who were Blue Star Line.
- Progressing through the ranks, I was promoted to 3rd officer on the Montreal Star in 1978, 2nd officer on ACT 5 in 1981, chief officer on the Castle Peak (Avelona Star) in 1986, and master on the Almeda Star in 1994.
- I started off on British flag ships, with all British officers, but by the time I became captain it was foreign flag with three British onboard. I turned down the chance to go offshore in 1986 with the promise of quick promotion.
- The Vestey family sold their container ships to P&O in 1996 but I stayed with the refrigerated side which became Albion reefers. I sailed on various reefers as master – e.g. Snow Delta, Norman Star, and my last vessel was the Canterbury Star when the company was sold to Norwegian owners and all the British replaced.
- During my last year on the Canterbury Star (2001) we were hit by a large, 30m plus, abnormal wave in the Bay of Biscay which caused much damage to the deck cargo of used cars. We also rescued seven people from an upturned catamaran about 250 miles from the Azores. This was featured in the national papers.



- I was fortunate to join the Northern Lighthouse Board, working on their buoy tenders MV Pole Star and the MV Pharos, in all ranks to master, retiring in 2013.

PAULINE DOWLING

- I studied singing at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama in London in the 1970s and was set for that career. I turned to writing (my next love) when my voice developed serious problems in the 1980s.
- I became a feature writer and photographer for various journals and newspapers: World Medicine, Here's Health, The Observer, Air India's in-flight magazine, and the London Evening Standard, among others. Travel, yoga and London were my main subjects.
- I sailed as a passenger on the containership ACT 7 in 1989. It lost its steering gear and I was on nearly three months. Stuart was the chief officer.
- We married in 1990 and moved to the Scottish island of Lismore. I became a press officer for the Isle of Lismore, writing for the Oban Times and two island websites, one of which I helped create. I wanted to help put Lismore on the map!
- I went to sea with Stuart from 1990 until 1998. I sailed on the ACT 7, the ACT 5, the Southland Star, the Australia Star and the Snow Delta. Writing about my sea experiences was a normal development.
- I was on the ACT 5 container ship when it was flagged out in 1992 in Panama. That was humiliating for the officers and Barbados crew.