Praising our champions

Many shipping giants have been acclaimed in the pages of Fairplay but only a handful can be seen as making a real difference to the way we think, argues Richard Clayton.

What makes one man or woman’s achievement in shipping influential rather than significant? What makes their legacy stand out from all the others? These are the questions we have tried to answer as part of Fairplay’s 130th anniversary celebration. Without a doubt the characters we have selected in the following pages are subjective: many will want to raise their own champion and fire arrows at others they consider unworthy. Some are obvious, others less so. And no doubt we have overlooked some of the massive pillars on which our great industry was built.

However, in choosing men who broke through technological barriers, or who had the vision to see how an existing solution in another industry could make a real difference in shipping, or whose tenacity against all the odds laid the foundation for an empire, we believe we have made a start in creating a hall of fame for shipping.

It will be quickly noted that there are no lawyers, bankers or brokers in this list. That should create discussion but it can be argued that the service professions are not best known for their ability to break the mould. That’s not their role. Bankers might find ways to use existing financial models to help client shipowners to fund a tranche of newbuilding vessels but this can’t be regarded as influencing the way banking is done. Similarly, brokers work with their owners in the way they have always done, rarely stunning the market with a re-interpretation of the business in the way Ted Arison did for cruise shipping, Charles Vanderperre did for ship management or Malcolm McLean did for containerisation.

When Fairplay’s first issue hit the streets of London in May 1883, that city was the world’s shipping powerhouse. Many of the major shipowners were headquartered there, the leading register and insurance centre were there, it was a hub of empire. It is not a coincidence that Fairplay was published there.

But the European century changed through the course of two major wars into an American century, and the influence of American thinking on global trade led, perhaps inevitably, to container shipping. Initially this new form of cargo handling and shipment linked old Europe with new America, but the rise of Asia as a powerhouse in its own right has brought innovation and leadership from the Pacific rim.

The Suez Canal opened before Fairplay was published, so it was not included here. However, it is interesting to note that 100 years ago Fairplay was preparing readers for the benefits of the new Panama Canal. Today we have identified Alberto Alemán to stand among the most influential people because his vision has pushed the boundaries beyond what was achieved in 1914 and shipping stands on the threshold of a new expansion.

But where are Sir YK Pao, Aristotle Onassis, Stavros Niarchos, Daniel Ludwig, the Bergesen family and John Fredriksen? How could any list of the most influential shipping people be complete without the owners and operators of the world’s largest fleets? They have not been included because, although they saw the opportunity to build empires of the sea by changing the dimensions of ships, borrowing heavily from banks to fund their enterprises, they were significant without being influential.

Alongside Diesel and Marconi, perhaps McLean ranks a top-three spot.

Alberto Alemán: typifies vision pushing boundaries