THE RAILWAYS
NATION, NETWORK AND PEOPLE

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PROFILE BOOKS
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INTRODUCTION

Until the age of eleven, I paid almost no attention to railways. The family went everywhere by car. Journeys to school were by bus, or on foot (this was the 1970s). What knowledge I had picked up came mostly from the few pages about trains – trains rather than railways, that is – that cropped up in books of the Our Amazing World kind. These introduced George and Robert Stephenson and their Rocket and proclaimed the Mallard’s world speed record for a steam locomotive in 1938 as another source of legitimate British pride; but this was tame stuff by comparison with atom-smashers, moon shots or Concorde. My great-grandfather had been an engine driver, and his son had briefly followed him on to the footplate, but it was Grandpa’s subsequent share in the defeat of the Axis powers that had value in the playground economy of competitive boasting. My father’s wistful cries when old footage of steam locomotives appeared on the television woke no echoes within me. I did not even own a Hornby model railway.

All this changed with secondary school. Mine stood on the triangle of land between the tracks leading away from Clapham Junction. Electric commuter trains passed on one side or another every few seconds, and many boys used them to get to school. This profusion had helped to keep the mid-century trainspotting cult alive for successive cohorts of incoming eleven-year-olds. Most gave up after a year or so, but others stayed keen. We could even register as spotters with the school authorities, a bit like more serious cases of addiction in the world outside. Registered spotters
were entitled to spend the lunch hour at otherwise out-of-bounds vantage points, including an iron fire escape with a panorama of the main line to Brighton. Here we were safe from harassment by the school’s hard lads and free from nosy invigilation by prefects and masters.

All the locomotives and passenger trains that passed had yellow ends for easy visibility and blue or blue-and-white sides: the corporate colours of our own nationalised British Rail, unchanged since the mid 1960s, the same from Penzance to Thurso. Highlights of the passing show were the diesel-hauled freights, especially those with mixed processions of wagons of every shape and size, sometimes with cargoes exposed: National Coal Board fuels, drums of British Steel Corporation wire, British Leyland cars. Their locomotives might come from depots hundreds of miles away, sometimes in obscure localities familiar only to insiders, such as Toton, Bescot or Healey Mills; places more resonant than suburban Wimbledon or Selhurst, where the commuters’ electric units were berthed overnight. Trains coasting down the slow incline towards Clapham Junction could be seen half a mile off, prompting competitive displays of recognition skills as the distant yellow blob gradually resolved itself into a distinctive configuration. Trains coming the other way were heard before they were seen, so we tried to memorise the various engine sounds.

We might even wave at the driver in his cab, in the half-ironical spirit with which adolescents carry on with things they fear may appear childish; but we valued the brief transmission of respect when a hand was raised in return. Less exalted in our eyes were the gangs of workers who came regularly to inspect and maintain the four lines of track, retreating to safety every few minutes at a signal from the lookout man; always just too far away for their voices to be overheard, or for their faces to be distinguishable. Driver and ganger alike belonged nonetheless to the world of proper work, visible and practical and comprehensible – a world away from the office-bound lives of most of our own fathers. For all that we dodged the odd fare and cheeked the ticket collectors, we sensed the integrity and purpose of the railway. Encouraged by vague ideas of expressing solidarity with the ‘real’, there was even a schoolboy fashion for versions of the black donkey jackets worn by the men on the track, the standard working man’s apparel of the seventies.

A few summers later, aged sixteen, I spent an entire August day on the end of Platform 4 at Newcastle Central station. The family had returned north to the city of my birth the year before. My new friends there were all
mystified by the practice of spotting, and certainly it was hard not to feel self-conscious; surely I was too old for all this now? Dressed in a baggy black V-neck and black corduroys – an almost convincing attempt at post-punk style – I snootily noted the incongruity with the chosen-by-Mum leisure jackets of other teenage spotters. Yet if anyone had challenged us, we would probably have closed ranks and denied being mere trainspotters; we were ‘interested in railways’, we were ‘enthusiasts’.

Besides, there were extenuating circumstances: I was trying to give up. At least, I had decided that this should be the last trainspotting day. There was a target in view, too. In a few months, the most powerful express diesel locomotives on the system – the Deltics, British Rail’s Class 55 – were due to be withdrawn after twenty years’ service. These were as charismatic as locomotives could get without actually being powered by steam. At once huge and smartly styled, each was equipped with two marine-type engines and made an intense sound quite unlike anything else on the rails. All twenty-two bore names: some of Derby winners, others of Northern or Scottish regiments. With London school friends, I had clambered exultantly into their unattended cabs on weekend visits to the maintenance depot at Finsbury Park in north London, where the indulgent foreman allowed spotters the run of the place, or begged a few moments on board from their drivers on the platform at King’s Cross. I had since seen all the Deltics but one: 55 021, Argyll & Sutherland Highlander.

That this elusive machine should pull into the station half an hour before I was due to head home, taking the most cinematic approach across the Tyne Bridge and round the sharply curved viaduct towards the platforms, was almost too good to be true. There were even a couple of exposures left on the Kodak to capture the moment. Who cared about looking nerdy now that I had the set? The Deltic numbers printed in my Locoshed Book could become a solid block at last, zebra-striped by evenly spaced underlining. Future sightings would produce a sense of conquest and completion.

A year or so later Argyll & Sutherland Highlander was so many acetylene-cut chunks ready for the furnace and I was no longer spending days on platforms with notebook in hand. Yet the interest in railways endured, growing broader and deeper. Every public library then had a shelf-load of books by post-war authors such as C. Hamilton Ellis, L. T. C. Rolt and David St John Thomas, lively and engaging writers who leavened technical description with human interest and historical understanding.
They described the railways of their own time, those of their youth and those of bygone generations. I read my way through these shelves.

Any aspect of the railways that was elderly, threatened or declining now assumed an increasing appeal. Those long trains of mixed wagons that had rumbled every day past the school fire escape were among the last of their kind: more than a century and a half after the first locomotive-hauled public railway opened for business, the ordinary general freight train had become hopelessly uneconomic and was disappearing fast. The future looked better for the bulk conveyance of minerals and chemicals, though here too there was change in the air. From the platforms at Newcastle it was still possible to see coal trains running without continuous brakes; when the locomotive stopped, the buffers pushed noisily together as each wagon hit the one in front. This relic of George Stephenson’s railways lingered into the 1980s Tyneside, sharing the same tracks as the streamlined Inter-City 125s, the fastest diesels in the world. The raw, archaic sound resounded for a few more years over the ancient quays and crumbling warehouses, a rebuke to the shiny consumerism that was taking over the rest of the city.

Much else that was commonplace in the 1980s has since vanished too. Many passenger trains then still included compartments opening off a side corridor, a development of the non-communicating compartment type used on the very first pre-Victorian carriages. The Night Mail in the 1980s was still ‘crossing the Border / Bringing the cheque and the postal order’. Some mail trains featured special windowless carriages known as Travelling Post Offices, in which swaying night-shift workers sorted first-class letters into tiers of pigeonholes during the course of the journey. These carriages had slots in their sides, so that last-minute letters could be posted on the platform, subject to a small supplement. British Rail also transported much of the nation’s newsprint, and masses of parcels went by train too. This traffic required other specialised vans and carriages, and separate platforms and compounds at the major stations, where a great deal of shunting went on. There were Motorail trains, strange hybrids with carriages at one end and flat wagons or covered vans for the conveyance of passengers’ cars at the other. Motorail’s advertising stressed modernity and convenience, but the practice had been going on since the 1830s, when private carriages were first mounted on flat trucks.

Such were the joys of train-watching in Mrs Thatcher’s first administration. Much of the network is busier now, although in terms of traffic
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it is much duller and more predictable. But trains are only part of the story. The railways remain a uniquely discrete system: a physically separate domain, its thousands of route-miles fenced off from the rest of the country and ruled by their own mysterious rhythms and laws. Parts of this system are new, other parts very old – some of them the oldest in the world and with buildings and structures intact. For those who have been initiated, a unique allure resides in the fabric and architecture of the railways, rather than in the trains themselves.

Take Newcastle station, an early-Victorian masterpiece, begun in 1846. Its frontage is a mighty display of classical architecture in the local golden sandstone, centred on a round-arched portico as roomy as a concert hall.* Behind, trains still pass through the original curving shelter or train shed of iron and glass, three parallel arched spans following a steady curve, the earliest structure of this form anywhere. Newcastle’s street plan was revised in order to align with the station entrance, and the viaducts and bridges approaching it created the modern image of the city. A little way along the line to Carlisle, going west, still older station houses can be found, treated like ornamented lodges to a gentleman’s estate. These date from the Newcastle & Carlisle Railway’s opening in the mid 1830s: before Victoria and Albert, before postage stamps, electric telegraph companies, ocean-going steamships or photography. By comparison, Clapham Junction station in the 1870s was at a low ebb architecturally – the old booking halls had been shut to save money, and tickets were sold from a prefabricated kiosk. Yet the place inspired awe, both because of its unrelenting traffic flows and for its sheer extent; a quarter of an hour is needed just to walk round the public perimeter of all its running lines and sidings.

The lines themselves – the ‘permanent way’, in railway terminology – carried a historical charge of their own. Landscapes that had barely altered since Shakespeare’s time were suddenly scarred by gigantic embankments, or punctured by tunnels so long that the very survival of the enginemen amid the smoke and fumes was sometimes imperilled. Tens of thousands of bridges and viaducts carried the new routes across roads, rivers and streams, flood plains and estuaries. Some of these – the Forth Bridge, Brunel’s bridge over the Tamar at Saltash, the soaring viaduct across Newcastle’s Dean Street – still take the breath away; most now carry trains vastly heavier, faster and more frequent than those of their early years.

* Spoiled in 2013, when the open arches were glazed.
As teenage interests widened into new historical and literary terrain, I found the railways waiting there too. They had reconfigured many relationships between residence and place of work, and between town and country. They transformed the conventions of tourism and holidays. Regiments no longer marched for days across the land; prisoners handcuffed to their escorts found carriage seats amid the blameless citizenry; the railborne dead were smoothly conveyed across the counties to their ancestral parishes for burial. The railways’ size and complexity forced the pace of change in insurance, accountancy and management. Railways promulgated mass advertising, both for their own services and for anyone who would pay for display space. They had promoted changes in the national diet, which became at once more varied and less distinctive from region to region. They had fostered new publishing formats, and even new types of literature, easily consumed on the move. The everyday lives of those who wrote so vividly about railways – Dickens, Trollope and Ruskin among them – were in turn subjected to their inexorable discipline.

To travel through Britain equipped with a little knowledge of how its railways were built and operated is therefore to journey in time as well as space. This book attempts to explore further this railway-haunted territory. It does so not by chronicling the growth of the network – that has been ably done elsewhere – nor by turning the spotlight on that old scene-stealer, the locomotive. Instead, it begins by following an imagined journey. The starting point is the carriage itself, a space formed and transformed by ever-shifting force fields in which technological change, safety, social class, gender relations and public health all exerted their pull on travellers’ bodies and consciousness. Infrastructure then takes command, from the ballast beneath the track to the grandest achievements of railway architecture and engineering. This leads on to the story of how the railways first fostered the growth of freight traffic and then had to cope with its painful decline. Questions of operation, control, management, communication and labour all come into play. The railway station follows, considered in the broadest terms of form and function and as a place of commerce and image-making. Lastly, the book explores the world of the railway enthusiast, from teenaged spotters to the adult volunteers who have saved entire lines from closure, as well as their forerunners in older generations: the first who came to understand the railways not simply as a force for modernity, but as a place where the present is confronted and enriched by the past.
If you fell asleep on a moving train tomorrow and awoke to find yourself transported back a century and a half in time – say, to 1862 – but still travelling onward, what would the differences be?

For a start, the shape, size, structure and materials of the carriage would be altogether unlike anything on modern commercial rails. Quite different too would be the sounds and smells, the rhythms and jolts, the entire world of the senses. Some aspects of this environment of 1862 would persist into the lifetimes of those still living; other features would be obsolete within less than a generation. But before looking more closely at this mobile enclosure, in which millions of people enjoyed or endured billions of hours – a space of confinement and of liberation, of solitude and of enforced companionship – it is worth sketching some outlines of the British railway network of 150 years ago.

This network had no governing plan. It happened by convergence and individual initiative, joining up the scattering of pioneer lines of the 1830s. Nor was there any consensus at first as to how far the railways might spread. Even after the early lines had shown what they could do, the first rush to invest in extensions and additions soon faltered. More miles of canals than of railways were built in the 1830s, and just one new railway bill passed through the parliamentary sessions of 1840 and 1841. For the Railway Times, it was quite good enough that Scotland could be reached after 1840 by fast steamship from the new rail-connected port at Fleetwood, Lancashire (‘What more can any reasonable man want?’). But
the picture changed again as the high dividends on railway shares were noted – so much so that the mid 1840s were remembered for the 'Railway Mania'. This was a textbook boom in which stock was oversubscribed and prices were inflated by speculators who got in early in order to sell up at an immediate profit; hence Karl Marx's description of the phenomenon in *Kapital* as 'the first great railway swindle'. Everything then came down with a crash, so that more than a third of the railway mileage authorised in these years was never built. Even so, the speculative peak of 1844–5 was followed by a mighty wave of construction as the paid-up lines took shape, with the peak of activity in 1847. Investment in railways in that extraordinary year accounted for almost 7 per cent of national income. After which came a period of solemn reflection and abstinence, ending in 1852–3 with a smaller and less well-remembered boom, then another dip, and then a steady rise to a second climax in 1866, by which time the chief investors were institutions rather than individuals.

In the early 1860s there was therefore no sense that the railway adventure had come to an end. The speculative turbulence of the early years left a residue of mistrust, but it was not intrinsic to railways as a *method* of transport. To the contemporary mind, they still represented the essence
of modernity. In certain towns bypassed by early main lines, the blame was laid on municipal reactionaries for failing to grasp the chance of a connection when it came. The MP for Abingdon in Berkshire actually managed to kill off the first proposal for a branch line to the town. A similar story is repeated, less fairly, of Northampton. Here the company in question was the London & Birmingham, the world’s first long-distance railway, opened in 1837–8; the populace was eager for the line to come that way, and it was the county landowners who led the party of opposition. (Yet the legend of blockheads at the town hall endures: on a train to Northampton an inhabitant was recently overheard repeating it to a visitor, as if to say, *What else can you expect from the folk round here?*) Railway builders around 1860 thus had many goals still to aim at: connecting to bypassed towns, pushing fresh lines into more remote areas, making short cuts for cross-country traffic. Because Britain was served by many independent lines, their companies also increasingly competed for traffic by means of rival or alternative routes.

The last English county to be joined to the national network was Cornwall, into which Isambard Kingdom Brunel’s Cornwall Railway began running trains in 1859. Three years later, the Isle of Wight received its first railway, the Cowes & Newport. On 1 July 1862 the inaugural train ran along its four miles of route in less than ten minutes. That was faster than anyone had ever travelled on the Isle of Wight before – simply because the steam railway could routinely go faster than a galloping horse, on which the existing limit on human swiftness depended. Having subdued the surface of Britain, railways began to probe below it. The Metropolitan Railway’s inaugural route was to have opened that same year, had the noxious waters of the Fleet Ditch not burst into its cavernous brick-lined tunnel as the line was under construction through London from Paddington to Farringdon Street. That put back the opening day of the world’s pioneer underground railway until the second week of 1863. One year later, the first train steamed into the new station at Aberystwyth, completing the railway route westward through the heart of Welsh-speaking Wales.

In Scotland, where railways spread outwards from the Central Belt anchored by Edinburgh and Glasgow, two great natural barriers had yet to be bridged in 1862, the firths of the Forth and the Tay. The bridges that eventually did the job have both become famous, for rather different reasons; less well-known is that trains had begun crossing these waters by
means of special ferries and floating jetties as early as the 1850s. That these gaps would one day be filled by something more solid would not have been doubted by any progressive-minded person in 1862.

The modern-minded traveller in mid-Victorian decades thus kept an eye on the railway map for new routes and opportunities. The poet and critic Matthew Arnold (1822–88), who was also a government inspector of schools, was of this class. His tours of inspection entailed a punishing amount of long- and medium-distance travel, largely by rail. January 1852 – a representative itinerary – began with a train connection from Windermere to the London & North Western Railway’s great junction at Crewe and continued with appointments at schools in at least fifteen towns, dotted across eight counties. Windermere was the nearest station to the inspector-poet’s Lake District retreat, Fox Howe at Rydal. Before setting off for the Monday morning train, Arnold found the time to finish his latest poem, ‘The Youth of Nature’. It was an elegy to his recently deceased neighbour William Wordsworth, a confirmed hater of railways, who back in 1844–5 had done all he could to prevent the branch line to Windermere happening at all. To this end, Wordsworth composed a celebrated anti-railway sonnet, which he posted to Mr Gladstone, then President of the Board of Trade, and also published as a pamphlet. The railway company then modified its plans a little, so that the line stopped...
railway (plural railways). (chiefly Britain, Ireland and Commonwealth of Nations) A transport system using rails used to move passengers or goods. 1918, W. B. Maxwell, chapter 2, in The Mirror and the Lamp: That the young Mr. Churchills liked but they did not like him coming round of an evening and drinking weak whisky-and-water while he held forth on railway debentures and corporation loans. Mr. Barrett, however, by fawning and flattery, seemed to be able to make not only Mrs. Churchill but everyone Rail News. Filter the results. Reset all. Hull Trains introduces passenger counting technology to support social distancing. 8 April 2021 | By Global Railway Review. The technology publishes the level of passengers onboard Hull Trains services in real time in order to help to make socially-distanced travelling easier. Alstom receives order from SNCF Voyageurs for first hydrogen trains in France. 8 April 2021 | By Global Railway Review. The Korean State Railway is the operating arm of the Ministry of Railways of North Korea and has its headquarters at P’yongyang. The current Minister of Railways is Chang Jun Song. The railway lines of North Korea were originally built during the Japanese occupation of Korea by the Chosen Government Railway (Sentetsu), the South Manchuria Railway (Mantetsu) and various privately owned railway companies such as the Chosen Railway (ChÅertzetsu). At the end of the Pacific War, in the territory of today's Turkish State Railways Delegation on Tanzania Railways 5 months before. Alstom Ships Metro Cars of the Hanoi Metro 5 months before. Alstom’s HealthHub TrainScanner enters service in Warsaw 4 months before. Alstom and Kiepe Electric to Supply 64 trams for Cologne 5 months before. Russian Railways Pioneered Debut International Social Bond Issue out of Russia 5 months before. IoT in Transportation Market Report Publishes 5 months before. Alstom to Supply Italy’s 1rt Hydrogen Trains 5 months before.