

EARLY MAIN LINE RAILWAYS – CULTURAL IMPACT & SOCIAL CHANGE 1829-1870

by Dr David Gwyn

This paper considers the ways in which cultural impact of the early main line railway, and the social change it inflicted, or made possible, have so far been understood in published academic writing.

Within this period, main line railways became an established part of the economy and society of the British Isles and Ireland; of continental Europe and European Russia; of British India; of Canada; and of the United States of America, where the Pacific Railroad had taken the concept of the main line railway to the trans-continental level in 1869. Conversely, railways as a technology had made little impact on South America, Africa, the Far East and Siberia by this stage.

Even so, the field a vast one, and it is highly unlikely that those with an academic interest in the subject should be aware of, still less keep up with, all the relevant literature. The present document draws not only from the author's familiarity with some of the texts noted here but also from internet searches and a trawl of bibliographies.

The field is made even more complicated by the fact that even within apparently similar, or politically united, cultures such as – for instance – Britain and Ireland, there are evident differences in the way the railway is understood as a social phenomenon; the railway is equated with the trauma of emigration in Ireland in a way that it is not in England. The development of the main line railway world-wide, however, threw together many very different societies. The railway was the cultural space where the American gilded age met both the 'celestials' (the Chinese labourers), and the Cheyenne, where Indian Brahmins mingled with Untouchables. It is clear that there is much recent scholarship on the experience of subaltern and exploited groups of railway builders or passengers with which western and Anglophone historians are likely to be unfamiliar eg Huang Annian 2006. It is likely that historians in the western tradition could learn a great deal from such studies.

For Britain and to some extent continental Europe, Jack Simmonds' *The Victorian Railway* is the starting point. It considers on the one hand technology, and on the other, perceptions of the railway, their impact on the landscape, their impact on the English and Welsh languages, and on communications, leisure and mobility. Michael Freeman *Railways and the Victorian Imagination* is a recent (1999) study that concentrates on the British Isles but advances Simmonds' argument by considering (for instance) education and social reproduction.

There are several studies of the way in which this technology was perceived by artists (including photographers) and to some extent novelists world-wide. *The Railway: Art in the Age of Steam* is a work by different contributors which nevertheless offers a comprehensive and coherent analysis of from a global perspective. As such it provides an important starting-point for further discussion.

Early main-line railways and politics have been the subject of much discussion. In particular, government policy towards railways has been considered extensively, certainly in Britain and no doubt in other countries as well. Thomas Arnold famously observed ‘... feudality is gone for ever’ when he saw his first main-line train (Smiles 1860), and it is remarkable how many early paintings of railways in Britain show a cathedral or a church in the background, whether demonstrating continuity or the forces of clerical privilege receding before the new technology. There have been several studies of British railways in the Victorian economy, and of railway contractors and promoters of this period (Reed 1996).

Even in the much younger society of the United States, the railway challenged the Jeffersonian ideal of a free yeomanry cultivating its own land by substituting a human industrial-cultural environment for the natural environment. Steven W. Usselman: *Regulating Railroad Innovation* begins by analysing the central preoccupation from 1840 to 1876, when Americans developed a political framework for economic expansion and launched a vigorous phase of inventing and patenting new railroad technologies; the author traces the consequences of the federalist system for its economic development (Harvard Business School ‘Working Knowledge’ archive review, 2003). Gerald Berk: *Alternative Tracks* discusses the example of the railroad industry to analyse the interactions of the corporate-industrial order with the American state from 1865 onwards.

The Duke of Wellington’s fears that it would encourage the working classes to move around and thereby acquire seditious habits are well known, though the potential of railways for dispatching troops to quell riots was recognised by authoritarian governments early on. However, main line railways were introduced to Russia by Tsar Nicholas I, generally thought to be one of the most reactionary of that country’s rulers of Russia.

Railways and warfare have recently been analysed by Christian Wolmar in *Engines of War*. Within this period, Mr Wolmar examines the American Civil War, the Austro-Prussian war and the Franco-Prussian war; drawing on the work of van Creveld, the historian of war logistics, and of A.J.P. Taylor, he concludes that railways effectively conferred an advantage on defending armies. A recent publication that examines the USA’s experience in this respect is Robert G. Angevine: *The Railroad and the State: War, Politics, and Technology in Nineteenth-Century America*.

Technological change – the stuff of ‘internalist’ railway history - should also be considered as a social change/impact. The transfer of railway technology from one polity to another is an example; Professor Fred Gamst’s introduction to von Gersten’s *Die Innern Communicationen* is a model of its type in this respect. Other examples of well-informed technical studies that acknowledge their non-technical dimension include Professor Jack (John) White’s study of the United States railroad carriage. As Professor White points out, the railway carriage as a social space influences design; carriages built for the supposedly classless republic of the USA nevertheless had to provide space for slaves. Carriages built for Muslim countries had to provide separate compartments for women. More explicitly social studies of passenger facilities, primarily Jeffrey Richards and John M. Mackenzie *The Railway Station*, also consider these matters. Fitzgerald’s *Liverpool Road Station* is an important study of one of the earliest surviving stations, though little work has

hitherto been undertaken to identify what inspired the provision of dedicated arrangements such as these, whether canal hotels or coaching facilities.

- Robert G. Angevine: *The Railroad and the State: War, Politics, and Technology in Nineteenth-Century America* (Stanford University Press, 2004)
- Huang Annian: *Chen mo de suo dao ding jian she Bei Mei tie lu de hua gong/The Silent Spikes: Chinese Laborers and the Construction of North American Railroads*, comp. and ed., trans. Zhang Juguo (China Intercontinental Press, 2006)
- Gerald Berk: *Alternative Tracks* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004)
- Ron Fitzgerald: *Liverpool Road Station* (Manchester University Press for The Royal Commission on Historical Monuments [England], May 1980)
- Fred Gamst: *Early American Railroads* (Stanford, 1997) introduction to von Gerstener's *Die Innern Communicationen*
- M.C. Reed: *Railways in the Victorian Economy: Studies in Finance and Economic Growth* (David and Charles, 1996)
- Jeffrey Richards and John M. Mackenzie: *The Railway Station*
- Samuel Smiles: *Brief Biographies* (Ticknor and Fields, 1860)
- Steven W. Usselman: *Regulating Railroad Innovation: Business, Technology, and Politics in America, 1840–1920* (Cambridge University Press, 2002)
- John White: *The American Railroad Passenger Car* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985)