This special issue of *Historic Environment* contains nine papers from the National Railway Heritage Conference: *Thinking rail, lessons from the past, the way of the future*, held at Tamworth, in northern New South Wales, between 28-30 September 2005. The conference, organised by the University of New England's Heritage Futures Research Centre, was part of celebrations of the sesquicentenary of railways in New South Wales. A steam-powered engine and carriages conveyed their first passengers along twenty-two kilometres of track, between Sydney and Parramatta, on 26 September 1855. Thereafter the railway system in New South Wales, like those elsewhere in Australia, developed into a principal driver of colonial, and then state industry, as well as a facilitator of nation building, with a network in excess of 11,000 kilometres. In recent times though, the role of rail in modern transport and logistics has been many, with the closure of numerous rural and regional lines, the heightened share of road haulage in moving freight and the inadequacies in many metropolitan rail systems (most notably in Greater Sydney).

As with the conference, this volume sets out to focus attention on the history and heritage of our railways, suggesting strongly that railways can, in the future as in the past, be a vital part of Australia's overall economic and social development. Some of the foremost workers in rail heritage describe their achievements, and discuss the issues and problems related to railway heritage operations across the world, but especially in Australia. What becomes obvious in reading this collection is that railway heritage management — indeed any heritage management — is not just an exercise in nostalgia, but an integral part of any attempt to run a cohesive, healthy society. This is partly because railway heritage is a heritage that has touched many. More than most it is a people's heritage. Its expression can be found not only in the fabric of old locos and what they hauled, but also in its industrial memory. This was expressed in songs, poems, images, dance, film, monuments (such the Australian Railway Monument at Werris Creek, a national memorial to those railway workers who lost their lives on duty, officially opened following the conference), exhibitions and museum displays, as well as the official record and the oral history of all who have travelled on, or worked for, Australia's railways. As well, the importance of railways to our future well-being is increasingly being recognised, particularly as we seek solutions to the challenges imposed by climate change. As railway aficionado, former Deputy Prime Minister and patron of the conference, the Hon. Tim Fischer, is fond of reminding us, 'a steel wheel on a steel track is seven times more efficient than a rubber wheel on an asphalt surface'.

What is emphasised in many of the contributions is the importance of remembering the social history of the railways. The railways were not only a major force in shaping our modern cities and fine-tuning our industrial technology, they determined our urban layout with the logistical organisation of time and space, the diurnal mass movement from suburbs to centre of the working population, and the link between city and the Bush, as well as more diffuse recreational movements. If later car-based systems, for instance, are imposed over the old form without understanding railway history and its connection with built heritage, the results are likely to be less than optimal.

Not to understand railway heritage and its effects is therefore not to understand our present cities and provincial centres, and invites planning disasters. Not to take into account this interwoven history of railways and towns when planning for future needs invites the disarray that we now see in the state of New South Wales, especially in the short-sighted misuse and re-development of the Eveleigh railway yards. Lovers of heritage and of a human-scale city alike are alarmed at the latest proposal for the old Eveleigh Railway Workshops site that covers many hectares of inner Sydney. The New South Wales Government excised the area from heritage protection legislation in order to allow maximum possible development of the site for high-rise apartment blocks and to close the still functioning Large Erecting Shed and transform it into multi-storey office towers. Damage to this prime Australian railway heritage location has already occurred under several NSW administrations, thus compromising a site that could become a lynchpin in cultural tourism and reverse the alarming decline in Sydney's tourism market, especially with overseas visitors.

The making and maintenance of railways keeps alive a memory of useful, life-enhancing mechanical work, a far cry from modern capitalism's obsession with 'creative' credit schemes to finance increasingly dubious real estate mega-projects. The railways spread far and wide a culture of mechanical skills and engineering technology that primed both railway and non-railway industries in a tradition of skilled labour. The wave of railway workshop closures, both in Australia and worldwide, that peaked in the 1980s, also destroyed the huge institutional apprenticeship training systems, the lack of which all industries are suffering from today with a worldwide shortage of skilled labour and no feasible ‘market solution’ in sight. Ian Gray develops this theme in his survey of what makes a good railway employee, past and present.

Two papers, by Robert McKillop and Donald Eilsmere, outline the railway museum monument project at Werris Creek in inland New South Wales, where the social history of railway workers and their families are given special emphasis. Bobbie Oliver describes the tragedy of the closure of the Midlands workshop in Western Australia. Lucy Taksa takes up the same theme for New South Wales by considering the short-sighted closure or restructure of the great Chullora and Eveleigh yards in Sydney.

An international perspective is given by David Morgan, based on his experience in Britain and his work towards a worldwide federation of heritage railways. Robert Lee also draws some interesting international comparisons, between Australian and Indian railway histories. Colin Divall from York continues the theme of the effect of railways on national identities. Peter Berriman, Andrew Killingsworth and Graeme Breydon describe two examples of successful heritage lines in Australia, the NSW Rail Transport Museum at Thirlmere and the Puffing Billy line in the Dandenong Range near Melbourne. As Breydon points out, their operation requires the development of expertise ranging across marketing, finance, law, engineering, town planning, IT...
and general communications as well as the obvious railway skills. With this volume we seek to engage a national focus on issues relating to both the heritage of our railways and the planning and development of its future. We are particularly concerned that state governments, who traditionally were custodians of much of the nation’s railway heritage, are relinquishing their responsibilities for its preservation. Local government and community groups that are being handed the responsibility for managing this heritage generally lack the resources to do so. While this problem is perceived at the local or state level it is in fact a national issue requiring a national approach. This is taking place at the same time as a worldwide rediscovery of the importance of railways to economic and social development appears to be floundering in Australia. These two issues, the abandonment of railway heritage and the need to strategically plan the redevelopment of Australia’s railways are linked and need to be considered as inter-related and from a national perspective. This is particularly the case in the loss of intellectual property, corporate memory and talent (industrial ‘memory’) due to the aging workforce demographic. This collection of papers encourages discussion of these points, while hopefully raising the profile of the sector. Failure to address these issues will result in an unnecessary loss to our national heritage and a failure to realise the full potential of a modernised rail network.

The various papers published here allow one to see the great potential for the proper development of railway heritage sites, not as an add-on, but as an integral part of our society, where the delight that people displayed in exercising the skills of the past can become common property. The fact that the provision of skilled labour for the future has also been seriously compromised by the imprudent and short-sighted closure of the great railway training centres is firmly put on record in this collection, so that at the very least the market fundamentalists responsible can be called to account. And it may be, when the last Wall Street financier has drowned in his sea of sub-prime fantasies, that healthier dreams will materialise, on the lines of the old railway workshops. Human beings will gather again in large numbers to cooperate and apply their skills, using hand-and-eye and common sense, and build the great engineering works and machines that are the true achievements of humanity, instructing and socialising the young into the bargain. Technologies will change, but the desire to be a creative productive member of society will not. For this alone the old railways are worth honouring and remembering. They passed the test that should be applied to any enterprise, past present or future — they allowed people to lead full lives based on meaningful work in the company of their fellows.

Many individuals and organisations worked hard to make the conference a success and their continued support has ensured the publication of this volume. We thank those who have contributed papers and our colleagues who have generously offered their time in reviewing and commenting upon them. We express our gratitude to, and acknowledge the financial support of, Australia ICOMOS and University of New England’s Heritage Futures Research Centre without which this publication would not have been possible.