Routes and Roots: Moving Beyond Australian Railways as Myth

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Abstract

Railways have helped to form and mark Australia's place in the world and its development as a nation. The earliest lines started the long process of opening up the hinterland to large numbers of European settlers, intensifying the exploitation of natural resources and, with the steamship and telegraphy, integrating Australia into an imperial world-order. The completion of the Trans-Australian route in 1917 and even the recent opening of the Alice Springs-Darwin line were significant markers in the evolution of the Australian nation-state and the country's search for new roles and identities in an era of intensifying globalisation. In all of this, the railway stands as a technology to be understood not just materially, as rather too much railway historiography treats it, but as also a cultural phenomenon — an aspect of the everyday system of meanings which enables us to live in the social world. In the last few years, researchers have started to apply this fundamental insight to railways in any number of countries, using it in particular to explore competing accounts of what a railway was, and is. This paper explores the implications of these ideas for the interpretation of Australia's railways to the public.

This essay explores how museums could exhibit the history of Australian railways with the goal, at least in part, of encouraging public debate about their future. This might prove a difficult task, because railways currently play such a small role in the everyday lives of most Australians that there is probably not much of a groundswell of untapped enthusiasm for the subject amongst the general public. Nonetheless, some of the country's institutions such as Queensland's The Workshop Rail Museum have already learnt how to appeal to an audience beyond a hard core of enthusiasts (Queensland Museum 2007). And it is possible that when transport's contribution to global warming rises higher up the political agenda — as it is already doing in many countries — that some concerned citizens might look to museums as a way of learning about different ways of moving themselves and the goods they consume. This kind of issue can of course be raised purely in the context of present threats and opportunities, but there are advantages in considering matters in relation to historical technologies. One can then suggest how over the long-term, power and circumstances shaped choices at the personal and social levels; how decisions made long ago tend to lock modern societies into particular ways of moving; and, how even apparently impregnable transport systems can unravel and become obsolete.

Museums are not the only medium through which we can try to do this, but their unique selling point, objects (most strikingly, vehicles), offer a potentially effective way of grabbing visitors' attention since many people like to connect to the past through things. Some years ago I made a case on this basis for transport museums to be taken more seriously as places in which the past is marked, memorialised and even interrogated — in other words, as fully fledged history museums (Divall and Scott 2001). While a longish tail of transport museums still reflect some enthusiasts' obsession with technology, narrowly conceived as hardware, and, at best, a nostalgic view of the past, current best practice at the sector's leading edge aims to attract new and wider audiences by telling stories partly about the social history of railway transport and travel. Some museums — The Workshop Rail Museum is again a good example — also include exhibits on the railway's future, a trend which I expect to accelerate. But I have in mind something still more radical than this, in which the design and content of exhibitions seek to encourage visitors to weave for themselves stories about how the railways' past shapes their future potential. Doing this would, I contend, place transport museums in the vanguard of history museums, moving them beyond their current position of trying to catch up with practices that have long been found elsewhere.

Visitors, identities and myth

For all the recent improvements in the ways transport museums seek to engage with the past (or, better, try to encourage their visitors to so engage), it is still worthwhile cautioning against the dangers of exhibiting the past in terms of myth, or 'heritage' in one sense of that ambiguous term. It is now some two decades since the 'new museology' developed novel approaches to exhibiting based on the idea that visitors to history museums react to the objects on display as meaning-laden, as embodying a notion of the past which informs their (and our) sense of identity — and thus by extension, in some degree shaping expectations about the future (Vergo 1989; Dubin 1999). If that often very particular sense of, or take, on the past — myth — is criticised or otherwise questioned, reactions are likely to be as much emotional as intellectual. An extreme instance of this was the sharp controversy over a decade ago in the USA when the so-called 'history wars' between social critics and conservatives' understanding of the nation's past spilled over into planning for what eventually became the 'Enola Gay' exhibition at the Smithsonian Institution. American veterans objected vociferously (and largely successfully) to what they took as an unwarranted curatorial attack on their role in the nuclear bombing of Japan (Pretzer et al. 1998; Dubin 1999: 186-226). So deeply rooted was the veterans' self-understanding of their role that they found it nigh-impossible to accept not only that there are other ways of comprehending the bombing and its historical context but also that a disinterested observer might come to a different conclusion from theirs.

For myth in this sense is often contrasted to 'history' ('historiography', scholarly research and writing about the past, is a less ambiguous word), and although the distinction is far from clear-cut and sometimes disputed it is a useful one. In David Lowenthal's decade-old formulation, history tries to understand the past in its own terms, detached from any immediate concern for the present-day uses to which such an understanding might be put. Myth (Lowenthal uses 'heritage'
roughly as a synonym) is orientated primarily towards the many and often conflicting needs of the present. Thus in its application to the public or collective realm, ‘heritage now’ mainly denotes what belongs to and certifies us as communal members’, it ‘passes on exclusive myths of origin and common purpose’ (Lowenthal 1998: 67, 128). As Lowenthal acknowledges, myth-cum-heritage is in a way inescapable — we all need a sense of a shared past to anchor ourselves in our everyday lives. This recognition lies behind some of the more positive appraisals of museums and other sites that commemorate the past in ways that do not try to ape the (ideally) disinterested perspective of the academic. Sympathetic critics emphasise quite rightly the agency of visitors to make and take their own meanings from displays (Macdonald 1997). But for the same reason, the truth or falsity of any particular popular consciousness of the past is often beside the point in everyday life. People’s emotional attachment to their past makes that it is difficult (and perhaps sometimes impossible) to get them to see that past in any other way. Myth wins out over history — the former’s ‘many faults are inseparable from heritage’s essential role in husbanding community, identity, continuity…’ (Lowenthal 1998: xi).

It seems rather unlikely that Australian railways would ever generate quite the level of discord witnessed with the ‘Enola Gay’, but nevertheless I suggest that some aspects of their past should be seen as myth, and that railway museums might be both more effective and perhaps also more attractive to a broader range of visitors if this fact were more widely acknowledged. Certainly, although egregious examples are now chiefly to be found in exhibitions widely acknowledged to be over-due for renewal, some railway museums outside Australia still peddle myths, particularly those of a nationalist kind — insisting that ‘we’ were the first, or the best, is one way in which museums help to shape collective identities. The English historian G.M. Trevelyan (1946: 531) once wrote that ‘Railways were England’s gift to the world’, and the UK’s National Railway Museum (NRM) still displays trophies and icons symbolising such nationalist sentiments. Although the exhibition will be replaced in the next round of renewals, the museum currently makes great play of the fact that one of its key exhibits, Mallard, is officially the fastest steam engine in the world — a harmless enough claim in itself, perhaps, but one probably tied up in all sorts of (rather poorly understood) ways with some Britons’ sense of themselves as, for example, belonging to a once-prerogative colonial nation. Challenge such a deep-rooted sense of identity — suggest that Mallard is almost certainly not the world’s fastest steam locomotive — and one is quickly made aware that one is entering the realm of myth, at least with visitors of a certain age and gender! But myths are not only peddled through the ways in which exhibits are displayed; exclusions — what is not shown — can be as important. Any museum has to sometimes make difficult choices about what to show, but part of the success of leading railway museums in recent years has been down to the comparatively simple step, long practised in other history museums, of including once-ignored groups such as workers, or women. Much more could be done: I have yet to see an exhibition that deals well with the experience of indigenous peoples confronted by the onslaught on their cultures represented by the railway, a theme to which I shall return.

Arguing that museums should develop as places that look to the past partly to stimulate debate about the railways’ future supposes that exhibitions really change the way people understand that past. What is the evidence? Systematic studies of what visitors take from transport museums are rare; I know of only one for Australia. Rob Pilgrim’s (1998, 2005) work is concerned with motor, not railway, museums. It goes some way to confirming the views of those sceptics who suggest that museums merely reflect back visitors’ preconceptions — visits to motor museums are driven largely by personal memories and, partly as a consequence of the kind of displays typically mounted (weakly interpreted with an emphasis on technical factors), many more men than women visit (for a sympathetic account of what was then) the Henry Ford Museum’s attempt to do things differently, see Pursell 1997). However studies of other history museums suggest that given appropriately conceived and designed exhibitions, people can learn there (Dernie 2006; Falk and Dierking 2000; Hein 1998). Much turns on what is meant by terms such as ‘learning’. Learning in a museum, at least through an exhibition, is clearly an informal process — it is voluntary and, largely, self-directed. These points are crucial. Visitors are in a real sense in the driving seat; their own agendas play a large part in what they will attend to during a visit. As Harold K. Skramstad, President Emeritus of the Henry Ford Museum and Greenwich Village, recently characterised the ‘continuing dilemma of exhibition design’:

Content is communicated in a format of free-choice learning to people who pick and choose what to engage — and what to learn and remember — according to personal criteria that are based on individual interests and background… the medium is a basic and fundamental way of communicating content;… [it] is considered a core institutional competency;… [but] the outcome is somewhat unpredictable…. [T]he fundamental challenge is to design exhibitions that have a clear and coherent intellectual intent while at the same time providing engaging individual experiences (Skramstad 2007: 603).

Visitors to railway museums may, for instance, be concerned about the political and other ramifications of contemporary transport policy, wrapped up in nostalgia for the once-familiar forms of transport of their earlier years, simply curious about vehicles wholly alien to their own experience — or none of these things. But as Pilgrim’s study suggests, an important lesson for anyone with responsibility for mounting exhibitions (‘exhibitors’) is that most people’s sense of the past is strongest when it relates to personal experience. What was very familiar to an earlier generation might not be so to modern visitors — at one time, for instance, steam locomotives were part of everyday life, but they are not so now, except in a tiny handful of places. Some of the current generation will be naturally curious about these massive machines, even when they are displayed statically and silently, but how to make them interesting to a wide audience is not easy without systematic studies of what attracts visitors and, perhaps more importantly, what deters those who do not currently visit. In recent years some transport museums, particularly those that are better resourced, have partly acknowledged this lesson and have followed other history museums in undertaking research (‘front-end evaluation’) into the kinds of topics that interest potential visitors and the sorts of treatment that work best. (For a useful summary of the different stages and methods of exhibition evaluation, see Kelly 2002. The developers of ‘America on the Move’ at the Smithsonian enjoyed what was a probably an unprecedented level of resource for a transport exhibition
through various kind of audience research and consultation with outside specialists. For critical reviews of the results from the perspective of, respectively, a museum exhibitor and an academic historian, see Devine 2005 and McShane 2005.) But even if this best practice were to be extended to all railway museums (and there is no reason in principle why even in a less well-resourced museum it could not be carried out, at least on a small scale, by trained volunteers), it would still not completely address the kinds of issue I have in mind. For even those museums which carry out research into how particular exhibitions were received by the public (‘summative evaluation’) rarely, if ever, enquire into the factors influencing long-term ‘learning’ that might result from museum visiting (the University of York’s Institute for the Public Understanding of the Past (I-PUP) was established in 2006 with this kind of research in mind).

Moving beyond the counsel of despair that believes that museums can never shift visitors’ emotionally-held take on the past suggests it is worth trying to use exhibitions to challenge myth. But how? At the most basic level, by contrasting it with the methods and fruits of historiographical enquiry, As Eric Hobsbawm (1997: 273) once remarked, the ‘deconstruction of political or social myths dressed up as history has long been part of the historian’s professional duties’, and this responsibility surely extends to exhibitors, however tough the challenge of meeting visitors’ needs as much (perhaps more) on the emotional as on the intellectual level. People can hardly be blamed for failing to break free of the myths that help to make us all what we are if museums offer no other ways of understanding ‘the past’. The ‘new’ museology has long seen us all what we are if museums offer no other ways of understanding ‘the past’. The ‘new’ museology has long seen people have a right to make use of a (railway) museum as they see fit, to take what meanings they will from the exhibitions, whilst not denying them opportunities — indeed, the right — to develop and stretch their appreciation of the past.

I am increasingly persuaded that introducing museum visitors to the methods rather than particular outcomes of historiography is of more value. The key point is that the former are (as long as one rejects post-modernist shibboleths of the impossibility of knowing ‘the past’) inherently critical in ways that the formation of myth is not. Getting visitors to recognise that there can be more than one way to view the past and that it is possible to weigh these, however provisionally, in the balance is more important than trying to ‘sell’ them any particular account. Indeed the latter is largely unacceptable, on both theoretical and practical grounds: expert knowledge of the past is, to some degree, contingent, selective and partial; and exhibitions are not a suitable medium for quasi-academic debate (the attempt all too readily deteriorates into a book-on-the-wall which hardly anyone reads). Thus by focussing on process, exhibitors minimise the risk of implying that any one social group has a monopoly on ‘the truth’ about the past, whilst also striving to encourage visitors to acquire the skills of decoding the evidence that can enlarge their understanding of that past (this emphasis on process is to be found, for example, in Mills 2003).

But in all this we must not lose sight of the emotional side to myth and indeed museum visiting — railway museums need to help their visitors feel they want to enhance their sense of the past, and make them comfortable with the effort to do so. Mounting exhibitions that are more critical of myths can be difficult for everyone; it requires transport exhibitors to think more deeply than has been customary about the topics they want to address, and how to do so. The best railway museums are moving rapidly in this direction — the NRM, for example, now has an award-winning exhibition about the Japanese Bullet Train (most relevantly here, the Dibner Award for Excellence in Museum Exhibits of the Society for the History of Technology (SHOT) which is much more critical of Britain’s railways in the 1960s and later) — than would have been possible even a dozen years ago. But this is not enough. Such an exhibition might be popular (the Bullet Train is), but unless that popularity reflects visitors’ eagerness to interrogate the past, can we really say that it is successful? There is little ground for complacency here, partly because we still know so little about what people like about such exhibitions, and partly because the fundamental philosophy of critical exhibitions is still overwhelming didactic. The NRM, for example, has yet to embrace the emphasis on process that I should like to see, although its next generation of exhibitions should represent a significant advance in that direction.

How to reconcile scholarly approaches to history with the personalised ways through which most people connect with the past is thus still one of the main challenges facing railway museums. For all sorts of reasons, including very practical ones such as pressures of time, money and institutional expectations, as well as differing professional outlooks, there is not always, at least in the UK, a ready interchange of ideas between historians (academic and otherwise) and exhibitors (Divall 2003a). But the situation is improving. The new Museum of Transport in Glasgow, due to open in late 2010, will have benefited from the advice of historians and other academics; and in recent years the meetings of the International Association of Transport and Communication Museums have attracted some academic interest and input. If we are going to encourage our visitors to reflect critically on the myths that inform contemporary identities and hence shape expectations of the future, then we are going to have to work harder at working together.

**Railways as symbols of (national) identity**

What might this all mean in practice? In the rest of this essay I first outline a recent trend in railway historiography which both identifies a subject which ought to be addressed more explicitly in museums and which, for all that it deals with ‘myth’, is suggestive of new directions in the way that museums deal with such matters. I shall round off with some brief thoughts of how all this might be tackled in exhibitions.

What I have in mind is nothing less than what to this outsider seems to be the thorny issue of the relationship between Australia’s railways and the country’s sense of nationhood and place in the world — what it means to be an Australian. Even if many people do not care about railway history in the abstract, they probably will do if they start to realise just how deeply implicated the railways were in the historical making of Australian identities. So this could prove to be a good way of attracting visitors to museums. It might prove a controversial one as well, given the complex ways in which the railways helped and hindered the development of the individual colonies/states and later the Commonwealth.

This is of course all tied up historically with Australia’s role in the British empire and, more recently, the country’s struggle to redefine its role in the era of intensifying globalisation. In academic terms, this brings us to the cultural historiography of nationalism which has been developing vigorously, at least in
the English-speaking world, for the best part of a generation. The term ‘culture’ here refers not so much to works of artistic expression (although they are included) but more widely to that everyday system of shared values and meaning which enables us to live at all in the social world (Chaney 2002: 1-9, 37-54; for an excellent general introduction, see Tudor 1999). In the context of imperial and post-colonial history, this kind of thinking was first applied via Benedict Anderson’s (1991) famous demonstration of the importance to the formation and maintenance of nation-states of the ‘imagined community’ binding people together through a shared (if also often-contented) culture. In short, nations (and by extension, empires) form partly because people imagine themselves to be (or agree that they are) part of one. I have suggested in another essay (Divall 2003b) that this idea of the imagined community can be useful in thinking about railways and identity in relation to empires. Other scholars have gone further and have started to develop a lively body of work on the cultural history of railway imperialism/colonialism and post-colonialism, much of which is relevant to the Australian case.

Imperialism is not a subject which railway museums handle particularly well (if they touch on it at all), although the NRM is planning to place its recently acquired colonial-era Rhodesian Railways locomotive and passenger carriage at the centre of a new exhibition on just this topic, while Glasgow’s Museum of Transport has just repatriated a 1950s South African Railways steam locomotive with a similar longer-term intent. Perhaps the single most influential academic publication about railways as a tool of empire is the 1991 collection of essays edited by C.B. Davis and K.E Wilburn. This did not deal in any depth with Australia and, as far as I am aware, there has been no recent academic study which analyses the country’s railways in that book’s terms. However, its category of the sub-imperial expansive/proto-national integrative railway fits Australia quite well, at least up to the Second World War. In other words, Australia’s railways were both a means of expanding European settlers’ political and economic domination into territories already formally proclaimed part of the British Empire, whilst the same railways, suitably extended, later served to help forge a single nation out of the separate colonies/states.

Canada is easily the most thoroughly researched instance of this kind of railway imperialism-cum-nationalism in the British Dominions, but the broad similarities with Australia are obvious (den Otter 1997; Robinson 1991: 176-9). Thus the earliest lines of any length, in New South Wales, started the long process of opening up the hinterlands to European settlement, from the 1870s intensifying the exploitation of natural and agricultural resources so that by 1900, and with the assistance of the steamship and telegraphy, the various Australian colonies were fully integrated into British imperialism (Headrick 1981: 139, 161-3,168-9, 173; Headrick 1988: 29-30, 41, 108-109, 112). With the creation of the Commonwealth in 1901, new possibilities opened up for Australia’s railways — the forging of physical and symbolic bonds between Western Australia and the eastern States, and the south and the north, deemed, at least by the new Commonwealth government, as a necessary step in cementing the new nation (Gunn 1989: 240-1; Livingston 1996). Military-strategic considerations also lay behind the early planning of the Trans-Australian route (Protheroe n.d.: 723). Few would disagree that the completion of that line in 1917 marked a significant symbolic, if not necessarily a successful commercial, step towards the forging of a new Australian nation-state.

So much for the fairly distant past. What is particularly exciting about this historical trajectory from the point of view of the public historian is the fact that in the early-twenty-first century railway development still seems to have a public resonance beyond the narrowly commercial or financial. While the practical importance of steel wheels on steel rails as a means of long-distance passenger transport is considerably diminished by comparison with a lifetime ago, the decision finally to build the long-discussed Alice Springs-Darwin line was at least partly a matter of symbolically, as well as physically, binding ‘the Far North’ and ‘the Centre’ into the rest of the Australian nation. This is the view of the cultural geographer Peter Bishop (2002), whose fine study of contemporary and contemporary-historical attitudes towards the Alice Springs-Darwin rail corridor (researched before the railway was completed) I am relying upon here. It is of course indisputably the case that the new route forms part of Australia’s continuing debate over its trading and geo-political strategies in relation to Asia. So although the political and economic contexts are very different than they were a century-and-a-half, or even half a century, ago, Australia’s railways still serve the dual role of marking the country’s place in the world and of contributing to a sense of what it is to be an Australian. And this, I argue, offers possibilities for getting people into railway museums and, once there, getting them thinking about the future of Australia’s railways in terms, at least partly, of their past.

I suspect though that in this context Australian railway history borders on myth. I am on rather dangerous ground here, because I simply do not know enough about present-day attitudes amongst the Australian public(s) to the railways’ past. But the question is worth asking: is the historical development of Australia’s railways so bound about with competing notions of what it means to be Australian (or perhaps even to reject that identity altogether) that individuals and social groups have become myopically attached to a mythical view of that past? If my ignorance is symptomatic of a more general condition, then clearly there is a research agenda here, in terms of contemporary social surveys or even ethnographic studies, which might have a spin-off for railway museums.

Peter Bishop’s work suggests that this would indeed be a fruitful line of enquiry. He shows how over many decades the proposal to build the Alice Springs-Darwin railway has been regarded by different social groups in many different ways, some overtly supportive, many highly ambivalent, and some outright hostile. In some measure, such contested views (which Bishop shows go far beyond differences over Federal and regional politics to embrace, for example, competing notions over white and Aboriginal attitudes towards landscape) have survived into the present, informing the current generation’s attitudes towards the present project and wider ‘complex debates about Australianness’ (Bishop 2002: 297). Railways are then, at least in this case, a myth, a fulcrum between the past and the future which inform people’s sense of belonging and which can attract deep emotional responses. But this is not to say that intellectual reflection is impossible or pointless. For, as Bishop (2002: 315) makes clear in his cautiously optimistic view, the (at the time of his writing, likely) realisation of the project was:

a crucial missing part of the jigsaw of federation, as if the late-19th century vision could be completed at last but now with the new agenda of [ethnic] reconciliation as integral, as if providing another chance, an opportunity to redeem past mistakes.
Bishop’s work has the virtue for my argument that he places present-day attitudes in the context of their historical development, so that we can see not only what might attract visitors to a museum exhibition but also what types of issue are likely to prove instances of myth once they are there. More studies of this kind would, I need hardly add, be very welcome. But more work on the history of Australia’s railways written from a cultural perspective are also wanted. What might be achieved is becoming apparent as historians delve more deeply into the murky world of railway development in other parts of the one-time British empire, and for that matter elsewhere. Thus, for example, as part of a wider so-called ‘cultural turn’ in transport history, scholars such as Di Drummmond (2005), Ian Kerr (2007) and Robert Lee (1999, 2004) are taking up ideas such as that of the railway corridor, analysing how in territories such as imperial-era Africa, India and other Asian countries, railways were a kind of technological landscape or space historically imbued with, and indeed partly constructed out of, the competing meanings placed upon them by imperialists and (ostensibly) subaltern social groups alike. All these scholars relate their various analyses of meaning to the exercise of other kinds of power, be it social, economic or political, and thus address themselves comprehensively to the question of how divisions of class, gender and ethnicity are both constituted by, and themselves constitute, the railway corridor (Divall & Revill 2005, 2006; Freeman 2006).

Moving beyond displaying railways as myth

So much for the historiographical agenda. How might all this bear upon the challenge of mounting engaging exhibitions which looks forward to the future of Australia’s railways partly by looking back? Moving in a museum exhibition from the present (where we all inevitably start) and then back to the past is an opportunity to suggest to visitors both the similarities and the differences in the way we live now and then, an opportunity to get people thinking about different ways of doing what at the functional level is the same thing, such as travelling from A to B or transporting goods from C to D. My hope is that this would spark at least some visitors into thinking about why we transport things and people the way we do today, and thus how we might do it differently in the future.

For, of course, modes of transport are, like all technologies (which must be understood to include people and social institutions as much as hardware), always about trade-offs. Travelling by train over a long distance is not the same as making the same trip by plane or car — different modes offer different experiences of the ground traversed, they take different lengths of time, cost different amounts of money, cause different levels of ecological damage, and so on. We can, and perhaps should, make the point directly in exhibitions about contemporary modes, but as I suggested earlier doing so with the benefit of hindsight in relation to historical techniques has the advantage of demonstrating more clearly how societies choose different technologies depending on circumstances. Thus colonial-era railways in New South Wales (I have particularly in mind John Whitton and the Lithgow Zig Zag) are a prime example of how British styles of railway building had to be fashioned to suit colonial priorities. Or again, contrasting Queensland’s choice of the narrow gauge to New South Wales’s of the standard and Victoria’s of the broad, in a way which does not simply reinforce modern preconceptions of the ‘stupidity’ of such divergences, might prove a challenge for exhibitor and visitor alike! Even more radically, the encounter between the European technology of the railway and the very different Aboriginal attitudes towards, and technologies of, mobility offers the potential for some fascinating exhibitions of what might prove to be myth.

How though to achieve any of this? Perhaps the most useful aspect of cultural approaches to history from the point of view of exhibitors is the fact that their very subject matter, popular meanings, is conveyed through media which many people find attractive. Film, prints, posters, photographs, cartoons, drama, all engage people in ways that museum text, however carefully drafted, rarely does. Of course, there are dangers here too, most notably that of visitors ‘reading’ these verbal and non-verbal texts exclusively through the prism of twenty-first century understandings, and thus missing the oppositions and shifts in meaning that are part and parcel of historical conflict and change (Thomas 1994). But all this is grist to the mill of my earlier argument that museums should be as much, if not more, about encouraging visitors to learn how to decode different kinds of representation, both those from the past and about the past (including that of the museum itself) rather than laying out the fruits of such inquiry. Museum treatments of history are always going to be, comparatively speaking, broad-brush. So getting visitors to appreciate that their forebears had particular ways of understanding the railway — bringing them up short with the ‘shock of the old’ — and perhaps getting them to understand in outline that social groups held certain points-of-view for good (or even bad) reasons is quite enough of a challenge.

There is enormous scope for experimenting with exhibitionary techniques here, and perhaps a ‘compare and contrast’ exercise might be one way in for visitors. Take, for instance, the Lithgow Zig Zag. There are many historical images of this to be had, and they might quite easily be used to suggest how such representations differed from the ‘reality’ on the ground. An extreme instance is the 1878 engraving by Le Conte de Beaubir, which with its multiplicity of zig-zags is so obviously an exaggeration of Whitton’s achievement that it must surely raise the curiosity of a fair proportion of those who view the image. Is this a way to introduce the idea of the engineer as a conquering hero?, a trope familiar enough to readers of such writers from the depths of British imperialism such as Frederick A. Talbot (1911, 1913-14) or Ernest Protheroe (n.d.), and which has been most ably dissected by Robert Lee (2000). In this way one might be able to move some visitors on to the idea of railways as a tool of European expansion in the colonial era, as, for example, in Talbot’s (1911: 175) depiction of the Australian: iron horse... tearing the veil from the unknown with amazing rapidity; it is fulfilling the dual role of exploring and colonising force simultaneously.

It is less easy to see how one might set about representing the views of those who were not so keen on railway development, although it depends partly about which social group one is talking. Since, infamously, railways were for long periods of Australian history as much a weapon of inter-colonial and inter-state rivalry as harbinger of national unity, I imagine it is easy enough to find contemporary cartoons and the like which cast particular schemes from ‘over the border’ in an unfavourable light. What of Aboriginal perspectives, however? What cultural forms might be appropriate here? Of course, Aboriginal views were,
and are, not unerringly negative, as images of Welcome to Country ceremonies, such as that associated with *Flying Scotsman’s* visit to Alice Springs in August 1989, demonstrate. I assume that similar images of greater historical vintage are available (although more or less inevitably, these will be, I imagine, rendered largely from the ‘European-settlers’ perspective). But is there anything that can be done to express what must have been the sometimes less-favourable reactions of indigenous peoples? Perhaps here we come up against the limits of the museum, as a form of representation which is so tied up with European notions of remembering and forgetting. Perhaps — but even so we should not ignore the rich possibilities of hybrid forms that combine Eurocentric methods with those of Aboriginal peoples (Bennett 1995:102-5).

One final idea, derived from one that has found a partial realisation at the NRM’s new branch museum, Locomotion (National Railway Museum). The effectiveness of an exhibition in getting people to think for themselves is enhanced when it encourages visitors to choose between alternatives, be these future-orientated, present-day or historical. For example, given that one can just as well travel in NSW from Tamworth to Sydney by rail, car or air, which one would you, the visitor, choose given the various parameters for each journey? Casting this kind of choice from a historical perspective can, if done carefully, help to bring home how the individual choices we make in the present and the future are shaped and constrained by longer-term technological trajectories — in other words, that our cultures of travel are shaped by our technological history. Thus an exhibition in this vein might consist of, say, three zoned areas, each representing a travel agency (or its historical equivalent) in the present, some suitable historical moment, and a point in the not-too-distant future, where the visitor role-plays the traveller from Tamworth to Sydney and is presented (and it does not have to be by software) with the various options. One can use this kind of scenario to set up counter-factuals — what decision would you have made if such-and-such a railway had (or had not) been built? It becomes particularly fun and instructive when one starts to alter the parameters so that, for instance, the ecological cost of the journey (for example, carbon emissions per passenger) is reflected in the financial cost.

I am moving away from the idea of railways as myth, but perhaps the basic issue here is not so different. For the fact is that we are very attached to particular ways of moving ourselves and our goods around, and our attachment cannot adequately be explained just in terms of the functional utility of one mode over another in the here-and-now. It is partly to do with culture and identity, with our sense, whether in Australia, the other rich countries, and increasingly in the rapidly developing countries such as Brazil, China and India, that more-or-less unconstrained mobility is a greatly valued part of what we are. The patterns of mobility we practise and the technologies we use are all shaped partly by the collective and individual choices made in the past. Granted that we cannot continue indefinitely with our increasingly energy-intensive mobile lifestyles, we have hard decisions ahead that will force us to rethink our relationship to transport in general and railways in particular. Rethinking the history of those relationships has a small but important part to play in identifying the ways in which we might make a difference in the future, and if railway museums make the effort to engage with their visitors in this way they will put themselves in the vanguard of history museums worldwide.

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