

# On Wooden Rails

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**Celebrating 150 Years of Work  
on the NSW Railways**

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**Peter O'Connor**

***On Wooden Rails - Celebrating 150 Years of Work on the NSW Railways***

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***Rail, Tram and Bus Union (NSW Branch)***

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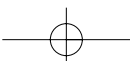
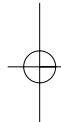
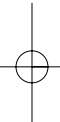
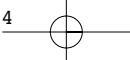
# Dedication

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*This book is dedicated to the hundreds of thousands of men and women who have built, operated and maintained the railways over the past 150 years against all odds, and to those who continue to run, repair and sustain the efficient, safe and reliable passenger and freight rail services today. Your dedication to your work and those who benefit from it remains truly awesome.*

*Thank you.*

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# Acknowledgements

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It only remains to place an obligatory rider – that mistakes, errors of form, substance and judgement remain my sole responsibility. I hope that none of them have in any way diminished to contributions by so many good people to this book.

## **Photos**

Many of the photos used in this book have come from the private collections of people who have a love of the railways and in maintaining its history and heritage. Thanks to Bruce Heinzl (and the many records kept by his grandfather Albert Horton during his years on the railways, and Bruce's brother, Colin's keen interest in photographing so much of the rail world), Ray Cross for access to his collection, and Roger Morris (who had the good sense to rescue some invaluable photos and documents from the RRRs and stations from certain destruction, and his own invaluable collection of memorabilia), Thanks also to Dave Morris, Mark Supple and Max Harrison for their efforts and generosity in tracking down some wonderful photographs, work documents and collectibles, and their foresight in preserving these items, and generously allowing access to their private collections.

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These sources have been acknowledged where they appear throughout the book. Where the particular source has not been acknowledged, it can be assumed that the photos are directly drawn from the RTBU archives.

# Foreword

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This is a book for the generations. It covers the full sweep of railway history from colonial times to the present. It is also a book for railway people. It contains memories, stories, pictures, and commentaries. The full emotional import of the book will be felt by those who work on the railways, or whose family had connections with the railways. For the rest it will be an interesting read, but it will not evoke or conjure the past in the same manner as it will for those who lived and worked in the railway tradition.

I am the son of a railway worker. My father left school at the end of his third year at school and joined the New South Wales Government Railways. He trained as a guard and the remainder of his working life he was part of the railway family. When he died in 1990 the church in the small country town where he retired was full to overflowing. Scores of people turned out for his funeral. I had been away from home for 20 years and was amazed at the turnout. I asked my mother who all these people were, and she admitted that she knew only a few of them by name. The rest were railway people who had come to honour one of their own.

My earliest memory as a child was of the railway yards in Dubbo in New South Wales. We lived in the shunters' cottages near the showground. Coal and soot was the backdrop to my childhood. We stood apart from the rest of the community as part of the railway family. Looking back I never felt that different to everyone else in Dubbo. It was just that railway people stood together. My earliest playmates were the children of other railway workers. When I was old enough to accompany my father to the local hotel, it was a place that railway people drank. Just as other children were the sons and daughters of the local doctor, or the teacher; I was the son of a bloke who worked on the track.

When I was 12 years old we moved from Dubbo to Taree. I learned to play billiards and read my first book at the Railway Institute. Again it was the local railway community in Taree that embraced us. I never felt that we had really moved away from anywhere. The sense of belonging to the railways sustained us.

I only really understood the importance of this connection after I left home at the end of high school. My mother insisted that I should not follow my father onto the railways. This was a difficult decision both for her and for me. I was expected by my mates to join the railways. My mother was determined that I would take a different path. She pushed me to study and to excel at school. She knew over her life the truth of the words in this book: "the work has been varied, hard, dirty, dangerous, often around broken and disruptive shift patterns." My mother was determined that I would be the generation raised away from the railways.

As a result I ended up with a cadetship at the BHP steelworks in Newcastle. I never looked back. University studies, business opportunities and a new life drew me away from my roots. Yet all my life I have felt connected to the railways. Leaving home meant taking the boy out of the railway, but not the railway out of the boy. I believe it is like this to all of us who've had the privilege of being part of the railway family. I am not surprised that Premiers recall their family heritage, and those who have served directly in rail are proud of their traditions.

There is something unique about the railways. I used to think it was the elemental nature of the business. Steel rails, large pieces of equipment, steam and diesel engines, endless pathways across the countryside. Massive stations and a million journeys throughout the city. There is something powerful in the image of the railways. It evokes a feeling of control over nature, a certainty of spirit in things mechanical and structural. It is definitely masculine in nature. The workshops and shunting yards, the platforms and offices, the monumental buildings and the sheer energy of the people in the workplace create a forceful environment. It is an environment that contains danger, production, social utility, industrial community, and a need to work together to get the job done.

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I found something of this in the steelworks in Newcastle but that was in one location. The railways are everywhere. They are the focus of many rural and regional communities, and in the cities they are the core of urban living. Even in these times with fewer people in the railway workshops and on the platforms there remains this sense that the railways are essential to the well-being of the city.

This book provides an emotional link to our past. It is a collective link that binds all of us to the generations that have come before. It may be fashionable to talk today of a “new” rail culture in Australia. The private corporate interests and the new public management ideology may have downsized, outsourced, re-engineered and de-industrialised the work of generations, but the spirit of rail remains.

There may be fewer rail workers today than there were a generation ago, but the memory of the railways is not so easily conquered. The technology is more sophisticated, the accounting systems sharper and the vision splendid replaced with a mission statement. Yet the spirit of the railways endures. It lives on in the society as an iconic reminder of who we were from whence we came. For example, I last rode in a working steam engine with my father in 1956. Yet when I had the chance to sit in the cab of 3801 last year on a heritage trip into Sydney my childhood returned as if it was yesterday.

It is a matter of pride for me that in 1997 when I returned to Sydney after many years in other places I found myself once again working on the railways. I was invited to apply my non rail policy and economic skills to the task of analysing modern management practice in various aspects of the New South Wales railways. I contributed in small part to the debate concerning the most appropriate manner of managing track maintenance, privatising the freight business, merging separate rail agencies that had been split up in 1996, and generally offering ideas and advice on how best to build capability in the modern railway culture.

In the last few years I have been reminded at every turn by the dignity and the passion, and the skills of those with who I have worked in the railways that no matter what new management ideology is introduced, the workforce will remain true to the basic ideals of the railways. Honour, loyalty, mateship, and practical commonsense are the hallmarks of railway workers.

This book reminds us that our roots are deep in the soil of our country. We should celebrate the past, and we should recognise the contribution made by generations of railway workers to the economic and social development of Australia. If in this process we create some myths and some heroes, so be it. The railways have produced larger-than-life individuals, the collective effort of thousands of workers have delivered millions of people from home to work and back again over the decades. There are few activities in our society which deliver such useful outcomes. We are entitled to brag a little about who we are.

I am so proud of my parents as railway people. They were part of the generation after the Second World War that took Australia from a colonial backwater to thriving first world economy. Their contribution was at least as important as any politician or businessperson. This book offers them recognition. It is in part a salute to my parents and to the parents of generation after generation of railway workers.

Peter takes us on a journey in this book through the workplaces that make up our history. He introduces us to the characters and the values and the commitment that are the essence of the railways. He evokes the past, offers a commentary on the present and raises some important questions for us about the future of the railways.

I think that Peter O'Connor has placed much of himself in the book, and at times his passion for the people who work in the railways carries him some distance from his historical analysis and into an enthusiastic advertisement for the railways and those who worked on them. His politics lead him into strong statements and a defence of the railway worker against all others. He wears his heart on his sleeve. This is where all good railway people wear their heart.

**Dr. Daryll Hull FAICD FCILT**

**Sydney**

**10 August 2005**