



# Introduction

## Sinners, Saints & Signalmen

### *Celebrating the Men and Women of the Railways*

The railways is an industry of diverse and rich tradition. For the past 150 years in New South Wales, men and women from all walks of life have converged on and melded the industry - not only as an efficient, cost effective means of transporting people and goods, and providing vital community links, but also as a fascinating cultural mix of people as varied in their beliefs and practices as the worlds they come from. This book is about some of these people and events and how they continue to merge and shape a unique railway culture.

This is a story of hard work, of hard people, of hard times. It is a story of often sub-human working conditions and treatment, of management experiments, and games of political football. It is about the relations between rail workers, their communities and their places of employment, and how they have occupied and cultivated these spaces. A tense but exciting story of the passion and the disappointments of industrial and political labour. It is most certainly rich in its battles over contested terrain.

It is also filled with creativity, with strong community ties and humanity. It is a heartfelt story of camaraderie, of strong bonds and loyalties, of jokes, songs, laughter and play. What brings these stories to life are the personalities that have authored and acted them out in

their daily lives. It is as old as the mid 18th century and as recent as the people living it today.

As the NSW community celebrates 150 years of rail history, this book is a glimpse into the rich railway culture through a window not often viewed or open to the public. It is the selective and unashamedly biased view of some of the characters that have helped to define the NSW rail industry over that time. This window opens onto the lives of the people who make up the railways culture. It is not intended as a comprehensive history or detailed sociology, nor does it concern itself with the mechanics, engineering or machinery of the rail industry - enthusiasts will continue to chronicle these facts, artefacts and icons.

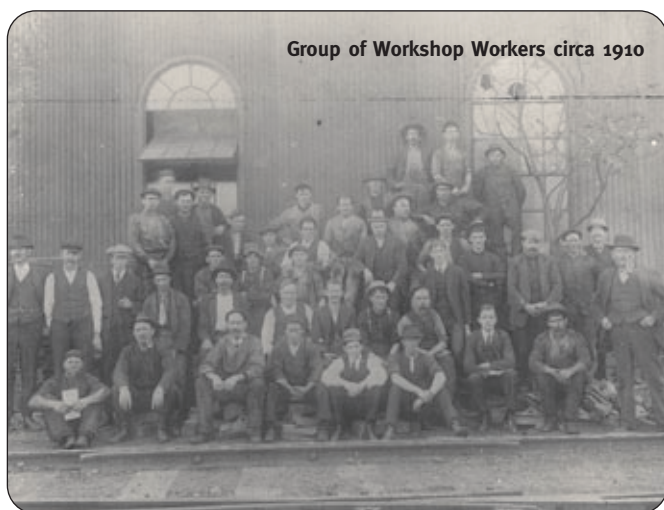
This is not a story of train spotting or engineering feats, but of people spotting and an acknowledgement of the contributions they have made to building and sustaining a vital industry, and in turn, their contributions to the general economic growth and societal development in NSW.

This book is not about bridges, locomotives or gauges of rail lines - nor is it about the many technical specifications that go into the mechanical workings of the railways. It is certainly not about Railway Commissioners, Chief Executive Officers or railway managers. It is a collection of scatterlings of experience and workers' stories, drawn and held together by fine threads of commonality - work on running the railways.

We often get caught up in the detail of the formal structures, organisations and functions of the rail industry, concentrating on job descriptions or classifications, rostering or timetabling to describe the work in the industry. What governments, employers, and to some extent unions, in the industry have overlooked and ignored is the mix of personalities, talent and creativity that is the railway workforce.



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



This book is a gesture at celebrating these people and their histories and stories, and acknowledging their ongoing value to the industry and to society generally. It attempts to draw on direct personal accounts, experience and memories of rail workers, as much as possible. These accounts have been corroborated and built on by supporting archival and documentary historical material. As with any story telling and memory recall, there are moments of selective amnesia and deliberate and non-deliberate omissions and embellishments and myths generated. There is no attempt to critique or minimise these accounts here, but allow them to be made freely and without censorship as an essential part and flavour of the story.

The main thesis of the book is a simple one - it is the recognition and validation of the spectrum of characters and practices that make the railways such a fascinating subject, and to hopefully contribute in some small way to a valuing and celebration of the significance of people who have kept the NSW railways running for 150 years.

These people are never just railway employees, they are never just cleaners, clerical workers, gangers or fettlers, station attendants, guards or drivers, station masters or signallers. They are people with beliefs, cultural practices, hopes, communities, interests and talents that they carry with them into their workplaces and their jobs every day, and by so doing enrich those same workplaces.

We know of some of the more colourful and celebrated characters that have been part of the NSW rail industry, whether it be the Bathurst train driver to Prime Minister story of Ben Chifley, or the likes of the Darling Harbour porter and union leader Dr. Lloyd Ross, through to the current Premier's association with the industry, through his father, or the former Labor Council Secretary (and

then Minister for Transport Services), Michael Costa, brief passage through the rail industry to political prominence.

These high profile examples do reflect the depth of identities and opportunities that have existed in the rail industry, that has nurtured and produced a host of civic, industrial and political leaders. Some of these will be recounted here, but mostly our story is about the 'ordinary' (or rather 'extraordinary') characters who work on the railways every day, content with their career choices, but also determined to maintain their own identities and character, their own creative pursuits, beyond their daily jobs.

Artists, performers, writers, actors, sportspeople, rail enthusiasts, business people, artisans - they are from the cities and the remote country towns, they are indigenous and european workers from generations of Australians and they are from diverse distant and recent migrant heritage. While they can be fiercely tribal around their particular occupational groupings, one of the many characteristics that they all share is that they proudly identify with the railway 'family'.

They mostly don't give a tinker's cuss about the organisational chart on the employer's office wall, or the policy documents on the Minister's desk - they are primarily concerned with the real working of the railways, the lived reality of where they work and the people they work with. They are proud, skilled and competent men and women who are the backbone and substance of the railways.

Likewise, they are not so concerned with the tedious preoccupation of whether a particular train is three minutes late. They are concerned about providing a quality service, and the safety of their communities and colleagues. They are also concerned about pride in their work and regard for their personal and collective dignity.

In 2003/2004 we had a flurry of public attacks on rail workers - the hoary old management excuses and government avoidance of responsibility - 'slow work', 'low productivity', 'poor work practices' from 'overpaid rail workers holding the rail system to ransom'. We had the new Minister for Transport Services, whose father was a railway guard, and for a brief period he himself was a trainee engineman and AFULE (Australian Federated Union of Locomotive Enginemen) official, testing the political waters.

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On one occasion, the hysteria extended to branding 60 or so metropolitan train drivers booked off sick (not an unreasonable proportion of the large workforce to be off sick at any given time) as a concerted industrial conspiracy. Apart from the obvious scapegoating involved in these sorts of campaigns, it is possible to take another angle on this type of concern.

Senior management and government were happy to publicly admit that 60 drivers out of the system was chaotic, that is, the system had difficulty operating without the 60 drivers. Imagine a day or week or month in the life of the railways when 60 management staff were off sick or playing golf - would anybody notice, would a single train be delayed due to this absence? Probably not. If this is the case, then perhaps more attention needs to be paid to the 60 drivers and less to the sixty managers in ensuring that the railways run well.

The simplistic equation and assumption that can be drawn from these public outbursts, and an obvious political and organisational lesson is that we know a train will not run without shunters, maintenance crews, fettlers, station staff, drivers and guards. It will run, and run well, without a manager.

### **Who Runs the Railways?**

Unfortunately, much of what is written about work and industry tends to focus on the economic, raw material or engineering aspects. Histories of the railways tend to highlight the locomotives, or the great train journeys - nostalgically painting glamorous pictures of a bygone era. Alternatively, we have dramatisations of tragedy on the railways through some of its more spectacular accidents. These social, economic and political stories are mostly from an organisational perspective, and mention of the railway workers scant and mostly in management language - cost items, disruptive or

disloyal industrial action that obstructed a business development, or a workforce as a necessary 'nuisance'.

There is little mention, recognition or valuing of the people who actually operate the mechanical beasts or the infrastructure, who maintain the railways - the men and women of the rail industry. Leafing through books of rail photo albums, you could almost be left with the impression that the railways is a giant train set run automatically from some central location, free of people. The proud photos of gleaming engines mostly don't have people in them, yards, stations and workshops are portrayed as ghost towns, inhabited only by machines and buildings, bridges and track.

In 2005, as we reflect on 150 years of development and progress on the railways, recounting the pioneering days and engineering spectacles, as we reminisce about the more romantic aspects of rail history, and the services that no longer exist, and as we analyse some of the current problems and future of the railways in New South Wales, we would do well to celebrate, reflect and analyse the people who have made that history possible, and on whom the future of the railways depends.

Governments, employers and the broader community should take this opportunity to view the future of the railways as an essential and vital key to our transport future. The environmental, economic and social benefits need to be carefully examined and re-examined. Our expectations of the system need to be realistic and bold, and the expectations of railway workers grounded in a high regard for the skills, expertise, and professional dedication that these people bring to work everyday. This respect should extend to the recognition that these same people are community leaders, sons, daughters, parents and grandparents, fully developed human beings with lives that do not begin and end at their workplace.

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This is not a story about heroes or villains, good or evil. It is not a history of the rail unions or even primarily union struggles. Rail workers cannot be neatly categorised by their particular occupations or affiliations. Very few are entirely 'loyalist', 'earlybirds' or 'lilywhites' as the participants in the 1917 general strike were known. It attempts to locate people in their time, place and space. It is as much about contradictions and exceptions to the rule or conventional wisdom, and about a history and future that are not simple or predictable. It is a collection of stories of 'people of interest' to the NSW railways. They will hopefully help us with our enquiries about many aspects of work and life on the railways.

It is awesome to read, hear about and imagine the effort and hardships involved in the construction, operation and maintenance of the railways in this country. To imagine the long days and months of laying track in extreme weather conditions and over every conceivable terrain, from the lines across the open plains to the Zig Zag over the Blue Mountains, the heat out west to the Snowy Mountains. The preparation and running of the early steam locomotives, and the skill and the labour involved in simply getting these clunkers to their destinations at all (let alone safely and on-time). The fettlers ahead of and behind the lines, repairing and maintaining the tracks, the huge workshops like Eveleigh and the foundries, building and repairing the locomotives.

The men and women keeping the stations in the big cities as well as remote locations operating smoothly, the station assistants, cleaners, conductors, refreshment room attendants, customer service, porters, guards, drivers, boiler room operators, firemen, the men in the signal box and the 'hairy legs'.

The break-down, 'flying gangs', emergency and salvage crews tending to derailments and accidents. The call boys out on their bicycles at all hours calling others in to work. These are some of the men and women who have kept railways running.

It is equally awesome and fascinating to discover that so many railway people have and continue to engage in social and civic pursuits across a wildly interesting spectrum of activities and interests. It is still difficult today to find someone who does not have a friend or relative connected with the railways, such is the central significance of this industry. It is also encouraging to know that the railways has always attracted and



developed a rich mix of interesting characters that continue to add enormous value to their local communities and society generally. The railways has certainly supplied more than its fair share to the ranks of the parliaments over the past century. It also continues to provide a healthy space for community leaders, sportspeople, artists, writers and musicians - undermining many of the stereotypes of mono culture and bland cultural expression.

These are some of the hundreds of thousands of men and women who have kept the railways running over the past 150 years. These men and women have come to the railways from all walks of life and have been only too proud to call the railways 'home'. It is the sacrifices, dedication and commitment to their industry that has created and sustained a vibrant and viable rail industry, delivering goods and services to communities throughout NSW. Some have famously gone on to public office or successful business or civic roles, some shall be recalled as rogues and traitors, but mostly they stayed and worked on the railways. It is these people that we salute and offer thanks for 150 years of rail service.

If there is a thesis to this collection, then it is a very basic assertion. That is, that the colourful men and women who have worked the railways run the railways. That despite obstacles, government meddling, poor management, they have enabled the railways to grow and prosper. This simple thesis was summarised by the current Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) Branch Secretary, Nick Lewocki during an interview. He was asked quite baldly. 'Who does run the railways?'

His unequivocal and unrehearsed response was that regardless of the myths, bragging and pretenders - the claims by government ministers, by CEOs, managers, or even unions, that they run the railways, they are kidding themselves, they don't.

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*'The workforce runs the railways, always have. Amongst the chaos, the restructuring, management posturing, under-resourcing, the truth is, the rail workers have kept the industry running. If the managers all go home this morning, the trains will still run this afternoon'.<sup>1</sup>*

It should be stated from the outset, that while the development of the tramways was integral to that of the railways, and for some time came under the same controls and management, this book restricts itself primarily to the work and social activities of the railways over the past 150 years. This is not intended as a shun, or lack of respect or acknowledgment of the tramways, its workers and their contributions. Quite the contrary, it is from a position of high regard for an equally unique and distinct history deserving of separate and detailed treatment that the separation has been made here.

We need to respect the massive contributions of rail workers in building the industry over the past 150 years. Rail operators (owners) and managers need a kick in the pants to get them out of a romanticised past and a troubled present, to view their workforce as their greatest and most valuable asset and investment. As has always been the case, the best consultants and problem-

solvers are the people addressing the issues every day. Generations of management have created problems, and generations of rail workers have continued to resolve them.

An approach based on a closer understanding of the railway workforce, and respect for the cultures within the railways, in co-operative and collaborative management and policy initiatives can provide the basis for a strong and healthy future for the railways. To continue to view rail workers as a cost item, to ignore the personalities and human requirements of the railways community, could be a significant factor contributing to the management and overseeing the ultimate demise of the railways.

The 'railway era' is not a historical artefact or curio. Our celebrations of the past 150 years need to direct attention to the future. Workers have provided the skill and commitment to run the railways, they have defended and protected the growth of the industry - as its custodians and gatekeepers - we can only hope that some of the major rail operators and government have the good sense, vision and political will to start to hear some of these stories and incorporate them at the centre of any strategic planning for the future of our railways.



<sup>1</sup> Interview with RTBU NSW Branch Secretary, Nick Lewocki, February 2005

## **OUR RAILWAY MEN**

*Take from our officials, who manage all affairs  
Right down to the platelayer, who spikes the iron chairs  
As each and every one, are railway servants true  
For as the dawn of day breaks forth, they must their duty do  
Take first our sub-inspectors, who travel o'er the road  
And then the operators, who must thoroughly learn their code  
And now the loco pumper, who supplies the engines' water  
The one who handles samples, for on his cap see 'Porter'*

*Working on the platform are the junior and the Pro.  
And the worthy S.M., who them their duties show  
They examine carriages, and punch the ticket too  
If you ask the reason, 'It's just to pass you through'  
The man who drives the engine, in his hands are lives  
The guard, he watches careful over husbands and their wives  
With parcels and their luggage his brake it is well stacked  
When running cheap excursions his carriages are packed*

*Now let us think of fettlers out in the rain and snow  
They have to watch the road, to let the traffic go  
Next we take the shop hands, always on repairs  
The booking clerk he issues the tickets for the fares  
Temperance should exist in us, great and small  
Punctuality is a thing we should not forget at all  
Civility, the masterpiece, it makes a railway man  
Gives joy to the travelling public - exercise it all you can*

**(W. Cornford, Junior, Per-way Department, Goulburn 1905  
Source The Federated Amalgamated Government Railway  
Employees Association Journal).**

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Fettlers on the Broken Hill Line, 1936



Sydney Yards, 1905

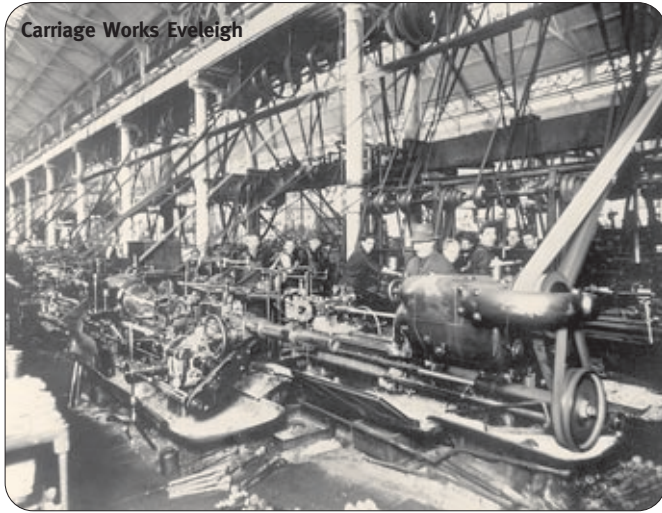


Station Master Ingleburn, 1928 (Bicentennial Copying Project, State Library of NSW)

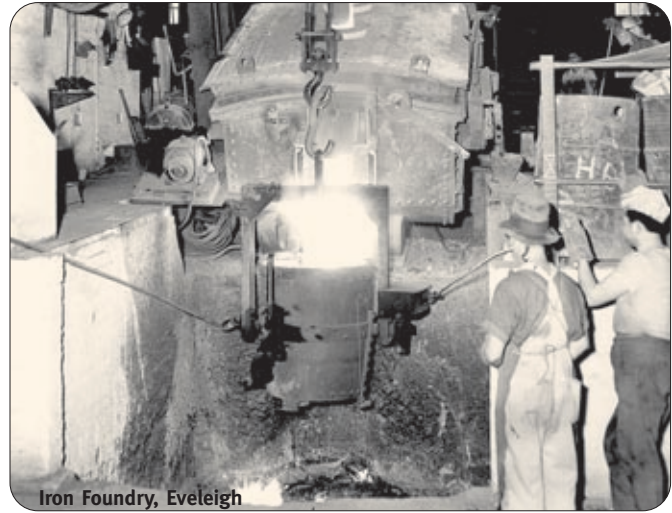
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Eveleigh Workshop Workers, 1934



Carriage Works Eveleigh



Iron Foundry, Eveleigh



Indicator Board, Central Station 1908



## Chapter 1: Starting a Railway

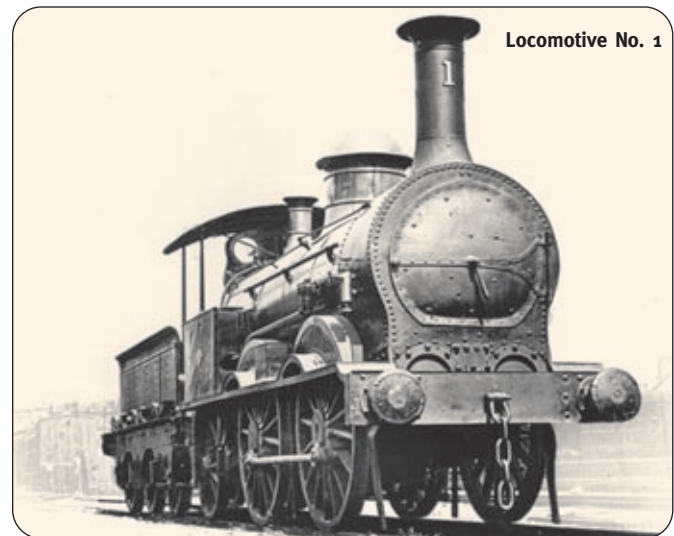
Railways had been developed in the 1840s in England, and soon after there were plans to connect the wool and grain growing areas of the interior of NSW - especially the Goulburn and Bathurst areas with the coastal ports, primarily to get export produce to England more quickly.

Public meetings were held in 1846 to discuss the establishment of railways in New South Wales. Some four years later the first sod of soil was turned at a Vice-Regal ceremony by the Governor's daughter, at the 'Cleveland Paddock', announcing the arrival of the railways in NSW.

The Sydney Morning Herald excitedly reported the event: *'Yesterday was a great day for Australia. The first railway was commenced. It is not now a question of whether we shall have railways but how many miles shall be made every year'*.<sup>1</sup> That was to become a good question, and one asked by many. The answer was seldom satisfactory to most. Nonetheless, the beginnings of a railway were there in the turning of the soil.

The first train, however, was a little late, it was another five years before the No 1 Loco eventually embarked upon its historic journey from Sydney to Parramatta. On 18 August 1855 the first trial trip took place, taking thirty nine minutes for the journey. All the construction had been completed - 2 terminal stations and four intermediate stations, a viaduct over Long Cove creek, tunnel at Redfern (Chippendale), *'there were twenty seven bridges, fifty culverts, workshops and other buildings'*<sup>2</sup> along the 14 mile (or 22 kilometre) stretch of track.

The official opening and train trip occurred on 16 September, 1855. The reports are of a festive gathering never before witnessed in the colony, as thousands of people came out to witness the event. *'Never was a greater concourse assembled in New South Wales. People of many climes, of all ages and representing*



*every class of society congregated to witness the opening of the colony's greatest work'* The Empire newspaper described the festivities and proceedings, with buildings and omnibuses draped in colourful bunting and people taking up every vantage point available.

*'At twenty minutes past eleven, the train with 2 first-class, 4 second-class and 5 third class carriages, moved slowly from the shed..... For those on board, it was a comfortable journey at a leisurely pace, all gaiety, surprise and beauty.'*

As the train approached Parramatta, the scene was similar to that which took place in Sydney. *'The Governor and his viceregal party proceeded to the Williams family Hotel and sat down to a cold collation while the other passengers spread themselves among other hotels and inns'*.<sup>3</sup>

The development and construction of the railways was by no means rapid, with an extension from Granville to Liverpool opened in 1856, and extended to Campbelltown in 1858; the line from Parramatta to Penrith was completed in 1861. Given that much of the

<sup>1</sup>Sydney Morning Herald, 4 July, 1850

<sup>2</sup>Gunn, *Along Parallel Lines*, op cit., p.45

<sup>3</sup>Empire, 27 September 1855, cited in Gunn, *ibid.*, p.47

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priority of railway construction was to open up the inland areas of the state, and to trading areas at the border river ports, there were often main line construction to these areas well ahead of suburban branch lines for passenger services. For example, the system reached Nyngan before it reached Hurstville.<sup>4</sup>

In the present time of instant gratification, expectation of all manner of services and amenities supplied on demand, and obsession with 'on time' running, it is also interesting to note some of the 'express' travel opportunities being provided towards the end of the 19th century. Keeping in mind the travel times and fares mentioned elsewhere for coach travel, in 1880, on the Southern Line, a passenger train departed Sydney at 9.40 a.m and arrived at Goulburn at 4.10 p.m. An incentive for passengers to use such services for social activity, was the considerably reduced excursion fares on Saturdays (twopence per mile for first-class and a penny per mile for second class). Thus, a trip from Sydney to Moss Vale could be achieved on Saturday by leaving Sydney at 7.55 a.m and arriving at 11.50 a.m, for the sum of 7/2 return, rather than the usual 9/3 single fare.

Similarly, an excursion west from Sydney to Orange could be achieved in the same day (as opposed to 6 days by mail coach !), leaving Sydney at 9.40 a.m and arriving in Orange at 8.05 p.m. As with the Southern Line, where trains stopped for refreshments at Mittagong and Gunning, on the Western Line, refreshments could be enjoyed at Mt Victoria and Bathurst.<sup>5</sup>

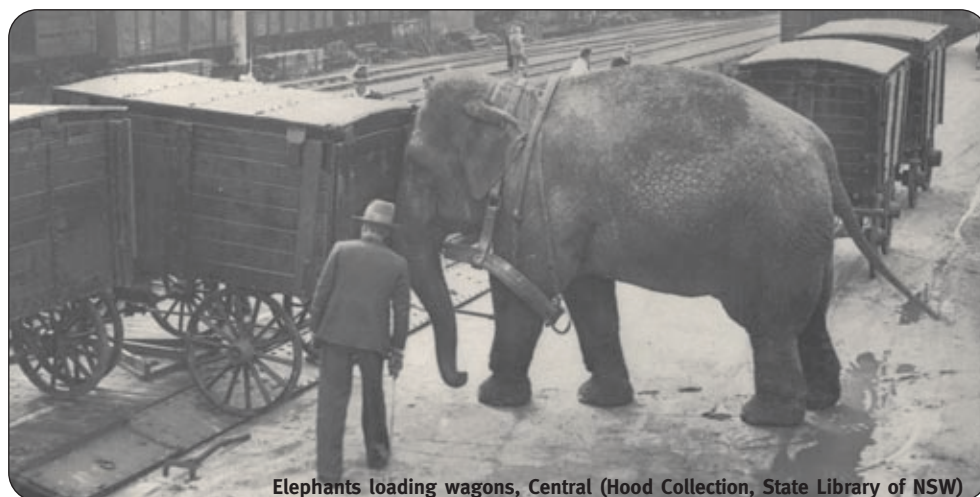
On the Great Northern system, the main trains ran in conjunction with the overnight boat service from Sydney. The North Coast line (later renamed Main North) was opened from Strathfield to Hornsby in 1886, extending to the Hawkesbury River in 1887. At the other end, the line from Hamilton to Gosford was opened. *'The steamer General Gordon provided a connecting service between the two railheads. One daily service was provided. Leaving Sydney at 8.15 a.m,*

*passengers transferred at Hawkesbury River to the ferry which arrived at Gosford in time for the 1.30 pm Mixed which was due to arrive at Newcastle at 5.15 p.m.'*<sup>6</sup>

During the infancy of the railways and well beyond, critics from a range of interests continued to question the wisdom of constructing the railway and urged moderation in extending the railways, suggesting other alternatives. One such commentator was the Reverend D.P. Hulbert, who chose an address to the Goulburn Mechanics Institute (where much of the initial impetus for the construction of the railway had come) in 1856, to offer his alternatives. The Sydney Morning Herald reported his lecture: *'Some other modes might be adopted from countries near to this and parties might find it a profitable speculation to import elephants from India - and their attendants would be better suited to the habits of the colonist than the Chinese. Other animals such as camels, which are peculiarly fitted for travelling in this country might also be useful.'*<sup>7</sup>

Many of the lines that were constructed were impractical and built for all the wrong reasons, quite often around the borders, to compete and draw trade from other states for trade. Thus, there was often an oversupply of railway services in these areas and none in others.

A nagging question remains throughout any such deliberation, namely whether a public passenger and freight transport system based on elephants and camels would have resulted in more of a circus than the rail system that eventually evolved.



Elephants loading wagons, Central (Hood Collection, State Library of NSW)

<sup>4</sup>Victor Isaacs, *New South Wales Railway Passenger Services 1880-1905*, Australian Railway History, April 2005

<sup>5</sup>Isaacs, *op. Cit.*, Pp 132 ff

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, p.138

<sup>7</sup>*Sydney Morning Herald*, *ibid.*, p.56

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### Getting Around Sydney and New South Wales

The development of a coherent and efficient transport system in Australia seems to have confounded the best of our politicians, bureaucrats and rail managers. When we consider the erratic and confused construction of a transport system in NSW and the problems that were faced initially and to this day, it would not be unreasonable to conclude that our modern muddled transport system is the result of a number of major factors - some natural, some perhaps not so natural. The lack of forethought in planning a transport system that can be economically and socially viable stems from the arrival of the first fleet.

The physical characteristics of our vast island continent posed more than its fair share of obstacles to any cheap and reliable system of transport, let alone the construction of major rail networks and services. Vast distances over inhospitable terrain didn't help. Apart from transportation to the penal colony, little or no thought seems to have been given to the transport of convicts and later free settlers within the colony.

Until the 1850s, most Australian cities were relatively small and people generally managed their transport requirements with human and animal power. The working class suburb did not yet exist. Most people lived near to the current CBD in Sydney, from the Rocks and Circular Quay to around Redfern and Central Station. Wealthier people had villas further from the city, and travelled to the city by carriage or on horseback. Workers however, mostly walked to their place of work. Even as recently as the 1960s, rail workers were paid a 'walking allowance' for time

between sign-on locations.

This pattern began to change with the gold rushes, with the goldfields some distance from the city, the areas spawned their own urban investment and development. These also affected the growth of the major cities, Sydney growing from around 20,000 in 1850 to more than half a million by the 1890s. The patterns of urbanisation which were to continue throughout the 20th century were established by 1900. By the 1920s Sydney's population had grown to 1 million, and by the 1950s to 2 million.

Ships were the main transport between the major ports of the colonies. On land, the

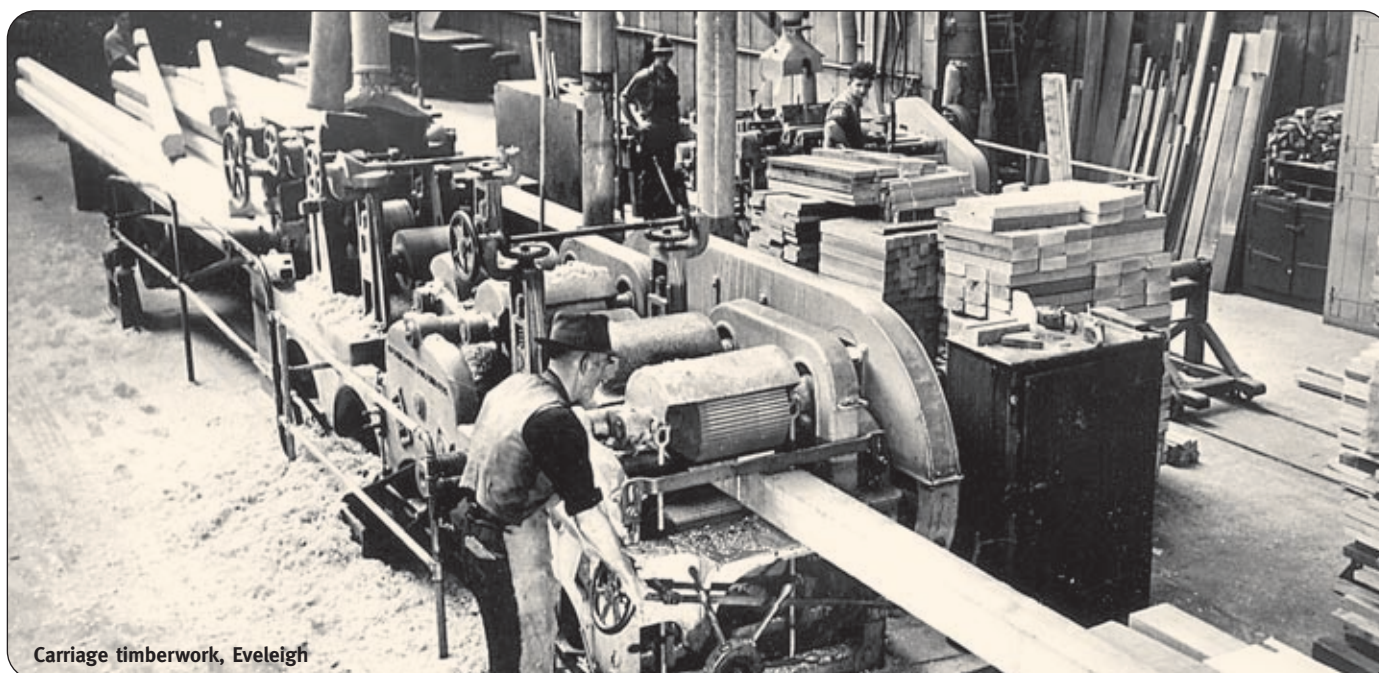
main power to move goods and humans were livestock - horses, donkeys, mules, oxen. Even then, these were brought in small numbers for breeding and providing a food supply rather than transportation. For most people, walking was the main mode of transport to and from work in the cities and country, often over considerable distances. The transport issue became more pressing as the population continued to grow and spread outwards from the main centres. With the crossing of the Blue Mountains in 1813, the issue of how to connect the interior, primary production areas to the west and south west to the coastal cities was paramount.

Wotherspoon provides examples of early travel times between Sydney and Bathurst. *'In 1841, for example, the mail cart took six days to go about 150 miles from Sydney to Bathurst.....The fare each way was four pounds and ten shillings a passenger, at a time when a skilled labourer's wage was around five shillings a day.....Heavy goods of course were slow movers. They took an average of just over three weeks to get from Sydney to Bathurst.'*<sup>8</sup>

In the time after white settlement and prior to the first railway construction, the relatively small population was scattered and concentrated in the larger south eastern cities. Even the early railway developments were aimed at the movement of goods, not passenger transport. The main passenger and public transport developments at the time were in the establishment of the tramway networks. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, when the main urban transport was still mainly horse-drawn (even the first tramways used horses), Sydney set up a tram network for transport within the city.

<sup>8</sup>Garry Wotherspoon, *Trains and Boats and Planes*, in Burgmann & Lee, *Making a Life: A People's History of Australia Since 1788*, McPhee Gribble, Melbourne, 1988, p.59

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Carriage timberwork, Eveleigh

### Public Transport Services

Public transport in Sydney appears to have begun in the early 1840s, when there were carriages for public hire. The 'jingle', a one-horse, single axle cart with a pair of seats back to back, was popular in the 1850s, but was superseded in the 1870s by the six-person one-horse wagonette, that began to run regular scheduled services. At about the same time, the enclosed one-horse hansom cab, and the horse bus became regular forms of urban transport. The standard fare was usually about threepence. As a proportion of earnings, *'fares would appear to have changed hardly at all over a century, at about three per cent of an unskilled worker's daily wage.'*<sup>9</sup>

One main operator of the horse buses ran most of the services in Sydney in the late part of the 19th century. The inaccurately named Sydney Tramway and Omnibus Company (that never owned or operated a tram) operated about 64 routes in and around Sydney, running to outlying areas such as Hornsby and Ryde. These services also acted as feeders to suburban railway stations.

The trams (first horse-driven, then steam, cable and electric) were essential public transport for the new sprawling suburbs. The first tramway in Sydney in 1861 was horse-powered, it ran from Central Railway station to Circular Quay along Pitt Street.

The first steam and cable trams were imported from America. The expansion of the tramways (nominally as part of the NSW railways) was relatively rapid. In Sydney, the line increased from one and a half miles in 1879, to almost 31 miles in 1884. The development of tram services were as vexed and confused as the railways, with debates over making a profit or primarily being a public utility, a service or a developmental role of helping expand the colony. So, in some instances trams were the 'developmental' leaders, and in others they complemented and fed into the rail lines and networks.

Lack of consistent and coherent policies were not restricted to the early developments, but were to plague the tramways and railways to the present day. Steam trams were limited in their capacity to haul, they were criticised for being noisy, dirty and smokey. They also came under scrutiny from the public purse watchers as each tram required a driver, a conductor for every car (of which there could be several) and a fireman for the engine. Some of these concerns were addressed by the introduction of cable powered trams (wire cable running under a narrow tunnel under the centre of each track) in Sydney in 1886. No sooner were these widespread in the system then they were overtaken by even newer technology, namely electricity.<sup>10</sup>

Electric trams were cheaper to build and run. They were more durable and had better speed, manoeuvring and

<sup>9</sup> *Linking a Nation: Australia's Transport and Communications 1788 – 1970, Australian Heritage Commission, 2003*

<sup>10</sup> See John Gunn, *Along Parallel: A History of the Railways of New South Wales, 1850-1986, Melbourne University Press, 1989; Also Wotherspoon, op cit Pp 56-70*

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control. By the early part of the twentieth century electric trams had replaced steam and cable and had significantly extended their networks.<sup>11</sup>

Early photos of the areas around the then Sydney Railway Terminal show the confusion and mayhem created by the ad hoc transport system developing alongside each other, but not necessarily in any synchronicity. Images show rail lines and terminal, crowded and obstructed with tram tracks in several directions, a range of horse drawn vehicles as well as pedestrian and bicycle traffic. The photo earlier in this chapter shows the transport pattern even after the completion of the Harbour Bridge in 1932, consisted of a combination of rail, tram, motor cars and horse-drawn carriages.

Despite some of these problems, the development and spread of the outer suburbs around major cities can be largely attributed to expansion in the suburban rail and tram networks, especially after electrification. The other major challenges in technology for the rail and tramways were the rapid developments in motor vehicles and air transportation from the 1920s.

Transport was both crucial to this process of urbanisation, and to a large extent determined its patterns and directions. Suburbs were a phenomenon of the last part of the 19th century, both being enabled by new transport technology, and in turn making further demands for transport. A good example is the Sydney suburb of Balmain. A village of 1,397 people in 1851, the opening of Mort's Dock in 1855 began a transfer from the city. Moreover, although not many of the New South Wales Government Railways (NSWGR) locomotives were built locally in the 19th century, most of those that were came from Mort's Dock. It still had no



J. Ferguson, F. Wickshat,  
R. Harrison, Wally Slone &  
M. Mepstead; Repton, 1935

rail link (the locomotives had to be floated to Sydney by barges). By 1871 Balmain's population had reached 6,272. By 1891 it was one of the most densely populated areas of Sydney with a population of 23,474. Significantly, all this growth occurred before the arrival of the steam tram line in 1892, until which time Balmain was served entirely by ferries.<sup>12</sup> Railway maintenance and manufacturing was also a spur to suburban growth, especially around the railway workshops in Redfern and Clyde.

In contrast to the municipal or privately owned tramways of other colonies, Sydney's trams were built, owned and operated by the NSWGR, and so had a remarkably railway-like quality to them throughout their lives. By the early 20th century, Sydney's tram system was the second largest (behind London) in the British Empire, with about 1,500 cars in service at any one time. It was also one of the most diverse, with the lines through the bush to the Zoo, the counterweight cable car at Balmain, the Fort Macquarie Depot at the site of the current Opera House, and later the spectacular tracks over the Sydney Harbour Bridge.

To give a snapshot of the growth of motor vehicles, in 1922 there were 137,000 motor vehicles registered in Australia; by 1925 this had increased to 306,000 and by 1930 to 656,000 (all well before the icon of the FJ Holden had appeared).<sup>13</sup> Similarly, after wartime experiments and technological improvements, commercial airlines became a possibility in the 1930s. If the public debates over expenditures on the railways and tramways, and the merits of public and private transport were heated before, then they became even more hotly contested items in the public domain. These developments saw new demands on the public purse, as the population, especially in wealthier suburbs demanded local roads, freeways, infrastructure such as the Harbour Bridge, and related services, and the political and funding priorities of politicians and bureaucrats became more torn and divided. The competition for freight haulage between rail, road transport and air travel, saw much of the most lucrative trade taken from the railways. A new era of restricted growth, capital expenditure and limited funds to public transport were to add to an already troubled and under-resourced public utility.

<sup>11</sup> See David R Keenan, *City Lines of the Sydney Tramway System*, Transit Press, Petersham, 1991

<sup>12</sup> Lesley Lynch, *TS Mort : His Dock and Balmain Labour*, in Max Kelly, *Nineteenth Century Sydney*, Sydney University Press, 1978 p 81

<sup>13</sup> Wotherspoon, *Trains and Boats and Planes*, op cit., p 64

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Sydney Terminal 1902, (Australian Railway Historical Society)

### Growth of the NSW Railways

The late 1870s and 1880s was the period when Australia's railway system reached maturity. In NSW, a few lines became the basis of an extensive network that more or less remains as the current rail network. Between 1878 and 1888, the NSWGR's mileage more than trebled from 688 to 2,398 (from 1,108km to 3,495 km); its passenger traffic quadrupled from 3,705,510 to 14,881,604; and goods tonnage more than doubled from 1,625,886 to 3,485,839 English tons.<sup>14</sup>

The railway boom was part of a wider economic in the Australian colonies in general. This was accompanied by a global prosperity and capital rich investors in Europe looking for investments which were highly profitable and secure. Colonies, and particularly their new railways, offering government guarantees on investment, were ideal for such investments. This trend of capital flowing into New South Wales, primarily from Britain, was reflected in other colonies, including India, Canada and Argentina, providing the foundation for impressive railway systems. Total overseas investment (mostly British) in the four major Australian colonies was around 33.6 million pounds between 1876 and 1880; 70 million from 1881 to 1885; and 100 million from 1886 to 1890.<sup>15</sup>

New South Wales, in many respects had the least ambitious, most affordable railway policy, and the one that produced the best results. While Victoria

concentrated on urban development, the main focus in NSW was commercial, linking the main agricultural and mercantile centres, with lines west to Bathurst and Goulburn, and extending the network south to the Murray, west to the Darling, and north to the Queensland border. During this period of growth for the railways, not a single track was laid within 200 kilometres of Sydney. The major urban networks, were to occur later.

Due to the distances of the main lines, and the rugged terrain they had to cross, they were often built to lower specifications than requested by the likes of the then Engineer-in-Chief, John Whitton. Consequently, they have required constant upgrading and rebuilding ever since and have remained inadequate for the loads they carry. However, even the most forward thinking and visionary planners and engineers would have found it difficult to imagine the freight loads carried on several carriages behind a steam loco transforming into the modern day snaking two kilometre long freight trains. The main lines constructed at this time included some notable and durable bridges and viaducts, from the impressive stone structures through the mountains to the distinctive lattice girder bridges, of which 11 were built and ten remain intact.

Of particular note were the railways north and south, from Sydney to Newcastle and Wollongong, and beyond. Built between 1882 and 1889, these involved tunnels and bridges on a scale never before seen in

<sup>14</sup>Robert Lee, *The Greatest Public Work: the New South Wales Railways 1848 – 1889*, Hale & Iremonger, Sydney 1988, p 175

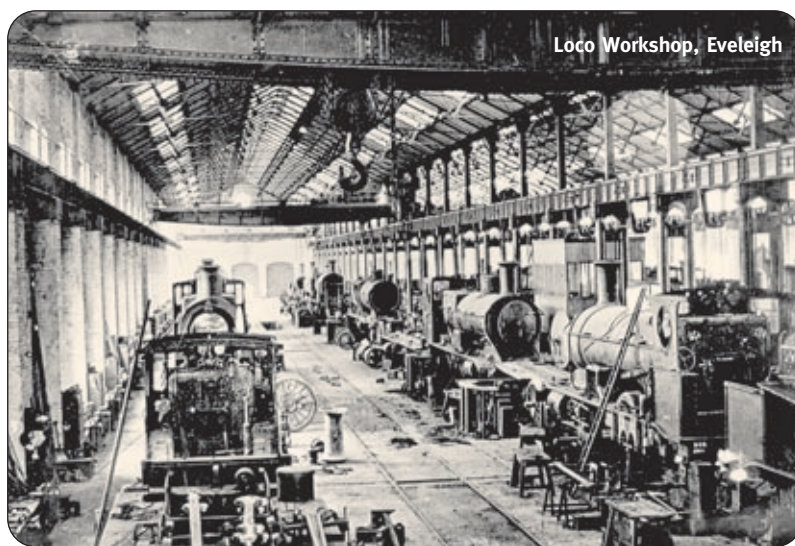
<sup>15</sup>*Linking a Nation: Australia's Transport and Communications 1788 – 1970*, Australian Heritage Commission, 2003

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Australia. The Sydney – Newcastle line was the first built in NSW as a double-track line (since the Sydney-Parramatta railway in 1855), reflecting the priority of covering distances rather than catering for anticipated intensive traffic. The Newcastle line included both the longest tunnel (Woy Woy tunnel) and the biggest railway bridge in Australia. The Hawkesbury River Bridge also marked the introduction of the American-style truss bridge into Australia. More than a century later, these structures remain the second largest in each category (behind the Cox's Gap tunnel, also between Sydney and Newcastle, and the Sydney Harbour Bridge).<sup>16</sup>

By 1890 the boom had stalled. International financial crises were affecting the land booms in the colonies. The main urban housing and land value dropping, the prices for wool (the colony's leading export) were falling. Despite these lulls, the railways were to go through a number of new phases of growth over the next half century.

Towards the end of the 19th century and early 20th century the services of the railway began to focus on providing suburban passenger and public transport. The first truly suburban line was probably that between Sydenham and Belmore, opened in 1896, and later extended through to Bankstown. In 1881, the first workmen's weekly tickets were introduced in Sydney, and soon the second class compartments of suburban trains were being filled with people who had never previously travelled such long distances to work.<sup>17</sup>



<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p7

<sup>17</sup>See *Linking a Nation*, op.cit., Chapter 6; and *Gunn*, op.cit., pp 166 ff

<sup>18</sup>AM Prescott 'A Thousand miles from care: The Manly Ferry, in Garry Wotherspoon (ed) *Sydney's Transport, Studies in Urban History*, Hale & Iremonger Sydney 1983, p65

The technology existed in the early 20th century for railway electrification. The opportunity arose to develop suburban rail services and relieve tram congestion in the city. In 1919 there were some 254 million tram journeys, compared to approximately 90 million by suburban train. The ferries by comparison, were carrying about 35 million. At the time the rail share of Sydney's public transport load was only about 23%.<sup>18</sup>

Underground light rail had been proposed in Sydney as early as 1895. By 1915, approval was given for electrification of existing suburban railways and construction of an underground city loop. Construction was suspended in 1917 due to the drain on resources by the war. Work on the city railway didn't commence until 1922. The first electric trains operated in 1926, as did the first stage of the underground, to Museum and St James stations. These steady developments, completion of the underground, together with the two new suburban lines to the Eastern and Western suburbs, as well as the Harbour Bridge (some of the most substantial infrastructure developments in Australia), stimulated both continual economic development and a boost to passenger numbers using the railways for public transport.

In 2005, as New South Wales commemorates and celebrates 150 years of the railway industry, the current Government finds itself faced with strident criticism for the poor state and condition of the railways. History may provide at least this consolation for the present government – that from the first meetings to discuss the railways there has been heated debates, confusion, procrastination, compromise, and criticism about how and who and where the railways should be operated. The fanfare of 26 September, 1855 was the culmination of more than nine years of consternation, bickering and correspondence to and from England, expert advice and select committees, public debate and profound differences of opinion on the appropriate roles and structures of the railways. They can take comfort in the knowledge that their current practices continue a long tradition of railway management and governance, that has always taken a haphazard and ill planned approach. When we review the history of the railways in NSW, some interesting, if not slightly disturbing patterns emerge.

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Coming to rest on the Zig Zag, 1909



Hawkesbury River Bridge



Workers at Eveleigh 1930s

## Some Constants

### Public or Private Railways

Public / private partnerships and the attendant debates around who should appropriately build and operate the railways has been with us since the idea of a railway was first floated. Unfortunately, from the Sydney Railway Company of the late 1840s to the Airport Link of the new Millennium, the result has mostly been calamitous failures.

The expectation by private enterprise of being underwritten by the government, receiving generous concessions, from acquisition of land, to government capital investment, tax breaks, and more often than not, the public fund cleaning up the mess or shortfall of private ventures on the railway.

The Select Committee of the Legislative Council, in defending the private running, gave this insight into what was to become a lasting cultural practice by Australian business:

*'The experience of all who have any knowledge upon the subject justifies the assertion that in transactions with Government, contractors and other persons seem to consider it not only fair but almost a part of their business to obtain as much as possible from the public funds, and that this is peculiarly the case in this Colony.'*<sup>19</sup>

As the attempts to raise private capital for the construction of the new railways continued to fall well short of even modest expectations, the Sydney Railway Company increasingly sought concessions and financial support from the Government, in land acquisitions, in underwriting investments and guaranteeing rates of returns, as well as direct subsidy of the works.

One of Sydney's leading merchants and auctioneer (who also had a large shareholding in the Sydney Railway

Company), Thomas Mort, was a strong advocate for private enterprise railways supported by the Government without interference:

*'Such an enterprise ..... should not be entrusted to the Government. As a general rule I think that the energy of private enterprise is superior to that of Government.....Private enterprise in this instance, he was asked tartly, can only be profitable by means of a Government guarantee?'*

*There must [Mort replied] be some inducement to people to take these shares. At present this is an untried matter. If we had a railway in operation it is possible that we need not come to the Government..... We seek it to give us a positive standing to enable us to obtain the funds.'*<sup>20</sup>

Even after years of generous support by the Government, grants of land and underwriting and guaranteeing shares and loan issues, the Sydney Railway Company could not operate. As the line between Sydney and Parramatta was nearing completion, the last act of generosity was for the Government to purchase the Sydney Railway Company and the Hunter River Railway Company, and hence beginning the direct ownership and control of the railways by the government.

As we continue to debate the merits of private over public ownership of the railways, governments continue to be tempted by sales of the more profitable sections of the rail network. At a time when renewed enthusiasm in policy circles for public / private partnerships in different areas of the railways, as private rail operators continue to complain about insufficient government support and too much government interference in their business. We may do well to reflect on the bad habits established early and passed on over the past 150 years.



<sup>19</sup> Gunn, *Along Parallel Lines*, op cit., p.18

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, p.36

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### The Parramatta Express Train

As we ruminate over the past 150 years of railways, the early debates, budgets and obstacles faced in the construction of the first line from Sydney to Parramatta, the current news has elements of the movie *Ground Hog Day*. There has been enthusiastic reporting of a proposed rail link between the city and Parramatta. The proposal, which has been on the 'drawing board' for several years, has received preliminary support from the Sustainability Commissioner, Mr Newman, Parramatta Council and others, as it goes to the government for detailed consideration. The proposal is for an express train link from Wynyard to Parramatta, via an underground tunnel, linking with existing infrastructure. The project is being proposed by a private consortium, and would be operated as a private enterprise, and would make the city to Parramatta trip in eleven minutes. The link would then be extended to Penrith, with an estimated travel time of thirty minutes from the City to Penrith.

*'A confidential report submitted to the Government says passengers using the high-speed service would continue to pay an existing fare to RailCorp, plus a \$2.10 supplement to the consortium ... the consortium would build and maintain the fast-train network, while the Government could be asked to provide rolling stock, operate the service and collect the fares. Unlike the airport rail link, in receivership since 2000, the consortium would bear any financial risk, with assets returned to the Government in 30 years.'*<sup>21</sup>

It just could happen.

It may be timely to take a stance that either forces private enterprise to make good its claims of efficiency and profitability, without public welfare contributions, or go the way of any other failed enterprise. It may also be an opportune time to re-visit some of the early debates about the broader economic and social purposes of the railways.

### Engineering by Committee

There are some striking examples of the confusion and politics of the early developments of the railways, with many committees drawing on 'experts' to persuade the



First Train, Parramatta, 1855

Colonial power on the merits and economic shrewdness of the viability of a cheap and effective railways. Perhaps none stand out more than the ongoing debates about whether particular lines could be built, the costs of such lines and what materials to use in construction.

In a classic attempt to both serve his masters well, and to maintain a tradition of imitating the customs and practice of the mother country, one of the first surveyors engaged to report on feasibility Mr Thomas Woore, argued that the countryside was abundant with iron bark trees, 'that would more than suffice for rails.' This solution would avoid importing or manufacturing the more expensive iron rails and greatly reduce costs. 'Ironbark timber would, he said, best answer for rails and almost any of the other timber would serve for the substructure.

Other, more experienced railway men, such as Francis Shields argued that *'the railway companies of England have found it necessary to increase, time after time weight and strength of their rails and from the great weight and heavy strain caused by the locomotive engines and trains I can scarcely conceive that a wooden rail could withstand the effects of heavy traffic'*<sup>22</sup>

During the early construction of the line between Sydney and Parramatta, wooden rails were used, to save costs and to overcome the difficulty in obtaining iron rails from England. These wore rapidly and because they had to be replaced frequently, were later capped with thin iron plate.

Former Prime Minister, Gough Whitlam expressed his incredulity at some of the more recent developments and decision-making on the railways. *'One does not need to be a railway man or a Treasurer or a Prime Minister to wonder why during the 1980s, when breaks of gauge had been substantially eliminated, breaks of voltage were being introduced. Who can justify the extension to Newcastle and Port Kembla of the Sydney 1500 volt metropolitan system, which is futile for dense and heavy freight traffic, at a time when the Brisbane and Perth metropolitan railways and the Queensland coal export railways were being electrified by the 25000 volt system...'*<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup>Sydney Morning Herald, 15 March 2005

<sup>22</sup>Cited in Gunn, *Along Parallel Lines*, op cit., p12

<sup>23</sup>Gough Whitlam, *The Light on The Hill Address to Seventh Annual Chifley Memorial Dinner, Bathurst, 7 September 1991, University of Western Sydney*



### Iron versus steel

There has been some confusion in the terms used to describe railway lines over time, and it is worth making a brief clarification now between what was meant by 'iron' rails and the difference with contemporary steel rails. The engineering problems experienced go some way to explain the long deliberations over what materials to use for the railways.

When the construction of the railways was being discussed and implemented there were no steel rails, but rather a choice of timber (used on some of the early line) or iron - either cast (or pig) iron, and wrought iron. As David Slee explains, cast iron was *'quite strong in compression (but weak in tension), rather hard and brittle, and certainly not ductile.'*<sup>24</sup> Wrought iron was made by further processing pig iron to remove most of the impurities and was much more costly to make. *'Compared to cast iron it was relatively strong in tension as well as in compression, and was quite tough and ductile.... The beginnings of the railways were built on these two materials. The first rails were longish plates of cast iron laid along timber sleepers (hence the term platelayers). When the brittleness of that material became evident, the cast iron was replaced by pieces of wrought iron, which was much tougher but bent more easily.'*<sup>25</sup>

Steel ( a more refined alloy with few impurities) , on the other hand was not in general production. It wasn't until

well into the 1880s that the New South Wales Railways started to use the stronger, longer wearing steel rails being developed in the USA and Britain. While small iron works existed in places such as Mittagong and Hoskins at Lithgow, providing some small scale production of cast iron rails, iron and then steel rails had to largely be imported during the first half century of the railways in New South Wales. The establishment of major steelworks at Port Kembla and Newcastle in the 1920s and 1930s saw mass production and availability of local steel rails.

### Standard gauge rails

The mess that was to become non-standardisation of a uniform railway gauge in Australia, began well before the first train had run. In a despatch in 1848 recommended to Earl Grey in the mother country that *'one uniform gauge for railways should be adopted for Australia'*. It suggested 4 feet 8 and a half inches as the most desirable.

Francis Shields, now employed as the Engineer for the Sydney Railway Company, in a letter of 1850, explaining that two gauges existed in the UK, one of 4 foot 8 and half inches, and another of 7 feet. Experience he argued had shown the narrower gauge more suitable, but not without its problems, in terms of maintenance and repair, and *'crowding the machinery' into the narrow space*. He recommended the gauge used in Ireland of 5 foot 3 inches to overcome some of these problems.

<sup>24</sup>David Slee, *A Metallurgical History of Railmaking. Australian Railway History, Feb 2004, Australian Railway Historical Society, Redfern, p. 43*

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, Pp 43-44

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In 1850, it was reported that the Executive Council in London had approved the gauge of 5 foot 3 inches as being the most suitable.<sup>26</sup>

There was another change of heart and policy on the desired gauge in 1853, before any lines had been laid, and the delays and vacillations were to lay the foundations for mixed gauges throughout the different colonies. In 1853, 'Victoria legislated to approve the 5 foot 3 inch gauge for the Melbourne and Hobson's Bay Railway Company. Both South Australia and Victoria, committed to orders placed overseas for rolling stock for the 5 foot 3 inch gauge, were not prepared to follow. New South Wales again in what seemed capricious and off-hand behaviour. They resolved to stay with the wider gauge.<sup>27</sup> NSW legislated to use the 4 foot 8 and half inch gauge.

The result was that New South Wales operated on a gauge of 4 foot 8 1/2 inches, Victoria on 5 foot 3 inches, Queensland on 3 foot 6 inches, and South Australia on a mix of gauges, mainly 5 foot 3 inches. The short sightedness, immediate regional advantages and local greed of this approach, overrode any consideration of longer term benefits of an integrated rail system.

While a universal gauge is still not in use, it wasn't until the end of the twentieth century that serious efforts were made to address this problem.

In his 'Light on the Hill' address to the Seventh Annual Chifley Memorial Dinner in Bathurst 1991, former Prime Minister Gough Whitlam summarised some of the attempts to achieve uniform railway gauges. In 1944, the Curtin Federal Government requested a report (by Sir Harold Clapp) regarding the standardisation of Australia's railway gauges. It was one of the powers sought by the Federal Government unsuccessfully sought in the 1944 referendum. As Whitlam points out, it wasn't until 1946, 'when the ALP formed every Government in Australia except South Australia, Ward as Minister for Transport and his mainland State counterparts discussed the Clapp report. All except those from Queensland and Western Australia signed a draft agreement. In August the Federal Parliament passed the Railway Standardization Agreement Act 1946 authorising the Government to execute the agreement. In December the agreement was signed by Chifley, [and Premiers] McKell, Cain and Playford.'<sup>28</sup>

<sup>26</sup>Gunn, *Along Parallel Lines*, op cit., p.26

<sup>27</sup>Gunn, *Along Parallel Lines*, op cit., p.29

<sup>28</sup>Whitlam, *Light On The Hill Address*, op.cit., Pp 10-11

<sup>29</sup>Ibid, p.11

Then the wheels of Federation turned and the agreement (and standard railway gauges) were tabled for decades. Legislation to enable the agreement was passed in South Australia in 1946. However, in 1947 the Cain Victorian Government was replaced by a Liberal Government, and McKell had been replaced by McGirr in NSW, who refused to honour the agreement. Prime Minister Chifley was forced to sign a more limited agreement with the South Australian Government in 1949. Menzies was elected in late 1949. In December 1950, the Menzies Government repealed the Railway Standardization Agreement Act 1946.

Whitlam stated that 'it was left to my Government [a quarter of a century later] to carry out the Railway Standardization Act (South Australia) agreement 1949 as far as possible. Melbourne and Adelaide are the only capitals which are still not linked by a standard gauge railway.'<sup>29</sup>

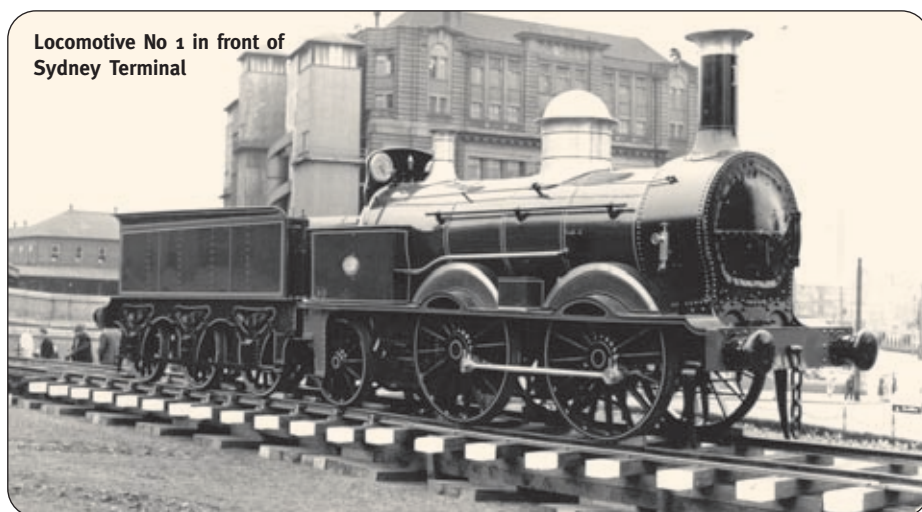
### Poor Management

Managing the railways safely, efficiently and cost-effectively has been a mystery that has eluded generations of government and management responsible for these functions.



Coal Wharf, Darling Harbour, 1969

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Locomotive No 1 in front of Sydney Terminal

A Select Committee on roads and railways made its final report to the Legislative Council in 1854 ( a year prior to the first train trip), which led to the government ultimately buying out the Sydney Railway Company, was critical of the management by the company. It found that the company was receiving substantial financial support from the government, yet *'the management under which these large sums of money is being expended is not, in the opinion of your Committee, either sound in principle or efficient in practice'*, and on the vexed question of private versus public ownership, the Committee concluded that *'it seems to be now acknowledged that private companies cannot succeed in constructing railways without Government aid upon a scale which ought not to be conceded, your Committee recommends that that these important works should be taken up by the Government'*.<sup>30</sup>

The press was less generous in their criticism of the Sydney Railway Company's ability to undertake the task upon which it had embarked. The People's Advocate provided the following commentary, in terms that may be familiar in some quarters today: *'The present Railway Company have, to say the least of it, been extremely remiss in their duty. They appear to have left things more to chance than to have foreseen and provided all that would be required.'*<sup>31</sup>

The recent report of the Commission of Inquiry in the Waterfall Rail accident used similar expressions. Terms such as 'ad hoc', 'disgraceful' and 'grossly inadequate', and was scathing in its assessment of management practices in the then State Rail Authority, now RailCorp. Sadly, for those holding out hope of significantly improved management practices on the railways, this

ailment also dates back to the Sydney Railway Company and the planning stages of the rail system.

There is a history of railway workers taking a pride in their work and their industry that has managed to keep the industry on the rails, despite attempts by management to de-rail it. It is a history of dedicated, hard working rail workers running often to an unofficial work organisation (the one that they know works) and allowing lack lustre management to look better for it, as they remain

bewildered as to how the system actually continues to operate .

The current RTBU Branch secretary, Nick Lewocki, provides an overview of management practices, when asked whether he would advise a young person to enter the railways as a career now: *'Absolutely, what I would be saying to them is that if you want to excel, if you want to take up a career path, and you want to get into a management job, then you haven't got much to beat. The management we have had over recent years I think is very poor. The managers in my view have not had a commitment to the industry, they have been stepping stones to other areas. They have developed short term strategies and planning, and they have to make it look good, this month and next month, and don't worry about the consequences in 2 - 3 years'*.<sup>32</sup>

### Bad Maths

The expertise drawn on to provide costings and estimates of railway works, from surveyors to government committees, to private contractors, has always been weak on maths. The original 'trial' line from Sydney to Parramatta, which was an attempt to demonstrate to private investors and the Colonial and Imperial Governments that railways were viable, was initially estimated at a cost of approximately 1,000 pounds per mile of track - ended up costing some 45,000 pounds per mile.

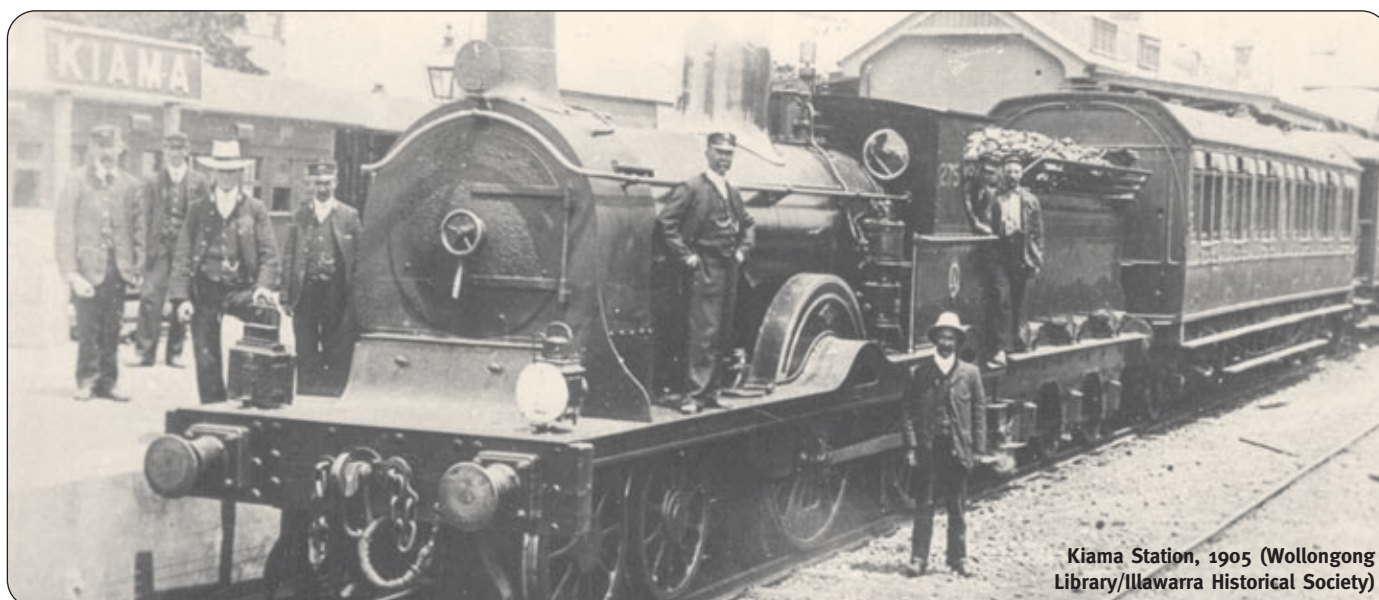
This weakness of maths seems to have continued down through the railways 150 year history, with spectacular blow-outs in budgets, and ongoing consternation about meeting the costs of the rail development, and returning a profit.

<sup>30</sup>Gunn, *Along Parallel Lines*, op cit., p.38

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 39

<sup>32</sup>Interview with Nick Lewocki, op cit.

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Kiama Station, 1905 (Wollongong Library/Illawarra Historical Society)

### Confounded Government

Government has attempted to grapple with the slippery eel that is the complex rail system. Governments have wrestled with the economic and social demands of providing a rail network to meet a growing and thriving economy with expectations of reliable passenger and freight services, with competing demands and expectations of expansions in air and road transport, and the good fiscal management of the State.

The confused relationship between the state and private enterprise in the running of the railways, has confounded successive governments, entrusted with developing social and economic infrastructure, and tending to the welfare of the population. The decisions of politicians and bureaucrats have often fallen well short of this objective. They have more often reflected personal or political gain or expediency. The railways have always been a hot ticket item electorally, where communities of railworkers have been relied on to support politicians, or conversely they have provided a platform of criticism for their political opponents. The decisions reflect a desire to expand the influence of a department, portfolio, or to pander to relatively small but influential lobby groups. As much effort has been directed at covering past mistakes as to developing solutions to overcome the problems caused by these mistakes. It is safe to assert that rail lines and services were allocated as much on political as economic grounds.

Contrary to myths of union militancy holding the Government to ransom in the rail industry, or workers and their unions receiving favours due to affiliations

with the Labor Party, the story is otherwise. It has been these 'friends' of the rail worker and the rail unions that have more often than not been the stewards of some of the more spectacular retrenchment programs and harsh interventions in industrial disputes.

It was W.A Holman, former Secretary of the Amaglamated Railway Tramway Services Association) (ARTSA), for example as Premier of NSW (first as Labor, then defecting to a Coalition under the Nationalist United Australia Party) that oversaw the defeats of the unions during the General Strike of 1917, and the de-registration of the unions involved.

Working people were also shocked by their champion, and former engine driver, Prime Minister Ben Chifley, when he finally broke the Coal Strike of 1949 with the use of troops. Current employees have witnessed some extreme media campaigns and public attacks in recent years<sup>33</sup>, headed up by former trainee engineman and former AFULE official, Michael Costa in his role as Minister for Transport Services.

Wotherspoon summarises the contribution of private enterprise, politicians and bureaucrats to the development of our modern railways, in these terms: *'it is the private companies, the politicians and the public servants who have given us the transport system that operates in Australia today. Its imperfections are their legacy to us. When we look back at how and why decisions were made it is hard to find many signs of concern for ordinary people's interests. Politicians may invoke the public good, but the reality of what we live with often gives the lie to this'*.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>33</sup>See Daily Telegraph reports, and *Around the Tracks*, No 1, February 2004, for RTBU response

<sup>34</sup>Wotherspoon, *Trains and Boats and Planes*, op cit., p.57

**Work Practices**

To be fair, it must be said that there have been poor work practices, inefficiencies and even abuses by sections of the workforce over the past 150 years. Yet again what stands out is the government and management failures to address these in any sensible or lasting way. The pattern and recurring trend appears to be reforms, organisational restructures and management 'initiatives' that have profoundly missed the targeted poor work practices and resulted in deeper and new inefficiencies.

The circumstances leading to the rail and tramways strike of 1917 is one example of how government and management, in their enthusiasm to right the perceived wrongs on the railways by introducing new 'scientific management' to improve productivity resulted in one of the largest and most widespread industrial dispute in our history. As we ponder these coincidences of history and couple them with the present issues of the rail system, we must draw our own inferences of what this may mean for the future.

Governments and management may draw comfort from knowing that many before them have failed to run the railways in ways that are any more effective than at present. That the debates and conflicts inherent in the present system, have pervaded it for many generations. Alternatively, they may take the opportunity to reflect upon this less than flattering history of governance and management of the railways to make their mark as true innovators.

Similarly, workers and unions may pause at the 150 year mark and see that there has always been a struggle to establish acceptable working conditions on the railways, with many attacks and betrayals along the way, but that the workforce remains relatively strong, unionised and capable of addressing and promoting their interests under hostile and often unfavourable circumstances.

Unlike the many observers or participants in the railways who rush to paint a bleak image of the future of the industry, or bemoan the 'demise' of rail, there are significant indicators that this is not and will not be the case. The positive interpretation on the story of the railways thus far, is that despite its failings, its poor management, its miscalculations, despite the political word pollution and posturing that has substituted for rigorous debate and policy development. Despite poor and short sighted management, the railways have not only continued - in many respects they have thrived.



Carriage Maintenance, Eveleigh

The working conditions and remuneration of rail workers have continued to improve. Unions remain strong and well represented in the workforce. There is cause for proud celebration 150 years after the first steam loco headed out of Sydney on its maiden journey to Parramatta, amongst military salutes, streamers, bands and fanfare. Equally there is cause to believe that we can manage and operate the railways in profoundly better ways over the next century.

There is certainly cause to take the view that on many of the issues and problems that have and continue to face the railways, that there is a light at the end of the tunnel. What remains to be seen is whether that is a light of hope and expansion, or whether it is an oncoming loco.

**Culture of Blame**

Another remarkable feature of the history of railwork is the effort and energy expended by government and management on taking the focus away from system or policy limitations. Just as groups of workers and their organisations possess and operate from collective memories, so too do organisations such as the railways and groups such as management. There has been a culture of blame that has developed and entrenched itself in the railways - the slowness of despatches from England, lack of private investment, the weather, the geography, the political back-flips - but more often than not - blame the workers. This is not unique to the railways, but it is a feature of the railways that remains to the present.

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



Drainage Gang, Temora, 1986

For example, there is a long history of blaming labour shortages or excessive wages as the main reasons for problems or returns from the railways. The construction of the first section of line and the increased costs of labour due to the gold rushes were the basis for revised costings and government support. Proposed drastic retrenchments during the late 1890s were reported by some newspapers as an inevitable response to past extravagance. *'It would be surprising if, when the Commissioners seek to remove extravagances which are the creation of political influence, there should not be some outcry'*, and *'the Commissioners have acknowledged that the work given to them was to make the railway pay .... Some may suffer in the process but that cannot be helped'*.<sup>35</sup>

Similarly, in 1902 the Railway Commissioners were reported in the Daily Telegraph as stating that they were obliged 'as honest trustees of the people's money, to cease paying wages that, with diminished traffic, could no longer be earned', and that this was due also to political interference, *'the most glaring case of political interference was the introduction of the eight-hour system, an innovation which costs 60,000 pounds per year'*.<sup>36</sup> Another example comes from Commissioner Fraser in the lead up to the 1917 general strike, when he is reported as blaming a 'conspiracy' of slow working for low productivity. *'These men, saturated with poisonous ideas, disseminate the poison .....where peace and contentment should reign, a very unhealthy condition of industrial life. 'Work Slowly'; 'Stop Work'; 'Do what damage you can' are mottoes they endeavour to instil'*.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>35</sup>Sydney Morning Herald Reports from 1889, cited in Gunn, *Along Parallel Lines*, op cit., p.207

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., p.244

<sup>37</sup>Address to the New South Wales Government Railway and Tramway Literary and Scientific Association, January 1917, cited in Gunn, p.282

<sup>38</sup>Justice Peter McInerney, *Final Report of the Special Inquiry into the Waterfall Rail Accident, Volume 1, February 2005*

<sup>39</sup>RTBU NSW Branch Secretary, Nick Lewocki in *Waterfall Never Again*, brochure produced by the RTBU, February 2005.

The Special Inquiry into the Waterfall Rail Accident, found that State Rail (now RailCorp) have a pervasive culture of 'blame, and not a just culture when dealing with incidents or accidents'. The Inquiry found that when *'defects were identified and reported by drivers or other rail workers, the response was often to reprimand the worker for making the report rather than rectify the defect'*.<sup>38</sup>

As RTBU NSW Branch Secretary, Nick Lewocki stated in response to the report of the Special Inquiry:

*'The disgraceful attacks by the Government, RailCorp and the media, following the crash attempted to shift blame for the accident onto individuals or poor work practices by the guard and train drivers and other rail workers, has now been exposed.'*<sup>39</sup>

### Chasing the Dollar

The study of all labour of any description, is an ethnography of problem-solving, tensions, conflict of wills and expectations, a battle for identity and pride. It is an ongoing gap between the official and 'unofficial theories in use' in workplaces - between management structures and policies and how work is actually done.

The misconception portrayed in spectacular headlines and rash statements is that workers are primarily 'greedy' and selfish and only interested in gaining more money for their work. While there is some obvious truth in these claims, they fall a long way short of explaining or understanding why people go to work, perform certain tasks, and remain in their chosen occupations for their lifetime.



Iron Foundry, Eveleigh

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

If money was the prime mover in career choice and job selection, much fewer numbers of people would work on the railways, go down a mine shaft or turn up to a factory every day. Indeed, if money was the motivator for work, we would expect much greater numbers of people seeking employment in some form of prostitution, criminal activity or seeking to join the ranks of politicians. Those who fell short on the qualifications or requirements for these vocations could always make a comfortable living in management.

Truth is, the vast bulk of workers in many industries actually enjoy their work, derive pleasure and a sense of pride in performing their jobs well. In the railways this has always been the case, the workforce has always maintained a dedication and commitment to the industry and to the roles and services it provides. This is what keeps the railways running, not some diagrams or clever policy documents, and this is what management has generally failed to come to terms with in 150 years.

There is a huge space between some management theories of slave labour, of unthinking and senseless work directed by intelligent and well paid managers, and the fact that many workers continue to turn up for work despite poor management. Workers arrive at work, know their job, the problems and obstacles that exist, and go about resolving or overcoming them, despite what memo may have come from head office. Trains do not run out of control centres or management high rises, they run from the hearts, brains and know how of the people working them. Some time in the next 150 years, those entrusted with the responsibility for managing the railways may come to understand this and revise their management practices accordingly.

I have experienced rail workers angry or frustrated around pay claims or other industrial agreements, but the times that they are most angry, most disillusioned and demoralised is when they are openly attacked for poor work practices or in some way damaging or failing the rail system. This was particularly evident in the past year or so with quite vicious attacks by government and sections of the media on drivers and other rail workers, in attempts to deflect mismanagement and a government under fire for allowing investment in the railways to deteriorate over the past decade. This came off the emotional 'highs' of contributing substantially to the running of the 'most successful Olympics ever' in 2000, and then the fatal train crash at Waterfall in 2002.

As the current Branch Secretary noted:

*'they have seen CEOs come and go with all sorts of promises, experienced rationlisation, upsizing, downsizing; they have seen overseas consultants coming in saying what's wrong with the railways, and they have seen government policies that have failed. .... they have seen the railway used as a political football. What they know is that we still get a million people a day to and from work comfortably and safely. The workforce out there, not withstanding the poor management, manage to get the task done. The railway workforce is very proud, very capable, and very skilled - they are not looking for people to pat them on the back, and say 'job well done' - but that wouldn't go astray from time to time'* <sup>34</sup>



## **BLAME THE RAILWAYS**

*If you read the caustic fudge  
Printed in the 'Daily Smudge',  
You'll conclude it has a grudge*

**On the Railways.**

*Every day another growl,  
It's a squeal or else a howl,  
Or some language almost foul*

**Re the Railways.**

*When the tragedies are light,  
And there's nothing else in sight,  
That's the time to have a bite*

**At the Railways.**

*So reporters off they trot  
(Sometimes there are quite a lot)  
Probing for some tender spot*

**Of the Railways.**

*Though it knows like you and I,  
It demands the reason why  
Fares are still 'so very high'*

**On the Railways.**

*Readers of 'The Smudge', 'tis clear,  
Must be taught to jibe and jeer,  
Or must live in mortal fear*

**Of the Railways.**

*So, if Mr Newlywed  
Comes home later than he said,  
Then he has to 'use his head' –*

**Blames the Railways.**

*Or if Mr Like-a-lot  
Stays to have a final 'spot',  
What excuse d'ye think he's got?*

**Why – the Railways.**

*If a tramway can't be built  
(Cos the State is short of 'gilt')  
Still, 'The Smudge' must have a tilt*

**At the Railways.**

*If the traffic's blocked by fogs  
Or it's raining cats and dogs,  
And the line gets fouled by logs  
Curse the Railways.*

*'Praps, upon a scorching day,  
There's a fire in someone's hay;  
Though it may be miles away,*

**Pick the Railways.**

*If a colt takes sudden fright  
At an engine in the night –  
Smashes things up left and right –*

**Swat the Railways.**

*From some drummer's sample box –  
'Spite of straps and 'spite of locks –  
There are missing ties and socks,*

**Charge the Railways.**

*Though we show in point of fact,  
That the locks are quite intact,  
Surely someone should be sacked*

**From the Railways.**

*If a lady sent a cat,  
In a box made for a hat,  
And it gets clean out of that,*

**Blame the Railways.**

*If some silk for Mrs Datch  
Doesn't just exactly match,  
Who gets hauled up to the scratch?*

**Why – the Railways.**

*When there's something 'big' in Town  
(Like the Fleet – or the 'Renown'),  
'Smudge' says, 'Service quite breaks down*

**On the Railways.**

*In hotels it's just the same,  
And the restaurants go 'lame',  
And there's no one gets the blame*

**'Cept the Railways.**

*Then a traveller, on the spree  
(He's been making rather free),  
Finds a 'spider' in his tea,*

**On the Railways.**

*'Course it isn't there at all,  
Isn't even on the wall,  
But it gives a chance to bawl*

**At the Railways.**

*So 'twill be right to the last;  
Be the service ne'er so fast,  
People still the blame will cast*

**On the Railways.**

*And St Peter at the gate,  
When he asks them why they're late,  
May expect the answer straight:*

**"Please, the Railways".**

Reprinted from the Staff, 20 May, 1924

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



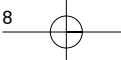
Fettlers, Broken Hill, 1921



Quirindi Station, 1890

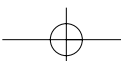
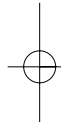
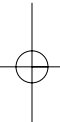


Wagons in front of Eveleigh Workshops



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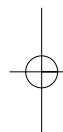
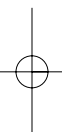
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Prime Minister Joseph Benedict Chifley,  
(National Library of Australia)

