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NOSTALGIA, MONUMENTALITY AND THE GREAT WESTERN RAIL- WAY

Henry Atmore

“Do all engine drivers, I wonder, eternally wish they were small boys?”¹

Nostalgia has some odd settings and unlikely objects. The first builders and users of steam locomotives would have been perplexed by the nostalgic significance later invested in their creations. Nostalgia means to return to a place at once familiar, sustaining and magical; railways made it impossible ever to go home again, to be untroubled by machines, timetables, the pressures of the working day.² So it is curious that they now occasion reverie, evoking a past nobler than the present.

The following is an excerpt from the introduction to a collection of photographs taken by Arthur Mace, an English clergyman, in a thirty-year period spanning the Second World War.³ It is representative of a frame of mind less often to be met with, as the number of people who can remember steam locomotion as anything other than a device to inject period gloom into costume dramas dwindles – representative of a world itself vanished or vanishing, the world of O.S.Nock, ‘Station Sauntering’, the Ian Allen Locospotters Club.⁴ The text is naïve, but the sym-

1 Flann O’Brian, *The Best of Myles*, (London, 1993), 39.

2 William Greg, ‘Life at High Pressure’, *Contemporary Review*, 25 (1874/5), 623-638.

3 C.Garratt, *The Golden Age of Steam Railways*, (London, 1994).

4 O.S.Nock, *One Facet of an Autobiography*, (Durham, 1992); Roger Lloyd, *The Fascination of Railways*, (London, 1951), 91-117; Ian Allen, *Driven by Steam*, (Shepperton, 1992); Michael G. Harvey, *Diary of a Train-spotter, 1955-59*, (Peterborough, 1993). All of these books, and countless others like them, contain passages cognate to the one under discussion here.

pathies it displays are not wholly alien to more sober excursions into the history of steam technology.⁵

Colin Garratt, the author, establishes his nostalgic credentials by denying that he is being nostalgic. “Arthur Mace’s work comes from a golden age”, he writes. “It was as fabulous as we remember it to be, time has not added a rosy glow”.⁶ He speaks out in anger, not irony:

[T]hese pictures remind us of how much our railway has lost, to the detriment of society ... The hideousness of our motorway network, the billions of pounds squandered on roads, with all their inefficiencies, point to one of the 20th century’s most disastrous social policies. And those policies, which fly in the face of all logic, continue to be perpetuated today. If the railway is, as Churchill said, the agent of civilisation, then the motor car is the agent of self-centredness, crime and life-threatening pollution. The road system of today has not evolved by being what is right for the nation, rather more it shows how vested interests can prevail - which tails can wag the dog. Twenty thousand locomotives which served the nation’s transport needs in a safe, disciplined and properly co-ordinated system have been replaced by millions of road vehicles which have settled on our society like a plague of flies.⁷

Nostalgia of this kind fuses the personal, the political, and the aesthetic. The motorway network is “hideous” and so are the values it propagates. Railway carriages were arenas for social interaction: cars encourage disregard for other people, and of the environment as existing beyond one’s use of it. Garratt, like John Tyme and other anti-motorway campaigners, associates roads with political tyranny, and railways with “democracy” – democracy defined not in terms of individual free-

5 Richard L.Hills, *Power From Steam: A History of the Stationary Steam Engine*, (Cambridge, 1989), 1-12 (“The noblest machine”); L.T.C.Rolt, *Landscape with Machines*, (London, 1971).

6 Garratt, *Golden Age*, n.p. Elsewhere, he has admitted to being a nostalgic, but not to nostalgia, an odd formulation. See Colin Garratt, *British Steam Nostalgia* (London, 1987), 6-7. He is innocent of the literature telling us that it has always been the case that the past is golden and modern times the pits: c.f. Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City*, (London, 1973).

7 Garratt, *Golden Age*.

dom, but social responsibility.⁸ Of course, this is all very contentious. Garratt is right to describe the construction of the motorway network as a ‘social policy’. That it has been “disastrous” environmentally would be difficult to dispute. Few also would deny its aesthetic shortcomings. But much, surely, has been gained as well as lost – in the way of personal autonomy, leisure opportunities, respite from urban anomie.⁹ Not every car driver is “self-centred”; not every use to which the car is put warrants our contempt. Garratt would not be the first nostalgic for whom “what is right for the nation” serves as a screen for a deeper misanthropy.¹⁰

He is not an old man, and his account of his fixation on steam locomotives gains poignancy from the fact that, while still young, he witnessed their obsolescence. His nostalgia both palliates and reinforces his predicament, the belatedness of his entry upon the scenes of his own life. The estrangement he exhibits is far from unique to railway enthusiasts. It might be argued that we always live our childhoods in a different world. Disenchantment is always uncomfortable, and in response nostalgia succours as it estranges, expressing a desire to be other than where and when we are. The half-actual, half-mythological, half-remembered, half-imagined past will often be richer, denser, surer, more colourful. The past so evoked can be a challenge to the present. It can also mark a refusal to engage with the present in terms that have any present meaning.¹¹

8 John Tyme, *Motorways versus Democracy: public inquiries into road proposals and their political significance*, (London, 1978); D.Starkie, *The Motorway Age: Traffic Policies in Post-war Britain*, (Oxford, 1982).

9 Peter Thorold, *The Motoring Age: The Automobile in Britain, 1896-1939*, (London, 2003); L.K.J.Setright, *Drive On!: A Social History of the Motor Car*, (London, 2004). See also Patrick Wright, *On Living in an Old Country: The National Past in Contemporary Britain*, (London, 1985), 52-87.

10 As was the case in one of the earliest and most remarkable outbursts of nostalgic *acidie* in English, Wordsworth’s diatribe against the Kendal & Windermere Railway (*The Prose Works of William Wordsworth, Volume 3*, (Oxford, 1974), 340-366).

11 For the politics of nostalgia see Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture*, (London, 1994); Patrick Wright, *A Journey Through Ruins: A Keyhole Portrait of British Postwar Life and Culture*, (London, 1992) and *The Village that Died for England: The Strange Story of Tyneham*, (London, 1995); David Lowenthal, ↗

On this understanding, the nostalgic past defeats reason. One of the pleasures of reverie is the belatedness of what occasions it; as Gaston Bachelard wrote: “When we turn inwards upon ourselves we turn aside from truth.”¹² When rendered in nostalgic form the past becomes difficult or impossible to assimilate to contemporary experience.¹³ This quality is a source of strength, of a kind; nostalgia is unfalsifiable. But it is also a weakness. Nostalgia does not capture the past as non-nostalgics think they know it to have been: different only in degree, not in kind, from the present.

Colin Garratt, though, must insist that the world really was different – and better – back then. If he is being ‘merely’ nostalgic then his denunciation of the motorway will have very little force. This is where Arthur Mace comes in. Through what Roland Barthes called the “magic” of photography, Mace returns to Garratt, with “an evidential force”, the lineaments of past reality.¹⁴ Mace’s photographs are proof that “time has not added a rosy glow” to his memory, and ground his distaste for the corruption and squalor of the present in something like historical fact.

After the promises of gold and disavowals of rosiness it is a little deflating to turn to the photographs themselves. For one thing, they are all in black and white. For another – although Garratt’s “safe, disciplined and properly co-ordinated” has prepared us for this – they are oddly inhuman. Their contingency is palpable: what we see here is not a world but a way of showing a world. Mace’s pictures depict locomotive engines, in motion, framed by craggy highlands and bruised skies,

∖ *The Past is a Foreign Country*, (Cambridge, 1985); and, in particular, Stuart Tannock, ‘Nostalgia Critique’ *Cultural Studies*, 9 (1995), 453-464. For corollaries in nostalgic representations of childhood in nineteenth and early twentieth-century poetry and fiction see Walter Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind, 1830-1870*, (Yale, 1957), 85-89 and Juliet Dusinberre, *Alice to the Lighthouse: Children’s Books and Radical Experiments in Art*, revised ed., (London, 1999), 123-138.

12 Gaston Bachelard, *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*, (1938), tr. A.C.M.Moss, (New York, 1987), 5.

13 David Lowenthal, ‘Nostalgia tells it like it wasn’t’, in C.Shaw & M.Chase (eds.) *The imagined past. history and nostalgia*, (Manchester, 1989), 18-32.

14 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, tr. R.Howard, (London, 1982), 88-89.

sometimes in more sedate passage through allotments and back gardens, or halted in stations. A few capture drivers, stokers, signalmen, and guards going about their labours. In none are any passengers visible. The engines themselves come across as a mythical, elemental agency, built and worked by men, but only accidentally answering to human purposes. In this, Mace's aesthetic conforms to the nostalgic, alienated modernism extant in 1930s Britain, when he was most active, a modernism still in thrall to the machine, but capable of ironic reflection on the technological whimsies of the Victorians.¹⁵ The compositions are stiff, hieratic, gloomy, cold - the engines are monuments, things to be admired, or even worshipped. It is difficult to imagine them ever having been quotidian, ever being used. As is usually the case with railway books, the captions identify the trains very precisely, by line, company, and technical specifications.¹⁶ If the photographs seek to awe with the physical power of steam engines, the text impresses upon us the corporate power of the companies that ran them.

This is, it bears repeating, an odd basis for nostalgia. Mace fetishizes the engines and Garratt fetishizes Mace's representations. Far from enabling his readers to "relive that amazing period of man's industrial progress", the pictures doubly defeat Garratt's intentions. Their moral significance, the superiority of the railway as "agent of civilisation" to the motorcar as agent of all sorts of pestilential horrors, is far from apparent. Even if it were, Mace's vision is too idiosyncratic to save Garratt from the limits of nostalgia. It seems, like Garratt's rhetoric, to come from a different world.

Svetlana Boym has argued for a distinction between two types of nostalgia: *reflective* and *restorative*.¹⁷ Restorative nostalgia is nationalist

15 The ur-text for this sensibility is Humphrey Jennings, *Pandaemonium: The Coming of the Machine as seen by Contemporary Observers*, (London, 1985).

16 To be fair to Garratt, in the collection of his own railway photography, *British Steam Nostalgia*, he works very hard to inject humanity into what is, essentially, a montage of rusting metal. Engines headed for the scrap-yard in the early 1960s have a pathos rather lacking from the so-called 'golden age'.

17 Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, (New York, 2001), xviii-xix, 41-56.

and monumental, characterised by myths of origin and identifications of whom is to be excluded from the earthly paradise. It is expressed through statues, obelisks, memorials, flags and uniforms, national anthems, vengeful folk ditties, state propaganda. Reflective nostalgia is altogether more playful. It tends to be literary, and produces its share of unreadable poetry and prose, together with famous epiphanies on the smell of madeleines and the flutter of butterfly wings in the grounds of Russian country houses. At its best, reflective nostalgia challenges monumentality, the effort to channel the mind's drifts, to focus memory. Reflective nostalgia is a trust that the mundane and singular prompts of reverie can help us to resist the coercions inscribed into public memorials, our being told what it is we should remember, and the possibility that what we do remember belongs to us only collectively.

Boym's distinction is attractive, but a little pat. Where does somebody like Colin Garratt fit into her typology? He stresses the personal to the extent of photographing his girlfriend at the old Banbury *Great Western* depot and describing, without embarrassment, how they "sought solace" in the railway and each other. There is a picture of him at age ten, with short back-and-sides, jug ears, and a hopeful expression.¹⁸ Yet he is, as I suggested earlier, representative - of an age, a way of thinking, a bundle of grievances, with a nostrum, no matter how regressive, ever to hand. He is so little enamoured of the state that he accuses it of deliberately fostering crime, selfishness and environmental degradation. But the vehicle of his nostalgia, and his assurance that his dissatisfaction is rooted in something more than nostalgia, is a collection of photographs that celebrates the inhuman power of the machine.

Not all railway nostalgias conform to type, and one might doubt whether Colin Garratt is as representative as I have made him out to be. Nevertheless, for the purposes of this essay I take the following to be significant features of most, if not all, of them:

- A. *Fetishization* – railways imbued with love, care, decency; the railway as the figure of the good life.

18 Garratt, *British Steam Nostalgia*, 7, 25.

- B. *An affective response to monumentality.* This can be traced back to the picturesque (rust and ruins) or the romantic sublime (fires and smokes); here, my concern will be with more straightforwardly Arcadian tropes of ease, leisure, simplicity, the railway as the figure of the good life.¹⁹
- C. *An ambiguously politicized aesthetic.* Metaphors of *binding, tying, sustaining, supporting* suggest the railway as a monolithic social agency. But the *aesthetics* of railway nostalgia contrast the variety and delight to be had in railway architecture and locomotive design with the alienating monotony of the road network.
- D. *A refusal to countenance the profit motive.* Money is not mentioned in railway nostalgias. ‘Commerce’, ‘commercial imperatives’ figure, if they figure at all, as threats to the community of railway users.
- E. *A belief that once upon a time everything worked as it should.* The contrast, more or less implicit, is with the present, where *nothing works*. The gamut of fecklessness ranges from station staff who don’t understand English, to something like the Hatfield disaster.
- F. *Community without democracy.* Railway nostalgia will speak of the ‘public good’, the ‘public interest’, but it abhors the mass. In terms of general theory of social agency, communities are valorized, autonomy deprecated. In terms of public policy, the good sense of Keynes is as obvious as the bad faith of Friedman. Hence, the complex conviction of betrayal when the state is seen to be furthering alienated individualism.
- G. *An ambivalent relationship to the state.* On the one hand, state railway policy is invariably malign, destructive and irrational; on the other, two of the major foci of railway nostalgia are the period post-Combination (Garratt’s Golden Age), and the years

19 An ironic reversal of the famous argument made in Leo Marx, *Machine in Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*, (Oxford, 1964).

of British Rail pre-Dr Beeching; both times when the state's interest in railways was active and fiscally burdensome. Thus, the state is at once *to blame* for our current plight, and the only hope for *future* relief.

H. *Reason and Interest*. The nostalgic lays claim to objectivity and disinterest: railways *are* better, for *everyone*. But his perspective is by most standards irrational, and compelling only insofar as it is affective. This is another aspect of nostalgia's unfalsifiability: a mode of life, rather than an argument, it need not submit to reason.

It goes without saying that railway nostalgia involves the misrepresentation of a great deal of railway history. What perhaps does need to be said is that its relation to the past it rewrites is dialectical, to the point of its appearing almost perverse in its choice of an object to yearn after. One possible explanation of the discrepancy between railway nostalgia and railway history is this: that railway nostalgia has been constructed by and of elements antithetical to its desire. Obviously railway nostalgia is a construct – what else could it be? The question is, by whom, and for what purposes?

In order to suggest an answer I will be re-entering familiar territory: the early history of that most magical of railways, the Great Western. This serves as a corrective to the nostalgic imagination, by showing that, for example, railways were quite as prone to the malign machinations of “vested interests” as any modern motorway bypass. Indeed, it might well be that “vested interests” as understood by Garratt originated in the heroic age of railway construction.²⁰ But it is, to be honest, not difficult to show where nostalgics get their history wrong. The greater challenge is to subject the *forms* of nostalgia to historical scru-

20 Philip S. Bagwell, ‘The Railway Interest: Its Organization and Influence, 1839-1914’, *Journal of Transport History*, 7 (1965), 65-86; Geoffrey Alderman, *The Railway Interest*, (Leicester, 1973); on the newly pejorative sense of the word ‘interest’ extant in early-mid nineteenth century Britain see A.O.Hirschman, ‘The Concept of Interest: From Euphemism to Tautology’, in *Rival Views of Market Society and Other Recent Essays*, (New York, 1986), 35-55.

tiny. Terms like “vested interests”, “hideousness”, “logic”, “properly coordinated” – which, as suggested, involve the nostalgic in much perplexity, if not downright self-contradiction - do not arise from nowhere. It will be my contention that the Great Western Railway represents an unusually rich sample of the nineteenth-century loam from which twentieth-century nostalgia has drawn its ambiguous sustenance.

1. NOSTALGIA SITUATED: GOD’S WONDERFUL RAILWAY

In Britain, where railway nostalgia is concerned, all railways are by no means equal. The GWR was not destined to be the most profitable and was certainly never the most efficient of Victorian railway companies. What it did possess was style. Memories of travelling on the GWR were shot through with a sense of place and occasion; luxury, summer holidays, Paddington Station, generously spaced rails running to the horizon, chocolate-cream carriages, bottle-green engines setting speed records well into the twentieth century. The company’s viaducts, bridges and tunnels still impress; museums at Didcot, Swindon and Colerford, together with an enormous popular literature, offer ample satisfaction to those who want to know more. And, if it were famous for nothing else, the GWR would retain some measure of immortality by association with its chief engineer, Isambard Kingdom Brunel.

Brunel is at once a brilliant and problematic figure.²¹ Both upbringing and temperament set him apart from his great engineering rivals, self-made northern autodidacts like Thomas Telford, John Rennie, George Stephenson, James Nasmyth, and Joseph Locke. He would be

21 The classic biography is L.T.C.Rolt, *Isambard Kingdom Brunel* (London, 1961); this can now be supplemented by Angus Buchanan, *Brunel: The Life and Times of Isambard Kingdom Brunel*, (London, 2002), which is, by the author’s own admission, drawn from much the same materials as Rolt’s. It does, however, contain very useful reflections on Brunel’s status as a hero-engineer (210-227). Less scholarly, but refreshingly revisionist is Adrian Vaughan, *Isambard Kingdom Brunel: Engineering Knight-Errant*, (London, 1991), which perhaps puts a little too much stress on the errancy.

regarded, not always kindly, as “the very Napoleon of engineers, thinking more of glory than of profit”, “the Michael Angelo of modern engineering.” “His conceptions were always cast in a colossal mode” Joseph Devey, Locke’s biographer, was to write.²² ‘Brunel’ stands for the engineer as hero, creator, visionary, moulding the material environment for the benefit of future generations.²³

His ambition was to build the perfect railway, “the *best* road that imagination could devise.”²⁴ He was not content to be one of “the crowd of engineers” slavishly “following in the track of the Stephensons”; instead, he “hoped to imperishably connect his name with a new system.”²⁵ He would not do so alone, however, and that was the root of many of his later troubles. The image of the engineer as heroic genius obscures the fact that the fate of his projects was never entirely, or even largely, in his hands. The success of any company hinged on the acquisition and retention of territory.²⁶ To this end decisions had to be made over routes, compensation to landowners, locomotive design, carriage design, width of gauge, station architecture, the relative commercial merits of freight and passenger traffic – only some of which came under the jurisdiction of the chief engineer, and none of which, ultimately, needed harmonise with his interests. The successful railway engineer was a practical man, attuned to the technical exigencies of his trade, but also to the concerns of managers, directors and shareholders. In the Smilesian tradition of industrial hagiography he came to resemble the machines he

22 Samuel Smiles, ‘The Brunels’, *Quarterly Review*, 112 (1862), 1-39: on 38; Joseph Devey, *The Life of Joseph Locke*, (London, 1862), 189-190

23 In technology studies terms Brunel is the Pasteur of the machine world, following Bruno Latour’s distinction between Pasteur and ‘Pasteur’, so as not to ‘confuse the force of a man with that attributed to him’. See Bruno Latour, *The Pasteurization of France*, tr. A.Sheridan & J.Law, (Cambridge, Mass., 1993), 15. There is a large uncritical literature on the engineer as a creative force in history. See (e.g.) S.Dasgupta, *Technology and Creativity*, (Oxford, 1996); H.Petroski, *Invention by Design. How Engineers Get from Thought to Thing*, (Cambridge, Mass., 1996); and (better), T.L.Hankins & R.J.Silverman, *Instruments and the Imagination*, (Princeton, 1995).

24 Rolt, *Brunel*, 54.

25 Samuel Sidney, *Gauge Evidence: The History and Prospects of the Railway System, Illustrated by the evidence given before the Gauge Commission*, (London, 1846), xix.

26 Michael Freeman, *Railways and the Imagination*, (New Haven, 1999), 153-164.

constructed: “orderly, regular in his habits, disciplined, predictable, methodical ... even-tempered, and law abiding. He had brought order out of the chaos of his natural instincts; sensuousness, self-indulgence, recklessness, untidiness and emotional outbursts were foreign to him.” Brunel was anything but predictable; not, perhaps, quite the right kind of hero.²⁷

The GWR was formed in 1833 by an association of Bristol and London merchants, incorporated in 1835, and opened to the public on 4 June 1838. Brunel, already known in Bristol for his work on the Clifton Bridge project, was appointed chief engineer on 6 March 1833.²⁸ He was fortunate in having taken up with a group of men who, for reasons of their own, were willing to indulge his fertile technological imagination, his desire to build the best of all possible railways. In October 1835 the directorate met to consider Brunel’s proposal to build their line on a 7-foot gauge, as opposed to the 4-foot 8-inches most new companies, following the *Liverpool & Manchester Railway*, were adopting as standard. The wider gauge promised much higher speed and comfort, but also more expense. The directors accepted the proposal by a large majority.²⁹

The GWR was the “Great Experimental Railway”, “an entirely new system” of railway organization,³⁰ an experiment in speed.³¹ The seven-foot gauge would remove shaking and enable the use of more powerful locomotives. These would draw larger and heavier carriages, leading to greater safety and comfort for passengers.³² A brilliant young locomotive engineer, Daniel Gooch, was appointed to help design the engines (mechanics was never Brunel’s strong suit). Gooch, who was to enjoy a close but difficult relationship with the great man, recalled that he and

27 Thomas Hughes, *Selections from Lives of the Engineers by Samuel Smiles*, (Cambridge, Mass., 1966), 11. For a reappraisal of Brunel’s uneasy place in the Smilesian tradition see Andrew Jarvis, *Samuel Smiles and the Construction of Victorian Values*, (Sutton, 1997), 120-121.

28 Rolt, *Brunel* 78-80.

30 Smiles, ‘Brunels’, 29.

31 G.A.Nokes [‘Sekon’], *A History of the Great Western Railway*, (London, 1895), 4.

32 Nicholas Wood, *A Practical Treatise on Railroads and Interior Communications in General*, 3rd Ed., (London, 1838), 713-719.

his fellows “suffered dreadfully” from Brunel’s zeal “to perfect his road.”³³ The interests of colleagues, shareholders and, some argued, passengers, were subordinated to the grand design.

The result was, in L.T.C.Rolt’s phrase, the “commodification of speed”.³⁴ The GWR was “an enthusiastic admirer of itself” and advertised its superiority on posters and hoardings, in pamphlets and the pages of the railway press.³⁵ Its services were faster, safer and more comfortable than those offered by narrow-gauge competitors.

It was

presented as an agent of national regeneration. The less time spent in transit, the more could be devoted to productive activity. The swiftness of Gooch’s engines was “equivalent to the creation of time”, and the broad-gauge held up “as the sign of human advancement, and the narrow, by consequence, as the type of the degradation of mankind - a deliberate re-establishment of a lower standard for every benefit which railroads confer on mankind.”³⁶

From an early date in its history the GWR was a successful generator of images. These reinforced the company’s grandiose self-conception. Most notable was a collection of lithographs, *The History and Description of the Great Western Railway*, published by David Bogue in the spring of 1846. The artist and author, John Cooke Bourne, was the best of a small band of railway lithographers. Eight years previously he had published *A Series of Lithographed Drawings on the London and Birmingham Railway* (in four parts, 1838-9) to much acclaim.³⁷ This earlier work had been marked by an unusual attention to the details of railway technology and the work that went into railway construction. His work for the GWR evinced a similar concern with the sheer difficulty of the enterprise. “Those glistening lines of iron that now traverse

33 Daniel Gooch, *Memoirs and Diary* (1867-1889), ed. R.B.Wilson, (Newton Abbot, 1972), 29-31.

34 L.T.C.Rolt, *George and Robert Stephenson*, (London, 1960), 281.

35 For GWR advertising methods see F.Booker, *The Great Western Railway: A New History*, (Newton Abbot, 1977), 9-15; Nokes, *History of the GWR*, 113.

36 ‘The B.G. and the N.G’, *Fraser’s Magazine*, 33 (1846), 743-750.

37 Francis Klingender, *Art and the Industrial Revolution*, (New York, 1968), 136-140.

England in every direction ... with the white cloud that hovers over them,” Bourne wrote, were “the representations of much patient labour, much steady perseverance, of frequent disappointments suffered, of heavy losses incurred, before they become the well known symbol of commercial activity and wealth.”³⁸ But be that as it may, the GWR emerged from Bourne’s drawings as a quite different animal from the LBR. In place of excavations, scaffolds, piles of earth and jumbles of metal parts, dray-horses and scurrying navvies, we have something more ambiguous. The ruptures Brunel inflicted on landscape and workforce are largely hidden from view.

Instead, Bourne describes GWR employees, clad in livery of dark green, scarlet and gold, having the appearance of “functionaries of an imperial court”, anticipating every whim of the genteel traveller.³⁹ He shows the restrained classicism of features such as the Wharncliffe Viaduct and Maidenhead Bridge complementing rather than overpowering the countryside. The viaduct looks Attic, with its clean lines and curving sunlit surfaces, and happy bucolic cows congregating in the foreground. The entrance of the infamous Box Hill tunnel, source of terror to weaker-willed passengers, gains a deceptive spaciousness. But while demonstrating the GWR’s commitment to speed, safety and comfort, Bourne’s lithographs also record a tendency towards monumentality. The broad gauge engines are squat and malevolent, less iron horses, more giant frogs. Workers, passengers and spectators are dwarfed by machines and masonry; the men squatting to the side of the tunnel in the frontispiece look grubby and out of place. The net effect of the lithographs is to make people seem somehow anterior to the enterprise.

A slightly earlier and even more famous image also caught the ambiguity. In Turner’s *Rain, Steam, and Speed* (1844) a GWR express crosses the Maidenhead Bridge during a violent rainstorm. The picture, as much as any of Bourne’s lithographs, was an exercise in puffery.

38 John Cooke Bourne, *The History and Description of the Great Western Railway*, (London, 1846), 2.

39 *Ibid.* On GWR livery in the period see E.T.MacDermot, *History of the Great Western Railway, 1833-1863*, (London, 1964), 357-358, and Booker, *The Great Western Railway*, 13.

GWR trains were not noted for their reliability; here the engine spits fire and hurtles past, a blur of speed. The bridge, with its two delicate elliptical arches, was a typical Brunel extravagance, and many predicted that it would collapse. In the picture it is massive and dense, withstanding the storm, comfortably bearing the train. Turner was a GWR shareholder, and *Rain, Steam and Speed* a fitting expression of faith in the company and its chief engineer.⁴⁰

But the painting also documents loss, “the old order changing, the easy-going past giving way to the quick living future”.⁴¹ Turner registers the disturbance as well as the exhilaration railways could bring. Smog obscures the riverscape. A pleasure boat is buffeted by the train’s passage. The old road bridge is a puny echo of its rival. This is, perhaps, to misread the painting’s critical focus for despair. Alternatively, the road bridge mocks pretensions to grandeur, while the hare racing in the engine’s path suggests that the latter is not moving quite so fast after all. But whether Turner is meekly accepting or cocking a snook, it is clear that his attitude is not simply, or only, celebratory. The very features that made the GWR extraordinary also give rise to anxiety. As we will see, Turner was not alone in feeling this.

Unique among Victorian railway engineers, Brunel contrived to leave his mark on the landscapes of posterity.⁴² His judgement was questioned because it was aesthetic rather than utilitarian, oriented to the future not the present. Profit “was of minor consideration” to him, Smiles wrote, and “public convenience” was disregarded.⁴³ This disregard seemed, to some, to manifest sinister intent, to appeal to something beyond the marketplace - profitability measured not by dividends,

40 The best accounts of the picture are John Gage, *Turner: Rain, Steam and Speed*, (London, 1972) and Stephen Daniels, ‘J.M.W. Turner and the Circulation of the State’, in *Fields of Vision: Landscape Imagery and National Identity in England and the United States*, (Cambridge, 1993), 112-145. See also Andrew Wilton, *J.M.W. Turner: His Art and Life*, (New York, 1979), 193-228.

41 J.McCoubrey, ‘Time’s Railway: Turner and the Great Western’, *Turner Studies*, 6 (1986), 33-39: on 33. Also Michel Serres, ‘Turner Translates Carnot’, *Hermes. Literature, Science, Philosophy*, ed. J.V.Harari & D.F.Bell, (Baltimore, 1982), 54-62.

42 D.Beckett, *Brunel’s Britain*, (Newton Abbot, 1980).

43 Samuel Smiles, *The Story of the Life of George Stephenson*, (London, 1864), 305.

nor even utility, but by vague gestures towards something else, couched as the 'national good'. Much of the criticism of Brunel's work was inspired by concern that here there was the potential for machinery to become an agent of repression. "If the public did not pay they ought to be made to pay. A generation of pigmies would grow into a generation of giants if a good ideal standard was adopted."⁴⁴

The GWR was to become the best loved of all railway companies, but love of a kind many Victorians did not believe a railway should inspire. It paraded its monumentality a little too ostentatiously. Yes, GWR trains were quicker and its carriages more luxurious. Opponents admitted that the broad gauge, if it could be got to work properly, delivered a higher standard of service. But by the mid-1840s, as Bourne embarked upon his lithographs, a good case could be made for the majority of railway users suffering in consequence of Brunel's peculiar technological vision. Even before the Gauge War erupted in 1844 the company had come in for criticism, originating from within, and spreading in ever-increasing circles of discontent. Who exactly, people began to ask, did the GWR serve?

2. VESTED INTERESTS

Initially at least, it was not the public, or the nation, or mankind, but Bristol's commercial elite. A railway connection with London had first been mooted by a committee representing three mainstays of the Bristol oligarchy: the town Corporation, the Merchant Venturers' Society, and the Dock Company. The "public countenance" these bodies lent the venture was crucial.⁴⁵ The GWR was prized because, in difficult

⁴⁴ Devey, *Locke*, 189-90.

⁴⁵ Both bodies were well represented on the directorate; in 1835 seven directors were members of the Corporation and six were Merchant Venturers. See Nokes, *History of the GWR*, 2; G.Channon, "The recruitment of directors to the board of the GWR", *Journal of Transport History*, 3rd Series, 17 (1996), 1-19; John Latimer, *Annals of Bristol in the 19th Century*, (Bristol, 1887), 189; *idem*, *The History of the Society of Merchant Venturers of the City of Bristol*, (Bristol, 1903), 257; P.McGrath, *The Merchant Venturers of Bristol*, (Bristol, 1975), 439.

times, it promised “in a very extensive degree to improve the Trade and Commerce of the City.”⁴⁶ Bristol, second only to London in commercial importance in the first half of the eighteenth century, was a declining force. It was dependent on a dwindling West Indian and Irish trade, and its staple industries - glass, metal working, brewing, sugar processing - were stagnating. In 1831 the populace had registered its displeasure with the Tory Corporation in the worst violence of the Reform crisis. Economic weakness and class hostility threatened the mercantile culture that had made the city rich.⁴⁷ A minority of Whigs and liberal Tories responded to the city’s plight by sponsoring projects emphasising a commitment to civic unity and economic regeneration. This was the context in which Brunel first made himself known to the Bristol elite. Projects such as the Clifton Bridge, the liberalisation of the docks and, later, the development of the first steamships, conserved without giving the appearance of conservatism, accommodated progress in order to stave off more radical reform. The GWR was likewise an instrument to restore civic pride and revive commerce. Measures of profitability applied to other railways, notably share dividends, were a secondary consideration.⁴⁸

A clause in the *GWR*’s charter stipulated that all directors should

46 McGrath, *Merchant Venturers*, 439.

47 B.W.E.Alford, ‘The economic development of Bristol in the 19th century: an enigma?’ in P.McGrath & J.Cannon (eds.) *Essays in Bristol and Gloucestershire History*, (Bristol, 1976), 252-283; J.F.Nicholls & J.Taylor, *Bristol Past and Present*, (Bristol, 1882) 324-338 (on the riots). For Bristol’s governance and its discontents in the period see G.Bush, *Bristol and its Municipal Government 1820-1851*, (Bristol, 1976).

48 Unusually for Bristol, Whigs outnumbered Tories. Robert Bright, the leading subscriber, was the son of one of the previous century’s most active and progressive Whigs; Robert Bright senior had been a student of Priestley, a friend to Davy and Marc Brunel, and the foremost patron of William Jessop’s harbour improvement schemes of the 1790s. Another director, T.R.Guppy, married social respectability with a leaning towards radicalism; he was Brunel’s chief ally on the directorate. George Henry Gibbs (a director of the London Assurance Corporation as well as the GWR), while politically more circumspect, also had a strong emotional investment in the broad gauge. See McGrath, *Merchant Venturers*; Nicholls & Taylor, *Bristol Past and Present*, 319-318; R.Trainor, ‘Urban Elites in Victorian Britain’, *Urban History Yearbook*, 1985, 1-17; M.C.Jacob, *Scientific Culture and the Making of the Industrial West*, (Oxford, 1997), 192-201 (on Robert Bright senior); P.Bright, *Dr Richard Bright*, (London, 1983), passim, (on Robert Bright junior). For attempts to revive Bristol’s dormant scientific culture in the early 19th century see Michael Neve, ‘Science in a commercial city: Bristol 1820-1860’ in Ian Inkster & Jack Morell (eds.) *Metropolis & Province. Science in British Culture, 1780-1850*, (London, 1983), 179-204.

reside in either Bristol or London. Directors were appointed on the assumption that the “best constituted Board will comprise gentlemen, all of high character and integrity, but of various stations, habits and professions of life”.⁴⁹ The first directorate combined interests in shipping, merchant banking, West Indian trade and the glass industry. Political, commercial and family ties intertwined. Two firms, the Phoenix Glass Works and Gibbs, Bright & Co., merchant bankers, supplied five directors between them.⁵⁰ These men were willing to invest heavily in the company. In 1835-1836 the mean value of their holdings was £8128. What they required from their railway were promises of progress, not dividends: they were already rich. Their needs, the perceived needs of commercial travellers, and Brunel’s vision dovetailed.⁵¹ The luxurious carriages, the express trains speeding past the sidetracked wagons containing goods and third-class passengers, the epauletted functionaries, were emblems of gentility. Bourne was to contrast the rough-hewn consumers of railway services in northern England to the more cultivated travellers of Cheltenham, Gloucester and Cirencester, “a class of passengers if not so numerous, yet indulging in higher comforts than the general population of such cities as Birmingham and Manchester.” For the mercantile passenger time saved by taking a GWR express made “the difference between his dining or sleeping abroad or at home, that is, it frequently makes the difference between his omitting his journey and performing it.”⁵²

This very particular idea of what the GWR stood for did no go unchallenged. Throughout 1838 and 1839 the directorate confronted shareholder disquiet at company policy, and distrust of the broad gauge.

49 Channon, ‘GWR directors’, 13.

50 *Ibid*; John Latimer, *Annals of Bristol* 188; B.W.E.Alford, ‘Economic development’ 262 (on the Phoenix Glass Company).

51 As noted, Guppy was an admirer of Brunel; the engineer also enjoyed close social relations with the Bright family, and was regarded (rather sorrowfully) by George Henry Gibbs as a good friend. For Brunel’s Bristol connections see R.A.Buchanan, ‘Brunel in Bristol’ in McGrath & Cannon (eds.) *Bristol & Gloucs History*, 217-251.

52 Bourne, *History of the GWR*, 3-4, 11; Latimer, *Annals of Bristol*, 190-191; Booker, *The GWR*, 79.

John Latimer, Bristol's foremost nineteenth-century historian, was to attribute the troubles to the directors "neglecting the sober-minded, practical, and economical engineers of the North" in favour of Brunel, an "inexperienced theorist" with a tendency to make free with other people's money. Shareholders chafed at the demands on their pockets and even more at depressed share prices and low dividends. Profits were being sacrificed to Brunel's idiosyncrasies.⁵³ Accordingly, in 1838 a group of Liverpool-based shareholders campaigned to oust both the chief engineer and his gauge.⁵⁴ At a meeting in January 1839 the dissentients proposed, "that the plans of construction pursued by Mr Brunel are injudicious, expensive and ineffectual for this professed object and ought not to be persevered in".⁵⁵ The struggle reflected wider social and commercial antagonisms, and was the occasion of not a little West Country snobbery.⁵⁶ The GWR directors expressed disdain for the profit motive and dismissed the Liverpool shareholders as uncultivated upstarts. Gibbs seethed at being "in the power of a set of fellows who hold a large number of shares and who have no other merit to recommend them." Gibbs, according to a cousin, craved "for the stimulus of some great strokes in business"; he believed that an overriding interest in profit compromised the company's loftier ends. He abhorred the "selfish, illiberal and ungentlemanlike minds" of his adversaries, "which lead them to measure everything that is done by rule of pocket." The purpose of

53 Costs rose from an initial estimate of £2,805,000 in 1833, to £4,000,000 in 1838; in 1844 total paid up capital amounted to £8,160,000. See John Latimer, *Annals of Bristol* 191-192.

54 The 'Liverpool group' armed themselves with the results of experiments conducted by Nicholas Wood, John Hawkshaw, and Dionysius Lardner, which showed the broad gauge to be exorbitant and inefficient. See Dionysius Lardner, 'First Report on the Determination of the Mean Numerical Values of Railway Constants', *Proceedings of the British Association for the Advancement of Science* VII (1838) 197-252, esp. the conclusions on 251-252. Brunel and Gooch successfully cast doubt upon the experimental protocols: the first, but not the last, instance of the GWR proving resistant to rival claims of reason. See pp24-25, below.

55 Nokes, *History of the GWR*, 37; Jack Simmons, *The Birth of the Great Western Railway: Extracts from the Diary and Correspondence of George Henry Gibbs* (Bath, 1971).

56 Bristol's decline had benefited Liverpool, now the country's major Atlantic port, possessing a vast industrial hinterland. See Asa Briggs, *Victorian Cities*, (Harmondsworth, 1968), 365-366.

the GWR had never been merely to pay. Galvanised by appeals to commercial pride, and with Charles Babbage lending scientific support to the broad gauge, the Bristol/London mercantile connexion defeated the motion, albeit narrowly.⁵⁷

Brunel was “almost brokenhearted” by the slurs on his competence and declared himself willing to give way in favour of Joseph Locke. His despair was compounded by his powerlessness. He might have enjoyed close personal relations with Bright, Guppy and Gibbs, but the attacks of the ‘Liverpool group’ had revealed the extent to which his expertise was subordinate to the interests of his masters. Gibbs’ diary records numerous conversations with fellow-directors in which Brunel’s resignation was mooted. In the end, the engineer was fortunate the company remained prepared to bankroll his vision. Still, it was his decisions that were being calumniated, his name, not that of any of the mostly anonymous directors, tarnished. From this period, Brunel’s ability to shift from conception to operation, to build machines that worked and lasted, was to be repeatedly questioned.⁵⁸

3. DISASTERS: THE GWR & THE TRAVELLING PUBLIC

From the inception of the broad gauge doom-sayers had warned of the risk to passengers of the high speeds projected by Brunel and his supporters. In fact, during the first three years of its operational life the GWR was one of the safest – if not most reliable - of railways.⁵⁹ Then, on the evening of 24 December 1841, disaster struck. A slippage

57 J.A.Gibbs, *The History of Antony and Dorothea Gibbs*, (London, 1922), 309-310; Simmons, *Birth of the GWR*, 1-3, 49-51; Charles Babbage, *Passages from the life of a Philosopher* (1864) ed. M.Campbell-Kelly, (London, 1991) 239-240.

58 Simmons, *Birth of the GWR*, 51-2, 61; Channon, ‘GWR directors’, 8. For the various delays, bankruptcies and technical problems that bedevilled the Clifton Bridge see J.F.Nicholls & J.Taylor, *Bristol Past and Present*, III.319-318. The bridge was not opened until 1864, five years after Brunel’s death.

59 L.T.C.Rolt, *Red for Danger: A History of Railway Accidents and Railway Safety*, 4th Ed., (Newton Abbot, 1982), 36.

on the Sonning cutting, the longest on the line, deposited a mass of “spoil” onto the tracks. A third-class train, directly in its path, was derailed. Eight men were killed and seventeen injured, all “of the labouring class.” The machinery of state railway regulation was set in motion, and Frederic Smith, one of the newly created Inspectors of Railways, hurried to the scene to investigate.⁶⁰ His conclusion was that the accident could not have been prevented. The driver, Thomas Reynolds, “a steady man”, was exonerated. So, to an extent, was the company. Speed was not a factor in the disaster. But while the company was not liable for *causing* the accident, it was culpable in its effects. The accident had been unavoidable, but it need not have been fatal.

A derailment had become a tragedy, Smith wrote, because on impact nearly all of the passengers had been thrown from the train. One reason was the absence of buffers; the *GWR* had not seen fit to install them. Further, Smith reported that he was “bound to state that the third-class carriages used on the occasion of this accident were not of such construction as the public have a right to expect.” The seats were eighteen inches from the floor, the sides only two feet high, so that any person standing up, and many of those sitting down, were “in great danger of being thrown out of the carriage”. Besides which, even under normal conditions the carriage-design showed scant regard for passengers: “the exposure to the cutting winds of the winter must be very injurious to the traveller”.⁶¹

Sonning demonstrated the *GWR*’s understanding of the relationship between wealth, worth, and the duty of care.⁶² Its commitment to the

60 Smith’s report on the Sonning disaster is in PP.1842.XLI *Report of the Officers of the Railway Department*, 77-79. The following account is drawn from this source. For government procedures on the occasion of railway accidents see Rolt, *Red for Danger*; Henry Parris, *Government and Railways in nineteenth-century Britain*, (London, 1965), 28-47; Stanley Hall, *Railway Detectives: The 150-year Saga of the Railway Inspectorate*, (London, 1990).

61 PP.1842.XLI *Report of the Officers of the Railway Department*, 77-79.

62 The exact legal responsibility of railway companies for the safety of passengers of any class was, in the early days, uncertain. By the mid-1840s judges began to award punitive damages against companies in railway accident cases. See R.W.Kostal, *Law and English Railway Capitalism 1825-1875*, (Oxford, 1994), 279-313.

comfort of the genteel traveller was matched by neglect of people travelling third-class. The company was simply not interested in poorer passengers: in the six months to July 1841 it had the lowest volume of third class traffic of any railway company, regardless of size.⁶³ It had nobler ends than the carting of those whom Bourne referred to as the “numerous” to and from their places of work. A disavowal of responsibility for an entire class of passengers had, in the Sonning cutting, led to carnage.

Smith’s report concluded with a recommendation to establish minimum standards of third-class passenger safety, and was one of the factors leading to the 1844 legislative requirement for third-class carriages to be clean, moderately comfortable, and safe – the inauguration of the ‘parliamentary carriage’. Unrepentant, the *GWR* resisted this and other attempts by the government to regulate its provision of third-class travel. Poorer passengers continued to experience discomfort, “wholly unprotected from the weather”; according to Latimer, the directorate, reluctant to implement the 1844 legislation, “revenged themselves by inventing a horse-box for the obnoxious caste, and by reducing the speed of the cheap trains to twelve miles an hour”. All this as Gooch’s express engines got faster, and the first-class carriages yet more extravagantly fitted out.⁶⁴

Four months after Sonning the world witnessed its first major railway disaster. It happened in France, not in Britain, and had no direct connection with the *GWR*. Nonetheless, the disaster was felt to have major implications for British railway practice, and that of the *GWR* in particular.

The Meudon disaster of 8 May 1842 was a derailment, followed by a boiler explosion, leading to a fire that spread to the carriages, which were crammed with revellers returning home to Paris from a Versailles

63 PP.1842.XLI *Report of the Officers of the Railway Department*, xii.

64 Booker, *The GWR*, 79-80; C.E.Lee, *Passenger Class Distinctions*, (London, 1946), 15-16, 21-23; Latimer, *Annals of Bristol*, 190-191.

fête.⁶⁵ The heat at the front of the train was so intense that the passengers' jewellery melted, and bodies fused together.⁶⁶ It was difficult to disentangle the flesh from the machinery: estimates of the number killed ranged from 45 to 187. The night of the accident witnessed a near-riot while relatives picked over the debris in a search for traces of loved ones. "At Serves, Meudon and Bellevue, persons are to be seen in a state of distraction running and searching amongst the ashes to endeavour to discover their friends."⁶⁷ The British press recorded these and other details with a shuddering fascination.

Of the three causes bruited for the accident the first, excessive speed, was soon discounted. The train had been moving at no more than 20 mph at the time of the derailment. More decisive were defects in four-wheeled locomotives of the type used on the Versailles line – notably, over-strained axle-rods. That so many people had died was attributed to the two-locomotive haulage system (thereafter discontinued in both France and Britain), the absence of buffers, and the fact that the carriage doors had been locked from the outside, preventing escape.⁶⁸

The specific mechanical causes of the Meudon disaster were of little concern to British observers, who assumed a natural superiority in British locomotive workmanship. National pride was piqued at the rumour that the driver, a Mancunian, had been drunk, but this was refuted.⁶⁹ What worried the British were the locked doors. "Locking-in" was common practice on many railways. Sonning had demonstrated the effects of passengers being inadequately confined to their carriages. Meudon, by contrast, showed that in certain circumstances the carriage was the *least* appropriate place for anybody to be.

After Meudon the GWR was the only major company in Britain to

65 *Siecle*, quoted in *The Times*, 11 May 1842 7.

66 'The Paris Railway Accident - More Victims to Mismanagement', *Mechanics' Magazine*, 36 (1842), 395-397; *Illustrated London News*, 1 (1842), 4.

67 *Railway Times*, 5 (1842), 529-530.

68 *Ibid*, 564-564; PP.1842.XLI. *Copies of Communications from the Board of Trade in reference to locking both the Doors of Railway Carriages*, 1.

69 *Morning Chronicle*, 14 May 1842, 5.

persist with locking-in. Some passengers, Charles Saunders (the company's secretary) argued, were not only a threat to themselves, they also endangered the lives of others. This stance drew a stern rebuke from the state. Companies were not, Samuel Laing stated, responsible for the actions of idiots, suicides or drunkards, but they were liable for the well being of the majority of passengers, those who were not foolish, reckless, wilful or incontinent. He concluded: "in the case of lives being lost in consequence of the passengers being locked up, the blame would be properly attributed to the Directors."⁷⁰

Saunders had written to Laing explaining that locking in was a precaution, not a risk. "If it were done only for the purpose of saving the life of a person devoid of common prudence, or reckless from liquor, and therefore incapable of preserving himself, the system would still seem to be warranted, unless it could be shown that greater danger would ensue therefrom to other passengers", which Saunders of course denied.⁷¹ Others were more forthright. One apologist wrote to the *Railway Times* asserting that passengers should be glad to relinquish responsibility to the company and its employees. The railway passenger was not a rational or responsible agent: he or she needed looking after. George Beauclerc, a GWR director, pursued the point. He argued that it was the "duty" of companies to lock the carriage doors, because if an accident did occur the passengers would be too unhinged to fend for themselves. He made an analogy to the cowardice of soldiers when not disciplined by their officers.⁷² In response, the company's critics did not stint in their scorn. Sydney Smith, finding a fresh hobbyhorse, described locking-in as a violation of a basic political right: "In all other positions of life there is egress where there is ingress. Man is universally the master of his own body, except he chooses to go from Paddington to Bridgewater; there only Habeas Corpus is refused." The GWR treated everybody, regardless of age, sex, status, physical and mental health, as a lunatic,

⁷⁰ PP.1842.XLI. *Communications in reference to locking the Doors of Railway Carriages*, 1.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 7-10.

⁷² *Railway Times*, 5 (1842), 559, 660-662.

fit only for imprisonment. Smith inveighed against “this over-officious care of the public; as if every man who was not a railway director was a child or a fool. But why stop here? Why are not strait-waistcoats used? Why is not the accidental traveller strapped down? Why do contusion and fracture still remain physically possible?”⁷³ Passengers were subjected to “abominable tyranny and perilous imprisonment”, in the event of accidents prevented from pursuing self-preservation, treated as if they lacked all reason. A *Morning Chronicle* correspondent even compared his train to cages at a zoo: “there we were, shut up like felons, stared at like wild beasts, merely to gratify the morbid, if real, and insulting, if assumed, philanthropy of the directors.”⁷⁴ Sam Weller, locked-in during the course of *Master Humphrey’s Clock*, thereby considered the railway “unconstitootional and an inwaser o’privileges” - an ironic reversal, because these were charges often levelled against the executive.⁷⁵

Meudon intensified the debate over whether government should intervene to protect the railway public from companies, with the GWR often being presented as the *sine qua non* of railway negligence. Before Sonning George Stephenson had written to Henry Labouchere warning of the likelihood of disaster on the GWR mainline and urging the Inspectorate to impose safety procedures upon the company: “I am quite sure that some interference on the part of Government is much wanted ... I am convinced that some system should be laid down, to prevent wild and visionary schemes [i.e. Brunel’s], being tried, at the great danger of injury or loss of life to the public.”⁷⁶ Now, George Cayley, author of one of the first studies of railway accidents, argued that after Meudon it was urgent for the government to oversee the installation of buffers on every

73 Sydney Smith, ‘Locking In on Railways’ (1842) in *Selected Writings of Sydney Smith* ed. W.H.Auden, (London, 1957), 311-316: on 312.

74 *Morning Chronicle*, 24 May 1842, 6.

75 Quoted in Richard Altick, *The Presence of the Present: Topics of the Day in the Victorian Novel*, (Ohio, 1991), 188. Cf. Joshua Toulmin Smith, *Government by Commissions Illegal and Pernicious*, (London, 1849).

76 Quoted in Hall, *Railway Detectives*, 18-19.

train in Britain. “[I]t is ... absurd and wicked”, he wrote, “not to have the most rational means of preventing these accidents enforced upon the railway companies by law.” John Robertson, editor of the *Mechanic’s Magazine*, agreed that passenger safety should not be entrusted to railway proprietors and their lackeys, more concerned with profit than with preventing accidents: “we shall wonder greatly if the good sense of society bear much longer with the apathy of railway proprietors, or the empty babble of their apologists.”⁷⁷

The GWR was not alone in opposing the legislative imposition of safety procedures, but its motives were unusual. “I do not conceive,” Brunel had told a select committee in 1841, “that it is to the advantage of the public, in the management of the railway system, that any power should be given to the Board of Trade, or any central body, to issue regulations for the management of the concern.”⁷⁸ The mistake lay in thinking of British railways as a network, the same in all its parts, which in turn should be held to a common standard. A railway company, Brunel stated, depended upon the essentially *local* management of human and mechanical resources. External regulation, whether executive or by agreement of private interests, was superfluous, if not downright detrimental. Instead, it was “by gradual and progressive improvements in all the little details, that the risk of accident is diminished; and it is by that alone that the risk of danger will be removed.”⁷⁹ Goods and property damaged, people killed and injured, were not properly the concern of the State. The railway accident, according to Brunel, was the province of middle management.

GWR tardiness in responding to Sonning and Meudon exposed the limitations of this approach to railway operations, limitations, it seemed, apparent to all but the GWR. As public fears about accidents grew, the

77 George Cayley, *Essay on the Prevention of Railway Accidents*, (London, 1842); idem, ‘On the Late Accident on the Paris & Versailles Railway’, *Mechanics’ Magazine*, 36 (1842), 397-398; Robertson’s comments are on p396 of the same issue.

78 PP 1841.VIII *Select Committee on the Prevention of Accidents upon Railways*, 43-49.

79 Ibid. Context for this kind of argument can be found in Otto Mayr, *Authority, Liberty & Automatic Machinery in Early Modern Europe*, (Baltimore, 1986).

company made little visible effort to alleviate the risk. Third-class passengers were crammed into wagons from which precipitation was a constant threat. Those fortunate enough to travel first-class experienced speed and comfort, but at the cost of a loss of liberty that had, at Meudon, proved fatal. Bourne's lithographs have come down to us wreathed in antique glamour; to contemporaries, though, they must have appeared more than a little hollow.⁸⁰

4. WAR: THE COMPANY VERSUS THE STATE

Brunel's belief that all railways were different and should be treated differently was not common currency. It was much more common to hold to the opposite, that the railway network was founded on the maintenance of precise and uniform standards, and that deviations from those standards were harmful to the national interest:

Throughout the whole, the machinery is adjusted on one plan to the smallest fraction of an inch; the parts at Bristol or at Birmingham must fit the parts in London with the accuracy of clockwork. In point of time, the combination must be no less complete and exact. It is to defects in that special point of combination that we attribute the greater number of accidents; and in order to prevent these accidents, we are, with all diligence and anxiety, perfecting the existing system of combination, until at last every movement throughout the whole will be regulated by the spirit of unity.⁸¹

The 'defect' was the broad gauge. With the boom in railway construction in mid-decade, the GWR sent lines south into Dorset, Devon and Cornwall, west into South Wales, and north towards Gloucester and Birmingham. Expansion brought a problem that had seemed distant in

80 Klingender, *Art and the Industrial Revolution*, 140.

81 Thornton Hunt, *Unity of the Iron Network*, (London, 1846), 23-24. On the GWR as an affront to standards see Tim Alborn, *Conceiving Companies: Joint-stock Politics in Victorian England*, (London, 1998), 175-180; and on technical standards more generally, M. Norton Wise, 'Precision: Agent of Unity and Product of Agreement', in Wise, ed., *The Values Of Precision*, (Princeton, 1995), 222-236.

the 1830s, when the decision had been made to adopt the broad gauge. What would happen when, as was now inevitable, the broad gauge network met up with the narrow?

The weak link turned out to be Gloucester: Bristol trains entered on the broad gauge, Birmingham trains on the narrow. With travellers and traders severely inconvenienced, in the summer of 1845 – after some vigorous politicking from Richard Cobden on behalf of the narrow gauge interest – Parliament voted for a Royal Commission to investigate the problems that had arisen, and were likely to arise in the future, from breaks of gauge on the expanding railway network.⁸²

The Commission comprised Frederic Smith, now retired from the Railway Inspectorate but still a senior figure in the Royal Engineers; George Biddell Airy, head of the Greenwich Observatory; and Peter Barlow, Professor of Mathematics at the Woolwich Military Academy. Smith was an experienced, if not universally respected, railwayman. Airy and Barlow's scientific credentials were thought to be a guarantee of rigour.⁸³ It is worth examining their activities in some detail, because these furnish an unusually vivid example of how nineteenth-century 'reason' – in this case, the idea that the railway network was precisely that, a network, all of the component parts of which should be held to a common standard – could be instantiated in and through the state ap-

82 *Hansard* 3rd Series, LXXXI (1845), 'Debate of the Oxford & Wolverhampton Railway Bill', 971-1002: on 971-972. Cobden's initial amendment to the Oxford & Wolverhampton Bill was defeated by 247 votes to 113, after Peel made a speech implying that it would be injurious to the "private interests" of the GWR; Cobden then moved for the establishment of a Gauge Commission unattached to the specific issue of the Oxford & Wolverhampton Railway, and this was carried *nem con*. A number of MPs, lobbied by narrow gauge companies, shared Cobden's anti-broad gauge fervour. On 9 June G.C.Glyn, chairman of the *London & Birmingham*, had written to the *Midlands and Great North England* Railways urging them to 'write to all Members of Parliament with whom you are connected' and bring to their attention 'the importance of this contest between the two systems'. See the Royal Greenwich Observatory, 'Gauge Commission', Archive **RGO** 6/291/3 86.

83 Alan Chapman, 'Science and the Public Good: George Biddell Airy and the concept of a Scientific Civil Servant' in Nicholas Rupke (ed) *Science, Politics and the Public Good*, (London, 1988), 36-62, esp. 44. Airy would later do government work on metropolitan sewers, the Ordnance Survey, the Great Exhibition, and coinage reform. See A.J.Meadows, *Greenwich Observatory Volume II: Recent History, 1836-1975*, (London, 1975), 110.

paratus.⁸⁴ The GWR, of course, fought this idea every step of the way, and not without some short-term success. But in so doing it very publicly forfeited any claim to disinterest – and thus to having the interests of the wider travelling public at its heart.

It was assumed that there *was* a solution to the gauge problem, one that would still the voices of faction and advance only the national interest. This hope was not realized. Supporters of the narrow gauge insisted on “the great benefit of UNIFORMITY OF SYSTEM - of a NATIONAL GAUGE”, which the broad gauge was undermining. The *Railway Chronicle*, in a histrionic editorial, demanded that the commissioners recognise this fact. “Their decision, if for the public interest, will reflect on them personal credit and enduring gratitude”. But if the Commission ruled in favour of a dual gauge network it would be overwhelmed “with neverending disgrace.”⁸⁵ Broad gauge apologists claimed that the narrow gauge interest wanted only to prevent the advantages of speed and comfort from being more widely enjoyed. “The Broad Gauge and the Narrow Gauge” one wag scoffed. “The meaning of these phrases depends, in a great measure, upon whether you happen to have shares in the Great Western or the North Western Line. If you are a proprietor of the former, the narrow gauge is a paltry humbug;- if of the latter, the broad gauge is an extravagant quackery.”⁸⁶

The Commission was diligent and aspired to even-handedness. Circulars were sent to all railway companies. To the same end the commissioners travelled widely, to Gloucester, Birmingham, Norwich, York, Winchester, Croydon, Paris, negotiating surly workmen, hysterical stationmasters and abusive engineers. Transshipment machineries were tested. They visited the Clearing House in Drummond Street, to see how far the break of gauge disrupted the through-ticket system. They poured over the *Times*, *Railway Times*, *Railway Record*, *Railway Jour-*

84 On which generally see Philip Corrigan and Derek Sayer, *The Great Arch: English State Formation as Cultural Revolution*, (Oxford, 1985).

85 *Railway Chronicle*, 22 November 1845, 1897-1898.

86 A.B.Reach, *The Comic Bradshaw: or, Bubbles from the Boiler*, (London, 1848), 39.

nal, Railway Gazette, and Railway Chronicle. They called nearly fifty witnesses to the committee room; the GWR complicated matters by insisting that a broad gauge representative sit in on all interviews. Between July and February Airy devoted over ninety days to Commission duties, losing priority over the discovery of Neptune in the process.⁸⁷

Majority opinion favoured the narrow gauge. This was itself problematic. Cobden objected to the break of gauge because it restricted freedom of trade and nurtured local monopolies. But from another perspective the gauge war was perfect railway competition. Passengers benefited from larger carriages, higher speeds and greater reliability; shareholders and speculators from generous dividends; contractors and engineers from the sheer volume of business. A decision for the narrow gauge would create a monopoly in place of profitable rivalry. The broad gauge was, after all, the only real alternative to the standard railway machineries developed by the Stephensons. Lord Hatherton, the voice of the GWR in the Lords, spoke in this regard of “the necessity of maintaining the principle of competing lines between all the great towns in the kingdom.”⁸⁸ Worse, enforced uniformity of gauge would do the GWR a clear injustice. The company had acted in good faith. Why should it now suffer at the hands of Parliament? If, as opponents demanded, it were forced to convert to the narrow gauge, how could it be compensated?⁸⁹

What the commissioners needed were objective facts on the relative merits of the two systems. If the broad gauge were indeed faster and smoother, without a sacrifice of efficiency, it would be wrong to legislate it out of existence. Alternatively, the less accurate the GWR’s puffery, the less justifiable its singularity. Accordingly, the Commission arranged

87 **RGO** 6/284; 6/291; 6/309 3,4,12. For Airy and Neptune see Alan Chapman, ‘Private Research and Public Duty: George Biddell Airy and the search for Neptune’, *Journal of the History of Astronomy*, 19 (1988), 121-139.

88 *Hansard* 3rd Series, LXXXIV (1846). From this point of view the GWR was supported by *Bradshaw’s Gazette*, for which uniformity of gauge portended a state monopoly, the spectre that had haunted this journal since before the 1844 Railway Act. See *Bradshaw’s Railway Gazette*, 28 February 1846, 464-465.

89 PP.1846.XVI *Report of the Commissioners appointed to inquire into the Merits of the Broad and Narrow Gauge*.

two sets of experiments for December 1845, to be conducted by the interested parties but subject to strict protocols. First, broad gauge engines were tested for speed, oscillation, and the power/weight ratio on the fifty-three mile stretch between Paddington and Didcot. Two weeks later the experiments were repeated with narrow gauge engines on the forty-five mile stretch connecting York and Darlington. One commissioner and a representative of the rival system had to be present throughout.⁹⁰

The broad gauge was quicker, but its high speeds were accompanied by violent oscillations. "It is questionable", the commissioners wrote, "whether this contest for speed ought to be carried to any greater length." Regarding efficiency the results marginally favoured the narrow gauge. The commissioners were cautious, holding only that broad gauge working costs were higher, and that "there is no economy in the locomotive expenses resulting from working a line on the broad gauge system." Although ceding no absolute advantage to either gauge, the experiments did prove that claims for the superiority of the broad were unfounded.⁹¹

Predictably, the GWR rejected these conclusions. The narrow gauge interest had insisted that the experiments be conducted on short, flat stretches of line. Saunders wrote to the commissioners pointing out that this nullified the broad gauge's advantages in power and speed. He also claimed that GWR witnesses had not been granted access to the narrow gauge engines, as they had been promised. On both counts he was ignored. Later the company hinted that its own experiments had been sabotaged by "some Narrow Gauge fanatic", and that results favourable to the broad gauge were glossed over in the commissioners' report.⁹² It also resorted to ad hominem attacks on the commissioners, casting aspersions on their competence and disinterest. ⁹³Claims to ob-

90 Nokes, *History of the GWR*, 134-141.

91 PP.1846.XVI *Report on the Broad and Narrow Gauge*, 12-19.

92 **RGO** 6/292 151-154; Nokes, *History of the GWR*, 136-141.

93 [I.K.Brunel, Daniel Gooch & Charles Saunders], *Observations on the Report of the Gauge Commissioners*, (Bristol, 1846); Gooch, *Memoirs and Diary*, 49-51. These attacks drew a ↗

jectivity – whether deriving from the commissioners’ executive status, or from experiment – could not be countenanced by the beleaguered company.⁹⁴

The commissioners’ report, published in February 1846, stated unequivocally the necessity of uniformity of gauge. Airy and Barlow worried about the fairness of requiring the GWR to convert; Smith was adamant that, in the long run, it would have to convert.⁹⁵ The local advantages the broad gauge offered were outweighed by the disadvantage of the break at Gloucester. None of the proposed transshipment mechanisms were likely to be effective. The *GWR* system was too exclusive: “esteeming the importance of the highest speed on express trains for the accommodation of a comparative small number of persons ... as of far less moment than affording increased convenience to the general commercial traffic of the country, we are inclined to consider the narrow gauge as that which should be preferred for general convenience”. The commissioners concluded by advising Parliament to legislate for all future lines to be built on the narrow gauge. The question of what should happen to existing broad gauge lines was unresolved.⁹⁶

This modest attempt at a solution was emasculated by a Board of Trade committee sympathetic to the *GWR*’s objections. The commissioners had paid too much heed to the situation at Gloucester and not enough to the superiorities of the wider gauge. In addition, they had failed to consider that “the advance of science and the course of experience may point out a practicable method of altering an existing gauge,

↘ memorable riposte from Lord Clarendon, who said that, railwaymen having failed to agree on anything, the executive would have to do the agreeing for them: “There was not a single engineer who had not been examined before some Commission or Committee, and there were scarcely two of them who agreed in opinion respecting the gauges” (*Hansard 3rd Series*, LXXXVIII (1846), 107.

94 On the historical interpretation of experiment see the essays collected in D.Gooding, T. Pinch & S.Schaffer, *The Uses of Experiment: Studies in the Natural Sciences*, (Cambridge, 1989); and on the problematic of technology and experiment, Harry Collins & Trevor Pinch, *The Golem at Large: What You Should Know about Technology*, (Cambridge, 1998).

95 See the drafts of the individual commissioners’ recommendations, **RGO** 6/284/7 and 6/284/8.

96 PP.1846.XVI. *Report on the Broad and Narrow Gauge*, 19.

and of easily effecting a great operation which is now generally considered to be so costly and so difficult as, in truth, to be impracticable.” Just because, for example, the transshipment problem was currently insurmountable did not mean that it would remain so. The Lords, acting on the Board of Trade’s advice, amended the Gauge Act to enable all lines connecting to the *GWR* to be built on the broad gauge, a concession that left things much as they had been in 1845.⁹⁷

The Commission’s proposals may have been diluted, but they did mark a new stage in the conflict. The broad gauge interest was forced onto the defensive. For all that the amended Gauge Act, passed on 12 August 1846, did little to harm the broad gauge, opinion was perceived to be shifting against it. “[T]he public is against us,” wrote one *GWR* shareholder. The broad gauge had failed to benefit its proprietors - dividends were still low - and it was not going to benefit anybody else. “It is the belief ... of not a few of us that we made a great mistake for our own interests in humouring our engineer with his eccentric hobby. In making this sacrifice we have likewise failed to secure any compensating public good.”⁹⁸ A three-page spread in the 6 June issue of the *Illustrated London News* famously captured the disillusionment. The article set out to make readers who had never set foot in Gloucester sensible of the impact on ordinary human lives of this question of “parallel lines, essentially stiff, mechanical and monotonous”, of the sufferings the *GWR* had inflicted. The pictures showed cases smashed by inattentive porters, terrified horses manhandled between broad and narrow gauge wagons, women and children bewildered, in tears tyrannized by dark-visaged officials in *GWR* livery. “Gentle Reader,” the newspaper counselled, “you now have a theory of what *Break of Gauge* is. If you chance to travel yourself between Birmingham or Cheltenham and Bristol, you will sensibly *feel* it.” And, if the *GWR* had its way, if it were

97 PP.1846.XXXVII. *Minute of the Committee of Privy Council for Trade relative to Gauge of Railways*, 2-5; MacDermot, *History of the GWR*, I.124.

98 MacDermot, *History of the GWR*, I.101; [Anon], *To the Proprietors of the Great Western Railway*, (privately distributed among *GWR* shareholders, 1846), 1.

successful in its projections, these scenes would be repeated throughout the country.⁹⁹

The narrow gaugers had earlier made much of the defection of Wyndham Harding, former general manager of the *Birmingham & Gloucester Railway*, who at a meeting of Birmingham businessmen in 1845 had admitted the break of gauge to be “a serious evil”. Now, with the government unable to decide either way, their efforts intensified. Henry Cole’s considerable reputation as a public servant was put to work on behalf of the *London & North Western Railway*, the largest of the narrow gauge companies. In May, at Cole’s behest, Thackeray contributed a couple of gentle but telling satires on “that *nashnal newsance* - THE BREAK OF GAUGE” to *Punch*. Samuel Sidney devoted a four hundred and fifty page book to the subject, including a complete transcript of the evidence given before the Commission. By his reckoning, only three of the forty-seven witnesses called had supported the wider gauge. GWR responses came to seem thin and ineffectual. However quick broad gauge trains, however comfortable the first class carriages, these could not make up for the confusions so starkly displayed at Gloucester. As Harding put it, “punctuality ... is even more desirable than speed of conveyance.” The broad gauge campaign came to be focused on the hapless figure of Henry Lushington, late of Trinity College, Cambridge, whose effusions were the subject of much derision amongst the hard-nosed hacks of the railway press.¹⁰⁰

Speed and opulence without “punctuality and economy” were of little use to the ordinary passenger. “In going to the races nothing can equal the Great Western”, Sidney sneered: even if “it must be confessed that there was something imposing and grand about [Brunel’s] scheme

99 *Illustrated London News*, 6 June 1846, 368-370; [Anon], *A Railway Traveller’s Reasons for Adopting Uniformity of Gauge*, (London, 1846).

100 Wyndham Harding, *Evils of a Diversity of Gauge and a Remedy*, (London, 1845), 21; [Henry Cole], *Railway Eccentrics: Inconsistencies of Men of Genius*, (London, 1846); *idem*, *Fifty Years of Public Work*, 2 Vols., (London, 1884), I.77-83; W.M.Thackeray, ‘Jeames on the Gauge Question’, *Punch*, 10 (1846), Nos.253, 257; Sidney, *Gauge Evidence*; H.Lushington, *The Broad and the Narrow Gauge; or, Remarks on the Report of The Gauge Commissioners*, (Westminster, 1846).

well calculated to fascinate aspiring spirits”, all the broad gauge amounted to was monumental ambition, a project that paid insufficient regard to the requirements of the present. It was a victim of its celebrated singularity: “The magnificent exclusiveness of the broad gauge is broken up for ever. It mustn’t and it can’t live in isolation; the country won’t consent to the existence of a West End in railways.”¹⁰¹

Elements of Colin Garratt’s nostalgia are now in clearer focus: the bucolic monumentality; the ambiguous rhetoric of interest; the tension between phrases like “properly co-ordinated” and “logic”, and the insistence upon personal communion with the objects of nostalgic desire. Corollaries to the forms of that desire can be found in the strategies adopted by the GWR first to assert its singularity, and then to shore it up against rival interests, state prerogatives, alternative visions of the railway future. It is, I would argue, no accident that the GWR holds a special place in the nostalgic’s affections. But what cannot be gleaned from the company’s early history – except, in embryo, in Bourne’s lithographs – is the origin of Garratt’s “rosy glow”. The mixture of meretricious hauteur and commercial squalor, shown most starkly in the company’s reaction to Sonning, would not on the face of it appear to be a propitious ground for fondness. But fondness – love – is the desideratum. For this it will be necessary to follow Garratt into the true ‘Golden Age’ – the interwar period that also, not coincidentally, witnessed a renaissance in the GWR’s fortunes.

5. WHERE THEY WERE HEADED

In the end, the ineffectuality of the state apparatus with regard to railway matters, and the residual strength of the regional model of railway development, postponed the process of gauge conversion until the mid-1860s.¹⁰² By 1876 all GWR territory north and east of the Severn Bridge had been converted, with the exception of the Paddington-Bristol

101 Sidney, *Gauge Evidence*, xix, xxxvii; *Fraser’s Magazine*, 33, (1846), 748.

102 Alborn, *Conceiving Companies*, passim.

line, which continued to carry broad gauge expresses. The last of these ran on 20 May 1892, the date usually taken to commemorate the end of the broad gauge in Britain (although a few branch services remained).¹⁰³

Gauge conversion was expensive and compounded a waning in the GWR following the 1866 banking crash, from which it took the company over twenty-five years to recover. It had grown too big for its own good, and passenger services in particular suffered. Third class passengers were still barred from the faster trains, and even in the comforts it provided to the higher class of traveller the GWR fell behind its competitors. The company came to exemplify a kind of organizational sclerosis. It had become, Edward Foxwell wrote in 1889, “stolid”, operating “with the immovability of Jove”.¹⁰⁴

Recovery came in the late 1890s, in a conscious effort to recapture the singularity of old. Tracks were re-laid, more powerful engines commissioned, dining cars introduced, at first only in first class but soon open to all, carriages equipped with lavatories and heaters. Speed and comfort were once more GWR priorities, a fact it advertised with self-conscious reference to what could now, from a safe distance, be represented as the company’s glory days:

On the excellencies of the Great Western in the matter of speed and smoothness of travelling it is almost needless to dwell. The trains of the Great Western Railway are noted for comfort, just as its road-beds have been famous for smooth-running since the days of the great G.W.R. engineer, Brunel. The latest-model G.W.R. passenger coaches are the best that modern science and expert workmanship can produce. In completeness of detail, artistic taste, appointments and finish the principal G.W.R. corridor expresses vie with any trains in the world. Large and comfortable smoking rooms are provided ... and the Restaurant Cars on these fast trains are some of the finest railway carriages running.... Some of the Great Western Expresses are famous as the fastest and most luxurious in the world, and represent un-

103 MacDermot, *History of the Great Western Railway, 1863-1921*, rev. ed. C.R.Clinker, (London, 1964), 1-38; Rolt, *Brunel*, 347-348.

104 MacDermot, *History of the GWR*, II.208.

doubtedly the last word in modern travel-comfort.¹⁰⁵

By 1906, when this was written, the *GWR* could again present itself as “the best”, “the finest”, “the fastest and most luxurious”, now not just in Britain but the world. But while the grandiloquence was familiar, this was a new form of puffery, with new targets, people travelling neither for business nor at a gentleman’s leisure, but on that compromise between the two, a summer holiday. The company now styling itself “the Holiday Line *par excellence* of the British Empire” was increasingly dependent on the custom of middle class urban dwellers eager to escape the stresses of work and the squalor of the city. Luxuries were no longer provided because passengers expected them as a matter of course, but because for most they were not an everyday occurrence. “Day by day it is more and more apparent that some period of rest and relaxation ... is rapidly becoming one of the essentials of our exciting twentieth century existence”, holiday-makers were advised. “What was once a question of caprice and luxury is now a necessity if the danger of a breakdown is to be avoided.” In recognition of the importance of relaxation travellers were assured that they could relinquish all responsibility for their holiday to the *GWR*, which would arrange everything from hotel bookings to day-trips to campsites. The company even guaranteed local hospitality, eliding the fact that especially after the War rural interests regarded the thickening tourist stream with much disquiet. “Landowners and farmers are invariably ready to help in every way to make campers comfortable” the company breezily asserted, adding: “when possible an inspection of the ground beforehand is advisable.”¹⁰⁶

Despite the change in constituency, traces of the old gentility remained, notably in the importance attached to the transatlantic steamer

105 *Holiday Haunts in England and Wales: A Guide to the Holiday Resorts served by the GWR*, (London, 1911), (1st ed. 1906), 13.

106 *Holiday Haunts*, 11; *Camping Holidays*, (London, 1927), 3; *The Ideal Holiday Lands of the GWR*, (London, 1927) (“Present-day railway facilities make it easy for the people of the North and Midlands to visit these lovely parts of the country”).

trade; Fishguard gained a main line, a terminus and a Gothic hotel between 1899 and 1906, and after the War Plymouth was the focus of similar attentions.¹⁰⁷ Closer to home, *haute-cuisine* dining cars, baths and a hair-dressing saloon on Paddington's No.1 platform, and the christening of the Plymouth holiday train 'The Cornish Riviera Express' imbued the company, and by association its customers, with at least the semblance of glamour. Authentic or not, the GWR's combination of preening and mass marketing was as successful as it was shameless; in 1924 Felix Pole, the source of many of these developments, announced an 8% dividend.¹⁰⁸

The GWR presented its jazz-age comforts as a complement to the pleasures of the past. The Riviera Express was not only "the Holiday line *par excellence*", but also "The Line to Legend Land". The historical "associations" of South-West England, 'The Land of the *Mayflower*', home to such disparate deceased luminaries as Walter Raleigh, the Pilgrim Fathers, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, were strenuously puffed from GWR bookstalls. The company counted itself among the attractions, with Brunel accorded the same kind of mythical treatment as Tintagel.¹⁰⁹ It invited customers to indulge in the rueful pleasure of mourning the passage of time, hitching potentially critical reflection to commerce; the pasts evoked were not intended to be interrogated, simply consumed. The story of the broad gauge was rewritten as a romance, a period of childish infatuation which the mature company could now afford to recall with indulgence, or as the occasion of a trifling disagreement between two good friends, Brunel and Robert Stephenson. Under the new dispensation, the exclusivity of the GWR's original commitment to speed and comfort, at odds with its present mass demo-

107 MacDermot, *History of the GWR*, II.18-228; O.S.Nock, *History of the Great Western Railway, 1923-1947*, (London, 1967), 18-23.

108 *Holiday Haunts*; Nock, *History of the GWR*, 13.

109 *Devon: The Lovely Land of the 'Mayflower'*, 6th Ed., (London, 1924); *Legend Land, Being a Collection of some of the Old Tales in those Western Parts of Britain served by the Great Western Railway*, 4 Vols., (London, 1922-1923); *Brunel and After: The Romance of the Great Western Railway*, (London, 1924).

graphic, underwent a subtle reconfiguration. The mass-holiday itself was designed to occupy, in memories triggered by advertising promising so much for so little, a golden age: “There is so much health and happiness to be gained by a camping holiday, for such an infinitesimal outlay, that those who have once experienced its joys rarely fail to fall under its bohemian spell.” Of course, puffery opened up a gap between life and ideality, but this was largely the point. The desire to take a “good old-fashioned” holiday was more important than the holiday itself, because after all it was desire that sustained workers through the other fifty dreary weeks of the year, desire that would lay identical plans for next summer.¹¹⁰ Like other railway companies, but more successfully, the GWR turned nostalgia to profit by realizing that the yearning for something and sometime better must be provoked, but never consummated. The railway, Charles Madge and Tom Harrison wrote in 1937, specifically citing GWR advertising, “has given us a different conception of space, of speed and of power. It has rendered possible mass activities - the Cup Final, the monster rally, the seaside holiday, the hiking excursion - whose ramifying effects on our behaviour extend almost beyond imagination.”¹¹¹

One of the most popular *GWR* enticements was W.G.Chapman’s *A Railway Book for Boys of all Ages*, first published in 1923 and running through six editions by the end of the decade. Guiding readers through the various operations of the 10.30 a.m. Plymouth Express, this turned the carriage into a classroom, albeit one with “no horrible equations to worry you, and the *GWR* into an friendly master, firm where it needed to be but happy to indulge the appetites of youth, whether for technological fantasy or strawberries with clotted cream, a comforting presence

110 *Camping Holidays*, 2; *Holiday Haunts*, 11.

111 Charles Madge & Tom Harrison, *Mass-Observation*, (London, 1937), 15-16. For this movement see Angus Calder, ‘Mass-Observation 1937-1949’ in M.Bulmer (ed.), *Essays on the History of British Sociological Research*, (Cambridge, 1985), 121-136. See also the comments on the GWR in Arthur Elton, *British Railways*, (London, 1945), 26-29: perhaps the earliest explicit formulation, with reference to railways, of the link between monumentality and the nostalgic imagination.

on the journey into knowledge and adulthood.¹¹² The lessons were familiar ones. Machines are fetishized, to stress the mystery of their working and the power of the men who work them; the locomotive “suggests the embodiment of concentrated power, and appears to be straining at the leash and anxious to stretch herself to full capacity. Driver and fireman ... are obviously proud of their charge.” Expository chapters on engines, signals and safety interrupt the narrative, promising the pupil that under the GWR’s aegis he too might achieve railway mastery. Speed, the ultimate expression of such mastery, can once more be celebrated. Thanks to Brunel, Gooch and the other GWR pioneers the permanent way is “generally admitted to be one of the finest in the world ... there is an almost entire lack of vibration”; the Paddington-Swindon express service is “the fastest booked start-to-stop run in the British Isles”, with a top speed of 102 mph. The GWR is “The line that put the ees in speed”; on the record-breaking Swindon run “the travelling was so curiously smooth that, but for the sound, it was difficult to believe we were moving at all”.¹¹³

GWR machineries are almost literally good enough to eat. Early in the trip Chapman points to “the beauty of the 70-footer coaches, resplendent in their chocolate and cream ... colours with sweet associations for schoolboys”; later the road’s smoothness is demonstrated by the stability of a bottle of ginger beer on a dining car table. The boy is on holiday; equally, it is important for him to understand the connection between railways and the production of the goods it is his pleasure to consume. Just past Southall, Scott’s Emulsion Laboratory and the Gramophone Company Works have “direct access to Britain’s premier railway”, and other concerns are invited to “Settle on the Great Western”. Freight traffic is scarcely romantic, and must wait until more exciting topics have been exhausted, but it is in the “conveyance of commodities” that the real, manly work of the GWR is done: “all means

112 W.G.Chapman, *The 10.30 Limited: A Railway Book for Boys of all Ages*, 3rd Ed., (London, 1923), i, 21.

113 Ibid, 2-3, 65-67, 106-109.

money in the traders' pockets, as less capital is locked up in stock, and less storage accommodation has to be provided than was formerly the case."¹¹⁴

Self-promotion is a constant strain. The GWR is "Britain's premier railway", "has always been noted for its wonderful train speeds", "is the only railway which under the grouping¹¹⁵ maintains its name"; the permanent way is "one of the finest in the world" and the Severn Tunnel is "the largest underwater railway tunnel in the world"; Paddington is a panorama of "Hustle without confusion" and passengers are subjected to the "old-time courtesy of G.W.R. employees." The book ends by admonishing readers who have, despite all Chapman's efforts, not been impressed enough: "From the knowledge you have gained ... you will, I think, be able to realise what a wonderful thing a modern railway is, and particularly (note this please) what a wonderful railway the Great Western is".¹¹⁶ The problem, as the author understood, was that awe could no longer be counted upon as a response to travelling by rail; the lures of "aeronautics, wireless, telephony, and other wonders of this twentieth century" were as strong, if not stronger. There is consequently something almost frantic about his repeated assertion of GWR singularity, as if the end was already in sight. 1924 would be the first year in which competition from the automobile significantly affected railway profits.¹¹⁷ In that "note this please" lay eighty years of embattled and vainglorious history; and also, finally, the first sounding of defeat.

One irony of the GWR's history is that, initially so exclusive, it would be remembered more fondly, and by a larger number of people, than any other British railway. This irony rests on another, more complex one. As early as the 1860s the broad gauge was a source of embarrassment, a mark of failure in a culture driven by dividends. Yet Brunel's achievement was never forgotten. In the early years of the

114 Ibid, 8, 72-73, 113-115.

115 Grouping rationalized all U.K. railways into four companies, of which the GWR was one. It came into effect on 1 January 1923.

116 Chapman, *The 10.30 Limited*, 106, 116, 121.

117 Nock, *History of the GWR*, 20.

twentieth century the GWR discovered, belatedly, that speed was still marketable. So was the company's own history. The enduring image of the GWR thus emerges in a dialectic between the so-called 'Golden Age of Railways' and the company's heroic broad gauge past. Unsurprisingly, a great deal was lost in the process. The GWR's new constituency was unlikely to be much interested in tales of battling interests and commercial squalor: they got too much of that at home.¹¹⁸ Holidaymakers wanted, or were perceived to want, heroes, romance, comfort, continuity. In a nice twist, it now paid the GWR to deny that things had ever been, or ever would be, other than as they always already were.

"Do railway nostalgics eternally wish they were small boys?" The answer is: Yes, they do. They are forever seeking to emerge into a condition that has always already been achieved, and always already lost. I will conclude with speculations on three forms of this peculiar dream-state with resonances in the history of the GWR.

The first is that the conviction of *absolute* difference involves the nostalgic in a principled refusal of any argument that matters are *contingently* other than how the nostalgic represents them as being. Thus, the GWR's peremptory dismissal of the findings of the Gauge Commission can be mapped directly onto John Tyme's position that public inquiries are invalidated by dint of being *inquiries*: and both find expression in Garratt's "which tails can wag the dog". Nostalgic romance-narratives must not engage with any more 'rationalist' modes of procedure.

Second, assertions of singularity are generally accompanied by attempts to impose that singularity upon others. Thus can be understood the GWR's conception of its duty of care, and the mysterious ease with which Garratt can move from "solace" to statements of public policy. And, insofar as railway nostalgia is restorative nostalgia, it will always contain some or other principle of exclusion. This is what we see in the

118 On issues relating to the de-politicization of leisure see G.Stedman Jones, 'Class Expression versus Social Control? A critique of recent trends in the social history of leisure', in *Languages of Class*, (Cambridge, 1983), 76-89.

odd investments in warmth and alienation in Bourne's lithographs, in *Rain, Steam, and Speed*, and in Garratt's appropriation of the pictures of Arthur Mace. Garratt draws inspiration from the photographs. But for one uninfected by the nostalgia bug there is something slightly dreadful about them, opening out as they do onto a world impervious to doubt and, to all appearances, emptied of humanity.

Whose fault is that? How much sympathy does the professional historian owe the nostalgic? More, it might be thought, than has been on offer in this essay. I have to admit to a certain impatience, and a certain unease, with Garratt's style of railway nostalgia. The impatience and unease both stem, I think, from how clichéd it is, with its artless juggling of the archaic ("how vested interests can prevail") and the colloquial ("which tails can wag the dog"). Where does this language of the dream-state come from? From advertising hoardings and holiday brochures, from "Brunel for ever! Hurrah!" and "The line that put the ees in speed." The eternal boyishness of Garratt's prose recalls for me Orwell's warning that it is when we are at our most naïve, our most unguarded, that our dreaming selves become naked to the understandings of commerce.¹¹⁹ At the risk of sententiousness, I would venture that, above all, it is to resist *this* that railway nostalgia must also be resisted.

119 George Orwell, 'Boy's Weeklies' (1940), in *Essays*, (Harmondsworth, 1984), 78-100.