

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



The Railway Man

Eric Lomax

Eric Lomax

THE RAILWAY MAN

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FOR
ELIZABETH SUTHERLAND LOMAX
(1877–1942)

AND HER GRANDCHILDREN, LINDA,
ERIC AND CHARMAINE,
WHO NEVER KNEW THE STORY.

AND FOR MY WIFE PATTI
WITHOUT WHOSE SUPPORT
THE STORY WOULD NEVER
HAVE BEEN TOLD.

THE RAILWAY MAN

Eric Lomax was born in 1919. He now lives in Berwick-upon-Tweed.

This book owes an immeasurable debt to the creativity and skill of Neil Belton. His invaluable contribution to the final text far exceeded the usual relationship between author and publisher. It is true to say that without his help I would not have been able to give final form to so much that I have reflected on for the past fifty years.

I am alive, and was dead ... Write therefore the things which thou hast seen.

Revelation, I, vv. 18–19

Burma-Siam Railway 1942-45

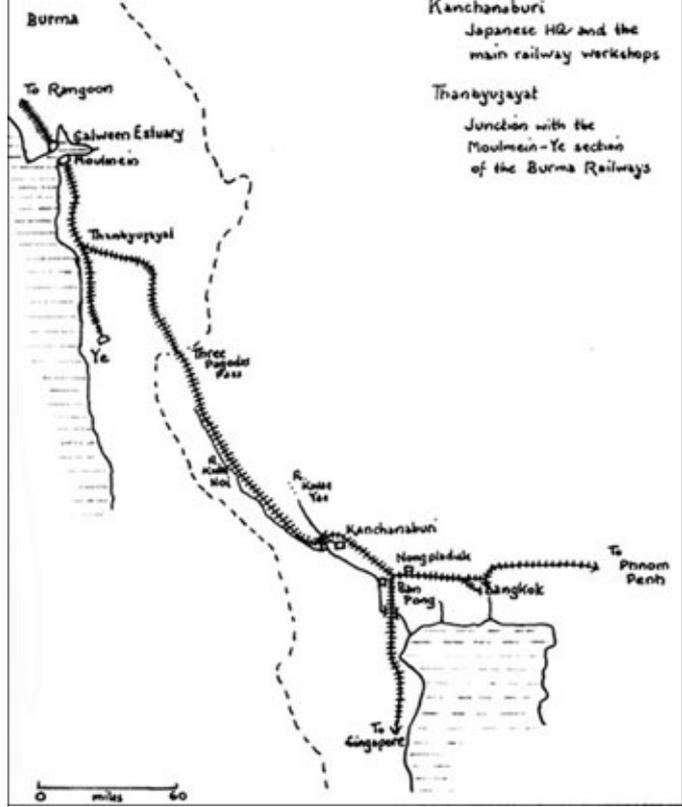


Ban Pong
Terminal point of the
POW trains from Singapore

Nongpladuk
Starting point of the Railway

Kanchanaburi
Japanese HQ and the
main railway workshops

Thanbyujayat
Junction with the
Moulmein-Ye section
of the Burma Railways



CHAPTER ONE

I HAVE A PAINTING in the hallway of my house in Berwick-upon-Tweed, by the Scottish artist Duncan Mackellar. It is a large work set in St Enoch Station in Glasgow on a dusty summer evening in the 1880s. A woman in late middle age, dressed in dark and modest clothes and carrying a parasol, standing tense and distraught, looking out beyond us, oblivious of any other presence. Behind her the high smoke-grimed glass and wrought-iron walls of the station rise up. She is gazing off the edge of the platform at a vanishing train, so that we see her through the eyes of a receding traveller, and she has the flat restrained face of a person who has learned to swallow grief. Her sudden loneliness is captured as she strains to keep an image of her child, or so we assume, who is on the train heading for the emigrant ship or a colonial war – India, Afghanistan, the Gold Coast.

Although it is a conventional image, it is genuinely moving. I have always loved it. Railway stations have always attracted me, not just because trains are there, but because they are always ambivalent places, echoing with completed journeys and shrill with the melancholy noises of departure. Mackellar's painting is about the inevitability of separation, the cost of journeying. And we have never created any sound so evocative of separation as the whistle of a steam locomotive, the high note of inhuman relief as vaporized water is blown off and meets the cold air.

Once in the 1970s I went to St Enoch and stood on the platform at the spot that Mackellar's painting creates for the viewer, and the back of the great shed, like an enormous Victorian conservatory, seemed hardly to have changed. The station was not yet quite disused and silent, though a few years later it was destroyed, like so many of the other steam cathedrals. That age is gone now, finally, but the reality of grief, and the consequences of grief, of which Mackellar caught something in his painting, are not so easily banished.

The passion for trains and railways is, I have been told, incurable. I have also learned that there is no cure for torture. These two afflictions have been intimately linked in the course of my life, and yet through some chance combination of luck and grace I have survived them both. But it took me nearly fifty years to surmount the consequences of torture.

* * *

I was born in 1919, the year the World War formally ended, the year that Alcock and Brown drifted down out of the rain over the Atlantic and landed their frail bomber in an Irish bog. I remember being told about this feat of aeronautical engineering and skill at a very young age, and thinking about the two intrepid pilots as I was walked along the grey promenade of the seafront at Joppa, to the east of Edinburgh. 'Joppa' is the name of the biblical town where Jonah went when he was fleeing God, and from which he took ship. I discovered soon enough, though it was a long time before space on that scale meant much to me, that this sea was a sheltered inlet, the Firth of Forth, and that even though the distant Fife shore could only be seen in fine weather there were worse seas out there behind the fog and wind.

John Lomax, my father, was a quiet, disciplined, serious man who knew what was best for his wife

and child and was unused to taking no for an answer in his own house. Until the age of fourteen I worked for a pawnbroker in Stockport, on the fringe of industrial Manchester, and then in 1899 somehow got into the Post Office, an institution he stayed in until his retirement almost half a century later. He started as a 'telegraph messenger', the most junior post then available and even lower than the entry grade which he would choose for me when I was sixteen. By the time I was born he was a middle-grade civil servant, a manager of staff in the Edinburgh General Post Office, a stable and trusted official.

My father moved to Edinburgh, a city of politics, law and services in 1909, but all his life remained a child of the industrial revolution, full of vivid memories of coal, smoke, smog and steam power, of great mill engines and railway locomotives and the Manchester Ship Canal. It is hard to explain to young people born in countries that have almost forgotten heavy manufacturing just how awe-inspiring the very processes that shaped our lives could be; for my father, and for me later, great machines were not fearful or distressing but things to be celebrated, as fascinating as the natural world, creatures made by men.

By the time I was able to notice such things, he was part of a reading circle of fifteen or so, men and women, who would visit each other's houses and read papers on such topics as the novels of Arnold Bennett, which my father devoured as the nearest thing he could find to a literature of his boyhood world, or the Edinburgh of Sir Walter Scott. My father was also the regional editor of the *Journal of the Institution of Post Office Electrical Engineers*, to which he contributed local news. And like all dedicated believers in improvement and discovery, he read H.G. Wells. He had a little library of such books. On his shelves I remember Oliver & Boyd's *Edinburgh Almanac* from the 1830s, some books on popular science and Samuel Smiles's *Lives of the Engineers*.

I also remember my father's copy of Hendrik Willem Van Loon's *The Story of Mankind*, which came out in 1931. It was an inspiring narrative of achievement and progress, and as a child I absorbed its tale of optimism and invention, each new break-through seeming to promise more speed and ease and excitement. One of the most intense events of my childhood was finding the secret chart of 'The Great Discoveries' hidden inside the decorative dust-jacket of Van Loon's book. I was convinced that there were thousands of readers who had never looked at the back of the jacket, and that that wonderful branching tree of human ingenuity was for me alone.

My first memory of a world beyond my infant needs was not of an animal or a park, but of a strange mechanical assembly. One of my father's frequent destinations on those walks beside the sea was the Joppa Tram Terminus, which was situated where the historic main road from Edinburgh to London touched the Firth of Forth. On one of these walks, when I was a very small child, we rounded the corner of Di Rollo's ice-cream parlour and found Joppa Road blocked by a huge barricade of tram cars, a wall of maroon and white metal. Each tram was an elegant two-storeyed coach-house, with delicate looking wooden frames surrounding the windows, and each was two-headed, its end windows arranged in a five sided prism. The trams had open platforms at each end from which right-angled stairs disappeared tantalizingly into the open upper decks. They were waiting to take the crowd coming from a race meeting in nearby Musselburgh back into Edinburgh. I stared at this herd of machines. I didn't know there were so many trams in the world.

Joppa was, unfortunately for my awakening fascination for vehicles that ran on rails, a tram heaven. It was a terminus on one of the last cable tram systems in the world, its cars attached to the bases by ropes of steel wire up to five miles long running in a conduit between the rails, the cable paid out by big stationary steam engines in the depots. Soon after the revelation of the massed tram

cars, my father took me to see an oily trench below the surface of the roadway at the Joppa terminus. This chamber was the cable pit, and in it was a large flanged wheel round which a steel hawse revolved, pulling in the car from Portobello, the nearest suburb to the west. Every few minutes a tram would arrive, detach itself from the eastbound cable and, after gripping the westbound cable, head back to Edinburgh at a stately twelve miles an hour.

There was something infinitely reassuring in the predictability of this system: the heavy double-decked trams drawn through the streets, moving widely but never randomly around the town, cruising steadily through the mill of bicycles, horse-drawn delivery wagons and pedestrians. It was as though the trams laid down an orderly grid on the chaotic life of the city.

The antiquated cable vehicles gave way, soon after I became aware of them, to electric trams. When I was about four, I was with my mother on the promenade when she pointed out what she told me was the first electric tram heading for Edinburgh. The big steam engine in the local depot shuddered to a halt late at night about a month later. My father told me about it the following day; he could tell that to him this was a solemn moment, the end of something, and that it made him sad.

As children we loved playing on and riding the trams, learning the personalities of the conductors, some of them not exactly friendly to boys, and discovering that the drivers now had personalities too. The fixed jogging pace of the old cable trams was a thing of the past and some of the drivers put their hands down and ran their sparking wagons like demons. A tram one day jumped the rails on the curve of King's Road in Portobello, broke through the wall of Portobello Power station yard and ended up hanging over the railway line that fed the power station with coal. It was a sight, that big green tram car poised so weirdly out of place: a hint that orderly communication between one place and another could be violently interrupted, that the world could be a dangerous place. Still, electric trams were progress, and every advance was greeted in those severe and frugal years with more acclaim than regret. We were entranced by progress, in a way no-one now is. Little did I know where it was taking me.

My mother was not so taken with mechanical wonders, which is not surprising in someone who grew up one hundred and fifty miles from the northern Scottish coast, in the Shetland Islands. She was a very gentle woman, with a dignified manner and a visionary quality that I've always associated with her growing up in a community which still spoke a dialect of Norse. She was the fifth of eight children. No greater contrast with my father's background can be imagined. Generations of her family had gone to sea in small fishing boats. Her father had built up a substantial fish business, had come south and was a prosperous man in Leith, Edinburgh's port, by the time he died in the year before my birth.

My mother's dreams and traditions were also very different from my father's. She talked about lonely crofts, herring fishing, peat fires and the never ending sound of the sea; she described a summer daylight that lasted twenty-four hours, hay-making, banks of sea-pinks on the white mica-sand beaches; and the ferocious winds that rip everything but the most twisted and flexible forms of life off the ground in the winter months. Her family, the Sutherlands, had their own chronicle of disaster: her ancestor John Sutherland was one of 105 fishermen drowned in 1832 when eighteen open boats were overwhelmed in a July storm; and two more Sutherland men were lost in another Shetland summer storm in 1881. The family lived close to death in a way that city people could not understand. My mother nurtured the romanticism of a person displaced from a hard rural community, though she knew there was no going back. For all that, she was probably homesick throughout her life in Edinburgh.

She gave her child a sense of mystery. Even the place-names of Shetland seemed intangibly beautiful: where else were there islands with names like Vaila, Trondra, Balta and Unst? My mother had modest literary ambitions, and wrote what she called 'essays' and poems; she read a lot of books. The dour realism of Arnold Bennett could not do justice to the extremes of an island imagination, and my mother's favourite reading was probably the work of Jessie Margaret Edmonston Saxby, Shetland's most famous writer, who she knew, and who was already in her late seventies when I was born. She would still be alive in the first year of the Second World War.

My mother cared for me deeply, and was probably over-protective of me, and a little possessive. She had a demanding streak, loved making lists, writing things down, collecting cuttings from newspapers, and my mother tolerated and encouraged all this and kept up a supply of stationery for me. She called me 'The Peerie Professor': 'peerie' was Shetland dialect for 'little'. I loved her, but perhaps the kind of world into which I was born did not encourage identification with her nostalgia for the past. Something harder bit into me and led me into my father's world, and after all this was what was expected of boys in the 1920s.

One lasting effect of my mother's influence was the situation of the house I was born in, on a terrace in Joppa that offered a magnificent view of the Firth of Forth. I think she wanted to be near a stretch of water that had no visible landfall, most of the time, and from our terrace you could look out of the window over the sea, which was usually grey and cold. Its short restless waves sent a bracing chill into our bones, reminding us that we were lucky to be on firm ground, never quite allowing us to relax into the illusion that we were in command of the earth.

Childhood was a time of stern affection. I was sheltered by serious and old-fashioned people who cared for their 'only child', the term implying a slight misfortune, as though single children were deprived, the lucky product of some fault in the hereditary material. I may have been a surprise to my parents. And I've often thought that it was just as well there was only one of me.

My father had a carefully organized routine and I still have an image of him leaving the house each morning to catch the No. 20 electric tram to the GPO in Waterloo Place in Edinburgh. He was meticulous about timetables and journey times, a trait I have inherited, a need to know that I can arrive and depart predictably.

He took us on holidays, to places like Aberdour in Fife and Glenfarg in Perthshire, crossing the high and wide span of the Forth Bridge in a carriage drawn by one of the beautiful Atlantic locomotives of the former North British Railway. To be trundled across that bridge was to be moved through a rattling world of steel and cold air, the high cantilever towers soaring above us and the water far below, visible through the metal struts. The bridge was a greater wonder than the Pyramids, the most wonderful bridge in the world: as every Scottish boy knew, it was about a mile long, contained eight million rivets and employed twenty-nine men full time just to paint it.

When I was still very young, my father took us to Shetland. This was a real expedition, a five-hour train journey to Aberdeen for a night crossing by steamer to Lerwick. The steamer was called the *Sunniva*, the pride of the sonorously named North of Scotland and Orkney and Shetland Steam Navigation Company Limited. It was an elegant vessel, a converted cruising yacht, well able for the North Sea.

I think my mother must have known the chief engineer, because when we were out to sea I was taken to the engine room, from which I was extracted only with considerable difficulty. It was another of my childhood epiphanies: a rapture of hot oil, of enclosure in vibrating energetic metal, the low

rhythmic thunder of the pistons in their cylinders, the warm vibrating air, the smell of burning coal, the ingenious swimming movement of the rods as they moved back and forth. If this was a machine, I wanted to be near one again soon.

We stayed in the Shetland Islands for a month. I remember falling into the sea, and running around half-naked all afternoon while my trousers were spread to dry on a rock in the sun; and playing on the beach at Lerwick and skipping flat stones over the water. One stone was a piece of bottle-glass, which ripped open the end of my finger. But it was all perfect, the stiff transparent sheen of salt on hot skin and the seaweed smell of the sea. The high ceremonial point of the holiday was the visit to Great Uncle Archibald, who was no less than the Clerk to the County of Shetland. He lived at Lystina House, considered the best address in the whole of Shetland. My mother was immensely proud to be the niece of the top local government officer in the islands, while my father, and I myself, were rather more impressed by Great Uncle Archie's stamp collection, which was quite magnificent.

My curiosity nearly killed me even then. I was taken out with my father by a couple of fishermen in a rowing boat on the Loch of Spiggie, in the south of the island. Insatiably inquisitive, I pulled on the bung in the boat's hull and held it up. 'What's this?' I asked. I was aware of a spasm of anger and a sudden controlled urgency about the adults' behaviour. I had done something dangerous. The oarsman pulled for shore, his boat slowly sinking under us.

* * *

Shortly after that first visit to the Shetlands in 1924, I was made to attend the Royal High School in Edinburgh. So far as I could make out, the choice of this school was based not on its 800-year history, but solely on the convenience of the new electric tram service and its door-to-door linkage of one's house with the school.

For all my later interest in technology, the school did nothing to encourage it: not even physics was taught properly. Our subjects were Maths, English, Latin, Greek and French. It was a deep traditional academy, and it was difficult to shake it out of its obsession with the classics.

I did not feel that I was a particularly isolated child, but perhaps the habits of the only child made me more aloof, gave me some element of self-sufficiency that others did not need or simply lacked. I avoided organized sports and games, for example, with stubborn determination, a non-conformist regarded as eccentric at a time when team spirit was the key to manliness. I went to a football match once; I think I played rugby about as frequently; and I occasionally played cricket. On the other hand, I discovered that I could swim exceptionally well, particularly in the sheer hard slogging of long distance events. I never really discovered what my limit was, but I could swim several miles without pause. This was a solitary and dogged skill, and I loved the drugged rhythm of drawing myself through the water, that strange anaesthetic called stamina sustaining the ache of tired muscles. I was immensely proud, despite being a loner, of the Portobello Amateur Swimming Club badge, even if the regulation colours of brown and yellow made one look like a wasp. This did not save me from persistent pressure, from masters and even other boys, to conform and to put my obvious fitness to use in the rucks and scrums of the rugby field. I would offer to discuss the question over a mile or two in the water, which had a way of silencing my critics.

Because it became with hindsight a premonition of other events, I remember one consequence of slackening my resistance to team activity. I joined the Owl Patrol in the 12th Edinburgh Royal High School Scouts, and wore my brown uniform along with all the other boys. We met weekly in the

school gymnasium. One evening in the early 1930s, we were being taught by our scoutmaster to use long staves for crowd control – a most unscout-like activity, some echo of the General Strike of 1926 or maybe just another of those hints that the world we were about to enter was a place so full of conflict that even games had to be made a preparation for it.

Towards the close of the evening the scoutmaster decided to give us a demonstration. We were lined up as a kind of human barrier, our poles at the ready, while certain other scouts were struck off to impersonate a mob. They were unleashed at us through a suddenly opened door, charging at us wildly in a licensed free-for-all, young bodies crashing into others with good-natured brutality. We could not control them and our troop leader had lost control of all of us. The crush of the attackers caught me with my hand flung out. I can still feel my right arm being bent further and further backwards until it snapped. There was a moment of sheer panic and disbelief, then the shocking pain of the break.

The scoutmaster, resourceful to the last, turned his failed experiment at crowd control into a first aid demonstration. It was not every day that he could show his troop a real broken arm. He snapped a yard-stick in two to make a pair of splints, found some bandages and called for a taxi. When I reached the emergency department of Edinburgh Royal Infirmary I had to wait only briefly before being wheeled into the operating room where I was given a very inadequate anaesthetic: the chloroform barely dulled the crushed nerves. I felt my arm being stretched and manipulated to get the sheared bones back into position. It is strange how easy it is to remember pain.

* * *

I did not like the school, and even though I achieved first place in some subjects in my early adolescence – once scoring 100 per cent in a Latin examination – I found the syllabus intolerably dull. Gradually, I lost interest in academic results. I became enthralled by subjects that the Royal High School found it difficult to endorse.

Like many schoolboys, I collected things as a way of making sense of the world's confusion. In August 1926, my father took my mother and me to Inverness for a few days' holiday while he was doing some work in the Post Office there. We stayed in the Glen Mhor Hotel on the south bank of the River Ness. He bought a large packet of mixed foreign stamps in the Inverness market to keep me amused. This was a good pacifier of a curious and restless child, but it started the first of my collecting passions, that of philately, which has not left me yet. Later this mania expanded into collecting cigarette cards, then the collecting of picture postcards. Fortunately other boys were similarly inclined; fortunately too the raw material was cheap, so building up collections was not a problem. This hunger for all the little circulating tokens of an industrial economy could take anything, and with us it extended to railway tickets, matchbox covers, autographs and marbles. Compared to the temptations open to children today, ours were not dangerous compulsions, and those parents who tried to wean us off this acquisitive mania would be shocked to see these schoolboy collections now selling for small fortunes.

But these were minor pastimes, mere flirtations, compared to the discovery I made one war-torn evening in the autumn of 1932 when I was out walking with my mother in the Portobello district. I even remember the precise date: 12th September. We were crossing Park Bridge, a long foot-bridge that spanned a wide cut in the ground between a golf course and a residential neighbourhood. I stopped on the bridge, on an impulse of no importance, and looked down – into a new world. Below me was

shiny heavy web of iron and wood, dead straight parallel lines of metal suddenly curving and merging smoothly into other sets of tracks; ladders fixed to the earth, climbing into the distance. They were spread out and branched off beyond the bridge; close up I could see the worn silver of the rail surface and the dark steel of the chairs and the wood of the cross-sleepers. In the dusk the tracks looked like lines of mercury on the oil-stained timber and gravel.

I was looking into Portobello Goods Yard, one of the largest and busiest rail freight yards in the country. It wasn't empty even on that quiet late summer evening. There were two steam engines working near the bridge, shunting engines pushing trains and empty independent wagons further back into the yard. I read the engine numbers: 9387 and 9388. They were solid machines, their lines unflattering, with large tanks flanking and obscuring the curve of the boiler, but they were gorgeous. Each had a tall chimney, shaped like the stove-pipe hat worn by Isambard Kingdom Brunel as he posed against the giant paddle wheel of his *Great Eastern* for that famous photograph. I was not surprised he looked so confident, if he could create machines like these. Their six driving wheels turned slowly but irresistibly against the tons of rolling-stock in front of them; I heard the crash of straining metal as the couplings took the weight and tension; I smelled again the combination of hot oil and coal smoke that I remembered from my visit to the engine room of the Shetland steamer. A grey column of smoke billowed gently out of the chimney of the squat shunting engine, with little feathers of steam drifting back over the length of the tubular boiler and around the polished brass safety valves in their dome like a fixed bell set in front of the cab. I didn't know it at the time, but I was watching a well-run engine in the hands of a good driver.

On the bridge, I felt suspended amidst the working engines, the branching rails and signal gantries, the station platforms and the brick warehouses. Anyone who has not seen a great railway junction on a sunny evening in the steam age cannot imagine the fascination of it. For a boy – for me – it was an animated, mysterious, mechanical paradise.

Further back in the yard several larger, more powerful-looking engines were drawn up, their giant spoked wheels connected by coupling rods that looked as big as the foot-bridge's girders. There was an awesome potential in those linked wheels, rods and pistons – power at rest. A little way beyond Portobello one of the engines was drawn up beside a blackened wooden shed, and from a high door on its side a wooden chute hung out over the tender behind the engine. A man wearing a waistcoat and a cloth cap was filling the chute from a big bucket of coal, and the lumps clattered down on to the black heaps which another man, dressed in a rough blackened grey jacket was shovelling and levelling in place.

That was the start of my incurable interest in railways. From that day onwards I spent a lot of time on Park Bridge, and soon became aware of other boys with similar interests leaning out over the engines as they slowed down on their way into the goods yard, or cruised at speed further out on the way up the East Coast main line between Edinburgh and London. For Edinburgh was a rail centre, and I lived at the eastern end of a great loop of lines punctuated by stations, depots, tunnels, repair yards and goods terminals. I could watch the flagship engines of the London and North Eastern Railway rush by, a long procession of carriages drawn after them as they headed for Edinburgh Waverley – the company's very own station and a mecca for train lovers – or catch the smaller, older engines at the head of suburban and country trains. They were all trains, and that was enough for now.

* * *

It was like love, my fascination for those huge, noisy machines that were already near the end of the golden age. They moved with such magnificent purpose. They were alive, they had steam, smoke and the smell of minerals; they burned energy without concealment, and you could see their fire. They raced against themselves, losing more heat than they used, running by burning their own cargo of coal but there was something very human about the need to keep fire going by hand, shovelling and watching, never for a second being able to forget responsibility for the journey and the work. The waste didn't have to be buried in lead-lined coffins, it was exhaled as carbon, sulphur and nitrogen, swept and scattered as ash, the unburnt particles of coal settling gently on our clothes and hair.

Some things that humans make transcend their function; instruments can be magical. The explosive, rhythmic sound we call puffing says more to us about getting under way, about departure than a petrol-driven snarl can ever do; perhaps it has something close to the beat of our pulse. Even when we were using up and heating the earth too much, and no-one knew that at the time, it would have been worth making an exception for steam engines. They were beautiful machines; the most beautiful machines produced in the industrial revolution.

The Reverend Awdry, author of the railway series of children's books that attracted millions of infant readers long after their parents had forgotten the age of steam, once said that railways 'touch people, make us seem eccentric; and yet we discover that they have the same effect on almost everybody else. I have certainly felt a little eccentric at times; but I suspect that we are all railway lovers, at some deep level.

The honest power of a steam engine is overwhelming – most of its important parts are on display. You see the great cylinder with cranks and mechanisms outside it, you see the ingenious connection of levers and rods to the enormous wheels and you have already understood that this combination of things will work, and you might even see how. Unlike a motor car or a nuclear ship, there's no secret about a steam engine's force. What engineers call the 'motion', the linked shafts and pistons and wheels that drive the engine, is as fascinating as the movement of a watch. And almost as jewel-like for the couplings and connecting rods were often still chipped and filed smooth by hammer and chisel after they came off the milling machine. Hands still made parts of these engines, and it is no surprise that drivers spoke of them as individuals. But essentially, the engine was a boiler held in heavy frame on a set of steel wheels.

The simplicity of it fascinated me. Coal burnt in a furnace surrounded by water created steam; steam confined in a cylinder pushed a piston, and linked to wheels by rods that turned the straight thrust of the piston into rotatory motion, the engine moved and worked. The idea that hordes of people and commodities could be carried at such shakingly powerful speeds by a sort of articulated kettle, in which the water could never be allowed to fall below the top of the furnace or there would be an explosion, seemed amazing to me. What made it all so different from today's electric railways, which run at set speeds, was the need to be aware at every moment of the perilous balance of fire and water, which also gave the possibility of going a little faster if the engineman was good, or of disaster if he was incompetent.

Like everything else we make – like firearms, for example – the simple idea could be endlessly refined, developed and decorated. I discovered trains in their heyday, when steam under pressure had achieved astonishing things. Libraries of books were written on the improvement of Watt's basic idea. More sophisticated valve gears gave more subtle control of pressure; steam could be superheated to get more pressure out of it; more yards could be added to the labyrinth of copper firetubes inside the boiler to give a bigger heating area, and therefore more heat and steam. But it was the way it a

worked together that mattered, in the poetry of great engines, their appearance, speed and mystique.

* * *

I learned to distinguish machines, to love some more than others. There were, for example, the imposing Atlantic engines, the most powerful Scottish engines of the early century, their four big driving wheels half hidden by 'splashers', like great mudguards, and their lesser wheels chunky with thick spokes. One of these engines, up close, seemed monstrous, the vast tube of the boiler painted solid dark green, the front a glossy black, resting on its 20-foot long iron frames. One of the driving wheels would dwarf a boy, who might come a little higher than the silver boss at the centre of its rim of black-painted spokes. The linked piston rods were as massive as one of the rails on which the wheels they drove ran so heavily. The rocking levers of the outside valves looked like swimmer's arms frozen in mid stroke. Above were the pipes, flues and stanchions of polished brass and copper running the length of the boiler, and higher up still the top-hat of the chimney.

By the late 1930s, this mighty engine began to look a little archaic, a little steamroller-like, as the last and most fabulous of the dinosaurs matured, running faster and longer than all their kind. There were engines like the Pacifics, which ran on the express route from London to Edinburgh, so heavy and powerful that they needed four smaller wheels in front of their six great driving wheels and two behind, just to balance their own weight. They were epic creatures; machines that looked as though they could drive through the world. Perhaps only the sight of a rare eagle to a birdwatcher could compare to the surge of excitement I would feel when one of these Pacifics, the pride of British engineering, swept by me, its slipstream battering me against the frame of my bicycle.

Even these leviathans could be improved. In the mid-Thirties, some were streamlined. The cylindrical boiler disappeared beneath a sweeping aerodynamic form painted two tones of grey, in steel adding a third richly military colour to the 'Silver Link', which could do the London-Edinburgh run in six hours, often at more than 100 mph. This made it one of the fastest engines in the world. The curve of the wing lifted over the wheels, a whale showing its teeth. It was like an enormous grey knife blade adhering to the rails, cutting a slice out of the landscape with over a hundred tons of metal. To feel this as it tore past was to be carried away into the future.

Of course, the first photograph I ever took was of a Pacific, the most famous of them all: the 'Flying Scotsman', on the opening day of the summer season of its London-Edinburgh run. I pointed my Box Brownie at the line and hoped that its lens would somehow capture the thundering displacement of air that was about to be unleashed on me. The snap came out, like most railway photographs, as a grainy black and white travesty of the real thing.

But what mattered was being there and having seen it. My hobby had grown into an obsession by the time I left school in 1936. In fact, steam engines occupied most of my free hours between 1933 and the moment when I volunteered for the army in 1939. I read histories of engineering, of companies that were long gone even then, haunting the second-hand bookshops around George IV Bridge in Edinburgh and finding beautiful old books on railways that I could buy for a penny each. Occasionally I would reach out and spend a few pence on some real treasure: a handsome set of Smiles, a book of Victorian photographs.

I had become what is known nowadays as a 'trainspotter', though that is not a word I would use, and I do not recognize myself in the lonely boys in anoraks who haunt British railway stations noting the numbers of passing trains. For me this was almost a scholarly passion, a 'subject' as valid as

mathematics or French, and I took it just as seriously as any specialist. In any case, the standardized and predictable high-speed engines of the monopoly railway company cannot compare with the magnificent variety of machinery on the iron roads of the 1930s.

I didn't just sit and dream about trains, but travelled to look and see, waiting on cold embankments and cuttings in the hope of catching a glimpse of some rare and famous locomotive. I thought nothing of riding fifteen or twenty miles on my bike to watch an engine hammer past on a rural line, and turning around to ride back to my parents' house as happy as though I had seen a girlfriend.

Until 1923 there had been 120 railway companies in Britain, but then they were grouped into four great combinations. The local combine in East Scotland was called the London and North Eastern Railway. The engines in Edinburgh were different from those in East Anglia, and no engine from Cornwall would penetrate as far north as Newcastle. An engine could sometimes run on a foreign system of track, but it was not always easy: Great Western engines were risky outside their territory for they were wider than others, and could clip a bridge or a platform in alien country, with disastrous results. Locomotives from the north east of England would often decouple from trains at Berwick; the border was a technical as well as historic boundary. A Scottish engine would then haul the train northward.

But now the engines evolved in isolation were infiltrating each other's territory, and you could see some exotic from the far south nosing on to the buffers at Waverley Station. The incredible variety remained: the old companies' engines were still in use, locomotives developed in the time of Victoria still working in the age of aircraft. I was among the last witnesses to this overlapping, inefficient and utterly wonderful chaos. I felt like Darwin on the Galapagos.

And just like species in their habitats, these creatures with their gleaming layers of paint and elegant steel and brass mountings had often still to be tracked to their native ranges. We talked the language of birdwatchers: rare engines were 'elusive' or 'difficult'. The world of railways was as surprising and complicated as the natural world: there seemed to be more kinds of locomotive than there were different birds in the Lothian Hills. There were at least 28,000 steam engines in Britain on the main lines; and several thousand more in private employment, cast-offs and survivors from the branch lines working for breweries, mines, ironworks. The LNER, my local railway, had been built up from the great lines like the North British Railway and tiny local companies like the East and West Yorkshire Union Railway, four battered engines lugging coal between some pitheads and the sea.

I rescued the most obscure railway in the British Isles from oblivion by writing a little article about it for *Railway Magazine* when I was sixteen. On Unst, the most northerly of the Shetland Islands, I found some overgrown tracks of a tiny 2-foot gauge running from chromite quarries in the island centre to the nearby pier. Stocky little ponies were pulling ramshackle wagons full of the chrome-iron ore in hot July sunshine. In another part of the island I found more lines radiating out from another chromite pit, the workings completely derelict. The tracks were covered in rough grass and nettles and dockweed; the rusty side tipping wagons were lying in the positions in which they had been abandoned by the side of the track. I felt I had reached the *ultima Thule* of the railway world.

For me it was a question of mapping and understanding that man-made world, of tracing the genealogies of engines, designs and companies. My habits of precision and of needing to know where I was, which may have attracted me to the spider's web of railways in the first place, would later get me into the most awful trouble on the worst railway in the world, but that need to locate myself and to imagine ways of escape would never leave me. And I was drawn to the railways so much that they have been a backdrop to almost every turning-point in my life, and have led me into unhappiness and

torment, as well as some of the only real contentment I have ever known.

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Railways are an intensely personal mania, but I was always aware that mine was not exactly a secret passion. Train study was one of the most popular pastimes in Britain. There were always other boys standing stiffly alert, taking notes and photographs, on platforms, on sidings, at level crossings out across the country. Guardedly, we traded information. We would hear of curious sightings, of locomotives straying out of their areas like big birds blown off course by a storm. The storm was an economic one, homogenizing the local railway systems in the face of the world slump; for the moment, the Great Depression and all it brought with it was our opportunity. We didn't hear the storm coming closer.

We got permits to visit engine sheds and workshops; saw still, silent herds of the great locomotives in sidings on Saturday afternoons or Sundays. There was a fine illicit thrill about climbing aboard the platform of a steam engine, nine or ten feet off the ground, and standing in front of the wall of instruments, the gleaming levers, throttles and stopcocks that regulated so much power.

We thought of ourselves as being involved with these smoky vehicles of change, we never saw ourselves as just standing on the ends of platforms crossing numbers off a list. We didn't tolerate frivolity, or drinkers or the unserious. But machines don't make good companions, and it is true that I spent much of my youth alone, cycling between stations on roads that could be grey and wet in autumn and winter, with often only a distant relationship to my fellow enthusiasts. It isn't much wonder that I was so easily recruited into the Chapel – but that was later.

Meanwhile, attendance at the Royal High School became more and more of a penance. Many of the boys delivered by tram on the 1st October 1924 continued to be unhappy ten years later. The attitude of many teachers towards pupils was deplorable. They seemed to regard us as something of a nuisance and an interruption to their daily routine; collectively to have been unaware that children and their interests had any connection with the employment of teachers.

There were exceptions. One devoted history teacher came up with a scheme by which any pupil who discovered a genuine error in any history text would be awarded an extra 1 per cent in the term examination. The enthusiasm with which his pupils combed their texts for mistakes was impressive, though there were rumours that their parents had been drawn into the research. Inevitably, a market economy developed around this precious information. Confident boys placed suspected errors on the market, charging rates that varied with the probability of acceptance. It was good practice for life, of a kind.

The school's emphasis on classics was less useful for the world we were about to enter. By the time I was fifteen, my father had to ask the Rector to make special arrangements to allow me to study history and geography instead of Greek. But as the final examinations approached, I knew that my prospects of formal academic success were slim.

On holiday in the autumn of 1935, my father saw an advertisement for a Civil Service competition for a single appointment as a sorting clerk and telegraphist in the GPO in Edinburgh, and announced that I should apply. Sons in those days did exactly what their fathers told them to do, or at least I did, so at the age of sixteen I sat the examination. I took first place in the city, to my own astonishment and my family's, and on the morning the brown envelope came my father told me that I could leave school that day.

I went to the Rector's office and told him that I was going. The Rector, a very elevated person

named Dr King Gillies told me in omniscient tones that I was being very foolish, that I could expect only to become a butcher's delivery boy – the ultimate social disgrace. I spoiled his day by showing him the letter from the Civil Service Commission. And so my formal education ended.

I still think I would have made a reasonably good butcher's boy.

Early in January 1936, I started to study at home for the next grade of the Civil Service. I had a couple of months before I started work. I also began to explore the Lothian Hills and the coast, cycling to small harbours and old docks, to obscure sidings that were said to contain interesting survivors of early locomotive classes. These were rehearsals for later marathon rides around the kingdom on my brief holidays from the Post Office. I thought that I might never have so much completely free time at my disposal again. I was right.

In the year of the Popular Front in France and of the Spanish Civil War, the year Japan began its assault on China, I was going on even longer excursions. In 1937, on my annual holiday from work which was then a not very fulfilling job, I cycled all the way to the English Channel and back – a 1000-mile round-trip down the west coast, and back up the east coast via Newcastle and Berwick. I did it completely alone. I was barely aware of what was happening thousands of miles away in Asia. I had no politics; I was an only child.

It is strange, looking back now, to think of those boys at school to whom I was never really close. Men born ten years after me could speculate idly about their schoolmates, but that option was closed to me by events in China and Central Europe while I was growing up. I know exactly what happened to each of my contemporaries. Of the twenty-five of us in our final year at school, only four survived the war. But there is no justice in statistics, and by some arbitrary chance not one of the twenty-two young men in my officer class at Catterick was killed.

* * *

You had to start at the bottom in the Post Office, just as my father had done nearly forty years before. I became a sorter of mail, and after a week's training I was put on the lowest rung of the Civil Service ladder, from which I was destined to become successively Senior Sorter, Postmaster and so on.

A worker called Bobby Kinghorn, who I would later meet under very different circumstances, took me in hand and showed me how to survive without working too hard, and I put his good advice to use on the main shift from 7.30 in the morning until 3.30 in the afternoon, six days a week.

I had to open parcels from overseas so that customs could inspect them, then laboriously tie them up again. They also assigned me to the football pools section, where a dozen sorters filtered millions of coupons being sent out to the punters who were hoping to get rich from their predictions of the scores of the coming Saturday's soccer matches. All this waste paper, victim of the laws of probability, would have to be sorted, bundled and bagged for movement to Waverley Station, where it would be loaded on to trains heading out to towns in the borders and further south.

I was now drawing a big circle around Edinburgh of places to which return journeys could be made by bicycle on early summer evenings, and I'd escape to some point on it every afternoon. So many miles, so many lonely sightings of worked metal and quiet satisfaction at another unusual entry in my orderly classification of the world. Ordnance Survey maps helped you to identify half-forgotten branch lines, perhaps some colliery where there might be a couple of engines whose identity and even whose existence would be unknown to anyone outside the colliery itself; but some of the sidings were so obscure that they did not appear on maps, and there was no alternative but to search them out.

I learned in the Post Office that obsession can take many forms. One much older man became something of a special friend. He had been unemployed for most of the previous five years and had become a communist. He became obsessed with our ignorance of the names of places to which the pools envelopes were being sent. His need for order and his conscientious devotion to the job drove him to make, in his own time, over a period of weeks, a card-index of every British place-name he could find, as an aid to sorting the pools mail. Anything less like the behaviour of a communist militant is difficult to imagine; but perhaps this innocent card-index man would have found a different outlet for his obsession if the circumstances had been different.

Some flavour of the austerity and discretion of the workplace in the 1930s remains with me in the memory of a colleague called Wendy, from whom I took over duties in the motor transport section after I passed the clerical officer's examination in late 1936. One lunchtime she failed to return to the office. Such was our respect for punctuality that I began to imagine that she had had an accident, been kidnapped. In a manner of speaking she had suffered both fates: she had used her lunch hour to get married.

My job was now to maintain the records for the Post Office Telephones' vehicles all over the south-east of Scotland. We had to watch out for things like excessive fuel consumption, breakdowns and accidents. This was my future now: the minute administration of Post Office machinery, counting and accounting in careful detail for the public's means of communication and the people who kept it running.

The life that awaited me if I had not broken from it can be guessed at in the story of the file on expanding shelter for our vehicles in the Edinburgh area. I wrote minutes, memos, drew up lists of suitable premises. In 1948 I went back briefly to the Post Office after leaving the army, after a war in which millions of people had died cruel and pointless deaths, in which I had been shattered psychologically and physically. On my first day back in civilian employment the file on garage accommodation was solemnly handed to me. It had not been opened for almost a decade. Time had stopped in this fusty government office while for me it had accelerated beyond reason.

Some inkling of dread must have percolated into me back in 1936, because I decided to make another move. I realize now, looking back, that for all my conformity I was looking for something more satisfying, more wholly absorbing than the set lines of my life could offer; in my own way I was very ambitious. I decided to take evening classes in telegraphy and telephony. My father thought that this was most irregular, wanting to switch from the office grades to the technical, from the supervisory to the practical. We were staff, we did not work with our hands. But with the stubbornness which I would later learn much more about, I went ahead.

CHAPTER TWO

I GREW UP IN a world in which tinkering and inventing and making were honoured pastimes. My father, though he was not a telegraph engineer, liked to experiment with technical equipment. In the early 1920s he and his friends Mr Weatherburn and Mr Patrick were building a wireless, which they kept in Weatherburn's house.

It sat on a table in a room cluttered with glass valves, flex, pliers, copper wire, soldering irons and screwdrivers. There was a strange burning metallic smell, a smell of glue and oil. I could touch the dark rolls of thick sticky tape, but was warned not to touch the big black dials with their pointers turned to the brass buttons set into the wood panel. Three beautifully-milled brass cylinders, detectors for those mysterious waves that I couldn't see as they rolled into the lighted room, were set into the polished mahogany of the box. The front panel was studded with protruding, fragile looking valve switches and dials, and polished brass terminals. I could see the delicate metal in the bulbs of the valves. The whole apparatus looked at once ridiculous and awesome. It was like an unfinished toy, but also an engineered aesthetic tool, something crafted and heavy. Its front sloped back like the stand used for the big Bible in church.

My father placed a pair of heavy headphones around my ears, and I heard, through the hiss and buzz of far-off energies, a disembodied human voice. Somewhere a long way away a man was sending his words into space and they were somehow being collected here and narrowed through my ears alone.

In the worst times, much later, when I thought I was about to die in pain and shock at the hands of men who could not imagine anything of my life, who had no respect for who I was or where I had come from, I might have wished that my father had had a different passion. But after the First World War technology was still powerful and beautiful without being menacing. Who could have thought that radio telegraphy, a simple channelling of ethereal lines of force, could cause terrible harm? It was a wonderful instrument by which people could speak to each other, and I knew that up on the hill at Edinburgh Castle there was a station of the BBC speaking calmly and authoritatively through educated English voices about the weather, the news and the Empire.

By the time I started my own radio course in 1940 I had already heard Adolf Hitler's voice coming out of my father's radio, an endless rhythmic scream full of strange crescendos. Hitler was not only the most powerful man in Europe, he was also clearly mad. None the less the threat his voice contained seemed as far away as all radio voices.

I got stuck into the electrical rote-learning that the Post Office Telephones arranged for its staff. We had to memorize complicated circuits and patterns of valves. A typical exam question might be 'Reproduce the Circuit for the No. 2A Switchboard', which was a bit of a labyrinth. The radios of the late Thirties were large heavy pieces of equipment, not quite as massive and unwieldy as Mr Weatherburn's home-made wireless, but solid and imposing for all that; and I began to learn how they worked and how they should be maintained. We also learned about telephones, morse signalling and telegraphy. I was moving on, but I can't have been content.

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