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Versions

Changing Track: repositioning the Irish and Australian railways in the national consciousness

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Abstract

This paper explores the development of rail systems in Ireland and Australia. The paper highlights the different trajectories of both systems and charts the experiences and influences of Empire and Commonwealth on both. In Australia the rail system was developed as a way to promote nation building and overcome isolation while in Ireland both prior to and after partition the system enabled access to ports thereby not only fuelling migration but improving levels of accessibility between different parts of rural Ireland and town and country.

.The paper also describes the role of the rail system in making travel to new worlds possible and the way in which systems developed in both 'new' and 'old' worlds to encourage population movements and dispersal and social cohesion.

Growing levels of car dependence since the 1960s and the movement of freight from rail to road has had a significant impact on how public transport is used.

Deregulation and privatisation have also meant that commercial pressures have had a significant impact on the operation of rail in the days of post Empire. The paper also highlights the ways in which this redefinition of public communication technology and infrastructure, not only confined to the rail industry, has impacted on travel culture and the perception of public transport infrastructure.

1: Introduction

Northern Ireland has been a source of population movement to a range of Empire and Commonwealth destinations, particularly Canada and Australia while Australia has expanded its source of inward migrants beyond both Britain and the Commonwealth.

For both countries the history of movement across the intervening spaces is well rehearsed. The Ulster American folk park emphasises the cultural and economic drivers of relocation (see http://www.geocities.com/odysseygroup2004/folkpark.html). For Australia, Geoffrey

Blainey's *Tyranny of Distance* encapsulated the impact of the country's physical location and isolation[1].

Both Ireland and Australia drew on the British model of development exemplified by the creation of the world's first railway network. Northern Ireland remains close to the British model while Australia has expanded it frame of reference in addition to a national role for rail transport sees a regional one in relation to Asia.

This paper argues for consideration of the shifting understanding of the role of on-shore transport infrastructure – the railways – which played a crucial role at each end of much longer journeys.

2: Ireland – encouraging development:

The UK government was keen to see an orderly development of the railway system in Ireland and in 1836 created the Drummond Commission to design a system of railways. By 1860 the major Irish railway routes had been completed, initially these lines were built to different gauges and were then subsequently standardized to 5 feet 3 inches. The extension of these lines into remoter rural areas was made possible with state assistance through a series of Acts passed in the 1880s and 1890s as they were unattractive to private developers. As a result the main lines reached County Kerry (1893), County Mayo (1894) and County Galway (1895)[2] . In addition to the 5 feet 3 inch gauge a number of lines were constructed to a narrower gauge of 3 feet. This included systems in County Antrim and extensive narrow gauge systems in County Donegal [3]. These systems reduced construction costs and frequently operated alongside public roads.

Railways had a significant impact on economic life in both rural and the growing urban areas. The Railways carried both goods and people at larger volumes and at a faster rate than had been possible before. The impact was also to make the major road routes, where paralleled by a rail line, less important while making feeder

[1] Blainey, G. (1966) *The Tyranny of Distance*. Melbourne, Sun Books

[2] Killen, J. (2003), 'Communications' in Aalen et al (eds) Atlas of the Irish Rural Landscape, Cork University Press, Cork

[3] Doyle, O and Hirsch, S. (1983), *Railways in Ireland* 1834-1984, Dublin.

Fayle, H. (1946), *The Narrow Gauge Railways of Ireland*, London.

Fisher, C. (1941) 'Evolution of the Irish Railway System', Economic Geography, (17), pp262-74

routes into railway stations of increasing importance. In the nineteenth century the railways had a devastating impact on populations in rural areas fuelling their decline and migration to the new world. Local industry also suffered as cheaper goods from Dublin and England were brought into the country.

Historically the railway system in Ireland has also played an important part in shaping identity in a different way. Migration histories are affected by the journey to the host country. For example, Irish migration in the Nineteenth Century was fuelled by the growth of the rail system that brought people within easy access of the coast. In the 1820s competition between shipping companies also made travel cheaper[4]. Choice of route was also important as it determined where people would settle, the fares from Dublin to London were cheaper and this would account for the large Irish community in the North-West and in Liverpool. This pattern of settlement has clearly impacted on the identity of towns and cities across the UK (for example Liverpool, Wolverhampton (Little Rome), Dundee (Little Tipperary)) where the heavy industry and textile factories were often located. Often these new sources of labour became associated and identified with the large infrastructure projects of Victorian Britain[5].

3: Australia: achieving a nation-building agenda

In contrast to the national overview provided for Ireland by the Drummond Commission, Australian railway development was in the hands of separate colonial administrations. Although the initial projects in New South Wales and Victoria were in the hands of private companies, these were quickly superseded by state rail authorities. Some exceptions remained, the major private undertakings being the Midland Railway in Western Australia and the Silverton Tramway, the latter a cross-border initiative built to link the mines of Broken Hill in New South Wales to the South Australian system, prior to the arrival of the NSW government railway. By 1861 there were 390 kilometres of line in Australia, by 1871 there were 1657

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[4] See http://www.movinghere.org.uk/galleries/histories/irish/journeys/journeys.htm
[5] Hine, J.P. (2005), 'Mobility, identity and connectivity', Paper presented to 37th World Congress of the International Institute of Sociology, 5-9 July 2005, Stockholm.

kilometres, and by 1881 there were 6456 kilometres in six colonies. The distances involved meant that train crews were frequently rostered for lengthy absences form home, spending nights in railway barracks, while isolated railway communities developed a distinctive sub-culture, dependent on the railway itself for all their needs[6].

Despite initial attempts to harmonise gauges, changes of personnel led to the use of both Irish and standard gauges in the most populous states, Victoria and New South Wales, while Queensland and Western Australia, with lower population densities opted for the cheaper 3'6" "Cape Gauge" developed for Southern Africa. These isolated and competitive efforts at railway construction only became a national programme following federation into the Commonwealth of Australia in 1901. By this time three different main-line gauges had been established and both Victoria and South Australia were following the Irish pattern of narrow gauge rural feeder lines. South Australia ended up with three gauges, the 3'6" gauge in the northern and less populated parts of the state and the Irish gauge for the connection with Victoria while the Trans Australian Railway, administered by federal government as the Commonwealth Railway, had been constructed to standard gauge. In Queensland the pattern of railway development was one of separate inland penetration from ports linked by coastal shipping until the construction of a north-south shore-line route

Rail transformed the economics of export for Australia's primary produce in the nineteenth century. The exploitation of wheat was dependent on bulk rail transport, as with North America and Canada. High value wool had previously being exported by bullock drawn convoys which took more than a year to make the return journey from farm to deep water port.

In 1901 the Commonwealth of Australia was created from six separate colonies as a federal nation state. With Federation railway development became a key component of the nation building agenda. With the completion of the Trans Australian Railway (TAR) from Kalgoorlie in Western Australia to Port Augusta in

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[6] See Adam-Smith P. (1983) *When We Rode the Rails* Melbourne: Dent

South Australia in 1917 an integrated rail system became a national project. The objective of standard gauge links between all state capitals was adopted. This objective was finally achieved in 1995 when Adelaide and Melbourne were linked by standard gauge, having originally being the only capitals connected without a break of gauge at 5'3".

4: Consolidation, Maturity, Decline

The Irish railway system at the start of the twentieth century went through a period of consolidation. The amalgamation of the railways into four companies in Great Britain following the 1919 Transport Act had a significant impact on the structure of the rail industry in Ireland due to these companies involvement in Irish rail companies. In 1923 when this occurred the largest of these in the world at that time was the London, Midland and Scottish Railway (LMS). The main constituents of this company were the London and North Western Railway and the Midland Railway and through these the LMS inherited substantial rail interests in Ireland. The link with English rail companies in Northern Ireland pre dates this to 1903 when the Midland Railway purchased the Belfast and Northern Counties Railway (BNCR)[7].

Partition in 1922 and the imposition of a border cut across established trading patterns, the geography of which the railways had been built to reflect and support, did little for the profitability of the rail network. In 1923 the Irish Free State Government was pursuing amalgamation of the railway companies in its jurisdiction, as was the British Government at this time.

In Northern Ireland the NCC in the 1930s made attempts to become a more broadly based operator this not only included fast main line express passenger services, but also a door to door delivery service and a bus network (after the passing of the Railway (Road Vehicles) Northern Ireland Act 1927. Unrestricted competition between rail and road led to the 1935 Northern Ireland Road and Rail Act, this also placed the NCC buses under the control of the Northern Ireland Road Transport Board (NIRTB). In many cases NIRTB buses competed with passenger services rather than co-operating with the railways. In 1948 the LMS was taken over by the British Transport Commission and became part of the nationalised British Railway. The

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[7] Kennedy, 2000

NCC was sold off by the British Transport Commission to the Ulster Transport Authority (UTA), a nationalised public transport authority set up by the Northern Ireland Government. Although the UTA was an early example of an integrated transport authority with control over bus and rail, it is largely still seen as an authority which implemented closure of many rail lines and services in favour of road transport. The 1950s-1970s is also associated with the growth in car ownership and increased suburbanisation and a transfer of freight from rail to road[8].

While Northern Ireland was dealing with the effects of partition, Australia was dealing with the challenge of integration. The creation of an Australian Federal government, and the insistence by Western Australia on an east-west transcontinental rail link as a condition of their participation in Federation led to a second transcontinental agenda, from south to north. This second continental crossing was first mooted as early as 1858, before the crossing had been undertaken by Europeans.. The project was discussed as a means of national development, and later as a component of national defense. The failure of initial attempts before and after Federation to link Adelaide to Darwin left an isolated stretch of 500 kilometres. The North Australian Railway (NAR) constructed at 3'6" gauge ran as far as Birdum, 1,000 kilometres short of Alice Springs, terminus of the southern section. Closed in 1976, the NAR had been a crucial element in the defence of the Northern Territory during World War II.

The completion of this project with the commencement of commercial standard gauge services in 2004 took place in a very different context. By the mid 1990s a north-south link was seen primarily as means of improving access to Asian neighbors and markets. Australia's relationship with Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim country, to the immediate north remains problematic, nevertheless, the imperative has shifted from northern development for defence to the strengthening of economic ties with northern regional neighbors.

Australian National Railways (ANR) was the successor to the Commonwealth Railways (CR) established to construct and manage the east-west inter-state link. At its creation in 1978 ANR absorbed two state rail systems: the non-urban lines of

South Australia and the Tasmanian Government Railways. The latter had already ceased passenger operations on the island of Tasmania, but ANR removed all non-suburban passenger services in South Australia, with the exception of interstate routes and the southern section of the north-south route which had reached Alice Springs in the Northern Territory.

CR and ANR had always been technical innovators, due to the challenging operating conditions of the trans-continental route. Diesel traction had been considered during the initial planning of the line before the First World War, and diesel traction was adopted at an early stage, largely due to water quality problems with steam. This equipment was sourced from General Motors in the USA, and marked a significant shift away from colonial links. Many of the British suppliers failed to make the transition from steam to diesel products and after the pacific campaigns of World War II Australia were more conscious of their geographic location. The U.S. diesels were eventually joined by Japanese manufactured electric locomotives and passenger multiple units, with local assembly and maintenance. David and Wheelwright[9] discuss this re-orientation in terms of waves of foreign investment, with British succeeded by American and Asian capital. This same reorientation of economy and markets led to a reevaluation of the role of rail transport, from the social development agenda of the state systems to more open competition with alternative modes of road and air, primarily for freight.

The pattern of coast to hinterland development reappeared in both Western Australia and Queensland in support of exports to East Asia with private investment in iron ore railways in the 1970s and state rail support for coal exports in the 1980s respectively. This mix of public and private initiatives signaled a switch from a nation building agenda with rail transport as a creator of social cohesion to one of infrastructure development geared to participation in global markets.

In 1993 the Hilmer Report on competition was published[10]. Commissioned by the federal prime minister it argued for greater competition among government-owned

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[9] David A. & Wheelwright T. (1989) *The Third Wave: Australia and Asian Capitalism* Sydney: Left Book Club

[10] Hilmer, F., Rayner, M., Taperell, G., (1993), National Competition Policy, Report by the Independent Committee of Inquiry Canberra: Australian Government Printing Service.

entities, the removal of interstate barriers to trade in energies such as electricity and gas, the elimination of duopoly in telecommunications where Telstra and OTC dealt with national and international communications respectively, and of the monopoly of Australia Post over the delivery of mail, the elimination of cross-subsidies in the provision and delivery of water, corporatisation of port authorities and the abolition of monopoly practices among the legal, medical and other professions. In the following decade there has been a comprehensive reconfiguration of rail services, with the break up of ANR and several state systems into separate infrastructure and operating companies, along the lines of UK rail privatisation.

The completion of the north-south link was undertaken by a private consortium established by the South Australian and Northern Territory governments. With a design and construction arm and a separate operating arm. The project was financed by Federal Government, State and Territory governments with the balance the private sector. The Federal Government also agreed to the lease of the existing 830km line between Tarcoola (near Adelaide) and Alice Springs.

5: Conclusions: tracking change

The consolidation of public transport networks both in the North and South of Ireland resulted in a withdrawal of rural rail services through the 1950s to the present day and the commercialization bus networks to the extent that operations are now largely focused on key corridors in urban areas. In rural Northern Ireland that has been more investment into express coach services and community transport initiatives. The growth and decline of the Irish rail network over the period 1860-2000 has been dramatic with the early and late rail systems looking remarkably similar, gone are the rural parts of the network that were in existence in the 1920s and 30s. This has left a landscape of disused lines in many rural areas.

The UTA was subsequently replaced by the Northern Ireland Transport Holding Company which has oversight of the public transport operations undertaken on their behalf by Translink. In Northern Ireland both rail and bus based public transport are in public ownership, the system was not deregulated in the 1980s as in England, Scotland and Wales. Northern Ireland is very unusual in the UK context in that it has integrated public transport organization responsible for the development and

management of the public transport system. Nonetheless continuing growth in car ownership has damaged the profitability of public transport in Northern Ireland.

Northern Ireland now experiences one the fastest rates of growth in car ownership in the UK and as a consequence has experienced a significant growth in CO_2 emissions. This trend in transport has been matched by a movement away from public transport in all but the more urban areas. In Northern Ireland these current transport trends prompted concerns over the viability of key parts of the rail network. Debates about the viability of the non-core or non-commuter rail system (that is the rail lines north of Ballymena and Whitehead respectively) prompted responses from local politicians and community leaders concerned about the vision for transport policy in Northern Ireland and also how the identity of settlements without rail links would be viewed within an overall regional development strategy[11].

Australia has a highly urbanized population concentrated in coastal centres, with an extensive rural hinterland. Rail has supported rural development and the exploitation of inland mineral resources. As with Northern Ireland, many rural passenger routes have been replaced by rail-operated buses timetabled with remaining trains and competing with private road operators. Rural freight traffic is highly seasonal, especially in the wheat growing areas. There has been a commuter rail revival in urban centres, with closed lines reopening or being integrated into light rail systems. In the Perth metropolitan area integrated rail and expressway development has been a feature of urban expansion for decades.

Shortly after the inauguration of the trans-Australian Railway led to the publication of *Trans-Australian Wonderland* an account of the environment crossed by the railway by a railway worker[12] Bolan (1923). His emphasis was on the revelation of a hidden and unspoilt hinterland contrasting with the developed centres linked by the new route. Bolan's exposure to the local aboriginal inhabitants along the route

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[11] Booz, Allen and Hamilton (2004), *Northern Ireland Railways Strategic Review*, Northern Ireland Railways, Belfast

[12] Bolan A.G. (1923) *The Trans-Australian Wonderland* Melbourne: Modern Printing Co.

led to a positive treatment of their culture by the author and a 1925 edition produced for the New South Wales Department of Public Instruction as a school textbook.

In the intervening years the Holden saloon car and the Ute – utility truck or pick-up - had become symbols of urban mobility and rural development respectively. Domestic air lines and road transport began to take long distance passenger traffic while Qantas became the national symbol representing the romance of long distance travel and more Australians aspired to visit Europe and North America. Disneyland was a preferred destination over Darwin. With lower air fares and road coach competition between main centres and the hinterland, residual long distance rail passenger were mainly pensioners – those with government subsidised tickets.

On completion of the Alice Springs to Darwin link in 2004 both freight and passenger services were inaugurated. The "Ghan" passenger service, operated by Great Southern Railways along with the "Indian-Pacific" east-west service and the Adelaide to Melbourne "Overland" service was heavily promoted in high-end tourist markets as an exotic and romantic experience, in line with similar services in India and South Africa. The tourist dimension presents an external view of the national-romantic view of Australia characterised by the film character Crocodile Dundee, played in reality by an urban working class actor who previously work on another national symbol the Sydney Harbour Bridge.

In contrast to the tourist oriented passenger service the freight service reflects a more contemporary understanding to Australians. The majority of the Australian population lives in coastal cites, all of which are ports. Robert Drewe's collection of stories: "the Bodysurfers" (Drewe, 1983) emphasizes this outward orientation of white Australian consciousness. Every state capital is either a port, or in the case of Perth (WA) and Adelaide (SA) has an outport: Fremantle and Port Adelaide respectively. The largest non-capital city (i.e. excluding Canberra, itself an artificial federal capital deliberately built out of the range of naval gunfire) was Toowoomba: with 80,000 people. With its orientation to external ties to regional neighbours the completion of the Darwin rail link represents a commitment to a regional role, economically and politically, for Australia.

In the Australian the symbolic power of rail remains. In the 1980s a Very Fast Train proposal modeled on the French TGV was developed to link the urban centers of the east coast (Network, 1989). In the 1990s a proposed inland high-speed rail route competed for resources with the completion of the North Australian Railway. This was intended to collect high value agricultural produced for delivery to the new markets of Asia via Darwin[13].

Despite the re-configuration of the State rail systems there has been a revival of the development and nation building agenda in a more fragmented form. In the new context of both the completion of the Darwin link and the continued promotion of the inland east-coast route. The broader notion of the development of public undertakings to deliver a service has been displaced by the promotion of high profile infrastructure projects. James has examined Australian examples, including proposals for high speed rail links[14] while Flyvbjerg, Bruzelius and Rothengatter have analysed the dynamics large scale megaprojects which require significant policy commitment over a lengthy period and which usually involve significant increases in cost once the commitment is made[15].

The durability of the Australian railway as an element of national identity has survived substantial institutional change, even as it now serves a different discourse of identity – South Asian good neighbour rather than European outpost.

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[13] Hoyle J. (2002) 'Victorian government fails to attract private investment in fast rail project' *Railway Digest* Vol.40 no.7 p.5

[14] James P. (ed) (1990) *Technocratic Dreaming: Of Very Fast Trains and Japanese Designer Cities* Melbourne: Left Book Club

[15] Flyvbjerg, B. Bruzelius N. and Rothengatter W. (2003) *Megaprojects and risk: an anatomy of ambition* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

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