

Gendering transport history

Retrospect and prospect

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Gender has been a vibrant category of historical analysis for well over a decade. Most branches of historical enquiry have been subject to the scrutiny of gendered lenses and the ensuing, often controversial, debates have advanced knowledge considerably. Gender history as a form of enquiry that challenges sex-blindness, both in reality and symbolically, has produced and can produce new and dynamic perspectives on and insights into the past.¹

This issue of the journal focuses on the proposition that taking gender seriously produces different perspectives on transport history. For too long the subject area has had a predominantly, if not exclusively, masculine appearance. Written primarily by men for a male audience, and focusing on machinery, technology and the operation of transport companies, it has become ghettoised. Professional or academic historians have written splendid histories of operations and business concerns or investigations of competition and technological change. Amateur historians or enthusiasts have been more involved with transport equipment and its preservation or with the nuts and bolts of routes. If these types of transport history have not been male-dominated they have been perceived as such, and few women have successfully crossed their threshold until recently. Thus the feminine side of transport ventures has, for the most part, been ignored. The traditional clarion cry of female historians, 'Missing from history', has been and still is the most appropriate description of transport history.

Yet both the feminine side and the gendered approach to transport history can be recovered (see J. Stanley's article). There may have been relatively few female producers in the shape of owners and managers, but some women have been actively involved in leading companies. Their presence and input have grown considerably since the general acceptance of equal opportunities in the Western world. More important, women have been hidden contributors to transport operations because they were often unpaid relatives in family firms and small organisations. These have always been important parts of the transport sector, even though historians have preferred to write about larger operations, which have more often maintained a coherent set of archival records. Women workers have also contributed to the well-being of firms, especially in the twentieth century. Female office staff, communications

staff, cleaners and personnel on vehicles have taken an active part in the efficient functioning of operations (see D. Whitelegg's article). Women have found careers and occupations in transport, even though most male historians have chosen to ignore them or have marginalised their worth. Yet organising transport services may not be the most important way in which women have contributed to the industry in the past. Women have always been significant consumers of travel, and their decisions and preferences have not only had an effect on the quality and nature of services, they have shaped the process of growth and decline (see B. Schmucki's article). Furthermore their representation in literature and the media has been significant in stimulating interest in and discussion of transport and travel patterns (see I. Carter's, A. Freedman's and B. Muellner's articles). Much more attention needs to be paid to the female side of transport history.²

While the female contribution needs to be recovered to move forward beyond the traditional transport history, it is not sufficient if it also stands alone and segregated as another part of the discipline. It must be part of an inclusive approach to discussing a new history, which integrates the feminine with the masculine. Gender as a category of analysis moves more towards reality by recognising that the different circumstances of the sexes make women and men feel and identify with events and views in dissimilar ways. Yet these ways remain complementary. Women and men exist in a relational situation and it is impossible to understand what is masculine without having a clear idea of what is feminine. Even the absence of women in history has created human patterns that were untypical. And since the characteristics of feminine and masculine are culturally constructed, and have been shaped and reshaped both historically and geographically, new narratives as well as new versions of old narratives come forward in gendered history to generate a range of rich experiences.

Transport historians have been neither averse to changing directions in the past nor slow to make connections with interesting trends in other disciplines and in other branches of history. Traditionally transport history was narrative, focusing on firms, modes of transport, entrepreneurs or governments. It often consisted of micro-studies, was limited in its scope and subject matter and made little attempt to discuss transport as a whole. As part of economic or institutional history, usually written by historians, or as local studies, written by enthusiasts, transport history lacked self-assurance. But in the mid-twentieth century it was propelled into wide-ranging and controversial areas. Following wartime destruction in Europe, and with the concern to liberate Third World countries from imperial domination, politicians and their analysts looked to capitalist models of growth. Central to any such model was the development of a viable transport network. Looking to the past as well as to theoretical models for inspiration, economists found that railways and shipping were key components of economic development. The emphasis given to trains and boats, and by implication to modern motor vehicles, raised the profile of transport history. This profile was raised still further when economists attempted to measure the specific contribution of particular modes of

transport, especially railways. Econometric studies, featuring the counterfactual model to estimate growth rates and the concept of social savings to gauge the value of railways or canals, made transport history the centre of path-breaking historical research. Economists were also interested in the management of transport systems and their relation to public policy. They were not alone. Political scientists, lawyers and public administrators also analysed issues of free enterprise, 'public interest', monopoly, rational expectations and inter- and intra-modal competition in their attempts to ascertain the appropriate relationship between governments and transport enterprise. Their search was influenced not only by contemporary intellectual ideas but by past practices. Thus transport historians were drawn into discussions about the private and public mix of transport policy, usually in the shape of controversial arguments about regulation and deregulation.³

At a similar time as long-distance transport was becoming a focus of historical and public policy debate re-interpretations of short-distance transport or transit systems emerged. New Urban Historians influenced by changes in social science methodology sought to understand the morphology of urban growth in the late nineteenth century when it was no longer possible to walk to work. The need to link the central business district with the suburbs and then the suburbs with the radial spread of workplaces stimulated both public and private responses in the shape of trams, electric railways, steam railways, underground railways, buses and motor cars. With each technological change, concerns were raised about the built and the natural environment, and historians of urban transit systems have been well placed to offer suggestions to the ever changing world of urban planning. Yet another genre of transport history was perceived to add practical value to its academic value when transport was considered as the pioneer of modern business enterprise. Initially the railways were used as a tool of analysis to investigate organisational innovations that achieved economies of scale, earned large profits and gained great power. Subsequently motor vehicles were examined to demonstrate a newer form of managerial capitalism in which professional managers were the architects of modern growth. Transport history here was becoming aligned with modern business history, where the focus of research was on the production of vehicles and transport services.

In the light of these diverse moves in transport history in the second half of the twentieth century it is not surprising that yet more academic and contemporary currents should have stimulated further debate. Since the early 1980s both cultural and feminist approaches to history and to many other disciplines and areas have been influencing research and writing. Informed by critical and literary theory, the cultural approach requires that matters of meaning, interpretation and value are examined. For transport historians the introduction of the cultural dimension asks that institutional practices and public policy interact with consumers. Companies and governments may have marketing and policy targets, but they have to listen to the desires and individual needs of customers if they are to be deemed effective. Postmodernism further suggests that subjects are not stable; they are fragmented and

are always being made or re-made. Hence there are multiple meanings to producers' and public policy strategies and to consumers' wishes and actions, and a plural approach to transport history is necessary.

Women's history aimed to recover the hidden half of the population. Initially ghettoised as a means of gaining recognition and acceptability, it has moved away from its early white liberal and middle-class focus to encompass race, multiculturalism and linguistic methodology. Its primarily female practitioners have also crossed the boundaries into other branches of history to help humanise their findings. Gradually, and often struggling against patterns of traditional historical resistance, they have made their presence not merely known and valuable but intrinsic. Sometimes women's history has been in the form of finding the missing pieces and discussing them. At other times it has taken the form of relating the missing pieces to the existing template and of examining gender. Often it has pushed down barriers to ask new questions and stimulate new approaches

Transport history has been slow to formally acknowledge the cultural and women's contributions to new and dynamic forms of enquiry. Yet there is no valid reason to hesitate. Other traditionally masculine areas of history have recognised their female and feminine components and have gained from so doing.⁴ Business history provides a good example of such gains. Until recently business history was male-dominated and had a masculine canon. Written primarily by men and for men, its emphasis was frequently the entrepreneur and his operations. Even when business historians examined the work force and the marketing of products these were set in a framework in which labour was impersonalised via a union organisation or through statistical generalisations. The female side was missing in that there were few, if any, female entrepreneurs and women workers were institutionalised into a neutral category called labour. Even the absence or the scarcity of women did not stimulate discussion about male-dominated processes and how these types of masculinity affected the efficiency of business operations.

Yet, in the United States, at least, women's place in business endeavours and the gendering of business have recently become 'the fastest-growing and most intellectually innovative areas of historical study'.⁵ Articles proliferate. Often they are published in a variety of outlets ranging from local and regional publications to women's history journals and thematic periodicals in labour and technological history. Then they can be perceived primarily as examples of their 'other' dimension rather than as examples of women's economic activities. But major business history journals, like *Business and Economic History*, *Business History Review* and *Enterprise and Society*, have also encouraged work in this area and have taken the sexual dimension to the heart of their subject. Seminal books have further promoted debate. Though both young and old business historians have worried about deconstructing established canons, gender analysis has added enormously to humanising business history. People matter. They, rather than the institutions, made history. In bringing in the female and the feminine and linking them with consumption and representation as well as production, gendered business historians have

opened the door to recognising that business endeavour is more than a rational search for profit, growth and stability. It is part of a social environment in which people and public policies count.⁶

Like business history, transport history has had a masculine face. Yet as a service industry it has encompassed a minority side that did not lose all its connections with the wider economic landscape and the human impact of social change. For transport is not concerned only with the production of vehicles; it is also concerned with the consumption of services. There is thus a tradition that has acknowledged women's presence, albeit in an indirect way. Women's historians and gender historians can claim a parentage of sorts and can suggest that they are reinvigorating earlier strands of transport history by re-emphasising personnel in transport and travel.⁷ More likely, however, they seek to break new ground and to modify the subject area by employing different conceptual approaches and by placing women at the centre or in a relational situation with men.⁸ Both these strands, of traditional social history and modern women's and gender history, can be seen in motor transport history, a branch that has focused on the motor car.

Most automobile history has been concerned with the production of vehicles.⁹ So there have been major company histories of firms like Ford or Austin and major studies of the impact of car production. But some studies have addressed the effects of motor vehicles when they left the factory and took to the roads. American historians have led the way because they live in a country where car transport is so popular that the words 'automobility' and 'autopia' have been coined to suggest that lifestyles were constructed around these vehicles. These historians wrote about the impact of the car and the road on American life and about car culture. Their work did not have specific sections on women, nor was it engendered to discuss how men and women perceived and used cars. But it did recognise that the automobile was a family vehicle that had had a profound effect on the American way of life. As a family vehicle it encompassed a female dimension which is recoverable.¹⁰

Women entered motor transport history more visibly through discussions of advertising and through women's history and cultural history. By the 1920s American car manufacturers had learned that they should style their vehicles to accommodate women. Advertisements clearly showed how influential women were in purchasing and using automobiles. And though the car was very much perceived as a masculine icon, women were important consumers in the emerging mass market and their desires altered production decisions. Thanks to the dynamics of women's history, women also became more clearly recognised in the world of motoring. As cars were private vehicles suited to individual and family travel, female passengers wanted comfort, safety and accessibility. As drivers they not only counted as taste makers; they proclaimed their independence and challenged cultural norms. Driving enabled women to move beyond the confines of domesticity and to contest gender stereotypes. Early in the development of motoring it was recognised that the car was not only his; it was also hers.¹¹ Though cars have so far offered the most insights into a sexually aware transport history,

forays have also been made into discussions about motor cycle and bus transport.¹² But motor transport is not peculiar among transport history. There are abundant opportunities to enhance perspectives on other modes of travel by acknowledging that women have existed, more often as consumers and in their representation in transport than as producers. Yet even when missing their absence has had an impact on the masculine nature of transport endeavours.

These opportunities were readily witnessed in the international conference 'Transporting Gender', held at the National Railway Museum, York, on 6–7 October 2000. Forty-six participants, well mixed in terms of age, experience, transport and travel interests and representing a variety of disciplines, learned new ideas and facts and integrated diverse concepts and methodologies. The sessions were both interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary because the organising committee had decided to mix the modes of transport when arranging the conference programme.¹³ There were two sessions on female operatives, two on imaging gendered travel, two on the consumption of transport and travel and a final session examining past trends and future prospects. Speakers were encouraged to interact with the audience, thereby furthering a friendly and stimulating atmosphere.¹⁴ The best of these papers, which were submitted to this journal, after refereeing and revision, are published in this special gender issue. As has happened so often in transport history, railways dominate, but the rails are portrayed in both their long and short-distance varieties of steam and electric. Trams, boats and airliners further demonstrate that gender is central to an analysis of any form of transport. Representation of transport features strongly as well as transport itself.

Jo Stanley offers perceptive insights into the ways in which maritime historians in particular, and transport historians in general, might examine and expand their subject area through gendered lenses. Alisa Freedman uses the literary genre to investigate gender relations on electric suburban trains in early twentieth-century Tokyo. Beth Muellner also works within the intellectual tradition of literature by examining the culturally gendered space of a railway journey to investigate women's place in mid-nineteenth-century Germany. Detective novels form the basis of Ian Carter's excursion into the real and literary gendered worlds of British railways. Barbara Schmucki finds that German trams offered women a diverse range of 'real' experiences and Drew Whitelegg examines gender relations in the modern airline industry through an analysis of emotional labour.

The variety of approaches, methodologies and perspectives of the articles in this issue of the journal demonstrate the importance of reassessments with a gendered dimension. New stories and analyses as well as re-cast versions of old narratives and debates can emerge to create a variety of rich experiences in travel, the production of transport services and their representation. As befitting recent academic research, there is no dominant theme but a wealth of theoretical and empirical suggestions. There is a dynamic here that can represent transport history not only to its traditional core readership but also to a much wider audience. Mobility has become a dominant feature of daily

life and in social and economic development; its past needs to be studied in its full human dimension. Gendering transport history offers a full, useful and constructive tool of analysis.

Notes

- 1 The classic statement on the importance of gender analysis for history is J. Scott, 'Gender: a useful category of analysis', *American Historical Review* 91 (1986), pp. 1053–75. For a useful insight into the value of gender history see Editorial Collective, 'Why Gender and History?', *Gender and History* 1, 1 (1989), pp. 1–6, and G. Bock, 'Women's history and gender history: aspects of an international debate', *Gender and History* 1, 1 (1989), pp. 7–30.
- 2 For a discussion of the diverse roles of women in a specific transport industry see M. Walsh, *Making Connections: the long-distance bus industry in the USA* (Aldershot, 2000), pp. 173–86.
- 3 This paragraph and the paragraph below are examined in more detail in M. Walsh, 'Moving on: Changing Emphases in Transport History', paper given at the third KFB Research Conference, 'Transport Systems, Organisation and Planning', Stockholm, 14 June 2000. Some of the major contributions to changing the foci of analysis in transport history are W. W. Rostow, *The Stages of Economic Growth: a non-communist manifesto* (Cambridge, 1960); D. C. North, *The Economic Growth of the United States, 1790–1860* (New York, 1961); R. W. Fogel, *Railroads and Economic Growth: essays in econometric history* (Baltimore MD, 1964); A. E. Fishlow, *American Railroads and the Transformation of the Antebellum Economy* (Cambridge MA, 1965); T. McCraw, 'Regulation in America: a review article', *Business History Review* 49 (1975), pp. 159–83; G. Kolko, *Railroads and Regulation, 1877–1916* (Princeton NJ, 1965); S. B. Warner, *Streetcar Suburbs: the process of growth in Boston, 1872–1900* (Cambridge MA, 1962); Charles W. Cheape, *Moving the Masses: urban transit in New York, Boston and Philadelphia* (Cambridge MA, 1980); A. D. Chandler Jr, *Strategy and Structure: chapters in the history of industrial enterprise* (Cambridge MA, 1962) and *id.*, *The Visible Hand: the managerial revolution in American business* (Cambridge MA, 1977).
- 4 The history of technology, which intersects transport history, has benefited profoundly from gendered analysis since the late 1970s. Of the numerous articles and books now available, two 'classics', R. Schwartz Cowan, *More Work for Mother: the ironies of household technology from the open hearth to the microwave* (New York, 1983), and J. Wacjman, *Feminism Confronts Technology* (University Park PA, 1991), stimulated much debate and research. *Technology and Culture*, the official publication of the Society for the History of Technology, has actively encouraged the gendered work of a new generation of scholars. For an interesting example of this work see the journal's special issue on gender, 'Gender Analysis and the History of Technology' 38, 1 (1987). For a recent collection of thoughtful essays see R. Horowitz and A. Mohun (eds), *His and Hers: gender, consumption and technology* (Charlottesville VA, 1998).
- 5 A. Kwolek-Folland, 'Gender and business history', *Enterprise and Society* 2, 1 (2001), p. 1.
- 6 Business historians traditionally viewed women's and gender history as a faddish innovation which either did not concern them or which might have a minor impact in adding a little information or revising interpretations. Yet, in the United States, at least, they have become more receptive to new ideas and have debated the issues, taking on board some of the challenges. M. Walsh, 'Gender and Business: refocusing the malestream', unpublished paper given at the Business History Seminar, London School of Economics, 22 January 2001. Examples of gendered business articles can be found in *Business and Economic History* 23, 1 (1994), pp. 128–40, 241–51, 23, 2 (1994), pp. 85–107, 24, 1 (1995), pp. 97–105; *Business History Review* 72 (1998), pp. 185–249; *Enterprise and Society* 2, 1 (2001), pp. 1–111, and M. A. Yeager (ed.), *Women in Business* (three volumes, Cheltenham, 1999). The books in this area are primarily in American history. See, for example, A. Kwolek-Folland, *Engendering Business: men and women in the corporate office, 1870–1930* (Baltimore MD, 1994); W. Gamber, *The Female Economy: the millinery and dressmaking trades, 1860–1930* (Urbana IL, 1997); A. Kwolek-Folland, *Incorporating Women: a history of women and business in the United States* (New York, 1998); K. Peiss, *Hope in a Jar: the making of American beauty culture* (New York, 1998). Both the discussion 'Profitable

- Complications: a round table on business and gender in Great Britain and America' at the Business and Theory Conference in Glasgow, July 1999, and the electronic forum on H-business in 1999 which followed Mary Yeager's review of *Incorporating Women* and the author's reply pointed to the gender concerns and aspirations of business historians.
- 7 Recent writing on business history suggests that earlier histories in the subject recognised the links between production and the social and human environment. Recovery of T. C. Cochran's view of business history has been seen to be more fruitful than A. D. Chandler's view when discussing culture and personal involvement in enterprise. See D. B. Sicilia, 'Cochran's legacy: a cultural path not taken', *Business and Economic History* 24, 1 (1995), pp. 27–39.
 - 8 Many of the participants at the 'Transporting Gender' conference came from non-transport history backgrounds and brought with them a variety of approaches, including those of literary and cultural theory, sociology, feminist studies, geography, technology and economic studies. The cross- and interdisciplinary discussions that followed the papers were fruitful in stimulating new ways of thinking. Historians who have written on women and transport history or gender and transport history have published their work in a range of academic outlets that reflect their paired interests, for example local history, women's history or technological history.
 - 9 M. Walsh, 'Introduction', in M. Walsh (ed.), *Motor Transport*, Studies in Transport History (Aldershot, 1997), pp. ix–xxiii.
 - 10 J. B. Rae, *The Road and the Car in American Life* (Cambridge MA, 1971), J. J. Flink, *The Car Culture* (Cambridge MA, 1975); W. J. Belasco, *Americans on the Road: from auto-camp to motel, 1910–45* (Cambridge MA, 1979); M. Berger, *The Devil's Wagon in God's Country: the automobile and social change in rural America* (Hamden CT, 1979); *Michigan Quarterly Review*, 19–20 (1980–81), subsequently reprinted as D. M. Lewis and L. Goldstein (eds), *The Automobile and Car Culture* (Ann Arbor MI, 1983); T. Barker (ed.), *The Economic and Social Effects of the Spread of Motor Vehicles* (1987); J. J. Flink, *The Automobile Age* (Cambridge MA, 1988) and J. A. Jackle, K. A. Sculle and J. S. Rogers, *The Motel in America* (Baltimore MD, 1996).
 - 11 A useful discussion of advertising and its relation to women can be found in R. Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: making way for modernity, 1920–40* (Berkeley CA, 1985). More recent books on women and the car broaden this discussion and place women at the centre of their analysis. See V. Scharff, *Taking the Wheel: women and the coming of the Motor Age* (New York, 1991), and S. O'Connell, *The Car in British Society: class, gender and motoring, 1896–1939* (Manchester, 1998).
 - 12 S. Koerner, 'Women and Motor Cycling in Britain', and M. Walsh, 'Gender Marketing and the Intercity Bus Industry in the United States', papers given at the Economic History Society conference, Bristol, 8 April 2000; Walsh, *Making Connections*, pp. 89–105, 173–208.
 - 13 The organising committee consisted of Colin Divall (University of York and National Railway Museum), Rosa Matheson (University of the West of England), Jo Stanley (University of Lancaster) and Maggie Walsh (University of Nottingham). Calls for papers were made via electronic history web sites and through hard copy sent to several history journals and university notice boards. The conference was supported financially by the British Academy, the Economic History Society, the Institute of Railway Studies (National Railway Museum), Manchester University Press, the Royal Historical Society and the University of Nottingham.
 - 14 See pp. vii–viii for a full listing of the papers given at this conference.

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