

T. C. Barker and transport history

Professor Theodore Cardwell Barker, who died in November 2001, was an economic and social historian of high standing and achievement. Detailed lists of his published work appear in *Who's Who* and the *Journal of Transport History* (third series, 19, 1998), and there was a comprehensive obituary notice in *The Times* of 28 November 2001.

'Theo', as he was called by all who knew him, came from St Helens, in Lancashire, where he was born in 1923. From Cowley School there he went on to Jesus College, Oxford, and Manchester University, where he took his Ph.D. He worked in the economic history department of the London School of Economics from 1953 to 1964 and then went to the new University of Kent at Canterbury, as professor, to set up its department of economic and social history. He returned to the London School of Economics in 1976 and remained there until he retired in 1983.

With *A Merseyside Town in the Industrial Revolution* (with J. R. Harris, 1954) and *Pilkington Brothers and the Glass Industry* (1960) he showed a mind intent on presenting urban history comprehensively, particularly as a matter of social change. This meant enlarging academic notions about the proper study of places and technological developments, with willingness to consider many kinds of evidence, including oral history, which up to that time had been largely ignored.

It must strike anyone who reads the list of his works how often Theo wrote in joint authorship with others: with J. R. Harris on St Helens; with R. H. Campbell, Peter Mathias and B. S. Yamey on business history; *A History of London Transport* with Michael Robbins; *Our Changing Fare* (on food habits) with J. C. McKenzie and John Yudkin; *An Economic History of Transport* with C. I. Savage; *The Rise and Rise of Road Transport* with Dorian Gerhold; and *Megalopolis: the giant city in history* with Anthony Sutcliffe as joint editor. And that was not all.

He brought to the job of producing a detailed and accurate historical account, of studying one industry or place, an insistence on high standards of good, clear writing; he looked to his collaborator to marshal the evidence on the business and technical side. This does not mean that, in the case of transport, he was less than fully interested in the technicalities, but that the

meeting of minds, starting at one corner from the academic approach, and at the other from enthusiasm and specialist knowledge, resulted in a well balanced picture of the development of a firm or a place, and the activities carried on there. Some authors, not excluding academics, have a dash of the enthusiast about them; some of the best accounts of aviation history, for instance, have been written by aircraft lovers. I have not yet heard of a camel addict making his contribution to transport history; but it should be done. Enthusiasm is no bar to good history.

So Theo, at first by chance, and later, I feel sure, by design, did all his biggest and best books in collaboration with other people who could bring experience from a different background as a contribution to the achievement of a balanced story. Joint authorship can be a risky thing, and it has been the *end* of several friendships. But Theo and I, when we agreed to tackle the history of London Transport together, decided that we must look at any possible problem of divergent interpretation straight in the eye and before it had become a menace. We sketched out a treaty about the handling of disagreements which certainly arose as the work went on. This was always there in the background and, because it was there, we (usually after considerable discussion) managed to come to agreement on every point in our 966 page story. We were still friends when the books were published – indeed, more so than when we began – and it seems, in the general opinion of transport historians, to have worn pretty well after some thirty to forty years of exposure to criticism.

So, with that book, Theo Barker became interested in a serious way in transport history. In the course of his busy life he managed to serve on the editorial committee of this journal; he was an adviser to the London Transport Museum; President of the Railway and Canal Historical Society, 1986–89; Chairman of the Transport History Research Group, 1991–97. But transport history was only one part of his activity in wider fields of academic research and publication. As well as motor cars, his interests covered glass making, pewter and City companies – it is astonishing to read the list of his activities and published works. Together with his gifted wife Joy (Judith Pierce, singer and teacher) he was very good company, with a wide circle of friends. He relished the pleasures of the table, with a special feeling for wine. As one of those who – fortuitously, in my case – came to be one of his collaborators, I salute his memory and thank him for his good feeling, exact scholarship, straightforwardness in all his dealings, and most of all for his cheerful companionship.

Michael Robbins