

# Michael Robbins

1915–2002

This journal owes an enormous debt to Michael Robbins, who died on the 21 December 2002. He was one of the founders of the journal in 1953, along with his friend from school days, Jack Simmons. They shared the joy and burden of editing for the next thirteen years, the longest period of any co-editorship in the journal's existence.

His contribution to *The Journal of Transport History* was multi-faceted and he carried out the role of editing meticulously. He was a stickler for correct grammar and ruthless on informality, Americanisms and 'modernisms'. In addition, he brought to the journal the credibility and practical eye of a practitioner based on his career in London Transport. Partially as a result of this, he encouraged practitioners to contribute to the journal, wishing to see a fusion of pieces by academics and managers. He was a frequent contributor to the journal, having over a dozen articles published in it, mostly on over-ground or underground railways, his last piece being published as recently as 2000. Michael also reviewed many books for the journal, combining speed of turnaround, with incisiveness and a broad understanding of transport history with which to contextualise the book reviewed.

Last, but by no means least, he gave support and sensible advice to later editors of the journal, in particular, the authors of this tribute. Although he was normally to the point, verging on the blunt, he rarely gave direct advice, but by a combination of careful questioning and apparent reminiscence of what he had achieved or strived for, he passed on values, aspirations, and directions. He kept the best interests of the journal close to his heart, having strong views on the value of book reviews, and making them trenchantly known when one recent issue fell short of his exacting standards.

*The Journal of Transport History* was only one manifestation of Michael's achievements. His main job was, of course, with London Transport serving from 1939 to 1980. There he had a distinguished career as Secretary to the London Transport Executive (1950–55), Chief Public Relations Officer (1955–65), and subsequently Member of the LTE (1965–80) and Managing Director (Railways) from 1971 to 1978. Among his other, honorary, appointments were President of the Omnibus Society 1965, President of the Institute of Transport 1975–76, and Chairman of the International Union of

Public Transport 1976–81. Michael did not suffer fools gladly and could seem aloof and distant at times, but this was his rather old-world formality. Underneath, he was generous, warm, courteous and concerned. He wrote well and encouraged others. He was also instrumental in the preservation of London's transport and its display, initially at Syon Park and then at the Covent Garden museum.

He was perhaps best known for inspiring generations of would-be railway historians in his short, provocative and highly stimulating book on *The Railway Age* (1962). He also wrote, with Theo Barker, the magisterial volumes on London Transport, Robbins being responsible for Volume II. The books were huge in scope, entertaining, drawing on a wide range of sources and judicial in their conclusions. Indeed 'Barker and Robbins' remain the first stop for anyone wishing to understand London's transport history. So much so, that there has been almost no new work on London's tube system in recent years. With the passing of both Theo and Michael, an opportunity arises to take on the mantle of London's transport history, but it will be a brave person who does so – they are big shoes to fill.

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25 January 2003