

## Book reviews

David Thoms and Tom Donnelly, *The Coventry Motor Industry: birth to renaissance*, Ashgate, Aldershot (2000), 240 pp., £47.50 (US\$84.95).

This book is a revised version of *The Motor Car Industry in Coventry since the 1890s* using additional primary and secondary sources not available for the original work and bringing the edition closer to the present day. It is indeed praise to be able to describe the volume as a serious history of Coventry and its associated motor industry. It is in no way to be confused with the many enthusiasts' accounts which exist and which serve a different purpose.

The book begins by describing Coventry's transition from its traditional industries of textiles and watchmaking through cycle production at the turn of the century to the relative domination of the cycle, motor vehicle and machine tool sectors by 1911. It includes a discussion of the socio-economic changes associated with the transition as the background for the rest of the volume.

Next the foundations of the motor industry are studied carefully. Coventry developed from a significant centre of production to a centre of motor car activity by the beginning of the First World War. Whilst those establishments which were to become major players (e.g. Daimler) started out as motor vehicle companies, the pioneers (e.g. Humber, Rover) had their origins in the cycle industry. Indeed, the Riley company is described as showing exceptional continuity by its transition from being first a textile company, turning then to cycle manufacturing and later motor cycle manufacturing before becoming a successful motor car producer. A wide range of determinants relating to Coventry's growth are explored in this chapter, including the availability of a suitable work force and locally provided finance, the inventiveness of cycle manufacturers

and the way in which this extended the market. The authors are wide-ranging in their attention and consider, for example, the way in which the demand for cycle components encouraged firms at the heavier end of the engineering industry to settle in the environs of Coventry – a useful adjunct to aid the growth of the emerging car industry. Technical links between cycle development and motor production are not ignored; the recession of the late 1890s provided the push for many of the cycle firms to begin experimenting with cars, which, in turn, led to the rapid change experienced in the opening years of the twentieth century. This exploration of the general determinants is followed by a chapter which examines organisation and growth in more detail.

Apart from the accommodation of military production, the chapter concerned with the consequences of the 1914–18 war also describes the conflicting impacts on the individual firms. Some component firms prospered but many more specialist car component enterprises floundered. The fates of individual car firms were much more mixed. In all manufacturing sectors the major constraint was labour shortage. This had two effects: one was to hasten the employment of women and the other was to strengthen the trade union movement. The consequences, discussed in some detail, were a worsening of labour relations and upward pressure on wages, leading the authors to conclude that volume producers of motor cars chose to build assembly plants away from Coventry.

Coventry's share of the enormous gains made by the British motor car industry in the inter-war years is the subject of the next chapters. Expansion of output led to structural change, and this was handled by the motor car companies in different ways. The authors explore both the major and the minor figures in the industry and highlight management

and individual personalities as significant factors in a company's success.

The long build-up to the outbreak of the Second World War meant that its impact on the motor car industry and on Coventry in particular was more planned than in 1914. The mid-1930s saw the leading Coventry car manufacturers accepting the challenge to make aero-engines in new, government-financed 'shadow' factories. The growth in engineering activity during the 1939–45 war led to changes in economic structure, wage levels and patterns of labour relations which had repercussions well into the post-war era. The concentration of engineering effort during the war also made Coventry a major target of German bombing, and the nature and consequences of this are discussed in some depth.

The authors then consider the post-war success of the British motor industry and its virtual demise within a twenty-five year period. Initially Coventry was regarded as a car boom town, with a significant inward flow of labour, but by the end of the period motor car manufacturing had all but disappeared. The early part of the period was characterised by modest profit levels despite the vast expansion of the domestic market. The authors examine the causes of this and outline the many interrelated reasons which led Coventry's volume producers to lag behind others in the British motor industry and which had led to their decline by the 1960s, in comparison with their foreign competitors. The analysis of this chapter pays significant attention to the role of labour relations in the process.

The penultimate chapter examines what is euphemistically referred to as 'the end of the boom'. This was a period in which the West Midland conurbation went into decline, relative to the rest of Britain, and Coventry's fate was exacerbated by its rapid growth on a narrow industrial base with virtually no diversification. The demise of motor manufacturing contributed to Coventry's economic troubles, and the authors trace the unhappy events in an industry with low productivity, low capitalisation and notoriously bad labour relations. They analyse the government's intervention with both

British Leyland and Chrysler, and bring together information on the involvement of Michael Edwardes in British Leyland and the effect on Coventry's motor industry.

The final chapter examines the 1990s and the fate of the remaining motor manufacturers in the Midlands – British Leyland (BL), Chrysler and Jaguar. It deals with BL's transformation into the Rover Group in an attempt to move up market, and the 'new deal' with the work force to rectify the company's poor quality image and disastrous labour relations. Rover's sale to BMW, and subsequently to Alchemy, is discussed in a postscript. Developments at Chrysler, as a UK subsidiary of Peugeot, are related essentially to complete the picture. In contrast, the fate of Jaguar, because of its importance to the Coventry economy, is analysed in more detail.

The book includes a detailed bibliography, although the index is not very full and its further development would have enhanced the book's usefulness as a research source. Overall it is a well researched, carefully analysed history of the rise and fall of Coventry's motor industry. At over 200 pages, it is enjoyable to read and instructive of how Coventry's motor industry thrived and then failed. It is a book that demonstrates how economic history can provide information, analysis and interest not only to an academic audience but to the wider general public.

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Ian Carter, *Railways and Culture in Britain: the epitome of modernity*, Manchester University Press, Manchester (2001), 352 pp., £49.99 hard covers, £16.99 paperback.

Ian Carter has written a fascinating and thought-provoking study of aspects of the cultural reception of railways in Britain in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This is an area which, it hardly needs saying, has been neglected by the discipline of 'railway history' as conventionally understood; and unsurprisingly it

has taken a scholar from outside the boundaries of the discipline (Carter is Professor of Sociology at the University of Auckland) to address the issue. Carter's book is highly significant in remedying that neglect and indicating an agenda for future study in this important area.

*Railways and Culture in Britain* is not a 'cultural history of railways' but a historical, sociological and even anthropological study of the railway as a presence in modern British culture. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say as a presence and an absence, for Carter is as concerned with the ways in which the railway has failed to find a cultural echo in Britain as he is with the ways in which it has. This is indicated by the argument of Part I of the book, 'In the canon', which concludes that the railway has not been a canonical subject in British culture since its appearance in the nineteenth century. Carter's readings of Charles Dickens's *Dombey and Son* and J. M. W. Turner's 'Rain, steam and speed' are not in themselves innovative, but his overall argument, that concentration by scholars on these works has distorted our understanding of the railway's place in culture by distracting attention from the actual lack of any substantial railway presence 'in the canon', is illuminating and, to this reader at least, convincing.

Carter further concludes that our failure to appreciate the absence of the railway in the canon has blinded us to the real significance of its cultural presence elsewhere. Part I ends with a discussion of Arnold Bennett's novel *Accident*, a section which acts as a bridge to Part II of the book, 'Beyond the canon', which opens up the potential of this wider field of study to scrutiny. Bennett's 1929 novel, marginalised and forgotten by both literary critics and scholars, unknown to railway historians, stands for a whole industry of cultural production whose output has been disregarded. As historians we have been concerned with the artefactual, the operational, the institutional; as scholars of culture, with high culture and the project of modernism. Carter seeks to provide a corrective, revealing the presence of the railway in crime novels, comic fiction, films and

the more obscure corners of British visual art.

This argument needs to be received with a degree of caution: the presence of the railway in what might broadly be termed 'popular culture', whether visual, literary or artefactual, has long been recognised by the more informed and sensitive of railway historians, if only on a level that often equates to the naively antiquarian. Carter's work here, however, is so wide-ranging and rich in insight and scholarship that there can be no doubting its potency and relevance. Less satisfactory is the concluding section, which seeks to position the railway as a once acknowledged 'epitome of modernity' as an emblem of a 'decisive shift to postmodernity'. The argument is interesting and treads new ground, but compared with the rest of the book it is thin, speculative and in the end unconvincing, and will, I suspect, soon seem dated. Overall, however, to read this book and appreciate its insights is to look at the railway and the world of which it is part with new eyes.

The book is well designed and well produced, and the illustrations (the selection of which must have been a laborious and expensive task for the author) are clearly reproduced – an important point in a book such as this in which visual evidence is thoroughly integrated with the text. In one respect, however, the volume falls short of the standards its audience has a right to expect. Unlike others in the *Studies in Popular Culture* series, it has no bibliography. The endnotes to each chapter are detailed and thorough, indeed often excessively so, but that does not compensate for the omission. It is the publisher's job to see that there is a bibliography, and Manchester University Press have let their readers down by not doing so in this case.

Ralph Harrington, Institute of Railway Studies, University of York/National Railway Museum

Ivan Jakubec, *Eisenbahn und Elbeschifffahrt in Mitteleuropa 1918–1938. Die Neuordnung der verkehrspolitischen Beziehungen zwischen der Tschecho-*

*slowakei, dem Deutschen Reich und Österreich in der Zwischenkriegszeit.* Beiträge zur Unternehmensgeschichte IX. Franz Steiner, Stuttgart (2001), 184 pp., DM 34.00.

At the end of the First World War the Habsburg monarchy was disintegrating rapidly. The very day Austria-Hungary asked the Allies for an armistice – 28 October 1918 – an independent Czechoslovak Republic was proclaimed in Prague. The new State considered itself to be on the side of the Entente and, as such, on the winning side. While political independence was quickly achieved, the question of getting access to railways, waterways and ports was much more complicated at a time when all economic communications were problematic because of simultaneous changes in practically all central European frontiers.

Jakubec's monograph centres on the political and economic problems the newly created State faced, cut off as it was from direct access to the sea and left with a railway network that had served Austrian needs but was far from being a unified transport system within the boundaries of the new republic. Railway connections not just with Austria and Germany but also with Hungary, Yugoslavia and Italy had to be readjusted to Czechoslovak needs; disparate regions needed connecting if they were to form significant parts of a new political and economic entity. The commercial and tariff aspects of transport played a dominant role at the Versailles peace conference of 1919. As the republic produced more industrial goods than the domestic market could absorb, it was essential to establish new openings in Europe and beyond. The port of Hamburg became the harbour terminal of the Elbe waterway, handling some 10 per cent of Czechoslovak foreign trade. With the internationalisation of shipping on the Elbe and the creation of a Czech zone in the free port, Hamburg's importance for commerce and transport greatly surpassed that of Trieste. Prague aimed at becoming the transport hub of Central Europe, replacing Vienna, Budapest and Berlin. State intervention in transport

and transport enterprises was thus motivated by the desire for political, military and economic independence.

Jakubec's study is convincing in every respect. Based on a variety of sources and on sound interpretation, he paints a clear picture of the problems a new inland State with an export-oriented economy faced during the inter-war period. The emphasis is on railway transport, river navigation receiving less attention. Since only the overall conditions are looked at, there is still a need for research into the operation of Czechoslovak railways and shipping. The book's only flaw is the poor quality of most of the appendices. Many maps are simply indecipherable and therefore useless. Otherwise this is a fine piece of scholarship, with a summary in English. Readers of this journal can also turn to the author's article in vol. 17 (September 1996).

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Stephen Halliday, *Underground to Everywhere: London's Underground railway in the life of the capital*, Alan Sutton, Stroud/London Transport Museum (2001), 248 pp., £19.99.

Stephen Halliday's book can be recommended as a reliable, well written and enjoyable general history of the London Underground which succeeds in locating the underground railway 'in the life of the capital'.

Following a basically chronological framework, Halliday begins with a summary of the urban transport situation in London prior to the arrival of the underground railways, then narrates the development of the system, from the first lines of the 1860s to the opening of the Jubilee Line extension. The technical details of the system and its development are effectively covered, but there is no undue emphasis on the infrastructure and operational history; Halliday seeks to live up to the subtitle of his book, placing the development of the Underground system in the context of the life of London more generally – socially, culturally and economically. To do this comprehensively

would be beyond the scope of any but the most unmanageably large history, and within this relatively compact volume the main emphasis is on the financing of the system and the relationship between the Underground and London's political masters. Halliday's previous book *The Great Stink: Sir Joseph Bazalgette and the cleaning of the Victorian metropolis* (1999) deftly interwove politics, engineering and finance, and the same is true of this volume.

Although the main narrative structure is provided by Halliday's anatomising of the politics, financing and building of the network, he is able to touch illuminatingly on many aspects of the Underground which are neglected in other accounts, notably the social and class implications of the development of the network, and race and gender in the work force. The network as a part of everyday life for Londoners and visitors to the capital is also reflected, with discussion of the experience of commuting, the presence of the Underground's stations in the landscape, the ways in which service patterns reflect the varying activities of the system's users, and the place of the Underground in the local politics of the town hall and the street. There is a very good chapter on the inter-war Underground as a patron of art and design and another on the Underground at war; in common with the rest of the book neither brings anything strikingly new to the well informed reader's attention but provides an intelligent, in-depth and effectively contextualised account.

This is an excellently produced volume with valuable notes and a bibliography which increase its value to an academic readership while in no way undermining its appeal to the general reader as a readable and comprehensive account. It will not supersede established scholarly texts on the history of the Underground by Alan Jackson, Theo Barker and Michael Robbins and others, but is a worthy addition to their ranks and is to be welcomed. The book is richly and intelligently illustrated, with some familiar images but also many that are unfamiliar and striking. The illustrations are not merely

decorative but are effectively integrated with the text.

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*Transportes, Servicios y Telecomunicaciones (TST)*, *Revista de historia*, No. 1 (2001), Editec@red, Madrid, 229 pp., Pta 15.03.

This new publication has the declared purpose of filling an important historiographical deficiency: whereas academic studies of transport and communication have experienced significant recent development in Spain, there has not previously been any Spanish journal dedicated to those matters. *TST* aims to become a reliable, scholarly means of communication, a forum for every sort of work, of diverse scope although preferably of a historical nature and focused on the Spanish context, yet keeping a clear and significant connection with European history, and in particular with the history of Latin America. Printed on glossy paper, using stylish fonts and modern design, *TST* carries endorsements by a number of scholars from many different institutions in Europe, Latin America, the United States and Japan.

The first issue begins with a brief editorial note, followed by a section devoted to news in the field of transport studies, information on conferences and associations. Because one of the aims of this publication is to be a means of communication between researchers, companies and institutions concerned with transport, it will be interesting to see how the editors liaise with different bodies and individuals in order to keep this 'Al día' section as varied, up-to-date and useful as possible.

Next comes a small section dedicated to the examination of web sites. Given the huge, continuously increasing number of sites on the internet, two pages seem insufficient; however, the magazine acknowledges the fact that cyberspace is an important part of today's world. Following the web site review comes an imaginary dialogue with Rondo Cameron, one

of the big names in American economic history, recently deceased. It is an interesting exercise as well as a form of tribute from a former student to his teacher, if slightly strange and seemingly out of place here; it is not stated whether or not it is a one-off item.

The main part of the magazine includes eight articles on road and maritime transport, Spanish historiography on railways and electricity, drinking water services, telecommunications networks, as well as various bibliographical issues; the time span embraced is wide, from the eighteenth century to the twentieth. They all seem to be significant contributions within their respective fields, and include a substantial amount of bibliographical references and sources. It is worth mentioning that all the authors are from Spanish institutions.

The final part contains eighteen pages of reviews of recent publications in the field of transport studies, as well as the usual guidance notes for authors wishing to submit articles. *TST* is willing to publish any original work, written in any of the European Union's official languages, that deals with pertinent matters, as long as it complies with the scientific and scholarly rigour that is one of the magazine's aims. Issue No. 2, announced at the end of this first issue, will be dedicated to the role of the Ministerio de Fomento in Spanish economic modernisation between 1851 and 2001.

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Guy Vanthemsche, *La Sabena 1923-2001: des origines au crash*, De Boeck, Brussels (2002), 352 pp., €23.75.

Despite the phenomenal expansion of commercial aviation in Europe since 1945, good business and political histories of the industry, or of individual airlines, are few and far between. In particular, there are virtually no monographs on the major Continental carriers, with the major exception of Marc Dierikx's meticulous study of the Dutch airline KLM, *Blauw in de lucht* (1999), which, however, still awaits a translator.

Guy Vanthemsche's excellent history of the Belgian flag carrier Sabena is therefore very welcome and peculiarly timely. Research for the book began in 1998, when Sabena was still profitable, but by the time the book was published the airline had gone bankrupt, following its major private shareholder, Swissair. While Vanthemsche discounts his epilogue on events after 1995 as lacking the documentation available for the previous seventy-two years, his account of the earlier period makes the story of the last few years all too intelligible. But it would be wrong to read the book to discover the causes of Sabena's eventual failure when it illuminates so many broader political and economic issues, both about state airlines and about the character of state-business relations in Belgium. This illumination is all the brighter and more authoritative because Vanthemsche has been able to draw on a wealth of documentation from both government archives and Sabena's own records.

What was typical and what atypical about Sabena as an example of that very slowly disappearing breed, the European flag carrier? In its origins, and in its subjection to the non-aeronautical interests of successive governments, it closely resembled many other flag carriers. It began as a creation of private enterprise – notably the Société générale bank and its colonial affiliates – but quickly attracted (and needed) State support, which (as in many other cases) was provided because of its contribution to imperial logistics (i.e. the Congo) and its potential contributions to national security and a domestic aircraft industry. The latter two turned out to be nebulous: though Sabena was tied to a parent company (Sabca) with aspirations to match Fokker and other aircraft builders, the main effect of the relationship was to deny it use of advanced American designs such as the Douglas DC-3 which its more aggressive neighbour, KLM, was purchasing in substantial numbers and to great profit.

In its constitution Sabena differed from other European national carriers. While other airlines moved inexorably towards full nationalisation, Sabena was

the object of an unusual public–private bargain, struck in 1923 and enduring until 1960, by which the Belgian state and the Belgian Congo each owned roughly 25 per cent of the airline’s equity, the remainder being held by Belgian banks. Although it followed an established Belgian tradition of colonial enterprise built on a ‘public–private partnership’, Sabena was nevertheless (as Vanthemsche notes) ‘a very odd creation: a private firm with a majority of public shareholders, but with private management . . . which could not function without major support from the State’. Neither group of shareholders was anxious to invest in the airline, which was chronically undercapitalised until the 1980s. Moreover, the unusual sharing of equity between Brussels and Leopoldville led to a crisis when the Congo became independent in 1960. Brussels suddenly faced the problem of having a quarter of the state airline’s shares being held by a foreign government. It therefore bought four-fifths of the private-sector holding (in the face of opposition by the airline’s management) to ensure Sabena’s Belgian nationality, thus ensuring – somewhat late in the day – that it became a state-owned carrier.

Sabena’s involvement in the Congo was more intense and enduring than that of Air France, BOAC or KLM in the French, British and Dutch colonies. Having concentrated its resources so heavily (and profitably) on the Ligne Belgique–Congo, by 1960 it had very few other long-haul routes to fall back on – partly because Belgian aviation diplomacy had been intensely protectionist and provoked other States to withhold new traffic rights. Worse still, Sabena continued to be involved in Congolese politics *after* 1960, with substantial revenue locked up in Congolese currency and hostage to the excruciating complexities of President Mobutu’s relations with Belgium.

Under State control after 1960, Sabena fared no better than it had as a *société mixte*. Each political party had its representatives in the airline’s management, and the tensions between the Walloon and Flemish halves created further con-

flicts. (The senior management was predominantly French-speaking, while the lower-ranking personnel were mainly Flemish.) Communal tension also complicated the airline’s increasingly urgent efforts to find a foreign partner: as a frustrated vice-president put it in 1988, ‘if we choose Air France as a partner, the Flemish community won’t agree, and if we choose KLM the French-speaking community will be against it’. In this respect, of course, Swissair was an acceptably multicultural partner.

Sabena’s relationship with the state was also a major factor in its dire financial condition. Vanthemsche is particularly acute when he argues that, from a political point of view, it was easier in an era of austerity for the Belgian government to go on paying large but virtually invisible subsidies to the airline than to make the necessary public commitment to the recapitalisation which was needed for Sabena to buy the aircraft needed to hold its own in the European air travel market. Although a substantial recapitalisation finally took place in 1983, the government decided to wean Sabena off subsidies and to force it to seek capital elsewhere.

Sabena then went through a series of relationships (with KLM, British Airways, Air France and, finally, Swissair) in which, as Vanthemsche observes, the Belgian nationality of the airline was steadily eroded. It ended up under a Swissair-appointed president and, ironically, its earlier financial arrangement in which ‘the junior, private shareholder controlled management with the consent of the majority, public shareholder’. When the private shareholder collapsed as the result of overambitious investment Sabena followed suit within weeks. But, as Vanthemsche stresses, Sabena’s history does not support critics of public ownership, since for most of its seventy-eight-year life it was not publicly owned. If anything, the story shows the dangers of shared ownership when it is accompanied by a retreat from managerial responsibility.

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