Transport museums: another kind of historiography

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Some transport historians have long thought of museums as a suitable place in which to ply their craft. The late Jack Simmons, founding co-editor of this journal, was a passionate advocate of the educational benefits of transport museums and in 1970 published what for many years was the only book in English on the subject.[1] In the 1960s he was largely responsible for the journal's ventures into museum reviewing, a practice recently revived after a lengthy period in abeyance. At least one other leading history journal, *Technology and Culture*, regularly reviews exhibitions of transport, travel and mobility. Nor is this all; at least one article critically analysing the representation of the past on heritage railways has been published in this journal in the last few years.[2] These are all very positive developments, not least because museums – like other mass media such as television – have the potential to reach audiences far in excess of the readership of the usual academic article or monograph; and most transport museums would certainly benefit from the help of historians.

Nevertheless I feel that few transport historians have got to grips with the peculiarities of museums and the ways they communicate with the public. Perhaps too there are still some scholars who are uneasy with any popularisation of their subject, regarding it as, at best, a second-string and, at worst, a second-rate activity offering a simplified and probably simplistic account of the past. There is something in this last point: no exhibition can deliver the kind of sophisticated and detailed arguments found in academic monographs or articles. But to expect this from a museum is to misunderstand its purpose. Gaining a sense of what, in educational terms, a museum is and, perhaps even more important, what it might become, is an essential step in recognising that there is nothing second-rate about the contribution that historians make to this kind of transport historiography. Helping the public to understand the past – *public history*, in one sense of an increasingly popular term – differs from academic history, narrowly defined, in its purpose and hence in some of its methods and techniques: but it need not be any the less scholarly, rigorous or challenging, whether the medium is a museum or some other kind of display, such as the re-enactment (*living history*) of a heritage transport operation (perhaps a steam railway or historic airfield).[3]

The academic training usually received by the transport historian and the methods of researching, writing and teaching conventional transport history provide useful knowledge and skills, but the public historian needs more. An exhibition is not a book, for all that it is sometimes useful to think of it as something that is 'written' by its creators and then 'read' by visitors. Communication is not only, or even primarily, through the written word; the ability to think spatially and to conceive of objects both as evidence and as a medium of communication is invaluable. True, historians who become involved with transport museums are likely to be part of a team and so will not need all the skills needed to produce an exhibition. But they will have much more to offer if they have a grasp of the peculiarities of exhibitions as a mass medium. They might even find that working in and with the museum sector encourages them to think about new lines of research. I have in mind both the kinds of subjects and theoretical perspectives scholars adopt in their academic historiography, and the intellectual challenges posed by the need to understand the museum as a medium of communication about the past.

Museums, visitors and 'the past'

All museums need to be clear about their audience, for otherwise they run the risk of telling stories that no one will hear. The principal audience is not always the member of the public who takes the time to walk round an exhibition; it might be a corporate client, for example. But, whatever the audience, exhibitors (that is, the museum staff responsible for mounting exhibitions) need to understand what visitors' interests might be, and which techniques of display are likely to engage their attention. Ideally, of course, one would also like to know what people take away from their experience of visiting a museum: whether, that is, exhibitions are indeed an effective way of 'teaching' about the past. Surprisingly little is known about the long-term educational benefits of museums, particularly those in the transport sector.[4] This is certainly one area in which historians working in conjunction with museologists, sociologists, social psychologists and educationalists could contribute to our understanding of the public's appreciation of the history of transport, travel and mobility.

Nonetheless, some important conclusions have already emerged. To state the obvious, people visit transport museums for all sorts of reasons, many, perhaps most, of which have little or nothing to do with a predilection for (academic) history. Many visitors, for instance, derive a good deal of pleasure from the memories rekindled by seeing old vehicles dating from their youth. Yet there is plenty of evidence that, whether or not they visit museums regularly or at all, most people in once industrialised societies are interested in 'the past', chiefly as a way of understanding how that past has shaped their own lives and what lessons it might provide for the future.[5] In other words, although people often feel distanced from history when it is presented in anything like the largely impersonal, abstract and unfamiliar explanations of much academic thought, they respond much more positively to a past perceived in personal

terms, as relevant to their own lives.[6] The very term 'public history' nicely captures the sense of a distinctive way of learning and knowing that results from people's engagement with museum exhibitions.

A sense of identity, of belonging or perhaps of exclusion, is central to this more personal way of knowing the past, and many writers theorise history museums, and indeed heritage sites more generally, as places that help to create and sustain this sense of identity through the individual and shared memories they trigger. Personal memories shape one's sense of oneself as an individual. But, as sites of collective memories, museums display and legitimate objects of cultural significance through which visitors may also acknowledge, commemorate, celebrate or perhaps even reflect on their membership of one or more social groups. Personal and collective memories meld, making and reproducing the shared identities that help to define us all as social beings. Equally, however, museums can exclude individuals, and whole social groups, from the collective memories and identities on display.[7] Few museums, for instance, adequately display the part played by workers in the transport industries. 'What is at stake in struggles for control over objects and the modes of exhibiting them,' argues Ivan Karp, 'finally, is the articulation of identity': all exhibitions 'represent identity, either directly, through assertion, or indirectly, by implication'.[8]

These interrelated senses of belonging and exclusion are intimately bound up with the ways in which the past is publicly represented through myth. Myth, or 'heritage' in one sense of that much abused term, is often contrasted with 'history'. In David Lowenthal's formulation the essential difference is between a representation of the past orientated primarily towards the many and often conflicting purposes of the collective present ('heritage') and that which tries – although always and necessarily with less than total success – to understand the past in its own terms ('history'). Thus 'heritage now mainly denotes what belongs to and certifies us as communal members', it 'passes on exclusive myths of origin and continuance, endowing a select group of people with prestige and common purpose'.[9] For this reason the truth or falsity of public representations of the past is, as Patrick Wright remarks, 'often peripheral to their practical appropriation in everyday life'.[10] Myth/heritage, in Lowenthal's sense, wins out over history as we collectively define who we are (or think we are).

Such misrepresentation of 'the past' no doubt underlies the reluctance of some historians to become involved with museums. Criticisms of myth/heritage as 'bad history' often extend to seeing it as sustaining the interests of dominant social groups.[11] Yet, without wishing for one moment to deny the validity of this kind of critique, I suggest that few, if any, of us in our everyday lives can tolerate a past in the state of turmoil occasioned by the doubts, uncertainties and contradictions of much academic historiography. Myth provides a welcome, and I suspect necessary, degree of stability to our collective – and hence individual – sense of identity.

Acknowledging this need not mean abandoning a critical attitude towards myth, either as an exhibitor or as a museum visitor. Indeed, challenging

public orthodoxies about the past in a constructive and sympathetic way is one of the most valuable contributions that the historian can make in the museum sector. But people's need of myth clearly makes the job of developing public histories that are both critical and popular much more difficult than merely 'getting the history right', of presenting a watered-down version of the latest academic monograph.[12]

First and foremost we must remember that most 'learning' in museums is *informal* learning; that is, voluntary and, largely, self-directed. Visitors are in a real sense in the driving seat – their preconceptions, state of mind, attitudes, emotions, knowledge and sense of intellectual confidence, all inform the ways in which they approach exhibitions, and help to shape the understanding and feelings – or 'knowledge' – they take away and retain in the longer term. Indeed, museum learning is as much about feeling, emotion and desire – the affective dimension – as it is about formal categorisation and analysis. Only if visitors can connect or engage with an exhibition's themes and treatment – that is, only if they can first recognise elements of what they already know and feel – will there be any chance of them experiencing the 'shock of the new' positively, of them reaching out to expand their understanding of the past, perhaps even to incorporate this into a revised sense of themselves.[13]

This is not a one-way process. Museums increasingly recognise that their visitors bring knowledge, know-how, feelings and emotions that might clash with a museum's orthodoxy. Hence many exhibitors are increasingly inclined to see the museum as a forum in which a debate develops between museum and visitors through the medium of the exhibition.[14]

What is the most effective way of developing such a dialogue? There is no straightforward answer: museums are constantly trying out new methods and techniques. But there is a good deal of evidence that visitors are more likely to engage with objects, especially those with which they have some familiarity, than with any graphic panel or written text. The pull of the 'real thing' is very strong. Objects, in Susan Pearce's judgement, 'alone have the power, in some sense, to carry the past into the present by virtue of their relationship to past events'.[15] Moreover although it may be the symbolism of objects that ultimately matters, rather than their physical type or form, for most visitors, as John H. Falk and Lynn D. Dierking argue, it is best to introduce abstract ideas such as those of the history of transport, traffic and mobility through 'a solid foundation of concrete understanding . . . and the concrete of the novice, not that of an expert'. This can best be done by contextualising historical objects through multisensory and multimedia techniques that help visitors get information through visual, aural, olfactory and tactile methods.[16]

The conclusion is inescapable: visitors' sense of the past is best developed through making objects – suitably interpreted – the focus of exhibitions. The ideal transport museum is one that allows visitors, in their own way, to traverse three routes to the past, those of material reminders (relics), personal and collective memory, and history. As Lowenthal writes, these are 'best traversed in combination':

> Each route requires the others for the journey to be significant and credible. Relics trigger recollection, which history affirms and extends backwards in time. History in isolation is barren and lifeless; relics mean only what history and memory convey. . . . Significant apprehension of the past demands engagement with previous experience, one's own and others', along all three routes.[17]

Thus the challenge for historians is to find ways to 'write' or display the history of transport, travel and mobility through objects in ways that encourage visitors to reflect critically on the past and what it means for them. Much of the knowledge and many of the skills of the archaeologist (particularly the industrial archaeologist) are relevant to this task.[18]

Transport historians in the museum

How then might the historiography of transport, travel and mobility evolve in museums? Subjects dear to the heart of the scholar are not necessarily those that immediately engage visitors, although it is dangerous to generalise, since people come with all sorts of interests and concerns. But, given that the opportunities and problems generated by ever increasing levels of mobility affect almost everyone in modern society, probably the most fruitful direction would be to compare and contrast everyday travel and transport today and in the past – in short, to introduce transport history from the perspective of the consumer or user. This would encourage academic interest in what is potentially one of the most stimulating but as yet under-researched areas of transport historiography, strengthening the intellectual links between public and academic historian.[19] Indeed, focusing on consumer goods and services might also be a way of generating public interest in other, initially less attractive aspects of transport historiography.

Take, for instance, the development of globalised production and distribution. Following the life cycle of a familiar and mundane article of, say, women's clothing from design to point of sale, tracing the various strands of transport and communication involved, from Scotland (where the designer worked), around Europe from the Iberian peninsula to the East, and back to Britain, might well attract the initial attention of visitors and could then be used as the starting-point to explore how the same or similar articles were made, distributed and sold in the past.[20] It would be fairly easy to extend the reach of this web globally by including the manufacture and distribution of the materials from which the garment was made; in Britain, the Museum of Science and Industry in Manchester has done something similar with its award-winning exhibition 'Fibres, Fabrics and Fashion'.[21]

This life-cycle approach could be extended to all sorts of other kinds of products. Food would likely be a popular choice, since none of us can do without it – in Britain the supermarkets and hypermarkets that have destroyed so many local producers and markets are totally reliant on so-called cheap transport for sourcing the cornucopia spread out before us on our weekly or monthly shop. An exhibition on the rapid increase in 'food miles' – that is, the distances travelled by food from production to

consumption – would inevitably have to treat the part played by transport in the globalisation of the world's food economy, and this lends itself to a historical treatment, at least in part, since it was not something that happened overnight. Another popular consumer item lending itself to a similar approach is the bicycle. Transport museums commonly trace the bike's technical evolution from the nineteenth-century 'penny-farthing' to the precursor of the modern machine, the safety bicycle, and beyond. But the historian can help to tell a different story, perhaps by looking at the evolution of the all-terrain or mountain bike, from home-built plaything of Californian dirt-trackers in the 1970s to today's commercial product with near-global appeal – a phenomenon itself sustained by an international process of distribution as much as that of design and manufacture.

The public historian's imagination in choosing a subject for research and eventual exhibition should be limited only by awareness of the need to engage with visitors. I remain convinced that on-site exhibitions, particularly those with artefacts as their focus, will remain the chief way in which histories of transport, travel and mobility are made in museums, for all that these will be supplemented by digital environments and other novel ways of accessing collections such as virtual exhibitions on the Web.[22] But a lot remains to be done before museums can be celebrated as sites of popular display that do not merely retread long-standing myths about the past. Transport historians have an important role to play in providing the historiography needed to develop exhibitions that go beyond visitors' preconceptions. But it is very much harder to make exhibitions that are also genuinely popular, that engage and sustain their audiences' interest, and that additionally allow visitors the conceptual space to challenge the museum's own orthodoxies. It implies that exhibitors – including, of course, transport historians – have to know their audience (including those who do not currently visit but may be persuaded to in the future) very well indeed. There is a profound 'knowledge deficit', between what (most) museums know and what they need to know if they are to think strategically.[23] Intellectually, it would be interesting to discover more about the sense of transport, travel and mobility in the past that museum visitors gain from their experience of exhibitions, about their priorities for future displays, and why some people choose not to visit history museums at all. But knowing all this is quite simply essential for developing a historiography of transport that sustains a dialogue between the expertise of historians and other exhibitors and the lay knowledge and diverse concerns of the public. Perhaps, then, the most important task facing the public historian of transport is to research less about the past and more about the modern public.

Notes

1 Jack Simmons, *Transport Museums in Britain and Western Europe* (1970).
2 Richard Sykes *et al.*, 'Steam attraction: railways in Britain's national heritage', *Journal of Transport History* 18, 2 (1997), pp. 156–75.
3 See, for instance, Ludmilla Jordanova, *History in Practice* (2000), pp. 141–71.

4 John H. Falk and Lynn D. Dierking, *Learning from Museums: visitor experiences and the making of meaning* (Walnut Creek CA and Oxford, 2000).
5 Nick Merriman, *Beyond the Glass Case: the past, the heritage and the public in Britain* (Leicester and London, 1991), pp. 22–41, especially pp. 37–8; Richard Handler and Eric Gable, *The New History in an old Museum: creating the past at Colonial Williamsburg* (Durham NC and London, 1997); Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: popular uses of history in American Life* (New York, 1998), especially p. 137.
6 John H. Falk and Lynn D. Dierking, *The Museum Experience* (Washington DC, 1992), p. 123; Louis H. Silverman, 'Personalizing the past: a review of literature with implications for historical interpretation', *Journal of Interpretation Research* 2, 1 (1997), pp. 1–12, at pp. 3–4.
7 Gaynor Kavanagh, *Dream Spaces: memory and the museum* (London and New York, 2000), pp. 1–8, 148–75; Marius Kwint, Christopher Breward and Jeremy Aynsley (eds), *Material Memories: design and evocation* (Oxford and New York, 1999), pp. 1–16; Susannah Radstone (ed.), *Memory and Methodology* (Oxford and New York, 2000), pp. 1–22; John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze: leisure and travel in contemporary societies* (London, Thousand Oaks CA and New Delhi, 1990), pp. 45–65.
8 Ivan Karp, 'Culture and representation', in I. Karp and S. D. Lavine (eds), *Exhibiting Cultures: the poetics and the politics of museum display* (Washington DC and London, 1991), pp. 11–24, at p. 15.
9 David Lowenthal, *The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History* (1997), pp. 67, 128.
10 Patrick Wright, *On Living in an Old Country: the national past in contemporary Britain* (1985), p. 188.
11 E.g. Kevin Walsh, *The Representation of the Past: museums and heritage in the postmodern world* (London and New York, 1992), pp. 130–2.
12 Probably the best-known demonstration of this in recent years is the controversy over the proposed exhibition at the National Air and Space Museum about the nuclear attack on Japan in 1945. See, e.g., 'The last act', special section of *Technology and Culture* 39, 3 (1998), pp. 457–88.
13 George E. Hein, *Learning in the Museum* (1998), especially pp. 135–54; Silverman, 'Personalizing the past', pp. 1–12; Falk and Dierking, *Museum Experience*, pp. 97–125, 131–2.
14 Steven Lubar, 'Exhibiting memories', in A. Henderson and A. L. Kaeppler (eds), *Exhibiting Dilemmas: issues of representation at the Smithsonian* (Washington DC and London, 1997), pp. 15–27; Sharon Macdonald and Gordon Fyfe (eds), *Theorizing Museums: representing identify and diversity in a changing world* (Oxford and Cambridge MA, 1996), pp. 1–18.
15 Susan M. Pearce, *Museums, Objects and Collections: a cultural study* (Leicester and London, 1992), pp. 24–30, quote at p. 24. See also David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge and New York, 1985), pp. 249–55.
16 Falk and Dierking, *Museum Experience*, pp. 107, 110, 137, 139, 154–5, quote at p. 139; Kevin Moore, *Museums and Popular Culture* (London and Washington DC, 1997), pp. 23–51; Michael Ettema, 'History museums and the culture of materialism', in J. Blatti (ed.), *Past meets Present: essays about historic interpretation and public audiences* (Washington DC and London, 1987), pp. 62–85.
17 Lowenthal, *Past is a Foreign Country*, p. 249.
18 Marilyn Palmer and Peter Neaverson, *Industrial Archaeology: principles and practice* (London and New York, 1998).
19 E.g. Colin Divall, 'Transport, 1900–39', in Chris Wrigley (ed.), *A Companion to Early Twentieth-century Britain* (Oxford, 2003), pp. 286–310.
20 I have taken this example from a television programme – the title of which escapes me – shown in Britain during 2001.
21 This permanent exhibition won the prestigious Dibner Award of the Society for the History of Technology in 1998.
22 On the possibilities for a new generation of object-focused displays see Colin Divall and Andrew Scott, *Making Histories in Transport Museums* (London and New York, 2001), pp. 114–58.
23 Victor T. C. Middleton, *New Visions for Museums in the Twenty-first Century* (1998), p. 8.

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