

The Trains of Brian Dunnett

Remembering Brian Dunnett in the Kingdom of Steam

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Professor John Ryan, editor of this journal, asked me to write of something honouring and remembering Brian Dunnett, who died in July 2016. Why me, I asked?

I only knew and worked with Brian at the beginning, as a young boy and railway apprentice in the 1950s, and met and worked with him again towards the end of his life at the Tamworth Railway Conference in 2005, where we tried to make a ledger of what little had been saved from the lost world of the old railways. But we saw that there is little desire to remember former things if the world and people who produced these things have vanished. Nonetheless, at that event at Tamworth we tried to conjure by word, art and display a more enduring world of memory than hitherto.

I knew little of Brian in the full flow of his life, from around 1960 to 2000. During this time, Brian's greatest work was to prepare against the coming storm of privatisation that was to destroy the vast, beautiful and complicated structure of NSW Government Railways by preserving as much of the cultural memory of the work force as possible.

There were many who knew much more of the man and his work, and worked with him, on such projects as the Trains of Treasure Exhibition in the 1980s. This was a travelling exhibition sponsored by several organisations, based on 26 panels created in 1985 and updated to 30 in 2005 to commemorate the 150th anniversary of Australian railways. Each panel was built around a poem, song or subject significant in the history of Australian Rail from 1813 to 1985 (yes, convict-pulled coal wagons on rail lines were used in the Newcastle coal mines as early as 1813). An important part of the original exhibition were two cassette tapes, now updated as CDs. They contained songs and poems from Australian railway history, but most importantly the voices of railway workers talking about their experiences. It was with these that Brian came into his own as

collector and organiser, as he himself was the quintessential product and culmination of the two centuries of industrial working class railway life, soon to pass away forever.

Indeed, it is hard to understand Brian and his important contribution to our life and country unless one understands the world, economy and society of mid 20th century Australia that he grew up in, which would probably seem as far and strange to a tablet tapping millennial as ancient Rome or the Middle Ages.

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Eveleigh workshops¹ at Redfern, Sydney, on a rainy day in the early 1950s (it was always raining in the 1950s: mega floods and La Nina weather systems introduced Australians to a hitherto unknown aspect of their climate).

Ecco mechanico! Behold an industrial Australia that has passed away. Huge steam locomotives, many made in Eveleigh during the blockade of war time, glorious giants almost sneering at the new fangled diesel locomotives that were about to replace them. Rain sweeping through broken glass vents precipitating as oily sludge on the engines and outsized machine tools. Parallel lines of sub-surface oily pits that we crawled down in the wet and cold and slime to service the underbelly of the giants. Huge overhead cranes lifting heavy engines and apparatus across a mile of open workshops, themselves filled with dangerous furnaces and boilers, with not hundreds, but several thousand² workers below. Under the non-stop roar of machinery they all worked assiduously to keep the transport system running by manufacturing many things which, unlike the products of the modern service economy, it would be very unwise to drop on your foot. And this was only Eveleigh, in old Sydney's heart at Redfern, taking up over 70 acres of inner city land with workshops!

Desperate to get rid of the steam locomotives that choked the city with soot, successive governments had opened new industrial railway workshop complexes, most famously on the greenfields site of Chullora, on the then western edge of residential suburban Sydney. To the north of Chullora were the vast marshalling yards of Enfield. But embedded so deep in the old city that they could not be moved, all along the western waterfront of the harbour, were miles of railway yards and terminals, through which Australia's rural exports reached the docks and overseas ships. Here also

¹ See map of Eveleigh industrial complex in: B. Dunnett and R.J. Haworth, 'The Fate of Eveleigh Workshops: "Ugly Sydney" or a World Class Heritage Destination?' *Australian Folklore*, 21 (2006), 157-171, (p. 161).

² In its heyday, Eveleigh workshops employed 3000 workers, and was regarded as the largest industrial site in Australia.

the coal trains serviced the waterside power stations, from Darling Harbour to Balmain, that provided electricity to much of the suburban rail system.

Into this vast and sprawling nation of machines and engineering, the young electrical mechanic apprentice Brian Dunnett, himself the son of a lifelong railway worker, was let loose. New South Wales Government Railways (NSWGR) trained the great bulk of apprentices state wide, not only electricians but blacksmiths, fitters, turners, pattern makers, carpenters, upholsterers, carriage builders and so on for all Australian industry. Only these huge government-owned enterprises could afford the tremendous financial and human burden of training the thousands of tradesmen and craftsmen that have always kept the country going. Small business, builders for instance, simply can't afford to keep many apprentices on if times turn uncertain. This is witnessed by the collapse in the number of apprentices trained since railway workshops were closed Australia-wide in the early 1990s by politicians on the advice of neo-liberal economists, the shortfall being made up by a cynical immigration policy that poaches skilled trades people from poorer countries that have maintained technical education.

But enough of a whinge about these brain dead political numbskulls who, as in Oscar Wilde's quip, seem to know the price of everything and the value of nothing.

Just imagine how wonderful it was for a bright eyed young lad like Brian in the 1950s to enter this world of manufacturing, machines and madness! Electrical mechanic apprentices had a rigorous five year theoretical training at the night time technical colleges, at least equal to modern day Physics 101 at your average University. Those who did well on the theoretical side could continue to train as electrical engineers. Another cohort of railway electricians went into politics, as Labour Ministers and Premiers. Both future Premier Barrie Unsworth and Minister Laurie Brereton were in or around our intake. The training of the average apprentice on the job in every possible facet of industrial technology and much more was unequalled by any modern comparison.

Every three months of the five year 'serving of your time' each apprentice was rotated to a different tradesman. in a different part of the enormous railway industrial complex spread across Sydney, even to 'small' shops on the outskirts like Hornsby in the north and Mortdale in the south. But the big three, where most workers were located, were Redfern's Eveleigh, the western suburbs' Chullora and the Darling Harbour/Balmain waterfront complex. Eveleigh with its multi storey red brick factories was Dickensian and grim. Chullora, set in what then were the open fields of paspalum of recently abandoned dairy farms, was a breath of fresh air. Out there every lunch time, or times in between, we would play free flow football in the wide open spaces, and even bring in

our pea rifles to go hunting the hares that seemed to abound in the rolling pastureland of what was to become the western suburbs.

By far the choicest destinations were the water front railway yards: As we railway electrical staff also serviced the power stations we could collect any number of big fish caught in the cooling sluices pumped in from the harbour, as well as fishing directly in said harbour and snorkelling around all the big ships, dodging sharks, and refuse disposal buckets.

There was a surprisingly class conscious hierarchy. Tradesmen were the elite: apprentices, like junior officers, were given a hard time because they were the elite in training. Each tradesmen had a labourer, who would always remain so. The junior order of labourer was the 'shop boy', unskilled youths who gathered in large gangs to do the sweeping and cleaning, and we could feel superior to, but nonetheless play cricket and football with whenever there were slack times. Over everyone were the on-site managers, who contended with shop stewards, but above them again were the head office bureaucrats directed by the more or less permanent State Labor governments who knew who and where their most stalwart supporters were. But untoward behaviour was not tolerated: most feared were the 'demons', railway detectives who could search you or your home at any time to check that there were no stolen goods taken from the well stocked stores in the workshops.

Oh, but I hear you say, all right for them, Brian and Bob, young and privileged members of the white, male Anglo-Celtic (we would have said 'British') skilled working class, where their plumbers charge more than brain surgeons.

Well cop this young Harriette. So far, I have neglected to mention that within this industrial cornucopia there was a full scale political cold war raging, that was both a product of Australia's sectarian past and a harbinger of the strange future we have all landed in. The Communist Party of Australia during a period of rule by an harassed wartime Labor Government had gained control of all but one of the major trade unions in Australia. By the early 1950s they were being challenged and ousted union by union by the Industrial Groups, organised by Catholic Action led by the erstwhile Fenian subversive Archbishop Daniel Patrick Mannix of Melbourne and his sinisterly named offsider Bartholomew Augustine Santamaria, with the covert and overt support of Conservative Prime Minister Robert Menzies, the spy agency ASIO, industrial leaders, and the full weight of the right wing establishment. The unionised work force (which was just about everyone working in those days) was sharply split between those who followed communist union leaders (not necessarily themselves communists, often just militant unionists) and those, most often practising Roman Catholics, who were led by the so-called 'Groupers'. There were a lot of people in between of course who probably wished for a particularly disfiguring pox to strike both houses.

Brian and I both came from new suburbs on the southern outskirts of Sydney by the Georges River and went to school within a mile or so of each other. Our families had each moved from the inner city slums to escape the privations of the Great Depression, and carved out homes, gardens and orchards from the bush, while embracing militant opposition to the system that had caused all the economic suffering, and of course were supporters of strong trade union action to defend workers' rights and conditions. Hence it was natural that we gravitated to the communist led side of industrial disputes. We both joined the local (Hurstville) branch of an organisation called the Eureka Youth League, or EYL. Critics would say that this was a thinly disguised version of the Young Communist League, which it had become, but it had been and still was much more.

The League had begun as a youth movement of national revival during the Second World War when Australia was in great peril of alien invasion, and many thought we had been betrayed by mother England. The League therefore had a nativist policy of promoting all things Australian, especially folk music and folk ways of all kinds, and a celebration of the land and its people, black or white, male or female. It was certainly eventually directed by the Communist Party, but the Australian Communist Party was, among many other things, an early taker up of what today goes by the name of 'political correctness'. And it applied this to the youth league with a rigour that would put to shame an Eastern European Commissar using strictures for far less commendable purposes.

Within the railway workshops, Brian was a natural leader of the apprentices, organising them for better conditions and pay (the thirty shillings a week we were paid produced the rather sour saying: "they pretend to pay us and we pretend to work"). But throughout the workshops, Brian and other Communist industrial leaders imposed a strict 'no racism' policy, just as in the social events of the League we had a strict 'no sexism' vibe, enforced with a Stalinist strictness by women who would in later decades become torchbearers of feminism.

The 1950s was the time, of course, when very large numbers of southern European migrants were allowed into Australia through the first crack in the White Australia Policy. Many of them found their first jobs in the railways. Most of the jobs involved leaning on brooms for most of the time, which would enrage the current generation of economic rationalist economists, worshipping economic efficiency above all else. However, it had one or two beneficial results which were so momentous that they may be claimed to be the foundation of the relative racial and cultural harmony that Australia enjoys today. One was that new migrants were given some kind of job straight away, albeit on a wage barely above what they would get on social services today (there was hardly any dole in those days). But most importantly they were socialised to local ways, and even more importantly, the white Australian workers, who could have gone either

way, were led by skilful shop floor leadership by organisers such as Brian Dunnett to accept people of an alien race and culture.

This was no small thing, as there was no guarantee that Australia's post war social experiment of mass migration was going to work, indeed, all the indications were for the opposite, given the history of the Labour Movement promoting White Australia around the time of federation. But there was an even stranger twist to this story. The war between Catholic Action and the Communists was vindictive and fiery, but they agreed on perhaps only one thing, and that probably turned out to be the most important of all. The Catholic Church, for perhaps completely different reasons, was as committed to internationalism as the Marxist Leninists. Hence, in a situation where, as we have seen from recent events world wide, loud mouthed populists can wreck social harmony, the two main politically organised groups of left and right among that part of the population most prone to be duped by racist demagogues created an odd but effective unity ticket that allowed a smooth transition to the multi-cultural society of today.

Given the animosity between the two factions this was an extraordinary achievement, and one where Brian Dunnett was almost a prime model of how to unite with an enemy for a common good. Brian was strong in his beliefs but conciliatory in manner. He was strongly opposed to any kind of sectarianism, and practised this by an open friendship and comradeship to people of different or no religion. It may be hard for moderns to understand that Sydney and Melbourne resembled in some ways the caricature of Belfast and its sectarian divisions up to the 1950s and beyond, but being Australian the sectarianism always stopped just short of outright violence.

So that's it, all I know about Brian the boy, but I think it is why he became Brian the man. I left Australia and the railways shortly after, but I occasionally heard of what Brian was up to. He became leader of the Eureka Youth League in the 1960s, and skilfully turned it from a hard line Stalinist organisation into a broad leftist activist group that could unite all people of good will against the terrible events of the endless Asian wars, and with Jack Munday and other reformed communists led campaigns to save the city that we loved from the worst of rapacious developers. And, with the Bush Music Club, Chris Kempster and others began a lively folk music scene, and developed an understanding of the importance of social heritage, especially the need to record and remember the lives of 'ordinary' working people, many of whom have actually lived extraordinary lives. Brian Dunnett must be counted among these.

Reference

Dunnett B., and R.J. Haworth, 'The Fate of Eveleigh Workshops: "Ugly Sydney" or a World Class Heritage Destination?' *Australian Folklore*, 21 (2006), 157-161.