

## Vale Brian Dunnett - A Railway Cultural Treasure \*

Roger Jowett

Brian Dunnett, a second generation railway worker, recently died at the age of 81. Brian spent his working life in the NSW rail industry as an electrician at the Eveleigh Locomotive Workshops and the Chullora Railway Workshops. He was a socialist, shop steward, and gave a lifetime of commitment to improving the lives of working people, blended with a passion for the railway industry and the workers who are its backbone. Brian had a vision that the amnesia in which working class struggles and achievements are forgotten, downgraded or erased should be challenged.

Brian's framework was a deep respect and understanding of his fellow workers welded from his own experiences as a shop steward and the working environment of the various railway workshops where he worked on steam and diesel locomotives. The railway workshops were noisy, dirty, and dangerous workplaces and often had poor amenities. Railway shop committees had a tradition of going beyond the traditional industrial agenda. In this environment Brian saw the opportunity to expand rail workers' horizons.

In the 1940s they had won the right to have an extended lunch hour each month to have a cultural presentation. Brian saw an opportunity to develop a play in situ at the Chullora workshops following a chance meeting with a theatre director. The play *Loco* by Sideshow Theatre was developed in 1983 using the experiences of workers on the job to fashion and direct the development of the play. This era for the railway workshops was one of great uncertainty about security of employment and the threat of contracting out.

In an interview given about the process of developing the play Brian made the crucial observation that the actors should not be providing readymade solutions but the material should be presented in such a way that workers could draw their own conclusions. The play was successful and was performed at a number of Sydney venues and toured interstate.

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\* A version of this was published on the Australian Railway Songs blog. <https://railwaysongs.blogspot.co.nz/2016/12/brian-dunnett-second-generation-railway.html>

The Loco play and the development of the Trains of Treasure Exhibition in 1985 came from the experiences and everyday realities of workers in the railway industry. It was driven from the shop floor and this is what makes it unique. The Loco play and the Trains of Treasure Exhibition were facilitated by grants from the Australia Council Arts and Working Life program. The Trains of Treasure Exhibition consisted originally of 25 panels. Each depicted an aspect of railway culture through song, verse or significant event.



*Brian Dunnett, Maureen Chapman, Chris Kempster – Photo Courtesy of Bush Music Club and the Australian Railways Songs blog.*

Railways in many countries have been incubators of national cultural characteristics, none more so than in Australia where railways were the steel ribbons which connected communities and their evolution and development was depicted in song and verse. The panels involve a rich tapestry of working class life which has been captured and preserved. Their diversity ranges from the poems of Henry Lawson's *Second Class Wait Here* to verse put together by rail workers and included in union magazines and shop committee publications. It includes the more contemporaneous, *The Ballad of Janet Oaken*, who fought to become the first woman train driver in Australia, and *The Fatal Train*, a poem concerning rail safety epitomised by the Granville and Waterfall train accidents. A further five panels were added to the exhibition in 2005 as part of the celebration of 150 years of railways in NSW.

The Loco play, the development of the Trains of Treasure Exhibition, the production of the trains of treasure CD of railway songs and verse were the result of countless hours spent in tracking down source material. These materials can be accessed at <https://railwaysongs.blogspot.com.au>

As with all endeavours these were the product of the collaborative work of many people. In the notes to the Loco play over 100 people are mentioned. Of particular note has been the collaboration between Brian and Mark Gregory in the assembling, collation and preparation of a railway song book. This project has been an exemplar of determination pursued over a number of years with more than its share of obstacles. The amount of time in translating ideas into a presentable or finished product was prodigious with the networking, administrative work and persuasion required, formidable.

A universal comment made by everyone who worked with Brian was that he was one of the most persistent and dogged characters one is ever likely to meet. Brian was a Catherine Wheel of ideas that were transformed into events. There was the railway film festival at Eveleigh Locomotive Workshops, the railway song and poem competitions and the Green Train run as a part of the Illawarra folk festival. These and other projects were vehicles for unions and unionists to engage with the community through cultural activities of song, poem, verse, short story and film.

Brian was never one, even at the age of 81 and, in deteriorating health, to not get involved and express strong opinions and involvement about a variety of projects. These included the Unions NSW Centenary Celebration of the 1917 Great Strike and the ongoing struggle, following the sale of the Australian Technology Park which included the Eveleigh Locomotive workshops to the property developer Mirvac, to present and preserve the considerable social and labour history associated with one of the most important heritage industrial sites in Australia and internationally.

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