Respectable Radicals

Studies in the Politics of Railway Trade Unionism

David Howell

RESPECTABLE RADICALS

In memory of Steve Sullivan, Trade Unionist and Socialist
1956-1997

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DH

Introduction

Company Servants and Labour Pioneers

Labour's election campaign in 1997 involved a thorough reconstruction of the party's identity. Often this centred on set pieces, which symbolised the advent of 'New Labour' and the rejection of traditional loyalties and sentiments. On the last Saturday of the campaign Tony Blair travelled by train from London to Manchester. The service was provided by the new private operator of the West Coast Main Line, Virgin Trains. The Labour leader was accompanied by the head of Virgin, Richard Branson. Here was a clear statement that under a Labour Government, the complicated and controversial privatisation of the railway system would not be reversed. The arguments of the railway unions, and of many others within and beyond the party, would count for nothing. The public ownership of rail transport had been party policy for decades before its achievement in 1948; thereafter it had seemed uncontroversial until the 1980s. Now New Labour was abandoning an historic position.

The significance was underlined six days later. The thorough New Labour landslide had happened. The Party leader was greeted in Downing Street by a carefully choreographed crowd. In a television studio Lord Callaghan, no longer after eighteen years 'the last Labour Prime Minister', reflected on the election result and its wider implications. He contrasted the reconstructed party with its predecessor, and suggested that images of traditional Labour were of historical interest only. Significantly he cited two legal cases as symbolic of the old Labour culture into which he had been inducted - the Taff Vale Judgment of 1901 and the Osborne Judgment of 1909. The cases were important moments in the growth of an independent Labour politics; each involved the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants. The making of New Labour did not simply mean the abandonment of policies, but the rejection of familiar identities. In the making and the maintenance of those identities, the railway unions and railway workers had played major roles. This study analyses some of the complexities of this history in an

attempt to extend the understanding of the making, durability and limitations of Labour politics. The railway unions were involved in the formation of the Labour Representation Committee in the most fundamental fashion. James Holmes, an official of the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants, moved the resolution at the 1899 TUC, which produced the foundation conference of the LRC five months later. With the exception of fifteen months in the early 1930s Members of Parliament have been sponsored by the railway unions continuously since 1900. In many small towns and country districts railway workers were crucial in the development of labour political organisation. Such emphases can seem supportive of a traditional imagery - the Forward March of Labour. One concern in the analysis will be to excavate the complexities and ambiguities within this process. One starting point involves an appreciation of the diversities and distinctiveness of railway work.

The British railway system before 1914 was operated by numerous private companies. Some were very small but several were major corporations employing, by late Victorian standards, vast numbers of people. Some dominated particular regions, others were much more far-flung in their operations. Some routes were highly competitive. Traffic from London to Manchester was contested by three, or - for a brief period - four companies; in contrast the business from London to Bristol and to South Wales was essentially a monopoly of the Great Western. In one sense competition had diminished significantly by 1900. The opening of the Great Central mainline from Sheffield to London in 1898-99 marked the end of serious competitive construction. Thereafter companies competed much more in terms of facilities and began to explore and sometimes to implement pooling agreements.

This last shift was one response to rising costs. The proportion of working expenses to gross receipts had stood at 52 per cent in the late 1880s; by 1900 it had risen to 62 per cent. The national significance of the railways' near monopoly of transport meant that the industry faced a significant degree of state regulation. Increasingly this involved the setting of safety standards - itself a cause of rising costs - but also a keen concern to limit increases in charges. The Liberal Government legislated in 1894 to virtually freeze railway rates; the previous year had seen legislation on railway workers' hours. Such measures increased the companies' concern to hold down costs. Given the labour-intensive

character of railway work, this meant a particular concern with wage levels.[1]

The position of railway workers was, in several respects, distinctive.[2] Their security was often assured. The slogan that 'a job on the railways is a job for life' remained true, despite the inter-war depression and the impact of road competition, until the advent of mass closures and rapid technological change in the 1960s. The stability was underwritten by company benefits such as pension schemes, the provision of uniforms and a limited access to reduced or free travel. Particularly in rural locations, railway workers lived often in company housing adjacent to their workplaces. 'The Company' became a central feature of many railway workers' lives, and loyalty was assiduously promoted by managers and supervisors. Such identities often proved attractive. For years after the amalgamations of the early 1920s, railway workers retained an affinity with their former company. Whatever their formal commitment to public ownership, identities acquired under private ownership maintained their resonance through into the 1950s.

The paternalism was complemented by a rigorous system of authority. Railway work was dominated by timetables and by rules. Discipline was seen as essential to the operation of an efficient - and above all - safe system. The status that was acquired through promotion within a complex hierarchy of grades only came to those who accepted the company's authority. Downgrading affected income; dismissal meant not just unemployment, but possibly the loss of housing. Obedience and deference were central to the culture of the industry, yet there were countervailing factors. Many railway workers in the locomotive and traffic grades could not be thoroughly supervised. Locomotive crews outside the relatively controlled territory of stations and goods yards were disciplined by the demands of the timetable, but worked as a team, subject to no immediate jurisdiction. Similarly, the signalman, in his isolated cabin, was beyond the regular access of supervisors. Such workers enjoyed a degree of independence which was essential to the smooth operation of the system. Locomotive crews had to respond to the temperamental behaviour of their engines. Creativity was often needed

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[1] For the politics of the railway companies prior to World War I, see Geoffrey Alderman, *The Railway Interest* (University Press, Leicester, 1973).

[2] The experiences of railway workers can be followed in Rowland Kenney, *Men and Rails* (T. Fisher Unwin, London, 1913); Frank McKenna, *The Railway Workers 1840-1970* (Faber & Faber, London, 1980). See also the evidence to the *Royal Commission on Labour* 1893-4, XXXIII, Group B, vol. III.

to ensure punctuality. They faced the challenges of adverse weather or of breakdown with a keen awareness that a mistake could lead to disastrous consequences. Signalmen frequently had to take critical decisions about the flow of traffic. Slowly moving freights had to be shunted to make way for express passenger services. Co-operation and experience were essential for the avoidance of delays. After 1900, managements attempted to circumscribe this autonomy by systems of scientific management, and sometimes centralised control. The struggle to defend this space was important in the development of a more militant workforce.

Yet the diversity of employment in the railway service has to be appreciated. If locomotivemen and signalmen could achieve some autonomy, this was not true of passenger porters. Their uniformed presence was a statement of company identity. They worked under close supervision. Deference was encouraged, and in the quest for tips was prudential. Goods shunters worked in yards often with few technical aids, with poor lighting at night, and sometimes in appalling weather. The work was physically demanding. The accident rate was high. The transit of goods also required warehouse staff and men to collect and deliver goods to customers. Draymen - and later, truck drivers - were employed by railway companies but their work was indistinguishable from that of the broader, and from the 1920s, increasingly competitive road haulage sector. The diversity of company services meant that 'railway workers' also carried out tasks that were not concerned with the movement of traffic. Skilled craftsmen built and repaired locomotives and carriages; they had served apprenticeships. They were time-served men characteristic of the engineering industry, not of transport. Railway hotels required catering staff and legions of cleaners. The rule-governed character of the industry meant that it generated tasks for increasing numbers of clerks.

Divisions of experience came not only from the character of the job but also from the intensity of work. Some locomotivemen faced onerous shifts on the footplates of express engines or on suburban services negotiating complex networks. Some signalmen worked boxes responsible for junctions where traffic was heavy, and there was a repeated need to make decisions about priorities. Modern equipment still left considerable responsibility to the individual, especially in situations where the equipment failed. Speed and complexity were not the experiences of others within the industry. On secondary routes and

branch lines, schedules were often leisurely and the service could be infrequent. In such environments the responsibility and the discipline remained but the work was less exacting.

Such diversities were used repeatedly by the companies to justify hierarchical grading structures, with relatively low wages in the bottom grades. Until the First World War, signal boxes were typically divided into eight hour, ten hour and twelve hour boxes, dependent on the average level of traffic. Within these hours classifications, there were sub-divisions to allow for other features of the work. The result of such wage structures was to increase dependency. Workers often hoped for promotion to a better-paid location. Increased earnings depended on a clean record and the judgement of superiors. The companies' response to accusations of low wages prior to 1914 was a mixture of paternalism and a cold-eyed approach to the labour market. Managers and chairmen insisted that wage levels did not tell the whole story; fringe benefits had to be included in any assessment. But there was also the simple calculation of what was needed to attract labour. In rural areas, recruits could be attracted easily and cheaply from an even worse paid agricultural workforce. The number of applicants was cited frequently as evidence of the attractiveness of railway employment.

Faced with such fragmentation by company, grade and location, the construction of any effective organisation of railway workers encountered obvious difficulties. Yet there were some resources enjoyed by those who wished to develop a counterweight to company paternalism and authority. One grew from the relative autonomy enjoyed by some grades. This not only freed them to some degree from company supervision, it also often provided the chance to expand their consciousness beyond their own locality. Locomotivemen and guards met colleagues from other depots as they took meal breaks or lodged away. Signalmen communicated with each other by telephone. Typically, they became well acquainted with colleagues on the same shift in other boxes, whom they rarely, if ever, met. The imperatives of railway operation widened their consciousness, perhaps as members of their own grade, or as employees of a company who shared common concerns. This development was particularly marked in some rural communities. Railway workers remained in one sense within a social structure dominated by agricultural identities and hierarchies, but they had also become members of an industrial working class. This broader conception could be developed through an awareness of interdependence. Railway operations pulsed to the rhythm of the wider economy. Prosperity meant

long hours; depression, before the guaranteed week, could mean reduction of earnings. A dispute in the coal industry would impact firstly on freight traffic and then on the supply of locomotive coal.

Such experiences could engender identities that counteracted the claims of the company. These could be supported by one feature of the employer's own image of railway work. Chairmen and managers frequently claimed that railway work was exceptional. Men did not take a job, they joined 'the service'. If they left the railways for a period their service was 'broken'. One characteristic of this uniformed section of the working class was claimed by employers to be its respectability. These workers were responsible; they worked within a system of rules. Those not concerned directly with the movement of traffic had to act with integrity. Opportunity to pilfer from warehouses was easy; defaulters were subject to instant dismissal. But such images of decency and respectability could be turned against the employer. An individual sense of value could promote collective action to raise wages and improve conditions. The skills often acquired in this rule-governed industry were precisely those conducive to the development of trade union organisation.

The structure of railway trade unionism reflected both the industry's sectionalism and the factors facilitating a wider solidarity.[3] The Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants, founded in 1871, indicated in its very name the character of railway employment. Its early history was difficult. More a friendly society than a credible trade union, it suffered from both employer hostility and inadequate leadership. Only with the arrival of Edward Harford as leader in 1883 did the ASRS begin to develop a coherent, if cautious, strategy. Its appeal was largely to the better-paid grades in the industry. In contrast, the General Railway Workers' Union, founded in 1889, was a product of Socialist sponsorship and the optimism of 'New Unionism'. The GRWU proclaimed itself a 'fighting union'. It offered cheaper membership in a bid to attract the lower grades. Yet the ASRS continued to strengthen its position whilst the GRWU stagnated. When the National Union of Railwaymen was formed early in 1913, the Railway Servants brought in six times as many members as the GRWU.

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[3] Histories of the railway unions include J.R. Raynes, *Engines and Men* (Goodall & Suddick, Leeds, 1921); G.W. Alcock, *Fifty Years of Railway Trade Unionism* (Co-operative Printing Society, London, 1922); Norman McKillop, *The Lighted Flame* (Nelson, London, 1950); Philip Bagwell, *The Railwaymen* (Allen & Unwin, London, 1963); *The Railwaymen Volume 2: The Beeching Era and After* (Allen & Unwin, London, 1982).

The NUR hoped to become the industrial union for all railway workers. The GRWU brought in members from the workshops, an area where the ASRS had not recruited. Immediately, the NUR began an aggressive and effective recruitment strategy, despite the opposition of the craft unions. During the twenties, the conception of the 'railway industry' became more elastic as the companies responded to road competition by setting up their own bus services. By 1929 workers employed in this sector were represented by the NUR. The diversity of the union's membership was reflected in the delegates' lists to any General Meeting, the supreme policymaking body of the union. Many of the delegates were employed in grades central and distinctive to the industry, but many followed occupations not so readily associated with railway work.

The heterogeneity of NUR membership contrasted with the homogeneity and the culture of the Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen. Founded in 1880 and restricted to the locomotive grades, its conception of trade unionism contrasted with that of the ASRS and subsequently the NUR. Locomotive men acquired their hard-won status through lengthy training. They could be protected effectively only by an organisation wholly dedicated to their interests. ASLEF's early years were difficult not just because of company hostility, but also because the ASRS had recruited significant numbers of locomotivemen. Only under the leadership of Albert Fox, from 1901 to 1914, did ASLEF really establish itself as a credible and durable organisation. Fox's aggressive strategy ensured that ASLEF would not be absorbed by the larger union. By the mid-1920s ASLEF had secured its position as the dominant organisation for locomotivemen. Relationships between national officials varied between pragmatic co-operation and hostility. The industrial unionist ambition of the NUR would never be achieved.

The ambition was also frustrated by the growth of the Railway Clerks Association. This grew from modest beginnings in 1897, persuading the ASRS to end its attempts to organise clerical staff. The RCA organised workers who often had reservations about solidarity with other grades, yet their highly respectable leadership attempted, with some success, to mobilise their members in the 1926 General Strike. The RCA was also significant in that it was a white-collar union with a political commitment to the Labour Party, expressed by the late twenties in the successful election of sponsored parliamentary candidates.

The style of trade unionism within the clerical grades was epitomised in the career of Percy Judd.[4] He followed his father into the Doncaster 'Plant' works of the Great Northern on leaving school in 1901. A year later he transferred to a clerk's post in the mineral manager's department. He stayed there until he retired from a senior position forty-five years later. This respectable white-collar trade union activist was, for much of his life, a regular church-goer. He was also an active member of the Labour Party, an ethical socialist, a town councillor and, in 1947, Doncaster's Mayor. This blend of respectability and political commitment was one that was shared by many activists in other grades of the industry.

The same blend was apparent in the style of the Railway Women's Guild, formed in 1900 at a meeting of wives and daughters of ASRS members. It began as an attempt to construct a social network and also to give assistance to the ASRS. Here was a recognition of the inclusive character of railway employment. The presence of the company intruded into the railway worker's family. Perhaps they lived in a company house; often the rigors of shift work imposed restraints on leisure patterns. The frequent development of railway communities or railway streets brought women together in shared concerns about railway employment. The Guild played its part in the broader radical politics of Edwardian Britain. By 1905, its Conference was declaring in favour of 'direct' Labour representation. Members of the Guild were involved, in the following year, in the formation of the Women's Labour League.[5] Obviously such activities were restricted to the enthusiasms of a minority, but they played a significant part in shaping the political culture of the labour movement. By the 1920s it became possible to talk of railway families where employment in the industry provided the basis for a range of activities in the union, in the Labour Party and in the Railway Women's Guild.

The development of the RWG did not mean that the railway unions were notable for their progressive views on sexual equality. Predictably ASLEF, with its attachment to the craft of the locomotiveman, never had to face the issue. The introduction of female labour in both wars never reached the footplate. Conventional images of muscularity and male qualities meant that this was inconceivable. Appropriately, the first

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[4] For Percy Judd see Geoffrey Goodman, *The Awkward Warrior* (Davis-Poynter, London, 1979), pp. 24-26.

[5] See records of the Railway Women's Guild in the National Museum of Labour History.

history of ASLEF, published in 1921, was titled *Engines and Men*. The NUR's situation was more complicated. Prior to 1914, the union's position had been that women were not eligible for membership. The radical increase in women's employment following the outbreak of war undercut this position and the policy was reversed at the 1915 AGM. Nevertheless, the NUR leadership insisted that women's involvement in the industry should be temporary, a judgement that left its mark on the union's attitude towards women's wages. The admission of women to membership did not produce any change in the union's name. Not until 1978 was there a woman delegate at the union's Annual General Meeting.

This network of institutions, in its solidarities and divisions, its visions and limitations was, by the 1900s, an increasingly powerful force within the industry. This strength, the modernising proclivities of some company managers and the crisis of 1914-18 transformed industrial relations. Recognition, long resisted by most companies, was achieved. Thereafter the respectable culture of railway trade unionism could be expressed through a stable system of collective bargaining. Expanding industrial influence was paralleled by a strong attachment to the Labour Party. This shift was complex. The style of the railway unions, the sense that railway workers were a thoroughly decent section of the working class, was compatible with both the radicalism of the Lib-Labs and the Progressive Liberalism of the years immediately before World War I. The first group of essays investigates key themes in the politics of the Edwardian railway unions. The detailed material has relevance for two broader issues. Debates within the industry can be construed as belonging within the broader contemporary arguments over modernisation and National Efficiency. The extent to which companies and unions responded to problems of obsolescence raises important questions about the character of Edwardian industrial politics. Secondly, the railway unions' political partnership provides significant insights into the changing politics of Labour, not least the extent to which political shifts were produced primarily by industrial experiences.

The achievement of recognition was followed by three radical changes: the amalgamation of the companies into the 'Big Four', the railway's loss of its near monopoly, and the arrival of the Labour Party as the second largest party. The second set of essays examines railway union politics in this context. The dominant politics within the NUR is connected to the situation within the industry, and to the style of MacDonald's Labour Party. This ethos reflected and contributed to the

post-1918 pattern of stabilisation within British society. The debate over National Efficiency was succeeded by the politics of reassurance, whether articulated by Baldwin or by MacDonald. Yet stabilisation was not unproblematic; the solidarities generated within the railway industry sometimes challenged the architects of unostentatious consensus, whether party leaders or union officials. These studies, once again, belong within a broader debate about the character of inter-war British politics. In particular, the growing significance of the Labour Party is sometimes viewed as a barrier to modernisation strategies in an increasingly obsolescent society.

This theme is continued in the final study, with an analysis of the experiences of railway workers during the first years of public ownership. The translation of modernisation as a publicly owned system gave the Labour Party and the railway unions a coherent agenda, following the traumas of 1929-31. The actual implementation of the proposal in transformed circumstances raises broader questions about the character of the Attlee Government. Did its record represent the loss of a more radical opportunity? Should its achievement be understood not as the first and only instalment of a socialist transformation, but as the modernisation of an outdated capitalism, a return in effect to the politics of National Efficiency?

The following analyses are often highly detailed; the peculiarities of, and the diversities within the industry will be evident. Yet, hopefully, the presentation of the complexities of one significant case will illuminate some broad and controversial issues.

Part I

Edwardian Questions

Changes in the structures and the style of industrial relations within the railway industry illuminate complex themes central to the understanding of British society and politics in the years immediately prior to the First World War. Much political and intellectual debate was dominated by the theme of National Efficiency.[1] The reforms pioneered by the more progressive railway managements through the reorganisation of operating methods, the utilisation of new technologies, the restructuring of administrative systems and changing attitudes towards trade unions, can be characterised as a variation on this national theme. The result of the 1906 election meant that modernisation would be the responsibility of a Liberal Government which was gradually abandoning its Gladstonian legacy, and which embarked, at first tentatively, on a programme of economic and social reconstruction. The Government's responses to the railway crises of 1907 and 1911 indicated much about the strengths and the limits of this Progressivism. Ministerial strategy, and particularly that of its principal representative in both crises, David Lloyd George, was based on the assumption that even in this traditional industry, sufficient Company Chairmen and General Managers would appreciate that the agenda of modernisation must include a more flexible approach towards the unions. Similarly the Government's approach required that the railway unions could be incorporated within a bargaining system that provided the basis for the reconstruction of the industry. Such a belief assumed the amenability of union officials, backed by the consent of most union members. Within this framework, the industrial turbulence of 1910 to 1914 could be seen as evidence of the teething problems unavoidable within any new system of industrial relations, with the conflicts intensified by workers' natural attempts to exploit relatively full employment to redress earlier falls in real wages. Alternatively, these stoppages have been characterised as evidence of a potentially radical

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[1] See G.R. Searle, *The Quest for National Efficiency: A Study in British Politics and Political Thought 1899-1914* (Blackwell, Oxford 1971).

challenge to recently established procedures with their consensual agenda for industrial relations.

The Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants embarked on its 'All Grades' campaign in November 1906. This was a more formidable challenge to the Companies than an earlier mobilisation in 1897. The union's National Programme included an eight hour day for the traffic grades with a ten hour maximum for all others within the service. Other demands included overtime payments, and the guaranteed week. A two shillings a week increase was demanded for those grades who would not benefit from an eight hour day. Above all the specific proposals, there stood the demand for recognition. Throughout much of 1907, the Campaign was blocked by the refusal of the Railway Directors to meet union officials. Richard Bell, the union's General Secretary, worked assiduously to construct an image of the ASRS as the reasonable party in the dispute. His advocacy was backed by meticulous research on hours and wages, published as the Railwaymen's Charter. Eventually, in October 1907, the ASRS membership was balloted on strike action. The turnout was high; the result was unequivocal. Almost 98,000 ballot papers had been issued; 76,925 backed a stoppage and 8,773 voted in opposition.[2] But by the time this result was declared at the start of November Lloyd George, the President of the Board of Trade, had intervened and the crisis, for those centrally involved but not for the wider public, was close to a solution.

Meetings between Lloyd George and the Company representatives had begun on 25 October 1907; the union negotiators were brought formally into discussions on 6 November. They were presented with a scheme which had been developed in negotiations between the Companies' representatives and the President of the Board of Trade. The two parties remained in separate rooms at the Board of Trade. For the Companies any face-to-face meeting would have meant the sacrifice of a principle. The outcome was a scheme for Conciliation and Arbitration, signed by both Companies and unions. The latter failed to secure recognition; the former considered that the introduction of the possibility

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[2] For details of the National Programme and the prelude to the 1907 crisis, see *ASRS Reports*, 1906 and 1907. Note in particular Richard Bell, *The Railwaymen's Charter. Reply to Criticisms,* May 1907; and *Summary Statement of the Results of the Census of Wages, Hours of Labour & C.* Also two parliamentary debates on the hours of railway workers. *HC Deb* 4th Series Vol.157 Columns 552-81 (16 May 1906); Vol.170, Columns 885-923 (6 March 1907).

of arbitration over wages and hours diluted managerial control. The complex scheme could be regarded as an institutional expression of the Progressive Liberal belief that a harmony of interests existed between useful sections of society - both capital and labour - against the parasitic and the non-productive. Lloyd George had suggested to the Company Chairmen and General Managers that a strike would have damaging consequences, not just for the industry but for the national economy:

> ... the business which we are now doing would necessarily go to Germany and the United States, postponing the slump there, precipitating one here, and once you lose your trade, it is not easy to get it back.[3]

A search for a settlement should utilise the consensual aspirations of officials, such as Richard Bell, against the disruptive radicalism of a section of the ASRS Executive. Therefore, Lloyd George relied on a quick settlement with the latter:

> I should rather like to keep them on the premises until the thing is done. If I let them outside, three or four of them especially - they are the Socialist group - will do their very best to upset the whole scheme.[4]

This rhetoric, with its spectre of the Socialist threat, was obviously directed at doubters amongst the Company representatives; but it also indicated Lloyd George's agenda for the modernisation and stabilisation of industrial relations. The strategy complemented the outlook of Richard Bell, whose own vision of trade union statesmanship facilitated the settlement:

> He must satisfy an exacting, suspicious and often insubordinate section of men. He must reconcile impossible aspirations with solid facts. He must be conciliatory with employers, whilst firmly maintaining the interests of his members. He must

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[3] Verbatim Report of Conference on 1907 Railway Dispute *BR/LAS (S) 77.* (Scottish Record Office), p.7.

[4] Ibid., p.105.

> keep a keen eye on public opinion, and be alive to the state of trade and the labour market.[5]

For optimists, the November 1907 settlement promised to give the industry some stability. The Conciliation scheme would operate for, in effect, a minimum of seven years. Lloyd George welcomed this as facilitating the necessary modernisation of the system:

> ... the important thing is that for seven years, at any rate, you are guaranteed that you will have no great labour trouble. It gives what is above all important to capital, and through capital to industry, a sense of security.[6]

The policy belonged within the developing agenda highlighted by the People's Budget, the Peers versus People elections of 1910, and the Government's concern with a more interventionist social programme. But as Progressive Liberals and pragmatic Labour leaders achieved electoral and parliamentary successes on the basis of significant co-operation, so the Railway settlement of 1907 disintegrated. The procedures were at best cumbersome, and railwaymen complained about the bad faith of managers who allegedly hampered the negotiations as much as possible. Often the arbitration awards gave many railway workers little or nothing, and some Companies, according to critics, evaded the impact of specific decisions by arbitrators through arcane interpretations and regradings. Sometimes claims were made of managerial intimidation of employees who advocated the workers' case within the Conciliation system. As discontent escalated, Lloyd George's prediction of seven pacific years seemed not the realistic assessment of a pragmatic negotiator, but a manifestation of Progressive naiveté in the face of escalating class conflict.

The summer of 1911 offered images that contrasted sharply with the diplomacy of 1907. The earlier conflict had been contained effectively within the offices of the Board of Trade; in August 1911, large numbers of railwaymen stopped work. The early strikers came out in response to local grievances; in some cases they were encouraged by recent or current stoppages by other transport workers. More members went on strike, as

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[5] Richard Bell, *Trade Unionism* (TC & E Jack, London, 1907), p.70.

[6] Speech at Cardiff, 24 January 1908, cited in C.J. Wrigley, *David Lloyd George and the British Labour Movement.* (Harvester, Hassocks, 1976), p.57.

the union leaderships, acting for once in harmony, proclaimed an official strike, in an attempt to regain control of their own members. The brief and sometimes turbulent stoppage became part of the folklore of that hot summer. Despite the optimistic prognostications of the Companies, many timetables disintegrated. Anxiety over food stocks escalated, troops were despatched to key locations, in the case of Llanelly with tragic consequences; and abrasive confrontations occurred between police and troops - and working class crowds. Normality was ruptured; but only briefly.

The interim settlement again involved Lloyd George and produced a Royal Commission, with the task of assessing the operation of the 1907 scheme and suggesting modifications. The decisive meeting had brought Gilbert Claughton, Chairman of the London & North Western, and Guy Granet, General Manager of the Midland, into the same room as union officials. This shift, compared with 1907, indicated the pressures on the railway companies. These were very evident almost three weeks later, when Company representatives met in a futile attempt to agree a common line on evidence to the Royal Commission. Claughton insisted that the position taken by himself and Granet was unavoidable: 'If... they had refused, they would have been swept away by public opinion'. Rather, their strategy should be 'to mould the findings of the Commission into something that was acceptable.'[7]

The Commissioners' Report, produced late in October, proposed few changes to the existing and, for many railway workers, discredited, procedures.[8] Their widespread dissatisfaction did not produce another stoppage; company representatives and union officials met under the chairmanship of a Board of Trade official and agreed a settlement. The ASRS President, Albert Bellamy, insisted that the objective of the unions

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[7] Royal Commission on the Railway Conciliation Scheme of 1907. Notes of a Meeting of the Chairmen of principal Railway Companies of Great Britain and Ireland, 8 September 1911. Railway Companies Association *Rail 1098/55* (PRO). Claughton was unhappy about Chairmen and Directors giving evidence. 'In cross-examination by a skilled expert answers might be obtained which would set public opinion against them. The evidence had to be given by experts only.'

[8] Report of Royal Commission on the Working of the Railway Conciliation and Arbitration Scheme of 1907. *Command* 5922 (1911). Minutes of Evidence *Command* 6014.

was 'peace on the railways'.[9] However, relationships were sometimes uneasy until the outbreak of war. Localised but intense disputes suggested enduring grievances; the search of managers and union officials for a stable pattern of industrial relations remained problematic. Whether such outbreaks represented a significant challenge to the evolution of an agreed system of conciliation is a critical question. There were certainly more and less adversarial positions on both sides.

Trade union sentiments were not adequately captured by the agendas of full-time officials. Many branch officials and activists had been reluctant to accept the Conciliation Scheme in the first place; by 1911, they demanded its abolition, and advocated a 'down-tools' policy in order to remove grievances. The 1911 dispute began amongst goods workers in Liverpool, who had been encouraged by the militancy of the port workers. One of the strikers, Robert Segar, an employee of the Lancashire and Yorkshire Railway, explained the cynicism about the 1907 Agreement to the Royal Commission:

> We are complaining about the conciliation boards. The company have violated the settlements, the machinery is out of date and we cannot conduct negotiations because they will not listen to us, making the whole thing into a complete farce.

In the absence of recognition, with full time officials prevented from meeting the employers, negotiations could not be between equals:

> ... how can a workman go forward and arbitrate with his employer, a man with just a common board school education and, on the other side, men with the best college education? They can twist and turn your figures as much as they like.

A strike seemed more effective. Segar responded robustly to a Commissioner's concern about the consequences:

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[9] File on Conciliation Scheme *BR/LAS(S)32 (SRO)* p.19. Bellamy's comment was in response to Guy Granet: 'You say as a conciliator we are endeavouring to compromise... Compromise means give and take... What are we going to get in return?'

> Do you know the terrible misery which results from strikes? Yes, and I also know the misery which results from the starvation wages which we get.[10]

Such anger posed a challenge to union officials concerned to improve bargaining procedures, achieve recognition and establish predictability in the industry. Isaac Brassington, an Organising Secretary of the General Railway Workers' Union, reflected on the key role played by goods station workers and draymen in the militancy of 1911:

> They are the grades that undoubtedly have brought about the present trouble. They were the men who came out in thousands before the joint executives called out the whole of the men, and they were the men who were most reluctant to go back. Many of them were out for four or five days after the officials of the union had told them to go back.[11]

Rank and file militancy could be used by adroit officials as a resource to achieve a more favourable settlement, but it could explode out of control, embarrassing union advocates of harmony, and strengthening the credibility of the die-hards amongst Company Chairmen and managers. The Companies were no more a monolith than the unions. Critics could focus on the more inflexible of the Chairmen, epitomised by Lord Claud Hamilton of the Great Eastern. He insisted that his relatively poor company would have been a harmonious place if it had not been for the agitators, 'men who make speeches, and get paid 7s 6d and 10s for each speech, and make it hot in order to get better pay'.[12] Hamilton's apocalyptic views were unrepresentative by the 1900s; nevertheless, some modernisers took a firm line on the undesirability of trade unions. Herbert Walker would become an innovative General Manager of the Southern Railway. In 1911, as assistant to the General Manager of the London and North Western, he stigmatised recognition as a tactic for imposing union membership on reluctant railwaymen. The proper sphere for trade unions should be no more than the traditional role of benefit provision to those who chose to pay into the appropriate fund; even in

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[10] *Command* 6014, paragraphs 8865, 8903, 8910. The Commissioner was Sir Thomas Ratcliffe-Ellis.

[11] Ibid., Paragraph 4814.

[12] Ibid., Paragraph 10,011.

this field Walker objected to the ASRS policy of paying benefits to men regarded as victimised by the Companies.[13]

Nevertheless, some senior figures had more flexible positions. Sam Fay, of the Great Central, had played a significant role in the 1907 settlement. He was the innovative General Manager of a company fighting hard to improve its competitive position. Although opposed to recognition on disciplinary grounds, he offered a more nuanced appreciation of the subsequent crisis. He felt that the shortcomings of the Conciliation Scheme resulted neither from managerial sabotage nor union agitation. Rather, the key lay in the poor economic records of many companies in the depression of 1908-9. In such circumstances, Fay claimed, no one benefitted. Arbitration awards imposed new burdens on hard pressed companies through reduced hours and overtime payments; the limited increases, or the absence of any advance were disappointing to workers, whose expectations had been heightened by the 'All Grades' campaign. A decline in business and the consequential reduction in train mileage led inexorably to the downgrading of many: 'it is a natural source of discontent'. By 1911, Fay was advocating a legislative framework for the resolution of disputes and expressing sympathy for the abortive arbitration proposals of the Labour Member, Will Crooks.[14]

Guy Granet, General Manager of the Midland, and formerly Secretary to the Railway Companies Association, had been involved closely in the negotiations in both 1907 and 1911. On the later occasion he and Gilbert Claughton had sought to minimise the significance of their meeting with trade union officials. This had been in the context of a specific crisis, and did not entail the concession of the general principle of recognition. The episode nevertheless produced tensions between company representatives. In fact, although a stern disciplinarian, Granet's opposition to recognition seemed more pragmatic than the Bourbon-like resistance of Hamilton or the dismissiveness of Walker. Rather, he claimed that the genesis of the 1911 strike had demonstrated

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[13] Ibid., Paragraph 9179 for Walker's definition of the proper trade union function, and 9083 for attack on union policy of suspension benefits. The latter paragraph also includes the traditional management view that recognition would lower the standard of discipline, 'quite as important as in the army, navy and police'.

[14] For Fay's emphasis on the economic context, see ibid., 11,813-11,814. The quotation is from the latter. His support for Will Crooks's proposals and for the Canadian legal approach to industrial relations is at Paragraphs 11,848-11,849.

the irrelevance of recognition since this would not promote orderly industrial relations:

> the society abdicates its functions as a leader and simply becomes a follower... that is an object lesson to us... on the futility of granting recognition to the Amalgamated Society.[15]

Such criticisms could be interpreted, however, as an invitation to union officials to establish the appropriate control over their members. Similarly, Granet acknowledged the increasing weakness of the familiar company claim that the unions could not be recognised, since they represented only a minority of each company's employees. This could well change; by 1911, there was growing evidence of the unions' recruiting capacities. Granet's response to this prospect was far removed from the inflexibility of many of his peers: 'I should have probably to reconsider my position'.[16]

Beyond the stalwart traditionalists and the modernisers who hinted at a future flexibility, a very few railway managements had already conceded recognition. These included one major company, the North Eastern, where under successive General Managers - George Gibb and Alexander Kaye Butterworth - the company had developed over two decades a distinctive pattern of industrial relations. For traditionalists, the North Eastern example was anathema; they had sold the pass. A representative of the Old Guard, Sir Charles Owens of the London & South Western, suggested that this folly resulted from outsiders gaining senior positions. He dissented from the fashionable assessment of Gibb as an innovative and talented manager. The reason for North Eastern heresy lay in what for others would have been Gibb's strength, that is, his lack of a background in traditional railway operating techniques.[17]

This outline of developments is well known amongst students of the industry and of the labour movement. The analysis which follows provides a more thorough investigation of selected themes, through a focus on both particular companies and significant episodes. One highly important but neglected issue concerns the relationship between technical

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[15] Ibid., Paragraph 12,912.

[16] Ibid., Paragraph 13,019.

[17] Ibid., Paragraph 9851. The current North Eastern General Manager, Kaye Butterworth, gave extensive evidence to the 1911 Royal Commission. His submission is discussed below in Chapter Four.

changes, reforms of management practice and safety. The railway unions were constantly preoccupied with the issue and two chapters investigate controversies which developed around particular disasters. In one case, the debates were largely contemporaneous with the 'All Grades' Campaign; in the other, a crisis arose in the troubled period between the 1911 settlement and the outbreak of war. The theme also raises significant questions of trade union strategy. For organisations lacking recognition, investigations into disasters by Board of Trade Inspectors, Coroners and occasionally through criminal procedures offered opportunities. Union officials not only defended their members, they had the space to present general claims about Company practices. In these contexts, union officials could sometimes develop relationships with Company Officers that were part co-operative and part adversarial, with each side protecting their own interests but acknowledging that there were matters of common concern. Yet trade union responses were affected by internal divisions. Since investigations into disasters focused on the attribution of individual responsibility, the ASRS and ASLEF attempted to protect their own members; in doing so they often implied that the responsibility lay elsewhere. The conflict between the unions had several causes; differences over strategy and personal frictions were important, but so were responses on safety issues. The complexities of the safety question provide a significant avenue into union politics.

This relatively novel emphasis can be complemented by a deeper investigation of a more familiar theme. The analysis of industrial relations within the industry is presented typically in general terms. Yet the Edwardian railway companies had very different market situations, ranging from regional monopoly to the highly competitive. In such hierarchical organisations, the personalities, priorities and prejudices of Chairmen and General Managers could count for a great deal. Despite the hope that the Railway Companies Association could develop a coherent position on crucial questions, the diversity of Company evidence to the 1911 Royal Commission was revealing. The differences can be analysed further through an examination of the industrial relations practices of two modernising companies, the North Eastern and the Midland. The former, under Gibb, was viewed as a pace-setter most decisively in the early 1900s. When Gibb left for the Metropolitan Railway in 1906, the NER experienced a period of consolidation under Alexander Kaye Butterworth. In contrast, the Midland's innovatory period came after 1906 with firstly the appointment of Granet as General

Manager, and then the creation of the new post of General Superintendent, filled by Cecil Paget. Contemporaries viewed both companies as pioneering new managerial and operating strategies; but there was a sharp contrast in the two companies' records and reputations on industrial relations. The North Eastern was distinctive in its early moves towards recognition; the Midland was condemned frequently in trade union circles for autocracy and intimidation. Such contrasts and similarities provide insights into broader themes concerning modernisation and the relationship between labour and capital.

These themes also require exploration at the level of party politics. The Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants could claim to be the direct founder of the Labour Representation Committee. The seminal resolution of the 1899 Trades Union Congress was moved by an ASRS delegate, James Holmes. Its genesis was in the union's Doncaster Branch. The union was one of the very first organisations to affiliate to the Labour Representation Committee in March 1900; later that year, the ASRS General Secretary, Richard Bell, was returned in the general election as one of the LRC's first two Members of Parliament. After the election of 1906, the ASRS provided two of the Labour Party's bloc of thirty Members, and in January 1910, the number rose to three. The Railway Servants were active advocates of Independent Labour representation on many Trades Councils, and contributed to the slow development of a Party presence in small towns and rural areas, where unionised workers were sparse.[18] Moreover, the union was the defendant in two legal cases - Taff Vale on trade union liabilities and Osborne, on political funding - which were central to the politics of Edwardian labour.

This account fits easily within an orthodoxy which dominated much traditional labour historiography. It was central to the litany of the 'Forward March of Labour'. Yet the party politics of the ASRS were notable as much for their ambiguities and suppressed options as for a clear and decisive contribution to political independence. Bell was the first trade union official to be elected as an LRC Member; the combination of Bell at Derby and Keir Hardie at Merthyr seemed to personify the political compromise between trade unionists and the socialists of the Independent Labour Party that was central to the LRC strategy. Nevertheless, by 1904, Bell's continuing Liberalism and his

[18] For the political development of the ASRS down to 1906 see David Howell, *British Workers and the Independent Labour Party 1888-1906* (University Press, Manchester, 1983), Chapter 4.

refusal to sign the revised LRC constitution precipitated a crisis within the union. The ASRS went into the 1906 election with a compromise. Three of the union's candidates were endorsed by the LRC, and the two successful ones subsequently became members of the Parliamentary Labour Party. Although Bell was sponsored by the union, he stood not as a LRC candidate, but as the nominee of the Derby Trades Council, in effect an orthodox Lib-Lab. The deepening rift between Bell and his two parliamentary colleagues both reflected and, in turn, contributed to the acrimony which culminated in Bell's resignation from the General Secretaryship and his Derby candidacy just before the January 1910 election. The Derby vacancy was filled by another ASRS official, Jimmy Thomas, running as a Labour Party candidate, but accepted readily by the Derby Liberals as a fitting successor to Bell.

The element of continuity at Derby illuminates a broader issue. All three successful ASRS Labour Party candidates occupied seats in two-member constituencies where the other seat was taken by a Liberal and the splitting of each elector's two votes was decisive. This was precisely the route by which Bell had entered Parliament in 1900; it was a major factor in the LRC's expansion in 1906, and remained central to Labour's parliamentary standing until 1914. The ASRS Labour Members were amongst the many beneficiaries of the Gladstone-MacDonald arrangement - the secret Liberal/LRC pact - of 1903. Whatever the controversy within the union about Bell's political leanings, the union's parliamentary representation must be located within the complexities of Edwardian Progressivism.

The two legal cases also illuminate the complexities of the union's politics. The Taff Vale affair caused acrimony within the union; the principal protagonists were Bell and James Holmes, the organiser responsible for South Wales and subsequently a Labour candidate. The clash cannot be translated easily into party-political factionalism, but the issue fed into the growing concern about Bell's style of leadership and his industrial priorities. The alleviation of the judgment's consequences for trade unions through the legislation of 1906 suggested an ambiguous political moral.[19] The outcome owed much to trade union pressure before, during and after the 1906 election, and to Labour Party arguments in the Commons. Yet the response of the Campbell-Bannerman

[19] For the 1906 legislation, see John Saville, 'The Trades Disputes Act of 1906', in *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations* No. 1, March 1996, pp.11-46.

Government suggested that a Liberal administration, even one with a massive parliamentary majority, could be sensitive on labour issues.

The Osborne case was similarly complex in its political background and consequences. Walter Osborne was a Great Eastern porter, active in the Walthamstow Branch of the ASRS and a delegate to the union's 1905 AGM. He was also a Radical Liberal, who was happy to support Richard Bell as a union-sponsored parliamentary candidate, but who objected to the commitment of union funds to what he characterised as the 'socialist' LRC and later, the Labour Party. There is no doubt that Osborne's position had significant support within the ASRS, but the legal judgement did not distinguish in its prohibition of political funding between Labour and Lib-Lab. Rather, any such activity by a trade union was declared 'ultra vires'. This thorough outcome perhaps obscured the extent to which Osborne's original purpose had enjoyed sympathy in some sections of the union; moreover the decision united all shades of trade union political opinion, facilitating the legislative redress of 1913.[20]

The issue also demonstrated how the unions needed a Government that would be sympathetic on vital issues. Alongside partisan calculations and rivalries of the kind articulated by Osborne, there remained some shared sentiments and priorities captured by the concept of Progressivism. The party politics of the ASRS and from 1913 of its successor, the National Union of Railwaymen, were much more complex than can be represented by any imagery of a natural Labour advance. Whilst analysis clarifies broader themes concerning the Edwardian Left, the union's political identity was distinctive nonetheless, and such themes were refracted through a specific organisational culture. Alongside the explorations of such political complexities there remains the question of the relationship between the industrial strategies of the railway unions and their complex party politics, and between such organisational manifestations and the work experiences and political choices of railway workers. It is time to focus on the men who worked the roads in a time of technical and managerial innovations.

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[20] For the Osborne Judgment, see Michael Klarman, 'Osborne: A Judgment gone too far?' *English Historical Review,* (1989), pp.21-37. For Osborne's post-judgment views see his *Sane Trade Unionism* (Collins, London, n.d.). A political self-portrait can be found in the *Walthamstow Guardian* August 28, 1910 - 'I came of an old Nonconformist and Radical family in the Eastern Counties... and a Radical I have always remained. I know something of what it means to be a Radical and a Dissenter in a country village, and the freedom to vote and speak and worship as we like, which our forefathers won for us in the past'.

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Chapter One

A Mystery and a Feud

At 8.45 pm on 19 September 1906, a train left London's Kings Cross station for Scotland. This was not one of the prestigious overnight sleeping car services which had developed reputations for comfort and speed; the 8.45 stopped at several intermediate stations and took over nine hours on its journey to Edinburgh. Operations on the first stages of the journey were the responsibility of the Great Northern Railway. The schedule was modest - 91 minutes for the first 76 miles to Peterborough, four minutes to change locomotives and then 40 minutes for the next 29 miles to Grantham. On this night, the train left Peterborough punctually with a new engine and crew. Northbound trains faced rising gradients until Stoke Summit over 23 miles from the Peterborough start. The climb was not particularly steep, but it could be a slog on a steam locomotive. When the train entered Stoke Tunnel at the top of the bank, 37 of the 40 minutes allocated for the Peterborough-Grantham stage had already elapsed.

From Stoke, the gradients favour northbound trains and the 8.45 accelerated to about 60 miles an hour. Passengers and railway staff on the platform at Grantham saw the train approaching about three minutes after its scheduled time of 11.00pm. A typical night of rule-governed railway working was shattered as the train ran through the station at between forty and fifty miles an hour. All signals at the north end of the station were set at danger; the points beyond the signals were set not for the main line to the north, but for the Nottingham Branch. The train ran through the signals and onto a left curve with a 15 miles an hour speed restriction. The consequence was the derailment, first of the tender, and then of the front vans and carriages. Some wreckage piled up against the locomotive, some was flung leftwards and downwards through a shattered viaduct parapet. Fire broke out. Although the train was lightly loaded, twelve people were killed including the locomotive crew and a

post office sorter. If mail vans had not been marshalled at the front of the train, fatalities would in all probability have been higher.[1]

The disaster was the second high speed night-time derailment of 1906. Two and a half months earlier, an American boat special from Plymouth to London had been derailed on a sharp curve at Salisbury. The heavy loss of life had included the locomotive crew and the disregard of a permanent speed restriction remained a mystery.[2] The Grantham disaster, so soon afterwards, produced a variety of explanations for another breach in expectation. Some claimed that the failure to make an advertised stop resulted from a mechanical failure on the locomotive; others suggested a brake failure. Hypotheses about the driver were sensational. He was drunk; he had gone mad. There were those who suggested a struggle on the footplate in the fashion of Zola's *La Bête Humaine*.

Against these claims stood the statement of Alfred Day, in charge of Grantham South signal box, and the first Grantham railwayman to see the train. He insisted that he had seen the locomotive crew from his window at the north end of the box - 'they both appeared to be standing looking out of their respective glasses in front of them, but they did not appear to be doing anything'.[3] This evidence, if accurate, complicated any attempt at explanation since it indicated a simple and apparently inexplicable

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[1] The Grantham disaster is examined in L.T.C. Rolt, *Red for Danger* (Bodley Head, 1955), pp.142-5, and O. S. Nock, *Historic Railway Accidents* (Ian Allan, London, 1966), pp.84-7. See also Harold Bennett, *Grantham: The Rail Crash of 1906* (By Gone, Grantham, 1978); Philip Green, *Britain's Greatest Railway Mystery: the Full Story of Grantham, 1906* (Context Books, Farnham 1991). The official report on the accident, including evidence, can be found in Railway Department Board of Trade Returns of Accidents and Casualties (3 months to 30 September 1906), *Command 3332*, 1907, pp.54-76. Reports of the Inquest and connected matters can be found in *Grantham Journal* 22 and 29 September 1906; *Doncaster Gazette* 21 and 28 September, 5 October 1906; *Doncaster Chronicle* 21 and 28 September 1906. There is also a Board of Trade Railway Department file: *MT6 1652/2* (PRO). For a discussion of the value of Board of Trade Accident Reports, see Jack Simmons, 'Accident Reports, 1840-1890', in his *The Express Train and other Railway Studies* (Thomas & Lochar, Nairn 1994), pp.213-33. See also Stanley Hall, *Railway Detectives: The 150-year Saga of the Railway Inspectorate* (Ian Allan, 1994).

[2] See *Command 3332* as above, 1907, pp.86-106; also *MT6 1657* (PRO).

[3] *Command* 3332, p.57 (evidence of Alfred Day); see also *Grantham Journal*, 29 September 1906: 'they appeared to be in the usual position under the cab of the engine...'

failure to carry out familiar tasks. Equally, Day could have been mistaken in his brief and nocturnal sighting of a fast moving train. A similar, evidential problem emerged with the conflicting testimonies of experienced railwaymen as to whether the brakes were applied at the last minute.[4]

The result is what one writer has called the railway equivalent of the Marie Celeste.[5] But the affair was not simply a tragedy without an agreed explanation. In both its origin and its aftermath, it must be located in the context of problems facing the Edwardian railway companies and railway workers. In turn, these issues deeply affected the policies and the strategies of the railway unions. Placing 'Grantham 1906' in this wider context will not solve an old mystery, but new insights can emerge both into the specific episode, and into broader questions.

The Great Northern was the southern partner in the East Coast alliance with the North Eastern and North British Companies. Together they operated one of the major routes between London and Scotland. By the 1900s the highly competitive phase symbolised by the railway races of 1888 and 1895 was declining; competition for Anglo-Scottish traffic focused increasingly on facilities, and the first signs of the pooling of services were apparent. The Great Northern/North Eastern partnership had a monopoly of traffic between London and the north-east of England, whilst the Great Northern had a strongly competitive advantage for traffic from London to the West Riding. Freight business was extensive with sizeable traffics from the Nottinghamshire, Derbyshire and Yorkshire coalfields. These market strengths provided the core of Great Northern business. Elsewhere its London suburban traffic was vast, particularly prior to the growth of electric tramways and then of the underground system; but its bulk placed facilities under excessive pressure. A near monopoly position in Lincolnshire provided only limited benefits on account of sparse population and the vagaries of the rural economy. Strongly competitive bids had been launched for Manchester and Sheffield traffic in partnership with the Manchester, Sheffield and Lincolnshire Railway, but when the latter constructed its own mainline to London in the 1890s, and was reborn as the Great Central, that strategy was undercut.

The Great Northern's economic situation had its distinctive strengths and limitations, but like all railway companies, it faced from the 1890s a

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[4] See the range of testimony in *Command 3332*.

[5] The phrase is in L.T.C. Rolt, op.cit., p.145.

long term problem of working expenses as a rising proportion of receipts. By 1908-1909, the Great Northern was proposing an amalgamation with two relatively impoverished neighbours, the Great Eastern and the Great Central. This would have established a near monopoly over Eastern England south of the Humber. Together with the Great Northern's East Coast alliance, the proposal would have come close to the London & North Eastern Railway as produced by the amalgamation of 1923. However, opposition from traders, and lack of sympathy from Government helped to ensure that the scheme was not realised. Instead, the Great Northern's attempts to solve economic difficulties were restricted largely to innovations within its own system.[6]

One symbolic moment came with the appointment of Henry A Ivatt as Chief Mechanical Engineer in November 1895. Ten days later his predecessor, Patrick Stirling, died in office. Ivatt inherited a locomotive stock that was struggling to cope with increased weights and speeds. Between 1880 and 1896, an express train carrying around 250 passengers from London to York had doubled in weight, whilst the speed of the fastest services had shown a limited increase. The state of the track also gave grave cause for concern. Ivatt's arrival on the Great Northern was contemporaneous with two serious derailments of express trains. One resulted from an old and defective rail being placed back on the mainline, the other from the inadequate completion and supervision of relaying work. Investigation showed that the strength of the rails was inadequate for the rising train weights. Ivatt allegedly informed the Great Northern Chairman that, had he known the state of the track, he would not have taken up the appointment.

The track was modernised and Ivatt gradually replaced key sectors of the locomotive stock. In 1898, the Great Northern's Doncaster works

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[6] For accounts of the Great Northern, see C.H. Grinling, *The Great Northern Railway 1845-1902* (Methuen, London, 1903). O.S. Nock, *The Great Northern Railway* (Ian Allan, London, 1958); John Wrottesley, *The Great Northern Railway*, 3 volumes (Batsford, London, 1979-1988). For the proposed amalgamation of 1909, see 5th Series *HC Deb.*, Vol.3., Cols.417-452 (31 March 1909) and 798-848 (5 April 1909) for the Second Reading, Cols.996-1040 (6 April 1909) for the Committee stage. The GNR's own self-presentation to the MacDonnell Arbitration of 1909 no doubt dramatised its predicament: 'The past 10 years have been a most anxious period... On every side they are hemmed in by competing lines, and they have to fight for every ton of traffic they carry.' W.B. Thomas, Great Northern Railway Arbitration (1909), p.244. *MSS.127/NU/MU1/1/11* (Modern Records Centre). For material on the abortive amalgamation proposal, see Peter J. Cain, Railway Combination and Government 1900-14. *Economic History Review* 1972, pp.623-639.

produced Britain's first Atlantic tender engine. Compared with its predecessors, Ivatt's innovation offered more heating surface and a larger boiler. Four years later, a new version of the Atlantic design appeared, No.251, with an even larger boiler and a wider firebox. '251' became a symbol of the modernisation of the Great Northern, and was used widely in Company advertising. Initially '251' stood alone but in June 1903, Ivatt persuaded the Great Northern Railway's locomotive committee that an order for twenty more engines of the 1898 design should be revised to incorporate the larger dimensions of '251'. His justification was a chronicle of increased train weights, tighter schedules, a growth in mileage debited to assisting locomotives and problems of punctuality. The batch of twenty, the first of many, were numbered 272-291, and appeared in the summer of 1904. They were allocated to the principal Great Northern depots responsible for express work and became established on the most prestigious mainline services. Amongst the batch allocated to Doncaster was No.276, the locomotive heading the 8.45 northwards from Peterborough on the night of the disaster.[7]

The large Atlantics were presented as a symbol of Great Northern innovation, and eventually they became feted as an engineering triumph; their early performances, however, could be mediocre. They were sometimes indifferent starters and, on some heavier assignments, time could be lost. Perhaps the early disappointments reflected the challenge to footplatemen posed by the demands of their new charges, but one characteristic soon became familiar to firemen. The Atlantics established a reputation as 'fiery'; they consumed large amounts of coal requiring hard physical labour and the skilful placing of coal in the wide firebox. The heat could singe the fireman's legs and some took to wearing leather aprons as protection.[8] For the trade unions, the Atlantic was not so much a positive image of modernity as a symbol of the accelerating and increasingly damaging pace of railway work.[9]

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7 For H.A. Ivatt, see N. Groves, *Great Northern Locomotive History,* Volume 3a, 1896-1911. The Ivatt Era (Railway Correspondence and Travel Society 1990); H.A.V. Bulleid, *Master Builders of Steam* (Ian Allan Shepperton, 1983). For the two accidents, St Neots, November 10 1895 and Little Bytham, February 7 1896, see *Command* 8007, pp.51-8 and *Command* 8132, pp.54-66.

8 Groves, op.cit., p.221. For the Atlantic's modest early reputation, see F.A.S. Brown, *From Stirling to Gresley 1881-1922* (Oxford Publishing, Oxford, 1974), p.95.

9 For example, see the comments of W. Ayres (ASRS Doncaster No.2 Branch) on the practice of working to London and back in one shift. Conference of the Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen and the Locomotive Members

The Great Northern drive for efficiency produced resentment amongst some sections of the locomotive men.[10] Larger locomotives meant fewer and heavier trains, and more demanding work on the footplate. Promotion on the long hierarchy from cleaner to fireman to driver became slower. When Great Northern footplatemen demanded wage increases in 1902-1903, the Company Chairman, Lord Allerton, argued that the only way to restore wage levels was to reduce the numbers in the locomotive grades. Ivatt felt the situation could only deteriorate:

> We find it difficult to provide work for all drivers and firemen at present, and it looks as if new methods of working the traffic, together with increased competition from Electric traction, will still further reduce the number of trains to be run.[11]

Within this changing environment three railwaymen were central to the Grantham drama. The driver of '276', Frederick William Fleetwood, was 45 years old; his working life had been spent at the Doncaster locomotive sheds, one of the principal depots on the Great Northern system. He had risen through the hierarchy familiar to locomotivemen: cleaner, fireman at each grade of traffic, then driver in a repeat progression. His career had developed at a time when promotion was more rapid than in the 1900s. When the first large Atlantics arrived at Doncaster in 1904, he was allocated '276' and had driven it ever since. On the Great Northern Railway top link drivers had their own locomotives, encouraging high standards of maintenance. Fleetwood was consistently presented as a steady, stable, cautious engineman, highly skilled, the master of his locomotive. A photograph shows him on the footplate of an earlier locomotive, his white overalls demonstrating pride in his craft. On the road, the locomotive was his domain; a Doncaster fireman who had

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of the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants. 11 and 12 April 1905, pp.32-3 in *ASRS Reports* 1905.

[10] The April 1905 joint conference also heard a comment from a Kings' Cross delegate about the Doncaster to London duties: 'These... men were doing eight men at Peterborough out of a job', p.31. The speaker shared a common view that such duties were too demanding: 'those men would soon earn enough to buy themselves coffins.'

[11] For Allerton's comment see interview of locomotive mens' delegates with Great Northern Board, 23 March 1903 *ASRS Reports*, June 1903 pp.39-41. Ivatt's comment had been made to an earlier deputation. 1 December 1902, see Minutes of Doncaster ASRS/ASLEF Joint Committee *DS5/2/1* (Doncaster Borough Archive).

worked with him regularly commented that Fleetwood never allowed him to touch the controls. In appearance and in style he symbolised a trustworthy professionalism as commended by both management and unions - 'a typical healthy and strong driver, sound in both mind and body'.[12]

By the standard of the Edwardian working-class, and more specifically of the railwaymen, he made a relatively high wage. Experienced Great Northern drivers on express duties earned 7s 6d a day - 45 shillings for the normal six day week. The turn of duty on the night of the accident totalled 224 miles and entitled him to a mileage allowance. For that week, therefore, his payment was at time and a quarter, £2-16s 3d. This contrasts with the overall pattern of railway workers' earnings as revealed by the 1907 Board of Trade census. The industry-wide average for a full week without overtime was 24s 4d; in terms of actual earnings this rose to 26s 8d. Drivers were decisively at the top of the earnings league (45s 11d); signalmen near to the average (27s 6d), porters well down at 19s 9d. Such figures ignored, as the Companies regularly emphasised, fringe benefits; but they also were oblivious to the personal and social costs of irregular and long hours, and the major and sometimes divisive variations within the occupational sub-groups.[13]

Fleetwood, by any measure, was a railwayman of high status; his private life, however, had had its problems. Early in 1905 his wife had died after giving birth to their second child. His domestic arrangements had drastically altered with his mother-in-law acting as housekeeper and looking after the younger child, with the elder one boarded out to relatives. With Fleetwood's pattern of shiftworking and the fragmentation of his family, life could not have been easy and this robust locomotiveman began to have periods of illness. He had been diagnosed as having sciatica in 1904, but from early 1906, his illnesses became

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[12] The portrait of Fleetwood can be found in the evidence given to the Board of Trade inquiry and to the inquest. See, for example, the judgement of Martin Cole, the Doncaster District Locomotive Superintendent: 'an exceptionally reliable driver... specially selected to be employed on express passenger trains... he was everything I could admire'. *Command* 3332, p.60. The fireman's comment is in *Grantham Journal*, 29 September 1906; the comment about Fleetwood's health is from Dr W.H. Corbett, *Command* 3332, p.61. The photograph is in Bennett, op.cit.

[13] The wage scales and allowances can be found in *ASRS Reports*, December 1903, pp.30-3. For a summary of the overall situation, see H.A. Clegg., Alan Fox & A.F. Thompson, *A History of British Trade Unions Since 1889* Volume 1, 1889-1910 (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1964), p.481.

more prevalent. In June he was taken ill on the footplate, but completed the journey to London. He refused to work his return train on health grounds. A final period of illness had ended on 3 September. His mother-in-law recalled how, in August 1906, he had found it difficult to move around; she endorsed the judgement that he had sciatica. He had refused, however, to visit a doctor - 'oh, the doctor will do me no good', - nor had he drawn any benefits from the Great Northern Railway's Sickness Society. Many members tended to forego these to avoid the Society's restrictions on their leisure activities whilst on sick benefit.[14]

No one working with, or responsible for, Fleetwood had any accurate knowledge of his medical condition. His fireman at the time of the June incident had been told little. Fleetwood comes over as a relatively taciturn figure who simply said that he felt 'queer all over'.[15] The authorities at the Doncaster locomotive sheds required no medical assessment before permitting Fleetwood to resume work. The system was surprisingly informal, given the typical paternalism of railway companies:

> When a driver is so unwell that he cannot do his duty, he sends word to the shed foreman to that effect. When once a man goes on the sick list in this way, the Company would make no special inquiries about him unless they suspected something wrong. When an engineman is fit to come on duty again off the sick list, he sends word to his foreman that he will be fit for duty on a certain day, or perhaps he comes down himself and tells the foreman. But before actually coming on duty again, he is not examined by any doctor to see whether he is fit to do so.[16]

The procedure, or rather lack of it, perhaps reflected the status of the driver - a skilled man whose judgement of his own capacities should be respected.

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[14] The comment recalled by his mother-in-law and her evidence about Fleetwood's domestic circumstances are in *Command* 3332, p.65-6. She also noted that he never drew benefit from the Sickness Society. His June 1906 illness was referred to in the evidence of William Brooks at p.61. The witnesses to the Inquiry and the Inquest were not always agreed on the duration of Fleetwood's recent illnesses. On his family, see also *Doncaster Journal*, 28 September 1906.

[15] *Grantham Journal*, 29 September 1906.

[16] *Command* 3332, p.66, for evidence of H.A. Ivatt.

Fleetwood was a relatively early recruit to trade unionism. In October 1887 he joined the Doncaster No.1 Branch of the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants (ASRS).[17] Both time and branch were of interest. 1887 was a critical year for unionised locomotivemen. In August, a strike by ASLEF members on the Midland had been defeated.[18] But the following month a disastrous collision at Hexthorpe on the Manchester, Sheffield and Lincolnshire's western approach to Doncaster had led to a locomotive crew appearing at York Assizes on a manslaughter charge. ASLEF financed the defence and the locomotive men were acquitted, with the Lord Chief Justice condemning the operating methods of the Company. The acquittal was a notable victory for the union and suggested a worthwhile strategy in a context of non-recognition.[19]

This accident, occurring within walking distance of Fleetwood's home depot, perhaps provided the catalyst for a young and respectable locomotiveman to join a trade union. Like many contemporaries, Fleetwood joined the Railway Servants; no ASLEF branch existed at Doncaster until 1889. The ASRS's Doncaster No.1 Branch proved to be a significant actor not just within the union, but within the wider labour movement. This was the branch of the ASRS's Executive member and advocate of Independent Labour politics, T.R. Steels. Formally, it was the source of the resolution that became in turn union and TUC policy and, produced in 1900, the formation of the Labour Representation Committee.[20] Fleetwood's attitude towards this initiative is unknown, but significantly he belonged to a branch with a strong record of activity within the union, and one which could be expected to take up the broader aspects of any personal case in a combative fashion.

Top link drivers such as Fleetwood had a regular fireman who worked with them on a day-to-day basis. Knowledge of each other's

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[17] From late 1906, Fleetwood's case is listed in the ASRS Orphan's payments in *ASRS Reports*. The information includes the date when he joined the union.

[18] For the Midland strike, see J.R. Raynes, *Engines and Men,* Chapter 6; P. Bagwell, *The Railwaymen,* pp.129-30.

[19] For Hexthorpe, see Raynes op.cit., pp.80-2; George Dow, *Great Central* Vol.2, *The Dominion of Watkin 1864-1899* (Locomotive Publishing Co., London, 1962), pp.202-5; the official report is in *Command* 5360 (1887); *Doncaster Gazette* 23 and 30 September; 14 and 21 October and 18 November 1887. *Yorkshire Press* 15 and 16 November 1887.

[20] For this development see David Howell, *British Workers and the Independent Labour Party 1888-1906*, Chapter 4.

habits and foibles was vital to the smooth operation of what could be temperamental machinery and to combating the unexpected difficulties that formed part of day-to-day locomotive work. An effective footplate team was built on trust, and on the fireman's respect for the competence of the driver. Early in 1906, Fleetwood's regular fireman had been promoted to driver and had been replaced by William Brooks, a fireman since 1894; this in itself was a demonstration of the slow promotion in the locomotive grades. Fleetwood and Brooks appear to have worked well together. Brooks described the driver as thoroughly straightforward and cautious; his approach to Grantham from the south always followed the same meticulous routine.[21] Their partnership was interrupted by Fleetwood's illness, and then on 12 September Brooks went off duty with a cold. From the start of the following week Fleetwood was allocated a new and temporary fireman, Ralph Talbot.

This choice became the subject of heated controversy. The 23-year-old Talbot was not in the established line of promotion for footplate staff, and was not from the working class background that characterised Fleetwood and other Doncaster locomotivemen. His deceased father had been a City merchant and he had been educated at Abingdon School. He had moved to Doncaster aged sixteen under the Great Northern's Premium Apprentice scheme. This group paid a £50 fee and formed a section distinct from the bulk of the apprentices in the Great Northern Railways' 'Plant' Works. Most of the latter acquired a trade in which they remained for the rest of their working lives. Premium apprentices went through each shop, with a view to securing senior railway positions. In an obvious sense the group was privileged, but their work could be demanding. The working week was 54 hours with a six o'clock start; when their day at the 'Plant' was over, they were expected to attend night school for two hours, five nights a week. Amongst the 'Plant' workers they might be seen as different and therefore to some extent excluded. Nevertheless, Talbot seemed to fit into Doncaster life, playing cricket for the 'Plant', and singing in a local church choir.[22]

In August 1905 he came under the authority of the District Locomotive Superintendent, Martin Cole, and until the end of the year

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[21] See *Command* 3332, p.59 and *Grantham Journal* 29 September 1906.

[22] For Talbot, see *Doncaster Journal* 28 September 1906. Conditions for Great Northern Premium Apprentices are illuminated in Sean Day-Lewis, *Bulleid: Last Giant of Steam* (Allen & Unwin, London, 1964), Chapter 2, and H.A.V. Bulleid, *Bulleid of the Southern* (Ian Allan, Shepperton, 1977).

rode on express locomotives as an inspector, taking notes on their performance. At the beginning of 1906 he began to work as a fireman, eventually in May moving to mainline passenger work.[23] Cole's assessment of Talbot's competence was predictably positive. His experience and abilities were more than sufficient, and compared with the average fireman, 'he had taken more interest in the work'. This judgement was underwritten by William Pollard, his driver on mainline duties from May:

> I took him to be a competent man. He was very clever with the shovel and everything else he had to do... a biggish and strong man... he could manage his work with very little instruction.

These claims reflected the official response of the Great Northern Railway to criticisms of the practice:

> There was nothing to be feared from their system of employing apprentices on express trains, as those apprentices had received a thorough training, and as expert engineers, knew more about the working of locomotive engines than even the drivers themselves.[24]

Whatever the validity of the assessments there was a sharp contrast between this rapid rise to senior firing duties and the increasingly slow promotion of most Great Northern Railway footplatemen. When Talbot's total firing experience on passenger duties was aggregated, it amounted to just 54 days, together with 66 runs on shunting and goods - far below the normal preparation for the principal mainline duties: moreover, prior to his work with Fleetwood, Talbot had never fired an Atlantic. The distinctive techniques and the fiery environment were one more challenge.

Beyond the issue of Talbot's competence there was a disturbing question as to his state of mind as he prepared to work with a new driver on an unfamiliar locomotive. He had spoken to friends about

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[23] *Command* 3332, p.70 for listing of Talbot's duties on locomotives since August 1905.

[24] See ibid., p.60 for Cole; also quotation from *Grantham Journal* 29 September 1906. Pollard's views are in *Command* 3332, pp.61-2; *Railway News* 29 September 1906.

Fleetwood's alleged weakness for alcohol; the source of this concern was never clarified, and its accuracy was repudiated thoroughly by all other railway workers and by Fleetwood's mother-in-law and housekeeper, Margaret Dunkerley. Yet Talbot was concerned enough to tell two friends on the day of the disaster about his likely response to any evidence of drunkenness. Talbot insisted that if the driver came on duty drunk he would refuse to go with him.

> One of us then... asked what he would do if Fleetwood became drunk after they had started; he replied that he would drive the engine himself to the nearest pilot station, and hand it over to the charge of the pilot man. Then one of us asked him what he would do if the driver refused to let him take charge of the engine... he said... that he should do his best to stun him. I believe he mentioned that he should do it either with the shovel or with a lump of coal. He either said he would stun him or lay him out.[25]

This can sound like the musings of an inexperienced man whose social position marginalised him within his workplace. Yet one anecdote from another friend who was also a Premium Apprentice suggests that Talbot's proposed remedy was more than rhetoric. One day in the works Talbot's spanner had slipped off a nut, and a fitter - happy perhaps to see the discomfort of a Premium Apprentice - had laughed. Immediately Talbot had flattened the fitter with a right hook to the jaw.[26] Faced with a footplate crisis, a man with this temperament and critical expectations about his driver might react explosively. Ironically, Fleetwood's view of Talbot seems to have been both positive and sympathetic. He commented that Talbot 'was willing to do anything, but he would have five or six tons of coal to move that day, and he would be sure to suffer with his hands, which were soft and soon blistered'.[27] Talbot had soon discovered the Atlantic's fiery character. He told his friends that his left hand and side had been scorched and that he intended to protect his left hand with a glove.

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[25] *Command* 3332, evidence of W.A. Blackburn at p.65; also note evidence of Miss M.V. Rogers at pp.64-5.

[26] For this incident, see Day-Lewis, op.cit,. p.65.

[27] A comment made by him to Margaret Dunkerley on the morning of 19 September; see *Doncaster Gazette* 28 September 1906.

The third key actor was Richard Scoffin, signalman at the Grantham North Box. He had spent 18 years with the Great Northern, almost 16 as a signalman. He had held his current job only since the previous January and, at 36, was a relatively young man for this senior post. The box was located at a critical point on the Great Northern system. Apart from dealing with trains on a busy main line, Scoffin had to deal with the entrance to a locomotive yard. Grantham was a little over half way between London and both Leeds and York, and had become established as a significant engine changing point for expresses. Connecting services ran from the north end of the station to Lincoln and Boston, and westwards to Nottingham and Leicester. The junction for the latter two services was under Scoffin's control. The complexities of the working necessitated a large frame of levers which it was in the signalman's interest to operate with economy of effort, avoiding unnecessary movements.[28]

Fleetwood and Talbot signed on duty at Doncaster at 2.55pm on 19 September. Having prepared '276' they worked a semi-fast to York and then waited more than two hours before taking over the most prestigious train in their assignment, the 2.20 from Edinburgh to London. They worked this service from York to Peterborough, arriving there at 9.08pm, and at that point the tempo of the evening had to quicken. Once the locomotive was uncoupled, Fleetwood had to reverse through Peterborough Station to the locomotive lay-by at the station's north end. '276' then had to be turned and inspected. As the locomotive had travelled 115 miles since the start of the duty, coal had to be brought forward in the tender. The crew needed time to take some supper. All had to be ready for the arrival of the 8.45 from London at 10.16.

This turnaround schedule, introduced at the start of 1906, left little room for delay, either through the late arrival of the Edinburgh train from the north or problems at Peterborough.[29] A second Doncaster crew and locomotive were on hand to cover this eventuality, and if not needed, followed northwards on a later train. That night, this crew, Richard Cartwright and Abraham Massey, were asked by the Peterborough foreman to assist Fleetwood:

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[28] For Scoffin's evidence at the Inquiry and the Inquest, see respectively *Command* 3332 pp.57-8 and 64; *Grantham Journal* 21 February 1914.

[29] *Command* 3332, p.66.