

Globalisation, Nostalgia & Cultural Heritage

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Industry and Romance? What does romance have to do with industry? Well, for most of the 20th century the answer would have been nothing at all. Industry's value was measured purely in terms of economic outcomes and jobs. Its dirt, noise and danger made it aesthetically unappealing if not repugnant for most people. Old industrial sites rarely inspired nostalgia. Little effort was made to preserve the material vestiges of industrial plants after their manufacturing activities ceased. Despite the architectural grandeur of many industrial structures and the amazing accomplishments of those who worked in them, few people thought either held any heritage value

This is no longer the case. But the change in attitude has been very slow in coming. The first stone was cast during the 1950s, when the emergence of industrial archaeology as a distinct field in the United Kingdom encouraged at least some recognition that industry formed an important part of cultural heritage and that it wasn't necessarily 'synonymous with ugliness'. This was the period when railway modernisation and dieselisation led to the slow but inexorable decline of steam power. The diesel not only revolutionised railway work and travel. As Maury Klein observed in *Unfinished Business: The Railroad in American Life*, the diesel also consigned 'an entire sub-culture rooted in a shared passion for ... the steam locomotive' into 'the realm of nostalgia'.

This passion is captured by the 'romance of steam' narrative that initially appeared in Reverend W Awdry's *Thomas the Tank Engine* stories, whose central character remains an international icon and an emblem of the steam era. Many railway histories emphasise the 'captivating and entrancing' nature of steam-powered railways. According to historian John K Brown, the steam locomotive's 'infinite freight of mental imagery' continues to exert an 'enduring fascination' that carries with it

← Staff from the Eveleigh workshops with a C3806 locomotive as it prepares for a trial trip; Coffs Harbour Railway

↖ Refreshment Room staff; State Rail Authority Archives

Both photographs: Photographic Reference Print Collection No 1110, [NUA69]



'a highly romantic symbolic burden'. As David Burke, the author of *Australia's Last Giants of Steam*, put it so evocatively: 'consider the echo of a whistle on a frosty night, the blur of speeding side rods, the white plume trailed across green paddocksthis is the stuff that stirs the imagination, and in its spell, the romance of steam's last giants will ever endure.'

A less obvious, but no less important part of the locomotive story is the industrial landscape, full of architecturally magnificent railway stations and well appointed railway refreshment rooms, immense workshops and depots — a landscape that has receded as inexorably as the 'iron horse', albeit without the same fanfare. Even so, more and more people have become interested in the lives and work of those who inhabited this landscape. Raphael Samuel argues in his book *Theatres of Memory* that this is a response to 'the disappearance, or near disappearance, of heavy manual labour and the unexampled haemorrhage of industrial jobs' that began during the 1960s and 1970s in Western 'developed' countries when manufacturing began to shift to other shores. Or perhaps the growing appreciation of industry and industrial lives was inspired by the 'history from below' approach to social history that emerged in the 1970s and that focused attention on ordinary working people.

More likely though people have begun to listen to the stories of the industrial landscape and to look closely at its remaining images because of the combined effect of these changes and also a plethora of others we now encapsulate in the term 'globalisation'. Together, the remaining industrial buildings, and the stories and

images of the lives that were lived in and around them, have helped to create what J Arwel Edwards and Joan Carles Llundés I Coit describe as 'aesthetics of de-industrialisation'. A connection between romance and industry.

While most Australians willingly discard all vestiges and lessons of history as they rush headlong into the future, growing numbers of people have embraced the past in an effort to understand and learn from earlier experiences and endeavours, successes and failures. For such people, the demise of the industrial era, of entire occupations and jobs, of long-standing connections with specific enterprises and places of work, has created a desire to celebrate the toil and sweat of their forebears, to listen to their stories and to look at their pictures. As David Lowenstein expressed it in *The Past is a Foreign Country*: 'In the face of massive change we cling to the remaining familiar vestiges', because doing so gives our lives meaning.

Steam & Romance

Although many of the steam buffs who experienced the massive disruption caused by the diesel chose to leave the railways rather than to adapt to new work practices and new occupational identities, some responded to the decline of the iron horse by clinging on for dear life. They were able to do so because the transformation was extremely drawn out. Although the first main-line diesel electric locomotives were introduced in November 1951 and the last steam locomotives were delivered in 1958, it was not until

1971 that the dieselisation of the locomotive fleet was completed. The Eveleigh and Chullora workshops survived the process and also the last regular steam run in NSW in 1973.

The romance with steam was not shared by everyone, however. Indeed, for many women steam locos were a source of anger and frustration. One employee of the Eveleigh railway workshops recalled the day when the women who lived in the lane adjacent to its steam shed in Redfern marched over to complain to 'the head of the railway' about the black spots that covered their newly-washed white sheets. These women were not alone. Others, in Illinois and Pennsylvania for example, were equally as vocal, as recorded by Studs Terkel in his American oral history classic *Working* and Albert Churella in *From Steam to Diesel*.

Yet despite such different attitudes to steam locomotives, most people loved travelling on the railways. From the late 19th century they would journey beyond Sydney where the air was not polluted by industry. In turn, the railways linked the hinterland and country towns to the city, its suburbs, factories, commercial centres and docks. In fact, railways provided the lifeblood of many small rural centres, while the train stations, with their refreshment rooms, provided an important hub for community life. These places offered respite to travellers and employment for women.

Looking at pictures of them now gives us a sense of style and glamour. We should not forget, however, that working on the railways, and in industry more generally, was difficult if not harsh. Many employees of the NSW

railways encountered dangers on a daily basis. Accidents happened in refreshment rooms as much as on rails and in the workshops. Some workers never recovered. Others struggled to obtain improvements so that they could have a better and easier life.

Pictures from the past allow us to make connections. They allow us to remember that which is gone. They should also help us appreciate not just the things that were good but, as importantly, the conditions that were not. We need to celebrate those who survived those hard times and their legacy, as much as the survival of their images.

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Steam locomotive going through Glenbrook cutting

Platform kiosk at Cootamundra Station

Dining room at Central Station

Indicator board at old Sydney Station

All photographs: State Rail Authority Archives
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