WOLLONGONG RAILWAY STATION: A PROBLEM OF 1882

It was ever thus: East is east, and West is west, and never the twain shall meet, even though in this instance they were not much more than half a mile apart.

The advent to Illawarra of that acme of 19th century progress, the railway, had long been advocated. The Illawarra Mercury of 16 April 1875 had produced in a special leader facts and figures showing the immense savings to be made by land movement of coal for shipping at Port Jackson rather than in Illawarra's diminutive ports. Parenthetically, one may wonder at the reactions in those days to the present-day concept of getting politicians off a political hook by reversing the trend, whereby Illawarra's coal-loaders are to ship the coal of other regions as well as its own, leaving us with the environmental turmoil. But that hot subject might better be promptly dropped, for present purposes.

The decision to construct the railway having been made—sorry, taken: one must heed the current argot—trains began to roll in 1888. Meanwhile, over intervening years, committees of citizens had met and debated plans and prospects, in the fond belief that their views might prevail over political exigency and the conveniently straight lines of engineering drawing-boards. Discussion began to centre upon where Wollongong's station should be sited: to the west of the township, approximately where it now is, or on the Green, which was the area where sports and agricultural shows were held, near the Roman Catholic Church. A description which is near enough would today be Wollongong Showground.

The latter proposal was not as silly as it now sounds. A railway being an essential utility, why should it not be entirely central? And what could be nearer the centre than the Green? The commercial heart of the town was still Market Square, with a growing tendency to creep into lower Crown Street, but always with a magnetic drag back towards the real centre of gravity, the harbour. So the argument in favour of the Green was cogent, particularly if one were to overlook the dubious effect of a swath cut by a continuation and widening of one of the colliery tramroads southwards through the town towards Spring Hill and Unanderra.

Newspaper items in the Illawarra Mercury of 16 and 30 June 1882, and a leader in the Wollongong Argus of 29 June 1882 attest the force of the debate at meetings of citizens. Logic was not prominent in argument. Citizens did not scruple to twit each other that their advocacy for one site or another was pre-determined by where their respective properties happened to be. One worthy chap condemned the eastern site by saying that it would lead to people being drowned in Tom Thumb Lagoon; no reason having been advanced, one is forced for the only likely explanation to the startling vision of a brakeless train plunging past the station into the lagoon. And there was an accusation of "tiddly-winking" associated with another citizen's mention of the different views to the engineer in charge. All this related to a motion before the meeting in a strange mixture of positive and negative, to the effect that the committee should be
empowered to ask the government that the station be put as close to the town as possible on the western side if it refused to place it on the eastern side; and in any event a link with the harbour was to be sought. And when all the debate was over, the motion was carried unanimously.

It is pleasing to note that we of the year 1982 were vicariously present in the prophetic utterance of Mr. J. Kiernan, who spoke "in the interest of those who might live in Wollongong a hundred years hence, and not because he had property on the east side of the town." Naturally, he favoured the eastern site, and the presumption seems to have been that we of 1982 would be grateful for the proposed divergence of the line by sea-shore and harbour, though in a burst of muddled thinking he added: "A railway station, however, was not a wise thing to have near one's residence on account of the noise, and for this reason there were no gentlemen residing at Redfern"—Sydney Central being non-existent then. Doubtless the muddled addendum accords more with 1982 thinking than the prophetic flight of fancy. In any event, people of 1982 may form their own views. The thought of a sweeping railway looping blackly through the city could almost reconcile some of us to the restrictive bans of latter-day town planners.

Predictably, the government of the day won; they always do. One may be sure that if it had suited the engineers and administrators to cut a swathe through the town, they would have done so regardless of the differences between East and West. Yet at the same time we can only be grateful that they settled for straight railway lines both into and out of the town. And in any event the town looked after itself. The proponents of a station on the Green must have relied on the invalid assumption that Wollongong would stay put where it was in that minor pocket of development in 1882. In fact, as we all know, it has been bulging westwards ever since. In this the railway station must have been an influence, and perhaps it was the first instigation for the chicken to burst out of its shell, whence it could spread not only westward, but north and south too. The protagonists for the East can have had little idea of expansion.

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