

## RAILWAY POLICY IN N.S.W. 1889

*[At the Editor's request, Dr. Robert Lee, of the Macarthur Institute of Higher Education, has kindly furnished the following summary of the talk given by him to the Society on 1st. April]*

In acquiring the Sydney Railway Company's assets on 3 September, 1855, the Colonial Government assumed the responsibility for planning and managing what was to become easily its largest enterprise. It was at first very uncertain as to how it should exercise this responsibility. The rapidly changing political situation following the introduction of responsible government in 1856 and of a democratic franchise in 1858 increased this uncertainty. At first the government relied on the contractor who had completed the line from Sydney to Parramatta, William Randle. He leased and operated the line for the first year after the opening 26 September 1855. Thus the N.S.W. railways began as a government-owned but privately-operated concern.

This temporary arrangement was followed by reliance on Royal Engineers. The new governor, Sir William Denison was himself an R.E. and recruited Captain Ben Hey Martindale to act as Commissioner for Internal Communications, which included management of main roads, telegraphs, harbours and rivers and railways. Martindale's term was fraught with difficulties. Denison, domineering and accustomed to command, believed the Colony could not afford steam railways and so should build horse tramways. The railway's Engineer-in-Chief, John Whitton

recruited in England in 1856, believed with even more passion that steam railways were essential. The members of parliament voted only small sums and then complained about slow progress. An attempt to pass the responsibility for construction over to the great English contractors, Peto, Brassey and Betts, failed due to the conflicts between Whitton and the contractors' engineers. Nevertheless by 1863 they had completed the first phase of railway construction and the lines were open from Sydney to Picton and Penrith and from Newcastle to Singleton.

The next phase would be far more difficult, as the lines had now to cross the Great Dividing Range. Martindale and Denison had both left in 1861, and the Premier from 1861 to 1863 was Charles Cowper, founder and first President of the Sydney Railway Company as well as a politician dedicated to breaking the squatters' monopoly on the land. Railways could give inland small farmers access to the markets they would need to survive, so for Cowper railway construction was both a personal and political commitment. He persuaded Whitton to adopt lower and cheaper standards for the new lines, but agreed that steam traction must be used. Thus the second phase of construction saw the lines extended over the difficult terrain to Goulburn in 1869 and Raglan (near Bathurst) in 1873 and over the rather easier country to Murrurundi in 1872. These railways involved some massive works, including the two zig-zags on the western line, and had cost about half as much again as Whitton had told Cowper in 1861. With their completion the aims the Sydney Railway Company had stated in its prospectus in 1848 were at last achieved.

The high cost led some conservative politicians to ask if the Colony could afford any more railways. A select committee led by Alexander Macleay of Elizabeth Bay House once again argued that future extensions should take the form of narrow gauge horse tramways. However, Public Works Minister John Sutherland and Whitton mounted an effective campaign to continue construction of standard gauge steam railways. Once again Whitton had to compromise and build the extensions to lower standards than he desired. Sutherland also determined the future pattern of construction. In 1873 he produced a plan of the future railway network. Although subsequently modified in detail, sometimes for engineering, sometimes for political reasons, Sutherland's 1873 plan was, in essence, implemented over the following twenty years. Thus in 1873 funds were voted to extend the main line to Wagga Wagga, Orange and Tamworth.

By the time these lines were nearing completion in the late 1870's the financial situation of N.S.W. Railways was transformed. Although never worked at a loss, for the first twenty years, they had only occasionally returned sufficient revenue to cover the interest on the cost of their construction. By 1881 the Railways were returning a very respectable 5.31 percent. In these circumstances colonial governments found it far easier to borrow funds on the London market and during the 1880's construction advanced rapidly. The main lines to Albury (1881) Bourke (1885) and the Queensland border (1888) were completed and important branch lines to Hay (1882), Mudgee (1884) and Narrabri (1882) built. Two new lines out of Sydney were also built, to Newcastle (1889) and Kiama (1887). For the first time railways were duplicating a service provided by coastal steamers. Their construction is evidence of the optimism of the times.

(to be continued)

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(A summary of the talk given by Dr. Robert Lee, of the Macarthur Institute of Higher Education, to the Society on 1st April.) (Continued from July Bulletin)

It has often been alleged that railway development during these years was subject to considerable political interference, some of it of a corrupt nature. Henry Parkes used this argument to create an independent board of three railway commissioners in 1888. The building of the Illawarra line provides an interesting example of such interference and its effect on railway policy. Whitton had proposed to build the Illawarra line to much the same route it follows at present. However in 1883 the Public Works Minister, Francis Wright, ordered construction suspended while an alternative route via the valley of Hacking River instead of via Engadine and Waterfall was surveyed. Wright produced spurious technical arguments in favour of the deviation which were effectively countered by Whitton. Cabinet ultimately decided to build along Whitton's route. Later evidence was produced which revealed that the Premier, Alexander Stuart, owned virtually all the private land through which the proposed deviation would pass. What is significant about the incident is not so much that a politician attempted to use public policy for private gain, but that Whitton was able to frustrate this attempt. It is an example of his dominance of railway policy from his arrival in 1856 to his retirement in 1889. This dominance was in part achieved through political allies like Cowper and Sutherland and in part by the force of his arguments and personality.

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