

Railways and the Victorians

Source: The Victorian Web (<http://www.victorianweb.org/technology/railways/rrlit1.html>)

1 of 4) Railways and Victorian Literature — An Introduction

George P. Landow, Professor of English and the History of Art, Brown University



The Victorian Web

literature, history, & culture in
the age of Victoria



He confessed to being absorbed in railways, the new lines of railways projected to thread the land and fast mapping it. — George Meredith, *Diana of the Crossways*

"How gloriously we go along! I should like to ride on a railway every day." Hippias remarked: "They say it rather injures the digestion." "Nonsense! see how you'll digest to-night and to-morrow." "I hate slow motion after being in the railway," he said. — George Meredith, *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*



Victorians experienced the coming of the railway age as a watershed in the history of Great Britain. Some greeted and others mourned the changes that came with the new technology. As one might expect, references to railways and the phenomena surrounding them become an important part of Victorian fiction. The railway not only changed both the landscapes and cityscapes of great British, often for the worse many writers claimed, but it also changed conceptions of time and distance. Since the construction and running of railways had major impact on the financial world, particularly after railway mania of the late 1840s — the Victorian equivalent to the dot.com bust of the 1990s — it provided obvious material for both plot devices and social commentary for writers.

Perhaps the simplest, most obvious appearance of the Victorian railway comes in the form of little realistic touches some of which serve as handy plot devices. The railway rug that travelers used to keep warm in the early carriages becomes a staple of Victorian novels — one of those well observed details that, like Gaskell's Indian shawl in the first chapter of *North and South* places the action in a broader cultural context. A similarly observed detail that situates a story in the railway age involves the oft-cited railway timetable. This new form of transportation not only allowed easier, though not always very comfortable, movement over greater distances but it also placed a rigid temporal grid over travel in the form of railway schedules. Making a train trip of any distance often required coordinating the schedules of several railroads. Not surprisingly, therefore, Victorian novels from Collins to Gissing are filled with characters requesting, obtaining, and consulting Bradshaw's and other timetables. Thus Norah in Wilkie Collins's *No Name*, like so many other character in Victorian fiction, "had the railway time-table in her hand."

Moreover, both the train station and the railway carriage became places where both acquaintances and strangers encountered each other, often with important consequences for the plot. The incipient romance of Margaret Hale and John Thornton in Gaskell's *North and South* becomes threatened, for example, when she is reported to have met an unknown man at the Milton railway station, and M. E. Braddon's *The Lovells of Aberdeen* centers on encounters and misunderstandings in a railway carriage.

Making and missing connections becomes an obvious plot device. Getting off a train in some location unknown to the character and waiting, often alone, to be met and taken to a country house also became a common means of setting a plot in motion. Both appear in Collins *Woman in White* when the narrator tells us:

My travelling instructions directed me to go to Carlisle, and then to diverge by a branch railway which ran in the direction of the coast. As a misfortune to begin with, our engine broke down between Lancaster and Carlisle. The delay occasioned by this accident caused me to be too late for the branch train, by which I was to have gone on immediately. I had to wait some hours; and when a later train finally deposited me at the nearest station to Limmeridge House, it was past ten, and the night was so dark that I could hardly see my way to the pony-chaise which Mr. Fairlie had ordered to be in waiting for me.

And, of course, it's always more effective when the train drops one off at a lonely station in the dark of night, which is both disorienting and mysterious.

The discomforts of railway journeys provide a common means of conveying both the experience of travel and the character of the traveler. A character in M. E. Braddon's *The Golden Calf* makes the usual contrast of machine and nature: "I am only tired of railway travelling, smoke and sulphur, dust and heat. A quiet walk across the common and through the wood will be absolute refreshment and repose." Fictional and nonfictional speakers commonly complain about the bustle and chaos of large numbers of people rushing about, bumping into one another and in general acting in ways uncommon in earlier ages. Here Collins's *No Name* plunges us into the crowded scene at the York train station:

He reached the platform a few minutes after the train had arrived. That entire incapability of devising administrative measures for the management of large crowds, which is one of the characteristics of Englishmen in authority, is nowhere more strikingly exemplified than at York. Three different lines of railway assemble three passenger mobs, from morning to night, under one roof; and leave them to raise a traveler's riot, with all the assistance which the bewildered servants of the company can render to increase the confusion. The customary disturbance was rising to its climax as Captain Wragge approached the platform. Dozens of different people were trying to attain dozens of different objects, in dozens of different directions, all starting from the same common point and all equally deprived of the means of information. A sudden parting of the crowd, near the second-class carriages, attracted the captain's curiosity. He pushed his way in; and found a decently-dressed man — assisted by a porter and a policeman — attempting to pick up some printed bills scattered from a paper parcel, which his frenzied fellow-passengers had knocked out of his hand.

Equally common as complaints about crowds are those about **vulgar behavior** and having to associate with workers who bore the **odors and dirt of hard manual labor**. As John R. Kellett points out in *Railways and Victorian Cities*, reports to the House of Commons noted such complaints as well as the fact that **workmen used foul language and "spat on the floors, smoked offensive pipes, cooked herrings in the waiting rooms if they were left open, cut off leather window straps and stole them,** and, if they arrived too early for work, hung about the station killing time, 'with evil consequences' for the young female workers" (97-98). As a character in Dinah Mulock Craik's *A Life for a Life* complains,

I never take a short railway journey in the after part of the day but I am liable to meet at least one drunken "gentleman" snoozing in his first-class carriage; or, in the second class, two or three drunken "men," singing, swearing, or pushed stupidly about by pale-faced wives. The sadness of the thing is, that the wives do not seem to mind it, that everybody takes it quite as a matter of course. The "gentleman," often grey-haired, is but "merry," as he is accustomed to be every night of his life; **the poor man has only "had a drop or two," as all his comrades are in the habit of taking, whenever they get the chance:** they see no disgrace in it; so they laugh at him a bit, and humour him, and are quite ready to stand up for him against all in-corners who may object to such a fellow-passenger. They don't; nor do the women belonging to them, who are well used to tolerate drunken sweethearts, and lead about and pacify drunken husbands. It makes me sick at heart sometimes to see a decent, pretty girl sit tittering at a foul-mouthed beast opposite; or a tidy young mother, with two or three bonnie children, trying to coax home, without harm to himself or them, some brutish husband, who does not know his right hand from his left, so utterly stupid is he with drink. To-night, but for my chance hand at a railway-station, such a family party as this might have reached home fatherless, and no great misfortune, one might suppose. Yet the wife had not even looked sad — had only scolded and laughed at him.

In addition to providing plot devices and material for realistic description, Victorian railways generated three important themes — their destructive **effects on the city**, particularly on housing for the poor, their **cutting up the English landscape**, and their involvement with greed, swindling, stock fraud and the **Railroad Mania**.

2 of 4) Railways in Victorian Fiction — The Effect upon the City
George P. Landow, Professor of English and the History of Art, Brown University



The Victorian Web

literature, history, & culture in
the age of Victoria



ot many Victorian or Edwardian novelists follow **Dickens, who while pointing out some of the railway's bad effects upon the city, strongly argues for its positive ones as well.** More commonly, writers describe the railway in an urban setting as largely destructive, and the artificial, mechanical sound of the steam locomotive's whistle, so beloved by modern rail fans, was often cited as the perfect symbol of that destructiveness. The sound of the steam whistle, which is often described as a "scream," intrudes in the Victorian city much as it does in the American landscape. Thus, **Bulwer-Lytton's *What Will He Do With It?*** describes how "just as our travellers neared the town, the screech of a railway whistle resounded towards the right, — a long train rushed from the jaws of a tunnel and shot into the neighbouring station." The same scream occurs in **Wilkie Collins's *Basil*,** where we encounter a character experiencing the effect of railways on the city: "It was a very lonely place — a colony of half-finished streets, and half-inhabited houses, which had grown up in the neighbourhood of a great railway station. I heard the fierce scream of the whistle, and the heaving, heavy throb of the engine starting on its journey, as I advanced along the gloomy Square in which I now found myself." In the same author's *No Name* experiencing **the railway's irruption into the city** becomes a cause for comparing past and present, much in the manner of **Carlyle and Pugin,** when the character arrives at the exact spot the tracks enter the ancient city of York (which now, ironically enough, has a major railway museum): "He reached the spot where the iron course of the railroad strikes its way through arches in the old wall. He paused at this place — where the central activity of a great railway enterprise beats, with all the pulses of its loud-clanging life, side by side with the dead majesty of the past, deep under the old historic stones which tell of fortified York and the sieges of two centuries since."



Aerial view of St. Pancras and King's Cross Stations. This photograph, which shows the extremely long train sheds, also reveals how much land the mainline tracks and railways yards occupied.

Other novels quite properly emphasize **the havoc wreaked upon urban centers by the railway companies to which Parliament gave the power to seize property by eminent domain.** As John R. Kellett points out in his magisterial *Railways and Victorian Cities* (1979), the "railroad companies' . . . renewed and determined

invasion of the central core of the Victorian city in the 1860s" (p. 69) ultimately had the effect of **making them owners of between 8 and 10% of the most valuable central land often with negative effects on both the companies themselves and urban life.** "By 1890," Kellett reports, "the principal railway companies had expended £100,000,000, more than one eighth of all railway capital,

on the provision of terminals, had bought thousands of acres of central land, and undertaken the direct work of urban demolition and reconstruction on a large scale" (2). Furthermore, "all promoters had [not only] grossly underestimated the expenses involved" (8) but they also made many decisions without any sensible cost-benefit calculations with the result that many railways lost enormous sums of money. The Great Western Railway, for example, put up the money for the Metropolitan line (now part of the London tube) and negotiated access to Victorian Station ten years before they considered how useful this arrangement would be and how many trains would be needed (p. 62), and surprised by heavy traffic from Windsor and Ealing, it opened money-losing stations at other places for which there was no need. Typically, railways built enormously expensive stations while neglecting their rolling stock, which was "filthy and poverty stricken" (78). Incredibly in the 1860s the railway companies spent between 1/8 and 1/2 per cent of the nation's total income on less than half a dozen stations! (79). According to Kellett, "in the North the railway company that played the most active part in carving out new termini for itself in Manchester and Liverpool — the Manchester, Sheffield, and Lincolnshire — paid such poor dividends that the shareholders ironically suggested that the company's initials stood for "Money Sunk and Lost" (p. 80).

Not surprisingly, railway companies turned out to be even less aware of the wider effects, particularly the social costs, of building in urban centers than they were of businesslike ways of running their businesses. And as people realized as early as the 1840s, these costs were high indeed: appropriating land in the centers of cities drove up real estate prices, devastated working class housing, added to congestion, and even when residential housing was left standing it was never renewed:

It is conspicuous that where the railways passed no residential improvement took place. They were frozen, as far as renovation or improvement were concerned, as completed as if time has stopped in 1830. Capital sunk in replacing residential housing in such an environment with a more up-to-date equivalent was obviously considered capital wasted. The best plan for a proprietor was to patch the properties up, accept a lower class of tenant, and wait until a major alteration made it possible to abandon residential use altogether: until commercial or business offer was made, a corporation clearance or street widening scheme swept the district away, or the railways themselves enlarged their approaches. [p. 340]

*Over the city by railway by Gustave Doré. 1872.
Doré here depicts what happens when railways cut into the heart of London.*

Dickens, Punch, and many others early realized the ill effects of railways. Thus in *Robert Falconer*, George Macdonald, otherwise a writer of gentle fantasies, the protagonist sees "the utter wickedness of railway companies, who pulled down every house that stood in their way, and did nothing to provide room for those who were thus ejected — most probably from a wretched place, but only, to be driven into a more wretched still. To provide suitable dwellings for the poor he considered the most pressing of all necessary reforms."

Two very different authors — Diana Mullock Craik and George Gissing — characterize a place positively because the railway has not touched it. Gissing tells us about a "No corner of England more safely rural; beyond sound of railway whistle, bosomed in great old elms, amid wide meadows and generous tillage; sloping westward to the river Dee, and from its soft green hills descrying the mountains of Wales." In Mrs. Craik's *The Olgivies* a city is characterized precisely because a railway has not yet entered it.

Yet there is much that is good about the place and its inhabitants. The latter may well be proud of their ancient and beautiful city — beautiful not so much in itself as for its situation. It lies in the midst of a fertile and gracefully undulated region, and consists of a cluster of artistically irregular and deliciously old-fashioned streets, of which the nucleus is the cathedral. This rises aloft with its three airy spires, so light, so delicately traced, that they have been christened the Ladies of the Vale. It has an air of repose, an old-world look, which becomes it well. No railway has yet disturbed the sacred peace of its antiquity, and here and there you may see grass growing in its quiet streets, — over which you would no more think of thundering in a modern equipage than of driving a coach-and-four across the graves of your ancestors.

As this passage makes clear, the ancient city in British fiction functions imaginatively much as does the untamed wilderness in American literature — as an ideal place into which modernity in the form of the railway intrudes. Of course, as Mrs. Gaskell points out in the second half of *North and South*, a good bit of the beauty and charm of such ancient cities derives from its prosperous citizen's willful ignorance of the economic, intellectual, and spiritual impoverishment of the lower classes — a point wilyly made by Mrs Craik when she describes the "melancholy emphasis" with which one of her characters points out "the line where the threatened railway was to traverse this beautiful champaign, and bring at last the evil spirit of reform and progress into the time-honoured sanctity of the cathedral town."



3 of 4) Railways in the Victorian Landscape

George P. Landow, Professor of English and the History of Art, Brown University



The Victorian Web

literature, history, & culture in
the age of Victoria



Many Victorian writers of fiction and non-fiction described the havoc wreaked upon urban centers by railways, such as driving up real estate prices, devastating working class housing, and adding to urban congestion. Novelists also protested the

effects of the new transportation technology upon the countryside, but here the protests seem aimed more at some preserving some sort of primal innocence in places in which as Gerard Manley Hopkins put it,

Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all is seared with trade; Bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod. ["God's Grandeur"]

The objections all center on the charge, now hard to take seriously, that laying the railway tracks through a landscape in some way irremediably chopped and divided it — as if the English countryside were not already criss-crossed by centuries-old fences and stone walls. In George Meredith's *Diana of the Crossways*, for example, the heroine objects to the way the railways cut through the landscape, expressing

her personal sorrow at the disfigurement of our dear England. . . Those railways! When would there be peace in the land? Where one single nook of shelter and escape from them! And the English, blunt as their senses are to noise and hubbub, would be revelling in hisses, shrieks, puffings and screeches, so that travelling would become an intolerable affliction. 'I speak rather as an invalid,' she admitted; 'I conjure up all sorts of horrors, the whistle in the night beneath one's windows, and the smoke of trains defacing the landscape; hideous accidents too. They will be wholesale and past help. Imagine a collision! I have borne many changes with equanimity, I pretend to a certain degree of philosophy, but this mania for cutting up the land does really cause me to pity those who are to follow us. They will not see the England we have seen. It will be patched and scored, disfigured . . . a sort of barbarous Maori visage — England in a New Zealand mask.

And, she continues, "I love my country. I do love quiet, rural England. Well, and I love beauty, I love simplicity. All that will be destroyed by the refuse of the towns flooding the land." Ah, it's all those members of the lower orders freed from their urban settings.

In the same novel a countryman complains:

"Once it were a capital county, I say. Hah! you asks me what have happened to it. You take and go and look at it now. And down heer'll be no better soon, I tells 'em. When ah was a boy, old Hampshire was a proud country, wi' the old coaches and the old squires, and Harvest Homes, and Christmas merryings. — Cutting up the land! There's no pride in livin' theer, nor anywhere, as I sees, now."

"You mean the railways."

"It's the Devil come up and abroad ower all England!" exclaimed the melancholy ancient patriot.

Trollope made a somewhat different point in *The Three Clerks* when he claimed that "it is very difficult nowadays to say where the suburbs of London come to an end, and where the country begins. The railways, instead of enabling Londoners to live in the country, have turned the country into a city. London will soon assume the shape of a Hammersmith, will be the nucleus, and the various railway lines will be the projecting rays. [Ch 3 "The Woodward's"] The coming of the railway marks a watershed, a turning point and a border not only between places but between times as well. Therefore to locate his story of Castle Richmond in a time before modernity arrives, Trollope's narrator tells us that "Castle Richmond stands close upon its banks, within the Mallow and Killarney railway now passes, but which some thirteen years since knew nothing of the navy's spade, or even of the engineer's theodolite."

4 of 4) Railway Mania

George P. Landow, Professor of English and the History of Art, Brown University



The Victorian Web

literature, history, & culture in
the age of Victoria



Railway Mania of the 1840s has many parallels to the dot.com bust of the 1990s. In both cases people invested, foolishly often more than they could afford, in dramatically innovative new technologies that promised to make changes in the way we live and work — and in the end actually did so. Although some of the financial losses resulted from outright fraud, probably more money was lost through simple bad business practice: inadequate initial financing, poor planning, and little attention paid to the question of whether the technology could do what entrepreneurs claimed it could or even if anyone wanted it to do so. For example, one of the justifications for constructing astonishingly expensive large stations and lines leading to them in the center of major cities was that they would supposedly permit low-cost shipping of essential goods, such as coal and fuel, that would benefit the poorer classes and thus demonstrate social responsibility benefit society as a whole. Unfortunately, to pay for the enormous cost of construction railways had to raise rates, thereby making the low-cost shipping of necessities impossible. Another instance of poor bad planning appears in the creation of stations or entire lines for which there turned out to be little need.

The seriousness of the Railway Mania derives in part from the fact that in the investment booms of 1837 and 1846 . . . the whole character of the investing class changed. An entirely new range of small shareholders pressed forward to offer their savings, or even the working capital from their businesses. . . . Because of the relatively high unit cost of these shares, it can be assumed that the majority, if not all of this numerous group were from the middle class, were politically enfranchised, and therefore proportionately influential in making their disappointment felt when they saw their investments more than halved in value in 1846 and 1847. Their resentment was increased by the knowledge that a

great part of their loss could be assigned not to legitimate business miscalculations but to the sharp practices . . . [such as] misleading prospectuses, payments of dividends out of capital, rigged Board Meetings, accounts "audited by daring amateurs." [Kellett, 29]

The Railway Mania that affected the United Kingdom saw many forms of dishonest practice ranging from careless estimates of costs to outright fraud, many forms of which involved stocks and bonds. In the earliest days of nineteenth-century capitalism, Great Britain did not have limited companies, which meant in practice that if an investor bought, say, £500 worth of bonds and the managers of the company later declared that constructing the railroad line actually cost twice as much as initially thought, the investor had to pay additional funds in proportion to his or her ownership in the company or forfeit his or her shares. Managers who worked essentially without oversight could claim losses, thereby drive down the value of the stock, and then take control of the railway for a tiny fraction of its actual cost and value. Another form of sharp practice, shown in great detail by Trollope in *The Way We Live Now*, involved floating a stock company, watching its stock rise, and then selling out before the company ever turned a profit or in some cases before it even produced a product.

Sounding much like Carlyle (who liked to use the word "whirligig"), Charles Reade in *Hard Cash* describes the kind of investing frenzy England had not seen since the South Sea Bubble.

When this sober state of things had endured some time, there came a year that money was loose, and a speculative fever due in the whirligig of time. Then railways bubbled. New ones were advertised, fifty a month, and all went to a premium. High and low scrambled for the shares, even when the projected line was to run from the town of Nought to the village of Nothing across a goose common. The flame spread, fanned by prospectus and advertisement, two mines of glowing fiction, compared with which the legitimate article is a mere tissue of understatements; princes sat in railway tenders, and clove the air like the birds whose effigies surmount their armorials; our stiffest Peers relaxed into Boards [of Directors]; Bishops warned their clergy against avarice, and buttered Hudson an inch thick for shares; and turned their little aprons into great pockets; men, stainless hitherto, put down their infants, nurses included, as independent subscribers, and bagged the coupons.

Wilkie Collins's *No Name* shows the effects of such investing on Captain Wragge:

The railway mania of that famous year had attacked even the wary Wragge; had withdrawn him from his customary pursuits; and had left him prostrate in the end, like many a better man. He had lost his clerical appearance — he had faded with the autumn leaves. His crape hat-band had put itself in brown mourning for its own bereavement of black. His dingy white collar and cravat had died the death of old linen, and had gone to their long home at the paper-maker's, to live again one day in quires at a stationer's shop. A gray shooting-jacket in the last stage of woollen atrophy replaced the black frock coat of former times, and, like a faithful servant, kept the dark secret of its master's linen from the eyes of a prying world. From top to toe every square inch of the captain's clothing was altered for the worse; but the man himself remained unchanged — superior to all forms of moral mildew, impervious to the action of social rust.

Nothing could help the often amateurish business practices of many of the railways except failure and consolidation, but Parliament eventually passed laws curbing certain kinds of fraud, the battle for which often had to overcome what came to be known as the Railway interest in the Houses of Commons and Lords. According to Kellett, the owners of railways, contractors, engineers, and surveyors formed the so-called Railway interest in Parliament, which varied in numbers between "50 and 150 M.P.s. Some had already become directors of railways before they entered Parliament; others were elected first and received invitations to the boardroom afterwards" (74).

References

- 1) Arnold, A. J. and S. M. McCartney. *George Hudson: The Rise and Fall of the Railway King*. London and New York: Hambledon and London, 2004
A new book about one of the most famous — and infamous — figures of the railway age who served as the basis of works by Carlyle, Dickens, Trollope, and others [GPL].
- 2) Kellett, John R. *Railways and Victorian Cities*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979; Toronto: U. of Toronto Press, 1979.
The essential book for anyone who wants to learn about the relations of Victorian railways to contemporary government, industry, finance, urban life, and so on, Kellett's volume is packed with quotations from primary sources, including parliamentary reports and contemporary periodicals; it also has valuable maps and illustrations [GPL].
- 3) Lewin, Henry Grote. *The Railway Mania and Its Aftermath, 1845-1852*. London: Railway Gazette, 1936.