Editorial
Making transport history

‘Making history’ is often associated with record setting and record breaking. Regarding the transport past, records are associated with size, speed and distance: the biggest ship, the fastest train and car, the longest non-stop flight. ‘Firsts’ stand as records for ever, albeit with some controversy about what they measure: what exactly was the first car built; who was the first to fly? The first journeys between two points or across some territory can also be matters of conjecture. Endings also constitute transport history: last engine, final flight, last haul and last production vehicle, for example. Yet, the precise era and date end of a transport technology or service can also be hard to identify.

The transport past comprises more than records, firsts and endings, of course. Indeed, most of the transport past was unremarkable, involving carriage of countless people and commodities interrupted occasionally by innovation and highly publicised incidents. The daily activities of innumerable manufacturers and constructors, service suppliers and users made those pasts, mostly subconsciously.

Deliberate interventions in transport may be sentimental (as in heritage activities), but most actions that come to be seen as moments of history-making in transport are initially directed at improved performance of a transport technology or service. Inspired (if not always arrogant or ruthless) individuals can be key, as evident in any roll call of famous transport designers, manufacturers and planners. Ego counts. Personalities and power-bases are important.

The point is made well in Gilbert and Poitras’s paper in this issue of the JTH. Their paper about the making of the Montreal metro around mid-century is peppered with the names and political affiliations of prominent citizens in local and provincial government. Also featured are civic committees, commissions and departments and a transport consultancy. How civic reports are commissioned and read is evidently a crucial element in the making of transport history. And not just in Montreal. Not dissimilar power struggles were occurring half-a-hemisphere away in 1950s Tokyo. There, as Hasegawa reveals in his paper, Tokyo’s first elevated motorway (and submerged historic waterway) was an instance of centralised planning, provision and profiteering trumping citizen and neighbourhood anxieties.

Like pet projects, celebrities dazzle and deflect: the work of lobby and support groups of various stripes, is apt to be side-lined. In her paper, Piglia shows how two different Argentinian motor clubs helped to shape public understanding, debate, policy and practices to do with automobility and roads during the first half of the twentieth century. Andersson and Pettersson’s paper analyses the brokerage role of the Swedish Railway Council before
1967, in which it mediated the interests of the freight shippers, regions and the state railways. Delivering effective, co-ordinated rail transport was the goal; evading state ‘capture’ of the process was one challenge. Both papers tackle the complexities of institutional mediation in the transport past, probing in detail the mandate, composition and workings of public and private organisations.

Another new paper on this theme addresses a deliberate intervention to prolong skills and protect jobs in the context of sudden technological innovation in road transport. Tjong Tjin Tai’s paper shows how trade associations and a government agency in the Netherlands made transport history in the first half of the twentieth century by helping craftsmen switch out of wagon making for animal drawn wagons into building bodies for motorised vehicles. Her paper examines the assisted transition of labour practices in transport provision, involving, for example, shifts in material use, vehicle design and decoration, wheel-making and foundry work. Visits, training courses and publications helped transport workers to adapt.

A sixth research paper in this edition of the JTH offers another angle on the making of the transport past: Hyslop argues that the image and reality of accelerated global steam shipping and uninterrupted seafaring at the turn of the nineteenth century was compromised by a non-transport agency. His study is of exclusionary colonial regulation of maritime labour in one British Empire port, Durban. There, a particular terrestrial political-economy bent maritime history in unexpected ways, with the help of an ardent port captain.

Transport history is clearly made in multiple ways, at multiple levels. In addition to the self-evident participants in the transport past, there are people – archaeologists, archivists and JTH authors among them – who resurrect those pasts and give history shape and meaning. Publishers of transport history are near the end of the chain of history making. Their time-old task has been to accept, adjudicate, print, promote and distribute books and journals. In our electronic age, publishers continue this work, but they face markets expecting ever more sophisticated gateways and platforms for digital and speedier submission, storage, indexing, cross-referencing, marketing, subscription, access and rating. As in our own field, the vehicles and technologies of transmission have been evolving fast. The expense and requisite nimbleness has led to significant publisher specialisation.

After thirty-six years of publishing the Journal of Transport History, Manchester University Press has let go of the title. In 1980, the Press picked up after Leicester University Press, the founding publisher. The first volume of the JTH was dated May 1953. There was a break in publication between 1967 and 1971. After nine years of the Second Series, Manchester took over publication, starting the Third Series, numbered from volume 1 again. The first half-century of the JTH has been surveyed elsewhere by one of the Journal’s past editors.1

Scholars of the transport past – and transport enthusiasts even more so – will know the high rate of attrition among publishers keen and able to help
‘make’ transport history. Two English university presses nourished academic transport history for sixty years, from a fledging UK speciality to a mature international field of enquiry. Now is the turn of a global publishing company, SAGE. Here is another last and first in transport history. But the distinctive JTH title will continue. Under new custodianship, transport history will continue to be made.

Note


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