Creating Railway Culture, 1830–1947

[Introduction]

In London three railwaymen – a guard, an engine-driver, and a signalman – are up before a coroner’s jury. A tremendous railway accident has dispatched hundreds of passengers into the next world. The negligence of the railway workers is the cause of the misfortune ... their labour often lasts for 40 or 50 hours without a break. They are ordinary men, not Cyclops. At a certain point their labour-power ran out.

(Karl Marx, *Capital*, Volume 1, 1976 [1867]: 363)

In 1844, over twenty years before the accident Marx refers to, J.M.W. Turner completed his famous canvas *Rain, Steam and Speed*. The painting, which now hangs in the National Gallery in London, depicts one of the Great Western Railway’s locomotives thundering over a viaduct on the newly constructed route between Bristol and the capital. The enduring appeal of the picture is the way it captures the tension in modernity itself – at once creative and destructive – the brash, technologically advanced railway cutting a swath through a timeless rural landscape, fire spilling forth from its iron belly. The railways brought into being the modern world, they accelerated communication that had hitherto been tied to the pace of the fastest horse, they opened up new markets for goods and services, allowed cities to expand and imposed uniform, ‘railway time’ on the nation.

The birth of the railways also saw the creation of a new group of workers, an industrial proletariat, who were as much dependent on employment in these increasingly complex organisations as any factory operative. Railway workers occupied a strange occupational...
space between modernity and tradition, the industrial and the military. Few workers before 1825 were subject to such an intense specialisation in their trades, but railway servants forged new identities and meaning from their work which scarcely any other industries could rival. This chapter explores how it was that railway employment created such strong traditions and loyalties, and seeks to understand the ways in which these distinct customs evolved after 1830. It does this by examining the structure of the industry, the recruitment and training of the workforce and the impact of trade unionism, and questions the extent to which we can talk of a distinct ‘railway culture’.

Birth of an industry

The new railway companies were undoubtedly modern organisations. They burst onto a world where most commercial concerns were modest local affairs with few employees, working with relatively small amounts of capital. Around the time Turner completed Rain, Steam and Speed in the mid-1840s, the Dowlais iron works in Wales was one of the largest industrial undertakings in the country, with a capital value estimated at £1 million. This was dwarfed by several still relatively new railway companies. For instance, in 1851 the London North Western Railway Company (LNWR) constituted the largest joint stock company of its day, and was capitalised to the value of over 29 million pounds, boasting over eight hundred miles of track linking London with the West Midlands, Liverpool and Manchester (Gourvish, 1972: 108–9).

Such large organisations needed new control structures, and have since been viewed as being in the vanguard of modern industrial corporations. As a result of their sheer scale and geographical spread, railway companies quickly developed centralised bureaucracies, a high degree of management control and a specialised division of labour organised by grades and departments, and the whole organisation was governed by formal law – the company rule book (see Gourvish, 1972; Brown, 1977; Savage, 1998). As Savage (1998: 70) points out:

Such was the sophistication of the administrative apparatus that in 1919 the GWR had nearly 10,000, or 13 per cent, of its 75,344 staff working in supervisory or salaried grades – a proportion unimaginable in most sectors of the British economy.

The industry grew rapidly during the Victorian era in several cycles of activity created by the railway boom. Each of the ‘railway manias’ –