

THE MODERN PASSENGER: CONSTRUCTING THE CONSUMER ON BRITAIN'S RAILWAYS, 1919-1939

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Much contemporary thinking about railway modernization in Europe focuses on the alleged benefits of liberalizing passenger markets by means of open access and associated changes to regulatory regimes, technological interoperability, infrastructure management, labour regimes and so on. Such policies are premised on an understanding of passengers as consumers making choices between railway services (and other modes of transport) offered in a competitive market. The desirability of this state of affairs is not infrequently contrasted to what is held to be the more limited possibilities found in earlier periods, particularly those in which the railways were nationalized or otherwise controlled by the state.

This paper explores some of the historical roots of thinking about the passenger as a consumer of rail-based mobility – ‘railing’ – taking as an example inter-war Britain, a country and a period in which railways were privately owned. This subject chimes well with recent calls for studies of what Frank Trentmann describes as the ‘broader dynamics of change in the history of consumer politics’, more particularly, the ‘larger reconfiguration of consumption and citizenship’ represented by discourses concerning ‘necessaries’ such as food. Debates about which kinds of railing should be regarded as a ‘necessary’ for participation in civil society, and which seen as aspirational goods to be purchased in the market, form the backdrop to this paper. More particularly, I concentrate on Matthew Hilton’s point that consumption in the 20th century was ‘one of the main acts around which governments... focussed their policies and interventions’, for from 1923 the railway companies were subject to an intensified degree of state regulation, ostensibly for the protection of consumers against the railways’ ‘natural’ monopoly. This regime had its origins in the 1880s, but after the first world war it was briefly possible to conceive of direct representation of the passenger-consumer in a world where previously, as Martin Daunton notes more generally, s/he ‘was someone for whom others claimed to speak, rather than an interest with his or her own voice’. The first part of this paper explores this window of opportunity. The second analyses what came after, in the continued absence of any systematically organized direct representation. The initial focus here is on the ways in which the railway companies constructed the passenger as a consumer through their marketing and other aspects of ‘commercial culture’. But I also suggest that the complexity of the railway companies as social organizations demands that we should acknowledge that there were other ways of comprehending the passenger-consumer.

(NOT) SPEAKING FOR THE CONSUMER, 1919-1921

Despite the rise of road competition, especially from buses, the railways continued to be important passenger carriers up to 1939. Traffic continued to expand after 1918, if not at the same rate as previously, and passengers

became an increasingly important part of the railways' business. Some – probably quite a small proportion – of this traffic was carried at fares set by statute or regulatory bodies, a consequence of 19th-century views that certain types of railway travel were necessary for full participation in civil society. By the 1880s the railway companies had accepted that aspects of their commercial practice had to be tempered by considerations of public service, and the tension between these norms continued to reflect and inform debates, policies and practices about the consumption of railway travel throughout the inter-war period.

Such discourses were in turn partly a reflection of more general ones about how to protect the consumer in certain kinds of market. Immediately after the first world war, transport was one of several areas of so-called 'necessitous' consumption where a significant body of political and public opinion thought that greatly extending consumer representation was the best way forward. Concerns over the possible political ramifications of the high cost of food led to the creation of a state-sponsored Consumers' Council of 1918-21, which included railways in its remit because of their effect on the cost of living. By the time wider political currents caused the Council's demise in early 1921, it was calling for transport to be included within a new department of state to represent consumers' interests. Other, more radical, ideas circulated on the Left. G.D.H. Cole's guild socialism of the late 1910s and 1920s provided models for the collective provision of transport in which consumers were to be represented on key decision-making bodies. In 1917 Cole envisaged the railways being organized as a national guild of workers, with consumers' interests articulated through a 'functional parliament' intended to resolve disputes between producers and consumers. Three years later the overall structure of guilds had been simplified, but the commitment to giving a voice to consumers remained.

During this period the reorganization of the railways after the depredations of the war was a political priority. A hitherto neglected aspect of the debates leading up to the Railways Act of 1921 (which established a new corporate structure of four main line companies) was the possibility of introducing a measure of direct consumer representation into the railways' regulatory framework. Although these eventually came to nothing, the 1921 act – described by one academic contemporary as 'by far the most comprehensive statute which has ever been passed to regulate British railways' – did strengthen the regulation of passenger services and fares, renewing one regulatory body, the Railway and Canal Commission, and creating another, the Railway Rates Tribunal. Together these formed a mechanism which had the potential to represent and promote consumers' interests, even in the absence of a direct voice for consumers. It is therefore worthwhile reviewing the thinking underlying these initiatives and some of the reasons for the very modest progress they made.

The Railway Rates Tribunal had its origins in the temporary extension of government control of the railways into peacetime; the 1919 act creating the Ministry of Transport established a Rates Advisory Committee which metamorphosed into the Tribunal. The major concern was always freight, not passenger fares or services, but the initiative is of interest because it illustrates the shift of government opinion concerning the representation of interest groups. Traders (two), the transport industries and labour all had statutory representation on the committee, but the Minister had discretionary powers to add an additional member, which might well have represented consumers more widely. This is not an implausible suggestion, for supplementing the committee was a 'panel of experts, and of impartial persons' representing a wide range of interests, including (as later noted by a

Labour member in 1921 during the parliamentary scrutiny of the Railways Bill) ‘a representative of the general users of railways’.

The new Railway Rates Tribunal was however a quasi-judicial body, not an advisory group, and as such was not supposed to represent interest groups. Labour Party politicians had argued in favour of a permanent representative of consumers (‘general users’) on the Tribunal – indeed, Labour’s attempts to have a representative of labour added were couched partly in terms of impact of railway fares on the cost of living experienced by workers-as-consumers. Much was made subsequently in parliamentary committee by other M.P.s of the issue of fares, particularly with regard to the so-called exceptional fares that the railways were to be permitted to charge below the standard ones set by the Tribunal. But by 1921 majority opinion in parliament had swung firmly against the principle of consumer representation – one government member argued in committee that ‘it is possible to push it so far that it becomes a fetish...’ – and the only concession was to create a General Panel of specialists, one of two from which the Tribunal could appoint additional members on a case-by-case basis. This had started life as a proposal for a Traders’ Panel, but in its expanded form it included 12 people ‘representative of the interests of labour and of passengers’ among its membership of three dozen.

On a more positive note, the Railway Rates Tribunal was charged with ensuring ‘the maximum development and extension in the public interest of the carriage by railway of... passengers and their luggage’. Its workings in this regard would repay additional study, not least because one contemporary referred to ‘various associations representing the interests of the travelling public’ coming before it. However, it is clear that although some useful advances were made in areas that had long proved troublesome – for example, drawing up standard conditions of carriage covering the kinds and quantity of personal luggage carried free of charge – in practice rather little was achieved, either in terms of fares or the quality of services. Indeed, if anything the two regulatory bodies’ strategic thinking favoured the railways against consumers, particularly with the Railway and Canal Commission’s decision in 1931 that a railway company could not be required to continue to provide an unprofitable passenger service.

In any case, by the late 1920s the meteoric growth of road competition meant the regulatory regime was out of date. Market forces and, occasionally, inter-company considerations of prestige now dictated fares and service levels for most passenger services; indeed from the start regulated maxima for fares were, as one authority presciently put it, either ‘obsolete for practical purposes’ or ‘only registered what the companies had conceded of their own accord’. The railways therefore pursued with increasing vigour commercial practices developed before 1914, tailoring fares and providing services to maximize revenue which they trusted would generate a return over and above direct costs (although this did not mean that they abandoned all services which even the rudimentary cost accounting of the day suggested were making a loss). In the apparent absence of any body systematically representing passengers it was left to the railways to develop an understanding of consumers and the kinds of services which might appeal to them.

CONSTRUCTING THE PASSENGER-AS-CONSUMER: THE LONDON, MIDLAND AND SCOTTISH RAILWAY, 1923-39

A key element in this task was the railways' commercial culture. This concept captures the idea that 'various aspects of cultural production... are inherently concerned with the commodification of various kinds of cultural difference' at the same time as 'the apparently rational calculus of the market is inescapably embedded in a range of cultural processes'. In other words, particular kinds of goods and services have a symbolic value which serve to define, and indeed in part create, social hierarchies, and successful companies market upon this recognition. In the railways' case, this meant they sought to market discretionary travel on the basis of what they thought would appeal to the social aspirations of particular social groups. In part, riling became (or more accurately, continued to develop as) a kind of aspirational consumption.

Recent studies of this phenomenon have sensibly focused on leisure journeys, an important area of growth between the wars, showing how the railways' sophisticated understanding of potential markets enabled them to appeal (although with questionable results) through graphic advertising and travel literature to various, often middle-class, groups. The rapidly growing purchasing power of women was a particularly attractive target. Understandably, scholars have for the most part deconstructed the 'official' commercial culture of the companies – more particularly, the marketing sanctioned by managers. This official culture did not rely solely on the books, pamphlets and graphic posters that so far have been studied in some detail. Other media used once government controls were lifted in the early 1920s included established forms such as maps, handbills, timetable books, newspaper advertisements and press announcements, and new ones like radio broadcasts, lantern slides, photographs, films and illuminated advertisements. We obviously need a fuller analysis of all of these, to get a better appreciation of how the railways' marketeers understood their potential customers.

But railways are complex social organizations, and we should not assume that the official marketing line was the only way in which the companies, broadly understood, constructed the passenger as a consumer. Another avenue to explore is the railways' 'semi-official' culture – in other words, those values, norms and forms of behaviour found amongst a railway's workforce (at all levels, including the managerial) which a company was willing in some degree to sanction, even if they did not align fully with those embedded in official marketing. Workers conceived and represented consumers and riling in a variety of ways, and behaved accordingly towards the railways' customers, actual and potential. The companies knew this, and knew it mattered: there is plenty of evidence of managers struggling to discipline workers so that their behaviour enhanced, or at least did not damage, commercial prospects. For example, pleas for staff to be civil to passengers were commonplace from the early 1920s.

The companies' staff magazines are a way into this semi-official culture, as well as elements of the alternative. These publications were partly a response to the challenge of maintaining managerial control in the changing circumstances of the late-19th and early-20th centuries, one of a range of measures intended to maintain hegemony. But the magazines were not *just* an expression of the corporate line. They were more likely to succeed in developing attitudes broadly compatible with managers' goals if they expressed views which resonated with most workers. Radical opinions were highly unlikely to appear, but dissent that did not challenge fundamentals

such as the managerial prerogative might be tolerated, not least since it might produce potentially useful new ideas; suggestions schemes and their attendant publicity were quite common. Reports of railway debates and lecture societies, letters to the editor, gossip columns, contributed articles, cartoons, short stories and verse, and so on could all express aspects of the wider culture.

In what remains I briefly analyse how gender functioned in the construction of the passenger-as-consumer through the semi-official culture of the largest of the inter-war companies, the London, Midland and Scottish Railway (LMS). The *LMS Magazine* (Fig. 1) was launched in November 1923, less than a year after the company came into existence, and was published monthly until the second world war. Attractively produced, it was sold chiefly to staff through a network (in 1938) of nearly 800 agents at the subsidized price of a penny (with a twopenny edition offering insurance benefits), reaching sales of roughly 70 to 79 thousand in the second half of the 1930s. Readership was then estimated to be about three times this figure, suggesting a coverage of something over three-quarters of the total workforce, assuming that all readers were employees. This was unlikely though, for it is clear (from the contents) that a family audience was an important segment of the readership. The magazine was also sold to members of the public, something that was encouraged in the mid 1930s on the grounds that it would 'enable us to exert that influence to make people rail-minded that is so necessary for the future well-being of every servant of the Company'; 'school boys, university and professional men in all parts of the world' merited particular mention, suggesting both the gendered and class dimensions of this wider audience.

Sheryl Kroen has recently noted the increasing prominence of gender in the political historiography of consumption in the early-20th century, tying this in with the historical emergence of a more 'positive appraisal of the consumer as an active agent of democratization'. This conceptualization of the citizen as essentially – at least in some degree – a consumer represents, she argues, part of the assertion of women's rights to full political, economic and social status. Although, as I have already noted, existing studies suggest that the railway companies' inter-war marketing was increasingly designed to appeal to women, the *LMS Magazine* demonstrated a degree of ambivalence within the company as a whole. Here I focus on the visual evidence.

The magazine did of course carry official images, such as that in Fig. 2, in tune with the marketing line. But it is not surprising, given that the magazine's readership was largely men, to find expressions of male uncertainties in the face of women's growing presence as consumers. Take, for instance, the cartoon in Fig.3, 'Nonplussed!' (August 1928) expressing a sense of male unease at the disruptive effect of women's changing fashions and behaviour on the railways' conventions of social propriety. The magazine was also wont, as in the cartoon 'Management!' (July 1934) (Fig. 4), to draw upon archetypal images of older, grotesque women as representative of domestic authority, an image that was conspicuously absent from the company's graphic advertising. Such women did not even have to make an appearance for their presence to be felt, as Fig. 5 (June 1936) demonstrates.

Even when they were not represented as grotesque, the technological ineptitude of women was a fairly common theme, as in Fig. 6 (September 1937). But the traffic was not all one way. In Fig. 7 (November 1936), the humour turns on the young man's wrongful assumption of his companion's ignorance of railway engineering and operating. In the 1930s the magazine also included several cartoons which drew – usually in a more positive way – upon images of women to connote the desirability of rail travel, either specifically to women or more generally to both sexes. Here I note two categories, the first a series of cartoons (from the same hand, 'Sinton')

depicting the railway carriage as a space permitting a degree of (hetero)sexual licence. This in itself was a fairly well-worn trope, but the degree of control asserted by these self-assured women was perhaps more unusual (Fig. 8, May 1936; Fig. 9 May 1937). The second category employed women to connote the railway's favourable characteristics of, variously, speed, comfort and safety, sometimes by deflating male obsessions with motoring (Fig. 10, September 1935) or, on at least one occasion (Fig. 11, October 1937), by depicting the carriage interior, and more particularly the compartment, as a quasi-domestic space. The latter kind of representation was, of course, scarcely a novelty, and it is arguable that here the cartoonist's rendition of his (I assume – H.C. Walker) three middle-aged characters did more to confirm than challenge a traditional view of women's place in the domestic sphere. Nevertheless, this was one area where semi-official culture clearly echoed that of official marketing.

In sum, the *LMS Magazine* provides evidence that gender was understood within the company in a number of ways, to comprehend both 'the female passenger' as – potentially at least – a consumer of railway travel and the attractions – or otherwise – of railing to a wider market. That these constructions did not always accord with those of the company's marketing suggests that a fruitful line of research would be to explore how the company attempted to control the disjuncture between the messages it wanted to convey and the more complex understandings prevalent within its workforce, and indeed more widely in society. The early signs are that by the mid-to-late 1930s, some at least of the main line companies were treating this kinds of problem with increasing seriousness by way of improved internal communications and a more holistic approach to marketing.

Figure 1



Figure 4



300

Figure 2



Figure 5

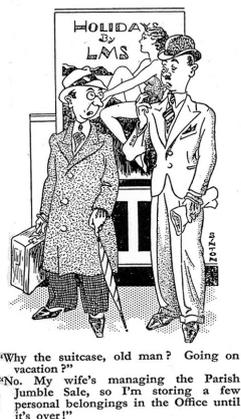


Figure 3



Figure 6

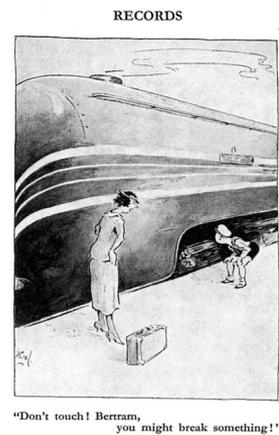
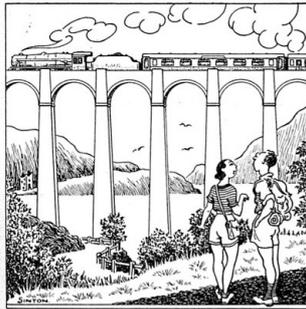


Figure 7



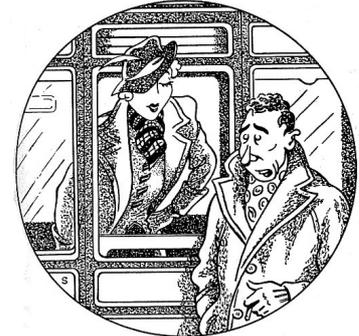
"That must be a good strain on the bridge."
 "Pardon me contradicting you, Edith, but it is quite obviously a passenger one."

Figure 8



He (making final effort to form acquaintance):
 "Pardon me! Did I leave anything behind?"
 She: "You did! A decidedly poor impression."

Figure 9



Him: "What would I have to give you for just one little kiss?"
 Her: "An anaesthetic."

Figure 10



Girl: "Hullo, Mr. Smith, you down here too. How did you come?"
 Smith: "Oh, in my car, of course—fresh air—no smoke or smuts—eh, what?"

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Figure 11

COMFORT



"You see, my husband's so partial to a mantel-shelf."

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CONCLUDING REMARKS

As current debates over the sustainability of Britain's railway franchising system demonstrate, the railways' commercial policies are still affected by the tension between norms of public service and financial imperatives. Franchising is predicated upon a train operating company (TOC) being given commercial freedom regarding matters such as (most) fares and quality of service within a set of very tight constraints (both regulatory and practical) regarding the timetable and, perhaps most importantly of all, the requirement either to return hefty and increasing financial premiums to the Treasury or to require a steadily reducing level of subsidy. There are, of course, many differences between this business structure and that of the inter-war period. Nonetheless, there are significant parallels too.

One is the question of how to protect the consumer. Just as in the inter-war period, a small minority of types of fare is protected by regulation, but the assumption amongst government and regulators is that for the most part consumers' interests are sufficiently protected by the operation of a competitive market, not so much between TOCs (although this does occur on a handful of routes) but with other modes of transport. A direct voice for consumers is therefore not something that is looked upon with much favour in official circles. However, one senior industry journalist has recently remarked that the failure to provide such representation during the franchising process has led to agreements that do not strike a proper balance between the interests of passengers, TOCs and the Treasury. Although there is a government-funded, statutorily independent representative body

(Passenger Focus) operating at the national level, many critics argue that this represents a diminution of the influence of consumers from an alleged heyday in the early days of nationalization. I suspect that 1919-21 was the first time that serious consideration was given to providing consumers with a direct voice in the regulatory machinery. It would therefore be worthwhile to explore the history of consumer representation, both prospective and actual, in more depth for the inter-war years and on into the post-war period, not only to supplement the work of historians of consumerism but also so that the claims of present-day critics might be subject to a more careful appraisal.

The other clear parallel is the issue of aspirational marketing and the consumption of discretionary travel. Techniques such as yield management might well be a comparatively recent innovation in the railway industry, but British railway companies were trying to 'grow the market' well before 1914 by, as Douglas Knoop, an academic contemporary, put matters, reducing fares so as 'to induce people, who would otherwise not do so, to travel by rail, and to encourage such as would travel a little, to travel more'. With this kind of technique the railways were already clearly crossing the permeable, and historically shifting, boundary between the necessitous and aspirational consumption of mobility, and it would be worth while exploring in more depth how this happened and what continuities and ruptures exist between then, the inter-war period and now. We might well be surprised at just how 'modern' not only the inter-war railways but also those of the Edwardian era were in their understanding of the passenger as a consumer of railings.