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British Trains, Cambridge and Nostalgia

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Global Research, February 01, 2018
Region: Europe
Theme: History

This is a different Cambridge. The gowns are gone, banished to a museum of what Britain was. The traffic and pollution have moved in, angry, irritable, uncompromising. Hopping off the train from Kings Cross,London doesn't prepare you for the scene, one facing energetic fumes as disarmed citizens before a gas attack.

Another thing is also striking. The builders, constructors and developers have moved in, adding pudgy monsters of glass and cement, trendy forums for shopping and glitzy arenas for communing. Coffee shops have become colonists, and we are being told that eating in Cambridge has improved.

There is a sense that history has, with its feelers and reminders, caught up. The Scotsman manning a brightly lit bar from yet another new hotel down from the main station is friendly. He exudes a confidence that would make the academics in this city squirm. He is, as it were, not one of them, town, not gown.

This is to the good, if to the good means attributing value to movement, change and momentum. This has not always been the case – coming to this city of the Fens, a place of asylum and refuge from Oxford, is much like venturing to a living archaeological site, with humans still going about their business since time immemorial. Construction and building might be taking place on the perimeter, but the aged interior remains stubbornly intact, a city, as **Matthew Arnold** described, of perspiring dreams.

To be at Cambridge is to swan, squirm and delight in a zoo, an autistic mash, a spectrum patterned delight with people of genius and the occasional charlatan who might, had the occasion arisen, been in prison or some other unfortunate institute at Her Majesty's Pleasure. Britain's political and social genius is to have created an institutional framework for the deranged, the uncomfortable and the awkward, be it the House of Lords or the Oxbridge college system.

Less ingenious has been Britain's now advanced reputation for having an insufferably poor train network, one that butchers time and drains pockets. The culture of train delays, non-appearances and vanishings, is famous. Ian Hislop of the deliciously vituperative *Private Eye*, redoubtable team captain on the quiz show*Have I Got News For You* symbolises the Brit in despair of his country, the sort who goes to a train station sceptical that he will find one.

To find a train in Britain, let alone one that appears and moves, would be tantamount, in Hislop's lethal serve, to finding a thylacine or a dodo. He is the bird watcher who can't find his feathery friends, the gardener despairing at not finding the first, vital blooms of spring.

In 2017, British progressive columnist **Owen Jones** saw the British train system as a means to read the nation.

> "If how the railways run is a guide to the state of a nation, then it tells you something that Britain is in the middle of its biggest railway strike since 1994."

Jones embraces a traditional critique: it all went wrong with the privatisation of the national railway network in 1994 during the John Major government. Since then, debates have raged over all arrangements touching on services from the provision of guards to appropriate standards of safety. Such are the perils, asserts Jones, of "introducing market ideology into key public services".

Even before Major was a certain **Dr. Richard Beeching**, considered something of a "Genghis Khan with a slide rule". In 1963, his report unleashed a ruthless savaging of the nation's railway network, giving pride and place to the car. A third of the lines and stations were closed.

These are extinct beasts, vanished and banished, and Britain, now exiting Europe in stumbling confusion, is better at producing, and reproducing the extinct, as few other cultures. What is dead is bound to be revered; what is glorious is bound to be reconfigured and re-confected.

Even now, with such productions as *Dunkirk* and *Darkest Hour*, we are talking about episodes long past, with figures long dead, who still exert a more realistic pull on citizens than the feasibility of an efficient train network, and much else besides. It remains a point of discomfort, but British writers, intellectuals and politicians waxed lyrically and obscenely about the efforts being made by totalitarian governments through the late 1920s and 1930s on facilitating train travel. A directed economy, in other words, could work wonders.

Interestingly enough, there was no better time to travel by train in Britain than the decade after the conclusion of the First World War. The 1921 Railway Act outlined the objective of a "more efficient and economical working of the railway system of Great Britain".

Train watchers chalk up data on which line is the greatest offender in the punctuality charts. In 2015, the dubious honour went to the 07:29 Brighton to London Victoria as one of the country's worst offenders. During the previous year, the train had failed to make its scheduled time on a single occasion. Added to this the annual increases in fares, it is remarkable that commuters remain, in the main, composed if not resigned to the whole thing.

Little wonder, then, that nostalgia reigns with orb and sceptre over Her Britannic Majesty's lands. Provided the pageants and heraldry are in order, nothing else really matters. There are markets to conquer, new fictional worlds to lay claim to. Britain, whatever it decides to do with citizenry or fictions, will remain totally committed against a functioning, efficient not to mention affordable, train network.

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