



*Britain's Railways in Wartime: The Nation's Lifeline* by Anthony Lambert.

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In *Britain's Railways in Wartime*, journalist, travel writer, and prolific author of railway titles Anthony Lambert presents a concise account of the railway industry's role in both world wars, stressing the scale of the task faced by its managers and employees. The book's accessible chronological narrative conveys the titanic efforts made to keep the wheels of a vital service industry turning under extraordinary pressures.<sup>1</sup>

Each chapter in the book is divided into themes indicated by subtitles. After summarizing in chap. 1 the pre-1914 relationship between railways and warfare, Lambert devotes chapters 2-5 to the activities of the railways and their personnel at home and in overseas theaters of both world wars. Chapter 6, "In Memoriam," describes the pains taken by rail companies and their staffs to commemorate fallen colleagues.

The book's purpose is to prepare the ground for a gazetteer of British railway monuments erected after both wars, as part of the painstaking work by the Railway Heritage Trust to identify, research, catalogue, and sometimes restore extant memorials, several of them little known. Lambert pointedly reminds us that "neither [conflict] could have been won without the railways" (ix); as Britain's principal means of long-distance, bulk transport, the railways were expected to bear much of the logistical burden of making war.

Lambert writes that "the contribution of the railways has often been overlooked in books" (ix). This rings true when considering the extent of the literature analyzing the role of the British railway network during the First World War. Whilst the 1918 Armistice centenary commemorations have generated a plethora of topical books on military activities, there remain few recent authoritative histories on how the British railway network was mobilized for this conflict.<sup>2</sup>

The book spotlights the effect of volunteering for military service on railways in World War I (23), when "the prevailing optimism" that the war would end in 1914 meant "staff losses were immediate and substantial" (25). On the Great Western Railway (GWR) alone, "10.12 percent of the total staff had enlisted" (26). Lambert describes the prejudices and perceived difficulties accompanying the employment of women in male roles and the consequent efforts made to preserve the posts of enlisted railwaymen for their return (30-39). As it adapted to wartime operation, the GWR reduced its annual passenger mileage from 32,419,547 in 1913 to 22,755,883 in 1917 (39).

Due attention is paid to the material assistance given to the military by the construction of ambulance trains and the Military Railways' training of Royal Engineers in railway construction and operation (45-51). We also learn in detail of the efforts made to supply the Grand Fleet at

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1. The book was written with the support of the Railway Heritage Trust, which maintains the British railway network's historic monuments and structures.

2. Lambert is aware of (and duly cites) the major relevant studies: on World War I, respectively, Edwin Pratt, *British Railways and the Great War*, 2 vols. (London: Selwyn and Blount, 1921), and J.A.B. Hamilton, *Britain's Railways in World War 1* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1967). On World War II, Michael Williams's recent, invaluable *Steaming to Victory: How Britain's Railways Won the War* (London: Preface Publ, 2013).

Scapa Flow in the Orkney Islands. Lambert describes the “Jellicoe Trains” that carried coal from the South Wales Coalfield to Grangemouth Dock on the Firth of Forth beginning in August 1914 (66). By February 1917, the Daily Naval Special carried an average of three hundred naval personnel from London to Thurso in ca. twenty-two hours (68).

Lambert also discusses the social impact of the war on railway employees, including its effect on their wages; through a series of pay reviews, the government instituted a War Bonus to keep pace with inflation (55–59). By contrast, he is less thorough on conditions of employment during World War II. Nevertheless, while “there was no immediate exodus of staff” (137), interwar contractions owing to the economic depression caused skilled workers who enlisted to be keenly missed (137). Consequently, “Staff shortages were so severe by May 1942 that the REC [Railway Executive Committee] warned the Ministry of Transport that operating manpower was ‘dangerously weak’” (137) and that workers would not be released without the company’s consent.

The author makes good use of pertinent statistics, as in the following account of the evacuation of the British Expeditionary Force from Dunkirk (26 May 1940):

Between 7 am that day and 4 pm on 4 June, 620 trains carrying 319,056 officers and men left the south-east ports. Ships landed troops at Sheerness, Weymouth and Harwich, as well as the most commonly used ports of Margate (38,000 men, 75 trains plus 21 ambulance trains), Ramsgate (43,000 men, 82 trains), Folkestone (35,000 men, 64 trains) and Dover (200,000 men, 327 trains). The peak days were 31 May (107 trains) and 1 June (110 trains), and Folkestone presented the greatest operating problem with the 1 in 30 gradient up from Harbour station, requiring three locomotives. (109)

The book’s narrative style reflects its material: chiefly photographs, contemporary publications, and administrative documents in the National Archives, Kew. Lambert also draws on periodicals like *Railway Magazine* and *Railway Review*, as well as publications of the railway companies themselves.<sup>3</sup> The First World War chapters feature prodigious use of minutes of meetings of government officials, company managers, and REC members. But this top-down perspective glosses over the lived experience of the war, especially as glimpsed in contemporary local journalism. Though personal testimony is mostly confined to official sources, Lambert does tell tales of individual heroism, including Elizabeth May Owen’s rescue of six women when her ship, the GWR steamer *St. Patrick*, was bombed and sunk in the Irish Sea on 13 June 1941 (141).

Lambert correctly observes that many government departments failed to work coherently to prepare the railways for war in 1939 (99–101), but non-railway sources, for instance on the official history of food distribution during World War II,<sup>4</sup> shed more light on behind-the-scenes planning. Furthermore, the author gives short shrift to the interruption and delay of the London & North Eastern Railway’s Woodhead electrification scheme between Manchester and Sheffield and the Southern Railway’s proposed Kent Coast electrification.

The book’s two short chapters on the experience of railway workers in theaters of conflict seem out of place in a study overwhelmingly focused on the home front. Their inclusion gives context to chap. 6 but contradicts Lambert’s claim that his book “is not about the way railways became part of the strategy or tactics of military campaigns” (ix). That said, when the railways are

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3. E.g., Bernard Darwin, *War on the Line* (London: Southern Railway, 1946), and Robert Bell, *History of the British Railways during the War, 1939–45* (London: Railway Gazette, 1946).

4. Viz., R.J. Hammond, *History of the Second World War: Food*, 3 vols. (London: HMSO, 1951–62).

considered a part of a longer supply chain, it is easy to see how events in France and elsewhere might have an impact upon the domestic situation.

*Britain's Railways in Wartime* will engage and inform readers desiring a good general history of Britain's railways during the world wars. Academics will value the book for its range of sources, even though its subject matter has been treated elsewhere. In sum, Anthony Lambert provides a timely reminder that both the military repurposing of railways and war memorialization are subjects ripe for further research, analysis, and discussion.