



'The laying of tramlines.' Photograph by Trevallyn, c1910.

QUEEN VICTORIA MUSEUM AND ART GALLERY, LAUNCESTON

## CHAPTER 33

# TRANSPORT

P. RIMMER

DISTANCE AND ITS implacable foe—efficient transport—have been elevated by Geoffrey Blainey (1982) to a pivotal position in explaining Australian history. His study discusses both the effects of isolation during the long era when the country was reliant on sailing ships and bullock carts and the arrival of various forms of mechanical transport—steamships, railways, aircraft and motor cars. It is still the best interpretative account of a subject that has always been full of the 'romance' of Australian transport and neglected the hardships of sailors, bullockies, camel drivers, railwaymen, seamen, aviators and truck drivers. Blainey has been at pains, however, to emphasise that climate, resources, European ideas, wars, markets and money were also important factors in shaping Australian history. Nevertheless, the subsequent preoccupation with distance 'measured along Euclidean lines with Cartesian references' has had a numbing rather than a liberating effect on later writers (P. O'Sullivan, 'Issues in transportation', in R. Davies and P. Hall eds, *Issues in urban society*, Harmondsworth, England, Penguin, 1978, 106). Accepting the obstacle of distance as theory rather than hypothesis, studies in the field have either continued their romantic attachment or contracted into dry technical accounts which take the immediately given as the real, with little sense of where Australia has been or where it might be going.

The transport literature of Australia has been grouped under three headings: *international*, involving movements of people and goods originating or terminating in Australia; *domestic long-distance*, involving interregional movements of people and goods within and between states; and *urban*, involving movements of people and goods within cities.

Political decisions have been important not only in locating transport facilities and offering them for use but in influencing decisions as to whether and how intensively the facilities will be used. The degree of autonomous government control over the location and pace of transport development, as highlighted by N.G. Butlin (1964) and P.J. Rimmer (1975), provides strong contrasts with British and American free market experiences. Therefore, much of the raw material for examining changes in transport patterns of interest and the associated progressive evaluation of the investment environment, differing appraisals of resources and regional potential, variations in leadership (people and places) and permutations in administrative and institutional structures, have to be distilled from debates, messages, reports and royal commission findings. While it does not necessarily follow that what happened is recorded in parliamentary papers, the usefulness of any publication on Australian transport depends on the writer's skill in sifting the documentary evidence—agendas and accompanying papers, minutes, maps and

photographs—to unravel events and ideas and determine how key bureaucrats, politicians and petitioners conceived and made use of space.

Government reports on transport problems occur frequently in Australian parliamentary papers or as separate documents. Some help in tracing them can be found in D.H. Borchardt's, *Checklist of royal commissions, select committees of parliament and boards of inquiry* (see chapter 8).

As transport periodicals are, for the most part, strictly for buffs or overly technical, the reader can easily become stranded. A list of major serial transport publications will be found at the end of the reading list to this topic.

Readers may be assisted in interpreting the literature by recognising five phases in the development of the transport system, linked with the introduction of technological innovations. These innovations are associated with radical restructuring of the economic geography at different scales brought about by major crises in the world economy: 1840s, 1890s, 1930s and 1970s. Each technological innovation resulted in the downgrading in importance of the previous dominant mode of transport and its relegation to peripheral locations within the respective international, long-distance or urban spheres of circulation.

### INTERNATIONAL CONNECTIONS

Overseas shipping studies from the arrival of the first fleet until the recession of the 1840s are often dated but their language and illustrations are sufficient to confirm that the large wooden sailing ships were symbols of British authority. Although the gold-seeking passengers brought in the fast American clippers after 1850 challenged this authority, writers emphasise the British hegemony despite the repeal of the Navigation Acts, and the progressive granting of self-rule to individual colonies. British dominance was reinforced not by the unpredictable steamers carrying affluent passengers and mails via Suez but by sailing ships. The distances between coaling stations ensured that the Australian route was a step behind in technological innovation. After the recession of the 1890s contemporary observers were quick to note that the switchover to the new breed of fuel-efficient steamships and the subsequent downgrading of sailing ships as carriers of wheat, coal and timber seemed to endorse the Mother Country's stranglehold over Australia in perpetuity as the colonies were slow to perceive the worldwide decline in British maritime supremacy.

Australia slipped from an exclusive British sphere into an Anglo-American trading orbit after the recession of the 1930s. Commentators have stressed, however, that the promised savings to consignors from greater use of the Suez and Panama canals and technological innovations (larger ships, and oil and diesel fuel) did not materialise because of the influence of the cartel-like activities of the British liner conference and recurrent labour strife on the Australian waterfront. Since the recession of the early 1970s it is clear that the switch to container, bulk and semibulk ships and automated handling gear has stifled the threat of organised labour. Australian trade has now diversified but two policy issues have arisen as the conference system is still in place: how does the liner conference system affect the welfare of Australian shippers and what share of the trade should be carried in Australian-owned vessels? As yet, air transport technology has not developed to the extent that it can be a strong competitor for cargoes carried by sea, although there is renewed interest in using large freight-carrying airships.

Overseas air transport studies have highlighted the Australian contribution to the pioneering of international aviation after 1900 though Lawrence Hargrave's work on the theory of flight occurred before that date. Nevertheless, there has been some feeling that the daring exploits of local aviators, such as Harry Hawker, Bert Hinkler, Ray Parer, Charles Ulm and Charles Kingsford Smith, have been overglamorised despite Smithy's role in pioneering the Kangaroo route to London. Regular flights for passengers and mails along the route did not begin until the 1930s when W. Hudson Fysh and Qantas Empire Airways were at the forefront. They were, however, not commonplace until after World War II when commentators noted that the national carrier, Qantas, and other airlines had eroded the market for passenger liners. Since 1970, Qantas's newly acquired jumbo fleet has had to face competition from southeast Asian airlines,

prompting it to adopt discounts to offset fare cutting and seasonal fares to counter the north-south imbalance, and to suggest that it should control long-distance air routes within Australia—an issue that has yet to be resolved.

#### DOMESTIC LONG-DISTANCE TRANSPORT

The key to understanding the evolution of the system of transport and its alter ego, landuse, within Australia is to be conscious of the multiple ripple effect on its economic landscape of successive technological innovations. Australia's transport-landuse system reflects, as P.A. Baran and P.M. Sweezy have noted in their monograph *Monopoly capital* (New York, Monthly Review Press, 1966), the impact of 'epoch-making innovations' that have 'each produced a radical alteration of economic geography with attendant internal migration and the building of new communities'. Conflicts caused by externally induced innovations are usually only partially resolved by internal responses before they are superseded by another innovation—the contemporary restructuring since 1970 prompted by the introduction of container ships and jumbo jets being the last in a series that has affected Australia.

Literature on the transport-landuse system, designed originally to serve an experimental convict settlement based on Sydney and its satellites, is scanty. Much reliance was placed on the 'saltwater highway' in transforming it into a permanent white settler society because bullock drays on the embryonic road system were expensive. As pastoral activities expanded until the 1840s writers emphasised that inland transport costs were a constraining but not a limiting factor.

Bullock drays and horse-drawn coaches were pushed into peripheral locations during the restructuring that followed the recession and a burgeoning literature stressed the development of the railway—a major weapon used by newly created colonial governments in the aftermath of the gold discoveries to relieve Britain of 'capital glut' and labour, and stimulate internal trade at the expense of adjacent colonies. Individual writers (Butlin, 1964; Rimmer, 1977, 1980) have focused on the debates involving animal or steam power, private or public enterprise, and British or American locomotives and gauges, and have noted the triumph of steam, the dominance of British techniques (at least temporarily) and universal government ownership. They show how 'octopus' trunk lines from major ports spread to transport passengers and goods carried previously by road, river and coastal shipping to sate the desires of log-rolling politicians and their business supporters (pastoralists, merchants and equipment suppliers). From the 1880s the rational arguments of influential bureaucrats took second place to the insatiable desire for grabbing the land value increments of rail development, so it was not surprising that the construction fuelled by massive borrowings from London was an early and major victim of the recession of the 1890s.

The subsequent restructuring has led many authors (for example, Wettenhall, 1961) into describing how the states of the newly formed commonwealth sought to professionalise their large-scale railway bureaucracies and yet still satisfy the closer settlement and branch line ambitions of the political masters. They also discuss how the federal government sought after World War I to unify the mainland states into a cohesive whole by interconnecting the disparate railway systems and upgrading interstate coastal shipping connections. As many writers acknowledge (for example, Butlin *et al*, 1982) these immediate developments to promote economic growth overshadowed the introduction of the motor vehicle. At first, given the condition of the roads, it seemed an unlikely threat to the railway monopoly serving long-distance passenger and goods traffic that was fed into terminals by horse-drawn vehicles. By the late 1920s, however, there was clamour from the state railways for protection against motor buses and motor trucks as they were siphoning off the most lucrative traffic.

As is evident from some of the commentators (for example, Butlin *et al*, 1982; Kolsen, 1968) on the recession of the 1930s and later years, restructuring of the transport-landuse system revolved around the increased use of the motor vehicle and the growth of the domestic airline industry. This was especially true after World War II with the development of an integrated national market based on improved road and air connections. Although controls over buses and trucks were maintained to protect state railways, the finding that the regulation of interstate road

transport was contrary to the Australian constitution prompted its expansion. These developments galvanised the railways into gauge standardisation and the greater use of diesel engines, and coastal shipping into introducing roll-on roll-off and container ships. This modernisation program enabled them to maintain their position as carriers of bulky goods but the mass consumption of the motor car drove rail and shipping into residual passenger markets. Much long-distance business and leisure travel, however, became the preserve of the artificial monopoly operated by the two major domestic airlines—the commonwealth government's Trans Australia Airlines (TAA—renamed Australian Airlines in 1986) and the private carrier Ansett Airlines of Australia—as the result of takeovers and deals designed to maintain the financial stability of trunk services.

### URBAN TRANSPORT

Most writers emphasise that ports preceded cities. Until the 1850s, therefore, attention is focused on the settlements built around the wharves and cargo-handling facilities, except for a couple of decades when pastoralism held sway. The major port towns developed into capitals or provincial cities but most journeys involved walking, bicycling or horse-drawn coaches, buses or trams until the 1890s. Although there were urban spinoffs from long-distance trains, mechanised transport did not really begin until the 1880s with the development of the steam tram in Sydney and the cable tram in Melbourne; by then their respective populations had exceeded 250 000.

After the recession of the 1890s, commentators, such as Spearritt (1978), point to rising city populations and the progressive spread of tramways and suburban railways (facilitated in Sydney by the Harbour Bridge) to meet the needs of shoppers attracted by Central Business District merchandise, and workers and shippers attracted by the development of manufacturing. The latter activity was also reflected in the expansion of port capacity and the replacement of horse-drawn vehicles by motorised transport. As competition from private buses in the late 1920s threatened the financial viability of both suburban railways and trams, the state governments, fearing the clout of organised labour, took over their urban activities as part of what has been termed a transport co-ordination program—though most economists suggest 'restraint on competition' as the more appropriate appellation.

Analysts have highlighted that after the recession of the 1930s, transport co-ordination led to increased investment in fixed track and bus systems. Any benefits were shortlived as pressures from the motor vehicle lobby gathered momentum because road construction was part of unemployment relief and the motor vehicle a key prop in an import-substitution manufacturing program. The development of Australia's own car after World War II led to the progressive decline of public transport despite the growth in population fuelled by immigration. During the 'long boom' (1950–70) the expanding car population prompted the removal of trams (except in Melbourne) and economic growth objectives overrode environmental sensibilities to noise and pollution generated by new transport routes and terminals. Nevertheless, the congestion phobia was sufficient to spawn a series of transport-landuse plans for major urban areas. They recommended a dose of freeways which, together with seaports, promised to resolve such side-effects of accelerated economic growth.

Commentators on the aftermath of the recession of the early 1970s and the accompanying energy crisis have drawn attention to the disadvantages of the growth-at-all-costs urban transport-landuse policy, particularly air and noise pollution and community severance effects (Black *et al.*, 1983). This new consciousness led to the termination of many radial freeway dreams, the appearance of the 'save public transport' lobby and an attack on extravagant overinvestment in new airport and seaport facilities to accommodate jumbo jets and container ships. Some social scientists, moreover, argue that there is a need to go beyond the economists' agenda and explore the transport-related aspects of urban unemployment and the marginalisation of subgroups such as the housebound, young people, migrants and the semiskilled.

The assistance received from Barbara Banks, John Black, Gwen Carroll, Joh Forsyth and Howard Quinlan in compiling the bibliography is acknowledged.

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Air route map, Victoria to Tasmania, prepared by Matthews Aviation Pty Ltd, Melbourne, c1935.

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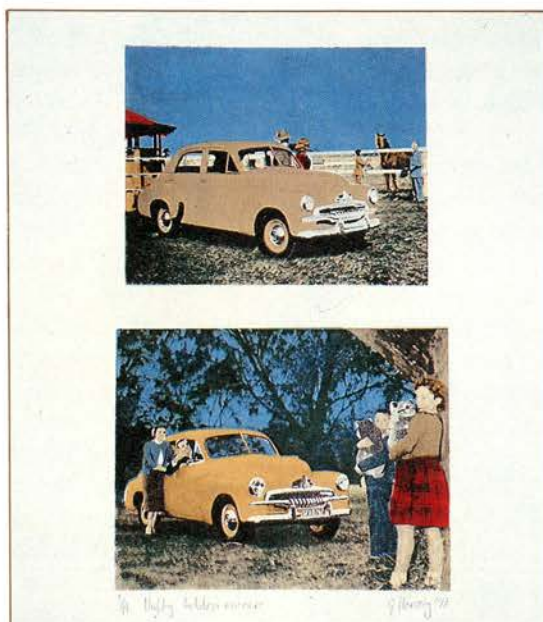
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Geoffrey Harvey (b Australia 1954), Happy Holden owners, 1977. Colour screenprint on paper, 35.4 x 21.8 cm. Harvey recognises and satirises the importance of the Holden in Australian life.

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through the horse-bus industry and trams to the Eastern Suburbs railway, motor vehicles, the journey to work, and Sydney's wharves.

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