

## 2.0 PEOPLING AUSTRALIA

The key connections between this theme and the railways are through Indigenous and migrant involvement. Migrants were active in shaping our early railways, translating their ideas and traditions to a new Australian environment, while there were both direct and indirect impacts by railways on Aboriginal individuals and communities. These interactions are described under this theme.

### 2.1 Aboriginal cultures and interactions with other cultures

#### 2.1.1 Railway Impacts on Aborigines

The limited recording of how railways impacted on indigenous people from their perspective makes a balanced perspective difficult to assess. There are some reports by Europeans of Aboriginal responses to the arrival of railways in their territory, although such accounts invariably attribute different cultural perspectives to these responses. The grand ceremony held at **Dubbo** to mark the extension of the **Great Western Railway** to that centre on 1 February 1881, for instance, was also marked by the last Corroborees held by the local Aboriginal tribes – one being held at Dundullimal and another at Brocklehurst – on the eve of the opening.<sup>1</sup>

Railways also had a role in implementing the biological assimilation policies that emerged in the 20<sup>th</sup> century to ensure that 'all persons of Aboriginal blood or mixed blood in Australia will live like White Australians do.'<sup>2</sup> The NSW Aboriginal Protection Board was empowered to prescribe the residence of Aborigines, determine the conditions of employment, control marriage and cohabitation and assume custody of children. The managers the Board employed at the various Aboriginal reserves in rural areas enforced strict segregation of their charges. They decided if Aborigines could travel, purchased their tickets, took them to the station just before the train arrived and ensured that they were seated in a special compartment set aside for them.

In implementing these policies, numbers of Aboriginal children living on reserves in country areas were forcibly removed from their families and sent to special homes. Train travel by Aborigines was essentially segregated. Their ability to travel elsewhere was restricted, and where travel was approved, the Reserve Manager made the bookings for the train, restricted their presence on the platform until shortly before departure of the train and then placed them in a separate booked compartment. To the Aboriginal community at Narromine, the rail motor which ran twice weekly from that town over the Federation Line to Cootamundra and return was a symbol of fear and oppression because: 'It took our girls away to the girl's home there.'<sup>3</sup>

#### 2.1.2 Employment of Aborigines

While it was generally seen as a huge industrial enterprise with a work culture very different to that of Aborigines, certain aspects of railway work attracted Aborigines in significant numbers. This was particularly true for fitters, who were responsible for maintaining the track. Gangs of five men under the supervision of a ganger were allocated a section of track to maintain (13 miles for pioneer lines for instance). They lived in isolated camps and undertook hard physical labour replacing worn sleepers and rails, and shovelling ballast. Don Crowther, a ganger at Spring Ridge, recalls that: '*There were a lot of men of Aboriginal descent in the gangs I knew. I found them all good workers and good men to get on with.*'<sup>4</sup>

#### 3.1.2 Servicing the pastoral industry

As described under the **Pastoralism** theme (3.1), the role of railways in transporting fencing materials for pastoralists to enclose and sub-divide their runs in the 1870s-80s had an indirect impact on Aborigines. This greatly reduced the need for shepherds and other labourers, and particularly impacted on Aborigines who had who had assisted

1 Dormer, Marion, *Dubbo to the turn of the century, 1818-1900*, Dubbo, Macquarie Publications, 1981, p.100.

2 Macintyre, Stuart, *A Concise History of Australia*, Oakleigh, Oxford University Press, 1999, pp. 144-5, 186, 220.

3 McKillop, RF, 'Narromine: a railway history', *ARHS Bulletin*, Vol. 48, No. 711, January 1997, pp. 3-22.

4 Don Crother, interview at Werris Creek, 18 July 2003.

graziers to maintain their runs following their loss of workers during the gold rushes.<sup>5</sup> Employment on the railways as members of the track gangs that maintained the NSW railway network offered a new employment opportunity.



*A ganger and fettlers head off to their track maintenance tasks on the Broken Hill line (State Library of NSW, At Work and Play 00717).*

## 2.2 Migration – Migrant labour

### 2.2.1 Migrants as railway promoters and managers

The men who promoted the first railways in the colony and those who designed, constructed and managed the railways during their formative years were nearly all migrants from Britain or Ireland and, as such, they brought experience and values from their respective cultural backgrounds.

The men who established the **Sydney Railway Company** in 1849 were predominantly migrants. For instance, the English-born **Charles Cowper**, who came to NSW as a young man, was the leading figure in the establishment of the Sydney Railway Company from 1848 and gave strong support for expansion of the railways during four terms as Premier.<sup>6</sup> More significantly, the first engineer of the company was **Francis Webb Shields**, an Irishman who had worked with Charles Vignoles on several railway construction projects in England before migrating to Sydney in 1842-43. Vignoles was a supporter of a wider gauge than the 'coal cart gauge' of 4ft 8½in.<sup>7</sup>

Although the Secretary for Colonies, Earl Grey, had sent a dispatch to the Governor in 1846 advising that the 'standard gauge' of 4ft 8½in be adopted by the Australian colonies, Shields believed a wider gauge was required for the new railway. Initially he suggested a gauge of 5ft 6in, but he changed this to the 'Irish gauge' of 5ft 3in in March 1850 and this was adopted by the company. Earl Grey agreed to this gauge on 14 January 1851 and the administrations in Victoria and South Australia adopted this gauge for their railways. Following the resignation of Shields in December 1850, James Wallace was recruited in England to take on the position of engineer. By August 1852 Wallace was recommending to the board that the gauge be changed to 4ft 8½in

5 McKillop, Robert F, *Into the Golden West: the McKillops of Buddah 1782 to 1974*, Castlecrag, MWA International, 2007, pp. 37-38, 57-58, 63, 72-73, 75, 81, 90.

6 John M. Ward, 'Cowper, Sir Charles (1807 - 1875)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Volume 3, [Melbourne University Press](http://www.melbourne.edu.au), 1969, pp 475-479.

7 Hagarty, Don, *Sydney Railway Company 1848-1857*, Sydney, ARHS/NSW Division, 2005, pp. 57-64, 81.

and on 8 September he formally wrote to the board requesting a revision of the Act that had fixed the gauge of railways in Australia at 5ft 3in. The NSW government responded to this request in January 1853 and the Sydney line was constructed to this gauge, while those in Victoria and South Australia were constructed the 5ft 3in gauge. The Australian **gauge problem** had been created.<sup>8</sup>

The other great issue confronting early railway policy concerned the standard to which the lines should be constructed and the central player in this debate was the Engineer-in-Chief, **John Whitton**. On arrival in Sydney in 1856, Whitton was immediately enmeshed in a controversial proposal by the Governor-General, Sir William Denison, to terminate the steam railways at Campbelltown, Penrith and Lochinvar and to continue the lines as cheaply constructed horse tramways. Whitton strongly opposed this and other similar proposals on the grounds that such systems would entail high operating and maintenance costs. Although obliged to compromise on the standards of his trunk railways for financial reasons, Whitton triumphed in his arguments for the use of steam railways.<sup>9</sup> His obstinate faith in British railway standards and workmanship was, however, to be a future barrier to the adoption of American technology in later years.



**Francis Shields** (ARHS Rail Resource Centre).



**Sir Charles Cowper**, Premier and railway promoter (State Library of NSW: GPO 1 - 18417).

### 2.2.2 Using migrant labour for railway construction

The colony's first railways were built at a time of extreme labour shortages as the gold rushes had drawn many men away in search of quick fortunes. Accordingly the Sydney Railway Company brought 500 experienced railway workers (or '**navvies**') from Britain to undertake the work. The first shipment (120 single men and 47 married men and their families) arrived in the emigrant ship *David McIvor* on 25 August 1853. Similarly 410 navvies were recruited by **William Randle** and William Wright for construction work on the Newcastle to Maitland railway in 1855.<sup>10</sup>

8 Hagarty, Don, 2005, pp. 141, 148.

9 Lee, Robert, *Colonial Engineer: John Whitton and the Building of Australia's Railways*, Sydney, ARHS/NSW Division, 2005, pp. 95-119.

10 Hagarty, Don, 2005, pp. 293-306; McKillop, Robert F, *Our Region, Our Railway: The Hunter and the Great Northern Railway 1857-2007*, Sydney, ARHS/NSW Division, pp. 15-16.

While the continuing influx of migrants after the 1850s meant that labour shortages eased and recruitment of navvies from Britain was no longer required, newly arrived migrants continued to make up the bulk of the workforce employed in railway construction works. Moreover, the majority of the contractors who employed them were themselves immigrants. The first contractor, William Randle, accompanied William Wallace on his journey from England, while the large English contracting firm of Peto, Brassey & Betts was engaged to take on the next construction phase. Following their withdrawal, English migrants such as William Watkins, Daniel Williams and George Blunt, took on the task of extending the NSW railway network.

### 3.8.4 Maintaining the railways

From the early 1950s, European **migrants** were employed by the NSW Railways in large numbers, chiefly in maintenance tasks such as track gangs and carriage cleaners.

### 2.2.3 Moving migrants inland

To cope with the huge influx of migrants from war-ravaged Britain and Europe from 1947, former army camps at Anvil Creek near Greta, Bathurst, Cowra and at Bonegilla on the Murray River near Albury-Wodonga were converted to reception and training centres for the new arrivals. Their first experience of Australia after disembarking from ships in Sydney Harbour were of waiting for trains on the cavernous concourse at Central Station and the train journey through harsh and unfamiliar landscapes to the camps. Herman and Geesje Blom, who arrived in 1958, recalled the 10-hour train and bus trip to Bonegilla as a nightmare:

They put us on a train which was very old-fashioned. They had placed some benches in the carriages. When we looked out of the window, the landscape seemed dry with dead sheep, dead cows and dead trees everywhere.<sup>11</sup>

Construction of the huge **Snowy Mountains Scheme** from 1949, the largest engineering project ever undertaken in Australia, provided a major source of employment for the post-war migrants. Overall 100,000 people worked on the Scheme between 1949 and 1974, two-thirds of them being migrants from more than 30 countries. The Goulburn to Cooma railway line became the lifeline for the Scheme, with passenger trains transporting the workers and their families to and from Cooma.



*The Canberra-Monaro Express at Cooma station in 1955. The large numbers of travellers to and from Cooma for the Snowy Mountains Scheme resulted in the introduction of this air-conditioned diesel train (National Archives of Australia: A11016, 6802B).*

11 Dirk and Marijke Eysbertse (eds), *Bonegilla: where waters meet – the Dutch migrant experience in Australia*, Melbourne, Erasmus Foundation, 2006.