Open Library of Humanities

Railways, Disjointed Mobility, and National Decline: Navigating George Chesney's 'The Battle of Dorking'

Alicia Barnes

This article thinks through the imagined impact of railway collapse in George Chesney's short story 'The Battle of Dorking' (1871). By interrogating the representation of railway infrastructure and mobilities in the first example of invasion-scare fiction, it reads a conflation between nation, empire, and railway network, materially and symbolically. Noting the dependence on railway networks for national and imperial organization by the later decades of the nineteenth century, this reading shows that the invasion anxiety that surfaced in these decades unsettled presumptions around railway superiority and highlighted the political nature of railway construction, operation, and organization.

Over the course of the nineteenth century, railway networks became integral to the conceptualization and expansion of nations and empires, in particular, the British. While originally designed for the efficient transportation of raw materials, often exploited from colonies and other imperial territories, to and from manufacturing centres, railways soon demonstrated their effectiveness for the movement and organization of people. Early debates around the effects of railways often focused on their ability to alter relationships between existing communities, both nationally and internationally. The promise of a well-connected nation after the railway mania of the 1840s prompted renegotiations in national identity, as the technological modernity that railways signalled became symbolic of Britain's industrial superiority, while also suggesting the loss of what was imagined to be a more authentic, pre-industrial Britain. Nevertheless, by the 1870s, the rail network in Britain was nearing completion, connecting all major cities with thousands of miles of branch lines expanding into localities across the country.[1] Railways had become necessary for the daily operations of Britain, through the movement of people, the carriage of post and news, distributing communications, and of course, the movement of manufactured goods and raw materials that sustained much of its economy.

It was only now that the network was so extensive, and so vital to everyday life, that the dependence on a fully operational rail network then exposed a vulnerability. Were the network to break down, the nation would grind to a halt. Of course, there had been anxieties around railway construction and railway transportation voiced in the public sphere since before the Liverpool and Manchester line opened in September 1830. In some early cases landowners, in particular, protested against railway construction for fear it would devalue their property, destroy crops and petrify livestock, and eradicate local relations. It soon became clear, though, that it would be far worse to be left off the network: cut off from faster transportation and communication, places that actively resisted rail construction might suffer from redirected economies.[2] What would it mean later in the century, then, when national and imperial organization depended on railway mobility and communication, and when many of Britain's imperial competitors had also constructed their own networks, if Britain's railways were to stop working?[3] As transportation and communication technologies developed alongside the railway, and in conjunction with the expanding British Empire, many commented on the new pace of life that seemed to characterize modernity. Indeed, as Alison Byerly notes, 'By the end of the century, novelists would use the railway as both example of, and metaphor

---

[1] Jack Simmons, *The Railway in Town and Country, 1830–1914* (London: David and Charles, 1986), p. 312.

[2] Articles such as 'Report on the Hull and Selby Railway', published in *Herapath's Railway Magazine*, 7 (1835), 202–07, exemplify this argument: 'Nor is it likely that those most concerned in the welfare of Selby will oppose such a measure, for it is not perhaps predicting too much to say that the trade of Selby will ultimately be benefited. If that town had the power, and were disposed to exercise it, of entirely stopping the proposed work, the effect would be to force the Railway and the trade in another direction, by which Selby would evidently be the loser' (p. 206).

[3] Harry Hearder, *Europe in the Nineteenth Century, 1830–1880*, 2nd edn (New York: Longman, 1988), p. 80.

for, the increasing interrelatedness and complexity of life [...] and the endless pressure for improved communication.'[4] Although necessarily part of wider and varied networks that facilitated national and imperial organization, it was the (functioning) railway that epitomized modernity and the modern nation.

This article thinks through the imagined impact of railway collapse in George Chesney's 'The Battle of Dorking' (1871), a short story credited as the first piece of invasion-scare fiction. I demonstrate that railway organization in Chesney's text is perceived as necessary for national functioning, and thus integral for wider imperial operations in the nineteenth century. I show that the invasion anxiety that permeated much popular culture in the later decades of the nineteenth century unsettled presumptions around railway superiority and highlighted the deeply political impacts of railway infrastructure, organization, and operation.

Modern warfare, nations, and empires

The outcome of the Franco-Prussian War (1870−71) was an unexpected shock to many contemporary observers. 'Together with Prussia's defeat of the Austrian empire in 1866,' Michael Brown writes, 'this remarkable victory convinced many that the equilibrium of power on the Continent had shifted, due in no small part to Prussia's superior military leadership, organization and use of technologies such as railways.'[5] While Britain had initiated railway construction four decades previously, the great powers of Europe had soon created their own networks and were beginning to catch up with Britain's impressive mileage. From the mid-century these networks quickly proved their military worth: from quashing potential Chartist uprisings, transporting armies and supplies during the Crimean War (1853−56), mobilizing troops in India during the Rebellion (1857), their use and strategic wholesale destruction in the American Civil War (1861−65) and the Franco-Prussian War, all attested to the new role railways would play in modern warfare.[6] In Europe in particular, the established rail networks across the Continent meant that 'when the great powers did fight [it was with] a new speed and smaller armies. [...] The concentration on the building of strategic railways testified to the importance generally accorded to speed of mobilization.'[7] Indeed, as General Moltke shaped the Prussian strategy throughout the Franco-Prussian War, he ordered, 'Build no more fortresses, build railways.'[8]

---

[4] Alison Byerly, *Are We There Yet?: Virtual Travel and Victorian Realism* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013), p. 190.

[5] Michael Brown, 'Cold Steel, Weak Flesh: Mechanism, Masculinity and the Anxieties of Late Victorian Empire', *Cultural and Social History*, 14 (2017), 155–81 (p. 159).

[6] Edward M. Spiers, *Engines for Empire: The Victorian Army and its Use of Railways* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015), pp. 37, 47, 57–58.

[7] F. R. Bridge and Roger Bullen, *The Great Powers and the European States System, 1814–1914*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 8.

[8] Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space, 1880–1918* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 269.

The significance of railways during the Franco-Prussian War did not go unnoticed. According to an 1873 lecture on the war by Captain C. E. Luard of the Royal Engineers, railways directly contributed to France's defeat, not just through the Prussians' superior utilization of them, but also through the French's poor railway strategy: in their attempt to 'save time by combining mobilization and concentration, massive confusion ensued'. 'The French sent everybody [via the railway] labelled *á Berlin*', which resulted in mayhem when they reached the terminus of the line. The lessons in effective martial railway operation were to be learnt from the Prussians, whose 'organization appears to have been more perfect throughout [...] and the results were consequently more successful'.[9] In general the war led many to reassess Britain's state security, with renewed concern especially around the vulnerability of railways. This was due in no small part to the ongoing projections for an underwater railway line connecting Britain to mainland Europe, which would require extensive defence so as not to 'impair the insular position of Great Britain'.[10] Connecting the British rail network with the Continent would provide definitive access to this vital national resource, and earlier anxieties that 'feared that the railway could be turned into a "weapon of offence by an enterprising enemy"', resurfaced (Spiers, pp. 26, 24). This is a fear that Chesney extrapolates.

It was not an unfounded fear; the British had direct experience in using railways to subjugate and control populations, both through martial operations and economic hegemony.[11] By the 1870s Britain had constructed an extensive national rail network, as shown in 'Bradshaw's New Map of the Railways in Great Britain' (*Fig. 1*). Passengers could now legitimately experience the railway as a great connector, where they had the potential to 'join the railway at any station and travel to any other node on a national grid'.[12] The network now connected, and in turn gave access to, the nation. Seemingly from any station, any passenger could travel throughout Britain, which both exemplified the 'political freedoms' that allegedly characterized the modern nation and prompted desperate fears around the anonymity of the travelling public.[13] Though the network could imaginatively be conceived of as an unbroken whole, in reality the numerous private companies operating various lines throughout the network meant that it was never a single entity. Nevertheless, as Figure 1 shows, the extent of the network and the

---

[9] Spiers, p. 57; Captain C. E. Luard, 'Field Railways, and Their General Application in War', *Journal of the Royal United Services Institution*, 17 (1873), 693–724 (p. 701).

[10] Keith Wilson, *Channel Tunnel Visions, 1850–1945: Dreams and Nightmares* (London: Hambledon, 1994), p. 18.

[11] From the mid-1840s, Britain had been building strategic railways in India, with a determined push for more construction to aid with policing efforts after the Indian Rebellion. Railways were also being built across the Canadian and Australian territories, as well as throughout South America. See Robert Lee, 'Potential Railway World Heritage Sites in Asia and the Pacific', *Working Papers in Railway Studies*, 5 (1999), 13–28.

[12] Nicola Kirkby, 'British Railway Infrastructure and the Novel, 1850–1910' (unpublished doctoral thesis, King's College London, 2017), p. 19. See also, Nicholas Faith, *The World the Railways Made* (London: Head of Zeus, 2014), p. 32.

[13] Ian Carter, *Railways and Culture in Britain: The Epitome of Modernity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), p. 16; Byerly, p. 25.

intersecting trunk and branch lines facilitated national mobility with varying degrees of ease. As an extensive national network of public transportation, the railway could both contain and represent the nation. It was this imagined open accessibility and influence throughout almost all areas of national operation that prompted concern. Britain's internal transportation, communication, and industries had become reliant on a well-connected, functioning rail network.

Fig. 1: 'Bradshaw's New Map of the Railways in Great Britain' (Manchester: Blacklock, 1872).

Railway infrastructure involves a complex matrix of social and physical elements: from the lines of track, stations, signalling systems, and engines themselves, to the company organization, scheduled timetables, flows of passengers and workers, thinking through railways demands an awareness of multiple coexistent and often competing components. These also involve necessarily stationary parts to facilitate the mobility of locomotives and carriages. Wolfgang Schivelbusch's seminal work, *The Railway Journey*, outlines what he calls the 'machine ensemble', that is not just the various parts of railway engineering that are directly involved with producing railway mobility, but also the wider pieces of the network that facilitate the use of railways, such as access to and from railway stations, signage within railway space, and telegraph wires that helped develop safety and signalling systems along lines.[14] Because of this wide array of necessary parts that influence railway organization and the individual's ability to use the railway, many critics have noted how railways are inherently political: varying levels of access to the space and mobility offered by railway transportation designates some with more autonomy than others. Passengers must fit their journeys around the scheduled timings, routes, and stopping points of rail travel, while also navigating a public space that outlined explicit class differences.

Infrastructure is integral to the functioning of both a nation and empire, and is thus adopted in later nineteenth-century literature to help imagine the communities it organized. Dominic Davies's *Imperial Infrastructure and Spatial Resistance in Colonial Literature, 1880–1930* develops a methodology that seeks to read infrastructure in literature as both an imaginative construction in and of the text — and within the world of the text — as well as a reflection of the material infrastructure that enabled the development of the empire that colonial texts interrogate. Infrastructure should be recognized as a literary tool that both represents and helps to construct an imagined nation necessarily built alongside empire, and reading infrastructurally allows readers to '[open] up and [comprehend] a mutually sustaining relationship embedded within colonial literary narratives'.[15] In this article I consider the (dys)functionality of railway infrastructure in Chesney's 'Dorking' as a way to interrogate previously unconsidered sources of imperial anxiety in nineteenth-century literature. In this short story I read railways as both symbolic of a nation allegedly in decline and physically significant for that nation's (unsuccessful) defence. While Michael Brown has commented on the perceived degeneration of the British 'race' in the later decades of the nineteenth century, understanding that 'the process of national physical decline was widely held

---

[14] Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the 19th Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), pp. 24, 29–31.

[15] Dominic Davies, *Imperial Infrastructure and Spatial Resistance in Colonial Literature, 1880–1930* (Oxford: Lang, 2017), p. 10.

to have begun with the advent of urban industrialism', railways have yet to be fully explored as a point of weakness in the British imagination (p. 156). Furthermore, I argue that the national rail network was so intricately involved with British imperial happenings — from finance and the movement of imperial goods, to the wider rhetoric that designated railways and Britain as culturally superior — that it is envisioned as part of an imperial network. This is realized in 'Dorking' as we see the collapse of the British Empire resulting from poor railway mobilization. Invasion literature is a genre that many have agreed is predicated on imperial anxiety. Flourishing during the age of imperialism is no coincidence, as the genre directly responds to contemporaneous happenings throughout wider European empires and exemplifies the strain of national and imperial pessimism so readily seen in popular literature of the *fin de siècle*.

George Tomkyns Chesney had deep roots in the British military and had served the empire with dedication. After training from the age of seventeen with the East India Company, he joined the Bengal Engineers in 1850, and served during the Indian Rebellion (1857) as 'field-engineer [...] in the battle of Badli-ke-Serai (8 June)', and was a brigade major during the siege of Delhi.[16] After the rebellion had been put down and the transfer of power to the British Crown was completed, he was promoted to Director of Public Works in 1860. While working as director, he authored an extensive volume entitled *Indian Polity: A View of the System of Administration in India* (1868) where he detailed the development and organization of all public works throughout India now run by the British government. In this book he argued for more centralized government control over railways, noting that 'Indian railways, under any form, are really government undertakings' for the progress and control of India.[17] He also founded the Royal Indian Civil Engineering College in 1870, after serving as 'principal of the Civil Engineering School at Fort William, Calcutta'.[18] His professional life and expertise speak to the necessity for considering infrastructure as a tool in both national organization and imperial operation. The use of infrastructure in literature both reflects and contributes to the perception and organization of material infrastructure in everyday life. This is an important aspect of 'Dorking' that has yet to be interrogated sufficiently.

Chesney's 'Dorking' details a vivid narrative of the invasion of southern England by a German-speaking army and narrates the chaotic and inefficient mobilization of the volunteer troops around London and Surrey. The slow scramble to the front and

---

[16] Roger T. Stearn, 'General Sir George Chesney', *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research*, 75 (1997), 106–18 (p. 108).

[17] George Chesney, *Indian Polity: A View of the System of Administration in India*, 2nd edn (London: Longmans, Green, 1870), p. 391.

[18] Patrick M. Kirkwood, 'The Impact of Fiction on Public Debate in Late Victorian Britain: *The Battle of Dorking* and the "Lost Career" of Sir George Tomkyns Chesney', *Graduate History Review*, 4 (2012), 1–16 (p. 4).

the fall of the British Empire served as a warning of the threats imperial competitors posed, as well as the precarity of national and imperial security relying on a functioning railway infrastructure. Published in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* for May 1871, just months after the end of the Franco-Prussian War, it is a story that is acutely and explicitly concerned with its contemporary moment. Using imaginative writing to explore the consequences of invasion and infrastructural collapse, it was rapidly consumed by readers of *Blackwood's* and then sold further when printed as a pamphlet one month after its original publication; Michael Matin claims that 'by July 110,000 copies had been sold'.[19] The story was seemingly influential, setting off 'a chain reaction of stupefaction, alarm, and such indignation in the United Kingdom that the prime minister, William Gladstone, felt he had to speak out against the "alarmism" of "a famous article called The Battle of Dorking"'.[20]

While two well-known invasion-scare texts of the *fin de siècle* conflate national safety and security with the rail network — H. G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds* (1898) compares the comforts of a pre-invasion functional railway system with the targeted destruction of rail lines during the Martians' invasion; and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) plays into contemporaneous metaphors and developing racial science theories that interpreted the railway as the circulatory system of the nation, transporting the British 'race' or 'stock' throughout the country — the railway in 'Dorking' has thus far been overlooked by critics.[21] The imagined collapse of the national rail network is the first method by which writers imagine complete national degradation. Prior to vampires or Martians subjugating the British, it is a dysfunctional railway system that brings the nation to its knees. Being able to effectively utilize the railway meant following a schedule set by railway operators, navigating to, from, and within stations, as well as travelling alongside other members of the public. With the additional nuances around uneven power relationships that mobility theory brings, as well as Schivelbusch's understanding of the 'machine ensemble', we must recognize that the railway is more than just a train, and includes the people required to operate it, the lines it runs along, the stations it can stop at, the carriages and their social space, as well as the time railways appeared to warp in the nineteenth century. Railways can simultaneously help mobilize the nation and threaten it with stasis and entrapment in many different ways.

---

[19] A. Michael Matin, 'Scrutinizing *The Battle of Dorking*: The Royal United Service Institution and the Mid-Victorian Invasion Controversy', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 39 (2011), 385–407 (p. 389).

[20] I. F. Clarke, 'Before and After *The Battle of Dorking*', *Science Fiction Studies*, 24 (1997), 33–46 (p. 40).

[21] I have written elsewhere about railways in *fin-de-siècle* texts. See Alicia Barnes, 'The Iron Arm of Empire: Railways, Imperialism and the Tensions of English Identity in Nineteenth-Century Literature' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Surrey, 2022), pp. 241–94.

My reading of 'Dorking' focuses on three areas of inefficient and ineffective railway use as presented in the text. In thinking through the various velocities railway transport promised and delivered, the frictions between on- and off-rail networks, and embodied experiences of mechanized mobility, I show how 'Dorking' questioned the supremacist assumptions that characterized national and imperial British rail transport and development in the nineteenth century.

The need for speed

In *The Culture of Speed* John Tomlinson determines that 'it is without doubt the increase of speed that has set the cultural agenda of modernity'.[22] By the 1870s the speeds associated with industrial modernity and steam locomotion extended throughout Britain as the network was almost complete, European networks were rapidly expanding, intercolonial lines were in operation, and the transcontinental line of the United States of America had opened in 1869.[23] What had previously been a six-month journey was reduced to only four to ten days.[24] And, as discussed above, railways — alongside steamships and telegraphs — meant that modern warfare was predicated on speed. Regular access to fast railway transportation from places previously inaccessible or difficult to reach meant that in the second half of the nineteenth century, 'speed and acceleration [came] to signify the zeitgeist, the quintessential experience of modernity'.[25]

The development of mechanical mobility and the perceived differences between pre-industrial, organic movement and the power over nature railway construction seemingly offered, found expression in imperialist rhetoric. Modernity, the state of existence that Britain and Western Europe found themselves in thanks to technological improvements — epitomized by the railway which had 'restructured physical and social worlds' — was exclusive.[26] Movement was often aligned with progress, superiority, and control, and was contrasted with perceptions of stillness that suggested stagnation and barbarity. In this line of thinking the railway was the epitome of civilization. In much

---

[22] John Tomlinson, *The Culture of Speed: The Coming of Immediacy* (London: SAGE, 2007), p. 2.

[23] Matthew Beaumont and Michael Freeman, 'Introduction: Tracks to Modernity', in *The Railway and Modernity: Time, Space, and the Machine Ensemble*, ed. by Matthew Beaumont and Michael Freeman (Oxford: Lang, 2007), pp. 13–44 (pp. 14–17); Faith, pp. 65–71; Asa Briggs, *The Age of Improvement, 1783–1867*, 2nd edn (New York: Longman, 1999), p. 257.

[24] History.com Editors, 'Express Train Crosses the Nation in 83 Hours', *HISTORY*, 16 November 2009 <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/express-train-crosses-the-nation-in-83-hours> [accessed 20 July 2023].

[25] Judy Wajcman and Nigel Dodd, 'Introduction: The Powerful are Fast, the Powerless are Slow', in *The Sociology of Speed: Digital, Organizational, and Social Temporalities*, ed. by Judy Wajcman and Nigel Dodd (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 1–10 (p. 1).

[26] John Urry, 'Accelerating to the Future', in *The Sociology of Speed*, ed. by Wajcman and Dodd, pp. 42–52 (p. 47).

travel writing Europeans believed themselves to be truly modern, and saw the 'others' that they encountered on their journeys throughout the world 'almost as living fossils', or 'survivals from an earlier epoch. Hence the frequent conflation of geographical and temporal distance in many Western travelogues.'[27] Measures of the worth of different peoples changed with the developments made in European societies, and by the second half of the nineteenth century, 'estimates of railway mileage [...] became [a] decisive criteria by which Europeans judged other cultures and celebrated the superiority of their own'.[28] With this cultural context in mind, this section focuses on the representation of speed on the railway, through both fast and slow manifestations, to highlight the moments of vulnerability posed by a mobile, imperial world. Consistent with the cultural narratives that originated in the nineteenth century, if speed is modernity, then slowness is antiquity and is a dangerous enactment of exclusion in a modernizing world.

From the earliest days of steam locomotion, passengers had commented on the disconnection between distance travelled and the time needed to travel said distance.[29] Rail transport was often compared to 'flying', it was as fast as a bullet, and miles could be passed, it seemed, in the blink of an eye.[30] The superiority of railway mobility is predicated on its mastery over nature, in particular on its ability to overcome the natural speed limits of organic motion and reach previously unreachable places. From the 1840s trains were travelling regularly at fifty miles per hour, with speeds increasing throughout the century. These unnatural speeds were also exacerbated by the locomotive's seemingly effortless mobility: it did not tire like a horse or person but could move faster and further than ever before.

In 'Dorking', however, Chesney highlights the threat of slowness that railways could inflict due to poor organization and dysfunction. In a fast-paced world slowness is a precarious state of being. On one journey, as the volunteer regiment travels from Surbiton to Waterloo to be sent to the front — at this point in the narrative believed to be in the east — the narrator despairs:

> There were so many stoppages on the way that we took nearly an hour and a half crawling up to Waterloo. It was between five and six in the afternoon when we arrived there, and it was nearly seven before we marched up to Shoreditch station.[31]

---

27 Carl Thompson, *Travel Writing*, New Critical Idiom (London: Routledge, 2011), p. 147.

28 Michael Adas, *Machines as the Measure of Men: Science, Technology, and Ideologies of Western Dominance*, new edn (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014), p. 146.

29 Charlotte Mathieson, *Mobility in the Victorian Novel: Placing the Nation* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 65–67.

30 Schivelbusch, pp. 129, 10; Mathieson, p. 66.

31 [George Chesney], 'The Battle of Dorking: Reminiscences of a Volunteer', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, May 1871, pp. 539–72 (p. 547).

Evidently in this passage the anxieties surrounding slow trains and poorly organized group movement is clear. Chesney's use of the verb 'crawling' signifies the cultural supremacism of imperialist rhetoric that saw faster movement as superior civilization. Crawling is both an infantilized and dehumanized form of movement, and it is thus ironic that the once supernatural and superior speed the railway provided is reduced to a speed imagined to be slower than walking. This particular journey, that should take approximately thirty-three minutes according to the *Bradshaw* for June 1871, triples in duration, and is followed by a further unspecified delay before the troops march to their next destination.[32] This experience of frustration at the ineffective railway was an entirely modern experience: Enda Duffy suggests that 'with speed came a new phase in the history of impatience. Only as speed became conventional could slowness become perceptible.'[33] While delays or changes to railway schedules were not uncommon, 'Dorking' envisions this poorly operated railway journey as itself a threat to British autonomy: if the troops are not sent swiftly to the front line, the invading army will face no resistance. This becomes reality as, later, we hear that 'in two days the invaders had got more than twenty miles inland, and nothing effectual had been done to stop them' (p. 550). The effective mobility of the invaders is contrasted with the almost painfully slow movements of the volunteers, who are not only forced to travel slowly in the poorly functioning railway, but are actually travelling in the wrong direction, as they soon find out.

Ideas of immobility and the slowness of inefficient mobility on the railway permeate the whole of 'Dorking'. Frequently, the narrator bemoans the slowness with which he and his fellow volunteers move: 'Anything seemed better than indecision and delay' (p. 548). Significantly, the retrospective account the Volunteer gives is keen to emphasize the importance of hindered railway journeys. It would be useful here to outline the general movement of the Volunteer in order to demonstrate the extent of this inefficiency (*Fig. 2*). In Chesney's narrative Britain begins to fear an invasion by the Prussians after the Franco-Prussian War. War is declared by the British on Monday, 6 August, and ten days later some full-time troops are finally mobilized. The first movements of the narrator are the monotonous and repetitive journeys made on his commute to his office in Westminster from his home in Surbiton. On some days he makes this journey multiple times when he must attend regimental training, and on one occasion he is forced to walk home after missing the last train from Waterloo. Once his regiment is mobilized, he must make the same journey from Westminster back to Surbiton to try and retrieve his equipment from home, only to begin a journey back again instantly to Waterloo where

---

[32] A standard journey from Waterloo to Kingston, calling at Vauxhall, Clapham, Wimbledon, Coombe, Surbiton and Kingston, took approximately thirty-three minutes. *Bradshaw's General Railway and Steamship Guide, June 1871* (London: Blacklock, 1871) <https://archive.org/details/1871-brad-6/mode/2up?q=surbiton> [accessed 21 July 2023] (p. 36).

[33] Enda Duffy, *The Speed Handbook: Velocity, Pleasure, Modernism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), p. 66.

he meets the volunteer troops upon arrival at Surbiton station. From Waterloo the regiment is sent to Shoreditch station, only to return to Waterloo as they are told that the east coast invasion was a 'feint', and that the real invasion will be on the south coast (p. 548). From Waterloo they take a train south, passing through Leatherhead and Dorking, before they alight at Horsham. With no more trains coming up from the south, the regiment marches back north to be stationed at Dorking. Finally, after the disastrous titular battle, the regiment is defeated and pushed further north once more, forced back to Kingston. When thinking through the extensive movements that a national network can facilitate and the unnecessary journeys the Volunteer makes, Tim Cresswell's 'politics of mobility' is illuminating. The various repeated and needless journeys made — the Volunteer walks approximately fifty miles on journeys that were entirely unnecessary — prompt us to consider the significance of 'order and predictability [which] is not simply a matter of fixing in space but of channelling motion — of producing correct mobilities through the designation of routes'.[34] Where one might have expected the expansive British rail network to offer clear and precise routes that could be effectively utilized by a defensive army, 'Dorking' instead plays into the anxieties surrounding the confusion of modern life and the reduced mobility that is produced by an inability to keep pace or organize oneself with said modernity, thus resisting the narrative that a mobile modernity is inherently fast.
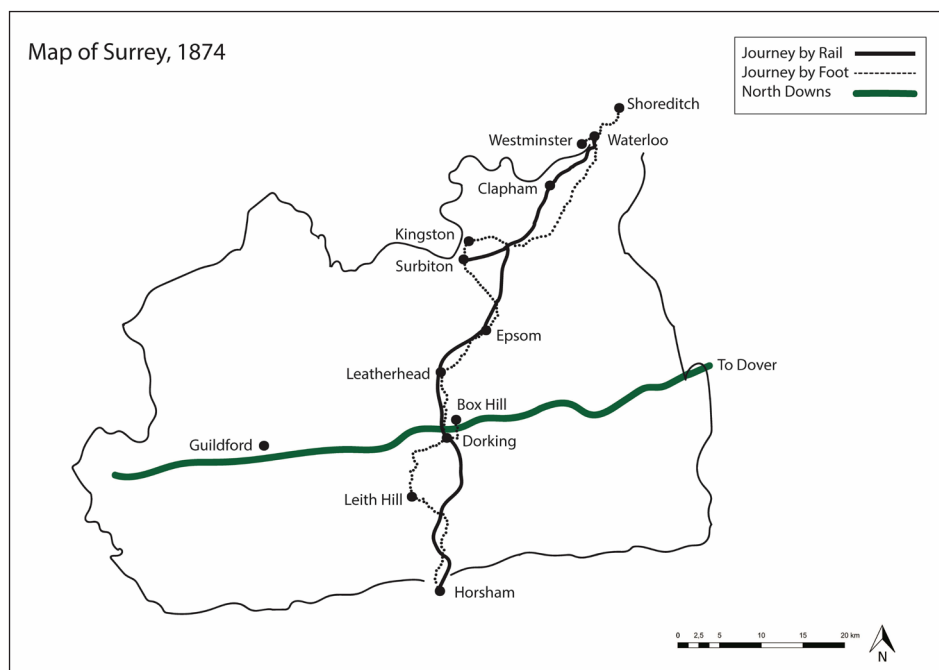

Fig. 2: Map of Surrey, 1874.

---

[34] Tim Cresswell, 'Towards a Politics of Mobility', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 28 (2010), 17–31 (p. 24).

The confusion of information and inefficiency of mobility which sees the regiment travel first east, then south, then north demonstrates the anxieties surrounding modernity as a mass of confusion and hurry, ironically leading to slowness. These anxieties reveal the necessary involvement of varied velocities within a rapidly mobile modernity, challenging any assumption that slowness is eradicated with mechanical transportation. Furthermore, it is critical that the movements of the Volunteer combine inefficient use of the railway — both through multiple journeys by railway or by foot, backtracking travels just made — and occasions where he is unable to schedule himself with the railway timetable, forcing pedestrian journeys.[35] Certainly, in any railway journey there are sections of travel that need to be made by walking, and as we see from the narrative, the volunteer regiment has to walk from Waterloo to Shoreditch station as the London Underground network was not complete at this time.[36] However, the periods of walking that were unnecessary demonstrate the 'politics of mobility' that demands a recognition of the context of an individual's movements.[37] Where an extensive rail network and fully operational timetable could have provided ease of movement for the Volunteer and his regiment, inefficient or non-operational railways do not just offer slower movements, but actually distort a direct and effective route. The inefficient journeys made by the Volunteer in effect act favourably for the invading Prussian army. The regiment, which could have been well rested and swiftly deployed to the defensive front, are instead forced to walk miles before they reach the location of the battle. These interconnections between the networks both on and off the rails then lead us to consider the frictions created by poor inter-network junctions.

Disjuncture

As discussed above, we find clear frustration of mobilities because of the poor intersection between modes of travel and of the communication of intelligence. The inefficiency and confusion of communication is exacerbated once the volunteer troops have been mobilized after lunch on Sunday, 19 August, and a clear sense of disruption appears in the narrative: Waterloo station 'had quite changed its aspect since the morning. The regular service of trains had ceased, and the station and approaches were full of troops, among them the Guards and artillery' (p. 547). Within the space of the station, a space defined by strict timekeeping, clear signage, and the organization of numerous trains and thousands of travellers each day, the superior regulation of

---

[35] Laura Marcus, *Dreams of Modernity: Psychoanalysis, Literature, Cinema* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 44.

[36] Shoreditch Tube Station was first opened in 1876 by the East London Railway Company.

[37] Cresswell, p. 21; Peter Adey, 'If Mobility is Everything Then it is Nothing: Towards a Relational Politics of (Im)mobilities', *Mobilities*, 1 (2006), 75–94 (p. 83).

modernity has deteriorated. Whereas in the morning, before the clear threat of the invasion was realized, a regular experience of the station could occur, the afternoon brings with it an upheaval of regular timekeeping and variations to those existing in the railway space. Matthew Beaumont and Michael Freeman emphasize the necessity of the railway timetable to the conceptualization and navigation of the modern nation, stating that in it, 'the interlocking grid of the railway system, which adhered to increasingly rigid schedules, was given an abstract printed form. It mapped both the time and space of the nation' (p. 19). Just as the Volunteer before had been unable to efficiently transition from off-rail to on-rail in the wider network of rail-assisted mobility, the deterioration of timetabling also signals a loss of control. The (in)ability to use the railway in 'Dorking' is representative of the autonomy of the nation and is clearly seen to deteriorate with the threat and realization of invasion.

In their introduction to *Mobilities, Literature, Culture*, Marian Aguiar, Charlotte Mathieson, and Lynne Pearce highlight the significance and 'the impact of enhanced networking capabilities on the emergence and evolution of national consciousness'.[38] The national consciousness presented in 'Dorking' is the simultaneous realization of connectedness through the rail network and the catastrophic effects disruption of this network presents to the entirety of the nation: as the Volunteer recounts, 'truly the nation was ripe for a fall' (p. 571). Waterloo has become a portal to the rest of the nation, engaging the entire population with war (Davies, pp. 4, 6, 8, 10). At this point in the nineteenth century, almost all locales and regions could be accessed via the national rail network, and thus, as Nicholas Faith writes, 'railways gave a new meaning to the phrase "a nation at war" by multiplying the number of men who could be mobilized in the first few days or weeks after the outbreak of hostilities.'[39] It is ironic, then, that this access to the nation provides very little defence when faced with an invasion; instead, the nation's strength has been dispersed throughout the empire, which was able to expand immensely thanks to the footholds railways offered, leaving the metropole and its own railways vulnerable and weak. Rather than providing efficient and effective defensive movements, the railways actually threaten the British with foreign hegemony.

Within the narrative, echoing a Colonel Dixon who had feared the usurpation of railways by 'an enterprising enemy', the threat of not just the organizational loss of control of the rail network, but also the material loss of control is clearly pinpointed

---

[38] Marian Aguiar, Charlotte Mathieson, and Lynne Pearce, 'Introduction: Mobilities, Literature, Culture', in *Mobilities, Literature, Culture*, ed. by Marian Aguiar, Charlotte Mathieson, and Lynne Pearce (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), pp. 1–31 (p. 10).

[39] Faith, p. 272; Keith Robbins, *Nineteenth-Century Britain: England, Scotland, and Wales: The Making of a Nation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 25–27.

(Spiers, p. 24). While the troops march north from Leith Hill to Dorking, prior to the titular battle, the Volunteer spots 'Royal Engineers [...] breaking up the line' from Dorking to Horsham (p. 551). As the troops retreat north, the defensive effort clearly considers the railway now not as a tool the British can utilize, but as a potential point of weakness. As mentioned above, the rail network was now nationally expansive. Although we never witness or hear of the invading army using the railway, this moment betrays an explicit fear that the British railway system could become an oppressive system of hegemony. In order to protect themselves they must break the network and cut connections with places south of Dorking. This scene is repeated, as the troops retreat to Surbiton after the defeat at Dorking:

> Our regiment and another had been moved a little to the rear [...] and presently we were ordered to occupy the railway station [...]. We should be supported by line troops [...] and in a few minutes a train full of them came slowly up from Guildford way. It was the last; the men got out, the train passed on, and a party began to tear up the rails. (p. 565)

Although the battle is lost, there is the persistent recognition that railway connections will provide a strong foothold for any occupying force. There is a resigned sense of defeat here, knowing that this is the last train, the last supporting troops, and the last chance to break a network that, if used efficiently, could have saved the British from invasion.

Prior to this final destruction of railway infrastructure, the narrative continues to highlight the dysfunctionality of the British railway system while the nation is under attack. Once the volunteer regiment arrives at Dorking and sets up camp on Box Hill, just north of the town, scenes of railway and infrastructural chaos continue. After climbing the steep Surrey hill, the Volunteer is told to retrace his steps back once again to the town to collect supplies being brought into the railway station. Upon arrival,

> [he] found a scene of great confusion at the railway station. Trains were still coming in with stores, ammunition, guns, and appliances of all sorts, which were being unloaded as fast as possible; but there were scarcely any means of getting the things off. There were plenty of waggons of all sorts, but hardly any horses to draw them, and the whole place was blocked up. (p. 554)

This moment highlights the reality that railway infrastructure, organization, and utilization cannot exist in isolation. It cannot function as a network entirely on its own, but requires off-rail connections, resources, planning, and wider mobility networks

in order to function successfully. As Ruth Livesey has shown, although there were fears that railways would eradicate the need for horses, putting many owners, carriage drivers, and ostlers out of work, railway development actually increased the need for horse labour, both during the construction works and alongside rail transportation to bring passengers and goods to and from stations that were usually not built in city or town centres.[40] Margaret Linley determines that, 'far from bringing about the disappearance of the living horse in Victorian culture, the "iron horse" propelled a massive boom in the equine industry, multiplying demand well into the early twentieth century.'[41] This need for horses to facilitate the transition of goods from on- to off-rail is demonstrated in the quotation from 'Dorking' above. In this instance, although the railway was able to transport plenty of goods to equip and support the troops, the lack of inter-network mobility inhibits any further distribution and chaos ensues.

Disjuncture is experienced throughout 'Dorking' and is suggested to be no small contributor to the downfall of the British. As the narrative describes various broken networks throughout the nation, it concludes with a final break in the wider networked empire:

> What was there left to us to live for? Stripped of our colonies; Canada and the West Indies gone to America; Australia forced to separate; India lost for ever, after the English there had all been destroyed, vainly trying to hold the country when cut off from aid by their countrymen; Gibraltar and Malta ceded to the new naval Power; Ireland independent and in perpetual anarchy and revolution. (pp. 570–71)

Railways had furthered imperial expansion from the 1840s and offered 'permanent' connections between the metropole and its colonies through physical infrastructure, financial investment, labour, and organization, as well as importing and symbolizing modern Western culture. Now, their collapse in Britain is necessarily productive of the collapse of the imperial networks that railways had helped to sustain.

An embodied invasion

Part of using railway infrastructure successfully includes fitting one's body into the space of the railway. Being comfortable and able to rest on a journey was a clear benefit

---

[40] Ruth Livesey, *Writing the Stage Coach Nation: Locality on the Move in Nineteenth-Century British Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 92–93.

[41] Margaret Linley, 'The Living Transport Machine: George Eliot's *Middlemarch*', in *Transport in British Fiction: Technologies of Movement, 1840–1940*, ed. by Adrienne E. Gavin and Andrew F. Humphries (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 84–100 (p. 87).

rail transportation could offer over the previously bumpy and arduous journeys in coaches or on horseback. The ability to read in a railway carriage was a clear indication of smoother travelling.[42] Tomlinson even suggests that the railway essentially eradicated 'travel's etymological link with "travail" — painful or laborious effort' (p. 104). Mechanical mobility was supposed to displace the effort required to move from organic beings onto machinery. This, however, is not the case for the Volunteer in 'Dorking'.

The space of the carriage the Volunteer occupies with his regiment from Surbiton to Waterloo, on a journey that should have only taken approximately thirty minutes, is not only slow but also physically exhausting. The Volunteer describes the embodied experience of incorrectly and inefficiently used trains, noting that 'it was a tremendous squeeze […]; for, besides the ten men sitting down, there were three or four standing up in every compartment, and the afternoon was close and sultry' (p. 547). The train compartments are overrun with soldiers, and the narrative suggests the physical conflation of the rail network bringing the nation closer together with the overcrowded closeness of the soldiers' bodies.[43] Although a crowded railway carriage may not seem alien to twenty-first century travellers, the Volunteer's previous experience of daily commuting is clearly very different to what he is experiencing now. The 'tremendous squeeze' is not just a consequence of the seats being completely occupied — ten men sitting down on seats that would comfortably seat six to eight — but others still had to stand in an aisle designed only for the legs of those seated. On the London and South Western Railway, carriages in operation during the 1860s and 1870s had interior compartments that measured from 7 ft 7 in. to 8 ft by 7 ft, with only about 2 ft between the opposite benches (*Fig. 3*). For third-class compartments, this distance was even smaller, with only 1ft 10 inches separating the parallel benches.[44] Although the Volunteer does not specify which class of carriage he is in, from these measurements and the number of bodies he counts inhabiting the space of the compartment, it is clearly overcrowded. The carriage is not being used as it was designed for — a maximum of eight passengers — and thus is not functioning appropriately. The narrative makes clear this is an incorrect experience of railway travelling, both in terms of speed and the leisure it clearly does not provide. The passengers are uncomfortable and hot, and those standing have no chance of rest. The railway in 'Dorking' does not function as it should, both signalling and effecting national decline.

[42] Schivelbusch, pp. 64–69; Richard Altick, *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800–1900*, 2nd edn (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1998), pp. 88–89.

[43] Davies, p. 10; Peter Merriman and Lynne Pearce, 'Mobility and the Humanities', *Mobilities*, 12 (2017), 493–508 (pp. 497–99).

[44] G. R. Weddell, *L.S.W.R. Carriages*, 4 vols (Didcot: Wild Swan, 1992–2006), I: *1838–1900* (1992), pp. 48, 55–56.
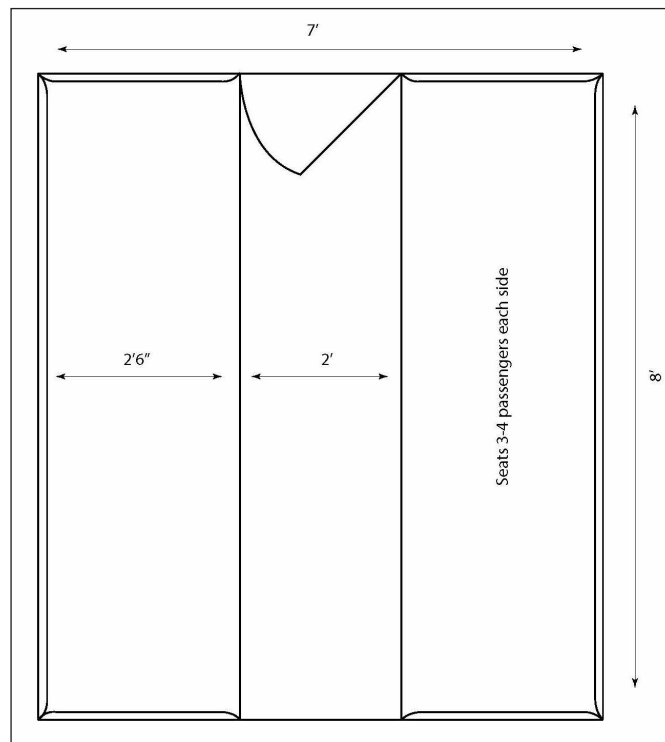
Fig. 3: Diagram showing approximate dimensions of a London and South Western Railway carriage, 1860s.

The discomfort felt by the Volunteer in the carriages due to overcrowding clearly demonstrates the reality that, 'in spite of the rhetoric of freedom associated with the railway's opening-up of travel, the accounts of individual travellers often focused on a physically and psychologically intimidating experience of confinement' (Byerly, p. 174). Here, the narrative presents what should have been an effective military strategy — mobilizing regiments en masse for the defence of the nation — as itself a method of imprisonment and subjugation of individual and national autonomy. They are forced to travel slowly and uncomfortably, the antithesis of what railway travel was supposed to be. This is an example of what Paul Virilio discusses in *Speed and Politics*: that the increasing mobilization of technology and its use in warfare in fact threatens individual freedom:

> The blindness of the speed of means of communicating destruction is not a liberation from geographical servitude [...]. We only need refer to the necessary controls and constraints on the railway [...] infrastructures to see the fatal impulse: the more speed increases, the faster freedom decreases.[45]

---

[45] Paul Virilio, *Speed and Politics: An Essay on Dromology*, trans. by Mark Polizzotti (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p. 142, quoted in Cresswell, p. 23.

Instead of a technological deterministic outcome, which would have seen 'national innovation determin[ing] national success', in 'Dorking' the British invention becomes a threat to British autonomy in Britain itself.[46]

The volunteers are not just trapped by slow, uncomfortable journeys, but are literally confined within the compartments, which were often locked between stations.[47] Not being able to control one's own journey and being subject to the routes, timetables, and public nature of the railway was a contemporary concern for travellers, who felt disempowered, their movements being at the mercy of the railway company (Mathieson, p. 83). Just as Cresswell's understanding of the politics of mobility recognizes the uneven access to mobility throughout a society, and the different forms of mobility within this politics, Yi-Fu Tuan similarly explores the political affiliations within different experiences of space: 'Spaciousness is closely associated with the sense of being free. Freedom implies space; it means having the power and enough room in which to act.'[48] In the overcrowded railway carriage of 'Dorking', the Volunteer experiences a lack of control due to an excess of bodies restricting a freedom of movement, and he can thus be read as not free; the invasion has begun and the retrospective narrative recognizes the outcome of subjugation for the British from the start. 'Fundamental' to being free, Tuan continues, 'is the ability to transcend the present condition, and this transcendence is most simply manifest as the elementary power to move' (p. 52). The overcrowded railway carriage perfectly represents the feeling of entrapment and the loss of autonomy over national freedoms. Once again, the railways are inhibiting a national defence and instead work to support, in their dysfunction, the invasion of England. They both symbolize and effect national degradation. It seems that the unintended extended periods of time on the railway induce a disruption to national regularity and threaten Britain and British bodies.

As the narrative draws to a close and the volunteers resign themselves to defeat, the narrator once again sees mobility as a key contributor to either victory or subjugation. Comparing the two armies, one 'soon [became] a helpless mob, fighting desperately here and there, but with whom, as a manoeuvring army, the disciplined invaders did just what they pleased' (p. 570). The British have become a 'mob', a disorderly and chaotic group whose very nature is predicated on their uncontrolled mobility: the term 'mob' is derived from 'mobile', once again demonstrating the necessity of supposedly

---

[46] David Edgerton, *The Shock of the Old: Technology and Global History Since 1900* (London: Profile, 2008), p. xiv.

[47] William Hughes, 'Gothic and the Coming of the Railways', in *The Cambridge History of the Gothic*, ed. by Dale Townshend, Angela Wright, and Catherine Spooner, 3 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020–21), II: *Gothic in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Dale Townshend and Angela Wright (2020), pp. 445–62 (pp. 450–52).

[48] Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), p. 52.

'correct' mobilities.[49] Though the British troops can in fact move, the narrative makes it clear that this is a poorer form of movement than efficient mechanical mobility. Even though we never witness the invading army using the railways, their regular and unimpeded mobility resembles what the railway was supposed to provide, and they can even manoeuvre the 'mob' as they please: they coerce and direct the mobility of the subjugated army through their efficient invasion. The volunteers' poor use of railways and the deterioration of the rail network — its lines and organization — not only lead to the downfall of the British nation and empire, but also symbolize the deterioration of national supremacy based on a functioning, connected, and efficient railway infrastructure.

Conclusion

That the first example of invasion literature places so much weight on railway infrastructure, with no mention of the human agents operating the system, betrays an understanding of the reliance the modern British nation and empire had on machine technology. The anxieties imaginatively realized in 'Dorking' were about the wider rail networks working poorly, or not at all, pinpointing a clear vulnerability in national organization, especially in the face of ever stronger imperial competitors. Chesney recognizes the necessity for, not just infrastructure, but also a functioning network that operates through various connected infrastructures. Reading infrastructure in 'Dorking' allows us not simply to recognize these anxieties, but also to read deeper connections made in fiction between a nation's infrastructure and the nation itself. Reading railways in nineteenth-century literature is a way of reading the nation. The transport network becomes, by the end of the century, symptomatic of the perceived state of the nation: where a well-run railway system reflects a well-run nation. Railways became so entwined with national organization that they were vital to its economic, political, social, and imperial functioning. They also contributed to a national consciousness, as they brought many previously disconnected localities into a material network of the nation.

Close attention should also be paid to how the infrastructure that enabled the age of imperialism is presented and used in literary texts. At a time when ideas of 'levelling up' seemingly recognize the uneven and unequal access to various forms of public works and transportation across Britain, reading imperial texts infrastructurally demonstrates the long history of politicized infrastructural works and the material and imaginative impacts disrupted access to national infrastructure can produce. In

---

[49] 'Mob, n. 2 (and adv.)', *OED Online*; Cresswell, p. 24.

'Dorking' it is not that the Prussians explicitly use the railway to invade England — though this is hinted at through the Royal Engineers' destruction of the lines — but that the British have lost control of them, organizationally and materially. 'Dorking' speaks to the dangers of poorly connected wider national networks: railways cannot operate in isolation but must contribute to and function alongside various networks of mobility and communication. At a time when industrial strikes highlight the necessity for a holistic approach to operating national infrastructure, including not just the material infrastructure of tracks and trains, but the people that operate, make safe, organize, and use railways, reading 'Dorking' with this lens demonstrates the longevity of these debates.

What is clear when reading 'Dorking' infrastructurally is the sense of a lack of control the British characters have over the railway, whether that be the timing of the journeys, the space in which they experience the railway, or the journeys the railway can offer them. In the imperially anxious British imagination, modernity and cultural supremacy are balanced precariously along railway lines.