

Slaithwaite Review of Books and Bookshops DISCONNECTED!

This issue of the SRB is devoted to the new book by Chris Austin and Richard Faulkner – *Disconnected – Broken Links in Britain’s Rail Policy* (to be published by Ian Allan on November 19th). This is an extremely important book which sheds much light on the dirty goings-on within the British Railways Board and Government in the 1960s and 1970s. It makes a convincing case that far bigger cuts to the network were only narrowly averted, often by the intervention of ‘whistle-blowers’ within BR and Government. The book offers insights which are both historical and contemporary. The introductory chapter on ‘The Policy Gap’ in the 1960s and 1970s is a very useful scene-setter and would make a good major stand-alone paper in its own right. I think the authors make the mistake of transplanting government thinking of the 1960s to the present-day in making a case against a return to state ownership.



A rare picture of Salvo campaigning against the closure of Lostock Junction station – on the day it closed (November 5th 1966). Left it a bit late...but it re-opened in 1989 and has done well ever since. Vindication or what? One day the full story of the last train from Lostock Jc that night of November 5th will be told..

Though I’m not a fan of ‘state ownership’ I don’t think this argument is particularly strong given how the policy and political landscape has changed so much since then. What is very clear from Chris and Richard’s research is that there was an unspoken cross-party consensus between Labour and Conservative back then which was hostile to rail. What’s also very interesting is the extent to which the drive for closures was led not just by civil service mandarins but also by senior BR managers.

The book will be of interest both to people with an interest in railway policy and history but should also be read by a wider audience. The early chapters in particular offer a fascinating glimpse of how politics actually operated in the 1960s and should be of great interest to Politics students. It would be a shame if the readership was confined to the likes of Salvo readers. Whilst Chris and Richard have a lot to say on the machinations of civil servants and BRB officers, they don’t ignore the role of the unions in building a broader opposition to closures. They mention the highly effective ‘Save Our Railways’ campaign led by the NUR in 1975, which this reviewer played a modest part in, as a union activist in Lancashire. The

lobby of parliament was the high point, and there's an interesting personal story to tell of this one day... But a lot of local campaigning activity went on as well, including a memorable public meeting held in Hapton Methodist Hall (ironically, long since disappeared as part of a motorway scheme). Virtually the entire population of the east Lancashire village must have turned out to express outrage at the prospect of their railway being closed. The meeting was chaired by local parish councillor Archie Johnstone, who was then a Blackburn driver and Aslef member, but ex-Rose Grove. I remain firmly of the view that Rose Grove locomotives were the best in the world. I spent several years working with them after the depot closed in the early 70s and most transferred to Blackburn. It was a great privilege to have worked with these genuine working class intellectuals. Thanks to their actions, supported by the local community, the East Lancs Line didn't close and is now served and promoted by the East Lancashire CRP.

The book isn't just 'history'. It includes a substantial amount of text on lines which have potential for re-opening and this is probably where controversy will arise. The authors produce a list of lines which would be strong contenders for re-opening as well as a list of routes which would be difficult if not impossible to re-open.



Aberystwyth: when's the next train to Carmarthen, Rhydian?

I admire their bravery. I think their list of potential re-openings is pretty well spot on but if I was them I wouldn't play down the prospects of Carmarthen – Aberystwyth (for example). What might seem a no-hoper could become a strong contender if it has political and community support, so I wouldn't dismiss that (and one or two others) out of hand. The re-openings scene is rapidly changing and some new campaigns may well develop momentum, including Levenmouth Rail Campaign (<http://www.lmrc-action.org.uk/>) promoting the reinstatement of Thornton to Leven, which gets scant (though positive) mention. I think in future years we need to focus a bit less on disused formations and be more imaginative, looking at what connectivity is required and how you achieve it...so building completely new railways (not just 'high speed') should be on the agenda. And if you really wanted to connect south, mid and north Wales you probably would have to think about a largely new alignment.

The book is co-authored by two people passionate about their railways. Richard Faulkner, a Labour peer, is the 'politician' amongst them though Chris is an astute political analyst. I remain of the view that Richard's political universe is highly Westminster-centric and downplays the importance of grassroots action – an issue I highlighted in my review of their previous book, *Holding the Line* .



A4 60016 passes Forfar in a hurry – Easter 1964 – a line which maybe shouldn't have closed – featured in the book

The Settle-Carlisle line would have closed if it hadn't been for broad-based community action, involving thousands of campaigners, parish councils, businesses, unions and the occasional dog. Portillo, for all his hype about being 'the man who saved the S&C' would have signed the closure order as quick as you could say 'Beeching' if it hadn't been for that mass opposition. Chris and Richard highlight the enormous change that has taken place in public and political attitudes towards rail. If there is a cross-party consensus on rail now, it is very pro-rail (see below), though there are big emerging differences on the most appropriate ownership structures.

This is an excellent book and I'd say if you only buy one 'railway' book in what remains of 2015, this should be it. And that isn't a pathetic attempt to get a review copy, because I already have one.

One small point. I'm not sure if the large format of the book is particularly appropriate. It allows for larger photographs but the illustrations are very much secondary to the text and makes it more, rather than less, easy to read. More up to date maps and less dependence on *The Railway Clearing House* would have been helpful, though fine as a part of the picture.