

## *The Political Career of Mr Reid's 'Ten Wheeler'*

1902: times had changed. Even in Natal, times had changed. The Anglo-Boer War had been the summation of an Imperial sense of 'calling', but it had also been the herald of a new Edwardian class-consciousness. So we find Mr Pepworth, Member for Klip River in the Natal Legislative Assembly, congratulating the colony's railwaymen for deferring their threatened strike until the war was over. 'These men', he reported,

have done their duty to the Colony and to the Empire, and although we have a threatened strike in the workshops of Durban, those men have been good enough to allow that to stand over until such time as the Colony will allow them to make their influence felt. It is not too late to prevent that strike . . . (31: 39)

And yet, even before the war was over, the voice of Labour was heard in Natal. A penny-pinching railway management had driven its workers too far, and they came out on strike in March of 1902.

The race of Victorian gentlemen who governed the colony were mortally offended at this unheard of breach of trust. In the Legislative Assembly they rushed to defend their mightiest civil servant, the General Manager of Railways. Mr Hitchins assured the House that 'if they knew what I know' they would be 'lost in admiration of that grand man in Durban, Sir David Hunter'. He told them how

on Sundays and through the night his telephone has been going down there in connection with the removal of troops, and the disorganization of the line. But he has gone through the whole thing. (31: 94)

This did not impress Mr F.S. Tatham, an important precursor of the Labour Party in the Natal House. It was difficult not to be sardonic about the 'titles industry' in the Edwardian empire. Noting that 'Mr David Hunter is now Sir David Hunter', Mr Tatham believed that the time for boss figures was over:

(He) is far too big to run this little railway of ours. We do not want belted Earls running our railways. We want plain, common-sense, business men who are approachable, not only by their servants . . . but by their masters — this House. And Sir David Hunter is absolutely unapproachable by anybody. Why, the Minister of Lands and Works dare not approach him . . . (31: 75)

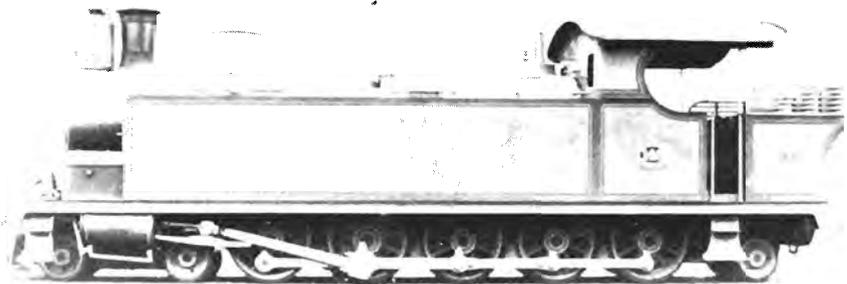
By becoming an Edwardian, Sir David Hunter's claim to dour plainness and Scots common-sense had undoubtedly been compromised. In Victorian times

that morality was everywhere implicit and intact, but in Edwardian times it had to be taught. The General Manager founded the 'Natal Government Railways Lecture and Debating Society' for that very purpose, and also to compete with the new working-class papers that were putting rebellious ideas into the heads of his staff. For those who had come up the rungs of the Victorian ladder, economic value was proved not in theory but in practice. It was proved in the Darwinian struggle for survival that one saw, for instance, in the development of locomotives out there on Natal's main line. This was the moral that was preached on that august occasion, the inaugural lecture of the 'Natal Government Railways Lecture and Debating Society', and delivered by the General Manager himself.

In the time of Mr Milne, our first Locomotive Superintendent, we had the advance, from the original small but capable engines of Kitson and Stephenson, to the well-known Dubs engine. Then Mr Reid, successfully, and in the face of many difficulties, produced the powerful machine which bears his name, and which pulled us through a very critical period. . .<sup>1</sup>

The Edwardian decade might be well advanced, but the Victorian mythos was still intact. But it was only intact because the General Manager chose not to mention that at least some of those 'many difficulties' that Mr Reid faced were of his own making, and that at least one reason why the period had been 'critical' was that the General Manager had made some very questionable decisions — decisions which had not promoted the cause of railway evolution.

One looks back with a certain nostalgia to the days when railway engines could be the subject of 'no confidence' debates. But in 1902, with the Anglo-Boer War almost over, and Sir Alfred Hime's 'old guard' government challenged by the Milnerite progressives under Maydon, Mr Reid's locally designed 4-10-2 engine (or 'ten-wheeler') providentially offered itself for political ammunition. Maydon's men exulted in the unsuccess of this latest production of the Natal Government Railways, a massive tank engine which had notched up an unprecedented count of derailments, and in fact laid open the possibility that the solid Victorians who governed the railway were not so much Imperial heroes as a sort of Scottish Mafia. Maydon threw down his gage in the annual 'no confidence' debate. Mr Reid's new engine possessed



The Reid Ten Wheeler

*(Photograph: SATS)*

an aptitude for running off the line which nothing of its kind (has) hitherto been able in the least degree to rival, and we do hope that nothing that we have in Natal at any future time will in any way approach this horrible thing. (31: 23)

The opposition gloated over the fact that 62 derailments had been reported since the inception of 'Reid' haulage in 1901. One excited critic demonstrated the destructiveness of the new engine with a fresh exhibit:

I had placed on my desk only this morning two large pieces of steel which I should like to hold up for honourable members of this House to see. These pieces of steel were carried off . . . our line by the Reid engine. (31: 36)

A political analogy obviously offered itself. If the Prime Minister had 'nailed his colours to the funnel of that engine', then, 'just as that engine sticks at the first heavy grade, breaks innumerable chairs, and runs off the line', so would Sir Alfred Hime and his government.

One hopes that poor Mr Reid was not an avid reader of *Hansard*: he would have found himself accused there of not having 'the remotest idea of the relations necessary between an engine and the line'. Natal had, until now, had its engines built by Messrs Dubs of Edinburgh, and Mr Taylor, MLA, couldn't see why a change was necessary.

If the Government had done their duty, they would have gone to recognised people, like the Dubs people, and said 'Your engines have worked most satisfactorily on our line, but we want something heavier . . .' But . . . this man starts his inventions. What is the result of it? We have got engines running on our line today that are a perfect curse to the country. This man has put forward a base on his driving wheels which cannot get around a curve without destroying the line . . . it is estimated by the platelayers that £1 000 worth of chairs are being destroyed per month . . . (31: 36)

In vain did the Prime Minister protest. Only the other night he had been told by the Stationmaster of Maritzburg ('with whom I incidentally entered into conversation') that 'the Reid engine had been the saving of the Railway'. (31: 31) It was most unfair to blame all the Reids as a class: of the 62 derailments, one third were caused by only one of their number, and the majority by only three of the 41 units then in use. But the MP for Ixopo, Mr Nicholson, was not to be persuaded. There had been insufficient testing: 'this Colony has committed itself to the ordering of a large number of these engines before they have been running a sufficient time.' (31: 50)

Needless to say, the General Manager had sooner or later to step into the argument, and he did so with an eloquence that, after twenty years, could still make governments quail. It is there in the style of the General Manager's Report for this year, where, for example, he calls the feat of despatching 2 500 tons a day up the line from Durban 'unique in Railway history'. In a private report to the Legislative Assembly (Sessional Papers, 1902), we find him ready to take on all comers. 'I understand', he says, that 'the "Man in the street" has condemned the "Reid" engine' (a gentleman 'usually in evidence when a new development takes place'). The man in the street is squashed with a homely maxim: 'disappointments, common to all new enterprises, are generally the presagers of success'.

Having delivered this salvo, the General Manager proceeds to answer his critics. He points out that the Reid engine *was* in fact built by Dubs, that there *had* been a test engine (it arrived in Durban in May 1900) which had fulfilled all expectations, and that it was only because of the immense pressure put on the railway by the Anglo-Boer War that individual units were now being entered into traffic without sufficient testing. The Reid engine was, in 1902, the heaviest on 3'6" gauge anywhere in the world, and, of course, difficulties were to be expected. There was, he admits, an 'excessive wear of tyres' on the Reids, and (what sounds much more alarming) a 'tendency' of the unflanged pair of driving wheels in the front 'to drop off the rail and break the chairs'. But this, he assures the House, is a temporary problem, and will be redressed as parts of the line are rebuilt. The new chairs had cost a mere £954, and, in the meantime, the fact was that each Reid engine carried '20 000 to 24 000 more tons per annum' than the old Dubses. ('Notes by General Manager on Reid Engines', Sessional Papers, 1902.)

But the Opposition was too excited by the whiff of scandal to be put down by wise maxims from the General Manager of Railways. The 'Reid' engine was notoriously the production of a certain race who tended to people the top echelons of the railway empire. The notion of a Caledonian conspiracy was actually put by Mr Taylor:

There is only one conclusion I can come to with regard to the management of the Locomotive Department, and that is that those works have resolved themselves into an asylum for imbeciles of a certain nationality. Like most imbeciles they are carried away by their imaginations. They imagine they are geniuses. This experiment with regard to an engine for our Railway is not only at the cost of the Colony, but it is the ruination of the Colony . . . (31: 36)

Now it has to be said that David Hunter had given scope to the conspiracy theory by the importation from Scotland of his own brother, in order to fill a senior post in the NGR. This chink in his moral armour was often exposed and the 1902 debate saw it again. Why could one not, these days, ever correspond with the General Manager himself? Because of a Scottish intrigue. 'I was told by a very reliable authority', said one member of the Legislative Assembly, referring to the railway in Scotland from which both Hunters had originally come,

that they had there a man whose duty it was to deal with all claims against the railway . . . And the way he dealt with claims was as follows: Directly a claim was received he would write reams of paper to the complainant putting him off until he wore him out, and abandoned the claim. And, on reliable authority, I may tell you that they have imported that man into Natal . . . That is exactly what they are doing with us . . . We get a letter signed 'David Hunter . . . XYZ' and this 'XYZ' I am firmly convinced is the very individual I have made reference to . . . (33: 446)

The aura of intrigue was obviously grist to the Opposition mill, and eventually Hime's Government had to accede to the appointment of a Committee of Enquiry into the Reid engine.

And it cannot be denied that this committee received further evidence for a 'conspiracy' theory. Messrs Hunter and Reid had proceeded, it seems, with

their ambitious ten-wheeler against a good deal of advice. There it was in the NGR records: on 22 February 1898, the NGR Engineer-in-Chief, Mr Shores, had recommended *against* 'the adoption of this type and weight of engine'. And the local agent for Messrs Dubs, Mr Lorimer, had given a 'decided opinion against it', and pronounced that the curves on the Natal main line were 'fatal' to the employment of a ten-wheeled locomotive. If that wasn't enough, the Consulting Engineer in London described the adoption of any such engine as a 'risky experiment'. So, while the Committee admitted that Mr Reid's locomotive had 'undoubtedly enabled the railway to deal with an increased traffic', it reprimanded the management for introducing it 'without sufficient trial, and too hurriedly'. The strengthening of the track that the 'Reids' necessitated had cost the Colony £458 000, and it would only be 'ascertained by experience' whether they warranted such costs.

But by the time this report was presented railway affairs had dramatically changed, and it had nothing like the political force that one might have expected. One factor was that the Imperial Military Railways, operating on the Reef, had graciously endorsed Mr Reid's 'imbecile' ideas by ordering a good number of 'Reid' engines for themselves. But, closer to home, matters of considerably greater moment had taken the heat off the Locomotive Department. The Natal railway strike of March 1902 spelt the end of the Victorian ethos even more forcefully than engine failures out on the line. A more aggressive Opposition began to be heard in the Natal House, representing the 'labour' interest. For William McLarty, one of the MLAs for Durban from 1903, the mantle of Darwinian evolution fell now on the workers: their 'battle for survival' made the class of gentlemen look comparatively effete. (His reference to 'the shops' here is of course to the railway workshops):

As soon as a white man comes into this country he is spoiled, because he is expected not to do any hard manual labour. You put a man into the shops in Durban. He comes out full of energy, and he takes off his coat, and he hustles around. At the end of a week you see all his energy is fading away. The climate is blamed. But it is not the climate: it is the people. As the newcomer looks round he finds that they are all gentlemen. None of them intend to work . . . (36: 350)

This low rating of 'gentlemen' demonstrates nicely the change of ethos. The sort of engineering works that the likes of McLarty pounced on were not concoctions of the Locomotive Department, but things like safety bridges, gangways, facilities in the workshops, and so on. The heroic age was over; the functional, proletarian one had just begun, as an extraordinary exchange in the Natal Legislature on 5 August 1903 amply proves.

Apparently the NGR management, with an entrenched Victorian view of their employees, resorted to the grisly expedient, in the Durban Workshops, of measuring the amount of time that workers spent at the urinal. This drastic supervision required the reconstruction not of a locomotive but of a lavatory (or so, at any rate, one presumes: the ethos was still Victorian enough for the edifice in question to be strictly unmentionable.) Labour spokesman Mr McLarty, blaming the government for not listening to the men's side of any dispute, suddenly revealed to the House

one grievance that should be remedied within 24 hours. I think it is a disgrace to this Colony, and ought to be at once remedied . . . Such a

thing has never been known, and I consider that a far better way could be taken than the mean way that the Management has taken to prevent some of the men, as it were, pilfering time from the Government . . . (34: 502)

What was this thing that had 'never been known'? No one would bring the unholy word to their lips. After a while another 'labour' member, Mr Ancketill, moved that the present motion (the Railway Supply Bill) stand down, since the railway management

has seen its way to deny the essential right of privacy consistent with all recognised laws of decency to the men in the employment of the Railway in Durban . . .

At last we get a small clue as to what was offending proletarian sensibility:

I move that this vote stand down until the masonry at Durban is restored to its former proportions, and if necessary, a clerk or a timekeeper, or some other mode be adopted, which is said to be needful in order to prevent men wasting the time of the public service. (34: 508)

But how could one keep the whole process of legislation waiting while some mysterious masonry down in Durban was put in order?

The Prime Minister: it seems to me that the motion of the hon. member for Durban is a most unreasonable one, especially as it is one which cannot possibly be discussed — as the hon. member knows — without moving for strangers to leave the House . . .

The word 'strangers' was the euphemism, I suspect, for 'ladies', whose ears must be guarded even at the inconvenience of parliamentary process. But what would be more likely to keep 'strangers' glued to the proceedings than an item which, as the Prime Minister himself said, 'cannot possibly be discussed'? In fact, what were they discussing?

Nobody else in the House knows a thing about it except the two hon. members for Durban, and the hon. member says that this work must be restored, the brickwork must be restored to its original position (Mr Ancketill: Hear, hear) — because, he says, the workmen object to it having been removed.

Mr Ancketill:

No. Sir. I do not say that. I say because it is flagrantly indecent; and I repeat it, and I am sorry to say that I can never see the right hon. gentleman referring to this question without a smile on his face, showing the views that he holds in regards to these matters.

The Prime Minister:

I was never further from smiling.

Mr Ancketill:

I have seen you, Sir, smile to-night.

The Prime Minister:

I have said, and I repeat it, that I was never further from smiling than I was when I was speaking on this subject; and I still say that it is utterly wrong for the hon. member to ask that a vote shall stand down until a certain work is restored. I say it is positively indecent on the part of the hon. member . . .

Mr Pepworth:

I beg, Sir, to draw your attention to the fact that there are strangers in the gallery.

Mr McLarty:

The arguments of the right hon. Prime Minister are the most conclusive that could ever be brought before this House for the immediate appointment of an Appeal Board— (*Cries of 'Order, order'*)

The Acting Chairman:

The question is that strangers be ordered to withdraw. Those in favour please say Aye.

(Motion negatived . . .)

Mr Taylor:

I venture to say that if they (the Prime Minister or any member of the government) had had to put up with the indecency that these men have been subjected to they would not have been two hours in the employ of the Government . . . A strike would have been on long since . . . (34: 508f.)

Order was only restored when the Prime Minister promised that he would 'myself personally tomorrow' look into the matter. (I may add, by way of touching the surface of an unresearched drama, that it was while Sir Alfred Hime was examining the unmentionable masonry in Durban that his government fell, and the progressives came in under Sutton!)

With such excitements as these on the go, Mr Reid's 'horrible thing' was largely forgotten. In fact it was serving Natal too well by now to offer itself for political ammunition. Besides, its chief weakness was eventually put right by Mr Reid's successors. The remedy for the troublesome 'Reids' was marvellously simple — you removed the rear pair of its ten driving wheels and called it an eight-wheeler! In that condition the locomotive lived to do service for another seven decades. Several of these modified 'Reids' were shunting up and down the coaling wharves of Durban as late as 1977, long after the Natal Legislative Assembly and its Committees of Enquiry had passed to dust. And it is nice to know that — all those years later — a very different generation of railway men deferentially referred to those grimy maids-of-all-work as 'the Reids'.<sup>2</sup>

#### REFERENCES

- <sup>1</sup> *The NGR Magazine* 1905, quoted in Bizley, W.H., 'The Life and Times of the Inchanga Viaduct', *Theoria*, 50, May 1978, p. 1.
- <sup>2</sup> Gilberthorpe, John. Memories of the 'Reids'. *S.A. Rail* 29 (2) March–April 1989.

All references to parliamentary debates from *Debates of the Legislative Assembly of the Colony of Natal*, volume first and then page number, e.g. (41: 356).

W.H. BIZLEY

