

Railway & Canal Historical Society

20th Annual Transport History Book of the Year Awards 2023



Judges' report and announcement of winners

The Society's awards are made to the best new books in up to four categories and this year were chosen from those that received good reviews in our *Journal* issues of July and November 2022 and March 2023. For those unfamiliar with the process, the book reviewers score each book against four defined criteria. In descending order of importance these are: their perceived contribution to transport history, the quality and extent of research involved, their clarity and interest of writing and their presentation and usability. These weighted scores are the starting point for short-listing. The judges review the highest scoring books and settle on ideally three or four titles in each category for detailed consideration.

Each winning author receives a cheque and a framed certificate. One of the category-winning books is then named as the overall Book of the Year and its author receives a further cash prize and the David St John Thomas trophy to hold for one year.

This year the judges short-listed seven titles, drawn from the 84 publications reviewed in the *Journal*, an increase on the previous year's figure of 77 but still below pre-pandemic levels. They decided to make awards in three categories. Two of the short-listed books were railway atlases, both highly praised by their reviewer. In view of the difficulty in fairly assessing a work of reference against a narrative history, it was decided to place these in a separate Reference Book category. The other awards were for Railway and Canal & Waterways histories.

The first of the two railway atlases was:

***Scottish Railway Atlas Then and Now* by Paul Smith and Paul Jordan, published by Crecy Publishing, hardback, £20.**

The first third of this atlas presents the RCH map of 1920, in segments, with a modern map to the same scale on the facing page. The latter, portraying the network at 1st January 2021, also shows lines no longer in use, colour coded to indicate their current status – abandoned, converted to roads, converted to leisure use as bridle/cycle/footpaths, heritage lines etc. Most of the remainder of the book is taken up by a series of small extracts from large-scale OS plans showing each closed station. Opening and closing dates are given along with OS grid references and an indication of what remains to be seen at each site. Stations remaining open are illustrated by a small photo, generally taken from the platform end. The final pages present a miscellany of information – notes about minor railways and some significant structures, diagrams of the Glasgow subway and modern Edinburgh tramway, a list of motive power depots in 1950, details of preserved

railways, a summary of principal railway walks, photos of six surviving signal boxes and some pre-grouping tickets, plus a brief bibliography.

Clearly a great deal of work has gone into assembling all this information. To the best of our knowledge the 1920 RCH map has not previously been reprinted and to have it juxtaposed with a modern map will be useful for those wishing to explore the remains of the Scottish railway network in the field or from their armchairs. The judges were not convinced that the OS plan extracts, reproduced to varying scales, would be equally useful, given their tight focus on the central area of each station. They show too small an area to give an understanding of their context and surroundings or even, in many cases, to display the full track layout. Similarly, many of the photographs of surviving stations are too small to convey much information.

The second atlas was:

***Birmingham & West Midlands Railway Atlas (Second Edition)* by Joe Brown, published by Crecy Publishing, hardback, £25.**

Printed at a scale of fractionally over two inches to the mile, this large-scale atlas covers the area between Stafford in the north, Rugby in the east, Leamington Spa and Stratford upon Avon in the south and Kidderminster and Wolverhampton in the west. The maps show individual running lines and sidings, both currently existing and those now removed, the latter in a paler hue. The author has attempted to portray the system at its zenith but admits that not all changes have been shown – an impossible task within the confines of a single volume. Insets of the more complicated areas are provided at enhanced scale together with several sets of diagrams to show how layouts in certain areas have evolved over the years. Colour coding is used to indicate pre-Grouping ownership and to distinguish between open and closed stations. Many rail-connected industrial sites are also recorded. An extensive index of locations gives basic chronology and additional information about specific locations, supplemented by further information in text boxes on the maps themselves. New to this edition are mapping and chronology of the historic Birmingham, Black Country and Coventry tram networks. For lack of information the author has not tried to include the numerous industrial tramroads and railways that were such a feature of the Black Country, although the Earl of Dudley's Railway is shown.

The maps have been drawn digitally from scratch using computer software and incorporate a huge amount of information. The list of principal references gives an indication of the range and variety of sources consulted. In this edition the author has included corrections notified by readers of the first edition and he undertakes to include any further corrections in future editions. A nice touch is the bound-in bookmark tape and separate map key which can be attached to it.

The judges' verdict was to award the Reference Book prize to Joe Brown for his ***Birmingham & West Midlands Railway Atlas***.

Unfortunately Joe was prevented from attending because of a delay to his train. The prize was collected on his behalf by his publisher, Peter Waller.

Two books were short-listed in the Canals & Waterways category, the first being:

***Birmingham Canal Navigations – a History* by Phil Clayton, published by The Crowood Press, softback, £18.99.**

To judge from the bibliography in this book, it appears that no-one has attempted to write a comprehensive history of the BCN since S R Broadbridge's projected multi-volume David & Charles opus of the 1970s, of which only the first volume was published. There have been any number of books and journal articles dealing with specific aspects of the subject but here Phil Clayton bravely attempts to fill the gap in the literature with an overview in a single slim volume.

He takes a thematic approach with chapters describing the origins of the system, its subsequent expansion and improvement, the problems of providing sufficient water on a plateau devoid of significant rivers, traffic, working arrangements, relationships with the railways and on into the years of declining traffic and repurposing for leisure users.

Inevitably the author has had to be selective with the material at his disposal and, whilst the bibliography provides a guide to further reading, it is unfortunate that detailed source references are not given. The author states that extensive use has been made of BCN records held by the BCN Society and at The National Archives but, in the absence of detailed references, it is impossible to judge how much of the book is genuinely new research and how much is a bringing together and/or cross-checking of previous work. Other, more minor criticisms were the design of the text-box inserts which use a small font against a coloured background, making them difficult for those with less than perfect vision to read, and perhaps one or two detailed overall maps of the network would have been helpful. Nevertheless, the book is well planned, well written, and attractively presented with numerous illustrations, old and new, many in colour. As the first general history of an important canal network, it deserves a place on the bookshelf.

The second book considered in this category was:

***Waterways and Means – Power, Money and Folly in Irish Waterways History* by Brian Goggin, published by Troubador Matador, hardback, £28.**

Brian Goggin was diagnosed with terminal cancer in the summer of 2020. During his time remaining he assembled a collection of articles from his website and elsewhere which could be published posthumously. His family completed the task and this volume is the result. It is gratifying to learn that the website now forms part of the Irish National Archive.

Brian adopts a broad definition of 'waterway' – any body of water, natural, adapted or constructed which is used for the transport of people or goods. He also points out that waterways can be viewed from different perspectives, for example, as obstacles to land communication, as convenient rubbish dumps or even as unofficial swimming facilities. They had many unrecorded users. Other writers have tended to concentrate on the 'official', documented waterways. Brian identifies gaps in the literature, particularly in the areas of political and economic factors, and in this book attempts to fill some of them whilst identifying further areas that he thought should merit attention.

Focussing on the late 18th and early 19th centuries, around half the book explores the history of navigation on the Shannon Estuary and Limerick Navigation, including steamer services on the estuary, use of steam tugs on the loughs and the traffic in agricultural produce sent mainly to Liverpool and described in Brian's 2014 RCHS Clinker Lecture 'Steam, the Shannon and the Great British Breakfast'. The remainder of the book is a series of essays, arranged thematically, exploring some of the little researched areas identified by the author, some of them referred to as 'rabbit holes' by his editors – fascinating diversions discovered in the course of his research. These include subjects such as navigations that were never completed, waterways built to drain land but found useful for transport purposes, internal canal systems on Irish estates and an Judges' Report 2022

account of unofficial bathing in the Dublin canals. There is little documentation for many of these subjects but, nevertheless, Brian found sufficient material to tell their story - the extensive endnotes list more than 1500 references. He suggests that waterways historians could work profitably with local historians to dig deeper into these matters.

The specially commissioned maps are particularly helpful in supporting an understanding of the text. The reproduction of the photographs is perhaps not fully up to the best contemporary standards, and the book lacks an index. These are minor criticisms, however. Readers will encounter a mixture of scholarly articles and story-telling. To borrow a term usually applied to fiction, this is a book of short stories, some on unexpected topics, which can be dipped into and revisited. It deserves a wide audience both for its coverage of Irish waterways history and for its novel and innovative approach.

The Waterway and Canal category Award was made to Brian Goggin.



The Society's President, Gerald Leach, presents the certificate to Brian's wife, Anne (photo: Tim Edmonds)

The third and final category was Railway History. The majority of new transport history books continue to be about railways, a seemingly inexhaustible subject, and there is always fierce competition for this Award. The judges short-listed three titles, the first being:

***Alfred Raworth's Electric Southern Railway* by Peter Steer, published by Pen & Sword, hardback, £40.**

There have been previous books about the 'Southern Electric' but none with such a wide scope as this. It is a book which takes a non-partisan overview of all aspects of its subject, the electrification of the railways of

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south-east England and the personalities responsible. Raworth has been rather glossed over by previous writers, in favour of more charismatic figures such as Herbert Walker and Oliver Bulleid, but that deficiency is here made good. The pioneering work carried out by his father, John Smith Raworth, which included an early system of regenerative control for tramcars, is also covered.

After some years working for the family's electrical engineering business, in 1912, at the age of 30, Alfred joined the London & South Western Railway as assistant to its electrical engineer, Herbert Jones. He was immediately involved in the work of electrifying the suburban lines out of Waterloo station, commissioned in 1915. The L&SWR opted for a third rail, 600v DC system. Economy was key. Use of overhead conductors would have required expensive alteration to bridges and other infrastructure to increase clearances. The trains were converted from existing locomotive-hauled stock. This choice rather flew in the face of conventional thinking and, although adopted for pragmatic commercial and operational reasons by the Southern Railway after the 1923 Grouping, there was constant conflict with government departments and electrical industry experts who wished to impose a different, national standard to enable inter-operability. In the event, whereas the other three of the Big Four railway companies achieved little in the electrification field other than completing small-scale inherited schemes, the SR incrementally expanded its system at relatively low cost, on time and within budget, achieving traffic growth ('the spark effect') and profitability.

The author describes the internal and external politics affecting the SR at the 1923 Grouping and the decision as to which direction future electrification should take. He explains Raworth's brilliant power supply arrangements which ensured security by use of multiple supply points from the embryonic national grid and 'ring main' connections between railway sub-stations and describes the forward planning that enabled easy extension of the electrified network at each stage. But, in addition to explaining these technical aspects, the author also provides an insight into the principal characters involved and their working relationships.

The book is thoroughly researched and fully referenced, sources ranging from Raworth's own notebook and reports, company minute books, government papers, the contemporary technical press, biographies and memoirs of those involved and much of what has previously been written on the subject. The technical explanations, dismissed by the author as 'boy's explanations', are clear and appropriately pitched for the non-technical reader. The writing style is very readable. The book includes a bibliography and index. Production is up to the publisher's usual high standard with a generous-sized font. One slight criticism is that the colour plates are tucked into the middle of the book but not listed in the contents, which might cause readers some initial confusion, and an overall map of the system would have been helpful.

The second book in this category was:

***The Chester and Holyhead Railway – a new history* by Philip M Lloyd, published by Pen & Sword, hardback, £30.**

Based on the author's University of York PhD thesis, the book focuses on the reasons the railway was built, the choice of a coastal route to Holyhead rather than an inland one to Port Dinllaen, proposed by the GWR, and the effects the completed line had on society and politics in north Wales. His emphasis is on people rather than hardware and operations. The author contends it was a political railway first and foremost, to help the government maintain control of Ireland in the face of rising nationalism there following the Act of Union of 1801. It was thus an English railway, though located in Wales, which inevitably led to tensions.

He then examines various aspects of the line's impact – accidents and the time it took for people to understand the new dangers of fast-moving trains, the line's role in various conflicts, the growth of tourism and the LNWR management's attitude to the Welsh language. The narrative moves on to the railway's slow decline in the 20th century as the result of increasing road competition, followed by the more recent growth in passenger traffic – until interrupted by the covid pandemic. It concludes with the sobering suggestion that climate warming, more frequent extreme weather events and rising sea levels will threaten the long-term future of the line. Maybe in the long run Vignoles was correct in promoting the mid-Wales route and Stephenson got it wrong?

The author has drawn extensively on the 19th century press and Parliamentary papers. Curiously, he does not appear to have consulted railway company records and such prominent LNWR figures as Richard Moon and George Carr Glyn are not mentioned. There is some discussion of the innovative tubular Britannia and Conway Bridges but no mention of those, including William Fairbairn, who so significantly assisted Robert Stephenson. The emphasis is on the political background to the line and its social impact. The writing style is clear and straightforward. Comprehensive source notes, index, bibliography, table of station opening, closing and re-opening dates and an interesting table linking the book's photos and events described to their location along the line, mile by mile are all provided. Illustrations are a nice mix of old and new, the latter in colour. Production values are to the publisher's usual high standard and again the font-size is generous.

Our final book was:

***No Way Through – Great Glen Railway Schemes* by John McGregor, published by the Highland Railway Society, hardback, £20.**

One of the judges declared an interest in this book, having prepared it for publication.

It tells a story of railway politics involving, amongst others, four of the five principal Scottish railway companies, major landowners, lessees and their agents, engineers, lawyers and contractors. On a small-scale map, the shortest route from the Central Belt to Inverness apparently lies on the western side of Scotland, from Glasgow towards Fort William and thence along the Great Glen. However, the railway route in existence was the Highland Railway's more central main line north from Perth. The creation of an alternative, shorter route by a competitor would be a severe financial threat to the HR which, over much of its impoverished territory, was barely profitable.

The book is an account of the efforts made during the final decades of the 19th century to provide this competitive railway. Ultimately, all that was achieved was a local branch line from Spean Bridge on the West Highland line to Fort Augustus, part way along the Great Glen. It was built by a company owned and financed by the local landowners, and proved to be a useful local facility but never earned enough to cover its operating costs. It managed to survive until closed by the LNER in the 1930s.

This is an academic study, concentrating on the manoeuvring of the numerous parties involved. Comparable situations must have occurred frequently from the 1840s on, as railway companies further south battled with their neighbours for territory, though perhaps seldom involving so many different parties. In this case the author has had at his disposal an apparently vast repository of documentation: not just the railway company minute books but the personal correspondence of many of those involved, along with evidence given to support parliamentary bills and contemporary press reportage. This has enabled a balanced account to be compiled. It is refreshing to come across a book that, rather than follow events from the viewpoint of a single company, takes an objective overview. The study raises questions about the benefits and

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disadvantages of monopoly v. competition, government policy towards an impoverished region and, on the part of the local landowners, private risk for public benefit.

The sheer volume of detail does make the story rather difficult to follow in places, requiring great concentration from the reader. This is compounded by the many confusing place names to those not familiar with the area, and the sheer number of people involved in the story. The 'Who was Who' guide to the principal participants was a good idea in this respect but additional large-scale maps might have been helpful. There are comprehensive source notes and an index.

Faced with three outstanding contributions to the corpus of railway history, the judges had a difficult decision in deciding which book should receive this year's Railway History prize. After deliberation, they decided that the most significant contribution was Peter Steer's *Alfred Raworth's Electric Southern Railway*.



Gerald Leach presents the Society's certificate to Peter Steer (photo: Roger Brice)

The judges' final task was to decide the overall winner of the David St John Thomas silver cup and prize for 2023 Transport History Book of the Year. The judges had to compare the respective merits of the three category winners in dealing with their chosen subjects. The difficulty in assessing the value of a work of reference such as Joe Brown's *Birmingham & West Midlands Railway Atlas* against a narrative history has already been mentioned. The judges took the conscious decision to award the Book of the Year prize to one of the conventional narratives, either *Waterways and Means* or *Alfred Raworth's Electric Southern Railway*. The former, a very personal work, takes an unusual and innovative approach to a relatively little-known subject. The latter is a comprehensive account of the Southern Railway's electrification that covers

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ground largely ignored in earlier accounts and firmly sets events in their technical, commercial and political context. Ultimately there was little to choose between the two but, because they felt that Brian Goggin's *Waterways and Means* should appeal to a more general readership as well as the transport specialist, it better met the spirit of the criteria set out by our late sponsor.

Once again, sincere thanks go to those who work behind the scenes to make these awards possible – Matthew Searle and his panel of book reviewers, whose informed and objective assessments enable a draft shortlist to be drawn up for the judges.

Thanks go also to this year's fellow judges, who are volunteers drawn from the Society's membership. This year, Keith Fenwick and Fabian Hiscock agreed to serve on the panel. Keith has had a lifelong interest in railways, especially Scottish ones, and has been a line society journal editor for over 30 years. Fabian's main interest is in waterways history. His book *'Passing Through'* was the RCHS Canal Book of the Year in 2020.

Finally, our thanks as always go to the late David St John Thomas, author and publisher, who left the Society a generous legacy to provide the prize fund, which will enable us to continue these awards for the foreseeable future. Thanks are also due to the Society's Treasurer, David Smith, whose careful husbanding of the legacy has increased its value, enabling us to increase the value of the prizes this year, to keep pace with inflation.

Philip Brown

May 2023