

COLETTE HOOPER

RAILWAYS  
— OF —  
THE GREAT WAR  
— WITH —  
MICHAEL PORTILLO



Based on a BBC Programme **BBC**

## About the Book

*From the exploits of railwaymen at the Front to the secrets of railway spies who worked behind enemy lines; the manufacture of munitions in railway workshops to the role of railways in post-war remembrance – this book explores some of the remarkable stories of the railway war. Individually, each illuminates a different aspect of the conflict. Taken together, they provide us with a fresh perspective on the First World War as a whole.*

The Great War was the quintessential railway war. Railways helped to precipitate this mechanized conflict: they defined how it was fought and kept the home front moving; they conveyed millions to the trenches and evacuated the huge numbers of wounded. The railways sustained a terrible war of attrition and, ultimately, bore witness to its end.

In *Railways of the Great War*, Michael Portillo and Colette Hooper tell the forgotten story of the war on the tracks and explore the numerous ways in which Britain's locomotives, railway companies and skilled railway workforce moulded the course of the conflict. From mobilizing men and moving weapons, to transporting food for troops and later taking grieving relatives to the battlefields on which their loved ones had fallen, the railways played a central role throughout this turbulent period in our history.





A Royal Engineers working party on the railway near Ypres on the Western Front in Belgium.

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Female ticket collectors in 1915, filling the shoes of railwaymen sent to the Front.

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— WITH —  
MICHAEL PORTILLO



For Emmeline, my railway baby.



Soldiers waving goodbye to loved ones as they leave Victoria Station in January 1915.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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I HAVE ADVANCED gingerly into this historical territory, where so many far more expert than I have trodden before me. Of the huge literature devoted to the First World War and to the railways, titles I have turned to again and again include David Stevenson's masterly overview of the conflict, *1914-1918: The History of the First World War*, and Christian Wolmar's accessible and inspiring railway histories, especially *Engines of War* and *Fire and Steam*. The two volumes of Edwin Pratt's *British Railways in the Great War*, published in 1921, are not for the faint-hearted but are a mine of detailed information unmatched elsewhere.

I must thank all the contributors interviewed for the series, too many to name but without whom neither the television programmes nor this book would be possible. I'm especially grateful to those who have given up their time to answer my questions and double-check facts. Special thanks are due to David Stevenson, who has acted as historical consultant to the programme and kindly reviewed this text. Of course, responsibility for any errors that remain is mine alone.

Colleagues past and present at Boundless have helped me build up my understanding of and passion for railway history over the last four years. I would particularly like to thank John Comerford for thinking of me for this project and Alison Kreps for her steady hand on the tiller; Tom Richardson and Bella Lloyd for sharing their research and contacts; and Rosie Wilcox and Giorgia Papapietro for their hard work on sourcing the images for this book. Chris Baker, thank you for your patience while I multitasked on this project and the programme.

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Special thanks to Michael Portillo, for writing the foreword but more importantly for his tireless commitment to sharing our rich railway history, come rain or shine, and to the BBC's Pam Cavannagh for steering us through this new railway venture.

A million thanks to Jane and Margaret – I couldn't have written this book without your backup.

Finally, thank you, Ian, for always believing in me, for all the late nights reading drafts and for inspiring me to make this book the best it could be.



## FOREWORD BY MICHAEL PORTILLO

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THE RAILWAYS HELPED to precipitate the First World War. They were the catalyst for mechanized war, enabling slaughter and destruction to occur on an unprecedented scale. Logistical skill or incompetence – organizing well or badly the trains that carried men, animals, food and shells – helped to determine the outcome of battles, arguably of the war. Eventually, an armistice was signed, in a railway carriage.

Because I had made numerous programmes about Britain's railways in the mid nineteenth century, I was used to thinking about the good that they had brought: for example, the increase in wealth through industrialization, fresh milk and fish to our cities, and seaside holidays for the working classes. In making these programmes about the First World War, I had to accept that its horrors could not have occurred without trains. No other transport system could have provided such an efficient conveyor belt, carrying millions of men to the trenches and tons of high explosive to annihilate them.

Accepting that that was the role allotted to railways, I began to delve into the human efforts involved in adapting them to total war. In Britain, the rail companies were huge employers, and their workers were skilled with machinery. They worked with pride and a highly developed sense of common purpose. Lord Kitchener's call for army volunteers attracted vast numbers of railwaymen.

The names of many appear on memorials at our railway stations. It is worth pausing by them, now that the centenary of their deaths is upon us. Men plucked from the footplate, signal boxes and ticket offices died on the Somme or in a hundred other battles.

Britain's mobilization was deftly managed. Sixty-eight thousand soldiers of the British Expeditionary Force were conveyed by train mainly to Southampton by the end of August 1914, and thence to the Continent. They arrived in time to fight at Mons and to make a difference. Might German forces have reached Paris in their absence? The railway companies also produced their ambulance trains by the end of August, although nobody had foreseen that they would have to be taken to France, where they handled unbelievable numbers of casualties.

Despite the efficiency of the British mobilization, in the following year we faced a chronic shortage of shells. Eric Geddes, a railway manager through and through, was detached from the North Eastern Railway to deal with the crisis, and then to build and organize railways at the Front. He is a contender for the title 'The man who won the war', but he could rely on a large number of troops drawn from the railways, men who laid and re-laid tracks, cleared wreckage and kept locomotives running, under the screams of artillery.



Michael Portillo on location at Fort Nelson, near Portsmouth.

The British Army understood the need to keep its millions of soldiers – and their horses – fed. Reliable supplies of rations, sufficiently high in calories for men working and fighting in trenches, were dispatched by train and conveyed to the dugouts. In the final stages of the war, as German soldiers went hungry, the British advantage may have been decisive.



At home, the appearance of Britain was changed. Young women greatly outnumbered young men. Many children had a father away on service or dead. The factories and railways were short of men, and women had to be recruited. Pre-war suffragettes helped to recruit 'munitionettes', who filled the artillery shells with explosives. Women (some in breeches) appeared in signal boxes, as porters and even station mistresses.

The First World War was a railway war like no other. It was different from previous European conflicts, because by 1914 the railways had reached such a high degree of development that all war planning on the Continent depended on efficient mobilization by rail - in a process that, once launched, was evidently unstoppable. A generation later, at the time of the Second World War, the lorry, jeep and tank were advanced enough to reduce somewhat armies' reliance on trains.

A century on from the outbreak of the First World War, historians and the public are trying to understand its causes and its course better. I for one had never realized until now that it *was* a railway war. Grasping that helps us to appreciate how commanders planned offensives and defined objectives. The general who did not grasp logistics was headed for defeat. Britain was moving in that direction until it tackled the shell crisis of 1915 and the bottlenecks on the railways in France and Belgium the following year.

Nearly a hundred years after the world's first locomotives had run in Britain, the advances in technology and industry, spurred on by railways, had created weapons with awful destructive power that humankind apparently could not control. Humanity had never previously had to wrestle with that thought, but it's remained a haunting issue for us ever since.

Making this television series about the railways in the First World War has been a more sombre task than

following leads in a *Bradshaw's* handbook, as I have done previously. There's an inescapable poignancy in visiting the sites of battles on the Western Front, or even the faint traces of where munitions factories once stood. But my guess is that there is presently a national mood to remember, and to honour, those who toiled at home and fought abroad.

After the war's end, a railway wagon brought back to Britain the remains of an unknown soldier. For nearly a hundred years we have paid tribute at his tomb, honouring through him approximately a million British Empire troops who died and millions more from the other belligerent powers.

If the unknown soldier can be a symbol for slaughter on an incomprehensible scale, then perhaps those names on railway station memorials can also be a proxy, enabling us to salute all those who served and suffered during that terrible conflict.

May 2014

# INTRODUCTION BY COLETTE HOOPER

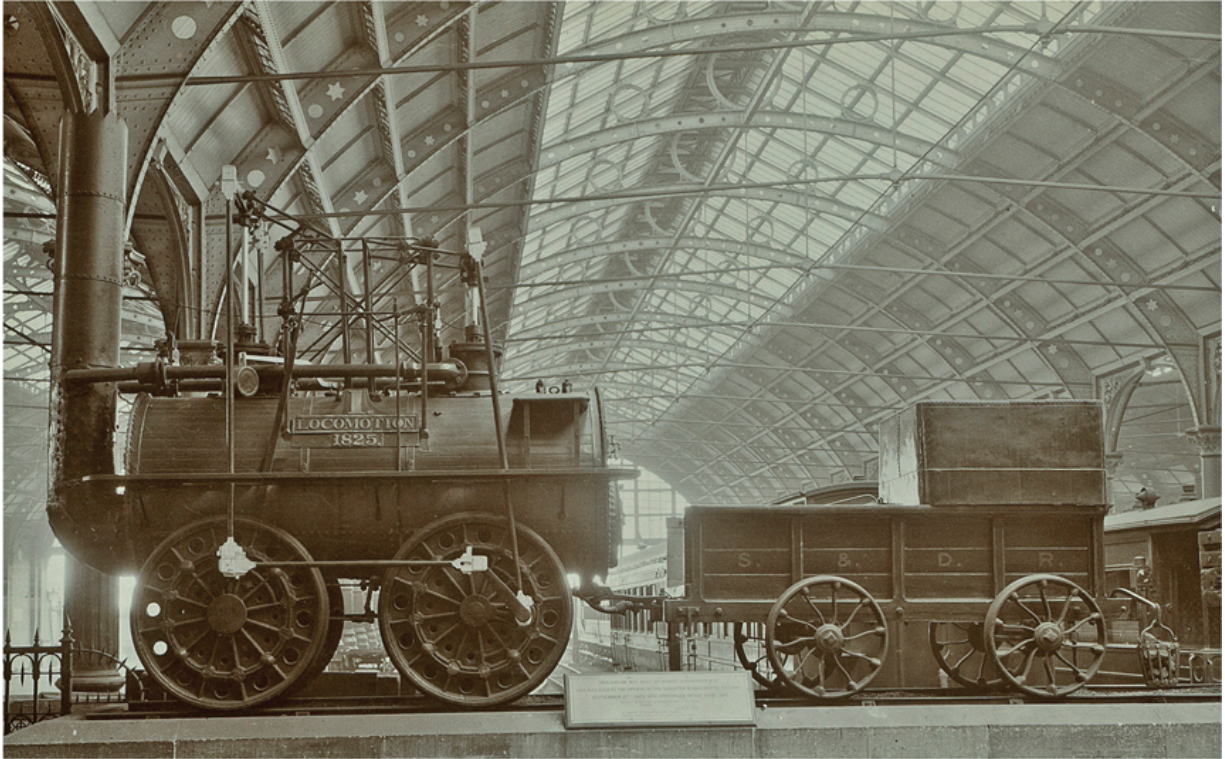
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## 1914 – A RAILWAY WORLD

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BY THE EVE of the First World War, almost a century had passed since the birth of the railways in Britain. Forged in the crucible of the industrial revolution, they had carried its transformative effects throughout the country and beyond – the embodiment of and the engine for extraordinary economic growth. By 1900, almost half a million miles of tracks had been laid across the globe. And as shining steam locomotives flew along the rails, billowing clouds of smoke and steam, the modern world grew up in their wake. Britain had led the way as industrialization, urbanization and mechanization took hold across Europe. By the turn of the twentieth century, the Railway Age appeared to be an era of unstoppable progress.

This period of rapid industrial expansion was also one of unprecedented peace on the Continent. Since 1815 there had been no war involving all the Great Powers. By the early twentieth century, some people believed that there never would be again. In June 1913, *The Economist* referred to trends ‘which are slowly but surely making war between the civilised communities of the world an impossibility’. Two months later, a magnificent ‘Peace Palace’, intended as the home of international arbitration and funded by Andrew Carnegie – whose entrepreneurial career had begun on the railways – was opened at The Hague.



*Locomotion No. 1* – George Stephenson's engine, built for the Stockton and Darlington railway, the world's first public railway, opened in 1825.

This forward-looking world ran to the rhythm of the railway. Just as today the internet seems omnipresent, so, on the eve of the First World War, the railways were woven into the fabric of everyday life. In Edwardian Britain, commuters set out from recently built suburbs each morning. Cheap trains carried industrial workers to and from their jobs in smoky manufacturing towns, and summer specials whisked them off to fresher climes for their annual holidays. Indeed, all along Britain's coasts, flourishing seaside resorts from Blackpool to Brighton benefited from the arrival of the railways, which had also opened up the wild beauty of some of Britain's remotest corners to new waves of tourists.



CZAR

11-6-22  
KING GEORGE



The leaders of peaceful pre-war Europe were linked by close family ties. Cousins Tsar Nicholas II (left) and King George V at the wedding of the daughter of Kaiser Wilhelm II – also their cousin – in Berlin, 1913.

By now, people had grown used to the sight of the tracks that cut a swathe through the countryside. To the Victorians, who had witnessed their extraordinarily rapid multiplication, they had been a blot on the landscape. But vast viaducts that loomed over valleys and tunnels that plunged into hillsides had since become part of the scenery. In the cities, railway stations were key landmarks, while beneath Britain's capital the labyrinth of tunnels that housed the pioneering Underground continued to grow.

Londoners, along with all the other teeming urban populations that characterized industrial Britain, relied on the railways to feed them, and as well as staples the railways carried to the inner cities fresh delicacies, from Hampshire watercress to Yorkshire rhubarb. In the opposite direction, news and information radiated out along the railway lines. Trains carried newspapers and letters, while the telegraph wires that followed the tracks – initially used in Britain by railway operators for signalling – provided ordinary people with the means to send messages over vast distances at unmatched speed.



Andrew Carnegie's Peace Palace in The Hague, which opened in August 1913.

As the railways developed, they had become big business for Britain. Right from the start, entrepreneurs realized there was money to be made from this new technology, and in the 1840s Britain had witnessed an extraordinary railway-building bubble. At the peak of this so-called 'railway mania', between 1844 and 1847, a staggering 9,500 miles of lines – the equivalent of 90 per cent of today's railway network – were authorized by Parliament. Amazingly, despite the inevitable crash that followed the boom, two-thirds of these lines went on to be built. During this Victorian free-market free-for-all, new railway companies proliferated throughout the land, and on the eve of the First World War Britain boasted a multitude of mostly thriving railway concerns.



At the top of the pile were the big players – the most powerful of which were the London and North Western, the Great Western, the Midland and the North Eastern. These companies oversaw huge railway empires that were about far more than simply running trains. They managed huge engineering works – indeed, in places like Swindon whole new towns had grown up to serve their operations. They owned horses, motor vehicles and steamships; they even ran hotels. To showcase their power and wealth, they had poured money into ostentatious buildings, such as the remarkable station and hotel complex at St Pancras, built by the Midland Railway in the 1860s. But there were also plenty of middling enterprises and dozens of smaller railway operators, some responsible for just a few miles of track. Some 600,000 people depended on the railways for their livelihoods, among them some of Britain's top engineering talent and sharpest business minds.



Hampstead Underground station, which opened in 1907.



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PLAYS DURING  
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A FEW MINUTES BRINGS YOU TO THE  
DOOR FROM ALL PARTS

IF YOU TRAVEL BY TUBE  
THE STATION IS WITHIN ONE  
MINUTE



300 Rooms.

Exquisite





The Midland Grand Hotel at St Pancras – a grandiose expression of the ambition and power of Britain's Victorian railway companies.

And of course countless other industries relied on the rails. From factories that had sprung up alongside the tracks in the nineteenth century, British industry exported its products across the globe. Steel from Port Talbot, lace from Nottingham, pen nibs from Birmingham and biscuits from Reading – the railways carried them all.

Many of the consumers for these products were denizens of the vast British Empire. The mother country had been quick to see the value of exporting locomotive technology to its Colonies and Dominions, and had overseen ambitious railway-building schemes in India, Canada and elsewhere.

In conjunction with steamships, another nineteenth-century innovation, these tracks opened up new markets for British goods but also carried cheap imports, cutting prices for British consumers of all sorts of products from wheat to cocoa.

The railways were the arteries of this newly globalized economy, and the tracks were also a vital tool for exerting political power. Across the British Empire, they reinforced Britain's authority - a very visible reminder that troops could arrive swiftly to suppress dissent. By the early twentieth century, other European powers - notably Germany - were seeking to extend their own sphere of influence, and railways were an ideal means of doing so. Indeed, in the early years of the twentieth century, new railway routes such as the German-financed Berlin-Baghdad railway, which promised to give Germany a foothold in the Persian Gulf, became a source of international friction.

Within Europe, however, to most people it must have seemed as if railway expansion had brought nations closer. In 1870, there were some 64,000 miles of tracks in Europe. By 1914, that figure had almost tripled to 180,000 miles. This impressive network encouraged unprecedented numbers of travellers to board trains to explore the Continent. In the 1860s, the South Eastern and Chatham railway recorded an average of 310,000 people crossing the Channel each year. By 1913, more than 1.2 million were making the trip.



Early twentieth-century tourists flocked to Switzerland to marvel at the mountains from the comfort of the railway.

Never had the sights of Europe been within such easy reach. Well-heeled tourists from Britain could experience the Belle Epoque in all its glory. They could marvel at Art Nouveau Paris and catch the sun on the French Riviera before having a flutter in the Casino at Monte Carlo. Germany's Rhine attracted trainloads of tourists, who disembarked to enjoy paddle-steamer excursions, remarking on the castles that lined the river's banks – romantic relics of a violent past that was surely gone for ever. In Switzerland, extraordinary feats of railway engineering carried tourists to the very mountain peaks, where they could sample the new-found thrills of winter sports. And travellers bound for Constantinople could simply revel in the journey itself, on board a luxurious 'Orient Express'.



# ORIENT-EXPRESS

COMPAGNIE INTERNATIONALE  
des Wagons-Lits  
et des Grands Express Européens

## PARIS - VIENNE - CONSTANTINOPLE

SERVICE QUOTIDIEN ENTRE PARIS-VIENNE ET VICE-VERSA

Paris	7.10	Vienna	8.25
Strasbourg	9.22	Salzburg	2.00
Stuttgart	3.54	Munich	4.00
Munich	6.54	Stuttgart	9
Salzburg	1.10	Strasbourg	12.00
Vienna	1.53	Châlons	4.17
	6.52	Paris	7.25

PARIS-CONSTANTINOPLE

Paris	7.10	Constantinople	8.25
Strasbourg	9.22	Salzburg	2.00
Stuttgart	3.54	Munich	4.00
Munich	6.54	Stuttgart	9
Salzburg	1.10	Strasbourg	12.00
Vienna	1.53	Châlons	4.17
	6.52	Paris	7.25

### RETENIR SES PLACES A

PARIS	BADEN-BADEN	STUTTGARD
MUNICH	VIENNE	BUDAPEST
CONSTANTINOPLE	LONDRES	
BRUXELLES	BERLIN	BUCAREST

W. P. GUTHRIE, PARIS



The Orient Express started running in the late nineteenth century and came to epitomize the glamour of international rail travel.

Right up to the eve of war, pleasure-seekers continued consulting railway timetables to plan their next adventure, oblivious to signs that the optimistic world of the Belle Epoque was slipping away. Behind its glittering facade, it was possible to glimpse portents of the trauma that lay ahead. Diplomatic crises periodically raised the spectre of war. And throughout the preceding century, while the Great Powers refrained from entering into a general conflict, the peace was punctured by smaller clashes, including the Crimean War of 1854–6 and the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–1. Even while builders at The Hague laboured to construct the Peace Palace, government spending on armaments grew ever more extravagant. In a *Times* article of September 1913 it was projected that: ‘At the present rate of increase, Europe in ten years more would be spending on armaments annually a sum nearly sufficient to replace the mercantile marine of the whole world as it stands to-day.’

When the cataclysm came, it brought the express train of optimistic progress to a juddering halt. The outbreak of war sent tourists and expatriates racing to the railway stations, desperate to return to their home countries. In the interconnected world that the railways had helped to create, the violence quickly rippled outwards. The fruits of industrialization became the instruments of a mechanized war. And the railways, that emblem of civilization, were called to the service of a barbaric conflict, where cutting-edge technology would soon be juxtaposed with the primitive conditions of the trenches.

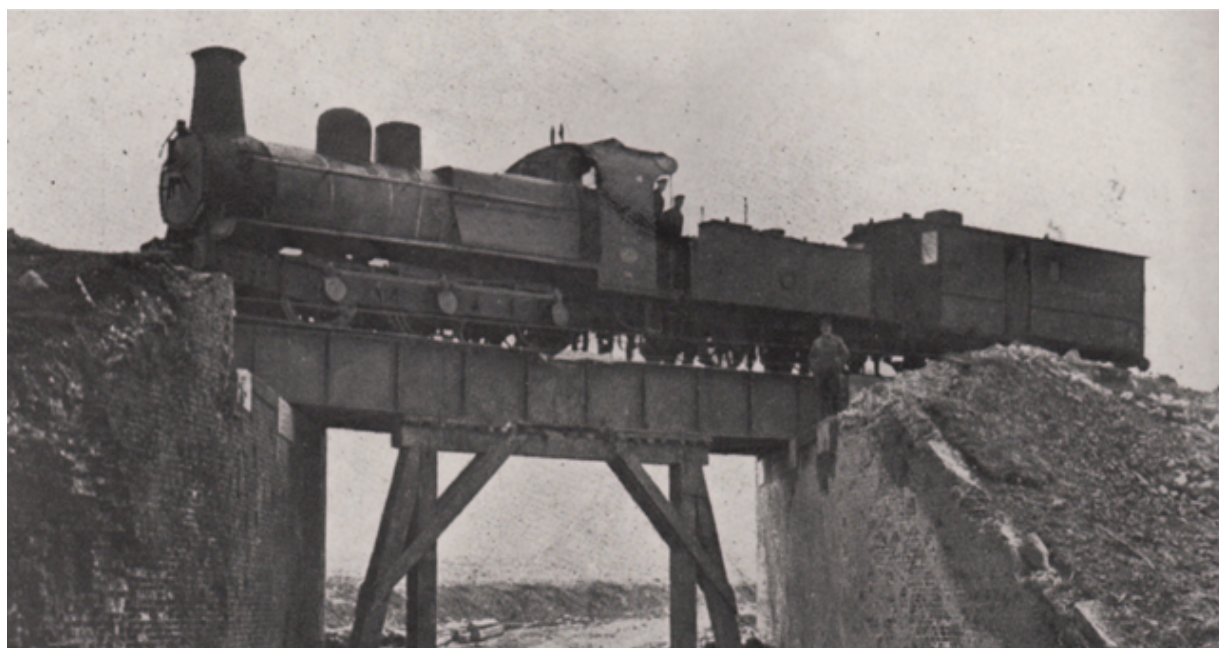
## 1914 – 1918 – THE RAILWAY WAR

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THE TRACKS AND trains that had dominated European life in peacetime were destined also to dominate it in war.

Railways were influencing military strategy before a shot was fired. They influenced where the war was fought and helped entrench the stalemate. Trains carried deadly weapons, ammunition, supplies and soldiers to the battlefields. And as total war extended its reach ever further, Britain's powerful rail industry was forced to make changes that ultimately altered the course of our railway history.

From the exploits of railwaymen at the Front to the secrets of railway spies who worked behind enemy lines; the manufacture of munitions in railway workshops to the role of railways in post-war remembrance – this book explores some of the remarkable stories of the railway war. Individually, each illuminates a different aspect of the conflict. Taken together, they provide us with a fresh perspective on the First World War as a whole.



Railway technology applied to war on the Western Front.





The innovations of the industrial age were now used to wreak destruction on an unprecedented scale.

As we dig deeper into the war's railway history, new themes emerge and we see familiar stories from a different angle. Learning about the military planners' reliance on the railways helps us to understand why the conflict snowballed so quickly. By building up a picture of the vast quantities of materiel carried by the railways to the trenches, we better comprehend the extraordinary scale of the operations on the Western Front. Tracing the evolution of transport policy over the course of the war demonstrates how, even in the years of stalemate, tactics were constantly changing as both sides innovated to try to break the deadlock. And by discovering how railway managers helped political and military leaders learn how to wage industrial war, we revive the memory of forgotten figures who shaped the war's history.

On the home front, focusing on the railway story highlights the extent to which the war changed civilian lives, as British passengers jostled with military traffic on the lines and railwaymen were replaced by women workers



on the tracks. Many of those railway employees who went to war never returned. By exploring how they were mourned, we can begin to understand the shock waves of grief that spread throughout the nation in the aftermath of the conflict.



The railways carried millions of men and huge quantities of munitions to the front line.

In the hundred years that have passed since the outbreak of the First World War, countless books have been written about the causes and course of the conflict. It has become a much-contested area of historical debate. But what cannot be disputed is the fundamental role played by the railways and those who worked on them. As we try to pick a path through this turbulent period in our history, we can follow the tracks of the railway war – from the twilight of the Belle Epoque, through the carnage of the fighting and into the shell-shocked post-war world.