

Journeys to the Rhine

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I

“Posterity may be shot, like a bullet in a tube, by atmospheric pressure from Winchester to Newcastle: that is a fine result to have among our hopes; but the tube-journey can never lend much to picture and narrative; it is as barren as an exclamatory O! Whereas the happy outside passenger seated on the box from the dawn to the gloaming gathered enough stories of English life, enough of English labours in town and country, enough aspects of earth and sky, to make episodes for a modern *Odyssey*.”

George Eliot lamented the passing of the stagecoaches in *Felix Holt*. Recent developments in the Harvie itinerary bring home the prospect of losing another *Odyssey*.

As easy as winking, more or less, I take the 7.20 341 bus from Islington to Waterloo International. Lovely station, pity about the railway. The 8.27 Eurostar to Brussels jogs through a mist-wreathed Kent on a line that the Tommies of 1915 would have known.

Occasional bulldozers and mounds of chalk show a high-speed link slowly taking shape. Then the ‘bullet-in-a-tube’ business from Folkestone to Fréthun. Lille Europe at 11.30, Brussels Midi at 12.10, Cologne at 14.57.

By eight in the evening, the lights of the Ammertal show up from our new branch-line train: Entringen below its castle, catholic Ammerhof, protestant Schwärzlocher Hof, with its peacocks and cider, and then Tübingen Westbahnhof, at the foot of my garden, opened as a strategic necessity (accessing the university’s hospitals) in July 1913.

The trip gives time to digest and file stories from the last few weeks’ British papers. *Scotland: a Short History* moves on a bit. Between Mainz and Stuttgart I wrote this.

I’m a Whitmanite, not a Theroux traveller: shunning human contact but fancying the eucharistic ‘mass of life’ element. Churches, next to stations, matter to this Tractarian Calvinist: candles lit, prayers murmured for – rather too many – dead friends. Though the pilgrimage element is more attenuated these days.

Before 1993, I started at Victoria, with a creaky electric to Dover Maritime. Then on to the old ferry *Invicta* (I once crossed on it in 1961, but it was now sliced in half and used as a waiting-room) and down gluey companionways to the Jetfoil to Ostend.

After a couple of hours threshing through milky seas, I wheeled my stuff along the platform, where the bridge had buttresses showing the Scots steam engines which once ran Belgian trains, on to an express some of whose carriages were lettered in cyrillics. Into Brussels by three.

As alternative, there was Liverpool Street to Parkeston Quay and a big Dutch ferry with fish buffet to match, then Hook and megaport Rotterdam looming up in the dawn. Cologne in late afternoon.

There were (and are) variations. You could overnight along the Rhine, in Königswinter, Boppard, Andernach or Koblenz; or sail up it from Cologne to Mainz on the magnificent Köln-Düsseldorfer paddle-steamers.

Trout, washed down with riesling, as the castles slid by, nearly equalled the salmon lunches on the *Duchess of Hamilton*, en route to Inveraray or Campbeltown, before the accountants scrapped her. The grand-bourgeois cities of Utrecht, Haarlem or Bruges: silent streets in fog, Simenon-haunted bars.

Once there were the swish Olau boats from Sheerness to Vlissingen – I walked across Zeeland to the old Scots Staple at Veere. And once I sailed to Hamburg and saw the Neuwerk lighthouse looming up in the dawn at the Elbe-mouth, as Davies and Carruthers sighted it from the deck of the *Dulcibella*, a century ago, in Erskine Childers' *The Riddle of the Sands*.

There are also the local lines encountered en route: always interesting, and these days harbingers of hope for public transport. The Belgian coastal tramway across the Dunes, the Dürener Kreisbahn winding up the Rurtal, and these days packing the passengers in.

The rack-and-pinion up the Drachenberg, across the Rhine from Bonn, and at Mannheim the Oberrheinisch Eisenbahngesellschaft to the vineyards of Weinheim and Bad Durkheim. Further south, the huge Karlsruhe system, with its inter-urban express trams, has boosted passengers in the last decade by a factor of *eight*.

II

I have, however, mixed feelings about parts of the new order. The Deutsche Bahn does a cheap fare, about one hundred and thirty pounds return from Tübingen to London. You can use the Thalys 'high-speed' train from Cologne to Brussels. Don't. It's a modified version of the French TGV and horrid: not a tilting train but as poky as one (be warned, prospective Virgin passengers: tilting trains have to tilt within the existing loading gauge, so they're about a quarter smaller than orthodox trains, and you get the Konrad Lorenz goose syndrome every time someone with a big rucksack gets on). The slower but elegant and roomy Belgian EuroCity is, by comparison, paradise.

Why not fly? Count up the hanging about, the connecting trains and buses: Tübingen-London works out at about seven hours, divided into awkward and restless one-hour chunks. One and a half hours to the airport, an hour checking in, one and a half hours in the air, an hour waiting for luggage, two hours by underground and bus to Islington.

Rail is over three hours longer, but relaxing and productive. With modernisation, London-Brussels will drop to two hours, Brussels-Cologne to two, Cologne-Stuttgart to two-and-a-half, making the times near-competitive. Through trains might shave a bit off this. OK? Not really.

The penalty will be dullness. The rail journey up or down the Rhine is apart from the Alpine crossings the greatest panorama in Europe: Cologne with its cathedral, Bonn and the Siebengebirge, where Wagner's Siegfried started his journey, the Ehrenbreitstein at Koblenz (*The Broadstone of Honour*, from which an obsessive Irishman called Kenelm Digby devised, in the years of Napoleon, the revival of chivalry) the Lorelei, and castle after castle, vineyard and cliff.

Endlessly changing conditions: storm and sunrise, crimson gloaming – Turner to Wagner – and filigree snow. And in fifteen-odd years only one delay of over half an hour: when the Rhine was up to the axles, and we went on the right bank line. Millions of tons of oil and coal and containers and cars rush past in barges and push-tows – terrifying on a road but fascinating and heartening on the R1.

Thirty years ago, I saw the last of the two-funnel steam tugs billowing smoke over the rapids at Bacharach. A couple of years back, a paddle-steamer of the 1850s came into view north of Boppard, splashing towards Koblenz with a payload of tweedy Victorians. A replica built for the tourist trade? Or a revenant born of too much *wein und würost*?

III

In under two years Deutsche Bahn's new *schnelltrasse* will shoot us through the hills of Nassau and the Taunus, from Cologne via Bonn airport and Limburg to Frankfurt. The Rhine will be only a distant glimmer.

I'm already working on an alternative, as this sounds like seeing London from the Bakerloo. Mainz, Koblenz, and Bonn will still have to be served, so the Rhine expresses – or some of them – will survive. Keep a place for me.

About the same time navvies will meet under the St Gotthard Pass, driving a tunnel from Arth-Goldau to Bellinzona. Around 2008 this will accelerate Zurich-Milan trains by an hour, and another great panorama will vanish. Will they keep that coil of steel round and round and through and over the hills to Goschenen and Airolo for the odd tourist train, or will it become one of Europe's strangest ruins, like the forgotten line that the Englishman Robert Fell and the Scot James Brunlees built over the Mont Cenis Pass in the 1860s, before the tunnel opened?

It probably will stay, as a fire closed the road tunnel a fortnight back, knocking out two of the five Alpine crossings. Road haulage is grinding against its limits, in a process parallel to, but less disastrous than, the air travel situation since 11 September. We will then need all the capacity we can get.

The journey, Leonard Woolf wrote, not the arrival, matters. Its quality – look, friends, at all the culture in the foregoing and compare it with Neanderthal's own Jeremy Clarkson – makes the case for rail. We don't have to drill our way through every mountain that we meet, so that we make the trip ten minutes quicker than a wanker in a Porsche.

Travel is to be savoured: it's wine, cafés, good food, churches and castles, and the view from the train, the balcony of Europe. I hope it stays that way.

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