

**AN ADDRESS ON THE
PROSPECTS OF RAILWAY
ENTERPRISE IN NATAL**

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An Address on the Prospects of Railway Enterprise in Natal by Fred. Boileau Elliot

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RAILWAY ENTERPRISE

IN NATAL.

A public meeting of the inhabitants of Pietermaritzburg was held in the Town Hall on Thursday evening for the purpose of learning the views and opinions of Mr. F. B. Elliot on that subject, previous to his departure by the next mail steamer.

His Worship the Mayor opened the meeting at the hour appointed (half-past seven) by stating the objects for which it had been convened. He then introduced Mr. Elliot, recommending those present to give him their most earnest and patient attention.

Mr. Elliot, who was received with hearty cheers, spoke as follows:—Mr. Mayor and Gentlemen, the question to which I have been asked to address myself to-night refers to the past, present, and future prospects of railway enterprise in Natal. I should not do justice to this question were I to confine my remarks altogether to the influences which the system of railways might exert upon this colony alone. I shall, therefore, trespass upon your patience while I touch upon its early history, and state the progress it has made in other countries; and I shall offer no apology for claiming from you a patient and attentive hearing, because the subject with which I am about to deal is in itself one which can scarcely fail both to interest and amuse you, and because it is one to which the thoughts of so many among you have been long turned with anxious solicitude. It has often been said that men may live in habitual contact with the most wonder-

ful and beautiful objects, and yet remain altogether unimpressed by their magnificence. The peasant may dwell beneath the mountain range, whose colossal peaks are covered with eternal snows, and yet show no homage for its grandeur; and multitudes will wander listlessly upon the shore, unconscious of the sublimity of the ocean. Thus, the very wild flowers upon which we so heedlessly trample during a summer's stroll, would, to the inhabitants of the frozen north, form objects of unceasing wonder and admiration; while the prairie and primeval forests, which form only the mere hunting ground to the American Indian, become to the pale-faced wanderer a glorious theme for poetry and romance. And this principle is true with reference to man's intercourse with the realms of science. We are often ignorant of its operations, as we are familiar with its effects. The blessings which it confers are daily enjoyed, till their amplitude makes us indifferent to the causes and means from which they originate; indeed, we seldom inquire into the causes by which scientific results are produced. Such is the case, to a great extent, with that mighty and elaborate locomotive system which has arisen under our own observation, which filled all with admiration, till its wonders were almost too numerous to be appreciated, and yet, with the arrangements and operations of which so few of us are acquainted. No mightier physical agency has ever been discovered for the promotion of the comfort and welfare of man. The discovery, or rather the invention of printing, gave to genius an immortality, and to mind an almost universal range. By the spread of true religion, by the establishment of a purer morality, and by the advancement of science, literature, and art, it effected a revolution in the world. Yet, not less glorious or wonderful were the moral and physical triumphs which attended the invention of the steam engine. That invention was one which, in hackneyed phrase, seemed to have annihilated time, and bridged over the difficulties of space, economised labour, opened up a thousand new sources of wealth, and, by facilitating communication and thus fostering the social and commercial relations between classes and nations, turned enmity into friendship, and promoted peace and good will among men. Yet what were the

circumstances attending the birth of this glorious child of genius and good promise? Was it ushered into the world amid the cheering plaudits of a grateful people? Or was it nurtured into vigorous youth by the love of a nation? No! such was not the case. It was born amid poverty and trouble, and baffled hope long watched beside its cradle. Few, save its parents, could recognise in its puny infancy that spirit of unconquerable vitality against which no opposition or persecution could long prevail, but which was destined, in after years, to shower upon the heads of its early opponents and persecutors the blessings of its success. Gentlemen, nothing is more painfully productive of genuine self-abasement than to turn to a page in the history of one's country which betrays the littleness and intolerance of that which we have prided ourselves in considering a great and free people. No words could be strong enough to condemn the treatment suffered by the first advocates of railways in England. Most of those who first advocated the introduction of railways were made the victims of unmerited neglect or persecution. The fate of Mr. Thomas Gray was a reproach to the justice and intelligence of England. He spoke, wrote, worked, and travelled from one end of the land to the other, in order to convince the world of the advantages of railways; and though he lived to see the realization of his hopes and predictions, yet (to use the language of his biographer) "he died, steeped to the lips in poverty." In the pulpit, in parliament, and in the press, his ideas were ridiculed as the disordered fancies of insanity. Many lords and commoners, distinguished in no other respect, distinguished themselves by the unreasoning bitterness of their opposition; and, in too many instances, was literature found arrayed against science, in a spirit of such bigoted hostility, as to appear utterly unaccountable. I hold in my hand an extract from the *Quarterly Review*, of 1824, in which the reviewer deems the advocates of railways and "their visionary schemes unworthy of notice;" and, in reference to a projected railway between London and Woolwich, which was calculated to travel at twice the velocity of coaches, he adds—"We should as soon expect the people of Woolwich to be fired from one of Congreve's rockets as to trust themselves to such a machine, going at such a rate." Yet the *Quarterly Review*

held a high place in the world of letters, and over the opinions of a large class of readers, exercised an almost despotic sway.

It was far more natural that poetry should be enlisted on the same side, and it is difficult to cavil at the motive that could draw from the poet of Mount Rydal those beautiful and touching lines, which, with your permission, I shall now read to you:—

Is there no nook of English ground secure
From rash assault? Schemes of retirement sown
In youth, and mid the busy world kept pure
As when their earliest flowers of hope were blown
Must perish; how can they this blight endure?
And must he, too, his old delights disown,
Who scorns a false utilitarian lure,
'Mid his paternal fields at random thrown?
Baffle the threat, bright scene, from Orms head,
Given to the pausing traveller's rapturous glance!
Plead for thy peace thou beautiful romance
Of nature; and if human hearts be dead,
Speak, passing winds; ye torrents, with your strong
And constant voice, protest against the wrong!

Certainly with the death of the old coaching system expired much of the poetry, as well as the discomfort, of travelling.

We miss the canting team, the winding way,
The roadside halt, the post-horn's well known air,
The inns, the gaping towns, and all the landscape fair.

But it was not to those tender effusions that the early opponents of the railway system confined themselves. They were chiefly influenced by great folly, or by great selfishness, which often induced them to raise an opposition with a view to being bought off; and the reaction which took place in the railway mania brought upon them, when the crash came, a just retribution, though it involved also many innocent persons in the general ruin. The folly of the railway mania can scarcely be said to have exceeded the folly of the railway opposition by which it was preceded. To quote the severe, yet expressive language of Lord Macaulay,—“There were fools then as there are fools now; fools who laughed at the railways as they had laughed at the canals; fools who thought they evinced their wisdom by doubting what they could not understand.” Nor were the means employed confined to parliamentary or legal opposition, ridicule, or argument. In conducting the surveys, brickbats, cudgels, and horse ponds were freely used by the

landowners against the engineering staff. Such operations had to be conducted either at night time, by the aid of dark lanterns, or under the protection of a regiment of assistants, who were often unable to resist the opposing forces brought against them. Thus, if we refer to the newspaper accounts of those days, we notice such headings as these:—"Opposition to surveyors from proprietors;" "Plan to outwit a clergyman;" "Desperate affray at Glenfallach;" "Fearful conflict on the estate of Sir W. Milner;" "Determined struggle on Lord Harborough's property near Stapleford Park." Then follows a list of the wounded, which would do no discredit to a well-fought battle field. One hon. gentleman, who has lately distinguished himself by a strong opposition to the Natal Central Railway Bill, has since confided to me that, in early life, as a railway surveyor, he had been obliged, in fear and trembling, to take surreptitious observations with a theodolite over a garden bottle-glass wall. (Laughter.) Such scenes, however, no longer occur in England, where landowners now rush in crowds to the support of an undertaking which brings value to their property, and comfort to their daily lives. Much that has lately been done before the committee of the Legislative Council resembles, in miniature, the great contests before committees of the House of Commons in the infancy of the railway. When George Stevenson was under examination before the last-mentioned august body, he was asked what would be the result if a locomotive engine came in contact with a cow on the line? To which he gravely replied, in his broad dialect, "it wad be vara bad for the coo." (Laughter.) Well, the identical cow somehow or other got on to the Central Railway here, and was hunted up and down by two honorable members during the greater part of a sitting of the committee; and even when the engineer, with a zeal and ingenuity that did him infinite credit, had not only succeeded in getting the cow off, but had even placed an imaginary ditch between the trespassers and the forbidden ground, the obnoxious beast was, to one's horror and surprise, again found courting an untimely end during a subsequent sitting of the committee, and the exciting hunt was again renewed with as much earnestness as ever. (Laughter.) One great difference may be noticed

between the contest which has lately taken place before the committee of the Council here, and those which enlivened the committees of the House of Commons in bygone years. No legal and organized opposition was established against the bills of the two companies whose representative I am; and time was so short, and proof so conclusive, that I did not even claim to address the committee upon the evidence given. Thus we have not witnessed those forensic displays of eloquence by opposing counsel, or that strange conflict of evidence by opposing engineers, which gave a zest to former contests. I hardly know whether you would like that I should briefly sketch for you a scene in a parliamentary railway committee in those stirring days. (The growling of a dog in the body of the hall here interrupted the speaker). The growls which I hear from one part of the room seem to me, at this stage of my subject, so appropriate to the scenes I was about to sketch for you, that it seems almost an inspiration which guides me as to which course I ought to pursue. (Loud laughter, cheers, and cries of "go on.") Fancy yourself, then, with me in the committee-room of the British House of Commons. In that room there is a table, covered with green cloth, and scattered with books, plans, and maps. At the top of the table sits the chairman, and around him ten or twelve gentlemen, members of committee. There is an air of fustiness pervading the apartment, which seems, indeed, to be attendant upon all committee-rooms. The fat, fussy gentleman, who stands at the end of the room, wiping the steaming perspiration from his face with a colored handkerchief, is the promoter of the line under discussion. He has just been roasted by the opposing counsel, and has had hot work of it. The witnesses are scattered about the room, having just given their evidence. Some of them are honest men, conscientious opponents and supporters of the line; others are influenced more by self-interest than by honesty. But the great mass of them belong to that peculiar class of railway witnesses to which the necessities of the time gave rise. They were a hard and a brazen race. I remember the story of a man who was a scavenger by trade, and who was of a literary, scientific, and argumentative turn of mind. (Laughter.) He rendered himself so intolerable in his own domestic circle, and in the low