

## **“When Women do the Work of Men”: Representations of Gendered Occupational Identities on British Railways in World War I Cartoons.**

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*During World War I in Britain, women workers took on previously men-only jobs on the railways. In response to this wartime development, the National Union of Railwaymen published a series of cartoons in their journal, Railway Review. These images depicted women employed as porters and guards, occupying the engine footplate, and acting in the role of station-mistress. Through a close reading of the cartoons, and related images in the journal, this article examines how the humorous portrayal of female railway workers reinforced masculine occupational identities at the same time as revealing ambiguities in (and negotiating anxieties over) the gendered nature of railway employment. Despite wartime labour shortages, certain occupations, notably the driving and firing of steam trains, remained stolidly men’s work and would do so until the late twentieth century. By scrutinising the construction of gendered occupational culture in union journals, we can better understand the tenacity of notions of ‘traditional’ work for men and women on the railways.*

### **Key words:**

gender; railway; cartoons; non-traditional work; trade unions; World War I

On 26 March 1915, the *Railway Review*, the journal of the National Union of Railwaymen (NUR) in Britain, published a cartoon of a woman “do[ing] the work of men owing to the war.”<sup>1</sup> Given the number “1”, it is immediately apparent that this was

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<sup>1</sup> *Railway Review*, 26 March 1915, 9. The Modern Records Centre, Warwick, UK (hereafter MRC) holds a complete collection of this journal.

intended to be the first in a series dealing with the question of women in men's jobs. This first and all subsequent images were signed by "DIN", the regular cartoonist for the journal from 1902 to 1919.<sup>2</sup> DIN satirised what *might* happen if women were to take "men's jobs" on the railways as porters and guards, ticket collectors and inspectors, drivers, firemen and station masters. The actual movement of women into these particular roles had not yet begun. The cartoons appeared at the very moment when the union were fiercely debating whether it would be necessary to admit women members for the first time, now that women were indeed taking on a variety of jobs to replace enlisted men.<sup>3</sup> The NUR finally relented in July 1915, giving women limited membership. Still, certain occupations, including some of those depicted by DIN, remained off-limits to railwaywomen. Each occupation featured in the cartoons would revert to a male grade in the interwar period. The images examined here thus appeared at a critical moment in the fashioning of occupational identities on the rails and offers insights into the tenacity of sex segregation in "traditionally" male industries.

Women transport workers on the railways, buses and trams came to occupy a public, visible role in British wartime society. Lucinda Gosling has noted, "The beguiling sight of girls in smocks and breeches or in smart uniforms was a boon for illustrators and cartoonists who celebrated, gently poked fun at and took delight in

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<sup>2</sup> For a history of the *Railway Review*, see Philip Bagwell, 'The *Railway Service Gazette* (1872-81) and *The Railway Review* (1880-)', *Bulletin – Society for the Study of Labour History* 28 (Spring 1974): 38-40. Unfortunately, we are unable to shed further light on DIN's identity. Although DIN may have been a professional artist with no prior knowledge of the industry, it is likely that the cartoonist came from within the union (as was the case for 'Battersea Bowser', another regular columnist and illustrator at the time). Battersea Bowser, a.k.a. Frederick George Burgess, was an employed railwayman until his identity was discovered in 1919 and he moved into politics. See his biography in *Railway Review*, 3 October 1924, 5.

<sup>3</sup> The cartoons would have had to meet with the approval of the *Railway Review*'s editor, George James Wardle, who had worked as a clerk on the Midland Railway and served as a Labour MP from 1906. See Philip S. Bagwell, *The Railwaymen: The History of the National Union of Railwaymen* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1963), 203.

depicting the feminisation of traditionally male workplaces.”<sup>4</sup> Women railway workers featured in such cartoons, not only in the *Railway Review* but in other publications including the prominent monthly *Punch*. The NUR cartoons, however, targeted a specific audience of railway workers (and their families) and warrant detailed analysis for what they can reveal about the internal operation of a male-dominated workplace culture in wartime and beyond. These cartoons, where historians have noted them at all, have previously been interpreted solely as a means of ridiculing women railway workers.<sup>5</sup> We suggest a more nuanced reading, which recognises their importance in the construction of gendered occupational identities for both railwaywomen and railwaymen.

Cartoons (like other visual sources) have the power to convey a message “quickly and pungently” (making them potentially more influential than written text) and have the capacity to offer “insights into the popular attitudes that underlay public opinion.”<sup>6</sup> Thomas Kemnitz’s assertion of their significance as a source, in 1973, seems to have gone largely unheeded over the following decades. More recently, in conjunction with the so-called “Visual Turn” in history, the validity of cartoons as a mode of historical evidence has been re-affirmed.<sup>7</sup> In Marian Quartly and Nick

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<sup>4</sup> Lucinda Gosling, *Great War Britain: The First World War at Home* (Stroud: The History Press, 2014), n.p. argues this sudden visibility of women workers in popular culture, and in public spaces, belied the regular paid employment of working-class women for generations prior to the war and may well have skewed subsequent understanding of the nature of women’s wartime employment by focussing attention on the novelty of women in uniform or in “men’s jobs”. Gosling notes that visual sources from the period make it “easy to assume women were infiltrating every area of employment in their thousands. But some of the jobs featured were a novel (and therefore newsworthy) exception rather than the rule, and certain industries, without government intervention, remained resolutely male.”

<sup>5</sup> Helena Wojtczak, *Railwaywomen: Exploitation, Betrayal and Triumph in the Workplace* (Hastings: Hastings Press, 2005), 44; David Swift, *For Class or Country: The Patriotic Left and the First World War* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2017), 111.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Milton Kemnitz, “The Cartoon as a Historical Source,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 4, no.1 (1973): 81-93, 84 and 93.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Scully and Marian Quartly, eds, *Drawing the Line: Using Cartoons as Historical Evidence* (Melbourne: Monash University ePress, 2009). Nick Dyrenfurth, “‘Truth and Time against the World’s Wrongs’: Montagu Scott, Jim Case and the Lost World of the Brisbane *Worker* Cartoonists,” *Labour History* 99 (2010): 115-48, 117. For a full discussion of the potential and

Dyrenfurth's contribution to a 2009 edited collection devoted to cartoons, they note, "There is much more to be written about the uses that labour cartoonists made of the female figure." Whilst Quartly and Dyrenfurth choose to focus instead on the "making of manliness," this article explores the interrelationship between working-class masculinity and images of working women.<sup>8</sup>

Cartoon images of women war workers did not emerge in a vacuum; they need to be understood in the context of existing and developing visual typographies of women. Lisa Tickner hints at how visual tropes (positive and negative) from suffrage cartoons remained important into the war years.<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately, pre-war images of women as workers, with the notable exception of Arthur Munby's collection of sketches and photographs, have received relatively little attention from historians, making it difficult to trace continuities and contrasts.<sup>10</sup> Deborah Thom is one of the few to consider how the visual iconography of women as victims of sweated labour conditions also persisted into the early phase of the war.<sup>11</sup> We know more about the nature of wartime images of women. Condell and Liddiard argue for the importance of paying attention to visual representations of World War I, given their implications for

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challenges of visual sources for women's labour history, see Diane Kirkby, "Writing the History of Women Working: Photographic Evidence and the 'Disreputable Occupation of Barmaid'," *Labour History*, 61 (Nov 1991): 3-16.

<sup>8</sup> Nick Dyrenfurth and Marian Quartly, "'All the World Over': The Transnational World of Australian Radical and Labour Cartoonists, 1880s to 1920," in *Drawing the Line* ed. Scully and Quartly, 148.

<sup>9</sup> Lisa Tickner, *The Spectacle of Women: Imagery of the Suffrage Campaign 1907-1914* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1987), 182-92. Renée Dickason similarly notes that "prevailing (especially male) national opposition to the suffragettes and female emancipation" made its way into cartoons of women in war, "The Nuanced Comic Perspectives of the Cartoons in *Mr. Punch's History of the Great War*," in *Humor, Entertainment, and Popular Culture during World War 1*, ed. Clémentine Tholas-Disset and Karen A. Ritzenhoff (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 129.

<sup>10</sup> On Arthur Munby's obsessive photographing and cataloguing of working women, see Michael Hiley, *Victorian Working Women: Portraits from Life* (London: Gordon Fraser, 1979). Also, Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (London: Routledge, 1995).

<sup>11</sup> Deborah Thom, *Nice Girls and Rude Girls: Women Workers in World War 1* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1998).

assessing women's broader place in society.<sup>12</sup> Deirdre Beddoe, with reference to World War I and its aftermath, contends that images actually shaped women's lives. She argues that representations of women workers became increasingly positive over the course of the conflict. Krisztina Robert, however, highlights the complexities of such images, teasing out the competing versions of women in the auxiliary forces of World War I in a range of sources, including cartoons.<sup>13</sup>

The union cartoons we explore here are fascinating not simply because they encapsulate some of the tensions and contradictions in union attitudes to women workers in male-dominated occupations. We argue that behind their overt concern with women workers, was a deeper concern with male workers. Consequently they provide insights into the ongoing construction of "railwayman" as a particular kind of hegemonic masculine workplace identity associated with respectability, responsibility, intelligence and duty.<sup>14</sup> Lucy Noakes has argued that women workers in military uniform "destabilise[d] ... the naturalised linkage between soldiering and masculinity."<sup>15</sup> We extend this approach to the railways, which had an occupational culture strongly influenced by military tropes (including the wearing of uniforms) and a similarly "naturalised linkage" between men and trains. The war was a moment when civilian masculinities more broadly were under scrutiny; men who remained in civilian

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<sup>12</sup> Diana Condell and Jean Liddiard, *Working for Victory? Images of Women in the First World War, 1914-18* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987), author's note. See also Thom, *Nice Girls and Rude Girls*, especially chapter four.

<sup>13</sup> Beddoe, *Back to Home and Duty*, 9 and 10-11; Krisztina Robert, "'All that is best of the modern woman'? Representations of Female Military Auxiliaries in British popular culture, 1914-1919," in *British Popular Culture and the First World War* ed. Jessica Meyers (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2008), 97-122.

<sup>14</sup> Although the concept of hegemonic masculinity is contested, we use it here to refer to the cultural dominance of the railwayman ideal in this particular workplace setting. See R. Connell, "The study of masculinities," *Qualitative Research Journal* 14, no.1 (2014): 5-15: 8-9; and R. W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept," *Gender and Society* 19, no. 6 (2005): 829-859.

<sup>15</sup> Noakes, "Playing at Being Soldiers," 126.

occupations could find their manliness called into question.<sup>16</sup> Through their exploration of the implications of bringing femininity to bear on railway work, these cartoons simultaneously shed light on the character of railway masculinities. As Paul Taillon has demonstrated in relation to the tensions and overlap between “rough” and “respectable” versions of American railwaymen, such gendered occupational identities were neither homogenous nor static.<sup>17</sup>

We examine the cartoons through three lenses: first for their depiction of women in service roles in the semi-public space of the railway station; second for their representation of relations between railway workers; and finally, for their imagining of women as union members. In contrast to photographs, cartoons allowed valuable fictional dramatisations in both visual and textual form of interactions between women workers and their male passengers, their male co-workers and their union brothers.<sup>18</sup> They provide glimpses, through the gaps in meaning opened up by humour, into the prewar homosocial world of men’s railway employment and the usually unarticulated sexual dynamics of this world.<sup>19</sup> As Tickner has argued, “Ridicule is a potent weapon in the maintenance of hegemony.”<sup>20</sup> The cartoons we examine here were one means of shoring up the existing patriarchal order of railway employment. To understand the complex ways in which ridicule operated in each image, to “get” the joke, we must first

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<sup>16</sup> Juliette Pattinson, “‘Shirkers’, ‘Scrimjacks’ and ‘Scrimshanks’?: British Civilian Masculinity and Reserved Occupations, 1914–45,” *Gender & History* 28, no.3 (2017): 709–27.

<sup>17</sup> Paul Michel Taillon, “‘What we want is good, sober men’: Masculinity, respectability, and temperance in the railroad brotherhoods, c. 1870–1919,” *Journal of Social History* 36, no. 2 (2002): 319–38. See also Taillon on the waning of “risk-filled” manhood in “Casey Jones, Better Watch Your Speed! Workplace Culture, Manhood and Protective Labor Legislation on the Railroads 1880s–1910,” *Australasian Journal of American Studies* 30, no.1 (2011): 32.

<sup>18</sup> On cartoons as both visual and textual, see Stephen Connolly, “Unseeing the Past: Vision and Modern British History,” *Visual Resources*, 24, no.2 (2008): 109–18.

<sup>19</sup> Ava Baron, “Masculinity, the Embodied Male Worker, and the Historians Gaze,” *International Labor and Working Class History* 69, no.1 (2006): 143–60.

<sup>20</sup> Tickner, *The Spectacle of Women*, 163.

understand some of the context.<sup>21</sup> We therefore begin with a brief explanation of the nature of railway employment before and during the war.

### **Occupational Segregation, Union Organisation and the Impact of War**

At the outbreak of World War I, the railways in Britain were an industry clearly segregated by sex. Since the rapid expansion of the rail network from the mid-nineteenth century, it had come to represent one of the most secure and well-paid areas of employment for men. As Rosa Matheson puts it, “The railways are a masculine world: railways and railwaymen are synonymous.”<sup>22</sup> In 1914, women constituted just two per cent of the total labour force, which stood at 625,559.<sup>23</sup> Histories of the railways have generally reflected and perpetuated this male-dominated world, as becomes immediately obvious from older titles such as *Engines and Men* and Bagwell’s two-volume history, *The Railwaymen*.<sup>24</sup>

Recent studies have argued for the importance of women in the industry. These tend to pursue, “the traditional route” of “recovering” stories of women’s working lives rather than engaging with the concept of gender.<sup>25</sup> Over 400 female crossing keepers

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<sup>21</sup> Humour is “strongly context-bound” according to Marjolein ‘t Hart, “Humour and Social Protest: An Introduction,” *International Review of Social History* 52 (2007): 1-20, 2.

<sup>22</sup> Rosa Matheson, *The Fair Sex: Women and the Great Western Railway* (Stroud: The History Press, 2007), 9; see also Wotzjack, *Railwaywomen*.

<sup>23</sup> Wojtczak, *Railwaywomen*, 43; Thom, *Nice Girls and Rude Girls*, 47 (vehicles, municipal tramways and other transport are also listed in Thom’s statistics with women as two per cent of the total workforce in 1914, with tramways and omnibuses even lower at one per cent)

<sup>24</sup> J.R. Raynes, *Engines and Men: The History of the Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen* (Leeds: Goodall & Suddick Ltd., 1921).

<sup>25</sup> Margaret Walsh, “Gender in the History of Transportation Services: A Historiographical Perspective,” *The Business History Review* 81, no. 3 (Autumn 2007): 545-62, 554. For examples, see Wojtczak, *Railwaywomen*; Susan Major, *Female Railway Workers in World War II* (Barnsley, UK: Pen & Sword Books, 2018); Rosa Matheson, *The Fair Sex: Women and the Great Western Railway* (Stroud: The History Press, 2007); Hannah Reeves, “The Railway Review, 1900-1948,” <https://warwickmrc.wordpress.com/2016/03/17/the-railway-review-1900-1948/> (accessed 15/01/2019). For Australian studies of women on the railways, see Eddie Butler-Bowden, *In the Service: A History of Victorian Railway Workers and Their Union* (South Yarra, VIC: Hyland House, 1991); Jim Longworth, “Railway Women in New South Wales,” *Australian Railway History* 62, no. 890 (December 2011): 6-13.

(often wives of gangers or platelayers) kept the railways functioning but received very little pay. There were also women in the offices, in the carriage works (engaged in appropriately feminine tasks such as sewing upholstery for train interiors) and at the stations working as waiting room attendants and cleaners.<sup>26</sup> The segregation of rail travel itself, which required separate ladies' waiting rooms for reasons of propriety, made the employment of women essential on some tasks.<sup>27</sup> Women in railway families were expected to support the work of men, facilitating long and sometimes unpredictable working hours through their domestic labour. In 1900, the inauguration of the Railway Women's Guild recognised the importance of women in railway communities but they remained at the margins of occupational culture. The weekly "Women's Page" of the *Railway Review* both enshrined and constrained their supporting role.<sup>28</sup>

The operation of trains, whether passenger or goods, was by demarcated "male grades" including guards, porters, signalmen, firemen and drivers. Handling trains was demanding, regimented and often highly dangerous work. For those who progressed to drivers, however, it offered social and cultural as well as economic prestige.<sup>29</sup> Driving a steam train was generally not described as physically taxing; it was the mental strain

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<sup>26</sup> Matheson, *The Fair Sex*, 11 notes the employment of women in the Swindon Carriage Works from the 1870s. They were put to work in a separate section of the factory and their employment was deemed to be a means of attracting more men to the area.

<sup>27</sup> On the transport industry as providing spaces for sexual encounters, see Jo Stanley, "On Buffer-kissers, Bus-station Skanks, and Mile-High Clubs: Sexualities and Transport," *Mobilities in History* 4 (2013): 29-49.

<sup>28</sup> See the work of Hannah Reeves, "The *Railway Review*, 1900-1948" <https://warwickmrc.wordpress.com/2016/03/17/the-railway-review-1900-1948/> (accessed 15 January 2019).

<sup>29</sup> Robert F Alegre, "Las Rieleras: Gender, Politics and Power in the Mexican Railway Movement, 1958-1959," *Journal of Women's History*, vol. 23, no. 2 (Summer 2011) 164. On railwaymen in the US context, see Amy Richter, *Home on the Rails: Women, the Railroad, and the Rise of Public Domesticity* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); Taillon, "What we want is good, sober men." For Australia, see especially Lucy Taksa, "'About as Popular as a Dose of Clap': Steam, Diesel and Masculinity at the New South Wales Eveleigh Railway Workshops," *The Journal of Transport History* 26, no.2 (2005): 79-97; also Barbara Webster, "'They'd go out of their way to cover up for you': Men and Mateship in the Rockhampton Railway Workshops, 1940s-1980s," *History Australia* 4, no. 2 (2007): 43.1-43.15.



that was commented on both by drivers and observers. Drivers had to be intelligent and literate to memorise the voluminous rules and routes, as well as physically fit to cope with the strain of standing on an exposed footplate in a state of constant alert for changing conditions which could jeopardise the safety of their passengers.<sup>30</sup> Signalmen, too, bore a heavy burden of responsibility but they were rewarded, at their peak, with command of a signal box.<sup>31</sup> At the other end of the scale, firedroppers had to be physically strong and fearless to manage shovelling the still-burning fire from the engine firebox on to the ashpits.<sup>32</sup> In the vast enterprise of the British railway network, workers adopted distinct occupational (and company) identities, which vied with each other for recognition and prestige.

After a shaky start to workplace organising, by the twentieth century railway workers were affiliated to three key unions. The British National Union of Railwaymen (NUR) came into existence shortly before the war in 1913, as an amalgamation of three prior unions.<sup>33</sup> By eschewing the previous terms of “railway servants” and “railway workers” in favour of “railwaymen”, the NUR enshrined the masculinity of the occupation. That this was no mere semantic exercise but had enduring political implications was reflected in vigorous future debates over changing the title. The locomotive grades – engine cleaners, firemen and drivers – remained largely outside the NUR in the Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen (ASLEF, established 1880). So too did the clerks, organised since 1897 in the Railway Clerks

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<sup>30</sup> Ralph Harrington, “Perceptions of the Locomotive Driver: Image and Identity on British Railways, c.1840-c.1950,” IDEAS Working Paper Series from RePEc, (2007). For France and the particular nature of driving, see Margot Stein, “The Meaning of Skill: The Case of the French Engine Drivers, 1837-1917,” *Politics and Society* 8, no.3 (1978): 399-427.

<sup>31</sup> Frank McKenna, “Victorian Railway Workers,” *History Workshop* 1 (1976): 68-69.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>33</sup> The NUR was formed as a result of the combination of the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants (founded 1872), the General Railway Workers Union (founded 1889) and the United Pointsman and Signalmen Society (founded 1880). J R Raynes, *Engines and Men: The History of the Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen* (Leeds: Goodall & Suddick (1916) Ltd., 1921), 24.

Association (RCA), which accepted both men and women members. The NUR represented the most diverse range of male railway workers, from platelayers to factory workers, attempting to unite them under the collective “railwayman” identity. NUR leaders had sometimes tense relationships with those who thwarted their vision of one big union to represent the industry. These tensions, as we shall argue, played out at times through the discussion of women wartime employees.

During the war, the railways provided crucial logistical support in the movement of troops, weapons and supplies. With the departure of railwaymen to the front from 1914, new sources of labour thus had to be found with some urgency. The numerous private railway companies were quickly brought under government control via the formation of a Railway Executive Committee (REC) on which managing directors of select companies had representation. Railway unions would now be negotiating with the REC over the exact conditions of wartime employment for both women and men. In this, they were in a similar position to the Associated Society of Engineers (ASE), following the reorganisation of munitions production under state control.

Negotiations came to a head in 1915. Until this point, the numbers of women had already been increasing in the existing female or mixed grades. From April 1915, however, women were permitted to move into select, previously men-only occupations, on the understanding that they would be paid the minimum wage for these roles and given explicitly temporary status as employees, with a guarantee that all returning servicemen would be reinstated automatically.<sup>34</sup> For their part, women quickly signed

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<sup>34</sup> 1915 proved to be a pivotal year for women’s employment. From May of that year, under Lloyd George’s leadership, the state took an active role in organising the production of munitions, including women’s labour, and became an employer in its own right. The government came to agreements with many unions that women would only be employed on limited aspects of skilled men’s jobs – known as “dilution” – and only for the duration. See Gail Braybon and Penny Summerfield, *Out of the Cage: Women’s Experiences in Two World Wars*, (London: Pandora, 1987),

up for a range of jobs. Domestic servants, middle-class women, existing women railway workers, and war widows from within and outside the sector, all sought employment.<sup>35</sup> The presence of women from within railway communities – daughters, sisters, wives – alongside external recruits, makes it impossible to generalise as to railwaymen's responses to women's presence in the industry. Nevertheless, unions and employers continued to argue over wages (especially the unequal war bonus which positioned women as cheaper labour), and over the precise roles suitable for women.<sup>36</sup> ASLEF excluded women from union membership for the duration of the war and no women were employed as drivers or firemen. Women gained more of a foothold in the public-facing, service-focused roles, which are the focus of the following section.

### **Public service, duty and modern femininity**

Regular contact with the public in railway stations was crucial to the performance of the duties of guards, porters, ticket-collectors and inspectors – all of which had been “male-grades” prior to April 1915. Such interactions were overlaid with class as well as sexual tensions that were highlighted by the employment of women.<sup>37</sup> For male

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35. Some union branches, however, were successful in keeping women out of their trades entirely: the most noted example being the Liverpool dockers. Sarah Boston, *Women Workers and the Trade Unions* (London: Lawrence & Wishart Ltd, 1987), 113.

<sup>35</sup> Wojtczak, *Railwaywomen*, 46-7.

<sup>36</sup> Some men argued both that women should not be allowed to complete certain tasks (such as climbing ladders to clean lights) as they were too dangerous (women did of course fulfil a range of dangerous tasks during the war – from working with explosives to climbing over engines to clean them). Deborah Montgomerie has noted how women working on the New Zealand railways during World War One were similarly not permitted to perform the full range of duties, leaving male-female divisions of labour effectively unchallenged. Deborah Montgomerie, “The Limitations of Wartime Change: Women War Workers in New Zealand,” *The New Zealand Journal of History*, vol. 23, no. 1 (April 1989) 68-86.

<sup>37</sup> Diane Kirkby argues that sexuality is key to understanding the workplace: “Sex permeates the workplace and workplace relations in all areas.” Kirkby, “Writing the History,” 4. Transport work in particular, as Stanley explores, especially in its blurring of public/private spaces and its access to a sense of freedom in mobility, has been understood as facilitating sexual encounters. Stanley, “On Buffer-kissers, Bus-station Skanks, and Mile-High Clubs.”

workers engaging with female passengers, the construction of respectability had been paramount, with company rules regulating their appearance and behaviour.<sup>38</sup> The Lancashire and Yorkshire Railway had a rule that “every servant receiving uniform must appear in it when on duty, neat and clean.” A stationmaster of this company noted in 1895 how passengers, especially women, “invariably pick[ed] out the tidiest and smartest-looking man on the platform” when they needed assistance.<sup>39</sup> The duty of railwaymen to provide service to male passengers of all classes was, if not carefully managed, potentially threatening to their sense of heterosexual masculinity. In the *Railway Review* cartoons assessed here, it is women who are imagined as *bringing* sexuality into the workplace, which heterosexual men (especially passengers) cannot then resist.

“The Guard”, in the first cartoon of March 1915 [figure 1], is lounging on the train window ledge, ignoring her duties and fraternising inappropriately with the male passengers. Train guards were responsible for ensuring the safe passage of the train, using their flags to signal to the driver that it was clear to depart. They travelled with the train in a designated guard’s van and recorded details of the journey as well as dealing with luggage and parcels on board. Although they were the first occupation to feature in the series of cartoons, in reality women guards were relatively rare. On the Caledonian Railway for example, just 21 of the 1,911 women employed in 1918 were working as guards, compared to 106 ticket collectors and 239 porters.<sup>40</sup> The level of

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<sup>38</sup> Richter observes that, in the US, gentlemanly “courtesy” from railway staff (which assured travelling men and women that women passengers would be cared for as if in their own homes), was transformed into “service” in the later nineteenth century. Richter, *Home on the Rails*, 124.

<sup>39</sup> McKenna also refers to an 1878 rulebook from Ashby and Nuneaton on the need for railwaymen to be “clean shaven, with his boots polished, his uniform neat.” McKenna, “Victorian Railway Workers,” 41.

<sup>40</sup> As Wojtczak notes, reliable statistics are hard to access due to varied reporting tactics, see *Railwaywomen*, 108-111. On the various protests and on those companies which did employ women guards, see also Wojtczak, *Railwaywomen*, 92-3.

responsibility for train safety (and thereby the safety of both passengers and crew), the mobility required (including jumping on board the train as it departed the platform), and the physical strength assumed necessary for the handling of parcels (and sometimes passengers) in an unaccompanied guard's van all mitigated against the substitution of men by women in this role. DIN's vision is of a guard who both neglects the responsibilities of the role and yet also fails to conform to expectations of appropriately feminine behaviour and appearance. The character's large hands and feet may simply have been hastily drawn but they are in keeping with the overall impression of a rather unkempt, unfeminine, lazy figure. Her guard's hat, worn at an angle, is adorned with two oversize hatpins which have no real purpose, her skirt is ragged at the bottom and the impression is of an ill-fitting man's uniform hastily adapted.

The second image in the series [figure 2] also presents a female worker neglecting her railway duty of public service; on this occasion it is her efforts to *maintain* her femininity, however absurd in the context, which makes her an inefficient worker. Porters in passenger stations were expected to assist passengers, including helping with their luggage, as they boarded and alighted from the train. "The Porter" (2 April 1915) is powdering her nose in an exaggerated performance of femininity while chaos ensues around her. *Punch* picked up on the same theme in June, with an image captioned "A Railway Ticket Conductress Has An Unhappy Moment With Her Coiffure."<sup>41</sup> Where the *Punch* Conductress is dressed in a uniform very similar to that worn by real women workers, the Porter of the *Railway Review* looks to be wearing a 'hobble skirt', popular in the period just before the war. This created a fashionably sleek

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<sup>41</sup> *Punch*, 9 June 1915, 240. See also the Wilmot Lunt spread, "First Aid" in *The Bystander*, 6 June 1917, which depicts a woman driver with the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps checking her appearance in her mirror next to a car she has seemingly just crashed. Reproduced in Lucinda Gosling, *Brushes and Bayonets: Cartoons, Sketches and Paintings of World War I* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing in association with the Illustrated London News Picture Library, 2008), 102-103.

silhouette but tended to restrict women's mobility by effectively keeping their ankles bound together—a dangerous state on a railway platform.<sup>42</sup> The handbag dangling from one arm would have been another potential hazard. Aside from the armband signalling her identity as Porter, this woman appears as a comically unlikely candidate to push the heavy trolley of luggage.

Women did indeed take on the role of porter (goods and passenger) in some numbers. The Great Western Railway, for example, employed 616 goods porters and 346 porters during the war, out of a total of 6,345 women war workers (2,905 were clerks).<sup>43</sup> On 23 April 1915, an article entitled “She Arrives” documented one of the first women to act in the role for the Grand Central company. For male union members, she may have been, like the cartoon version, reassuringly feminine and thereby unthreatening. The humour of the article is certainly more sympathetic than the exaggeration of the visual caricature: here is a woman worth fighting for. This “lady porter,” of “naturally fresh complexion,” closes train doors “with feminine gentleness.” When the train arrives, she announces in a “musical voice, rather faintly at first” the name of the station.<sup>44</sup> This woman worker does nothing to transgress appropriate feminine appearance or behaviour. She is “attired in a tight-fitting grey costume and a round felt hat, from which dangled a couple of pheasant's tail feathers.” The Porter of the cartoon similarly wore a feathered hat. There was suspicion and criticism of women who continued to follow fashions in the context of wartime shortages but women were

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<sup>42</sup> On the hobble skirt as the “most defining garment of the early 1910s” and its ironic limitation of women's mobility, see Daniel Milford-Cottam, *Edwardian Fashion* (Oxford: Shire Publications, 2016), n.p.

<sup>43</sup> Wojtczak, *Railwaywomen*, 109.

<sup>44</sup> Wojtczak, *Railwaywomen*, 50, notes anxieties about women's voices calling out on the platform as being unfeminine and this piece seems to directly counter such fears, although in a patronising tone. It is notable that women in the cartoons are generally silent. Although the signalwoman is holding a megaphone, she is given no words.

nonetheless expected to retain their feminine appearance.<sup>45</sup> The *Railway Review* captures this ambivalence.

The stationmaster is thrilled with his new employee, even as she neglects to deal with the parcels. “[T]he fair one” is then sent to tidy the waiting room “a task to which she had evidently been more accustomed.” The young male porters pick up the neglected parcels, affirming that women will not be able to complete the full range of duties and thus are no real threat to men’s position (rules were passed by the REC to limit the weight of luggage temporarily for the benefit of women porters). This description of a female porter both ensures her femininity remains intact and reassures men that their masculine occupational identities are safe. In contrast to the cartoon, the author shifts the potential for romantic entanglements with passengers on to a more harmless admiration from afar by her fellow junior male workers. We return to these inter-worker dynamics later.

By June and July, DIN had standardised his image of women in service roles on the station platform as embodying modern, youthful femininity. The “Inspector-ess” (June 1915) and “Ticket Collector” (July 1915) both possess petite attractive features, womanly figures, identical skirts and identical dainty feet in feminine shoes [figures 3 and 4]. Although not numbered, the captions, “When Women Take the Place of Men (up)on the Railway,” connect these cartoons to the series. Women do not appear to have been employed in any number as “Inspector-esses,” at least not in the sense implied by the cartoon, although some smaller stations boasted an entirely female staff. The category of “Inspectress” had in fact existed before the war as the only uniformed grade for women, denoting a senior woman employed to inspect waiting rooms, and to

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<sup>45</sup> Noakes, “Playing at Being Soldiers,” 127-31. On the conflict between women over what constituted appropriate clothing for wartime railway work, see Albert Churella, “The Clothes make the Women: Skirts, Pants, and Railway Labor during World War II,” *Business and Economic History Online*, 2009.

supervise female staff, around the company network.<sup>46</sup> By contrast, about three quarters of ticket collectors were women by the end of the war.<sup>47</sup> Despite their extensive employment in the role, when the unions pushed for women to achieve a war bonus equal to men, managers resorted to undermining women's efforts. Bagwell records, "With a surprising and questionable precision the manager claimed that women's labour was only three-fifths as productive as that of men and that this was particularly the case with ticket collectors."<sup>48</sup> Within a few years after the end of the war most had either chosen or been forced to relinquish their positions.

Part of the context for the shifting representation of women in these cartoons was the developing acceptance of, and familiarity with, women in wartime work. During the first months of employing women, the railway companies had had no appropriate uniforms in stock and had to improvise. Armbands, as in the "The Porter" cartoon, were sometimes used to indicate employment. One correspondent to the *Railway Review* raised concerns that the lack of a uniform for female ticket collectors facilitated management's exploitation of women (to the future detriment of men) – were these in fact female booking clerks doing unpaid work in ticket collecting?<sup>49</sup> Both the Inspector-ess and the Ticket Collector appear to be in uniform, wearing the same peaked cap, although a comparison with photographs suggests the ways in which this was an idealised, sexualised version very different from the heavy serge skirts, jackets and sensible shoes worn by real women in public-facing roles on the platform.<sup>50</sup> In these later cartoons the frivolous feathers of the porter have disappeared but the

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<sup>46</sup> Wojtczak, *Railwaywomen*, 7.

<sup>47</sup> Wojtczak, *Railwaywomen*, 107.

<sup>48</sup> Bagwell, *The Railwaymen*, 359.

<sup>49</sup> *Railway Review*, 7 Jan 1916, 3.

<sup>50</sup> For example, see the photograph of ticket collectors in long heavy serge skirts reprinted in Wojtczak, *Railwaywomen*, 42 (from National Railway Museum, York, UK, Collection Ref. 10446705)



characters are nonetheless visibly feminine in their railway attire. This may have been intended to reassure *Railway Review* readers, both railwaymen and railwaywomen, that the dominant modes of femininity and masculinity remained essentially stable.

Uniforms had long been crucial to the construction of public-facing occupational identities on the railways, displaying company livery and individual status.<sup>51</sup> In the wartime context, uniforms were especially important markers, as for men to be out of military uniform raised questions about both their patriotism and masculinity.<sup>52</sup> For railwaymen on the home front, their access to a form of uniform may well have bolstered their sense of their own manly contribution to the war. Indeed, one wartime cartoon drew a direct parallel between the dangers faced in the railway yards and those faced on the front.<sup>53</sup> For women, too, uniforms (even non-military) had an appeal. They signified not simply a patriotic contribution but “convey[ed] an image of modernity and independence.”<sup>54</sup> Women in a range of wartime industries, as well as in the auxiliary services, dressed in often unfamiliar clothing – uniforms, overalls, trousers, dungarees – to allow them to carry out their work safely and efficiently, and sometimes to help create an occupational identity (marking them out in specific roles to fellow workers and/or to the public). The cartoon Inspector-ess and Ticket Collector, without the need for words, are accepted by the passengers in their uniformed roles but with comic results that undercut their long-term viability as railway employees.

*Punch* took up the theme of women railway workers in December 1916, when it presented a woman porter carrying heavy luggage on her head, asking the female passenger, “Excuse me, Mam [sic], but is my box on straight.” Captioned, “Eternal

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<sup>51</sup> McKenna, “Victorian Railway Workers,” 43.

<sup>52</sup> Pattinson, “‘Shirkers’, ‘Scrimjacks’ and ‘Scrimshanks’?,” 710.

<sup>53</sup> *Railway Review*, 1 January 1915, 9.

<sup>54</sup> Lucy Noakes, “‘Playing at Being Soldiers’?: British Women and Military Uniform in the First World War” in *British Popular Culture and the First World War* ed. Jessica Meyer (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2008), 124-25.

Feminine,” the woman worker was referred to as a “Railway Amazon.” Unlike the *Railway Review* figures, this woman is in a uniform very similar to that seen in contemporary photographs, with the heavy material, knee-length skirt and puttees over shoes. Although young and attractive, she is also heavier set than the delicate women of DIN’s imagination.<sup>55</sup> This may be related to the later date of the *Punch* image, reflecting a greater familiarity with real women in such roles. In 1919, comfortable in the knowledge that the war was over, the North Eastern Railway company magazine proudly published a photograph of one of its last remaining women porters, noting that her uniform “though sufficiently becoming, was not chosen for effect, but is the ordinary clothing of her calling.”<sup>56</sup> Femininity again remains intact – “sufficiently becoming” – but does not detract from the woman’s dedication to the job. By this point, many union members were angry at the railway companies for continuing to employ women.

The cartoons examined thus far have each represented the service element of railway work, which involved regular, sometimes difficult, interactions with the public. Beyond the representation of women workers, here was an opportunity to poke fun at the passengers. This was not a new theme: DIN published a cartoon on a railwayman dealing with an “idiot” passenger in January 1914.<sup>57</sup> In the background of “The Porter,” an older upper-class female traveller resorts to sticking on her own luggage label rather than continue to wait for assistance. Meanwhile, the civilian male passengers in both cartoons are rendered feminine through their helplessness and dependence on female assistance. The first cartoon in particular satirises the upper-class toffs who have not

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<sup>55</sup> *Punch*, 1 November 1916, 309.

<sup>56</sup> *North Eastern Railway Magazine* 9, no.101 (May 1919), 92. This assertion of femininity preserved even in wartime dress was not unique to the railways. Noakes cites a similar 1918 example praising the woman in khaki of the Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps who had “proved her womanliness” in her “neat frock coat,” in “Playing at Being Soldiers,” 140.

<sup>57</sup> “Things Railwaymen Have to Put Up With,” *Railway Review*, 30 January 1914, 2.

gone to fight in the war, placing them in a third-class carriage. In “The Inspector-ess,” the joke is still more clearly on the (male) passenger. The woman Inspector, without needing to say a word, is a calming influence on an otherwise irate male customer. While this is fascinating in how it represents women as capable workers, and suggests an acceptance that they brought certain attributes (even if only physical attractiveness) to the role, it is equally important in revealing the challenging daily interactions between men in a service role and male passengers on the platform. The male porter is depicted as deferential to the angry salesman, without the capacity to employ feminine wiles of seduction.

The implied sexualisation of the passenger-employee relationship in light of the employment of women as transport workers is both comic and troubling. “The Ticket Collector” cartoon appeared on 9 July 1915, in the very month when women were finally admitted as NUR members. In this image the drunken male customer claims to have swallowed his ticket – with the implication that the female collector will have to retrieve it, perhaps through a kiss. Meanwhile an older man ogles her to the frustration of his wife (an older woman who physically towers over him, glowering). Intended for the amusement of male NUR members, this is a disturbing depiction of sexual harassment by customers, of the kind that many women, especially in fetishized uniforms, no doubt faced on a daily basis in this and other work with the male public.

This was not a new idea. There are echoes, for example, of a much earlier 1870 cartoon of young modern women – the so-called “girls of the period” – employed as postal workers and being drooled over by men in the street.<sup>58</sup> In the railway context, whilst satirising women as workers, the cartoons simultaneously cast light on the

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<sup>58</sup> Girl of the Period Almanack – reference.

gendered and classed power dynamics of public railway spaces, which enforced certain kinds of respectable masculinity for railway employees.

The cartoons hint that women workers could possess some advantages in managing unruly male behaviour on the platform. Could women actually be more effective than men in these public-facing roles? *Punch* played around with the idea of women as effective service workers in 1916, with an older woman on a bus proclaiming of a female conductress, “How nice it is to have the ticket proffered ... rather than thrust upon one.”<sup>59</sup> The persistent maleness of railway work is intriguing given the scope of the industry for the kinds of service work which might elsewhere be designated feminine (as it would be in some other modes of transport, particularly commercial flights). It thereby required effort to maintain.

In their depiction of women in the public service side of railway work, the cartoons transition swiftly from a negative stereotype of a somewhat slovenly guard to a professional and attractive, young, modern ticket collector.<sup>60</sup> Perhaps *Railway Review* readers, male and female, did not appreciate the early caricatures given the war work of women from railway communities; or perhaps DIN needed to align the images more closely to the broader patriotic discourse of women nobly freeing men for the front. There is greater consistency in the portrayal of male passengers as both lecherous and ridiculous. This was an outlet for long-term tensions with problematic travellers but could also be interpreted in the context of criticising civilian men who were neither fighting nor obviously working in an essential industry. In the process, the masculinity of railwaymen could be reinforced. While it is possible to detect a measure of developing respect for women workers, they are nevertheless consistently portrayed as

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<sup>59</sup> *Punch*, 9 February 1916, 101.

<sup>60</sup> Dickason found a similar but much slower transition in her study, “The Nuanced Comic Perspectives of the Cartoons,” 130.

*bringing* sexuality, in problematic ways (for themselves, for passengers and for male workers), to the semi-public space of the station platform.<sup>61</sup>

### **“When women supersede men”: Internal Gender Dynamics**

DIN’s representations of women in service roles played on existing comic tropes of relations with passengers, and did not depart radically from conventional feminine stereotypes. By contrast, the depiction of the incursion of women into the internal workplace cultures of railway occupations such as driver, fireman, signaller and station master, produced more diverse, even subversive, gender caricatures. Here the focus was on interactions between established railwaymen and the new railwaywomen. In the third image of the series [figure 5], we see both a hyper-feminine character and a woman stripped of all femininity associated with the space of the engine footplate. The “Loco. Women” (9 April 1915), imagined a wartime scene that would never come to pass, even during World War II. Although women drove trams (and a variety of motor vehicles), they were never seriously contemplated (it would seem by either company, or union) for work on the footplate of steam trains as drivers and firemen. The years of training required to become drivers, those lofty aristocrats of labour, was one reason. This was a bone of contention amongst railwaymen themselves when career progression, based strictly on seniority, proved difficult to achieve. The role of fireman, responsible for shovelling the coal into the engine’s furnace, was physically demanding, dirty and dangerous, given the sheer amount of coal required to fuel a steam engine. It was also one position on the path to becoming a driver. The hostility to

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<sup>61</sup> There are echoes of a much earlier cartoon published in the *Girl of the Period Almanack* (1870) depicting modern young women employed as postal workers and being ogled by men on the street while the women themselves seem oblivious to the attention.

women as engine cleaners, whilst framed in terms of the danger of the job, was a way of ensuring they did not enter onto this line of promotion.

The depiction of the dainty woman driver in her domesticated engine cab could be read as signalling just how comically out of place a woman would be on this mode of technology, especially in a position of command. Steam trains were powerful, dirty modes of transport, which depended on being fed regularly with heavy shovelfuls of coal. The footplate itself was not a comfortable space, being largely open to the elements. The transformation of the footplate into a parlour room, complete with domestic servant in sparkling white pinafore was clearly meant to be ridiculous. Yet it might also be read as an underhand critique of engine drivers themselves, given the opposition of ASLEF to joining forces with the NUR. That the driver is transformed into a maid doing embroidery seems the ultimate insult to the men at the pinnacle of the industry and could be read as a critique of the latent feminised domesticity of their relationship to their engines. On the one hand, railway work de-feminises women through dirty, heavy work (as in the fire(wo)man). On the other hand, the presence of women (some of whom may indeed have once been domestic servants) brings the danger of emasculating the men who handled the trains.

In the triangular arrangement of the three railway employees, we see one very confused, older bearded guard (clearly too old to be on active military service) unable to comprehend either the dainty feminine driver or the masculine woman fireman. The “Loco. Women” (plural) leaves no doubt that the fireman is in fact a firewoman – as does the jacket straining over her ample bust. The masculine features of this stout working-class woman, her scowl, the angle of her hat and the smudges of dirt on her face suggest that either railway work has stripped her of femininity, or that this unnaturally manly woman is the only type of woman capable of attempting the heavy

work. Such a juxtaposition of these two women workers is interesting in keeping open two modes of inappropriate femininity on the rails, rather than assuming that railway work automatically de-sexes women. Neither character fits the typology of working women as downtrodden victims.<sup>62</sup> They are also distinct from the late nineteenth-century “Girl of the Period” stereotype of a modern young woman seeking new adventures. They seem untroubled by their position or by the curiosity of the guard. But they remain, like most of the women in DIN’s imagining, mute in the context of the cartoon.

The last numbered cartoon in the series, from 23 April 1915 [figure 6], is more direct in its vision of a world turned upside down. Gendered clothing, behavioural norms and sex hierarchies are each transgressed (though within limits). The female stationmistress adopts a form of hybrid masculine attire (a top hat tied with a bow, a dress coat with a skirt, and feather duster carried as a military drill sergeant might carry his pace stick). The male worker appears grumpily in a frilly apron and trousers. There is a carnivalesque subversion of gendered power dynamics: the central motif is of the hen-pecked husband (familiar from anti-suffrage cartoons). However, in a complication of the anti-suffrage narrative of the disruption of home life, the woman is not a wife but an employer and the cleaning role implied is not domestic.

The stationmistress shares features with the long-standing visual trope of the “embittered spinster,” as identified by Tickner. She has the sharp facial features and deep lines, the age and the unwomanly figure which Tickner notes as typical of this Victorian/Edwardian stereotype in anti-suffrage propaganda.<sup>63</sup> The caption, “When Women Supersede Men” is much more explicit than previous cartoons, and more

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<sup>62</sup> Tickner, *Spectacle of Women*, 174-82. Dickason also notes the use of the stout working-class woman stereotype in *Punch* wartime cartoons, “The Nuanced Comic Perspectives of the Cartoons,” 129.

<sup>63</sup> Tickner, *Spectacle of Women*, 164.

obviously anxious. It predicts male roles being completely taken over and, significantly, the emasculation of those male workers who remain. Yet women had performed the duties of station mistresses at small stations even before the war and men had engaged in cleaning tasks on the railways (without the need to don a pinny). Status and generation are clearly intertwined with gender here, with the cartoon figure of the stationmistress notably older than those depicted in guard and porter roles. The authority commanded by the position perhaps made it less apt, even in cartoon form, to be configured as the prerogative of young ladies and less amenable to caricatures of station romance.

With a cartoon on the “Signalwoman”, printed on 21 May 1915 [figure 7], railwaymen, rather than women, are the object of satire. As with the Loco. Women cartoon, it is difficult to know how much tension with the ASLEF union is influencing the representation of the locomotive staff. Here, drivers battle to carry out the disputed Rule 55, which demanded train crew tell signalmen personally if their train had stopped on a running line (violating the sanctity of the signalbox, potentially distracting the signalman, and inconveniencing the footplate men). There were demands that Rule 55 should be suspended if women were appointed to the signalbox – in line with general anxieties about women and men being left alone together in railway work.<sup>64</sup> The woman in the cartoon certainly looks anxious about the male fuss below her cosy fortress. The chaotic scene again undermines the respectable masculinity assumed of male railway workers. Here, women are not problematic in themselves but for the ways in which they are seen to be altering the homosocial occupational world by introducing

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<sup>64</sup> Janet Davidson has similarly explored the hostility towards women war workers on the US railways as being responsible for sexual immorality: “gendered notions of sexual respectability infused the workplace.” Janet F Davidson, “The Goosing of Violet Nye and Other Tales: White Women and Sexual Respectability on the Pennsylvania Railroad,” *Labor History*, 41 (Nov 2000): 437-52, 437-38.



female sexuality. By displacing inappropriate courtship onto ASLEF members, and making it laughably ridiculous, the cartoon might serve as a tool of social control to reinforce appropriate, respectable masculine behaviour towards women workers by NUR men.<sup>65</sup>

As feminist labour historians have argued, there is more to men's resistance to women workers than simply an economic imperative – unskilled men and boys, whilst a threat to wages and status, did not provoke such deep-seated anxieties. Gail Braybon puts it bluntly: “Women were not simply resented because they were unskilled or semi-skilled workers, but because they were *women*.”<sup>66</sup> In 1917, when skilled workers were no longer exempt from conscription, guards defended their roles as one that women especially should not do. In one cartoon (also by DIN), the guard tells the “lass” that, “This is not the job for you!” Hanging out the window of the train, he effectively polices the boundary between train and platform. The woman herself is represented sympathetically as young and attractive but the message of support for the guard is clear. Below this image, in the same frame, another sketch contrasts two male workers – one a young clerk, the other an older man holding a railway lantern and shunting pole. Unlike the first image, this requires a more detailed explanation: “Why should this man [the clerk] be put to partly learn railway work to serve in the R.O.C [Royal Observer Corps], whilst this man, who is an expert in dealing with railway traffic, is forced to serve in the infantry.”<sup>67</sup> The rejection of the woman guard relies entirely on

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<sup>65</sup> On humour as a means of ensuring conformity to masculine norms in the workplace, see David L. Collinson, “‘Engineering Humour’: Masculinity, Joking and Conflict in Shop-floor Relations,” *Organization Studies* 9, no.2 (1988): 181-99; Lucy Taksa, “Naming bodies at work: considering the gendered and emotional dimensions of nicknaming,” *International Journal of Work Organisation and Emotion* 5, no.1 (2012): 26-40.

<sup>66</sup> Gail Braybon, *Women Workers in the First World War* (Place?: Routledge, 1981 – this edition 2012 ebook), 72.

<sup>67</sup> *Railway Review*, 18 May 1917. Image available at [https://warwick.ac.uk/services/library/mrc/explorefurther/digital/railway\\_review/ww1\\_cartoons/women/](https://warwick.ac.uk/services/library/mrc/explorefurther/digital/railway_review/ww1_cartoons/women/) last accessed 15 Feb 2019.

assumptions about her unsuitability as a “lass”; the resistance to unskilled men is more complex in its undertones of class conflict and constructions of competing masculinities. The resistance of guards to the incursions of women continued to be documented in the *Railway Review* into 1918, along with support for signalmen in a similar struggle.<sup>68</sup>

Concerns about the effect of women usurping men’s “natural” roles had been central to anti-suffrage discourse prior to World War I. Working-class men had been urged to guard against “petticoat government” to preserve the correct order of things and avoid a descent into unnatural chaos. Tickner refers to the example of John Hassall’s poster, “A Suffragette’s Home” (with a working man returning to his neglected children and disorderly home as his wife attends a Votes for Women meeting).<sup>69</sup> In the set of NUR cartoons depicting relationships between workers, this sense of a dislocation of domestic duties by women is apparent: the domestic space has been transferred to the engine footplate in one; in another it is the man who becomes responsible for the “domestic” work of the station. The tone is of amusement at the absurdity of the situation however, rather than anger. The shift in the captions does suggest a fluctuating level of anxiety: from women “do the work of men,” to women “replace men,” to women “supersede men” but then back to “do the work of men.”

Finally, wartime conditions provided an opportunity to use the image of women workers to satirise the internal politics of the railway industry. The regular feature, “Flashes from our Wireless,” took the chance to critique the social pretensions, and assumed nepotism, of management. In a separate series of cartoons, members of the railway magnate’s and stationmaster’s family take up a variety of jobs on the railways.

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<sup>68</sup> See, for example, *Railway Review*, 5 July 1918, 2; and 14 July 1918, 2, on the “Battersea Bowser’s” belief that women should not become guards – for which “a certain amount o’nerve is required” – but should be kept out of harm’s way as “armchair railwaymen.”

<sup>69</sup> Tickner, *Spectacle of Women*, 179-80 and plate xv.

Their ineptitude is satirised through both class and gender stereotypes: for instance, the stationmaster's wife doing laundry outside the signal box, neglecting the vital duties of signalman. The presence of women, real and imagined, was thus used to crystallise other forms of internal railway and broader class politics.

### **Gender at Work in the NUR: Women as 'Problem' Members**

Women's presence had still broader implications for the unions, especially the NUR, and for the core identity of "railwayman". When women first appeared as wartime workers in the cartoons of 1915, they were outside official NUR jurisdiction. Shepherd's Bush and other branches had lobbied for women's membership prior to World War I, only to be frustrated by the Executive.<sup>70</sup> The war put the issue back on the agenda. On 7 May 1915, DIN rendered the "problem" of admitting women members in visual form, as a tentative courtship between male and female labour [figure 8]. The woman character is demure, attractive and unthreatening, yet she is labelled, "Another Problem to be Dealt With." The male union member looks anxiously askance at her but the mock courtship theme also allows a reading of mutual attraction. "Railway Service" is the gap between them to be bridged.

The presence of women members went to the heart of union identity. That the NUR lacked even a language for female workers was revealed by the semantic angst caused by proposals to grant them union membership. In the *Railway Review* of 25 June 1915, appeals were made in favour of admitting women, provoking the response: "This was the National Union of Railwaymen – that was fundamental"; "they were called on

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<sup>70</sup> Decisions of the NUR Executive Committee and Annual General Meeting affecting the Organisation Department 1913-1919, Ordinary E.C. Meeting Sept. 1913 and Annual General Meeting June 1915, Nottingham, MRC, MSS.127/NU/OR/3/1.

by the appeal to say that ‘railwaymen’ meant ‘railwaywomen’.”<sup>71</sup> Wojtczak contends that this explicitly went against earlier reassurances, at the time of union amalgamation, that the title was not intended to exclude women directly but was simply a way to distinguish the NUR from previous unions.<sup>72</sup> Clauses that stated the union aimed to represent *all* workers could not immediately overcome the linguistic power of the term “railwayman.”

The NUR Executive Committee finally relented at the summer AGM of 1915 and admitted women members, though only as temporary workers and therefore limited to level D subscriptions (a decision which was quickly challenged, to no effect, by the King’s Cross branch).<sup>73</sup> On 2 July, a cartoon marked the occasion in the *Railway Review*, with the caption “Eliza Comes – To Stay?” [figure 9] This adapted the title of a play from 1913 by H. V. Esmond, “Eliza Comes To Stay: a Farce in three acts” in which Eliza arrives as an initially unattractive and unexpected guest, who later wins the affections of the hero. The Eliza as drawn by DIN is young, feminine and plainly but not unfashionably dressed. She asks politely if she may come in whilst two male union officials occupy the boundaries of the office window and door. The cartoon picked up on the dispute over language, with what appears to be the NUR General Secretary, J. H. Thomas, adding a handwritten (and thus temporary) “and women” to the union signage.<sup>74</sup> Using a question mark at the end of “To Stay?” signalled the continuing concern that women might become a permanent feature of railway employment and thus of the union. This concern elided the pre-existing employment of women prior to World War I. Some members nonetheless actively welcomed the presence of women

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<sup>71</sup> *Railway Review*, 25 June 1915, 4.

<sup>72</sup> Wojtczak, *Railwaywomen*, 35.

<sup>73</sup> Decisions of the NUR Executive Committee and Annual General Meeting affecting the Organisation Department 1913-1919, Sept. E.C. 1915, MRC, MSS.127/NU/OR/3/1.

<sup>74</sup> We thank the anonymous referee for identifying the General Secretary.

in the union. One office worker, whose letter was published on 30 July 1915, referred to “sisters – in a double sense” in the railway offices and was pleased to report that they were relieving the “drabness” of the offices. This commonly used visual metaphor confirms the importance of outward physical appearances in negotiating women’s place in many male-dominated work environments.

July’s decision did not prevent women members being depicted as a “problem”. Unlike the attractive, demure figures of the earlier cartoons, in August 1915 the head of the woman worker was superimposed onto a serpent’s body [figure 10].<sup>75</sup> She is one of the serpents falling out of the bag of problems carried by the God of War. The association of the snake, and of women, with the biblical fall from grace, alongside a broader understanding of snakes as frightening and potentially deadly creatures, makes this a striking instance of wartime propaganda against women workers. Anxieties remained, especially at a structural level (for instance over the compliance of companies in paying the minimum male wage) however much women’s individual efforts in the wartime emergency might be recognised. Still, the union is ready to roll up its sleeves to keep its house in order.

In the later years of the war, the union publication demonstrated a concern with the conditions of wartime work for its women members. Even so, the anticipated end to women’s temporary employment was always kept in sight. In a January 1918 article, defending women against accusations of lateness, the author emphasised that women’s family responsibilities were rightly her first priority and that the end of the war would be welcomed in allowing her to return to her domestic sphere.<sup>76</sup> As several correspondents pointed out, how could the union genuinely protect female members at

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<sup>75</sup> *Railway Review*, 27 August 1915, 9.

<sup>76</sup> *Railway Review*, 11 January 1918, ‘Why she was late’, 5.

the same time as demanding they make way for returning servicemen?<sup>77</sup> The inclusion of women on only the temporary scale of union membership was one way to absolve the NUR of responsibility. By 1918, there were 36,000 women in male grades. Women's labour had facilitated the release of 184,475 railwaymen to the forces.<sup>78</sup> With the end of hostilities, many of these women found themselves quickly dismissed to make way for returning servicemen. Some union men were outspoken in their defence of their women colleagues (who might also be family members) but the railway employers would nevertheless return wholeheartedly to "traditional" divisions of labour in almost all sectors for many years to come. The identity of "railwayman" remained strong, fortified by the unions, and by the broader occupational culture (of which the *Railway Review* was an important component). Although women continued to work in the industry, and once again proved crucial during wartime labour shortages from 1939, they struggled to break down male-dominated areas of both employment and union activism. David Howell notes that it was not until 1978 that a woman delegate's name appeared on the records of the NUR Annual General Meeting.<sup>79</sup> In 1983, Anne Winter became British Rail's first woman driver.<sup>80</sup>

## Conclusion

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<sup>77</sup> Four signalwomen voiced their disillusionment with their branch, which had passed a resolution against their employment, in a letter published in the *Railway Review* of 16 April 1918: "we are contributing to our downfall." Quoted in Wojtczak, *Railwaywomen*, 94.

<sup>78</sup> Figures from Wojtczak, *Railwaywomen*, 91 and 115. The employment of women in British railways during the war appears from initial research to have been far more extensive than that in Australia. Butler-Bowden's study of the Victorian Railway Union found very few women employed prior to the mid-1920s, with the exception of a small number of cleaners and waiting room attendants, and gatekeepers. These Australian women appear from 1912 in the *Victorian Railway's Union Gazette*, thanking the union for intervening to win them better wages and conditions. Butler-Bowden, *In the Service*, 90.

<sup>79</sup> Howell, *Respectable Radicals*, 9.

<sup>80</sup> Wojtczak, *Railwaywomen*, 283.

The *Railway Review* cartoons are a unique source in their visual/textual representation of dramatised interactions between women workers and male passengers, male co-workers and the masculine institution of the union. Whilst photographs might capture the “spectacle” of women at work on the rails in wartime, the artistic licence and potential for additional written captions and speech bubbles in cartoons make them an especially rich medium. They suggest the ways in which the image and imagining of a gendered workplace culture might have mattered and made sense to railway employees in wartime, whether or not they agreed with DIN’s perspective. Members of many unions debated women’s physical, emotional and intellectual capacity to do the work; their appropriateness for such work; and later the need for equal pay to protect men’s positions. But these cartoons used the safety-valve of humour to defuse the potentially explosive consequences of women’s employment. They were one element in a fundamental struggle to assert the inherent masculinity of the roles of guard, porter, ticket-collector, inspector, stationmaster, fireman and driver. Women might not simply usurp men’s economic position, they could upset the gendered and classed social relations of the entire rail public transport network in very visible ways. By rendering this an absurd scenario, while still offering attractive images of women workers, DIN’s cartoons may have helped to soothe wartime anxieties of railwaymen both at home and away at the front.

Each cartoon in the series presented railwaywomen in a (semi)-public space: the station platform, the park bench, the door entrance from the street to the union offices. Railway work (in the roles depicted here) could make women highly visible, in a way that munitions and other factory work did not. The humour of the cartoons thus depends largely on the politics of appearance: women workers paying too much attention to their appearance; male passengers and some workers distracted by the

physical attractiveness of women workers; the bodily contrast between male and female union members (and an implied courtship narrative); or simply the absurdity of gendered appearances being transgressed. Women workers in the cartoons embodied female sexuality in ways that were ultimately deemed inappropriate for the railway workplace (if only because of the responses to them by male passengers); if they transgressed appropriate notions of feminine appearance, they raised still broader anxieties. The cartoons shed light on the complex, highly stratified, *homosocial* masculine world of railway employment, in which women's place was clearly designated as being at the margins.

In these wartime NUR cartoons, women were not positioned in entirely negative ways, nor were they celebrated as patriotic heroines freeing men for the front. Most often, they were silent, sometimes attractive, cyphers; a warning to male workers that their complex railway lives needed shoring up against the threat of women who could bring feminine attributes of aesthetic appeal to their public service duties on the platform, and even domestic aptitude for the management of stations. Ultimately, women's femininity was configured as both the "problem" and the solution, allowing the masculine nature of railway work to be confirmed. As in other industries, the war had not been a watershed for women railway workers.<sup>81</sup> Existing trends towards employing more women in the offices accelerated but "male grades" returned to their pre-war status as distinctly men only. More broadly, these cartoons are suggestive of the varied and complex cultural processes through which hegemonic masculine

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<sup>81</sup> Braybon and Summerfield, *Out of the Cage*, 281. Braybon has more recently critiqued the "watershed" narrative of the war for both women and men in, Gail Braybon, "Winners or Losers: Women's Symbolic Role in the War Story," in *Evidence, History and the Great War* ed. Gail Braybon (NY: Berghahn Books, 2008), 89. See also, Susan Grayzel, "Liberating Women? Examining Gender, Morality and Sexuality in First World War Britain and France," in *Evidence, History and the Great War* ed. Braybon, 113-34.



“traditions” of occupations have been invented and reinforced. This has been to the long-term detriment of not only women in the workforce but society as a whole.