Engines for empire

The Victorian army and its use of railways

EDWARD M. SPIERS

STUDIES IN IMPERIALISM

When the 'Studies in Imperialism' series was founded by Professor John M. MacKenzie more than thirty years ago, emphasis was laid upon the conviction that 'imperialism as a cultural phenomenon had as significant an effect on the dominant as on the subordinate societies'. With well over a hundred titles now published, this remains the prime concern of the series. Cross-disciplinary work has indeed appeared covering the full spectrum of cultural phenomena, as well as examining aspects of gender and sex, frontiers and law, science and the environment, language and literature, migration and patriotic societies, and much else. Moreover, the series has always wished to present comparative work on European and American imperialism, and particularly welcomes the submission of books in these areas. The fascination with imperialism, in all its aspects, shows no sign of abating, and this series will continue to lead the way in encouraging the widest possible range of studies in the field. 'Studies in Imperialism' is fully organic in its development, always seeking to be at the cutting edge, responding to the latest interests of scholars and the needs of this ever-expanding area of scholarship.

Engines for empire

Engines for empire

The Victorian army and its use of railways

Edward M. Spiers

CONTENTS

[v]

MAPS AND ILLUSTRATIONS

Maps

Illustrations

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Map 1 South African railways

1

Public order: the army and railways

The railway represented one of pivotal technological developments of the nineteenth century. In Britain, wrote W. T. Jackman, the appearance of the railway had a 'grandeur and ostentation that charmed the public. It seemed the embodiment of enterprise and boundless capabilities.'[1] For many Victorians, and railway historians, the primary benefits of the railways were socio-economic: they accelerated the movement of goods and people, connected disparate communities and facilitated the transmission of news, images and information.[2] Similar benefits would flow across the empire, opening up the hinterland in Canada, India and South Africa, and enhancing the development of commerce, free trade and prosperity. As the 'largest single investment of the age',[3] they overcame barriers of time and space, had a huge impact upon the economy of India, and enhanced Victorian understanding of the empire through the transmission of images of peoples, places and events.[4]

The onset of the 'railway age',[5] with the Stockton and Darlington line opening for colliery traffic in 1825 and the Liverpool and Manchester line for passenger and goods traffic in 1830, coincided with recurrent outbreaks of public disorder. Whether these events occurred in urban or rural communities, and whether they were triggered by economic discontent, localized agitation, radical demagoguery or a combination of all three, they often involved actual or potential threats to property. As the local magistrates often reported such events in a state of panic, the state had to respond but, in so doing, could not exploit the potential of railways until private investors had laid the critical lines. Fortunately, the astonishing example of George Stephenson's 'Rocket' in the Rainhill Trials of 1829, where it managed speeds of nearly 30 mph (48.3 km per hour), and then the example of a single company operating the Liverpool and Manchester Railway, inspired the first railway 'boom' when expenditure on railways increased from £1 million in 1834 to £9 million in 1839. The key lines were built, particularly the Grand Junction and the London and Birmingham lines in 1837 and 1838 respectively, which linked the capital by rail with the industrial towns and ports of Lancashire. Thereafter amid the railway-building

'mania' of 1845–49, peaking in 1847, the railway network expanded from 2,409 km in 1840 to 9,791 km in 1850, linking the major population centres of England, Scotland and Wales.[6]

That railways would come to assume a considerable significance in the maintenance of public order reflected the continuing role of the army in providing aid to the civil power. This role persisted despite the ratifications of the Metropolitan Police Act (1829), the Lighting and Watching Act (1833) and the Municipal Corporations Act (1835). Although the last Act required reformed corporations to establish watch committees, which could then appoint constables to be paid at the expense of the ratepayers, many corporations were reluctant to do so. As late as 1849, there were at least twenty-one corporate towns (or 12 per cent of the total number) that had not established a police force. Even more boroughs were reluctant to establish a sufficiently large police force, and so they complied with the letter if not the spirit of the legislation, and established police forces that were woefully under strength. Whereas the Metropolitan Police had established a ratio of constables to citizens of 1:443 by 1840, only 1 in 20 boroughs attained ratios of 1:600 or better from 1839 to 1848, and barely one-quarter of the provincial boroughs maintained a ratio of 1:1,100 throughout the period of the Chartist disturbances (1837–48).[7]

More recent research has challenged the traditional Whig narrative that Britain was a largely unpoliced society prior to the 1829 Act, and has shown that there was private policing in parts of London before the Act, and that a policing system existed at parish level, albeit one limited in scope.[8] There were also pockets of experimentation in policing, including a Cheshire Police Act passed in 1829 and private Policing Acts in the burghs of Scotland.[9] Yet the absence of regular police forces was manifest in many of the northern industrial communities of Yorkshire and Lancashire, where the People's Charter had an early appeal in 1838.[10] Advocating radical political reform, orators attracted noisy meetings and led parades, many of them held by torchlight at night, involving thousands of people and inducing widespread alarm among the property-owning classes. In Manchester, where a police 'force' of two constables and seventy-four watchmen had proved utterly ineffectual in the face of industrial disturbances and riots in 1829, the police, in 1837, amounted to only 30 constables, 150 watchmen and several hundred special constables.[11]

Accordingly, the state, county and municipal authorities looked to the military (both regular and auxiliary forces), part-time special constables and later military pensioners to provide aid to the civil power. This was nothing new for the regular army: even at the height of the Peninsular War, in 1812, more than 12,000 soldiers, including

militiamen and yeomanry, were deployed between Leicester and York to suppress the Luddite disturbances.[12] The military provided all manner of assistance. In coastal communities, particularly in Cornwall, the military aided customs and excise officers in the seizure of contraband and in countering smugglers. In Ireland military units provided escorts for prisoners and witnesses, guards at gaols and executions, protection for sheriffs, bailiffs and excise officers in their periodic attempts to curtail the distilling of illicit whiskey and a presence at public gatherings, such as fairs, markets and political meetings, where breaches of the peace might occur. They were deployed extensively during elections, acting as escorts for voters and poll books and serving as a riot-control force if necessary. Above all, in the early 1830s the military, including the Irish yeomanry until their abolition in 1834, assisted the Irish Constabulary during the tithe war,[13] when magistrates sought to enforce the collection of tithes on behalf of the Church of Ireland or the seizure of goods in default of payment. There were several bloody confrontations during this 'war', when the police and military fired on mobs, killing and wounding protestors and sometimes suffering fatalities themselves.[14]

However experienced in these multifarious duties, army commanders knew that these events were always risky and unpredictable. In the aftermath of Waterloo (18 June 1815), they were made even more demanding by the rapid and extensive cuts in military expenditure and manpower made by successive governments. As the state rushed to reduce the military-fiscal burden of wartime, it cut expenditure on the army and ordnance from £43,256,260 in 1815 to £10,699,865 in 1820, and thence to below £10 million in the 1820s and just under £8 million by 1836. It allowed this expenditure to rise only during the Chartist disturbances, and subsequent war scares, to reach £9,635,709 in 1853. Military numbers fell in line with the financial cuts as the army slumped from 233,952 men in 1815 to 114,513 in 1820, and to 104, 066 in 1830, before rising slightly to 124,659 in 1840 and 136,932 by 1850. Even worse, the garrisoning of the empire consumed at least half of the army, leaving only 64,426 officers and men in the United Kingdom in 1820 and a mere 44,731 by 1825. With the Guards normally based in London,[15] the other home-based infantry and cavalry units, scattered across the country, were frequently on the move. The 1st Royal Dragoons, for example, moved from Lancashire in 1820 to Dorset in 1821, and then, on half-yearly rotas, to Kent, London, York, Edinburgh, Dundalk, Dublin, Newbridge, Cork and Ballincollig, before returning to Lancashire in 1829.[16]

Hampered by the shortage of regular soldiers, the state was unable to compensate by drawing upon substantial numbers of auxiliary forces.

During the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, it had enrolled large bodies of militia, mounted yeomanry and volunteers primarily for home defence. All these forces, though, had aided the civil power, suppressing food riots, Luddite disturbances and riots or mutinies among the local militias. By 1808, most of the volunteers were incorporated into the semi-balloted local militias, and all of the local militias were disembodied in 1816. The militia, too, were disembodied apart from their permanent staff at the end of the Napoleonic Wars.[17] Only the yeomanry survived but in a severely truncated form, with much of their strength (17,818 men in 1817) concentrated in the home counties, East Anglia, the Midlands and the maritime counties of southern England.[18] More expensive than the regular forces (as they had to be paid for their voluntary services whenever called out in aid of the civil power), the yeomanry were also much less popular after the events at St Peter's Field, Manchester, on 16 August 1819, popularly known as the Peterloo Massacre. Faced with a vast crowd of possibly 60,000, sixty cavalrymen of the Manchester and Salford Yeomanry were ordered to assist in serving an arrest warrant on Henry Hunt and other radical orators. They became trapped, and escaped only with the assistance of the 15th Hussars, but during the resulting mêlée eleven people died and another 400 were injured (more by crushing than by sabring),[19] leaving the yeomanry's reputation in tatters. The Manchester and Salford Yeomanry was disbanded in 1824, and the government briefly tried to disembody the entire force in 1827–28 before an upsurge of disturbances in rural areas (the Swing riots of 1830–31) occasioned the restoration and renewed use of the yeomanry corps. Although Lord John Russell, when the Whig home secretary, declared that 'he would rather that any force should be employed in case of local disturbances than the local corps of yeomanry',[20] and distaste for employing the costly and unpopular yeomanry persisted, both Tory and Whig governments had to employ their services extensively during the 1840s.

Accordingly the army, sometimes bolstered by the support of ex-army pensioners, remained the principal military instrument in aid of civil power. When they served in this capacity, soldiers acted under the control of the civic authorities, with the home secretary assuming responsibility for the distribution of troops across the United Kingdom, though usually after consultation with the Horse Guards and the commanders of the military districts. At local level, the local magistracy had the responsibility for maintaining public order. In the event of a public disturbance, they had to gather sufficient forces, relying upon local police in the first instance, but if two or more magistrates were present, they could swear in special constables. They could also

request aid from the local military or call out, on their own authority, the local yeomanry. They then had to lead this force to the scene of the disturbance, decide whether to read the Riot Act (whereupon the riot became a felony and the authorities could use force, including firearms, to suppress it) and give the order to open fire.[21]

This process could prove disastrous. On 2 June 1831 an angry crowd of 2,000 protestors, demanding reductions in the price of bread and an increase in wages, assembled outside the Castle Inn, Merthyr Tydfil. Inside the inn, local employers and magistrates were meeting Richard Hoare Jenkins, the High Sheriff of Glamorgan; they rejected the demands of the mob, which not only refused to disperse but also then attacked the inn. Jenkins panicked and read the Riot Act before a small detachment from the Reserve of the 93rd (Sutherland) Highlanders were properly deployed in support of the special constables. In the resulting confrontation, six of the sixty-three Highlanders including their commander, Major Thomas Falls, were badly injured, at least sixteen people died, and another seventy were wounded. Compelled to withdraw from the inn to the more defensible Penydarren House, the magistrates and military abandoned the town for eight days as the rioters commandeered arms and explosives, set up road blocks and attacked the military reinforcements. They ambushed the 93rd's baggage-train under escort of forty of the Glamorgan Yeomanry; humiliated the Swansea Yeomanry by disarming them in an ambush and throwing them back in disorder to Neath; beat off a relief force of a hundred cavalry sent from Penydarren House; and organized a mass demonstration against Penydarren House. Only after the arrival of another 450 soldiers were the authorities able to regain control of the town.[22]

Among the Reform Bill riots of the same year, mob rule prevailed again when the military withdrew from the centre of Bristol. Under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel Thomas Brereton, two troops of the 14th Light Dragoons and a troop of the 3rd Dragoon Guards had arrived in the city on 29 October, when rioters were already attacking the Mansion House. Lacking any orders to fire, Brereton withdrew his ninety-three dragoons, allowing a mob that would eventually number several thousands to pillage and burn the principal buildings. Over three days the rioting continued until the mayor, Charles Pinney, authorized Brereton to act on 31 October. Although Brereton still dithered, Major Mackworth gave the orders to attack and the dragoons swept across Queen Square, clearing the rioters and inflicting over 100 casualties. Writing about these events in his diary, Edward Law, the first earl of Ellenborough, reflected upon the extensive destruction of property, including 'the Bishop's Palace, the Custom House, the

Mansion House and the three prisons': he dolefully observed, 'I fear there are very few Troops at Bristol.'[23] Compounding this disaster, Brereton was later court-martialled for leniency and, on the fourth day of his trial, shot himself.

If these were among the more serious disturbances, the Reform Bill riots had occurred in many localities (notably Derby, Nottingham and Mansfield in the Midlands and, on a smaller scale, Exeter, Yeovil and Blandford in the West Country), indicating that the maintenance of order could stretch the resources across the country. Accordingly, both the state and the army soon saw that the new network of railways offered a potential means of responding to challenges in different parts of the United Kingdom, and of doing so with relative alacrity. Ironically Britain's most famous general, Arthur Wellesley, the first duke of Wellington, had experienced the speed and power of the railways at first hand during the opening of the Liverpool and Manchester Railway on 15 September 1830. Wellington, who served twice in this period as commander-in-chief of the army (in 1827–28 and 1842–52) and twice as prime minister (in 1828–30 and 1834), was then prime minister. He led an unpopular Tory government that had fractured its own support over Catholic emancipation while remaining opposed to political reform. The railway company had hoped to mend some of those political fissures by inviting Wellington and many leading Tories, including the marquess of Salisbury, Sir Robert Peel and the leader of the more liberal Tory faction, William Huskisson, the MP for Liverpool, to the opening ceremony. While the duke was hugely impressed by the experience of travelling on a railway coach at speeds of 26 km per hour, and occasionally at 48 km per hour, with trains passing each other on the two lines, the whole event was overshadowed by an accident at Parkside, where the duke's train stopped to take on water. As Huskisson's party descended from their coach to meet the duke, Stephenson's 'Rocket' rushed down the other line, inducing panic in the portly and enfeebled Huskisson, who fell on the line and had his thigh crushed by a wheel. As Wellington subsequently encountered a very hostile mob at Manchester, before learning of Huskisson's agonizing death later that night, the whole experience, as his biographer remarks, 'prejudiced the Duke for ever against railways'.[24]

Nevertheless, the practical utility of railways was all too obvious even at a time when the railway network was far from complete. Soon after its opening in 1830 the Liverpool and Manchester Railway was the first railway to carry soldiers on active service, saving a two-day march from Manchester, and, on 10 July 1832, the 91st (Argyllshire) Regiment had its first experience of travelling by train from Manchester to Liverpool prior to embarking on two steamers to Dublin.[25]

Fortunately, from the perspective of the authorities, they were not challenged too much in the populous industrial region of the north until the onset of significant Chartist disturbances in 1839. Within the Northern District, a military district that encompassed eleven counties in the north of England, and had its headquarters in Manchester, the troop levels fell from 7,280 in 1831 to under 5,000 until 1839, whereupon the numbers rose steadily, peaking at 8,185 in May 1840 before easing down to 5,080 in 1841.[26]

Prior to the movement of substantial numbers of regular soldiers northwards, Metropolitan policemen were despatched regularly to the provinces to make up for the deficiencies of local constabularies. A total of 2,246 policemen were sent out from London between June 1830 and January 1838, an average of some 300 per annum but rising during the anti-Poor Law disturbances to 444 in 1837 and 764 in 1838 respectively. These policemen often received hostile receptions because many deemed them unconstitutional and quasi-military, since they wore uniforms (blue swallow tail coats) and carried wooden truncheons. They also discouraged the local authorities from providing for their own defence, were too small in number to deal with serious riots and had to act under the direction of local magistrates. They often proved less successful in controlling crowds than they were in London partly on account of inadequate numbers, and partly because they had less knowledge of the localities in which they had to operate. Sometimes their presence provoked the mob, notably at the Bull Ring in Birmingham on 4 July 1839, when they charged into a crowd of about a thousand people to arrest a Chartist speaker, precipitating such a violent response that the 4th Dragoons had to rescue the police.[27]

While the practice of sending Metropolitan policemen around the country diminished over the years (as provincial authorities raised their own police forces), the movement of large bodies of soldiers became more prevalent. The railway companies, all privately owned bodies, readily assisted. Some of these companies had close connections with the armed services, employing retired officers as secretaries and general managers, and they developed a corporate culture in which their companies functioned in a disciplined, hierarchical manner with uniformed staff.[28] They found the requisite coaches to convey soldiers and their families across country, buildings in some stations to serve as temporary barracks and work-people to serve as special constables protecting railway property. They also contributed indirectly, by enhancing communications through access to their telegraphic equipment, which ran alongside the lines to improve traffic control.[29]

Faced with anti-Poor Law agitation in the late 1830s, and the opening phase of Chartism in the Northern District, the commanding

officer, Major-General Sir Richard Downes Jackson, sought additional men from Ireland, and readily exploited the rail networks. Both he and his successor, Sir Charles James Napier (March 1839–September 1841), benefited from the relative tranquillity in Ireland, which enabled three infantry and three cavalry regiments to be brought over from Ireland. They were landed at Liverpool and moved by rail to Manchester. Of the three units brought over in May 1839, the 1st Royal Dragoons, the 10th (North Lincolnshire) Regiment of Foot and the 79th (Cameron) Highlanders, Napier remarked that 'the last being in kilts terrified the Chartists more than a brigade of other troops'.[30] For movements along the London and Birmingham Railway, a large military depot was established at Weedon in Northamptonshire. The aim of the policy was to bring large concentrations of troops together in critical districts, from which forces could be sent into disturbed areas where necessary. Many of these movements across the districts had to be made by foot or on horseback because apart from four railway lines, including the Manchester and Leeds line, the West Riding still lacked an extensive rail network. In bringing soldiers into Manchester, the heart of the Lancastrian industrial region, Napier sometimes tried to deceive the local agitators by a phased use of the rail network: as he informed the under-secretary of state on 25 May 1839, 'One wing of the 10th came by a morning train yesterday; the other by an evening train, which made everybody suppose two regiments had arrived.'[31]

By the end of 1839, the state had concentrated 10,527 soldiers in the military districts affected by Chartist disorders, with 7,686 men in the Northern District, 969 in the Midland command and 1,872 in South Wales,[32] where the largest armed insurrection of the Chartist era had erupted in Newport on 4 November. The killing of twenty-two people and the wounding of another fifty underlined the risks that could occur when a small company of soldiers (two non-commissioned officers (NCOs) and twenty-eight men of the 45th (Nottinghamshire) Regiment under Lieutenant Basil Gray) and some special constables (most of the 500 'sworn in') faced an all-out assault from a Chartist mob of between four and five thousand, armed with muskets and pikes. Thereafter as fears of further disturbances persisted, almost a thousand soldiers were rushed into South Wales to be billeted in Newport and later in Cardiff.[33]

Rushing large numbers of soldiers into a district by rail, however, posed numerous problems, and these were widely recognized at the time, not least by Charles Napier, arguably the most successful of the district commanders. An extreme radical who detested the new Poor Law and sympathized with the plight of the poor and the political aims of the Chartists, he was a courageous appointment.[34] While

Napier believed that the Whig government should seek a political solution to the rising tide of discontent, he could not countenance direct action: 'Bad laws must be reformed by the concentrated reason of the nation gradually acting on the legislature, not by the pikes of individuals acting on the bodies of the executive.'[35] So he accepted that he had to contain the threat from the Chartists locally but hoped to do so without spilling blood on either side. 'I dread bloodshed', he wrote, wanting to avoid both 'a terrible slaughter of the unhappy Chartists' and any military disaster: 'a military mishap would be a national misfortune'.[36]

Within this context he harboured all manner of anxieties and apprehensions about the security of his soldiers when they were brought into a district where there was a conspicuous lack of suitable barrack accommodation. He complained bitterly about soldiers being scattered in twenty-six detachments across his eleven counties, with some units 322 km from him, and often in 'disgusting' and 'dangerous' quarters, including public and private houses, the worst being the forty-two troopers quartered in twenty-one billets within Halifax.[37] His fears were twofold: first, that soldiers individually or in small groups could be subverted in their loyalty, and that reports of Chartism finding adherents among the Rifles only underscored his preference for relying upon 'troops from Ireland' and 'Irish rather than Scotch, and Scotch rather than English',[38] and second, that soldiers living in improvised barracks could be vulnerable to attack. 'Chartists', he feared, 'may place marksmen at windows commanding egress from the barracks, and setting fire to the last, shoot the soldiers as they attempt to form.'[39]

Accordingly, Napier proposed keeping his forces concentrated, with some 900 men under Sir Hew Ross in Carlisle, Newcastle, Tynemouth and Sunderland; another 2,800 men under Colonel Thomas J. Wemyss in Manchester, Stockport, Bolton, Blackburn, Burnley, Todmorden, Rochdale, Wigan, Haydock, Liverpool and Chester; and a third force of 1,000 men based in Hull, York, Leeds, Sheffield, Derby, Nottingham and Halifax under his own command. He envisaged being able to support each subordinate force in strength and not dissipate his numbers, even using the railways where available, in response to requests from distraught magistrates. He insisted that if magistrates wanted detachments, they had to provide for the safety of the soldiers by providing 'a good barrack', as the magistrates at Bury had promised, or call upon local yeomanry.[40] After reviewing the temporary barracks in the north of England, Napier submitted a formal report, which recommended that fresh sites should be chosen near railways, roads and fresh water, and on the edges of towns, so that the troops could be deployed quickly yet preserved from sudden attack. By establishing large garrisons at

places such as Thornhill in the West Riding of Yorkshire, he argued, soldiers could be kept 'out of mischief' while drill and discipline would prosper.[41]

If railway usage was still relatively limited in Napier's era, it was increasingly prominent during the Plug Plot disturbances of July–August 1842,[42] when regiments were reportedly whirled about 'at a rate of forty miles an hour',[43] and the renewed Chartist agitation of the mid- and late 1840s. A Railway Act, which received the royal assent only six days before the outbreak of the Plug Plot disturbances, contained a clause that compelled railway companies to convey soldiers at certain charges on presentation of an order signed by the proper authorities.[44] This proved to be a time when the authorities were able to move some 118,000 soldiers, and 12,000 dependants, by rail over two calendar years ending on 31 December 1843,[45] and commentators have hailed this transformation as providing 'a decisive edge' in the maintenance of public order.[46] The railways and their accompanying telegraphs, wrote the railway historian Jack Simmons, 'added immeasurably to the real power that could be exercised by the central government in London over the whole Kingdom'.[47]

Sir James Willoughby Gordon, then the quartermaster-general, was the source of this information on railway usage. Testifying before a parliamentary select committee on 1 March 1844, he famously remarked that the army could 'send a battalion of 1,000 men from London to Manchester in nine hours; that same battalion marching would take 17 days'. The men, he added, all long-service soldiers, some of whom were nearing the end of their twenty-one years of service, would arrive 'at the end of nine hours just as fresh, or nearly so, as when they started'. He asserted, too, that the railways enabled a relatively small army to act in a much more responsive way than it would otherwise have been able to do: 'you could not have done one-tenth part of the work that it was required' to do, 'and necessarily to do, in the year 1842'. Moving men with all their arms, ammunition and accoutrements, weighing about half a hundredweight (or 63.5 kg) per soldier, was, as he explained, much less burdensome by rail. Although they travelled in third-class coaches, the men had seats, and some railway companies provided covers for the coaches at no extra charge. It was just as feasible to move cavalry with their horses by rail, and overall the process was marginally cheaper than marching. Above all, as Gordon observed, rail movement facilitated the power of concentration at designated destinations, and maximized the time available for active duty (and did not waste it in travelling across country).[48]

The above use of the railways referred not merely to movements in connection with the maintenance of public order but also to all