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As I start to write this I can see a red engine in the twilight distance of an autumn evening waiting to take its freight train out of the yard to traverse the width of the country. Its mournful whistle rolls across the water and is soaked up by the pine-clad mountainside as it starts its long journey – a small cog in the clockwork of the transport infrastructure that keeps this nation on the move.

The locomotive livery is actually the candy apple-red of the Canadian Pacific, the water is the Burrard Inlet of the Pacific, this is fall in Vancouver and the train is leaving for a three day trip to the economic heartland of Canada in Ontario and the east. What has this to do with Switzerland?

Vancouver and the Canadian Confederation both owe their existence to the railway, the tool of the nineteenth century Merchant Venturers that opened up North America. Without the railway to link its far-flung lands Canada as we know it may not have existed, and British Columbia would probably have been another state of the Union. As I sit musing at my laptop it occurs to me that many towns and cities in the Switzerland we currently study also owe their existence to the railway promoters of nineteenth century Europe. Some 150 years on it is easy to assume that the railways set out to serve the communities we now know, but in many cases these prosperous places rose from obscurity and poverty to their current place on the Swiss national stage only because of the railway provision.

We all have our own particular interests in the wide field of railways. The class of loco, the history of the rolling stock, the detail of the timetable, counting rivets on a superb model, all these things interest some people. My underlying interest is in the railway in its environment – the economic and social history that the iron rail wrought on the areas it touched as it expanded across the land, and still touches

A TRAIN OF THOUGHT

and affects as the twenty first century opens. Yes – I have been known to stand and watch the working at a busy station. I admit that the sight of a sleek passenger train, or even a humble road freight, moving along the tracks will improve my demeanour on a manic day. But my thoughts invariably go to:- Who is travelling? Why are they travelling? Where are they going? What is it carrying? Each train is a part of the personal and public life of the nation, enriching its fabric – a microcosm of the society it serves.

It was not just the rise of transportation nodal points and industrial centres that the railway caused to occur, but it was also the tourist industry that rose upon its efficiency in a horse-drawn age. By introducing commuting the railways enabled existing major commercial centres to grow as they solved the problem of how to move the people needed to service the banks, insurance companies, business offices, etc. long before the rise of the internal combustion engine and the spread of electronic communication gave other alternatives. Zürich without its S-Bahn is unthinkable, as was the growth of somewhere like Interlaken as a tourist honeypot. The pre-eminence of Switzerland as a tourist centre in the first half of the twentieth century was solely down to the railway. It was the major tool in making a poor nation rich.

In its own way the building of the Rigi Bahn from Vitznau was as much a catalyst in the development of that community as was the arrival of the Canadian Pacific in Vancouver. In different ways both railways still serve the places that they caused to develop and both places still resound to whistles over water as red painted trains leave quaysides on quiet autumn evenings. Long may they remain.

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