

## Author Biography

*Jonathan Bea*

Jonathan Bea is a fifth-year Business major with minors in History and Spanish. He wrote his paper for Dr. Lewis Call's Research and Writing Seminar in History. His research interests include American legal and political histories and the Spanish Civil War. After graduating, Jonathan plans to travel and eventually pursue a career in corporate law.

# Awdry v. British Rail: The Politicization of Thomas the Tank Engine

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Many science fiction stories pose that as humans move forward, they lose perspective on the importance of the outdated technologies that allowed them to make such progress. In the mid-1940s, Reverend Wilbert Awdry began writing a series of science fiction books that would make him one of the most prolific writers of the genre. Consistently producing one book a year for over thirty years, Awdry's stories outlined an idealized world, grounded in technological accuracy and realism. His stories also contained biting social and political commentary, frequently critiquing the policies of the British government. Though originally these stories began as simple rhymes that Awdry told his ill son, Christopher, he eventually published them as *The Railway Series*. The series later became more famously known as *Thomas the Tank Engine*, taking on the moniker of Awdry's most famous character. While it is easy to dismiss *The Railway Series* as simplistic children's stories, the book draws heavily from science fiction tradition.

As defined in Adam Roberts' book *The History of Science Fiction*, *The Railway Series* was known as "hard science fiction": a form which focuses

on technology. Roberts explores the impact that technology has on science, presenting a case that science is a function of technology rather than technology as an application of science: “There is not theory on the one side and its practical implementation on the other. Rather science is one manifestation of the technological stance towards entities.”<sup>1</sup> Therefore, it can reasonably be extrapolated that literature focused on the workings of technology is, in fact, science fiction, as science itself is intrinsically linked to technology. In the most literal sense, *The Railway Series* was chiefly driven by anthropomorphized technology. Through language which young readers could understand, *The Railway Series* aimed to explore the functions of technology. In fact, anthropomorphizing machines were crucial to how the stories registered in the minds of the young readers, as it is likely that humanizing the locomotives improved readers’ abilities to remember Awdry’s lessons. Therefore, this research reflects on Awdry’s books as science fiction literature.

Several odd themes began to develop in Awdry’s stories beginning in the late 1950s. The first, and most important of these new thematic elements was the conflict between steam engines and diesel engines. During this period, British Rail, or B.R., the largest nationalized railway in England undertook a costly and ineffective modernization effort that involved decommissioning their fleet of steam engines and replacing them with Diesels. Parallel to this, Awdry began more frequently referencing a place known as “The Other Railway,” often using it as a foil to his utopian Island of Sodor and treating it akin to a steam engine hell. “The Other Railway” represented B.R. and their callous scrapping of countless steam engines. While B.R. transitioned from steam to diesel engines as part of its modernization plans, the Island of Sodor opts to continue using steam engines exclusively. As Awdry wrote more political stories and conflicts, the setting became increasingly anachronistic. Finally, Awdry included characters and locations directly inspired by real life preservation railways and the steam

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1 Adam Roberts, *The History of Science Fiction* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 12.

engines which worked on them. While this may seem insignificant, it marked a change in the world of Sodor as Awdry shifted from writing about characters of his own creation to those taken directly from real life. During this time in his writing career, Awdry criticized and rebuked the modernization efforts of B.R., characterizing diesel engines as untrustworthy, arrogant and antagonistic while simultaneously developing the Island of Sodor as a utopia which preserved the history and legacy of the steam engines that B.R. sought to destroy. Awdry's stories which best achieve his goals of critiquing modernization and dieselization while developing a steam engine utopia were *Duck and the Diesel Engine* (1958), *The Twin Engines* (1960), *Stepney the "Bluebell" Engine* (1963), and *Enterprising Engines* (1968). What caused these drastic shifts in his writing? In order to fully understand these changes, it is important to first explain the real life "debate" surrounding the modernization of British Rail—the largest nationalized British railway—which occurred while Awdry wrote many of his books.

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, B.R., one of the largest railway companies in England, undertook a massive modernization effort that became one of the most disastrous political and economic projects in modern British history. Over a period of about 15 years, B.R. not only replaced its fleet of steam engines with a new fleet of diesel engines but also closed down lines of track as well as stations and entire routes. According to the architects of these plans, in some ways, the modernization attempts were necessary and successful. The two key figures behind the modernization efforts were Sir Brian Robertson, a retired serviceman whom Winston Churchill personally asked assume the role as chairman of the British Transport Commission, and Richard Beeching, a businessman succeeded Robinson's failure. In 1955, B.R. recorded an operating loss, alarming the conservative U.K. government. As a result, the government sought to cut costs and improve the efficiency of the railway, and the first step in doing this would be decommissioning the fleet of steam engines. The second part of the modernization efforts began during Beeching's tenure with what became

known as the “Beeching Cuts,” which decommissioned thousands of miles of track, hundreds of stations, and countless branch lines. The scholarly consensus surrounding these efforts to modernize B.R. is that the dieselization and Beeching Cuts were misguided at best and outright disastrous at worst.<sup>2</sup> Although it seemed that the diesels were a cheaper alternative to the steam engines, B.R. focused only on production costs, and did not consider intangible expenses which made diesels more expensive than steam engines. Diesels were expected to operate during 85% of a 24-hour day but only clocked in at 50-60% at best, making them much more inefficient and costly than the steam engines they replaced.<sup>3</sup> One particularly unreliable diesel notoriously broke down every 8,000 miles.<sup>4</sup> This lack of reliability came from major design flaws stemming from rushed manufacturers and non-standard and mismatched fleet.<sup>5</sup> As for the “Beeching Cuts,” although the cuts were a successful short-term financial decision, they had long lasting social and economic consequences that resulted in Beeching becoming one of the most hated men in England.

By cutting the railway lines, rural areas throughout England became cut off from the rest of the country, with their citizens losing the ability to travel and easily transport goods. As recently as 2021, British politicians worked to remedy the consequences of the cuts by investing in projects to restore the lost lines: “[Secretary of State for Transport of the United Kingdom] Grant Shapps told the conference he wanted to reverse the ‘butchery’ of the cuts by Dr Beeching which saw thousands of miles of track closed.”<sup>6</sup> The final argument of those against the modernization efforts was one of the most crucial points to understanding the works of Wilbert Awdry: the cultural loss caused by cuts and dieselization.

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2 Charles Loft, “Chapter 4,” in *Last Trains* (London: Biteback Publishing); David Henshaw, *The Great Railway Conspiracy* (North Yorkshire: Leading Edge Press and Publishing, 1991), 100; T.R. Gourvish, *British Rail 1948-1973* (Cambridge University Press, 1974), 286-290.

3 Henshaw, 100.

4 Ibid.

5 Gourvish, 286-90; Loft, “Chapter 4.”

6 David Lynch, “Savage Cuts to the Rail Lines in the 60’s Will be Reversed,” *Express*, Oct. 4, 2021.

For hundreds of years, the steam locomotives worked thanklessly to make Great Britain a global superpower, even becoming a major sponsor Britain's war effort during World War II. However, barely any steam engines were preserved, with over 16,000 British steam engines sent away to be scrapped over the course of less than 20 years.<sup>7</sup> With the mass dieselization of B.R. and the Beeching cuts, Britain lost an important part of its history and cultural identity: a trade-off that Awdry would go on to argue was not worth it.

In his book *Demand the Impossible*, Tom Moylan introduces his concept of utopian science fiction with an explanation of what he believes is its source, espousing that “[utopian fiction] is rooted in the unfulfilled needs and wants of specific classes, groups, and individuals in their unique historical contexts ... forging visions of what is not realized either in theory or practice.”<sup>8</sup> This exposition on the origins of utopian fiction is especially helpful in understanding the works of Awdry. Wilbert Awdry grew up in a difficult family situation as the son of his father's second wife. However, in spite of the awkward nature, Wilbert, his brother George, and his father Vere were drawn together by a shared love of steam trains.<sup>9</sup> This mutual love of trains would grow into an obsession for Wilbert as he became more exposed to them, mainly through railway magazines—the only reading material Wilbert was allowed to peruse as a child.<sup>10</sup> Wilbert would eventually pass this love of trains on to his son, Christopher, telling him short stories about anthropomorphized trains and their daily lives, building on the plot and characters as Christopher requested.<sup>11</sup> Needless to say, steam locomotives were a crucial part of Wilbert Awdry's life, not only because they allowed him to bond with his father but also because they served as a way for him to bond with his own son. Therefore, when B.R. began their modernization efforts and went about

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7 John Daniel, “The Story of Barry Scrapyard,” Great Western Archive, 2013.

8 Tom Moylan, *Demand the Impossible*, ed. Raffaella Baccolini (Bern: Peter Lang, 1986), 524.

9 Brian Sibley, *The Thomas the Tank Engine Man* (Oxford: Lion Books, 2015), 50.

10 Sibley, 62.

11 *Ibid.*, 134-136.

scrapping so many engines it's likely that Wilbert became frustrated and wanted the steam engines to remain in service. Unfortunately, as a simple clergyman, Awdry never had the power to do so. According to Moylan's theory on the origins of Utopian fiction, it was this unfulfilled desire to save these locomotives that Awdry loved so dearly that probably motivated the development of the fictional Island of Sodor throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Because of this, Sodor was transformed from a simple railway into an imagined safe haven for steam engines.

Awdry introduced the idea of Sodor as a refuge for endangered steam engines in his 1960 book *The Twin Engines*.<sup>12</sup> The book revolved around two twin steam engines named Donald and Douglas visiting from Scotland, and chronicled their adventures as they underwent a trial period which would determine whether they were allowed to come to work on the fat controller's railway. Although the premise seems innocent, there were surprisingly dark implications of these stories. In the book, the fat controller saves the two twins from being scrapped, but he can only afford to keep one engine. To avoid losing one another, the twins engage in reckless trickery and disobedience, from switching their tenders to trick the fat controller, to convincing the other engines to go on strike on their behalf. Their efforts are eventually rewarded, and the two are allowed to stay on the Island, but the desperation the two exhibits paints a thoroughly grim picture of what life outside of the Island of Sodor is like for steam engines.

Awdry began using Douglas, the twin which came closest to being scrapped, in stories featuring other engines who had either escaped or attempted to escape a similar fate. Douglas made his second speaking appearance in the book *Stepney the "Bluebell" Engine* in the story "Bluebells of England." During this story, while conversing with another engine, Douglas learns that the eponymous Stepney was another engine who managed to avoid being scrapped. Douglas also learns from the other steam engine that the situation on "The Other Railway" is quite dire: "The engines on The Other Railway aren't safe now. Their controllers

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12 Wilbert Awdry, *Thomas the Tank Engine* (London: Egmont Books, 2015), 233-248.

are cruel. They don't like engines any more. They put them on cold damp sidings and then ... they c-c-cut them up."<sup>13</sup> This description of "The Other Railway" was accompanied by a thoroughly haunting picture showing two rusted engines with fearful expressions being approached by a man with a welding mask and a blow torch. "The Other Railway" is a reflection of what had happened in England ten years prior, as countless steam engines had been unceremoniously destroyed and sold off for scrap. Although the situation outside of Sodor is grim, the two engines take comfort in the fact that there are railways that are willing to save the decommissioned steam engines from being scrapped: "The Bluebells are kind people who want to save engines. They've made a place called 'the Bluebell Railway.' Engines can escape there and be safe."<sup>14</sup> The Bluebell Railway is a real preservation railway operating in England that Awdry visited before writing this book about Stepney, one of the engines in service on the preservation line. The reverence with which Awdry treated the preservation line in this book speaks to the impact his trip had on him, and how it likely inspired him to turn Sodor into a fictional preservation railway. The final example of Sodor as a Utopian setting comes from a book written in 1968, when an engine set to be scrapped escapes to the Island of Sodor and finds refuge from "The Other Railway."

In general, *Enterprising Engines* had a far darker tone than Awdry's previous works. For example, the book contains references to an "anti-rail league" in the story "Bulgy," which alludes to the real-world conflict between the British Railways and the road lobbies. However, the darkest story in the book is simply titled "Escape." In this story, Douglas finds himself on "The Other Railway" late at night after delivering a goods train, and comes across a tank engine named Oliver who is looking to escape to the Island of Sodor. The two eventually do escape; however, Oliver's journey plays out more like a story of a World War II soldier behind enemy lines than a story meant for children. Before meeting Douglas,

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<sup>13</sup> Awdry, 278.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 279.

Oliver travels across England at night, relying on the kindness of signalmen and hiding in a quarry to escape pursuers.<sup>15</sup> Things start to look up when he meets Douglas, however the two encounter more trouble when a foreman and a guard stop them, forcing Douglas' driver to present fake papers saying that they own Oliver.<sup>16</sup> At the end of the story, Oliver is welcomed onto the Island of Sodor with open arms, repainted in his original liveries, and given his own branch line: a happy ending. These stories help highlight the metaphor of the Island of Sodor as a Utopia for steam engines and show how it became a place that would not only take in decommissioned steam engines, but restore them to their former glory as well. By the end of "Escape," the Island of Sodor is realized as a utopia that is much more willing to rescue old steam engines than to take on a diesel. However, this does not indicate that diesel engines did not appear on the Island.

The first diesel introduced in *The Railway Series* is probably the most important, in that the diesel would set the standard for the portrayal of other diesel engines moving forward in future stories. This character, simply referred to as Diesel, appears as a visitor to the Island of Sodor in the 1959 book *Duck and the Diesel Engine*, during which he and a Great Western saddle tank steam engine who goes by Duck engage in a serious conflict. Everything about Diesel is alien and unpleasant. Instead of sounding like a normal steam engine, he is described as "purring smoothly" towards the engines, and speaking in an "oily voice."<sup>17</sup> At first, Diesel immediately attempts to ingratiate himself with the other engines, singing their praises and proclaiming how he is so excited to meet the famous engines of Sodor; however, when he is finally alone with Duck, he reveals his true colors, telling him that "[y]our worthy Sir Topham Hatt thinks I need to learn. He is mistaken. We Diesels don't need to learn. We come into a yard and improve it. We are revolutionary."<sup>18</sup> Diesel's introduction paints him as an

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15 Awdry, 357.

16 Ibid.

17 Awdry, 206.

18 Ibid, 206.

arrogant alien invader, an “other” to the steam engines to whom he intends to invade and prove his superiority. The introduction of Diesel is also the first time that an engine representing B.R. appeared in one of *The Railway Series* books. Diesel was directly based on a B.R. Class 08: a general-purpose shunting engine of which almost 1000 were produced and could be found at different stations all across England.<sup>19</sup> By basing Diesel on such a prolific and widely used real life B.R. engine, Awdry used Diesel as a proxy for B.R. in this book, with the character’s attitudes and beliefs reflecting those of the real-life railroad.

When given a chance to prove himself to Duck, Diesel ultimately lets his arrogance get the better of him. Diesel ends up humiliating himself in front of several freight cars, leading the cars to tease him relentlessly. Instead of internalizing his mistake and growing as a character, Diesel does something incredibly bizarre in the context of the railway series—he seeks revenge. Up until this story, every one of Awdry’s books featured a moment in which one of the primary characters was given a chance to learn from their mistakes and mature; however, when presented with this opportunity, Diesel consciously chooses to continue being petty, deciding that he wants Duck to be sent away.<sup>20</sup> Diesel eventually gets his wish, and the story ends with a picture of Diesel laughing as Duck is sent away by the fat controller. Diesel not only gets his revenge against Duck, but also goes as far as to take Duck’s place in the shed.<sup>21</sup> With this final page, Awdry implied that Diesels did not replace steam engines due to their own merit, but through deceit and politicking, a sentiment echoed by scholars such as Charles Loft.<sup>22</sup> Although modernization and efficiency were key concerns of the British Transportation Commission, a bigger contributing factor to the publication of the government white papers that led to the dieselization of B.R. was the desire to avoid a strike from, and gain favor with, the National Union of

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19 “EWS 08737 (D3905): Class 08: 0-6-0,” The One to One Collection.

20 Awdry, 209.

21 Ibid, 211.

22 Loft.

Railwaymen.<sup>23</sup> The British government approved a proposal for modernization not based on the merits of the actual plan and the usefulness of Diesels compared to steam engines, but instead approved the proposal on political grounds in order to gain favor with a valuable labor union for votes and political favors. In the same way that Diesel gained a place on the Island of Sodor through deceit, many real-life diesels were initially commissioned because of corrupt political favors.

The final story in *Duck and the Diesel Engine* has very little to do with Diesel at all, aside from a final line revealing that he had been personally sent away by Sir Thopham Hatt. Although this seems unimportant, it was actually the first time—but not the only time—Awdry portrayed an engine sent away from the Island of Sodor in *The Railway Series*. In a metaphorical sense, the sendoff of Diesel is a reflection of the Island of Sodor rejecting the ideals of B.R., given that the fat controller sent away the most widely used B.R. diesel shunter.

The next villainous diesel to arrive on the Island of Sodor appeared in the 1963 book *Stepney the “Bluebell” Engine*, which also happened to also be a B.R. diesel engine: a Class 40. One story starring Stepney titled “Bowled Out” played out almost exactly the same as the stories in *Duck and the Diesel Engine*. An arrogant diesel engine arrives on the island, antagonizes the steam engines, and is eventually humiliated. However, there are two key differences between this Class 40 and Diesel. The first is that this new diesel is much crueler, stating that he believes that all the steam engines should be scrapped and replaced with diesels within the first lines of the story.<sup>24</sup> The second major difference is how this diesel is sent off. This unnamed Class 40 is humiliated after stalling due to sucking up an engine inspector’s hat through his fuel intake, causing him to stall and necessitating his train to be pulled by the very steam engines he derided. Again, Awdry used the B.R. diesel engine as a proxy for B.R. at large and portrayed them as arrogant. However, this time, the railway is not only portrayed as outright cruel,

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23 Loft.

24 Awdry, 287.

but incompetent and unreliable as well. Though Awdry never directly addressed the increased animosity towards B.R. in this particular book, the publishing date provides a key insight into this shift in attitude. The book was published in November of 1963, only eight months after Dr. Richard Beeching's monolithic *The Reshaping of British Rail* was published: the same paper that called for the mass closures of railways, stations, and branch lines. These actions made Beeching one of the most hated men in England. Therefore, it is fair to assert that the book's increased criticism toward B.R. was motivated by Beeching's ghoulish uprooting of the British railway system.

The final, and most militant example of Awdry's anti-diesel sentiment can be found in the 1968 story from *Enterprising Engines*, "Super Rescue." Awdry was never as blunt with his messaging about the superiority of steam engines as he was in "Super Rescue." In this story, Awdry declaratively asserts the superiority of steam engines over diesels. The story begins with two visiting B.R. diesels—a Class 46 and a Class 35—announcing their intentions to replace the steam engines to an audience of well-established steam engine characters. The Class 46 announces that it is "time we took this railway over" before being shushed by the Class 35 who points out that "[i]t's *their* railway," but the Class 46 ultimately dismisses this and proclaims "[n]ot for long...our controller says, 'Steam engines spoil our image.'"<sup>25</sup> In response to this, Awdry used the character of Duck as a vehicle to voice his own personal beliefs, stating through duck that "[o]f course [steam engines make you look bad]...We show what frauds you are. Call yourselves engines? If anything happens, *you* care nothing for your train. *You* just moan for a Fitter. *We* bring it home, if only on one cylinder."<sup>26</sup> The two diesels eventually break down, and when the fitter can't arrive on time it falls on Henry, an older engine who had gone through more repairs than any other engine on the Island, to save them. Henry must ensure the trains arrive on time by not only pushing and pulling two

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25 Awdry, 352.

26 Ibid.

separate loads, but also the two broken-down diesels. With this act, Awdry not only demonstrated that steam engines were superior to diesel engines in terms of power and efficiency but also rebuked the arrogance of B.R. in their eagerness to get rid of steam engines in the pursuit of cutting costs. This would not be the last story where a new diesel appeared in *The Railway Series*; however, it would be the final story Awdry wrote that actively criticized B.R.

In the preface to *Duck and the Diesel Engine*, Awdry himself admitted that he didn't find all diesel engines troublesome, and occasionally introduced diesel characters to the island of Sodor who would presumably become permanent fixtures. In fact, one of the diesels from "Super Rescue" appeared in another story from *Enterprising Engines* working alongside the other steam engines. However, Awdry showed clear bitterness toward the B.R. diesels in these stories. Possibly the best summation of Awdry's true feelings is found in *Stepney the "Bluebell" Engine*, where, while using the character of Douglas as a mouthpiece, Awdry declared that "[The Diesels are] all devils."<sup>27</sup> Through this, Awdry revealed his disdain for diesel engines, as he sees them as on the same level as the Devil—an ultimate evil that terrorizes and subjugates others.

So why did Awdry use children's books to develop such a high-minded position in the first place? Most people reading Awdry's books would likely write them off as silly bedtime stories, but the audience was the most important part of Awdry's vision. In Awdry's biography, Brian Sibley quotes Jeffery Richards, a professor of history at Lancaster University, who discusses how trains are easily anthropomorphized due to their appearance.<sup>28</sup> As it turns out, it is possible that anthropomorphizing characters in children's media positively affects information retention: "anthropomorphic language and pictures in storybooks did not interfere with factual learning about real animals. Even though children did retell anthropomorphic stories using anthropomorphic language, they were

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<sup>27</sup> Awdry, 278.

<sup>28</sup> Sibley, 136.

nonetheless better at providing factual, biological explanations after being read an anthropomorphic storybook.”<sup>29</sup> Awdry’s stories exemplify the powerful effect real-life politics has on fiction. His stories about anthropomorphic trains may have served to fight back against B.R. and preserve these characterizations in the minds of his readers more than he could have ever imagined. Young readers would no doubt remember the horrors of “The Other Railway” and the deceit and arrogance of the diesels. As these readers grew older, perhaps they were inspired to work towards undoing the social damage caused by the previous generations. They would not only work to reverse the shortsighted destruction of important culture and history but also realize the importance of preserving the past and the technologies that created the present.

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29 Megan S. Geerdts, Gretchen A. Van de Walle, and Vanessa LoBue, “Learning About Real Animals From Anthropomorphic Media,” *Imagination, Cognition and Personality* 36, no. 1 (2016): 5-26.

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