

AN EXCERPT FROM PARALLEL LINES: JOURNEYS ON THE RAILWAY OF DREAMS

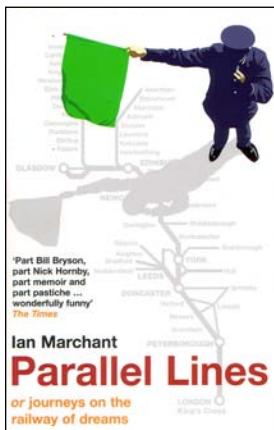
With Palin to Kyle



ColdType

IAN MARCHANT

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AN EXCERPT FROM **PARALLEL LINES** JOURNEYS ON THE RAILWAY OF DREAMS

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THE AUTHOR

Ian Marchant was born in 1958, a week before Elvis joined the army. He went to University at Lampeter, in Wales, where he failed a philosophy degree. He sang in pop groups and worked in a bookmaker's shop before moving back to Wales in 1987, where he dealt in second-hand records and books. He graduated with a degree in the History and Philosophy of Science at Lancaster University in 1992.

Marchant co-edited 'Juggling For A Degree', an account of mature student life, published by Innovations in Higher Education in 1994. 'Lino Women and Song' an album of his songs, with Peter French, was released by MIC in 1997. His first novel 'In Southern Waters' was published by Victor Gollancz in 1999, followed by 'The Battle For Dole Acre' (Weidenfeld and Nicholson) in 2001. His children's book 'Crypts Caves' and Tunnels of London' was published by Watling Street in 2002.

He has performed and sung with the cabaret act, Your Dad, since 1997, and has also performed and published as Hilary Spume FRSL, Britain's best-loved poet.

From 1998 until 2000, he lived in a caravan with a chicken called Ginger.

He has two daughters, Esme and Eleanor and lives in Devon, England, with the writer Monique Roffey.

When I was eleven, I went for a week with my dad to La Baule on the French Atlantic coast. The following year I went for a fortnight's camping in Italy with my mother and brother and step-father. I went on a school trip to Switzerland, on a school exchange to Germany, and in 1973, on a school cruise around the Baltic. And that was it for foreign travel and me for the next twenty-five years. Then, in 1997 my trainspotting ex took me on the Eurostar to Paris for three nights. In 1999 I drove my parents through Northern France and Belgium for four days, looking for my great-uncle Harvey's war grave. In 2001 I went to a wedding in Madrid with my girlfriend. We were there for five nights. I make it that in my forty-five years, I've spent a total of twelve weeks outside the British Isles.

Nothing against abroad, mind you. All in favour of it. It looks very nice on the television. All my friends have been there, and they tell me I should go. The weather's great, the bazaars are colourful, and they have marvellous cheeses/tropical fruit. It's just that money, time and inclination have never really come together at the same time. It doesn't mean I haven't travelled. I've travelled a lot around Britain. I could get from Abergavenny to Basingstoke, and on to Zeal Monachorum, without a map. I could tell you the best place to get a hairdo in Grimsby, where to find a decent upholsterer in Gainsborough, and the secret knock you need to be admitted to an illegal gambling den in Godalming. I'm a local in the British Isles. I like it here.

Anyway, it takes longer than a lifetime to see your back garden. And as for meeting strange new people? The old ones are strange enough. My neighbours are difficult to understand, my friends are baffling, my family are strangers and my lover a mystery. I'm bewildered by my own behaviour. What need do I have to go poncing off across the globe to gawp at indigenous people, when there are plenty of indigenous people right here at home just begging to be gawped at?

And then there's Michael Palin.

Michael Palin goes abroad for me.

He's been to the Poles for me, he's been *Around the World in Eighty Days* on my behalf. He's rimmed the Pacific and crossed the Sahara, all so that I could feel that I had really been there, and still get over to the pub for lasties. Michael Palin is just much better at going abroad than I am.

But it would be nice, sometimes, to get out a bit more. To go on an epic adventure, to follow in Palin's footsteps. Maybe one day. Then I remembered *Great Railway Journeys*, a popular travel series that led to at least two follow-ups. In the first series there was Ludovic Kennedy going coast to coast in the US, Miles Kington climbing the Andes on steam trains; and Michael Palin bashing up to Kyle of Lochalsh on the West Coast of Scotland. I could do that.

I wouldn't need special equipment. I wouldn't have to stand, open-necked and tanned, in the prow of small fishing vessels. I could just throw a few things in a bag, get down to Euston Station with my credit card, and go. It didn't need much planning. I didn't

have to set up a Hotmail account so that people could contact me while I was away. I could set off on one of the *Great Railway Journeys* on Thursday night, and still be back in time for *Antiques Roadshow*.

I booked the ticket. The first part of the journey, from Euston to Inverness, was to be on a sleeper.

As soon as you tell people that you are going to Scotland on a sleeper, their eyes mist over. ‘How romantic,’ they say, ‘I’ve always wanted to do that.’ If there is romance to be had on the railway, surely a sleeper is the place. It’s like living in the set of *Murder on the Orient Express*. Gouts of steam spouting from the locomotive hide the spy on the night mail from the plucky British agent. A mysterious femme fatale, half glimpsed by gaslight, boards the first-class Pullman, accompanied by her mulatto maid and a Pomeranian, which she carries under her arm. You share cocktails in the dining car; later she breaks your balls and then squeezes the juice from your heart when she tells you that her love is saved only for Poupoliana. That’s the Pomeranian, yeah? An ancient Chinaman with a long white beard and an opium pipe throws the yarrow stalks for you, and comes up with Hexagram 23, Breaking Apart.

‘Beware, my friend,’ he croaks, raising a bony finger. ‘Beware!’ If only the reality were half as good as the romance, you couldn’t keep people off the things.

So there I was at Euston, so excited that I’d turned up two hours early. The train was due to depart just after nine, and by seven I

was pacing around the station, desperate for the off. I think I got there early so that I could keep an eye open for spies, femmes fatales and sinister Chinese soothsayers. There was one man with a beard and a Homburg hat who looked promising. A spy if ever I'd seen one. I followed him, discreetly, but he got on the 19.27 for Milton Keynes Central. Which is not to say that he wasn't a spy, of course. Probably there are lots of spies living in MK. I decided to have a coffee while I waited.

I'd brought *The Railway Traveller's Handy Book*, but for once it was little help, as it was written before the sleeper carriage was conceived. To keep me occupied, I had Christian Wolmar's *Broken Rails. How Privatisation Wrecked Britain's Railways*. Nothing could be less romantic, or more terrifying.

My trip was taking place a week after Stephen Byers, the then Transport Secretary, had published another of the government's marvellous new plans for the railways. Transport Secretary is not regarded as an important or interesting job by politicians. Sorting out Britain's ancient transport infrastructure will take both courage and long-term vision, characteristics which politicians singularly lack. They like short-term profit and self-aggrandizement, and Transport Secretary hardly ever leads to either. So the post gets passed about from one second-rank careerist hack to another, each of whom comes up with a new crackpot scheme. Byers then, Darling today, somebody else tomorrow.

Take the last Railway Modernization Plan, which happened in 1954. Millions of pounds were poured into the railway, whose man-

agement spent it on vast new marshalling yards for freight traffic which never materialized, and lots and lots of lovely steam engines, which were scrapped within a decade. And then Ernest Marples became Transport Secretary – the last one anyone really remembers – and he liked motorways, not horrid old trains. So he made Dr Beeching chairman of BR, and he didn't like railways, either. So he decimated Britain's railway system, only five years after the investment of the Modernization Plan. So what hope for Mr Prescott/Byers/Darling/(insert name here)? The plan is nonsense, with billions of pounds going into largely unnecessary safety upgrades. The Strategic Rail Authority has recently admitted that this money is nothing like enough. Real investment is negligible. All Western politicians are scared of car drivers, and don't give a stuff about nonsense like the Kyoto Accord, and if they thought that there were votes in it, they'd sell their grandmothers and shut down every inch, of line they could get their sticky fingers on.

Coffee gets the old adrenalin pumping, and I was wound up.

There was no one who looked even vaguely like a femme fatale, but here was a very old lady with dropsy, a tam-o'-shanter and a moustache who got carried up the platform on one of those golf carts that the Queen Mum used to use. It beeped, and is one of the things that makes me think it can't be so bad getting old. I was met at the door to my sleeper by Violet, my hostess. At once I was on my guard. The last time I spent with a hostess ... but that's a different story. Violet was mumsy. She showed me to my compartment; there were two bunk beds and a sink. The compartment was about

the size of a mobile phone.

‘Will I be sharing?’ I asked.

‘Well, noo. Let’s have a wee look ... aye, you’re sharing with a Mr Mackenzie.’

Oh. Still, I suppose that’s the stuff of sleeper legend. Perhaps he’d be a spy. Perhaps he’d have some vital document that has to be carried, for some reason, to Inverness. Then, perhaps he’d be poisoned by agents of SMERSH, and I’d have to get the document to safety, helped only by Elizabeth Hurley in a rubber leotard. Perhaps.

I went for a stroll up the platform. This is a long train, at sixteen coaches, the longest scheduled train there is in Britain, bar the Eurostar. This means the engine has to be very powerful to pull the thing. The trip from London to Inverness has some of the steepest gradients the network has to offer, so the engine has to be very powerful indeed, at least for the first part of the journey, before it splits into three, just after Edinburgh: One bit goes to Inverness, one to Aberdeen, and the third to Fort William. They tried to stop this last service a few years back. It’s the so-called Deer-stalker Express. It’s not used by very many people, but the people who do use it are largely rich and powerful people going up to the Highlands for a shoot. So the Deer-stalker Express was saved.

I smoked a few cigarettes and strolled up and down the platform. I stopped and chatted with Violet. I’m looking for romance on the train, Violet. You know femmes fatales.’

‘Well, you do get people spending the night in one another’s compartments. They meet in the lounge car and have a few drinks, and

one thing leads to another. I don't know if any of them lead on to anything. I think they usually just say goodbye in the morning.'

'Well, I really meant romance in a somewhat wider sense . . .'

She looked at me as though I was mad, and at this point Mr Mackenzie turned up.

'Good evening, Mr Mackenzie,' said Violet. 'You'll be sharing with Mr Marchant here . . .' He looked about as thrilled to see me as I was to see him. He was skinny, in his late twenties, and we exchanged watery smiles. He went off to the kennel in which we were to sleep, while I sashayed up to the lounge car for a drink and a smoke. There was only a couple in their sixties in there, drinking tea. They certainly looked like deer-stalkers. She wore a calf-length A-line tartan skirt and a twin set; he, one of those little sportmen's waist-coats that Jack Hargreaves used to wear, with lots of pockets to keep trout flies and shotgun cartridges in. Who's Jack Hargreaves? A guy who used to present fishing and shooting shows in the Sixties and Seventies, the good old days when animals were for catching and killing. He had a beard.

As the train pulled out of Euston, I was childishly thrilled, bowled over with excitement. I have been on this line a hundred times, but it had never felt like this. The steward approached me. He was Blakey from the old TV programme, *On the Buses*. Clearly, since most of the newly privatized train companies are now owned by bus companies, the staff had been moved from one form of transport to another, and Blakey was now the steward on the sleeper.

'Hggo, swr. Whit cnnu gtyu?' he said through his moustache.

I smiled. ‘I’m sorry?’ I said.

‘Wld ewe lka drnk?’ The man was a mumbler, a very bad one, so I adopted a technique I picked up from the ‘Dear Mary’ column in the *Spectator*.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said. ‘I’m a little deaf. Could you speak up?’ This never fails; he tried again, and it transpired that he had been asking me what I would like to drink.

‘A scotch and water, please. And are you serving food?’

He handed me the menu and said gloomily (I’ll drop the mumbling, though he very much kept it up), ‘There’s everything on the menu except the chicken tikka marsala. And the venison pate He paused. ‘We haven’t had the venison pate for months.’

I chose the haggis, neeps and tatties. Well, what would you choose on the sleeper to Inverness?

Mr Mackenzie came into the lounge, sat down at the table next to mine and ordered a Coke. He was reading an Andy McNab book. ‘I hope I won’t keep you awake,’ I said brightly. My girlfriend says I snore like a pig!’ He gave me another wintry smile. ‘I’ve got my personal stereo,’ he said.

‘Good,’ I said. Shit, I meant. Did that mean I’d have to lie there all night listening to a faint *shhhhhh* from the bunk above? He returned to his Andy McNab, and I to Christian Wolmar and his analysis of the Southall train crash, which he says would not have happened but for privatization. Wolmar makes the point, a very good one, that private companies do not exist to run trains on time, or efficiently, or safely. Like any company, they exist to make profit

for their shareholders. The badly-trained, ill-informed drivers and the astoundingly cavalier attitude to sharing safety information which led to the crash can all be directly attributed to privatization. They are things which could not happen with an integrated system.

With the hastily botched-together privatization that we got, every possible function on the railway was hived off to a different private company, all of whom exist to make profit. And there's no profit to be had from doing things properly. The Train Operating Companies (TOCs) do not even own the trains; they lease them from a company which owns the rolling stock. They don't own the track; that is owned, or was, by the complacent mothers at Railtrack. All the TOCs own are time slots, the right to run trains at a certain time over a certain length of track. Railtrack got its money from selling these slots to the TOCs. In return, you might imagine, Railtrack was responsible for safety and maintenance. Well, ha ha ha. Yes, they were still responsible for signalling, but maintenance is contracted to yet another set of companies, all of whom are determined to make another buck at the expense of our old friends the taxpayer and the travelling public. Network Rail, the new not-for-profit company that has taken over the system, simply has to be better than Liartrack, one of the most irresponsible companies ever to have their fingers in your pocket.

As for safety: there was a small crash, nothing terribly serious, nobody hurt, at Royal Oak just outside Paddington, in 1995. The inquiry into the crash made fourteen recommendations. A safety

review group looked at these recommendations, and accepted nine of them. Railtrack proceeded with just two. Why? Three of the recommendations became the responsibility of Peter Wiseman, Railtrack's business development manager. He didn't implement them because he didn't find out that they were his responsibility until after the Ladbroke Grove crash, when thirteen people were killed and 425 were injured. And as Wolmar points out, 'business development', which presumably involves thinking up ways to make money, is hardly compatible with safety responsibilities, which inevitably cost money, and for no return. Oh, except saving lives, obviously. But who cares about namby-pamby stuff like that when your bonuses are on the line?

As we rattled through Berkhamsted, Blakey brought my haggis, and Mr Mackenzie headed off for our cupboard. He didn't say goodnight, which hurt. The haggis was rather good, served hot 'n' fresh from the microwave. Blakey told me a humorous story about haggis, of which I didn't catch one word.

This railway line is so familiar, probably the most familiar line to the most people. Anyone who's been to Birmingham, Manchester, Liverpool, Holyhead for Ireland, the Lake District or Glasgow by train will have used this line. The familiar place names rattle past: Berkhamsted, Milton Keynes, Rugby. It is hard to remember, in this ordinary and familiar landscape, that between 1833 and 1838 the building of this railway was, to quote Tom Rolt, 'the greatest task that any civil engineer had undertaken'. Between 12,000 and 20,000 men worked on the line at any one time. The French engineer

Leconte said of the work, ‘Never since the building of the pyramids had the world witnessed such an undertaking on so gigantic a scale.’

The line’s engineer was Robert Stephenson, who, when the job began, had not yet turned thirty. After the railway was completed, Stephenson estimated that he had walked its 112 miles at least fifteen times. Like Brunel, he smoked heavily to help with the stress of the undertaking, and there is some suggestion that he used laudanum. He wrote during construction. ‘My courage at times almost fails me, and I fear that some fine morning my reputation may break under me like an eggshell.’

If you watch from the window, you will see some of the problems that Stephenson had to deal with: the massive cuttings at Tring and Blisworth, the embankment and viaduct crossing the Great Ouse at Wolverton. The 2,400-yard-long Kilsby Tunnel was the longest railway tunnel attempted up until that date. Sceptics thought that passengers would be suffocated in its Stygian depths, and Stephenson wasn’t so sure they were wrong. He built two huge ventilation shafts to keep travellers breathing; they took like miniature castles if you drive by them on the A5 today. The hill at Kilsby turned out to be full of liquid subterranean quicksand. It took thirteen pumps working for nineteen months to clear the muck from the tunnel workings. When Kitsby was completed after four years of struggle, on 21 June 1838, the London and Birmingham Railway was declared open throughout its length.

The railway had arrived in London. The earliest terminus was at

Chalk Farm, North London.

The evolutionary philosopher Herbert Spencer, the man who coined the phrase ‘the survival of the fittest’, worked in his youth as an engineer on the London and Birmingham Railway. He was based at Chalk Farm station, and was one of the first people to travel by train through the raw new finished defile of the Tring cutting. He was based in London for almost six months, during which time he ‘visited no places of amusement’. Instead he spent his spare time solving conic sections and making drawings of steam engines. In his fantastically pompous *Autobiography*, published after his death in 1903, he said of the experience that he felt it gave him ‘valuable opportunities of obtaining information and undergoing discipline’. He was seventeen at the time. That’s how much the world has changed.

The last gasp of the Middle Ages was lost in a puff of steam.

Feudality might be on the wane, but poverty and degradation were proving to be as popular as ever. That certainly summed up the life of a navvy, the men who built the line using muscle power and shovels. They had ‘navigated’ the canals, and now, for most of the rest of the nineteenth century, they would move on to build the railways, too. Few of them had settled homes; they followed the work, terrifying the communities in which they landed, more despised than the gypsies. The Northamptonshire village of Kilsby, after four years of regular rioting outside the village pub on pay-day, was particularly pleased to see them go.

They died by the hundred, in accidents, from alcohol, from phys-

ical exhaustion. There are no records of how many men were lost during the building of the London and Birmingham, because no one ever bothered to count the bodies. Eighty per cent of them were English, but they didn't belong anywhere. Most of them were only known by their nicknames. They lived in communal huts, called shants, which were run by old women whose job was to feed the men and look after the beer. The shants were places of unimaginable filth and degradation.

Very few navvies came out of the good years with any savings. Without getting shitfaced every night, the work could not be contemplated. Millions of cubic feet of muck had to be dug from the cuttings and tunnels, removed by horses pulling wagons on temporary railway, and tipped on to the site of embankments. It was back-breaking, brutal and soul-destroying work. We should remember these men, I think, these thousands of dead men, before we close any more lines. The least we owe them is to look after the system they built, and the landscape they transformed with nothing more than muscle.

The sleeper train is not a fast train; it's too heavy for that. It can get up to 100 mph, but tends to average 80. This would be a long night. At Stafford, I felt tired enough to attempt sleep. I squeezed along the narrow corridor of the sleeper carriages, and couldn't help noticing that most of the compartments were empty. In fact, Violet told me that there were only sixteen passengers on our part of the train. So why were Mr Mackenzie and I forced together against our joint will? Presumably, it saves time and money at the

turnround in Inverness, but it didn't make me feel any better about sharing with Mr M.

I got to our compartment and tried the door. Mr Mackenzie had locked it. I rattled the handle and he let me in. Now I had to get undressed, and if there's one thing that British men don't like, it's getting undressed in front of other men. In point of fact, I always feel some nervousness about getting undressed in front of women, too. It still makes my girlfriend laugh when she sees me naked. I don't blame her for this, but I do think that after all these years, at least some of the comic potential of my body should have begun to wear a little thin.

Mr Mackenzie had the top bunk, so if I stood next to the beds to strip off, inevitably, given the size of the compartment, he was going to be able to have a fairly intimate look, unless he kept his eyes shut tight. I decided the best thing would be to get undressed lying on my bed. Not easy, this; it's how it must feel for vampires, trying to get dressed lying in a coffin. It makes you wonder how vampires always look so great, especially since they can't check their appearance by looking in a mirror. I grunted and struggled my way out of my jeans, and what Mr Mackenzie thought I was up to, I dread to think. Eventually, I got down to my Y-fronts and T-shirt, slid under the covers, and turned off the bunk light.

I can't say I slept well. The West Coast main line stands in severe need of relaying, and it is bumpy. At Preston, at round about midnight, I heard several more passengers get on, and they were not quiet. Then, of course, like many men of my age, I had to get up in

the night and stagger along to the loo. If I'd been on my own, I'd have used the sink, but I can't imagine Mr Mackenzie would have been too thrilled to wake up and find me having a piss. But I didn't want to blunder about the train in my Y-fronts, so every time I got up I had to struggle into and out of my jeans again. At last, I fell into a kind of doze. I was asleep, but I was also aware of the fact that I was on a train, and that the train was moving. It was one of those sleeps where you are aware of the passage of time; aware, somehow, that you are asleep. I used to have this thing where I would lie awake all night before the alarm clock went off and woke me up, so that I realized I had been asleep the whole time, but dreaming that I was awake. It was like that. Not romantic. And no hint of femmes fatales.

When Violet knocked on the door at 7.30, I was instantly awake. She brings you breakfast in bed, continental breakfast, at least. Tea, croissant, jam. The bunk above sagged with the weight of Mr Mackenzie's bum, which put me off a bit. I finished my breakfast as quickly as possible, wriggled into my clothes, and headed off to find Blakey in the lounge. At least I could smoke there, which is all the breakfast I find I usually need. Besides, I wanted to be out of the cupboard before Mr Mackenzie swung his hairy legs out of the bunk above me. Perhaps Mr Mackenzie would be one of those frightening people who are not ashamed of their body; perhaps he slept without his pants on; perhaps I would be faced with another man's todger swinging about in front of my nose, which I have never much enjoyed, especially first thing. Sadly, all these thoughts

were uppermost in my mind as I got dressed as quickly as possible. I'm glad to report that neither of us saw the slightest hint of each other's pale northern nakedness.

Blakey was not terribly forthcoming, and he was determined not to bring me more tea. He was tidying up and packing his bag, and even though there were at least five people hoping for a hot drink, not one of us got lucky. Looking out from the window, I could see pine forests, sheep and deer, and very few houses. The Highlands are empty of people. The rising sun stained the eastern sky, and beside the line I could see scraps of snow. The passengers who had got on at Preston were also in the dining car, smoking and without tea. They were discussing with the undisguised glee of the true football fan last night's home defeat for Manchester United. Each of them took it in turn to cough, wet, noisy smokers' morning coughs. And they reviewed the press.

'T Star's best for football,' said one.

'Aye, and Jordan's tits,' said his friend; and, in fairness, they have a point. They tried to laugh, but it only made them cough more.

The sun was getting above the hills as we approached Inverness, and I hurried back to the compartment to get my things together. Mr Mackenzie was just leaving as I arrived.

'Did you sleep well?' I asked.

'Aye, verra well, thank you,' he said.

'I didn't snore then?'

'No.' And that was that. Quite enough intimacy for both of us.

We pulled into Inverness at 8.30, eleven-and-a-half hours after

leaving Euston. It is not a pretty town, at least not the part of it that you can see from the station. The station sign is bilingual; Inverness is called Inbhir Nis in Gaelic. I found this sad. It is not like in Wales, where the Welsh language is vital and alive. The Gaelic language is dead, or very nearly, because the people who spoke it have gone. We see the Highlands as romantic. The run from Inverness to Kyle should be the most romantic rail journey, through all that magnificent emptiness. The Highlands are empty for a reason, which I think today we would have to call ethnic cleansing. Look from the window, and remember the price that was paid for our romantic journeys.

Bonnie Prince Charlie's doomed attempt to reclaim the throne for the Stuart succession came to an end at Culloden in 1745. After Culloden, the clan chieftains had lost faith in the old way of life. They had lost their powers to raise armies. They were defeated, and all they wanted to do was make a few bob. The population who owed them fealty in return for low rent were not going to be necessary, now that war was over for good.

The Highlanders who had formed Charlie's army had slunk away in defeat, back to their crofts hidden in remote Highland glens. Here they lived a peasant existence, subsisting on the land they rented from sub-tenants of the clan chiefs. They were a different people from the Lowlanders. They were Gaels, speaking in their own language, singing their own songs. They were peaceable and not inclined to hard work and loved their story-haunted glens, and they loved the whisky they made from the little wheat that they

could grow on the poor Highland soil. For eating, they had potatoes. Life was OK. They were like peasant people from all over the world. But from the point of view of their landlords, they didn't pay.

Sheep might pay, if enough land could be found. The few sheep kept by the Highlanders had no value outside their own communities. But if sheep could be raised in great quantities, then the increasingly aristocratic and absent-from-Scotland clan chieftains could rent their vast estates to sheep farmers from the south. In the Lowlands of Scotland, great fortunes were being made from one particular breed of sheep, the Long Hill, or Great Cheviot. Each sheep needed six acres of mountain pasturage, and access to valley floors in winter. So the people had to go.

A whole culture was driven from its land, as the landlords started to evict their tenants. From the 1780s until the 1850s, tens of thousands of people were forcibly driven from their homes. Often, when the eviction notices came, the tenants were unable to read, or to understand English, so the bailiffs came in, dragging women and children from their crofts, beating the men insensible, setting fire to the peat roofs of the cottages, not caring if there was anybody left inside. The glens began to empty, so that the sheep could appear. Glens that had supported townships of hundreds of people were now inhabited only by the shepherd and his family. The Highlanders were forced down to the coast, where they had, on occasion, generously been allocated new tenancies by their masters. The evictions would take place in winter, and whole town-

ships would arrive at the coast to find nothing but sand and sea.

Sometimes they were allowed to take the wood from the roofs of their cottages down to the coast, but more often, the landlords burnt it. After all, it belonged to them. Why couldn't they burn it if they liked? Wood is scarce in the Highlands; the crofters would not even be able to build themselves new houses. Sometimes the landlords gave the displaced Highlanders fishing nets, even though they had no real sea-going tradition. The landlords called this *improvement*.

It certainly improved the lot of the Earls of Stafford, who turned themselves into the Dukes of Sutherland and built themselves a fine castle at Dunrobin, high up on the east coast north of Inverness. They were the largest landowners in the far north of Scotland, and were therefore most deeply sunk in the iniquity of the clearances. One way they had to clear townships was to call upon the loyalty of their tenants and recruit them to fight for the King in the Napoleonic Wars. Then, when all the men were away fighting, it was much easier to throw their wives and children out on to the mountainside. Men returning from the wars came over the brow of a hill to find their glen empty, their families cleared.

The Sutherlands did all right out of the Highlands, but they didn't go there often. The sheep had made them fabulously wealthy, but they preferred the company in London. When they did trouble to get up there, they saw things that upset them. The Duchess of Sutherland, on one of her occasional visits to Dunrobin, saw pregnant women and starving children breaking up rocks to build har-

bours; so the men could try to fish. They were living in unspeakable hovels unfit for swine. No wonder the Sutherlands felt their tenants needed improving!

Another solution was forcible emigration. From the middle of the eighteenth century until the outbreak of the First World War, the unwanted Highlanders were sent in their tens of thousands to Canada and Australia. They were settled in Prince Edward Island and Nova Scotia. To a Highlander, exile from your glen is exile, whether it be four or four thousand miles. They did not have the skills, and many did not have the will to survive Canadian winters. Hundreds died of starvation and exposure.

Although the forcible clearances were largely over by the 1850s, the few who were left were hardly made welcome, and emigration from the Highlands was still prevalent into the 1940s. The landlords had found deer-stalking an even better way to earn money than sheep-farming. The great sheep walks were converted into sporting estates, a process which began in the middle of the nineteenth century with the coming of the railway. That is why the Highlands are empty of people, but full of deer.

The Highlanders have gone, and their language and their culture are gone with them.

Still, there you go. No use crying over spilled milk, or even a bit of quiet genocide. No one seems to mind that the money is the tiniest bit bloodsoaked, or else why would a civilized society allow their descendants to hang on to their plunder? Read John Prebble's *Highland Clearances* or David Craig's *On the Crofter's Trail*, and then

try to defend the hereditary principle.

I had a train to catch in twenty minutes to the West Coast, through the emptied glens to Kyle of Lochalsh. But looking at the departure board, I very quickly realized that there was no such train. I do wish they'd tell you things like this when you buy your ticket. The train was only going as far as Strathcarron, and the last ten miles or so of the journey would be by bus. I was disappointed, to say the least. If I'd known, I might have gone to Thurso, (next to John 'o' Groats), or chosen another of the *Great Railway Journeys* instead. Ah, me.

The old lady who had been carried to the sleeper at Euston on the beeping golf cart was catching this train, but this time she was being pushed in a wheelchair. Perhaps getting old isn't so great after all. Still, no time to worry about the old and infirm, either; I nipped into the station buffet, bought myself a nice hot cup of coffee, and settled down on the train for such of the ride that was up and running.

The light was grey, like twilight. Was this because of the cloud cover, because it was winter, and I was in the far north? The latter, I suspected, even at 8.50 a.m. Certainly the light was different, as though had been dimmed slightly. The line from Inverness up to Dingwall is shared between the line to Kyle, and the line to Thurso in the far north. It runs along the Beauly Firth, and to my excitement crossed the River Ness and the Caledonian Canal. The river was rough and flowing fast; not at all an English river, this close to the sea. Inverness means the mouth of the roaring water, and you

could see why. The Caledonian canal is a great example of early government subsidy; it has never been used by the coasting ships that were expected, and now it is used mainly leisure, but you can still see the occasional fishing boat going through massive locks, in order to cut off the long journey around Cape Wrath and the north of Scotland. I am a canal buff, a canal bore, even, and I had never seen it before, so I was thrilled, but it too has had its part play in the emptying of the Highlands. Improvements, they called them, remember?

It was wonderful scenery, even here on the sea shore, before the main event of the mountains started. I watched the white tails of small deer bouncing away from the side of the line as the train passed. There are small towns. Muir of Ord, and then Dingwall. A few people got off the train; none got on. Walking through the carriages, there were now only four passengers the length of the two modern cars. Dingwall is called Inbhirpheofharain in Gaelic; once again, it felt like something which had been laid on for the amusement of visitors. To my utter delight, I spotted the ground of Ross County FC. Scottish football teams are a constant staple of pub quizzes. Where do St Mirren play? Whither St Johnstone? Which team plays in Dumfries? Now I can't wait for 'Where do Ross County have their ground?' Inbhirpheoffian, I shall answer, just to cause the quizmaster grief; and to help me remember the time, only perhaps 150 years ago, when English was the minority language in these empty hills.

Just to the north of Dingwall, the lines divide. One, straight

ahead, is for Thurso and Wick; but ours curved steeply away to the left, for Kyle and Skye.

The scenery was thrilling. Thrilling. The line plunges through gorges, clings to the side of cliffs, rattles through pine forests lined with spindly silver birches. It passes Loch Garve, which in Scottish terms is probably not much of a size, but which to my Sassenach eyes looked huge. But there were no boats on it. You may like utter desolation; I suppose I do under certain circumstances, but I do like to see boats on the water. Does no one come sailing here? Why should they? The people of the glens were driven from their homes long ago. There were some Highland cattle beside the line as we pulled into Garve station; they would have looked very well on a tin of shortbread, with a backdrop of tartan, but I remembered Prebble's closing words in *The Highland Clearances*: 'the tartan is a shroud'.

Two of the passengers got off at Garve, and now it was just me and the old lady. We were hurrying across the high moors; the tops were skimmed with snow, and the deer were coming down from the heights, driven down by the bad weather; they ran away, startled, as the train passed them. The waterfalls by Loch Luichart were channelled into small hydroelectric stations. I saw one boat, and a tiny pier. There was a small caravan encampment, too; not for holiday-makers, but for intrepid hippies, who know a good thing when they see one. The light was still strange to my southern eyes; like twilight, though it was half-ten in the morning. We passed through a couple of small stations without stopping; why

should we stop? Who uses them, out of the shooting season? We passed a couple of huge shooting lodges; arrogant, incongruous, built in ludicrous Scots Gothic. A fast wide river brown with peat flows down Strath Bran, and here and there were occasional abandoned cottages, each with a tiny bright field of green in the brown of the moors.

My mobile stuttered. It was my girlfriend.

'Hello?'

'Hello, darling.'

'What? Hello? Are you there, love?'

'Hello! Can you hear me?'

'I can't hear you. If you can hear me I'll phone you when I get to Kyle.'

'Hello, I can't hear you ...'

I'm surprised the landlords haven't bunged up a few mobile phone masts out here for the benefit of the fat cats who come shooting. After all, how is one to stay in touch with one's business?

We waited at Achusheen station while an engineering train passed through. I asked the train guard why the last part of the line to Kyle was closed; after all, engineering works usually happen at weekends, and this was only Wednesday. He told me that there had been a landslide where the line runs along the foot of steep cliffs by Loch Carron, and that it had been decided to rebuild it further away from the shore, but Loch Carron is deep, and the rebuild was proving more technically difficult than had been at first imagined. He told me that it was going to cost £4.5 million to re-open

the line, but that work was in progress. He thought it should be opened again by early summer 2002. (The line has now been re-opened.) The train moved on.

We passed through an abandoned station, green with plantings of rhododendron and wellingtonia. There was a shooting lodge close to the line, Glencarron Lodge, and this was once its private station. Rhododendron is always a marker in the countryside of the Celtic nations. It shows where the grandes live, or lived. Its roots are poisonous to other native species, and it loves the acid-rich soils of the wilder places; so now it is a weed, spreading out of control, killing the native plants it grows next to. There is an analogy here, somewhere.

The train reached Strathcarron (there is a station, a couple of houses and an hotel), and I hurried across to the twenty-seater bus that was waiting outside. The guard was helping the old lady from the train to the bus; she walked painfully with the aid of two sticks. Slowly, the guard and the driver helped her on to the bus. She was coming home; she had been visiting her daughter in Bath. I knew this because she and the bus driver were acquaintances. She was very posh; English posh voice, though clearly Scottish in every sense. London is full of the Scottish aristocracy who did so well for themselves after Culloden, and although they may have Scottish names, none of them have posh Scottish accents. This lady sounded as English as English can be, a voice that we only hear very occasionally now, as the aristos attempt to hide their wealth and power by the adoption of the glottal stop. But I suspected that

she would be upset if anyone called her English; that she would feel fiercely Scottish. And the pain that she was in, and the effort of an eighteen-hour train journey from Bath to Strathcarron, showed her commitment to this place. Life cannot always be easy out here, right up in the North-west Highlands.

The bus wound its way along narrow single-track roads. The scenery was breathtaking; high mountains, sea lochs. The road was carried higher above the side of Loch Carron than the railway, which I could see from time to time, following the coast far beneath us. The bus driver pointed out where the line was being built out over the sea. He told me that the landslide was really very small; a political landslide, he called it. It was caused by scrub-cutting on the embankment above the line. As the roots of the scrub were what had been holding the bank together, the landslide was inevitable. I couldn't help feeling that it was yet another example of Railtrack's stupidity and incompetence. If the scrub-cutting had been thought out properly, then maybe the £4.5 million could have been saved. But at least they are spending the money, and not using the landslide as an excuse to close the line. It had taken four years, from 1893 to 1897, to build the last ten miles of it, from Strome Ferry to Kyle of Lochalsh. Mile for mile, it was the most expensive stretch of railway built up until that date. Shame to waste it.

The Kyle Line serves a few tiny but functioning settlements along the edge of Loch Carron. The bus burrowed down single-lane roads to find these hidden villages. At Duirinish, the posh old lady prepared to get out.

'I arranged with Morag that she should leave my car by the station ... ah, here we are.'

The driver helped her down, and she hobbled across to the car, opened the door and lowered herself in. It was left unlocked, and presumably the keys were inside. I thought of the world where you can leave cars unlocked, with the keys inside, without fear; a world where people are called Morag and can always be relied upon. This is the world I had arrived in, and I was so in love.

At last the bus pulled up outside Kyle of Lochalsh station, I was quite alone in the little bus as I ended my odyssey from Euston; it was 11.30, fourteen and a half hours after I set out. If there is a more spectacular station in Britain, I have yet to see it. A long single-storey bungalow, with a ticket office, a small museum and a seafood restaurant, it is built out into the sea, on a pier, so that passengers from the train could step on to the ferry for Skye. There are no ferries now, but a small coaster was unloading stone on to the quay. There was a work train standing ready; the stone is for the rebuilding of the line. Directly in front of me were the mountains of Skye, cloud-capped and iced with snow. The sea rushed through the narrow strait. Rain was sheeting down. I picked up my bags and wandered through the little village, looking for somewhere to stay.

The Kyle Hotel on Main Street was comfortable and warm; too warm, really, and I lay on the bed and caught up on the bad night's sleep. Very annoying, this; I'd travelled God knows how many miles on one of the *Great Railway Journeys* just for a snooze at the end.

But there. Eventually, I woke up and went for a stroll. It was still raining, though not half as badly as when I arrived, so I decided to walk across the Skye Bridge, which links the mainland to Skye. It is perhaps half a mile from the village centre to the toll booth along the edge of the water. The mountains on the other side of the strait screed down to the grey water. I wondered why I lived in London.

The Skye Bridge is a wonderful thing, and built in two parts; the first long and low out to the island of Eilean Bahn, which was the setting for Gavin Maxwell's *Ring of Bright Water*. Maxwell's house has been turned into a visitor centre, and the tiny island into a nature reserve. From Eilean Bahn, the bridge curves in a fine arch over the narrows to Skye. The people of Skye could be proud of their bridge; proud, that is, if it wasn't yet another example of corporate greed and the rank cowardice of politicians. It was built using private money, what Mr Blair would have us call a Public Private Finance Initiative, but what you and I might call blackmail. The contractors who built it were allowed to charge tolls for using it, and they are exorbitantly high. It costs, for example, £5.70 for a car to get on and off the island. Perhaps you could argue a case for this, as long as the contractors had got their money back and made a modest profit; and this, in fact, is what was supposed to happen. After the private investment had been repaid, the tolls were supposed to stop, or at least to come down to a nominal sum. Needless to say, this has not happened; the tolls remain disgustingly high, and the people of Skye are being held to ransom. There is no real alternative to the bridge. The ferry from Kyle stopped on the day

they opened it, and although there is a tiny ferry from Glenelg to Skye, it is even more inaccessible than Kyle, and runs only in the summer months. There is a strong local campaign against the bridge tolls; they are trying to organize a boycott, but it is hard, when there are no alternatives. The bridge, so far from improving access to Skye, has cut it off even further.

This does not stop it being a beautiful bridge. Standing on the highest point, I realized what a ridiculous London ponce I'd become. Who else would walk across it in freezing rain and a howling gale wearing suede shoes and no hat? I walked on to the island. I could see a filling station in the distance, and I walked towards it in the hope that they might sell hats. They didn't, but they did sell chunky Kit-Kats, which are the next best thing. I bought the *Highland Free Press* and got talking to the garage owner. I was interested in how many people speak Gaelic out here. I know there are very few out on the East Coast, and hardly a soul in the Central Belt and Borders, but here, surely, the language must still be alive? Not really, according to the garage guy. Yes, there are Gaelic speakers on Skye, he told me, but they are getting fewer and fewer by the year. He couldn't remember the last time anybody came into his garage speaking it. He didn't speak it himself, and blamed the young people, who are not interested. This seemed a bit easy to me; young people are not interested in anything, in my experience, the whole world over, except sex, drugs and baseball caps. You can't blame them for everything, though it might be tempting to try. No, if we need somebody to blame, let's stick with the clan

chieftains, who valued sheep above men, and money above everything. I walked back across the bridge and into Kyle.

The following morning the sun had come out, and it had been snowing. It was like a tiny miracle; beyond the bridge, a whole new mountain range had appeared. The mountains of the Applecross peninsula are very old, some of the oldest on earth; they are high, but rounded and smoothed by the passage of unimaginable periods of time. Now they were covered again by new snow, as they have been for countless millions of years, and were shining in the sun. A small fishing boat pulled away from the quay. Another coaster had arrived in the night. Waterfalls tumbled down the now all-white mountains of Skye; it was a wintry Eden.

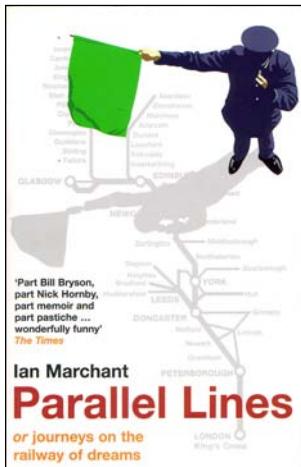
Oh, and here comes the snake; a grey RAF Nimrod flew low and loud above the water, and a military helicopter came chattering in to land at the military base that lies hidden on the edge of Kyle. Big, big toys for pathetic little boys; bad education, failing health services, and a crumbling transport infrastructure, all accounted for in this mini flypast. On the door of the ticket office there was a handwritten sign: '*Security Notice: due to bombings in America and threats to Great Britain we have had to withdraw all left luggage facilities and all litter bins.*' Presumably, it is the proximity of this military base which means that the fall-out from 9/11 had spread even here. And however horrific the events of that day, we should not forget that the number of people who died in the attack on the World Trade Center is about the same as the number who die each year on Britain's roads.

I climbed on to the bus waiting by the station. Snow was rolling in, and the mountains of Applecross were hidden again behind a wall of cloud. The only other passengers were a couple of American backpackers.

On the road back to Strathcarron the sun came out, and where yesterday the mountains were brown, today they were all white. In the mouth of Loch Carron, a rainbow curved into the sea. As we came in to the station yard, where the train for Inverness was waiting for us, I felt a deep sadness, as though I was leaving home behind me. I'd never been here before, and I didn't really know if I'd ever be back, but I felt my heart breaking as I turned my back on this wonderful and cruelly empty place.

Rousseau and his late-eighteenth-century contemporaries gave us our modern ideas about natural beauty; they were the progenitors of the romantic ideal, and surely the West Coast of Scotland is the epitome of that vision. If you wish to find romance by rail, if you want to go on one of the *Great Railway Journeys* and can't be bothered to save up for a ticket to India or South Africa; or if you want simply to relive some of the journeys of Michael Palin, then you must go down to your local station and buy a ticket for Kyle.

WITH PALIN TO KYLE



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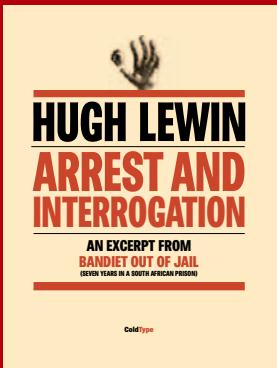
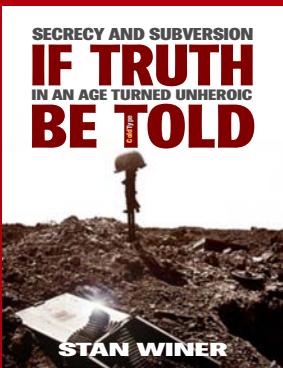
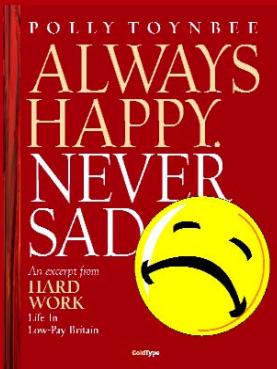
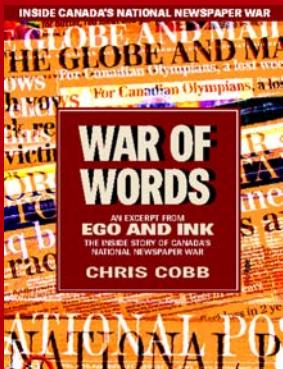
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