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The Naming of Railway Locomotives in Britain as a Cultural Indicator, 1846–1954

Abstract

From the birth of railways in Britain in the early nineteenth century, it rapidly became usual (but not obligatory) for the classes of locomotive used on passenger trains to bear names. Before 1846 diverse practices were in play; after that the majority of the names bestowed were reapplications of pre-existing proper names, for example those of persons, celestial bodies, racehorses, geographical features or buildings. This paper contends that such practices were not random, but closely aligned to sociocultural preoccupations of the period covered, 1846 to 1954, which coincides with Britain's peak as a world power. Evidence is presented that the major railway companies differed in detail in their practices, but that there was a common overarching unscripted policy regarding eponyms which responded to contemporary high culture, moral and political values and the underpinnings of Britain's imperial project.

1. Introduction

This paper explores the naming strategies adopted by British railway companies after 1846, and before the production of the final classes of named steam locomotives in 1951–54, a period coinciding with massive industrial and imperial expansion. The purpose in so doing is to demonstrate that the names chosen, almost always eponyms, in general reflected the sociocultural preoccupations of Britain as a great imperial power.

2. Previous work on the subject

Many writers have commented on British locomotive names, almost exclusively railway historians and enthusiasts (e.g., Casserley, 1967; Talbot, c. 1982; Pike, 2000; Walton, 2005). I may be the first onomastician to address the subject except Karlsson (1994). So far as I know, this is the first attempt at a systematization of locomotive naming practices in a particular cultural context. The task in hand will involve identifying the themes used in loco naming, and seeking to account for at least some of the skews and omissions in the dataset. In Coates (2009), based on a paper delivered at ICOS-23 in Toronto in 2008, I discussed the genesis of proper names for steam locomotives in the country in which they were invented, Great Britain. In that paper, and in a subsequent handbook chapter (Coates, 2016), I explored what strategies were used to create names in the period before 1846. I concluded that names in this early period typically made allusion to attributes of the machines themselves – for example by comparing them implicitly with archetypes of speed (such as birds, horses and stagecoaches) and to attributes of the machines themselves (e.g. excellence, novelty, power, and coal, fire and smoke – *Sanspareil*, *Novelty*, *Puffing Billy*, *Black Diamond*, *Rocket*). At the same time a tradition arose of eponymy – naming locos after significant places and above all after people and their exploits. Examples include *Blucher*, after the Prussian general Blücher who supported (or rescued) the Duke of Wellington at the battle of Waterloo

in 1815, *Salamanca* (a victory of Wellington's in the Peninsular War) and classical figures in mythology such as *Vulcan*, the Roman god of fire.

In the 2009 paper I also offered the general onomastic conjecture or "law" that whenever a new class of things culturally able to bear a name – let us call them *nominabilia* (Coates, 2022) – comes into being, their names become increasingly distanced from archetypes relevant to the things themselves, and increasingly more arbitrary whilst remaining significantly classifiable. To a large extent such a shift is a consequence of industrial mass production, which involves the creation of many individual instances of the same type of thing. In the present case, that made it increasingly difficult to find names that related to the individuality of the machines and to the archetypes that they evoked. If naming of representative locos in classes was to continue, then practices needed to diversify. I explore here the naming strategies adopted by British railway companies after 1846, the cut-off date in Coates (2009), and before the production of the final classes of named steam locomotives in 1951–54, a period coinciding with massive industrial and imperial expansion.

3. The scope of the material for discussion

Two preliminary remarks are necessary about the content of the paper.

Firstly, I deal only with mainline locomotives used for pulling passenger trains. These are public-facing artefacts. After the early and general introduction of numbering, the use of names was not the only characteristic that distinguished locos from each other, and probably not the most efficient one. Presumably therefore naming them was felt to be a source of public interest and pleasure, contributing naturally to commercial profit. Names applied to the small shunting locos used by industrial companies on their own self-contained railway systems are a different matter, and would benefit from a separate paper. For the present purpose, I ignore unique locos including undeveloped prototypes, and I base my discussion only on classes with 10 or more representatives.

Secondly, I deal with the period 1846–1954. In this paper, I shall not systematically attribute locos to individual railway companies. I shall mention

companies in passing, but readers may like to bear in mind that the many early private companies were geographically "grouped" into four large entities in 1922, and these were fully nationalized as British Railways in 1948. The dataset studied amounts to approximately 3,000 names.

4. The origin and development of locomotive naming

When mass production of locos of the same type began, *classes* of locomotive (i.e. sets of machines with essentially the same engineering specifications and external appearance) were often designated by a name derived from the type of entity from which the individual locos took their names. Well-known examples include "Stars", "Directors", "Castles", "Schools", "Princesses", "Clans", or more allusively, "West Country", whose locos bore names of holiday resorts in the south-west of England. Some classes had designations deriving from the name of a prototype or individual class member (*Precedent*, *Remembrance*, *King Arthur*, *Claud Hamilton*, *Royal Scot*, *Britannia*). It would be astonishing if the choices made by company directors for names of individual engines or classes had been random, and they were not. So, what were the preoccupations of the gentlemen responsible for approving names? Was there a national agenda? Did different railway companies differ in their practices?

Different companies certainly applied name-types that were distinctive to those companies, for example the famous "Kings" of the Great Western Railway (GWR) and the racehorses of the London and North-Eastern Railway (LNER). However, I contend that there was an overarching but unscripted policy common to the entire railway sector regarding suitable names, and that that policy responded mainly to contemporary aristocratic and grand-bourgeois conceptions of history, high culture, moral and political values and the underpinnings of Britain's imperial project. None of that is likely to cause surprise, but it has not been previously explored. I shall concentrate here more on the big picture than on individual company practices.

5. General characteristics of locomotive names from the earliest times onwards

It is very striking that after 1846, practically all loco names prove to be eponymous. That is, they are reapplications of proper names of entities in other categories: for example, persons, celestial bodies, racehorses, geographical features or buildings. Some categories are developments of the sorts of naming prevalent before 1846, whilst others are entirely new. (For a discussion of the concept of eponymy in onomastics see Coates, 2022.)

Eponymous naming had its roots in the earlier period (i.e. before 1846), but in that period it was not universal. The GWR pioneered the practice of giving locos thematic names with their "Star" class, beginning in 1837–41. A few of these were eponyms (*North Star, Morning Star* – from vernacular names for Polaris and Venus respectively). However, most of the other class members were not eponymous even when they contributed to the same theme (*Red Star, Rising Star*).

When thematic naming developed, it was not always applied with complete consistency within a class, and typically, classes of named locomotives contained onomastically distinct sub-groups. A somewhat extreme transitional example is afforded by the London and North-Western Railway's (LNWR's) "Samson" class, introduced in 1863, which had at least two instances of each of the following, all of which are onyms or taxonyms: mythological and literary characters, heavenly bodies, names of earlier successful locos, birds, lords, female divinities, racehorses, engineers, mountains and volcanoes, insects, places served by the LNWR, mythical beasts and geological specimens (Goodman, 2002). Many of these had been handed down from earlier locos, since scrapped, making a recognizable second-order subtype, the re-used name, that is, one reapplied whatever had been the status of the name of the original loco bearing it, with some therefore being what one might call epi-eponymous.

6. Findings of the present investigation

The practices and models applied in the more straightforward cases of the naming of locomotives in classes are now set out.

Many locos were named after human beings. The favoured people qualified by virtue of distinguished membership in a range of categories. There is a flood of representative kings, dukes, earls, generals, politicians, soldiers decorated for bravery, directors of railway companies, engineers and inventors, poets and characters from mythology and literature. A moderate number of locos were named after women: queens and duchesses, female characters in Greek and Roman mythology and history, and in literature written in English (specifically characters from Shakespeare's plays, like Miranda, and the novels of Sir Walter Scott (1771–1832), like Lucy Ashton and Jeanie Deans (Middlemass, 1993), plus the exotic Lalla Rookh, from a poem of 1817 by Thomas Moore (1779–1852)).

However, the starkest finding relates to the number named after a specific real woman of the modern era for her achievements, as opposed to her social status. We have records of about 3,000 named locos (the figure is an educated guess, with some indeterminacy because of duplicated names and to renamings during the working life of a loco).[1] The total commemorating such prominent females is precisely two: Jenny Lind and Sister Dora. In 1847 the London, Brighton and South Coast Railway (LBSCR) named the first of a new type after the famous Swedish singer Jenny Lind, "The Swedish Nightingale" (1820–87). In the following 100 years, only a single loco was named after a living or recently deceased female who did not have an aristocratic title. It was not after one of those now totally accepted as icons, Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, Florence Nightingale, Marie Skłodowska-Curie or Nancy Astor. That second loco was named after a local counterpart of nurse Florence Nightingale named Dorothy Pattison (1832–78). She was a nurse in the West Midlands manufacturing town of Walsall who was particularly active in the healthcare of railwaymen and deeply loved for that. She was widely known as *Sister Dora*, which is the name that found its way onto the side of

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[1] https://www.railuk.info/steam/steamname_search.php lists 2,456

an LNWR "Improved Precedent" (also known as "Jumbo") class locomotive in 1895. It is hard to imagine a clearer demonstration of an active ideology in naming, in this case Victorian and subsequent patriarchy. No woman born after 1832 who was not a titled aristocrat ever had a British mainline steam loco named after her.

Other prominent currents in the process of loco naming can be identified as follows, not all rigidly separable from each other:

• **Medievalism**, which was an integral component in the celebration of important formative aspects of Britain's history: representing this theme we find the historic counties, which were the chief organizing principle of pre-industrial administrative and legal life; people and places appearing in the legends of King Arthur; kings of England/Britain (but not of Scotland!) and other historical figures;[2] the Picturesque and Romantic: featuring ancient buildings such as abbeys and castles, often viewed either as ruins or, later, after the Dissolution of the Monasteries in 1536–40, as aristocratic homes (or at least homes of the rich gentry).

• **Military success**: naval ships and commanders; generals and regiments; First World War commanders, regiments and heroes ("patriots"); the Royal Air Force's Battle of Britain squadrons and their airfields, occasional instances in other classes, e.g., the GWR "Castle" called *Hurricane* after the World War II British fighter plane type, the London, Midland and Scottish Railway's (LMSR's) *Patriot*, and, as an interesting footnote on their origin as paramilitary training bodies, in the same "Patriot" class *Boy Scout* and *Girl Guide* (Goodman, 1994).

• **Business success / self-aggrandisement**: introspective: railway directors, chief mechanical engineers; commercial maritime firms, especially those using ports served by the relevant company (the Great Central Railway's "Directors" and the SR's "Merchant Navy", featuring the names of firms operating ocean-going vessels).

• In some sort of social tension with business: **society, in the sense of high society**, and practices of the rich and famous: names or titles of royal and aristocratic personages themselves, foxhunts, public schools.

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[2] The "Britannia" class introduced by British Railways in the 1950s provides through its names an instructive general overview of who and what was deemed particularly significant in the last period of the British empire, and how typally traditional the names were. They are listed and categorized in the appendix.

- Place-names (1): the larger **towns and cities** served by the relevant railway company (cities in the LMSR "Coronation" class and the GWR's "City" class, along with a few examples of the "Patriot" class of the LMSR commemorating such resorts in its territory as Blackpool and Llandudno).
- Place-names (2): in the broadest sense, representing **the imperial project**: empire countries (LMSR "Jubilee" class (Williams, 2010); the LNER's "A4" class had some locos named after the "White" dominions; military engagements that contributed to the spread of British rule (GWR "Atbara")).
- Place-names (3): **middle-class holiday destinations**, especially in the West Country of England (Southern Railway (SR)). This batch of locos of the inter-war period was essentially a massive advertising campaign. The loco-names were only those of places served by the SR and not the rival GWR, which served the blank spaces which remain on the map after the SR's loco names have been plotted (for example the county of Somerset). We can also add the Scottish names in the "Loch" and "Glen" classes, noting as we pass that there are no class-names commemorating English lakes and valleys. "Scotticism" was at its height during the classic naming period.
- **Literary characters**, almost exclusively taken from the works of Sir Walter Scott, considered in his time as a rival to Homer (the highly influential Victorian critic John Ruskin chose to cite Homer and Scott as "my own two masters" in his *Fors clavigera*). Nobody else's creations appear apart from the occasional Shakespeare, plus Moore's Lalla Rookh, as already mentioned. Not even Charles Dickens's characters put in an appearance. Scott represented a mania for things Scottish from about 1820 onwards, expressed also in locos named with geographical names ("Glens", "Lochs") and with the much later names of "Clans". Names of timetabled trains serving Scotland from London, such as The Waverley and The Talisman, were also drawn from Scott's works, and Edinburgh's main railway station is still called *Waverley.* These are further examples of the prevailing "Scotticism", of which Scott the author was a prime mover.

Fitting only loosely into the above categories are the GWR's "Saints". Perhaps it is enough that the GWR's territory included much of Wales, the Land of Saints, and that saints are people of great moral rectitude, like the directors and chairmen of a railway company.

7. Some names falling outside the predominant categories, and their relation to those categories

There were, of course, some classes whose names did not fit at all into the general framework I have just outlined.

In the earliest times, many were drawn from the taxonymy of the natural world, and (as before 1846) we find classes commemorating insects, flowers, birds and antelopes (conspicuously antelopes found in lands of the British empire, though that would not be surprising if they were drawn from the colonial experiences of the persons naming them). There could be some lack of linguistic sophistication, as with the LNER's B1 "Springbok" or "Bongo" class, where the taxonymic *Nyala* and *Inyala* denote the same antelope in Tsonga and Zulu respectively. *Wildebeest* and *Gnu* also appeared on separate locos despite identifying the same species.

Such taxonymically named locos might be viewed as challenges to my contention that names were largely eponymous, but we need to remember that the theoretical boundary between onyms and taxonyms has not been clearly drawn till relatively recently (the words *taxonym* and *taxonymy* are still absent from the *Oxford English Dictionary* [https://oed.com] in August 2022), and that we still speak informally of *plant-names* and *bird-names*. In that light, it looks quite secure to claim that loco-namers adhered strategically to a norm of what counted as eponymy at the relevant time.

Sporting eponyms appear. The LNER's "Hunts" were undoubtedly named from the preferred sport of the foxhunting upper classes, and therefore fit into the category **society, in the sense of high society**. However, others could appear socially two-edged, for example the LNER's racehorse names on their A3 and A2 classes. These winners might be evaluated from the perspective either of rich owners or of the gambling public. Truly exceptional, it seems to me, are the LNER's "Footballers", named after football clubs in its regional territory. Football had become the national working-class sport by the 1920s, so it seems a remarkable concession to commemorate it when set against the general naming practices skewed towards more patrician and grand-bourgeois values. Part of the attraction of these locos was not only the name, but the use of flashes alongside the nameplate in the club's colours and a metal 3-D old-fashioned leather ball (Figure 1), making a pleasant ensemble popular

with the general public. But in any case it was probably no coincidence that the racehorse names, the "Hunt" class and the "Footballers" were locos of the same company, the only company evincing a chrematonymic interest in sport.

Figure 1. The nameplate of a "Footballer" loco at the stadium of Norwich City FC

Source: https://www.canaries.co.uk/

There is another, unique-seeming, name that may appear to be exceptional, but which fits with others discussed. The LBSCR had a loco called *Remembrance* (see Figure 2), which was a member of a class otherwise named after pioneering locomotive engineers. It was the company's war memorial loco, and although named with an abstract noun, it belongs with the locos of other companies which bore the names of Great War battlefields and those of Allied generals and heroes (Dunn Birch, 2016).
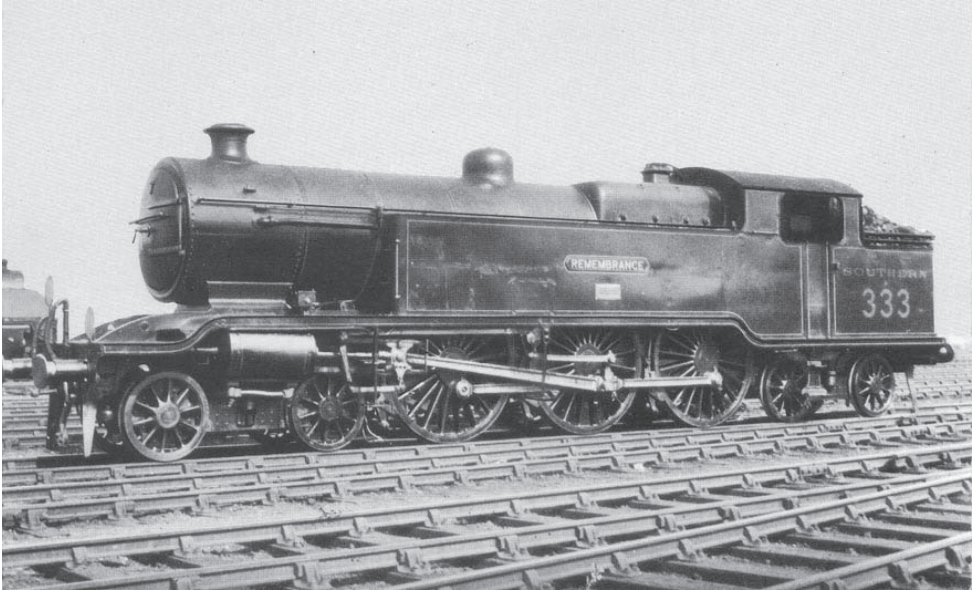
Figure 2. *Remembrance*

Source: an LBSCR publicity photo, 1923.

8. Some true exceptions

I should perhaps finish on a seemingly discordant note. Very few newly named locos indeed even seem to follow the pre-1846 practice of descriptive naming, but there are a few candidates.

Along with other locos, the LNER's *Silver Link* was painted silver; it was intended to pull the Silver Jubilee train between London and Newcastle. This name commemorated the silver jubilee of King George V in 1935, and was therefore in essence named from the train, in a manner reminiscent of the essentialist naming of the period before 1846. But even that is not all it appears to be: the loco's name is taken from a line in Walter Scott's poem "The lay of the last minstrel", and therefore echoes other themes in loco-naming discussed in this paper.

What are possibly the two most famous British steam locos of all also do not quite fit in an obvious way into the grand framework I have identified. The LNER's A3 *Flying Scotsman* got its name from the train it was intended to pull, The Flying Scotsman, connecting London and Edinburgh – so it has an eponymous name like *Silver Link*, but of an atypical sort mirrored by the same company's green-painted V2 class *Green Arrow*, named after the freight train that it was designed to pull. The LNER's A4 class *Mallard*, the fastest recorded steam loco ever, carries a vernacular duck taxonym.[3]

9. Conclusion

Noting that before 1846 diverse loco-naming practices were in play, we have seen that thereafter the majority of the names bestowed were eponyms, that is, reapplications of pre-existing proper names, for example those of persons, celestial bodies, racehorses, geographical features or buildings. Such practices were clearly not random, but closely aligned to social and cultural preoccupations of Britain's peak period as a world power. Evidence has been presented that while the major railway companies may have differed in detail in their practices, that there was an unscripted policy regarding the strategy of eponym selection which responded to values expressed in contemporary cultural, moral and political narratives, and that the great majority of locos were named in the light of those preoccupations.

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[3] Others in its class were also named after bird species.

Appendix: the names of the "Britannia" class locos

Number	Name	Category
70000	*Britannia*	Patriotic emblem/figure
70001	*Lord Hurcomb*	Senior transport civil servant
70002	*Geoffrey Chaucer*	Literary figure
70003	*John Bunyan*	Literary figure
70004	*William Shakespeare*	Literary figure
70005	*John Milton*	Literary figure
70006	*Robert Burns*	Literary figure
70007	*Coeur-de-Lion*	Pre-modern historical figure
70008	*Black Prince*	Pre-modern historical figure
70009	*Alfred the Great*	Pre-modern historical figure
70010	*Owen Glendower*	Pre-modern historical figure
70011	*Hotspur*	Pre-modern historical figure
70012	*John of Gaunt*	Pre-modern historical figure
70013	*Oliver Cromwell*	Pre-modern historical figure
70014	*Iron Duke*	Historical/military figure
70015	*Apollo*	Mythological figure or (less likely) astronomical body
70016	*Ariel*	Mythological/literary figure or astronomical body
70017	*Arrow*	Significance uncertain
70018	*Flying Dutchman*	In railway terms, usually commemorating a famous racehorse; otherwise a mythological entity
70019	*Lightning*	Meteorological/astronomical entity, picking up a loco name of the earliest period
70020	*Mercury*	Meteorological/astronomical entity (as 70019)
70021	*Morning Star*	Meteorological/astronomical entity (as 70019)
70022	*Tornado*	Meteorological/astronomical entity (as 70019)
70023	*Venus*	Meteorological/astronomical entity (as 70019)
70024	*Vulcan*	Meteorological/astronomical entity (as 70019)
70025	*Western Star*	Meteorological/astronomical entity (as 70019)

70026	*Polar Star*	Meteorological/astronomical entity (as 70019)
70027	*Rising Star*	Meteorological/astronomical entity (as 70019)
70028	*Royal Star*	Meteorological/astronomical entity (as 70019)
70029	*Shooting Star*	Meteorological/astronomical entity (as 70019)
70030	*William Wordsworth*	Literary figure
70031	*Byron*	Literary figure
70032	*Tennyson*	Literary figure
70033	*Charles Dickens*	Literary figure
70034	*Thomas Hardy*	Literary figure
70035	*Rudyard Kipling*	Literary figure
70036	*Boadicea*	Pre-modern historical figure
70037	*Hereward the Wake*	Pre-modern historical figure
70038	*Robin Hood*	Pre-modern historical/mythological figure
70039	*Sir Christopher Wren*	17th-century architect
70040	*Clive of India*	18th-century imperialist, historical/military figure
70041	*Sir John Moore*	Historical/military figure
70042	*Lord Roberts*	20th-century military figure
70043	*Lord Kitchener*	20th-century military figure
70044	*Earl Haig*	20th-century military figure
70045	*Lord Rowallan*	20th-century military figure
70046	*Anzac*	20th-century military body
70047	—	—
70048	*The Territorial Army 1908–1958*	20th-century military body
70049	*Solway Firth*	Waterway on the Scotland/England border
70050	*Firth of Clyde*	Waterway in Scotland
70051	*Firth of Forth*	Waterway in Scotland
70052	*Firth of Tay*	Waterway in Scotland
70053	*Moray Firth*	Waterway in Scotland
70054	*Dornoch Firth*	Waterway in Scotland

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