

‘This modern Cinderella’: Railway Queens, mass media, and British civic culture, 1925–75

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Abstract

Between 1925 and 1975, the British railway industry elected beauty queens from the daughters of employees. Focusing upon the Railway Queens, this article will reveal the importance of beauty queens as ‘civic celebrities’, a novel role for public figures that emerged between the wars and helped to sustain a vibrant civic culture across the early to mid-twentieth century. It combined the traditional ceremonial function of ‘civic’ representative with the modern consumerist ethos of media ‘celebrity’. Despite the gendered constraints of such competitions, this article posits that serving as a beauty queen enabled young working-class women to become legitimate representatives of various civic communities for the first time, whilst also enabling participation in the media’s image-making of glamorous, consumerist femininities. As such, the role rendered civic and consumer cultures more inclusive and increasingly inextricable. This article further suggests that civic celebrities altered how communities were represented to themselves within British civic culture. If elites continued to represent hierarchical communities of authority and deference, then from the 1920s onwards, civic celebrities such as beauty queens began to represent relatively democratic communities of non-partisan inclusivity and consumer aspiration.

Introduction

For the 1925 Stockton to Darlington Railway Centenary Carnival, the British railway industry established a beauty contest to elect the Railway Queen. The position was open to daughters, aged 14–16 years, of unionized railway employees who sent in a photograph to the Railway Carnival Committee. The contest proved remarkably popular, with Queens elected almost annually until 1975.¹ When former Railway Queen Audrey Mosson died in 2009, obituaries described her as a ‘national celebrity’.² This was not hyperbole. During her reign, mass media disseminated her image throughout Britain. As Railway Queen in

¹ The first Railway Queen was not replaced until 1927. Only two queens were elected during the Second World War in 1941 and 1944, respectively.

² *Daily Telegraph*, 7 Oct. 2009, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/6269990/Lives-Remembered.html>, accessed 2023.

1936, Mosson visited the Soviet Union on ‘a highly controversial peace’ mission, where she met Joseph Stalin.³ She was also the second person to switch on the Blackpool illuminations.⁴ Before turning 16 years old, Mosson had served as both a local and international representative alongside attaining celebrity status; she had become a ‘civic celebrity’.

Focusing on the Railway Queens, this article argues that beauty contest organizers, media producers, and beauty queens themselves collaborated to reinvent the traditional role of civic representative into that of ‘civic celebrity’. I have coined the term ‘civic celebrity’ to reflect a hybrid role for public figures that emerged in the inter-war period. It combined the ceremonial function of ‘civic’ representative with the consumerist ethos of media ‘celebrity’. I further suggest that this novel public role expedited changes in both consumer and civic cultures. Beauty contests utilized images of glamorous, sexualized femininity to render civic representation more inclusive, as any young woman could potentially win the tiara and represent their community. Concurrently, performing the official duties of a beauty queen allowed working-class women a rare opportunity to experience the consumer glamour of (inter)national celebrity.

Historians have revealed that civic culture—a range of non-partisan rituals, pageantry, and festive occasions—thrived in localities throughout Britain in the early and mid-twentieth century.⁵ Civic culture is defined here as urban culture that encouraged the active participation of all citizens in public life, irrespective of their background, as a means to foster community pride and social cohesion within a particular group or locality.⁶ Most public figures therefore had to be civic in the sense that they had to be acceptable non-partisan representatives of the community who could officiate at such events. In the early twentieth century, this role generally remained the preserve of elites; yet, by the mid-century, beauty queens had become prominent civic representatives.

However, beauty contest winners also functioned as media celebrities. By the early twentieth century, the ability to garner favourable media attention became inextricable from serving as an effective community representative. Simon Morgan defines celebrity as ‘a known individual who has become a marketable commodity’, that is, someone for whom there is a sufficiently interested audience to sell their image to.⁷ Beauty competitions were designed to create ‘marketable’ celebrities by exploiting media producers’ fascination with attractive, youthful women. Commercial beauty contests were inclusively aspirational, in that, theoretically at least, all women within the stipulated age bracket could participate. Young, often working-class, women competed, and won, in droves. Media coverage of beauty contests therefore opened the role of civic representative to women outside the conventional elite. Hence, this article argues that civic celebrities altered how communities were represented to themselves within British civic culture. If elites continued to represent hierarchical communities of authority and deference, then from the 1920s, civic celebrities such as beauty queens began to represent communities of non-partisan inclusivity and consumer aspiration.

Exploring the role of beauty queens through the concept of civic celebrity brings together the historiographies of civic culture and media images of women in twentieth-century

³ *Independent*, 1 Oct. 2009, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/audrey-mossom-railway-queen-of-great-britain-who-was-entertained-by-stalin-on-a-peace-trip-to-the-soviet-union-1795569.html>, accessed 2023.

⁴ *Independent*, 1 Oct. 2009, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/audrey-mossom-railway-queen-of-great-britain-who-was-entertained-by-stalin-on-a-peace-trip-to-the-soviet-union-1795569.html>, accessed 2023.

⁵ B. Roberts, ‘Entertaining the Community: the Evolution of Civic Ritual and Public Celebration, 1860–1953’, *Urban History*, 44 (2017), 445; T. Hulme, *After the Shock City: Urban Culture and the Making of Modern Citizenship* (The Boydell Press, Woodbridge, 2019); J. English, ‘Empire Day in Britain, 1904–1958’, *The Historical Journal*, 49 (2006), 247–76; A. Gregory, *The Silence of Memory: Armistice Day, 1919–1946* (Bloomsbury Publishing, London, 1994).

⁶ T. Hulme, ‘Putting the City Back into Citizenship: Civics Education and Local Government in Britain, 1918–45’, *Twentieth Century British History*, 26 (2015), 26–51.

⁷ S. Morgan, ‘Celebrity’, *Cultural and Social History*, 8 (2011), 98.

Britain. Revisionist scholarship on inter-war civic culture, spearheaded by Tom Hulme, Charlotte Wildman, and Ben Roberts, has collectively argued that, contrary to earlier work by Simon Gunn and others, this culture did not dwindle after 1918.⁸ Instead, it remained vibrant as municipal authorities and organizations proved adaptive to the demands of a new ‘mass’ electorate.⁹ This was a blooming culture that found expression in sundry well-attended parades, ceremonies, and festivities.¹⁰ Moreover, as Wildman suggests, ‘local government moved towards a more demotic and inclusive civic culture’, especially in terms of class and gender.¹¹ This article posits that the proliferation of beauty contests like the Railway Queen competition was another aspect of civic culture’s democratization and survival in the twentieth century. Beauty contests became a widespread, popular type of urban pageantry and ritual in the inter-war period, one that helped to sustain an inclusive civic culture until at least the 1970s.

Moreover, this study highlights the considerable involvement of trade unions in the wider civic culture of twentieth-century Britain. In trade union historiography, women have generally appeared either through their involvement in union politics or the gendered disparities they faced within the workplace.¹² Hannah Reeves’s thesis has revealed that the social life of trade unionism was important for the female relatives of railway workers.¹³ The Railway Queen contest shows alternative ways that young women became politically active within union-backed culture. Likewise, it reveals that trade unions collaborated readily with media producers, municipal authorities, and voluntary organizations to establish the Railway Queens as successful civic celebrities. This suggests that trade unionists and media producers were key agents in the democratization of civic culture.

Historians have also demonstrated, and long debated, the centrality of media images to British women’s lives from the inter-war period onwards. Adrian Bingham’s work on the popular press has revealed twentieth-century media to have been transfixed with the apparent ‘sex appeal’ of young women; attractive women were perceived as inherently newsworthy.¹⁴ These images were intended for men’s titillation, certainly, but also for women to enjoy displays of fashionable glamour and aspire towards consumer fantasies.¹⁵ However, historiography is divided concerning the effects of these images on women’s lives. Foundational work by Deirdre Beddoe, Billie Melman, and Joanne Meyerowitz argued that inter-war media demonized newly liberated women, depicted as louche flappers or undesirable feminists, as part of a concerted backlash to confine women within the traditional role of housewife—a form of social control to cloister women away from public life.¹⁶

⁸ Hulme, *After the Shock*, Chapters 3 and 4; Roberts, ‘Entertaining the Community’, 444–63; C. Wildman, *Urban Redevelopment and Modernity in Liverpool and Manchester*, pp. 10–11 (Bloomsbury Publishing, London, 2016).

⁹ Hulme, ‘Putting the City Back’, 28; Wildman, *Urban Redevelopment*, 10–11; L. Carter, *Histories of Everyday Life: the Making of Popular Social History in Britain, 1918–1979*, p. 6 (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2021).

¹⁰ T. Hulme, ‘A Nation of Town Criers’: Civic Publicity and Historical Pageantry in Inter-war Britain’, *Urban History*, 44 (2017), 271–3.

¹¹ C. Wildman, ‘Urban Transformation in Liverpool and Manchester, 1918–1939’, *The Historical Journal*, 55 (2012), 122.

¹² S. Lewenhak, *Women and Trade Unions* (St Martin’s Press, London, 1977); H. Wojtczak, *Railwaywomen* (Hastings Press, Hastings, 2005); E. Robertson and L.-A. Monk, ‘“When Women do the Work of Men”: Representations of Gendered Occupational Identities on British Railways in World War I Cartoons’, *Labour History*, 117 (2019), 47–77.

¹³ H. Reeves, ‘An Exploration of the “Railway Family”: 1900–1948’, PhD thesis, Keele University, 2018.

¹⁴ A. Bingham, *Family Newspapers? Sex, Private Life, and the British Popular Press 1918–1978* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2009); A. Bingham, *Gender, Modernity, and the Popular Press in Inter-war Britain* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2004).

¹⁵ Bingham, *Family Newspapers*, 205.

¹⁶ D. Beddoe, *Back to Home and Duty: Women Between the Wars, 1918–1939*, pp. 3–4 (Pandora, London, 1989); B. Melman, *Women and the Popular Imagination in the Twenties: Flappers and Nymphs* (Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1988); J. Meyerowitz, ‘Women, Cheesecake, and Borderline Material: Responses to Girlie Pictures in the Mid-Twentieth-Century U.S.’, *Journal of Women’s History*, 8 (1996), 25–6.

More recent work by Bingham, Wildman, and Carol Dyhouse has suggested that media images of feminine glamour and fashionable, attractive young women were more nuanced, as often celebrated as denounced.¹⁷ They also reveal the ways in which women used sexualized or glamorous media images to enhance their lives culturally and socially. Wildman argues that shopping, more often window shopping, for the latest fashions in department stores was 'potentially liberating and transformative' as it granted women of all classes 'opportunities to perform the aspirational images that they saw in the cinema, in novels and in advertisements'.¹⁸ She also contends that this democratization of urban consumer culture between the wars was influenced by the new 'populist rhetoric' of civic culture.¹⁹ Building on this, I concur with recent scholarship and argue that media coverage of beauty queens, though sometimes demeaning or trivializing, was not part of a backlash. Sexualized media provided, however unintentionally, real political opportunities for women to serve as civic representatives. Even if media producers and contest organizers did not intend it, the role of civic celebrity became an uncontroversial means for young working-class women to attain positions conventionally denied them in both civic and consumer cultures: to take the media limelight as glamorous celebrities and simultaneously represent a range of civic communities in public life.

Many major industries touted their own 'queen of industry', but to date the Cotton Queens are the only variant to have received sustained scholarly attention.²⁰ This work reinforces the argument made here, as it reveals that the Cotton Queen contest, established in the 1930s, combined media glamour with a political purpose. In terms of their image, Rebecca Conway has argued that winners, chosen from female mill workers, were intended to represent 'the idealised mill girl of the 1930s, who drew upon new [consumer] fashions ... to create a feminine type ... special to Lancashire'.²¹ Jack Southern has meanwhile elucidated the mission of the contest, which was part of a broader campaign to counteract the bad publicity of the region's ailing cotton industry.²² The Railway Queens, beginning in 1925, were the first queens of industry, and in many respects served as a model for subsequent contests, such as the Cotton or Coal Queens. This suggests that the synthesis of civic culture and media image-making was intrinsic to the queens of industry competitions. The Railway Queen competition was also among the longest lived, spanning five decades. This article therefore posits a chronological framework, suggesting that the creation of the hybrid role of civic celebrity occurred in the inter-war decades, and that this role persisted for beauty queens, relatively unchanged though declining gradually in popularity, into the late twentieth century.

This article has three sections. First, it examines the contest's origins to demonstrate how organizers merged ceremonial trappings with commercial culture to establish a civic

¹⁷ Bingham, *Gender*, 245–7; Wildman, *Urban Redevelopment*, Chapter 4; C. Dyhouse, *Glamour: Women, History, Feminism* (Zed, London, 2010); A. Kuhn, *An Everyday Magic: Cinema and Cultural Memory* (I.B. Tauris & Co., London, 2002).

¹⁸ Wildman, *Urban Redevelopment*, 140.

¹⁹ Wildman, *Urban Redevelopment*, 11.

²⁰ For rich work on beauty queens generally, which has done much to unpick the competing and conflicting gendered, classed, and racialized images that these contestants had to conform to and perform, see R. Rowe, *Imagining Caribbean Womanhood: Race, Nation and Beauty Competitions, 1929–70* (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2013); M. L. Craig, *Ain't I a Beauty Queen? Black Women, Beauty, and the Politics of Race* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2002); J. Robertson, 'Japan's First Cyborg? Miss Nippon, Eugenics and Wartime Technologies of Beauty, Body and Blood', *Body & Society*, 7 (2001), 1–34; R. C. King-O'Riain, *Pure Beauty: Judging Race in Japanese American Beauty Pageants*, p. 59 (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2006); S. Fielding, 'The Changing Face of Little Italy: The Miss Colombo Pageant and the Making of Ethnicity in Trail, British Columbia, 1970–1977', *Urban History Review*, 39 (2010), 46; J. Grimmeisen, 'Halutzah or Beauty Queen? National Images of Women in Early Israeli Society', *Israel Studies*, 20 (2015), 38.

²¹ R. Conway, 'Making the Mill Girl Modern? Beauty, Industry, and the Popular Newspaper in 1930s' England', *Twentieth Century British History*, 4 (2013), 521.

²² J. Southern, '"Lancashire Accents, Lancashire Goods and Lancashire Girls": Local Identity and the Image of the Cotton Industry in the Inter-war Period', *International Journal of Regional and Local History*, 12 (2017), 85.

celebrity role. Secondly, it explores the Railway Queens' gendered celebrity image to demonstrate why they consistently garnered media attention, its ties to consumer aspirations, and how this did not undermine their political purpose. Finally, it elucidates the civic 'work' that Railway Queens performed to represent three distinct yet overlapping political communities: the 'railway family', local civic cultures, and anti-war internationalists.

The origins of the Railway Queen contest

In 1925, the Railway Queen competition was devised by a Liverpool-based committee of unionized railwaymen who volunteered to run the competition and organize the annual Railway Employees Carnival. Harry Neilson was the driving force of what became the Railway Carnival Committee, serving as chairman from 1925 until 1952. Largely his brainchild, the Railway Queen was originally designed to represent accord across the picket line. Prior to this, the railways had witnessed severe industrial unrest following a major strike in 1919.²³ Thus, the Railway Queen was intended to be a non-partisan representative who unified the industry. At Belle Vue stadium in Manchester, Queens were jointly crowned by a union leader and a senior company official. Both groups supported the enterprise with funding and logistics. As the 1963 Carnival programme proclaimed, 'the activities of Britain's Railway Queen are made possible by the co-operation of the management ... [and] Trade Unionists, uniting in the cause of fostering Peace and Goodwill among Railwaymen'.²⁴ Likewise, only the daughters of unionized railway employees were eligible candidates to ensure that they represented the unions adequately.²⁵ Following the 1926 General Strike, in which railway unions were heavily involved, National Union of Railwaymen (NUR) General Secretary J. H. Thomas stated that the Railway Queen served as 'the best evidence that there was no need and no possibility of a revolution in this country'.²⁶ The Railway Queen contest, then, was established to bind together unionized labour and capitalist management through common ceremonial occasions.

For this, the Carnival Committee modelled the Railway Queen upon traditional civic representatives. Since the early modern period, monarchs and other elites propagated and consolidated their authority via ritual and display.²⁷ This continued into the twentieth century, as municipal authorities used historical pageants and commercial entertainments during Civic Weeks to present an attractive 'vision of itself' to the residents of the town or city.²⁸ Elites such as mayors and monarchs often embodied spectacle, wearing sumptuous robes of office or serving as the focal point of ceremonies. The Railway Queens readily aped royal spectacle. Each Queen had a mock coronation at Manchester's Belle Vue stadium; these elaborate rituals formed the centrepiece of the Railway Employees Carnival. For the first coronation, an advertisement claimed '100 ladies and 100 gentlemen are required, specially [sic] men who can manage horses'.²⁹ This conveys the scale of pageantry involved. The crowning itself consisted of a transferral of regalia from the retiring queen to the queen-elect, a 'guard of honour' procession, odes to the new queen, and a pipe band.³⁰ Like the monarchy, then, the Railway Queen

²³ P. Bagwell, *The Railwaymen: The History of the National Union of Railwaymen Volume One*, Chapter 17 (London, 1963).

²⁴ National Railway Museum (NRM), York, *Railway Queen Photographs, 1925-1970s* (Ref 2018-237).

²⁵ *Railway Review*, 7 Aug. 1925, 11.

²⁶ *The Scotsman*, 27 Sep. 1926, 8.

²⁷ K. Sharpe, *Image Wars: Promoting Kings and Commonwealths in England, 1603-1660* (Yale University Press, New Haven, 2010); M. Braddick and J. Walter (eds), *Negotiating Power in Early Modern Society: Order, Hierarchy and Subordination in Britain and Ireland* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2018); T. Hill, *Pageantry and Power: A Cultural History of the Early Modern Lord Mayor's Show 1585-1639* (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2010).

²⁸ Hulme, 'Town Criers', 273-4.

²⁹ *Railway Review*, 7 Aug. 1925, 11.

³⁰ Queen Photographs.



Figure 1. 'Official Portrait of Railway Queen Dorothy Northwood' (c.1941–4), *Dorothy Northwood Scrapbook*, Jill Dobson Private Collection. Reproduced with kind permissions from Jill Dobson, Jen Burrows, and Liz Boyle.

became central to 'invented' traditions and rituals.³¹ They also had their own regalia, worn at official engagements (Figure 1).³² Maids of honour were often chosen to carry the train of the Railway Queen's robe and accompany her during official visits.³³ Royal connotations were frequently played up in publicity. For instance, the committee was sometimes referred to as the Railway Queen's Council, in a playful allusion to the Privy Council, which advised the British monarch.³⁴ In 1969, the committee's secretary stated that the robes worn by Railway Queen Therese Faulds were 'an exact replica' of those worn by Queen Elizabeth II at her coronation.³⁵ Railway Queens thereby used faux regal splendour and ceremonial inspired by that of other elite dignitaries.

³¹ D. Cannadine, 'The Context, Performance, and Meaning of Ritual: The British Monarchy and the "Invention of Tradition", c.1820-1977', in E. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger, eds, *The Invention of Tradition*, pp. 101–64 (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1983).

³² NRM, *Velvet Railway Queen Gown* (Ref 1990-7590 Pt1); NRM, *Railway Queen Tiara* (Ref 1990-7590 Pt4/4).

³³ *The Scotsman*, 5 Apr. 1930, 11; *Nottingham Evening Post*, 26 Aug. 1950, 5; *Grantham Journal*, 29 Aug. 1952, 1.

³⁴ Queen Photographs.

³⁵ *Irvine Herald*, 7 Mar. 1969, 4.

Contemporaries were cognisant of the parallels. In 1947, the *Wolverton Express* claimed that ‘true democracy was in operation when the Railway Queen was extended the same courtesy and privileges as was Princess Elizabeth’ during the former’s recent visit.³⁶ Thus, Railway Queens were treated to a comparable level of pomp. Some found this too much. In 1938, A. Towser from Margate wrote to the *Observer*, grumbling ‘[i]s it not time that we stopped this schoolgirlish folly? It is not good taste to drag in the royal name for this purpose any more than it is to talk of railway and sausage ‘kings’.³⁷ Seemingly an idiosyncratic opinion, it highlights that the Railway Queens mimicked royalty enough to be distasteful to some. This is not to say that they were political equivalents. Railway Queens were in no way sovereigns, and, unlike the monarch or municipal authorities, had no formal political power. Rather, it is to say that Railway Queens utilized civic culture, hitherto reserved for elites, such as performing ceremonial spectacle, to the similar end of representing political communities. In this, they were pioneers. Subsequent British beauty queens adopted regalia and ritual, from the well-known Cotton and Coal Queens to short-lived titles like the Laundry or Silk Queens.³⁸

Alongside representing a harmonious industrial community, the Railway Queen was intended to be a media-friendly ‘face’ for the industry. The inter-war period witnessed the rise of marketing in Britain, from the proliferation of brand mascots to the establishment of institutions like J. Walter Thompson’s market research company.³⁹ Both railway companies and trade unions proved adept at advertising and self-promotion.⁴⁰ Indeed, the railways were the first major British industry to utilize beauty queens for publicity purposes. From the outset, the intention was to make celebrities of the Railway Queens. The Railway Film Association, a voluntary organization of unionized employees, was established in 1925 with ‘the primary aim’ of producing ‘a big film illustrating the life of railway workers’.⁴¹ The first Railway Queen, Helena Wootton, was originally intended to be ‘the heroine’ of the film, a fact advertised heavily in newspapers.⁴² An exclusive interview with *The Daily Express*, reprinted in regional newspapers, framed her as an ingénue dazzled by the glittering world of film stardom. It claimed that Wootton, ‘one of the screen’s few unbobbed heroines, already has had over 50 love letters’.⁴³ Emphasizing her appearance and amorous private life, press coverage was almost identical to the treatment of stars in contemporary film fan magazines.⁴⁴ Between the wars, feminine glamour was increasingly defined by the ‘screen goddesses’ of Hollywood: fashionable, elegant, and often sexualized film stars who captured the imaginations of British cinemagoers.⁴⁵ From the outset, it appears that the Railway Queen competition aimed to tap into the prevailing image of young women that was projected in popular culture. Wootton was intended to be the glamorous star, then, of a campaign to publicize the railway industry.

Moreover, the Railway Queen contest was structured akin to commercial beauty contests. Imported from America, these contests had several distinguishing features: candidates

³⁶ *Wolverton Express*, 19 Mar. 1948, 1.

³⁷ *Observer*, 4 Sep. 1938, 8.

³⁸ *Portsmouth Evening News*, 1 Aug. 1952, 2.

³⁹ R. Hornsey, ‘“The Penguins Are Coming”: Brand Mascots and Utopian Mass Consumption in Interwar Britain’, *Journal of British Studies*, 57 (2018), 813–39; J. Moran, ‘Mass-Observation, Market Research, and the Birth of the Focus Group, 1937–1997’, *Journal of British Studies*, 47 (2008), 830–1.

⁴⁰ L. Beers, ‘Is This Man an Anarchist?’ Industrial Action and the Battle for Public Opinion in Interwar Britain’, *The Journal of Modern History*, 82 (2010), 30–60; R. Harrington, ‘Beyond the Bathing Belle: Images of Women in Inter-war Railway Publicity’, *Journal of Transport History*, 25 (2004), 22–45; R. Harrison, ‘Inside the Cinema Train: Britain, Empire, and Modernity in the Twentieth Century’, *Film History*, 26 (2014), 32–57.

⁴¹ *The Bioscope*, 25 Aug. 1926, 56.

⁴² *Reynold’s Newspaper*, 21 Feb. 1926, 3; *Liverpool Echo*, 30 May 1927, 7.

⁴³ *Belfast Telegraph*, 20 Feb. 1926, 9.

⁴⁴ L. Stead, ‘Dear Cinema Girls’: Girlhood, Picture-going, and the Interwar Film Magazine’, in C. Clay and M. DiCenzo, eds, *Women’s Periodicals and Print Culture in Britain, 1918–1939: the Interwar Period*, pp. 103–17 (Edinburgh, 2018).

⁴⁵ Dyhouse, *Glamour*, Chapter 2.

were assessed by a panel of judges, they were chosen explicitly for their aesthetic qualities, and they were sponsored by organizations as publicity stunts. Typical were those run by media outlets, such as *Pathé* newsreel's 1920 Screen Beauty Competition or *The Daily Mail's* various beauty competitions.⁴⁶ These invited women within a set age bracket to send in photographs, which were then voted on by audiences through a series of rounds until a winner was chosen. Of course, the process of judging women aesthetically, and that only one could win, meant that the role of beauty queen was something of a meritocratic office. A 1949 letter to the *Nelson Leader* from J.D. Thompson, director of the Lancashire and Cheshire Economic League, drew attention to this. Riposting an article that praised the Soviet policy of rewarding workers that outperformed their peers, known as the Stakhanovite movement, Thompson carped that while railwaymen 'don't object to a Railway Queen being chosen for her good looks, they would object strongly to Stakhanovism on the footplate'.⁴⁷ The Railway Queen contest was seen as a meritocracy of 'good looks', distinct from the usual union practice of equality between members.

If all women could not win, entry was, at least theoretically, inclusive for railway employee's relatives. Photographs sent to the committee by daughters of unionized railway employees were judged by 'art experts' from Liverpool's Walker Art Gallery.⁴⁸ In the 1950s, the age bracket for eligible entries eventually became 15 to 17 years old, and the judging panel comprised railway officials and journalists. By the 1960s, a shortlist of finalists, chosen from photographs, were invited to a dance at the Belle Vue ballroom, where they paraded before judges.⁴⁹ Throughout the whole lifespan of the contest, winners could come from any region and their parents could be employed at any pay grade. The only barriers to participation were youthfulness and the nominal costs of a photograph and postage. Hence, the Railway Queens were designed by the Carnival Committee to be civic celebrities, situating an aspirational yet inclusive consumerist ethos at the heart of an older style of civic culture.

The Railway Queen as a media celebrity

From the inter-war period onwards, beauty queens became a notable variant of celebrity who could reliably secure media coverage. Twentieth-century media producers saw inherent news value in images of attractive women, typically in bathing costumes or otherwise scantily clad, for both men, chiefly as sexual titillation, and for women, to study the latest fashions.⁵⁰ In newsprint and celluloid, beauty queens were found to have an easily commodifiable image. The Carnival Committee actively cultivated Railway Queens' celebrity. Above all, Harry Neilson acted in a protean media relations capacity by managing press releases. For instance, he sent out booklets 'containing information ... and portraits of the Railway Queens' to enquiring journalists.⁵¹ Such efforts bore fruit as Railway Queens became a mainstay of the national press's picture pages.⁵² Despite their trade union affiliation, the watermarks on archived photographs reveal that they were not confined to left-leaning newspapers. The more conservative *Daily Express*, *Daily Mirror*, and *Daily Mail* were as content to photograph the Railway Queen as the liberal *Manchester Guardian* and left-wing *Daily Herald*.⁵³ Regional newspapers also photographed them, such as the

⁴⁶ Bingham, *Family Newspapers*, 205–06; C. O'Rourke, 'Imagining British Film Beauty: Gender and National Identity in 1920s 'star search' Contests', *Early Popular Visual Culture*, 19 (2021), 342–63; *The Daily Mail*, 1 Oct. 1928, 11; *Kinematograph Weekly*, 24 Jun. 1920, 84.

⁴⁷ *Nelson Leader*, 29 Apr. 1949, 4.

⁴⁸ *Liverpool Echo*, 13 Sep. 1928, 12; *Dundee Courier*, 30 Aug. 1934, 5.

⁴⁹ *Heywood Advertiser*, 28 Jun. 1968, 3.

⁵⁰ Meyerowitz, 'Women', 12; Bingham, *Family Newspapers*, 205.

⁵¹ *Hastings and St Leonard Observer*, 10 Mar. 1934, 7.

⁵² *Manchester Guardian*, 19 Jan. 1932, 12; *Daily Herald*, 13 Aug. 1962, 5.

⁵³ Queen Photographs.

Scottish Topical Press Agency and North east England's *Northern Echo*.⁵⁴ The popular press had burgeoning readerships across the period, peaking with national daily newspapers selling 16.6 million copies a day in 1950–1; subsequent circulation declined only gradually until the 1970s.⁵⁵ Neilson's overtures and press editors' preferences combined to ensure that a national audience met the Railway Queen in their daily newspaper.

The committee further established working relationships with other media producers. They collaborated with Gaumont Film Company so that the Railway Queen featured in their newsreel, *Gaumont Graphic*.⁵⁶ This was seemingly not an exclusive deal, as other newsreel companies also filmed the Railway Queens.⁵⁷ This was influential, as approximately 40 per cent of inter-war Britons attended the cinema weekly.⁵⁸ The British Broadcasting Company, later Corporation, (BBC), was also amenable to featuring Railway Queens in radio programming. The 1925 crowning was broadcast, as were later speeches by Railway Queens.⁵⁹ Already by 1939, 'three-quarters of British households had a radio'.⁶⁰ Moving with the times as television ownership supplanted cinemagoing and radio, in 1963, Railway Queen Pauline Gray was a guest on the 'Tuesday Rendezvous television programme'.⁶¹ Supported by the committee, the Railway Queens became prolific celebrities. Their images were consumed by diverse and considerable audiences across the period.

The ways in which young women were portrayed by the media, however, could sometimes be in tension with performing political roles. Beauty queens primarily appealed to media producers due to the sexualization of youthful femininity. A 1974 article entitled 'A Bit of Glamour' in *Railway Review*, the NUR magazine, was explicit about this when it claimed, 'he's a funny bloke who will object to a nice bit of skirt around the place ... to promote something, the dollies have a big part to play'.⁶² Beauty queens' supposed sex appeal could easily overshadow any political message in media content. As a 1948 article in *The Scotsman* declared, 'all that is required of them is to look beautiful and perhaps, but only rarely, to say a few words'.⁶³ Odes praising the 'good looks', 'beauty', or 'attractive' femininity of Railway Queens formed the bulk of press coverage.⁶⁴ Certainly, male dignitaries were rarely discussed in terms of their looks and were generally treated with a seriousness seldom afforded to young women in twentieth-century media.

It is worth noting that the Railway Queens were not explicitly sexualized in the same manner as female pin-ups. Scholars have discerned that the 'queen competition', which elects an idealized representative for a particular group, is principally about finding a woman who corresponds best to the ideals of the group or community.⁶⁵ Though contestants' attractiveness remained important, the criteria referred obliquely to Railway Queens' physical attributes. Alongside 'good looks', judges apparently selected a winner who was of 'good character', though quite how photographs revealed this was left unexplained.⁶⁶ It was purported in 1944 that 'Loveliness and intelligence' were the chief qualities of a

⁵⁴ Queen Photographs.

⁵⁵ Bingham, *Family Newspapers*, 16–18.

⁵⁶ *Railway Review*, 13 Apr. 1928, 5.

⁵⁷ *British Movietone*, 6 Aug. 1936; *Pathé*, 29 Sep. 1927; *Pathé*, 16 May 1929; *Pathé*, 9 Sep. 1937.

⁵⁸ Kuhn, *Everyday Magic*, 2.

⁵⁹ *Liverpool Echo*, 28 Sep. 1925, 4; *The Scotsman*, 1 May 1929, 18; *Western Mail*, 8 May 1929, 5; *Wolverton Express*, 6 Feb. 1948, 1.

⁶⁰ P. Scannell and D. Cardiff, *A Social History of British Broadcasting*, p. 362 (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1991).

⁶¹ Queen Photographs.

⁶² *Railway Review*, 28 Jul. 1974, 9.

⁶³ *The Scotsman*, 4 May 1948, 4.

⁶⁴ *Nelson Leader*, 29 Apr. 1949, 4; *Crewe Chronicle*, 8 Sep. 1951, 10; *Hammersmith and Shepherd's Bush Gazette*, 31 Aug. 1961, 1.

⁶⁵ Fielding, 'Miss Colombo', 50.

⁶⁶ *Runcorn Weekly News*, 28 Jul. 1960, 2.

successful Railway Queen.⁶⁷ Winning photographs were typically headshots, or else holiday snaps that displayed a minimum of bare flesh.⁶⁸ The main photographs that circulated of Railway Queens were of them in full regalia, hardly risqué. Physique was therefore deemphasized in lieu of more 'wholesome' qualities of respectability and personality. Winning photographs were chosen by a committee of 'art experts' from the Walker Art Gallery in Liverpool.⁶⁹ This framed the process as ostensibly one of disinterested experts assessing aesthetic qualities. At least as presented to the public, it was a contest to find a wholesomely attractive and respectable young woman. This stands in direct contrast to other beauty contests such as Morecambe's Miss Great Britain competition, started in 1945.⁷⁰ Here, contestants paraded in bathing costumes and were judged on the measurements of their busts, hips, and waists.⁷¹ By comparison, Railway Queens presented a less overtly sexualized style of femininity.

However, once taboo, the featuring of topless women became widespread within media after 1970.⁷² So too, Railway Queens were increasingly sexualized as the age range for eligible entries became 15 to 17 years old. In the 1960s, finalists were paraded before judges at the Belle Vue ballroom.⁷³ The judging process thereby came to focus upon contestants' physiques. When a local newspaper announced Anne Dawson from Retford as Railway Queen for 1973, it listed her body measurements as 'vital statistics'.⁷⁴ In its final years, distinctions between the Railway Queen competition and other commercial beauty contests eroded. Between loveliness and intelligence, it was the former that media producers increasingly lavished attention upon, perhaps demeaning the latter.

Yet, participating in contests gave working-class women the opportunity to secure the media spotlight for a year, and thereby perform the glamorous consumer styles that many aspired towards. This is evident in the scrapbook of Dorothy Northwood, who served an extended wartime term as Railway Queen between 1941 and 1944. Northwood preserved her winning Blackpool holiday photograph and captioned it 'the lucky photograph from which I was selected Britain's Railway Queen' (Figure 2).⁷⁵ Pasted throughout are other press photographs of Northwood posing for photographers whilst officiating at events. Though it remains speculative, it seems likely that Northwood took pride in her winning photograph and enjoyed the media images produced of her enough to keep them as happy mementoes.

Qualifying this somewhat are the press clippings pasted in the scrapbook, which detail Northwood's victory. Three different newspapers quoted Dorothy's mother, who explained that her daughter was entered into the competition without the family's knowledge by a 'friend of the family' they met whilst holidaying in Blackpool and only learned of this when Dorothy's victory was announced.⁷⁶ That this serendipitous encounter was foregrounded in press interviews, and subsequently preserved by Northwood herself, suggests that Dorothy and her family, though delighted in her achievement, desired to distance themselves from active participation in the contest. It portrayed Northwood as not brashly seeking victory but instead demure in assuming the mantle. As suggested above, sexualized glamorous femininity had to be tempered with wholesome respectability.

Nevertheless, the press clippings also hint at Northwood's dreams of social mobility. They reported that she wanted to become a secretary 'to a politician or a high railway

⁶⁷ *Weekly Dispatch*, 26 Nov. 1944, 5.

⁶⁸ Queen Photographs.

⁶⁹ *Liverpool Echo*, 13 Sep. 1928, 12; *Dundee Courier*, 30 Aug. 1934, 5.

⁷⁰ Women's Library, London School of Economics, 'The Records of Miss Great Britain' (Ref 5MGB).

⁷¹ Women's Library, London School of Economics.

⁷² Bingham, *Family Newspapers*, 201–02.

⁷³ *Heywood Advertiser*, 28 Jun. 1968, 3.

⁷⁴ *Nottingham Evening Post*, 31 Jan. 1973, 11.

⁷⁵ D. Northwood, *Dorothy Northwood Scrapbook* (Jill Dobson Private Collection).

⁷⁶ Northwood, *Dorothy Northwood Scrapbook*.



Figure 2. The 'lucky photograph' (c.1941). *Northwood Scrapbook*.

official and she also wants to fly'.⁷⁷ Already working as a secretary with the Air Ministry, Northwood had ambitions to get ahead in her career and to travel. The press also relayed that 'she is a wireless 'fan' and makes her own dresses'. As Wildman has demonstrated, many working-class women bought fabrics and made their own clothes to participate in the latest fashion trends and perform glamorous identities.⁷⁸ Versed in popular culture and designing clothes, it seems likely that Northwood enjoyed consumer pleasures, ones to which the Railway Queen contest granted her unprecedented access. Such beauty contests, albeit restricted by entry stipulations, therefore rendered celebrity glamour more accessible to working-class youths, typically in a way that did not entail the notoriety of more explicitly sexualized image-making or otherwise provoke controversy.

Furthermore, what is striking is that the media frequently covered Railway Queens' political 'work' alongside gushing over their looks. A prime example was media coverage of Audrey Mosson's official trip to the Soviet Union, where she was invited as a delegate to the International Women's Day Conference, held in Moscow on 8 March 1936. It demonstrates how glib human interest was often mixed with earnest discussion of politics.

⁷⁷ Northwood, *Dorothy Northwood Scrapbook*.

⁷⁸ Wildman, *Urban Redevelopment*, 134.

Pictures of Mosson smiling, both in and out of regalia, featured in national picture pages with only brief captions of what she was doing.⁷⁹ Evidently, editors perceived Mosson's youthful image as inherently appealing. The *Daily Herald* and *Daily Mirror* nonetheless covered Mosson's trip extensively and in considerable detail.⁸⁰ The *Mirror* even considered the trip's announcement, 'English Girl of 15 to Broadcast in Moscow', worthy of the front page.⁸¹ Most articles featured a photograph of Mosson beside columns detailing her official activities and rapturous reception by the Soviets.⁸² Coverage of Mosson's looks and her political purpose were therefore not mutually exclusive.

Wherever possible, Mosson was sought for her own views, likely to accentuate the human-interest angle. The *Herald's* Moscow correspondent interviewed Mosson during her trip, whilst the *Mirror* reprinted a letter she sent back to her father in England.⁸³ *Reynold's Newspaper*, meanwhile, printed a truncated version of articles she penned for *Railway Review* upon her return to England, wherein Mosson described her trip and its political significance in a travelogue style.⁸⁴ The left-leaning press, adopting the stylistic conventions of human-interest journalism, gave considerable space for Mosson to explain in her own words the internationalist purpose of her trip. Indeed, even *British Movietone* newsreel's brief item covering the trip featured close-ups on the International Chain worn by Mosson and described in detail that it symbolized anti-war solidarity amongst international railway workers.⁸⁵ Cinemagoers would have struggled to miss the chain's political symbolism and the trip's purpose. Media therefore covered Mosson's ceremonial 'work' and her looks, often concurrently. In this sense, beauty queens were foremost portrayed in twentieth-century media as civic celebrities, an admixture of spectacular politics and human-interest gossip.

The Railway Queen as a civic representative

The principal occupation of a Railway Queen during her year in office was to serve as a civic representative, officiating at events and performing a variety of rituals. As the *Crewe Chronicle* reported in 1951, 'the Railway Queen's reign is not over ... once the crowning has been performed. She will visit during the twelve months all parts of the country and ... do a trip to the Continent'.⁸⁶ However, Railway Queens themselves had little say in shaping this itinerary or choosing what civic communities they represented. Both were largely determined by the Committee. When Helen Forrest donated 6s of her own money to a fund aiding Czechoslovakian refugees at a formal reception in 1938, she 'surprised the company, including her mother and father'.⁸⁷ That her agency was considered noteworthy by a journalist suggests it was the exception that proved the rule: spontaneity was not ordinarily part of the Railway Queen's tightly orchestrated duties. Notwithstanding this, each queen's tireless performance of these duties should not be dismissed as superficial. The year in office appears to have been intensive, often approaching a full-time job of official engagements and travel. It was also not financially rewarding as, beyond travel expenses and occasional gifts, the press reported that a queen's 'services are quite voluntary, and she received no remuneration'.⁸⁸

This begs the question of why young women chose to compete for the office instead of taking other opportunities. It is likely that 14 was chosen for the lower entry age as, prior to 1945, this was the age at which most working-class women left education and started

⁷⁹ *Daily Mirror*, 13 Mar. 1936, 4; *Liverpool Daily Post*, 18 Mar. 1936, 12.

⁸⁰ *Daily Herald*, 12 Mar. 1936, 10; *Daily Herald*, 9 Mar. 1936, 11.

⁸¹ *Daily Mirror*, 3 Mar. 1936, 1.

⁸² *Daily Mirror*, 10 Mar. 1936, 5.

⁸³ *Daily Herald*, 11 Mar. 1936, 3; *Daily Mirror*, 23 Mar. 1936, 9.

⁸⁴ *Reynold's Newspaper*, 29 Mar. 1936, 13.

⁸⁵ *Movietone*, 6 Aug. 1936.

⁸⁶ *Crewe Chronicle*, 8 Sept. 1951, 10.

⁸⁷ *Dundee Courier*, 8 Oct. 1938, 6.

⁸⁸ *The Scotsman*, 8 Oct. 1938, 17.

work.⁸⁹ Thus, the year as Railway Queen was envisaged as a ‘gap year’ of sorts. However, even before the advent of compulsory education to 15, many winners were pursuing secondary education. For instance, Mabel Kitson, Railway Queen 1927, attended Ledbury Grammar School on a scholarship.⁹⁰ Likewise, 15-year-old Elizabeth Brown, Railway Queen 1929, was reported as attending Preston’s secondary school for girls.⁹¹ It was not for lack of alternative opportunities that women chose to compete.

The shift to compulsory education after the Second World War, combined with increasing employment opportunities for young single women, meant that the office of Railway Queen had to fit around other responsibilities. Many winners paused their career paths to be a Railway Queen. Beryl Parker delayed starting a nursing course at Hull Technical College in 1948 and Pauline Walker took a hiatus from her hairdressing apprenticeship in 1962.⁹² Likewise, in September 1945, Greta Richards, after serving her term, thanked ‘the headmaster and staff of her school for their patience with her’.⁹³ This implies she juggled her short-hand typing course at Chiswick Polytechnic School with her duties as Railway Queen.⁹⁴ Women therefore decided to compete despite the role being an additional burden to personal workloads.

Partly, as Northwood’s scrapbook suggests, the glamour of the role attracted contestants. Further insight into why women wanted to become the Railway Queen is provided by their family backgrounds. Contestants tended to come from public-spirited families actively involved in local affairs. Kitson’s father, for example, was chairman of his local NUR branch, and a member of the NUR district council.⁹⁵ He also served as the only Labour member of the Ledbury Board of Guardians.⁹⁶ Similarly, Irene Easton, Railway Queen 1936, had the president of the Lynn branch of the NUR Women’s Guild for a mother.⁹⁷ The contestants were also frequently active in associational life. Elise Peach, reportedly the first woman from Derby to enter the 1929 competition, attended a Primitive Methodist Sunday school and was a member of the local Girls Life Brigade youth group.⁹⁸ Mable Kitson was a member of the Women’s Temperance Association, Greta Richards was a member of the Girls Training Corps, and Teresa Boyden, Railway Queen 1957, volunteered for the St John’s Ambulance Brigade.⁹⁹ Voluntarism, particularly that of nonconformist Christian philanthropy, union-backed welfare, and civic organizations, appears to have played an important part in Railway Queen’s lives prior to winning the title. It therefore seems likely that young working-class women, with their parents’ blessings, competed to become the Railway Queen as a valuable opportunity to perform public service. In this sense, the role was considered a ‘job’ to rival paid employment or educational qualifications precisely because it was a high-profile voluntary position within non-partisan civic culture.

Railway Queens’ itineraries typically consisted of events that were intended, respectively, to represent three civic communities. What these communities had in common was a democratic ethos of non-partisanship, that is, inclusive of all who desired to join irrespective of background or political stance. As noted above, Railway Queens foremost represented a unified railway industry. Hannah Reeves’s concept of the ‘railway family’ is useful here to examine the ways in which Railway Queens represented an idealized industrial community. She argues that companies and unions each attempted to forge ‘an imagined community of railway workers

⁸⁹ P. Mandler, *The Crisis of the Meritocracy: Britain’s Transition to Mass Education since the Second World War*, Chapter 2 (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2020).

⁹⁰ *Cheltenham Chronicle*, 24 Sep. 1927, 10.

⁹¹ *Lancashire Evening Post*, 11 Sep. 1929, 6.

⁹² *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer*, 11 Sep. 1948, 3; *Daily Herald*, 13 Aug. 1962, 5.

⁹³ *Middlesex Chronicle*, 8 Sep. 1945, 4.

⁹⁴ *Middlesex Chronicle*, 18 Nov. 1944, 1.

⁹⁵ *Cheltenham Chronicle*, 24 Sep. 1927, 10.

⁹⁶ *Cheltenham Chronicle*, 24 Sep. 1927, 10.

⁹⁷ *Lynn News and County Press*, 1 Sep. 1936, 10.

⁹⁸ *Derby Daily Telegraph*, 12 Aug. 1929, 1.

⁹⁹ *Middlesex Chronicle*, 18 Nov. 1944, 1; *Peterborough Standard*, 20 Sep. 1957, 5.

across the wide geographical boundaries of individual railway companies and the local branches of national trade unions'.¹⁰⁰ Reeves also suggests that the Railway Queen was important to this, as 'they were chosen for their representative nature, symbolising different railway companies and trade unions each year'.¹⁰¹ Each queen worked to represent the unionized railway family to its membership by attending trade union events throughout Britain. Though trade unions eventually admitted female members, the majority of women's involvement in union affairs was via voluntary organizations like the NUR Women's Guild.¹⁰² These were social and philanthropic organizations for the female relatives of union members, primarily designed to support the unions with fundraising and welfare events.¹⁰³ Moreover, the women's pages of both company and union magazines, filled with domestic advice, suggest that the industry saw being a good wife and mother as women's proper place.¹⁰⁴

In some ways, Railway Queens' itineraries reinforced this view of women as auxiliaries for the masculine union. For instance, in 1960, Hazel Dobinson attended a party for 'over 200 widows and orphans of railwaymen'.¹⁰⁵ Railway Queens therefore performed acceptably 'feminine' duties when working with the women's organizations. Yet, they were not confined to welfare-related activities. In 1952, Eluned Jones attended a regional NUR conference at Crewe. She was formally presented with a pearl necklace in the morning session, before greeting 'each delegate individually'.¹⁰⁶ Though not participating in the conference's discussions, the ritual reception that Jones performed signalled the NUR's commitment to industrial goodwill. Her presence was also meant to inculcate a sense of belonging to the railway family amongst delegates. By travelling across Britain to perform such ceremonies, these young women linked together disparate union branches into an extended 'family'.

As non-partisan representatives, Railway Queens also attended company occasions to promote a cohesive railway family across the union-company divide. Here, they performed the role conventionally reserved for management and their wives. The scrapbooks of Harry Short, Chief Regional Officer of the North Eastern Region for British Rail in the 1950s, reveal that he and his wife Gladys tirelessly handed out gallantry awards to railway workers, officiated at the York Headquarters Horticultural Show, and were guests of honour at staff balls.¹⁰⁷ They represented the company as caring about the social lives and welfare of their employees, albeit from a position of paternalist authority. It is striking that at the 1952 Horticultural Show and 1959 Railway Staff Ball, Railway Queens presided as dignitaries alongside Mr and Mrs Short.¹⁰⁸ There was thus a symbolic parity between them as they performed similar rituals. Another staple of the Railway Queen's itinerary was visiting railway works. For example, in 1928, Mabel Kitson undertook a tour of 'every important railway centre in Britain...to foster the spirit of co-operation'.¹⁰⁹ The Railway Queens performed sundry rituals that represented an inclusive railway family of all employees. In doing so, beauty queens attained a prominent position outside the conventional gender and class confines, which otherwise restricted women's involvement in the industry's culture.

In 1929, the press relayed that 'the Railway Queen does not accept any invitation to public functions unless they come from railway officials, railway employees, or organizations kindred to the railway service'.¹¹⁰ In practice, 'kindred' organizations included most voluntary

¹⁰⁰ Reeves, 'The 'Railway Family'', iii.

¹⁰¹ Reeves, 'The 'Railway Family'', 256.

¹⁰² Reeves, 'The 'Railway Family'', 5–6.

¹⁰³ Reeves, 'The 'Railway Family'', 12–13.

¹⁰⁴ *Railway Review*, 1 Jun. 1928, 3; *LMS Railway Magazine*, Sep. 1925, 317.

¹⁰⁵ NRM, *Papers and Photograph Albums of H.A. Short, Chief Regional Officer, British Railways, North Eastern Region* (Ref 1992-7432).

¹⁰⁶ *Crewe Chronicle*, 2 Feb. 1952, 10.

¹⁰⁷ Albums of H.A. Short.

¹⁰⁸ Albums of H.A. Short.

¹⁰⁹ *Dundee Courier*, 12 Jan. 1928, 3.

¹¹⁰ *Lancashire Evening Post*, 11 Sep. 1929, 6.

associations and municipal institutions. By the turn of the twentieth century, the railway industry was deeply involved in civic culture across Britain.¹¹¹ A 1928 cartoon in *Railway Review* highlighted this when it depicted railwaymen serving as magistrates, mayors, and chairs of voluntary organizations.¹¹² The boundaries between railway-related events and local civic cultures were highly porous, often rendering the two indistinguishable.

As a result, committee members obtained invitations to purely civic occasions and the Railway Queen began to also represent the municipal culture of towns and cities across Britain. For example, in 1967, Billy Shaw, organizer for the Railway Carnival musical troupes, suggested that he was ‘instrumental’ in getting the Railway Queen invited to the Liverpool Show, with ‘full civic honours... for two days’.¹¹³ Likewise, municipal leaders readily cooperated to transform a Railway Queen visit into an occasion for local civic pride. In 1951, the mayor of Banbury published a letter in the local newspaper which exhorted residents to decorate their shops and houses ‘as a gesture of welcome’ for the arrival of the Railway Queen.¹¹⁴ Thus, Railway Queen visits were fashioned into civic events for the whole town to become involved in.

Northwood’s scrapbook again provides insight into how integral civic representation was to her term as Railway Queen. It contains a memorandum by Neilson, outlining the wartime purpose of the role. He exhorted readers to ‘take this report to your mayor, or the chairman of your council, [and] ask for support in a visit of Britain’s Railway Queen to your district to help awaken a greater public interest in salvage’.¹¹⁵ As Henry Irving has revealed, the salvage campaign was a nationwide recycling scheme to increase the production of armaments.¹¹⁶ Whilst the scheme was established by the Ministry of Supply in 1941 and involved municipal authorities, its viability relied upon the participation of voluntary organizations and individual citizens.¹¹⁷ In particular, it was women’s groups, principally the Women’s Voluntary Service, and children who mostly volunteered to manage waste dumps and promote recycling within their localities.¹¹⁸ Thus, the salvage campaign was a major area of urban civic voluntarism that was perceived as fitting for young women to participate in.

The clippings assembled by Northwood portray the salvage scheme as central to her term as Railway Queen. Pasted into the scrapbook is a telegram from the Controller of Salvage at the Ministry of Supply which stated, ‘I feel sure that during your reign you will give all your aid wherever you travel in bringing home to everyone the need to waste nothing and salvage every scrap’.¹¹⁹ A typical event was inaugurating local scrap collections, such as in Northampton in 1942, where Northwood performed the ‘formal opening’ of the town’s scrap drive exhibition. She gave a speech promoting the scheme alongside the mayor and salvage committee chairman at the town hall.¹²⁰ Her visit was capped off by leading a procession of local youth voluntary organizations, including the Boy Scouts, Girls Guides, Boys’ Brigade, and Civil Defence Messengers. Northwood thereby served as the focal point of a ceremony which was designed to foment civic participation and local pride. Clippings were also saved from Lincoln and Rhyl newspapers, highlighting that Northwood’s itinerary was chiefly devoted to one of the most prominent campaigns within

¹¹¹ Hannah Reeves, ‘The Place of Peripheral “Railway Towns” in Transport History’, *The Journal of Transport History*, 41 (2020), 458–68.

¹¹² *Railway Review*, 6 Apr. 1928, 9.

¹¹³ Queen Photographs.

¹¹⁴ *Banbury Advertiser*, 27 June 1951, 5.

¹¹⁵ Scrapbook.

¹¹⁶ H. Irving, ‘“We Want Everybody’s Salvage!”: Recycling, Voluntarism, and the People’s War’, *Cultural and Social History*, 16 (2019), 165–84.

¹¹⁷ H. Irving, Recycling, Voluntarism, 165.

¹¹⁸ Irving, Recycling, Voluntarism 177.

¹¹⁹ Scrapbook.

¹²⁰ Scrapbook.

wartime civic culture. Railway Queens, then, also served as representatives of local urban communities, collaborating with voluntary associations and municipal authorities.

Finally, the Railway Queen also represented the commitment of the trade unions to internationalism. In August 1928, Mabel Kitson was authorized by the Sheffield, Chesterfield, and District NUR branch to act as an 'Ambassador' to promote 'international understandings ... [concerning] the prevention of war and the advertising of its futility and harm'.¹²¹ As Helen McCarthy has revealed, the ideals of supranational cooperation via the League of Nations and pacificism, the notion that 'international cooperation [w]as the best means of abolishing war', became a salient ethos in British civic culture between the wars, thanks largely to the efforts of the League of Nations Union (LNU), a mass voluntary organization; the LNU itself achieved a membership of approximately 400,000 in the 1930s.¹²² It also dispersed its ideals into wider civic culture through affiliation with 'corporate' associations such as church groups and trade unions.¹²³ McCarthy further argues that the LNU's 'gospel of universal participation was belied by the sociological reality of its membership, dominated as it was by middle-class branch officers and aristocratic or super-wealthy patrons'.¹²⁴ Whilst the LNU did garner the support of working-class activists, most preferred to work through their own institutions.¹²⁵ The Railway Queen lends support to this idea, as the railway unions established their own internationalist campaign that ran parallel to, but was distinct from, that of the LNU.

Moreover, it is unsurprising that the unions chose the Railway Queen as their anti-war champion. It mirrored the gendered rhetoric of the LNU, and mid-century British political culture generally, that women, as mothers and daughters of those who would be conscripted in future wars, were considered to have inherent moral authority when speaking on anti-war subjects and were legitimate activists on behalf of peace.¹²⁶ The railway unions chose a representative who, through her femininity and non-partisanship, would resonate with audiences. Railway Queens were therefore perhaps delimited to conventionally feminine causes, even when this involved them in international relations.

Each Railway Queen represented an internationalist community through spectacle and ceremony. The chain of office worn by Railway Queens from 1928, dubbed the 'International Chain', comprised gold links given during annual overseas visits. It symbolized railway workers around the world united in an ever-growing 'chain of peace'.¹²⁷ Starting with Mabel Kitson's visit to France in 1928, trips abroad reached their zenith in the mid-1930s, with Audrey Mosson visiting Moscow, Ruby Dovey visiting Palestine, and Gracie Jones undertaking a 5-week tour of North America.¹²⁸ The itinerary of Audrey Mosson's 1936 visit to the USSR for the Women's Day conference is illustrative of how Railway Queens performed rituals which symbolized transnational connections between workers. This trip was extraordinary in its length, as most other queens travelled to Western Europe, and no annual overseas visits were conducted after 1952. However, in terms of the rituals and ceremonies of civic representation performed, it was akin to the duties of most Railway Queens.

Mosson was the only English delegate elected to speak on world disarmament from the conference presidium in Moscow. The speech, reported by the *Herald's* Moscow

¹²¹ *Railway Review*, 24 Aug. 1928, 4; *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer*, 21 Aug. 1928, 9.

¹²² M. Ceadel, *Semi-detached Idealists: the British Peace Movement and International Relations, 1854-1945* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2000); H. McCarthy, 'Democratizing British Foreign Policy: Rethinking the Peace Ballot, 1934-1935', *The Journal of British Studies*, 49 (2010), 358-87; H. McCarthy, *The British People and the League of Nations: Democracy, Citizenship and Internationalism, c.1918-45* (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2011).

¹²³ McCarthy, 'Democratizing British Foreign Policy', 358.

¹²⁴ McCarthy, *League of Nations*, 156-57.

¹²⁵ McCarthy, *League of Nations*, 174.

¹²⁶ Bingham, *Gender*, 204; McCarthy, *League of Nations*, 195-96.

¹²⁷ *Daily News*, 21 Aug. 1928, 10; *Daily Herald*, 27 Aug. 1928, 7; NRM, *The International Chain* (Ref 1990-7590 Pt2).

¹²⁸ *Railway Review*, 18 May 1934, 4; *Railway Review*, 19 Apr. 1935, 5; *Railway Review*, 3 Apr. 1936, 5.

correspondent as ‘a ringing call for international peace, unity, and goodwill’, was heard by top Soviet officials and all other delegates.¹²⁹ It was also widely reprinted in the Soviet press, and broadcast on Comintern Radio across Europe.¹³⁰ Mosson’s speech, endorsing an internationalist community, was framed as a highlight of the conference and heard by a wide-ranging transnational audience. Mosson’s other main ‘mission’, as she described it in *Reynold’s Newspaper*, ‘was to obtain a Link for the Chain of Office ... expressing the desire of the railwaymen for world peace and world disarmament’.¹³¹ The link was presented by the Soviet Railway Workers Union in a ceremony at Moscow’s Railway Workers’ Club. Mosson again gave a speech on peace before the link was presented. She recalled that after the much-publicized ceremony, Russians ‘who met me shook my hands, they wanted to say they loved me, that they loved all English railway workers. It was in that way, and with that storm of emotion that the Link was presented’.¹³² The symbolic reception of links by Railway Queens therefore appears to have been an emotionally potent representation of internationalist solidarity.

Before embarking, Mosson was also armed with formal missives of well-wishing from Britain. She visited the House of Commons to receive a letter of introduction to the British Ambassador in the USSR, signed by Labour opposition leader Clement Attlee alongside several other cross-party members of parliament, which expressed the hope that her visit would bolster friendship between the two nations.¹³³ Mosson carried a similar letter of friendship from the railway union women’s auxiliaries to Soviet railway workers. This, Mosson stated, rendered her ‘an authorised delegate with as much authority to speak as any of the [other] delegates present’.¹³⁴ In many ways, she was regarded by British officials as an emissary representing Britain and its industry at the conference. Certainly, the Soviet government perceived Mosson as important enough to be co-opted into their cultural diplomacy. During her stay, Mosson (and chaperone Neilson) visited Soviet schools, sanatoriums, railway workers’ homes, union recreational facilities, and a film studio. Stringently guided tours of ‘model institutions’ constituted the primary way that the Soviet government attempted to persuade notable foreign visitors, usually politicians or intellectuals, of their superiority.¹³⁵ What this suggests is that Mosson, as Railway Queen, was seen as a prominent representative who had to be sent home with a good impression. Both Soviet and British organizations, then, saw the political significance of Mosson’s international tour.

The Railway Queens continued as ‘ambassadors’ after the Second World War when the League of Nations was reborn as the United Nations. In the second half of the 1940s, there was renewed public enthusiasm for supranational governance.¹³⁶ Greta Richards, Railway Queen 1947, became closely tied to the United Nations Association (UNA), successor organization to the LNU. Her coronation featured a ‘United Nations Ceremony’ and her itinerary was sponsored by the UNA.¹³⁷ She even travelled to the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation’s headquarters in Paris, where she was presented with a gold emblem of the UN’s insignia.¹³⁸ Several ‘reaffirmation’ trips were taken by subsequent post-war Railway Queens to Western European countries visited before 1939, symbolizing continued anti-war solidarity.¹³⁹ Hence, Railway Queens represented three

¹²⁹ *Daily Herald*, 12 Mar. 1936, 10.

¹³⁰ *Daily Herald*, 9 Mar. 1936, 11.

¹³¹ *Reynold’s Newspaper*, 29 Mar. 1936, 13.

¹³² *Railway Review*, 17 Apr. 1936, 10.

¹³³ *Liverpool Daily Post*, 3 Mar. 1936, 11.

¹³⁴ *Railway Review*, 3 Apr. 1936, 5.

¹³⁵ M. David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment: Cultural Diplomacy and Western Visitors to the Soviet Union, 1921-1941*, pp. 98–99 (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2011).

¹³⁶ G. Sluga, *Internationalism in the Age of Nationalism*, Chapter 3 (Philadelphia, 2013).

¹³⁷ *Manchester Evening News*, 26 Sep. 1947, 3; *Railway Review*, 17 Oct. 1947, 1–2; *Railway Review*, 1 Aug. 1947, 1.

¹³⁸ *Railway Review*, 15 Aug. 1947, 8.

¹³⁹ Queen Photographs.

distinct but imbricated civic communities through their ceremonial ‘work’, deemed beneficial by municipal leaders and national governments alike.

The civic side of the Railway Queen role shared qualities with other novel opportunities for women to participate in civic culture, which arose in the inter-war period and continued into the later twentieth century. These were centrally through women’s groups attached to the major political parties and women’s non-partisan voluntary organization such as the Women’s Institute or Townswomen’s Guilds.¹⁴⁰ Like the NUR Women’s Guild or Labour women’s groups, beauty queens were sometimes relegated to supporting male-dominated organizations.¹⁴¹ Also, like many women’s voluntary associations, Railway Queens tended to represent communities and causes that were considered suitable for female activism, such as peace or welfare.¹⁴² Beauty queens therefore faced similar gendered constraints to those that other women encountered when they involved themselves in public life. Yet, as Catriona Beaumont and others have demonstrated, civic and associational culture nonetheless provided significant and meaningful ways for women to become politically active from the 1920s onwards.¹⁴³ So too, beauty contests should be considered another important facet of civic culture that, despite its gendered limitations, provided women with potentially rewarding political opportunities.

Moreover, it was preponderantly middle-class women who had the time and resources to commit themselves to consistent, full-time involvement with women’s groups and associations.¹⁴⁴ Indeed, those who conventionally represented organizations like the Women’s Institute, LNU, or even more working-class groups such as the Women’s Co-operative Guild, were almost exclusively middle-class professionals or wealthy titled patrons.¹⁴⁵ In contrast, the Railway Queen competition was a distinctly working-class creation, one that provided a rare opportunity for working-class young women to not only devote themselves full-time to civic culture for a year, but also to serve as legitimate representatives within that culture.

The Railway Queens remained popular for much of the contest’s existence. The Belle Vue coronation attracted significant audiences, estimated in the press as between 20,000 and 50,000.¹⁴⁶ A retired employee recalled fond memories of the 1925 Railway Carnival, ‘the highlight of the outing [being] the crowning of the first ... Queen’.¹⁴⁷ Moreover, an appearance by the Railway Queen was touted as a boon for civic occasions. In 1935, a Doncaster newspaper reported that the Railway Queen’s visit ‘brought a touch of colour to an otherwise dull holiday’.¹⁴⁸ Adverts for the 1970 Liverpool Show advertised a ‘personal appearance’ by ‘the British Railway Queen’ among its chief attractions.¹⁴⁹ Queens were often a crowd draw, then.

Overall, however, from the late 1960s, the contest declined in popularity until it was mothballed in 1975. Around 1970, the contest was scaled back from the 3-day Belle Vue

¹⁴⁰ H. McCarthy, ‘Parties, Voluntary Associations, and Democratic Politics in Interwar Britain’, *The Historical Journal*, 50 (2007), 891–912; C. Beaumont, *Housewives and Citizens: Domesticity and the Women’s Movement in England, 1928–64* (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2015); K. Hunt, ‘Making Politics in Local Communities: Labour Women in Interwar Manchester’, in M. Worley, ed., *Labour’s Grass Roots: Essays on the Activities of Local Labour Parties and Members, 1918–45* (Routledge, Aldershot, 2005), 79–101.

¹⁴¹ Hunt, ‘Labour Women’, 94–5; Reeves, ‘Railway Family’, 5–6.

¹⁴² McCarthy, *League of Nations*, 194–6.

¹⁴³ Beaumont, *Housewives*, 2–3; McCarthy, ‘Parties’, 894.

¹⁴⁴ E. Mason, *Democracy, Deeds and Dilemmas: Support for the Spanish Republic within British Civil Society, 1936–1939*, pp. 14–15 (Brighton, 2017); J. Hinton, *Women, Social Leadership, and the Second World War: Continuities of Class* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2002), introduction.

¹⁴⁵ McCarthy, *League of Nations*, 156–7; S. Hellawell, ‘A Strong International Spirit’: The Influence of Internationalism on the Women’s Co-operative Guild’, *Twentieth Century British History*, 32 (2021), 94.

¹⁴⁶ E. Beeston, ‘Spaces of Industrial Heritage: a History of Uses, Perceptions and the Re-making of Liverpool Road Station, Manchester’, PhD thesis, University of Manchester, 2020, 77.

¹⁴⁷ *Railway Review*, 10 Jan. 1975, 7.

¹⁴⁸ *Sheffield Independent*, 12 Jun. 1935, 11.

¹⁴⁹ *Liverpool Echo*, 15 Jul. 1970, 3.

carnival to an evening dance at the NUR's Shildon Club.¹⁵⁰ A 1974 appeal by the committee for more candidates further suggests difficulties in getting young women interested by this point.¹⁵¹ The contest dwindled away in the 1970s, largely because the communities that the role was established to represent had dissipated. First, enthusiasm for pacificism and liberal internationalism proved fleeting after 1945, lost in the nationalist antagonisms of the Cold War.¹⁵² In Britain, the UNA was a shadow of the LNU, unable to secure the same broad-based support.¹⁵³ This was neatly mirrored by the Railway Queens. Eluned Jones undertook the last 'reaffirmation' trip to Denmark in 1952.¹⁵⁴ The International Chain was subsequently retired in 1957 as the official chain of office.¹⁵⁵ The new chain was instead symbolic of domestic industrial cooperation, featuring emblems of the three trade unions and British Rail.¹⁵⁶ By 1960, Railway Queens were no longer internationalist spokeswomen.

Secondly, the railway family became at once smaller and more fractious. Between 1949 and 1980, NUR membership halved while the overall railway workforce shrank by 70 per cent.¹⁵⁷ A diminished industry and union likely struggled to muster the expenses and volunteers necessary to sustain the competition. Moreover, evidence suggests that animosity between unions and management began to disrupt the contest. In 1971, a *Railway Review* article entitled 'They've Seized Our Queen' grumbled, 'you will probably not see anything about the railway queen's activities in any of the trade union publications... It was supposed to be a joint affair ... [yet] management collar the lot'.¹⁵⁸ Another article in 1974 repeated these claims, carping that despite featuring in national newspapers, 'the Railway Queen from our point of view is a shadowy figure'.¹⁵⁹ In their magazine at least, trade unionists felt alienated from the Railway Queen by the 1970s. An unhappy railway family meant that the Railway Queen struggled to represent a unified industry.

Until the very end, Railway Queens' itineraries, full of local fetes, mayoral receptions, and town hall luncheons, reflected the buoyancy of local civic cultures. Furthermore, urban pageantry appears to have outlived the Railway Queen contest, the role of municipal civic representative being performed by later queens of different industries such as the National Coal Queen, first elected in the 1960s and continuing until the mid-1990s.¹⁶⁰ For the Railway Queens specifically, however, it appears that local variants often superseded the national queen as a civic representative. At various points, Nottingham, Grantham, Aberdeen, Chester, and Faversham elected their own Railway Queens.¹⁶¹ Thus, localized beauty contests were established to better represent a town or city to itself. Once the national Railway Queen could no longer function viably as a popular civic representative, a crucial half of their role as civic celebrities became defunct.

Conclusion

In 1925, Helena Wootton, the first Railway Queen, was described as 'this modern Cinderella... a symbol of the times when man and woman shall no longer know the

¹⁵⁰ *Railway Review*, 13 Sep. 1974, 10.

¹⁵¹ *Railway Review*, 13 Sep. 1974, 10.

¹⁵² Sluga, *Internationalism*, Chapter 3.

¹⁵³ H. McCarthy, 'The League of Nations, Public Ritual and National Identity in Britain, c.1919–56', *History Workshop Journal*, 70 (2010), 126–8.

¹⁵⁴ *Railway Review*, 20 Jun. 1952, 8; *Crewe Chronicle*, 7 Jun. 1952, 10; *Nantwich Chronicle*, 4 Oct. 1952, 9.

¹⁵⁵ *Runcorn Weekly News*, 28 Jul. 1960, 2.

¹⁵⁶ NRM, *British Railways Chain of Office* (Ref 1990-7590 Pt3).

¹⁵⁷ Wojtczak, *Railwaywomen*, 221.

¹⁵⁸ *Railway Review*, 26 Nov. 1971, 6.

¹⁵⁹ *Railway Review*, 13 Sep. 1974, 10.

¹⁶⁰ J. Arnold, 'That Rather Sinful City of London': The Coal Miner, the City and the Country in the British Cultural Imagination, c.1969–2014', *Urban History*, 47 (2020), 292–310.

¹⁶¹ 'Tracks Through Grantham', <https://www.tracksthroughgrantham.uk/railway-life-at-grantham/social-life/granthams-railway-queens-from-1954/>, accessed 2023; *Faversham News*, 13 Nov. 1937, 5; *Cheshire Observer*, 10 Sep. 1971, 14; *Nottingham Evening Post*, 5 May 1952, 5; *Aberdeen Evening Express*, 2 May 1962, 2.

distinctions of class'.¹⁶² Like most media coverage, comparing Wootton to Cinderella evoked the gendered constraints placed upon Railway Queens. They had to embody conventional femininity: wholesome 'good looks' and respectable 'good character'. Moreover, they often represented communities and causes that were considered suitably feminine. Stage managed by Neilson and the Carnival Committee, individuals' agency in the role was circumscribed.

However, such constraints did not necessarily marginalize beauty queens or equate to their victimization. Women evidently longed to become the 'modern Cinderella' through beauty contests, which enabled working-class youths to take a turn in the limelight and experience the glamour and fashion of celebrity status. Like Northwood, many also appeared to take pride in the public service they performed. Becoming a beauty queen enabled an unprecedented number of young, often working-class, women to attain positions of prominence in civic culture and (inter)national media conventionally denied them. In this sense, commercial beauty contests, orientated around glamorous, even sexualized media images of women, removed 'the distinctions of class', and to some degree, gender, which had hitherto restricted who could serve as accepted representatives in public life.

The Cinderella analogy is apt for another reason. A traditional fairy tale, Cinderella was reinvented by twentieth-century media and popular culture to become more attuned to the dreams and aspirations of women in this period.¹⁶³ The Carnival Committee, media producers, and Railway Queens themselves likewise took the well-established trappings of civic ceremonial pomp and revamped them with the relative inclusivity and aspirational social mobility of mass consumerism. More generally, beauty queens were transformed into civic celebrities who combined the traditional role of civic representative with the new media appeal of modern celebrity. In turn, civic celebrities represented markedly more democratic, non-partisan communities than extant elite representatives such as mayors, aristocrats, and actual royalty. Civic culture did not perish or stultify but adapted well during the inter-war period to the increasingly democratic sensibilities and consumer aspirations of twentieth-century British society. Beauty competitions were key to making civic culture more inclusive in this period and subsequently helped to sustain its vibrancy into the 1970s. Studying civic celebrities, then, offers fruitful new ways of looking at the changing relationship between commercial media and older forms of civic culture in twentieth-century Britain.

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¹⁶² *Railway Review*, 25 Sep. 1925, 10.

¹⁶³ C. Dyhouse, *Love Lives: From Cinderella to Frozen*, Chapter 2 (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2021).

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