



A railwayman goes to war: Francis Dent and the challenge of total war

by Christopher Phillips

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Francis Henry Dent was born at Holyhead on New Year's Eve 1866, where his father, Admiral Charles Bayley Calmady Dent, was employed as the Marine Superintendent of the London & North-Western Railway. At the age of seventeen the young Francis would choose to follow in his father's footsteps, not by joining the Navy, but by entering the General Manager's office of the London & North-Western at Euston Station. A series of promotions and a switch to the South-Eastern & Chatham Railway later, and by 1912 Dent was the General Manager of the South-Eastern & Chatham, earning £4,000 per year and managing a workforce of over 18,000 employees.

In addition, Dent was a Lieutenant-Colonel in the Engineer and Railway Staff Corps, an organization set up in 1865 by the Institute of Civil Engineers to provide advice and technical guidance to the Royal Engineers. As General Manager of a significant rail line - the South-Eastern & Chatham provided a vital link between London, Folkestone and the Continent - Dent was also a member of the Railway Executive Committee, a body formed of the managers of Britain's largest railways to ensure a coordinated approach to the operation of the network in the event of war.

By August 1914, therefore, Francis Dent was an experienced man, both in terms of his professional career and in his working relationship with the British Army. And despite his advancing years - Dent was 47 and too old to enlist - this experience meant that the war would not pass Dent by. In fact, Francis Dent's wartime record ably illustrates the scale and complexity of the First World War, and the myriad challenges faced by the British Empire in coordinating and managing such a vast undertaking.

Dent's first task was to help coordinate the mobilization of the British Expeditionary Force in the opening days of the conflict, a task which involved the Executive Committee meeting in almost constant session for the first fortnight of hostilities. In September 1914, Dent was despatched to France in answer to a request from the War Office for the provision of an ambulance train for the use of the British forces. Dent's mission was to investigate the technical details involved, focusing upon the differences between the French and British networks and any modifications to British stock that would be required in order for British trains to operate effectively. Within three weeks of the request, vehicles were arriving in France to tend for the higher than anticipated casualties of the early battles.

By December, the increasing scale of the war - and the increasing number of casualties - led to Dent crossing the Channel again to discuss the supply of bespoke ambulance trains, built in Britain and consisting of staff cars, kitchen-cars, pharmacy-cars and stores vans alongside carriages built for stretchers and 'sitting up' cases. Dent would chair the Ambulance Trains for the Continent sub-committee of the Railway Executive Committee, which oversaw the processes of manufacture and supply of these trains. However, on his return from France, Dent would make a stop at the port of Boulogne, where the Chief Engineer of the South-Eastern & Chatham,

Percy Tempest, had been employed to increase the size of the harbour (a job devolved onto a civilian firm as the military engineers of both the French and British Armies were simply too busy to undertake it under the exigencies of the war).

Whilst in Boulogne, Dent noticed that the area of the port assigned to the British, the Bassin Loubet, was being worked inefficiently, a result of an insufficient and inexperienced workforce due to the demands of the front line. By working the port with labour from the South-Eastern & Chatham and upon 'business lines', Dent believed, goods could be shifted from ship to rail more quickly, freeing up quay space and easing pressure on the supply services, who were being asked to deal with an army of ever-increasing size. Following a comprehensive survey of the port, Dent concluded that the Bassin Loubet 'with certain alterations' would be capable of handling 5,000 tons of supplies per day. The army, although sceptical of Dent's projections, were sufficiently open-minded to accept Dent's offer and the South-Eastern & Chatham took over responsibility for the operation of Bassin Loubet in April 1915.

Dent would not be involved in the day-to-day operations of the port however. By then, he had received yet another claim on his time and effort. This was not the flow of supplies from Britain to the mainland, but rather the flow of refugees in the other direction. Between August 1914 and May 1915, over 75,000 refugees arrived at Dover and Folkestone - both ports on the South-Eastern & Chatham network, and were transported to London and other destinations throughout the UK. Over 120,000 refugees would pass through Folkestone during the war. In addition to his responsibilities managing his own railway network, Dent would chair yet another sub-committee, the Belgian Railways Refugee sub-committee, tasked with identifying, finding, organizing and employing the thousands of Belgian railway workers who had evacuated their homeland during the German advance.

Within a year of the war's outbreak therefore, Dent's wide and varied experiences show the myriad challenges thrown up by the dislocation of 'normality' caused by the conflict. In addition to those mentioned above, he was also part of another sub-committee charged with the provision of 'comforts' to the Railway Troops at the front from December 1914, and would be integral to the formation of the Railway Operating Division in the spring of 1915, personally interviewing many of the applicants for roles as officers and non-commissioned officers in the division and answering a voluminous correspondence. Dent would continue in this role throughout 1916 and into 1917 as the demands for skilled British labour increased, the 'ad hoc' series of appointments that characterise Britain's early response to the challenges of the war effort settling into a more coherent role as the nature of the war became more intelligible and better understood.

However, in spite of this progressive 'settling down' - something which became increasingly necessary after Folkestone became the primary embarkation port for British troops in the summer of 1915 - Dent also found time in the autumn of 1916 to investigate railway operations in Egypt and Salonika at the request of the Director-General of Military Railways, Sir Eric Geddes (a mirror image of the investigation Geddes himself had undertaken on the Western Front earlier in the year in which the port of Boulogne, thanks in large part to Dent's intervention, was adjudged to be the most efficient port in France).

Unsurprisingly, Dent was officially recognized for his contribution to the war effort with a knighthood in January 1916. Today however, his efforts are largely forgotten. Dent's was a war effort which began prior to the conflict, and developed in a haphazard, uncoordinated manner as the implications of Britain's commitment to the war only gradually came into focus. The variety and the nature of the tasks he undertook demonstrate the 'totality' of the First World War, and offer just a tiny sample of the types of skills, mental and physical, which were required to maintain the Western Front, and the contribution that even those deemed too old to fight 'when

directed coherently, as took place later in the war ' could make to its successful conclusion.

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