ANDREW MARTIN is an author, journalist and broadcaster. His previous books with Profile are *Underground, Overground* and *Belles and Whistles*. He has written for the *Guardian*, *Evening Standard*, *Independent on Sunday*, *Daily Telegraph* and *New Statesman*, amongst many others. His 'Jim Stringer' series of novels based around railways is published by Faber. His latest novel, *Soot*, is set in late eighteenth-century York.

Praise for *Night Trains*

'You do not have to be a trainspotter to enjoy this book. It is social history, a kind of epitaph to a way of travel that seems to be lost, at least in Europe.' *Spectator*

'A delightful book ... charmingly combines Martin's own travels, as he recreates journeys on famous trains such as the Orient Express, with a serious, occasionally geeky, history of those elegant *wagons lits* of the past ... Even if you're not into the detail of rail gauges, this book is the perfect companion as you wait for the 8.10 from Hove.' *Observer*

'Excellent ... Mr Martin paints a vivid picture of this world on rails ... he proves a witty companion who wears his knowledge lightly' *Country Life*

'Andrew Martin has cornered the train market. He is the Bard of the Buffer, the Balladeer of the Blue Train, the Laureate of Lost Property ... I picked up *Night Trains* knowing that I would be entertained, but also in the hope that his many years of experience would teach me how to sleep on a sleeper ... Andrew Martin is the best sort of travel writer: inquisitive, knowledgeable, lively, congenial. He is also very funny, while never letting the humour drive reality, rather than vice versa. Every page has a good joke.' *Mail on Sunday*

NIGHT TRAINS

THE RISE AND FALL OF THE SLEEPER

ANDREW MARTIN

P
PROFILE BOOKS

This paperback edition published in 2018

First published in Great Britain in 2017 by
PROFILE BOOKS LTD
3 Holford Yard
Bevin Way
London WC1X 9HD
www.profilebooks.com

Copyright © Andrew Martin, 2017, 2018

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Typeset in Quadraat by MacGuru Ltd
Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

The moral right of the author has been asserted.

All rights reserved. Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise), without the prior written permission of both the copyright owner and the publisher of this book.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 78125 560 5
eISBN 978 1 78283 212 6

Mixed Sources
Product group from well-managed forests and other controlled sources
www.fsc.org Cert no. TT-COC-002227
© 1996 Forest Stewardship Council

CONTENTS

Introduction // 1
1 The Blue Train // 30
2 The Nordland Railway // 76
3 Paris-Venice // 101
4 The 'Orient Express' // 132
5 The Sud Express // 193
6 The Berlin Night Express // 214

Acknowledgements // 249
List of Illustrations // 250

The following passage is from *Railway Wonders of the World* magazine, October 1935. I intended to quote it ironically as soon as an official of one of the modern sleeper trains annoyed me:

> It is no exaggeration to say that the popularity of the International Sleeping Car Company is partly due to the travelling officials in their smart brown uniforms (the dining car waiters wear immaculate white jackets). They deal daily with a large number of passengers belonging to all nations of the world, where each has his own peculiarities and requirements, expressed in many different languages. The passengers may consist of Royalties and crooks, artists and millionaires, diplomats and spies, scientists and generals, old ladies and film stars, infants in arms and death-defying octogenarians, thrown together within the narrow space of the railway carriage. To deal daily with such a kaleidoscopic multitude demands iron nerves, endless tact and an eternally good humour.

In the event, the passage was never required (which is not to say that all my journeys went smoothly), so I dedicate this book to the men and women who operate the surviving European sleepers.

INTRODUCTION

THE BLUE CARRIAGES AND ME

My father not only worked for British Rail (BR), he also believed in the railways, in spite of their unfashionability during most of his career. His enthusiasm probably owed something to the fact that he was entitled to free train travel at home and in Europe. He was one of those who took advantage of that European perk, and he was a member of the British Railwaymen's Touring Club (BRTC), which organised group holidays for BR workers and their dependants.

For three successive summers, between 1973 and 1975, my father, my sister and I (my mother had died in 1971) convened on what the BRTC men called 'the main "up" platform' of York station, and what normal people called 'platform three', to wait for a London train. We were on our way to 'the Continent', a term implying a certain remoteness that began to fall out of use when Britain joined the European Economic Community in 1973. Twice we went to Lido di Jesolo in Italy, once to Lloret de Mar in Spain. In the weeks

before departure, my father, a Europhile, had been briefing me about the holiday ahead. He described the continental breakfast that awaited, which I was particularly excited about even though – considered objectively – it was bread and jam, albeit with real orange juice. ('The orange juice is a cocktail,' my dad counselled, 'you sip it.') He also held out the exciting prospect of an unusually thin soup called consommé (in which one put, strange as it may seem, grated cheese) while warning of very strong coffee served in very small cups, and a complete absence of tea.

I recall the cluster of suitcases on the York platform, the patterned summer frocks of the women, some of whom already had their sunglasses on. They took a maternal interest in my sister and me: 'Now you have brought your sunhats, haven't you?' I remember the freshly whitened plimsolls of the men, and the BRTC badges on the lapels of their summer jackets. The badge was circular, with the countries of Europe west of Russia shown in gold against a blue background. In the absence of my father, who died as I began writing this book, I might think I'd dreamt our railway jaunts were it not for that badge, which is the only thing that comes up when the words 'British Railwaymen's Touring Club' are put into the Internet. (The badges are offered for sale on various sites, with suggestions for starting bids around the three pound mark.)

The National Rail Museum in York reported no mention of the BRTC on their database, and suggested I contact an organisation called REPTA. This used to stand for Railway Employees' Privilege Ticket Association, a name that expressed the pride of the railwaymen of the 1920s, who had fought for travel concessions, and formed an association to protect them. Today, nobody calls themselves 'privileged', and the organisation has become the Railway Employees &

Public Transport Association. According to its spokesman, Colin Rolle, it is a 'benefits association for active and retired railwaymen', but the retired BR staff remain more privileged than those currently employed, who have concessionary travel within Britain only on the territory of their train operating company, and must clear high bureaucratic hurdles to access less generous European concessions than were enjoyed by my dad. According to Colin Rolle, 'The British Railwaymen's Touring Club wasn't part of British Rail. It was an independent tour company that organised package holidays for railwaymen, using their free travel. We don't have any mention of it in our records, but I think it folded in the early 80s.'

Now back to York station in 1973. When the train came in, I concentrated on looking nonchalant as we headed for first class. As a fairly senior man 'on the salaried side' (as he'd modestly say), my father's privilege tickets were all 'firsts'. We arrived at King's Cross – 'The Cross' to the BRTC men – at lunchtime. From there we transferred to Victoria by Underground. (The BRTC men had free travel on that as well, and I was always disappointed that there was no first class on the Tube, because if there had been, we'd have been in it.) At Victoria, we entrained for Dover. We then took a ferry operated by Sealink, the seagoing arm of BR. This we boarded at blustery Dover Marine station, which was located directly on the dock, and offered the classic conjunction of the boat–train era, which now seems dreamlike: a railway station with a ship alongside. It was customary for the railwaymen to point out to us children that the BR double arrow appeared the right way round on one side of the ferry's funnel, while being reversed on the other side so as to resemble an 'S' for Sealink.

We disembarked from the ferry at the French counterpart

to Dover Marine, Calais Maritime, which was demolished in the mid-1990s. Dover and Calais are now served by two stations located a ten-minute bus ride (if the bus is running that day) from the sea. The Calais Maritime I knew was a single-storey concrete building of 1956, almost Euston-like in its grey functionality. It appears in two films starring Alec Guinness: *The Lavender Hill Mob* and *The Detective*.

But still Calais Maritime was exciting, partly because Calais was exciting. For the British, it was where Europe began (whereas in recent years, migrants have thought it's where Britain begins). My dad always said Calais Maritime made him nervous, 'because if you got onto the wrong train you ended up in the wrong country'. I recall several trains waiting in that throbbing bunker, made up wholly or in part of dark-blue carriages with the words 'Compagnie Internationale des Wagons-Lits' written above the windows in gold, so the colour scheme was the same as that of the BRTC badge. (It is also, come to think of it, the colour of the European Community flag.)

Having grown up in a railway family, I was vaguely aware of Wagons-Lits (W-L), so I took the first sighting of those carriages in my stride, as when seeing a famous person in the street, but they were impressive. They seemed huge, the French loading gauge (the permissible dimensions of a carriage) being bigger than our own. But what was striking was the blueness, an indulgently dark and romantic shade compared to the weak-blue-and-off-white livery being rolled out across British Rail just then.

These vehicles were marked either 'Wagon Restaurant' or 'Wagon-Lits', eating and sleeping being the decadent specialisms of the company. They seemed grown up, remote from the schoolboyish pedantry I had already come to associate with British railways. Much of that pedantry comes

from locomotives and their vital statistics, but Wagons-Lits ran no locomotives, so the student of the company is spared all that talk of steam pressures, horse power, wheel formations. (Strictly speaking, Wagon-Lits had *one* locomotive, an Austrian battery-electric four-wheeled shunter, built in 1903, and used for moving carriages about at its workshop at Inzersdorf near Vienna.)

When it came to the European expresses, the bluer the train the better. The most famous ones were entirely Wagons-Lits, entirely blue. Other trains might just have a W-L restaurant car, or a couple of sleepers. I can't remember the make-up of the train that took us to Paris on that first occasion. I do know that on arrival we took the Métro from Gare du Nord to Gare de Lyon, where, in the early evening, there were more of the blue carriages. I have been studying old editions of the *Thomas Cook Continental Timetable* in the British Library, trying to piece together what happened next ...

Incidentally, it is much more enjoyable to type 'Thomas Cook Continental Timetable', which is what the publication was called from 1873 to 1987 – except for the three years from 1977 to 1980 when it flung its net wider, becoming the *Thomas Cook International Timetable* – than it is to type 'Thomas Cook European Timetable', which is what it became after 1987. Cook's ceased to publish it in 2013, and today there is a weedily named 'European Rail Timetable' ('Produced by the former compilers of the Thomas Cook European Rail Timetable'), but we ought to be glad to have it, given what's happened to the timetable genre.

I think I have identified the train we took from Gare de Lyon, and it did have a name, albeit not a famous one. My note, made in the library with the excited urgency of a spy decoding a cryptogram, reads: 'The Lombardie Express. Depart Gare de Lyon 2137; arrive Lausanne 0340; arrive Brig 0520;

arrive Milan 0905.' No train of that name ever formed one of the Wagons-Lits expresses, and I slept in a couchette, which I thought, wrongly, was a term interchangeable with 'sleeper'.

Wagons-Lits sleepers were sleepers properly so called. Each compartment offered seating by day, and was convertible into either one to two comfortable beds. Some of the early sleepers of the company had compartments with four berths, but from the introduction of the S-class sleepers in 1922, a twin-berth compartment was the basic unit. There were also single-berth compartments, and singles or doubles could be turned into a two or a four by the unlocking of a connecting door. Wagons-Lits operated its own class system, which overlapped in a complicated way with the class systems of the national railways, but in essence the first-class price was paid by those seeking 'espace privatif', or sole occupancy, whether of a single-bed compartment specifically designed to facilitate that privilege, or a double, which you could have to yourself if you paid enough. From the 1940s, when the luxury rail market was in decline, an increasing number of three-berth compartments were offered by W-L. Particularly associated with three-berth occupancy was the Yt-class, and if things seem to be becoming rather algebraic, it must be admitted that, despite the absence of locomotive numbers to collect, Wagons-Lits did give an opening to the more pedantic sort of rail enthusiast, in the classification of their sleepers. I will keep discussion of S-class, Lx-class, Yt-class and so on to a minimum, not least because these terms are not as precise as they sound.

A sleeper, unlike a couchette, had – and has – a wash basin but almost never an en-suite bathroom, although in the case of the Wagons-Lits there was sometimes this discreet offer, in the form of a small notice: 'Sous le lavabo se trouve une vase'. It resembled a gravy boat, and was more useful to a

gentleman than a lady, I would have thought. Each bed had blankets, a sheet and a pillow.

Couchettes were also convertible from seats. They were provided by the national rail companies rather than by the transnational W-L, which never dabbled in couchettes, just as there are no camp beds in the Ritz. In couchettes, there was no lavabo and no vase; the beds were harder than those on sleepers, and there would be four or six in a compartment depending on whether first or second class. So it was a matter of 'mucking in', and since you were likely to be sleeping with strangers, you kept your clothes on. Which is not to deny that plenty of sex must have occurred in couchettes, but it would have been less well upholstered than sex in a W-L compartment. In the *Thomas Cook Continental Timetable*, couchettes were indicated by a symbol resembling a plank, whereas sleepers were denoted by a drawing of a proper bed with headboard and plumped-up duvet. Being unaware of this discrepancy, I would drop the word 'couchette' at every opportunity when I got home to York. I remember sitting on the front lawn of our house with a group of my friends, who might have holidayed in Scarborough or Mablethorpe, lounging around me. My dad was mowing the lawn – always the first job on our return from holidays – as I held forth: 'While we were having our meal in the dining car, the guard came along and made up the couchettes!' and since they also didn't know the difference between a couchette and a sleeper, my friends were impressed, which in a way they were right to be.

At three in the morning on one of our jaunts, as our train approached the Simplon Tunnel, I raised the blind a few inches to see a perfect encapsulation of Switzerland: crescent moon, a handful of stars and a snow-capped mountain with a log chalet halfway up it. The journey was the highlight

of my continental holidays, especially that first one to Lido di Jesolo, because, having got both a heat rash *and* a migraine on the beach on the second day (and I insist that I *was* wearing my sunhat), I spent the rest of the holiday in the hotel room with the curtains closed. I was mortified that my dad – looking dapper in the cravat he only ever wore abroad – felt obliged to spend the evenings with me, even though he had struck up a promising friendship with a pretty Japanese widow in our hotel, a romance my sister and I were keen to encourage so that we might become a normal family again. ('Mum wouldn't mind,' we agreed.)

The holiday ended badly: the Japanese widow's time in Lido di Jesolo was up before ours, and my sister disgustedly relayed to me that dad hadn't even taken her address. At least I had the journey back to look forward to; but I did not at that point become interested in European sleeper trains, so I missed the milestones of their decline.

In 1967, the Wagons-Lits et des Grands Express Européens had become the more suburban-sounding Compagnie Internationale des Wagons-Lits et du Tourisme. In 1976, when I was fourteen, it was none of my concern that the bar car was withdrawn from the blue train that was actually *called* the Blue Train. I was unaware, in the mid-1970s, that W-L had been selling off its carriages to the various national operators for some years, and that its only two British expresses would soon expire: the Golden Arrow in 1972, the Night Ferry in 1980. As for the Orient Express, that died various deaths, but I certainly didn't know that there was no longer any through service between Paris and Istanbul from 1977. If, in 1981, I read about the opening of the first French high-speed line, I can't *remember* doing so, and if the news did reach my ears, I failed to draw the obvious conclusion that here was a new generation of trains sufficiently fast that passengers would not need beds.

But as I began to write journalism about railways, I kept coming across this somnambulistic organisation, whose telegraphic addresses included 'Sleeping Monaco' and 'Sleeping Paris', and which was known in Britain as 'The International Sleeping Car Company'. It struck me as resembling a great narcotic conspiracy with its introduction into Europe, in 1880, of carriages mounted on smooth-riding bogies (as opposed to six-wheel 'rattlers', with two wheels at either end and two in the middle), with cosy, panelled compartments, soft lights, upholstered beds and discreet attendants. One of the most famous of the Wagons-Lits Expresses, the Blue Train, was also the longest, and it often conveyed no fewer than twelve sleeping carriages on its nightly trips from Paris to Nice. In 1900, passengers on the P&O shipping line, which was closely associated with Wagons-Lits, were warned not to disturb the boudoir-like aspect of any sleeper trains their journeys might involve. No luggage could be carried into the sleeping cars except a handbag 20 by 12 by 10 inches high. Bundles of rugs could be, and were, taken in.

It seemed strange to find a commercial organisation dedicated to sleeping, and therefore dreaming, and so to mystery in general. On a night train, after all, you might not easily know where you were.

In Vladimir Nabokov's novel, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, one character has a 'strange, almost romantic, passion for sleeping cars and Great European Express Trains ... the soft crackle of polished panels in the blue-shaded night, the long sad sigh of brakes at dimly surmised stations, the upward slide of an embossed leather blind disclosing a platform, a man wheeling luggage, the milky globe of a lamp with a pale moth whirling around it'.

Anything that could get Nabokov going like that must be a good thing, and it turned out that most of the writers I liked

as a young man were enthusiasts for the 'grands express internationaux'.

THE SLEEPERS IN LITERATURE AND FILM

In 1931, the young Graham Greene was dependent on selling review copies of novels to Foyle's bookshop. He decided he'd better have a commercial success. As he said in his autobiography, 'for the first and last time in my life I deliberately set out to write a book to please'. The result, *Stamboul Train*, is set aboard one of the variants of the Orient Express, the Ostend-Vienna Orient Express. Greene could not afford a ticket to Constantinople, so he bought one to Cologne. Therefore, the early lineside scenes are more accurate than the later ones; as he admitted in his memoir, *Ways of Escape*, 'you may be sure the allotments outside Bruges are just where I placed them'.

His wife made him sandwiches so he could avoid the dining car. In the novel the chorus girl, Coral Musker, also has sandwiches. They enable her to save eight shillings, which is exactly what Greene saved. A chorus girl on a night train outpacing the jurisdictions through which it travels – this was always going to be a risqué novel. *Stamboul Train* also features a lesbian couple, an opportunist businessman, a revolutionary, a thief on the run. It is highly atmospheric. Here is the quayside at Ostend: 'The wind dropped for ten seconds, and the smoke which had swept backwards and forwards across the quay and the metal acres in the quick gusts stayed for that time in the middle air.'

Greene had feared that international sleeper trains were *too* popular a subject: 'the film rights seemed at the time an unlikely dream, for before I had completed the book, Marlene Dietrich had appeared in *Shanghai Express*, the English had

made *Rome Express*, and even the Russians had produced their railway film, *Turksib*'. In the event, Greene's career was saved when his novel became a Book Society choice, but it was sent back in disgust by many members.

In the compartment with Myatt (a Jewish currant trader), Coral Musker asks,

> 'What shall I do? Take off all my clothes?'
>
> He nodded, finding it hard to speak, and saw her rise from the berth and go into a corner and begin to undress slowly and very methodically, folding each garment in turn and laying it neatly on the opposite seat.

This being a Graham Greene novel, the next sentence reads, 'He was conscious as he watched her calm movements of the inadequacy of his body.' The reader is also not surprised that the sex scene is interrupted when the train comes to a sudden stop at a signal. But it wasn't stopped soon enough for Greene's aunt, Miss Helen Greene, who so disapproved of the book that she banished her nephew's photo from her sitting room to her bedroom.

Stamboul Train was filmed as *Orient Express* in 1933. Of the competing productions the best was probably *Rome Express* (1932), a tale of various night train passengers with things to hide. It was the first film to be shot at the Gaumont-British Studios at Lime Grove, Shepherd's Bush – i.e. not *on* the Rome Express, though a cameraman did travel on the train to capture the moving landscape. The director, Walter Forde, said: 'Even if there wasn't a scene through the window I'd still have the back projection going, because it would throw shadows on the wall and all the stuff. There was always a tag hanging from a piece of luggage; there was always beads on the little table lamps, so that you get movement all the time.'

Sidney Gilliat, who co-wrote *Rome Express*, also co-wrote *The Lady Vanishes* (1938) and *Night Train to Munich* (1940). The former – a sexed-up version of a novel called *The Wheel Spins*, directed by Alfred Hitchcock – is set on board an Orient Express-like train. So Gilliat covered a sizeable part of the Wagons-Lits network.

Greene gave *Rome Express* a good review in *The Spectator*, although he was not usually a fan of British detective films or stories: 'I found them lacking in realism. There were too many suspects and the criminal never belonged to what used to be called the criminal class.' He might have been slighting *Murder on the Orient Express*, published a year after *Stamboul Train*.

Agatha Christie had an affinity for trains. In *An Autobiography* (1977), she wrote, 'Trains have always been one of my favourite things. It is sad nowadays that one no longer has engines that seem to be one's personal friends.' *Murder on the Orient Express* is a refinement of her earlier Wagons-Lits novel, *The Mystery of the Blue Train* (1928), which is far too long and contains an operational implausibility, as we will see.

Christie stood apart from the literary tussle described by Martin Green in his book *Children of the Sun*, which I read in the year of its publication, 1977, when I was in the sixth form. In it Green describes what he calls the 'dandies' of British interwar literature, people like Harold Acton, Cyril Connolly, Evelyn Waugh, Auden, Isherwood and Spender. They were seen as whimsical and decadent by the austere likes of F. R. Leavis and George Orwell. Reacting against Edwardian stolidity and nationalism, the dandies were great travellers, and often wrote travel books. Green cites *Europe in the Looking Glass* by Robert Byron as a 'typical' dandy travel book. Like many of the dandies, Byron was anti-American (except where it came to cocktails and jazz); he wanted to build a 'European consciousness'.