

Light Railways No. 244 August 2015

Ghost Trains - Forgotten Railways

DVD, Anthony Buckley Films, Format 16.9, Colour, Stereo, 54 minutes in length

Review by - Phil Rickard

Having seen two of Buckley's previous films (*The Savannahlander*, *The Gulflander*) a good number of years ago, I was pleased to receive this title for review. Those mentioned films, narrated by the late Bill Peach, are still enjoyable viewing for armchair travellers – even my mother-in-law was impressed. Similarly, the title under review is not for hardcore railfans. However, gunzels excepted, I suspect most will find it interesting, thought-provoking and enjoyable.

Starting in Far North Queensland and finishing in Sydney's underground rail tunnels, with plenty of diversions along the way, this film has several layers to it – history, politics and vision or, all too often lately, the lack of it.

Broadly made up of a number of historical excursions looking at various long-closed industrial lines – Stannary Hills and Irvinebank 2ft gauge, Joadja, Wolgan Valley – interspersed with some thought-provoking examination of the plight of some NSW government lines where trains have been withdrawn but the rails just (Mudgee being a case in point) plus the surprising resurrection of the Mt Lyell railway in Tasmania. All this is rounded out with a look at John Bradfield's vision for Sydney's underground railways.

This is not just a presentation of old pictures and talking heads mixed-up to make a nice home movie (though it has all that). Accepting that industrial railways come and go depending on the industry behind them it can only be good that a number have become walking and 4WD tracks rather than reverting to impenetrable bush. A good couple of the historical segments make good use of historians – Leonie Knapman takes us to Joadja, whilst Michael Keats guides us along the Wolgan Valley railway to Newnes. At both places the decaying remains of the shale industry are inspected.

When commenting on the government railways, narrator Peter Fenton clearly has a wider picture in mind with some refreshing and provocative commentary on where this country has gone wrong with its railways. Fenton bemoans the lines of B-double trucks chewing up taxpayer-funded roads whilst perfectly good parallel railways are left to go to rack and ruin. Anyone who has ever been terrorised on a country road by one of those gargantuan trucks may well agree with his premise that the freight they carry should be on the railway.

Fenton also envisages a tourism role for the railway with some of the more scenic and historic lines being utilised for tourist purposes. To show what can be done, operations on the West Coast Wilderness Railway (WCWR) are interspersed between the historic and current segments. Will anything come of Fenton's vision? Who knows. We do have a number of tourist railways yet there is surely room for an enlarged role in the area – we all know of lines that seem to have potential. They just need people of vision. Will another Bradfield come along and galvanise matters? It's a question to ponder. Bearing in mind that political will and vision in this country has just about hit zero, one can only hope.

I did note a couple of small errors in the narration – the gradient of the WCWR Abt section and the number of locos at Rocky Bluff are both incorrect. Additionally, I thought a map would assist the less knowledgeable viewers at a couple of points. So, did this DVD pass the mother-in-law test? Unfortunately I can't do that anymore but I can say that "her indoors" thought it most interesting!

Aside from the mentioned points this is a welcome addition to the DVD library and I can thoroughly recommend it. Check the Sales List or Online Shop for members' prices.

