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978-0-521-13539-9 - Charles Blacker Vignoles: Romantic Engineer

K. H. Vignoles

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*TO THE MEMORY OF
ARTHUR ELTON*

PREFACE

The suggestion that I might write this book was made some years ago by the late Sir Arthur Elton, whose untimely death early in 1973 was so great a loss to his friends and to lovers of railway history. He was doing some research into the connection between Vignoles and the artist John Cooke Bourne, and he wrote to ask whether I knew the whereabouts of Vignoles's diaries. At the same time he suggested that there was a need for a new biography of Vignoles, and enquired whether perhaps I was writing one.

Some years before, the Vignoles family correspondence had come into my possession, and I had learned of the existence of Vignoles's extensive diaries in the Manuscript Department of the British Library. The opportunity to study these papers, afforded by retirement, had stimulated my interest in my great-grandfather's life story, and encouraged me to think seriously of Arthur Elton's suggestion, particularly as he offered to help me to find a publisher. The whole affair was clinched a few months later when he spent a night at my house inspecting Vignoles's papers. Neither my wife nor I will ever forget the occasion. From the moment when he descended from the train at Emsworth station, a burly bearded figure clutching a bulging carpet bag, to the time he left us next morning, except for the intervals necessary for sleep and meals, he was fully occupied, closely examining the stream of letters and papers we put before him, and exclaiming with boyish delight at everything he saw. It was an example of scholarly enthusiasm so infectious that we were spellbound, and the memory still makes it hard to believe in the fact of his death. Among the many items of help and advice he gave me were the opportunity to examine his collection of railway prints and his library, during a weekend my wife and I spent with him and Lady Elton at Clevedon, and the loan for several months of a precious copy of the report of the Irish Railway Commission. For all this I am deeply indebted to him, as well as for the many fascinating hours I have spent on this project. My only regret must be that he did not live to see the work completed. He shared with Vignoles the same quality of unbounded enthusiasm; and I am proud and pleased to be able, with Lady Elton's permission, to dedicate this book to his memory.

Owing to pressures arising from inflation, the original publishers were unable to complete the work, and for some years the book lay fallow, until it was accepted by the Cambridge University Press, to whose staff I am indebted for advice on a considerable revision of the text.

Preface

Vignoles's letters and diaries are rich material for the biographer. His son, the Rev. Olinthus J. Vignoles, quoted extensively from them in his *Life of Charles Blacker Vignoles*, published in 1889, hitherto the main authority on Vignoles for historians and students of railway history. He declared his intention to allow his subject 'wherever possible, to tell his own story'. But absence of relevant comment and explanation often leaves the story obscure; and as Olinthus Vignoles does not hesitate to alter the text of his quotations when he thinks fit, the character of his father's vigorous personal style is often lost and the facts distorted. In other respects, however, the portrait he draws is reasonably balanced, and his book contains some fascinating reminiscences of early railway history.

Starting with the framework provided by O. J. Vignoles, I have based my story of Vignoles's life on a complete re-examination of the letters and diaries, backed up wherever possible by reference to contemporary records, such as newspaper reports and the minutes of railway companies, and to the works listed in the bibliography. These have invariably confirmed the essential accuracy of Vignoles's own account, so that where the latter is the only available source of information (for example in the story of the building of the Kiev Bridge) I have been able to follow it with some confidence. My account of Vignoles's ancestry, which differs sharply from that given by O. J. Vignoles, is based on the patient research carried out over several years by my uncle, the late Ernest B. Vignoles, and other members of the family.

With so much material available, the task of selection has been a formidable one. The temptation to dwell on many fascinating details of personal and family history, in what is primarily intended as a study of an engineer's career, has had to be resisted; though I have thought it proper to retain sufficient of these to illuminate the personal background of a professional man in action. On the engineering side I must pay tribute to the invaluable assistance given me by my son, Mr M. J. P. Vignoles, M.A., C.Eng., M.I.C.E., who has acted as my technical adviser in all matters concerning Vignoles's professional work.

Passages in inverted commas, unless otherwise assigned, are taken from Vignoles's own writings, and in all cases the original spelling and punctuation has been retained.

I would like to thank the librarians, at home and overseas, who have been so ready to answer enquiries, and whose patience in ferreting out information seems quite inexhaustible. I am also grateful for the facilities for work and study so freely given by the libraries to anyone engaged in research. Foremost among these I would mention the Department of Manuscripts of the British Library, the Library of the Institution of Civil Engineers, and the British Transport Historical Records Department of the Public Records Office. I have also to acknowledge the help given to me by members of the staff of the following: the Royal Astronomical Society; the Reading Room and the Newspaper Library of the British Library; the Wills Memorial Library of Bristol University; the Cheltenham Public Library; the Hampshire County Library; the Lancaster District

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Central Library; the Library of the Institution of Mechanical Engineers; the Library of the Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst; the Central Library and the Literary & Philosophical Society, Newcastle-upon-Tyne; the Royal Photographical Society of Great Britain; the Portsmouth City Library; the Portsmouth City Record Office; the Harris Museum & Art Gallery, Preston; the Wardens of Rochester Bridge; the St Helens Central Library; the Library of the Science Museum, London; the National Library of Ireland; the Public Record Office of Ireland; the Records Department of Coras Iompair Eireann, Dublin; the New York Public Library, Prints Division; the Charleston County Library, South Carolina; the St Augustine Historical Society, Florida; the Technical Library, Leningrad. I am also grateful to the following individuals for advice, encouragement or help: Mr Anthony Adams, of the Moonraker Press, Bradford-on-Avon; Mr J. S. Allen, of the John Thompson Horseley Bridge Co. Ltd; Mr Edgar Anstey; M. André Bodin; Dr L. G. Booth, of the Department of Civil Engineering, Imperial College of Science & Technology; Mr John Burnett; Professor W. H. Chaloner, Professor of Economic History, University of Manchester; Mr J. H. Colyer-Ferguson, of the National Railway Museum, York; Lady Elton; Mr J. C. Gilbert; Mr A. C. Gutteridge; Señor Adolfo Lafarga, of the Biblioteca Provincial, Bilbao; Mr J. J. Leckey; the late Mr Peter Mrosovsky; Mrs Mary Monro, formerly of Thomas Telford (Publishing) Ltd; Mr K. A. Murray, of the Irish Railway Record Society; Mr R. H. Offord, of Manchester University Press; M. André Portefaix, of the *Revue Générale des Chemins de Fer*, Paris; Mr N. Rayman, City Engineer, Coventry; the late Mr L. T. C. Rolt and Mrs S. M. Rolt; Professor J. Simmons, of the Department of History, University of Leicester; Mr Jack Smythe; Mr C. W. Toogood, of the Oxford University Press; Señor Alfonso C. Saiz Valdivielso, of the Bank of Bilbao; Miss Margaret Wallace; and Professor J. M. Wallace-Hadrill.

I am indebted to the Editor of the *Journal of the Irish Railway Record Society*, for permission to quote from the transcript of Richard Osborne's diary; acknowledgements are also due to the Editors of the *Railway World* and *Country Life*, in whose pages some sections of Chapters 3 and 5 respectively have already been published.

Permission to publish, given by the various bodies mentioned in the list of illustrations, and to quote from unpublished material, is also gratefully acknowledged.

Finally I would like to thank Dr Simon Mitton of the Cambridge University Press, for his great interest, courtesy and encouragement; I remember with gratitude the hospitality afforded to my wife and myself by my cousin the late Mrs Lydia Vignoles de Ward, during our visits to London for research; and I thank my wife for her help and companionship in research, for her encouraging and constructive criticism, and for typing the final draft of the book.

K.H.V.

VIGNOLES AND HUTTON FAMILIES

