

A Writer's View

In an extract from his latest book, On the Slow Train Again, the follow-up to the critically acclaimed On the Slow Train, British author Michael Williams combines his love of trains, history and nostalgia as he recounts his journey on the British Pullman.



Norbert, the immaculate German train manager, shows me along the train, explaining its provenance in clipped tones, plumping the odd cushion and straightening the occasional anti-macassar as we go as though it were his own home – which in a sense it is, since he has been travelling with the train for a decade. He talks lovingly of the cars as though they were his maiden aunts. Ione, with her panels of burr yew and a frieze of Victorian roses, was once on the London-Edinburgh run and a favourite of royalty travelling north to their holidays at Balmoral. Perseus formed part of Winston Churchill's funeral train, while Phoenix was a special favourite of the Queen Mother. Aboard Zena, the president of France enjoyed such a good lunch of “fillets of sole Zena” that he expressed his appreciation on the back of the menu card.

With breakfast cleared away, we're already heading past Hounslow and are soon steaming into rural Berkshire. It's time to settle back in one of Gwen's comfy armchairs for the views on this fine late-October day. It's been a vintage autumn, and the trees at the trackside are every shade of red, orange, russet and gold, although with a hundred tonnes of locomotive on the front we have no need to fret about leaves on the line. A word of translation here: like many trains with such a title, the Orient Express is something of a misnomer. The train has never run particularly fast in its lifetime, which is just as well, since the deep panoramic windows on these old carriages allow us to lap up some of the most delicious countryside in England.

Somehow, the Orient Express has always been infused with an atmosphere of nostalgia for the romance of the past age of the railways. “The great trains are going out all over Europe, one by one, but still, three days a week, the Orient Express thunders superbly over 1,400 miles of glittering steel track,” wrote Ian Fleming in 1956 in his James Bond adventure From Russia with Love. It seems extraordinary that, more than half a century after James Bond's tussle with SMERSH, this “great train of Europe” should still be thriving and that Gwen and Audrey and Ibis and Lucille and Zena continue to make their imperious way around the network, turning heads in the age of the Eurostar. Will they still be around in another fifty years? Don't underestimate the willpower of these plucky old girls to outlive us all.



Michael Williams, 'On the Slow Train Again' (Preface Publishing, 2011).



“There is enough glamour here to sum up the entire history of luxury rail travel in the twentieth century”

Michael Williams