Writing the obituary of Ian J Kerr is as much an attempt to reflect upon the intellectual accomplishment of the preeminent railway historian of colonial (and post-colonial India); as it is a personal reminiscence.

I first met Ian at a conference in 2004 in Delhi, India. It was my first conference and as an M.Phil. student writing a dissertation on railway construction labour in colonial India, I was excited and awestruck in equal measure to meet Ian. Despite his reputation, Ian however shared his time and thoughts generously with a callow railway history enthusiast. This generosity – both as an intellectual and as a person characterised Ian till his last days. Later, as I had the occasion to know him better, I realised Ian’s significant role in shaping the direction and content of railway history of India through his research and publications and by being mentor to young scholars.

Ian is mainly known for his work on Indian Railways (hereafter IR). However, his early interest was in social and cultural history of Punjab; and he completed his PhD dissertation ‘The Punjab Province and the Lahore District, 1849–1872: A Case Study of British Colonial Rule and Social Change in India’, in 1975 from University of Minnesota under the guidance of late Burton Stein.

Soon after receiving his PhD, Ian joined the History Faculty in the University of Manitoba where he worked till retirement. Ian’s early publications reflect his interest in history of Punjab, a region he revisited (metaphorically speaking) in 2007 with an edited volume with Tony Ballantyne (Textures of the Sikh Past. New Historical Perspectives, edited by Tony Ballantyne. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007). However, by 1980s Ian was turning his attention to history of the IR – adding vitality to a languishing field.

Ian’s forays into the history of colonial IR began with articles on Indian railway construction labourers in colonial India and history of railway workers’ strike in the nineteenth century as an illustrative example of the wider history of labour movement in India. His interest in railway construction workers, especially processes of labour recruitment and employment and their role in rapid expansion of India’s railway network (fourth largest at the turn of the twentieth century) soon
coalesced into a now classic tome, *Building the Railways of the Raj 1850-1900*. Published in 1997, the book remains an invaluable and often to-go volume for amateurs and professional railway scholars alike.

By early 2000, Ian’s interest in the history of the IR widened, and it will not be an exaggeration to suggest he was the first to contextualise the significance of railways in broader socio-economic and cultural transformation of India under the colonial rule. This belief in centrality of railways in the ‘making of modern India’ is perhaps best exemplified in the volume of essays and primary sources he edited in 2001. Published by the Oxford University Press, New Delhi, the title *Railways in Modern India* underlined Ian’s conviction in the ways in which railways shaped aspects of colonial India ranging from economic change in north India and Bengal to pilgrimage. He continued to explore the significance of IR and its inter-relationships with other forces in colonial India in his book *Engines of Change: The Railroads That Made India* (Westport: Praeger, 2007).

Ian’s interest in the significance of IR in colonial India and beyond was not however, a love for narrow technological determinism. Equally importantly, it was not to illustrate ‘technological imperialism’, though he had an acute understanding of the colonial context in which transfer of railway technology occurred in India. If anything, Ian was interested in underscoring how railways interacted with other changes in colonial India and implications of such interactions on the wider society, economics and culture. This is evident in his later publications, where he responded to the ‘cultural turn’ and added his voice to ‘New Departures in Indian Railway Studies’. Ian’s commitment to bring together different perspectives and voices of IR’s historiography is best illustrated in the Research Handbook he co-edited with John Hurd (*India’s Railway History: A Research Handbook*, Leiden; Brill, 2012). This volume not only showcases Ian’s encyclopaedic knowledge of IR’s archive (that he once described as a ‘black hole’); but is also a handy source of information about the new directions in which history of the IR was travelling.

Though Ian remained consistently interested in the history of IR; in recent years he turned his attention to comparative railway history, especially in Africa and the Iberian Peninsula (specifically Portugal). Once again, these publications bring out his lifelong interest in railway construction, especially labour relations and its links with railway financing and construction.

Ian’s contribution to history of railways in colonial India should not be measured merely in terms of publications, though that too is impressive. Instead, Ian’s influence should be assessed through his nurturing of scholars interested in exploring different dimensions of the IR’s long and complex history. This is perhaps most evident in the recent and diverse publications about different aspects of history of the IR all of which invariably acknowledge Ian’s role in the shaping of the research.

Ian played an instrumental role in mentoring young scholars, including reading their not-so-ready drafts for publications and always finding time to generously share his knowledge and expertise about the IR. There is little doubt the absence of
Ian will be felt by scholars of India’s Railway history; and to go back to the note with which I began, I will deeply miss a kind, gentle and remarkable intellectual who found time to read each line I wrote for publication and provided detailed feedback. It was an honour to know Ian Kerr and to learn from him.

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