

Musings in the Mess Van

(Overheard by the Tea Boy)

Accuracy and Authenticity - the twin goddesses who inspire our hobby. Well, sort of. Arguably, anyone who aspires to anything more bending to the mind than buying RTR at random (guided perhaps by the pretty colours of their boxes), can reasonably call himself a railway modeller - rather than someone who just likes playing toy trains.

Of course, I can hear the protests, even sneers at such a minimalist notion. To be fair though, the moment someone says to him (or her-) self, something like: "Well, I have a pannier tank loco here; so I suppose I ought to buy myself some Western coaches for it", he or she is making the first obeisance to Authenticity (so let's slurp a libation to that!)

Some might say that he, or she, (may I be allowed to stop this clumsy PC formula from now on and assume mankind at large may just be referred to as a shorthand 'he'?) from that moment on is starting down the slippery slope that ends with the counting of rivets and the replication of the timetables of some long forgotten railway serving a worked-out quarry village in 19th Century Snowdonia. Or Patagonia.

Those latter aficionados are of course the High Priests of our hobby. Most of the rest of us that start down the slope find some point at which our descent is arrested, by time, money, knowledge or physical limitation. At least we have progressed some way; and always remember that it is the first step that counts (as the French are so fond of saying).

Of course, I have also heard rivet-counting sneered at too. In fact (dare I say it?) our hobby, a minority hobby and not greatly respected always by the world at large it must be acknowledged, sometimes seems all too populated by one sort of sneerer or another (but not in DOGA, praises be!). So often one modeller's object of praise is another's of derision.

With so much disparagement about between the different gauges, scales, and particularly within the different sub-divisions of the 4mm fraternity, one sometimes wonders whether 'Live and let live' might not be an appropriate slogan for a less fragmented, more charitable hobby. With the best will in the world, everyone has his educational or physical limitations when it comes to skills. Not everyone has served an apprenticeship in micro-precision engineering, or has a CNC workshop at his disposal; not everyone's eyesight or manual dexterity has survived the passing of years unimpaired. Putting together a Walschaerts motion can actually be quite daunting to some, would you believe?; so do not turn your back on him. Nor to be utterly fair, is it every modeller's ambition to join the exhibition rat-race, building his layout on an oh so clever set of interlocking baseboards for the pleasure and greater glory of hawking it around the prestigious circuit. Some who dare call themselves modellers too, take their equal pleasures in the privacy of attic, garage or garden shed.

They are in a different but not dishonourable league, who can enjoy similar satisfactions from solving for themselves in their own backyards some minor problem which adds to their personal view of realism. In fact, let us praise the most modest endeavour, exalt even the smallest step towards improving on what comes out of the box in the hallowed names of our goddess twins.

As an aside, I believe DOGA's strength is the support it can give, for example through this Journal, to those quiet people enjoying their secret vices in attic, garage or garden shed.

Accuracy? Well of course the one certainty in railway modelling is that there is no absolute scale accuracy, and no, I am not going to start the old ding-dong about OO/EM/P4 or Uncle Tom Cobbley, but just remind ourselves that modelling so-called 'accuracy' is all compromise and degrees of approximation.

Then, what of her twin-sister Authenticity? Producing a scratch-built Garrett may be taxing for some, for the reasons already suggested. But a little historical curiosity can help one to avoid the occasional solecism, like a loco wearing the wrong livery for the time and place, or (as I found to my own shame and irritation recently) a double chimney the year before they were introduced and that being the year after the withdrawal of the loco model alongside it in the platform bay for example. In fact, reading up the background to the period and location chosen for a layout can be a most interesting study in itself. Arguably such reading should in fact precede and lead thence to the choice of prototype; but this is not a perfect world and few of us start from scratch with an exhaustive knowledge of a carefully chosen *mis en scene*.

Either way, reading-up helps in the avoidance of anachronism; but also is a way of broadening the whole understanding of the historical circumstances of our hobby. Whether or not one has the skills to enhance a coach or build a loco kit, at least everyone can read!

So where are these musings leading? I'm not sure. What is the first thing our would-be 'modeller' should do if he is to qualify for that honourable estate? Make sure his 'models', be they RTR or whatever, run along his track and through his pointwork without falling off. So already some notice must be taken of 'Accuracy', back-to-back measurements check-rail distances etc. correcting where necessary the arbitrary variations of compromise in which our RTR manufacturers indulge themselves, as best he can. DOGA offers gauges and standards and leans as much weight as its membership numbers bring to bear upon the manufacturers to improve.

Then come the little extras that add 'Authenticity', call it realism, correct loco lamp codes, regional running numbers for rolling stock, avoiding POWs pretty though they may be long after WW2, if that is the chosen period (even during WW2, I seem to recall, most had become so faded or overpainted as to have long lost their prettiness anyway). Already Bachmann are selling pre-weathered stock, and so some of that unrealistic gloss is disappearing from RTR; weathering the rest follows. Then perhaps some other glaring horror, a Lima coupling or plastic body thick coach window embrasures demands something be done; and then, lo and behold, our would-be modeller is into enhancement. Next, following the dictates of historical Authenticity, there is need of a piece of stock which is not in the manufacturers' catalogues; and the first tentative venture into kit-building.

Welcome to the club, brother.

*This article first appeared in the Autumn 2001 issue of the DOGA Journal.
The views and opinions contained in this article do not represent DOGA.
All material Copyright the Double O Gauge Association
For more information, visit our web site at <http://www.doubleogauge.com/>*