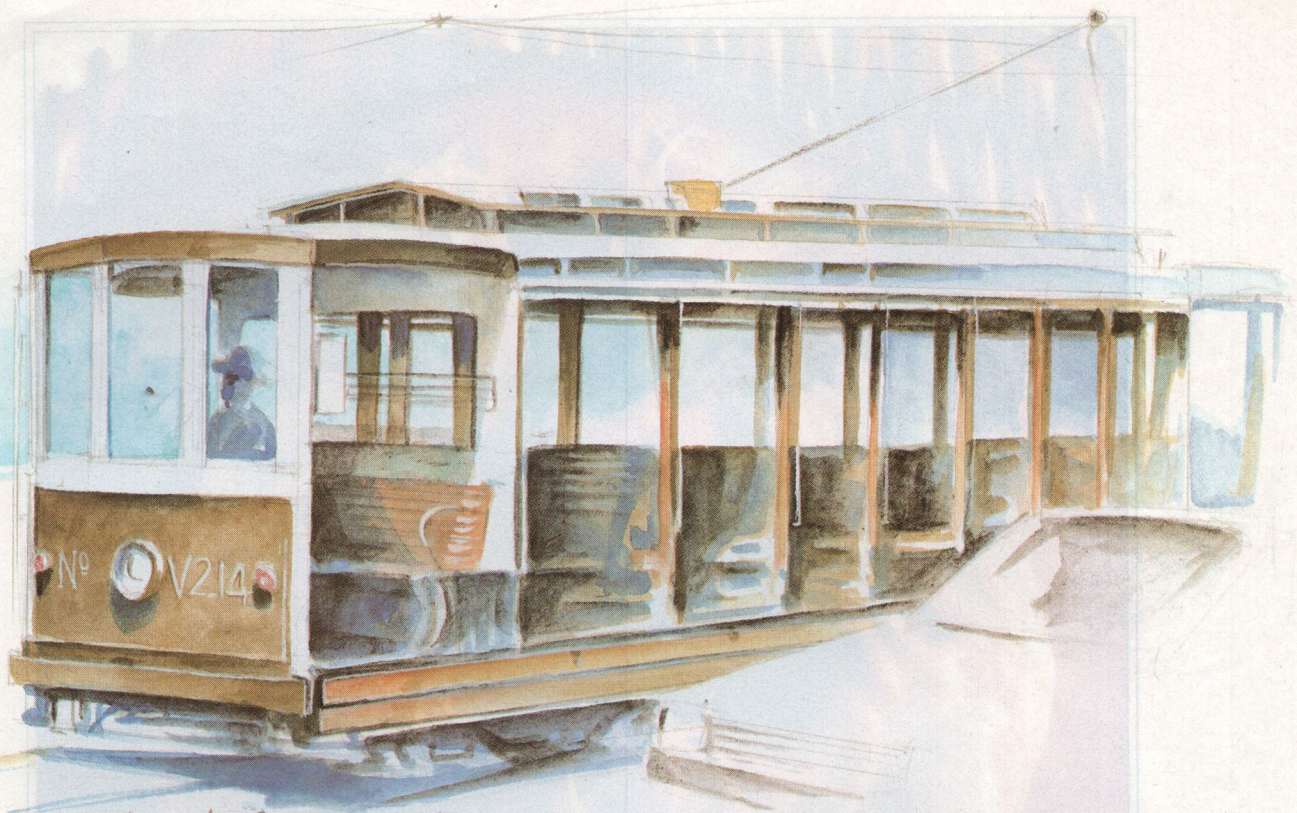


While Sydney bemoans its buried tramlines, Melbourne rejoices in the efficiency of its charismatic carriages. ANTHONY DENNIS and illustrator ROCCO FAZZARI spent three days riding the rails.



Passengers at Moreland, on the Coburg line.

FOR WHOM THE T



Vintage tram, Latrobe Street, city, Sunday morning.

A SUBURBAN TRAIN, especially at peak hour, is a miserable vehicle, full of unsmiling, unspeaking and unhappy passengers. So accustomed are they to the drudgery of their daily journeys, they scarcely need glance through the window to know when they've reached their destination.

Buses are worse: raucously, flatulently, arrogantly controlling the road, forever stopping or swerving in front of motorists without reason (except that the law says they have right of way), packed with passengers standing on shaky feet, like sailors in a storm.

But trams are different: dignified, historic and even, possibly, romantic. They don't dominate the road but share it and allow passengers to commune with the street while travelling along it. And trams are surely the only form of public transport where those who work on them are more eccentric than those who ride on them, a phenomenon especially apparent in Melbourne.

The tram systems of St Petersburg and Vienna are supposedly bigger. But the experts praise Melbourne's network anyway, with its 230 kilometres of double track and 42 routes, though they can't decide if it is great because it is more extensive, has more cars, requires more electricity or consumes more track. The only thing of which they are certain is that Melbourne's tram system, which spreads like an enormous electrified web across the city, is one of the jewels of world transport.

You do, of course, hear the odd Melburnian disparage the tramways but, unlike transport systems in many other cities, rarely are they condemned.

Trams reflect Melbourne's civility. You can tell that by the noise they make. Buses have horns, trains have whistles but trams have bells. When a tram driver rings one, it seems not a demand to a motorist or a pedestrian to get out of the way, but a request.

IT'S JUST past midnight on Saturday at a dark tram stop beside the grand old public baths at the top of Swanston Street – time for the last St Kilda night tram to rattle out of town.

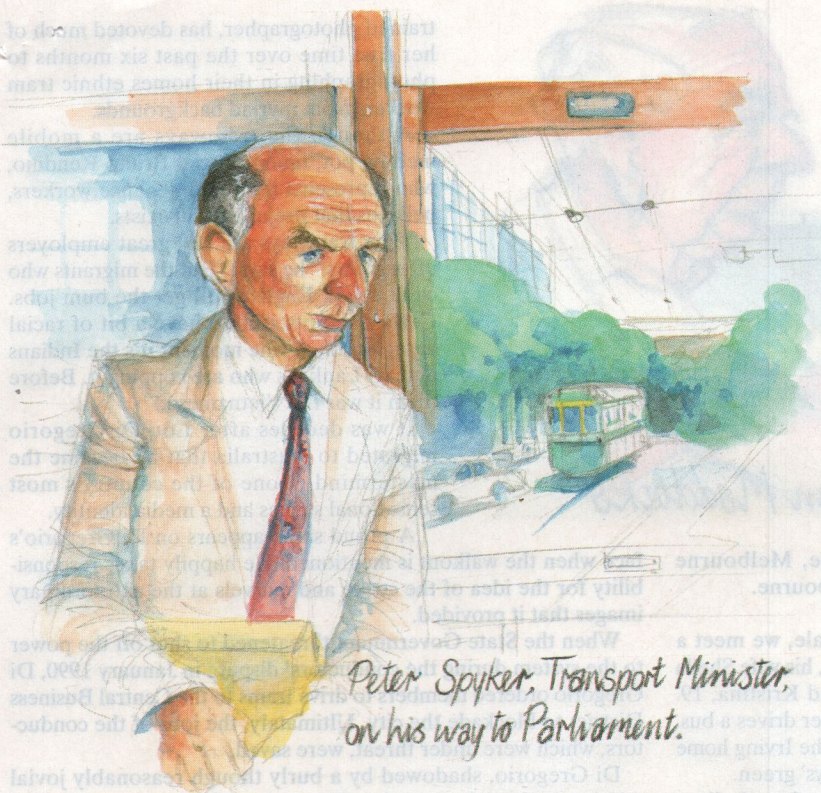
The only other passenger at the stop is Archie Larizza. He used to be a member of the rock group the Saints, but now, a struggling musician, he lives in Melbourne.

"The reason I moved from Sydney to Melbourne was because of the trams," Larizza explains before reaching his stop. "When I first arrived, I got on a tram and asked directions and about six people offered them to me. I thought, 'This is a friendly place; I think I'll move here.'"

Inside the driver's poky, timber-lined cabin, illuminated only by a weak, beige light, Geoffrey Sheldrake guides the almost empty tram down the tracks towards St Kilda. It is one of the famous W-class series, built between 1923 and 1956.

There are about 290 of them still >

RAM BELLS TOLL



*Peter Spyer, Transport Minister,
on his way to Parliament.*

FOR WHOM THE TRAM BELLS TOLL

in service, each with their roving conductors. These trams at last have acquired historical status. Recognised as mobile museum pieces and classified by the National Trust, there are limits on the number permitted to be exported. If they have the stamina to remain in service long enough, the W-class trams may become a major tourist attraction: the last vintage tram system in the world.

At the Bourke Street stop the tram is suddenly filled with revellers. Down the back of the tram, a latter-day beatnik produces a guitar for an impromptu performance as the softly spoken conductor wanders from seat to seat collecting fares.

"The St Kilda tram is always the last car out of the city," says Sheldrake. "I like being the last car out. And what could be more appropriate for the last tram than the St Kilda?"

"I suppose I'm a hopeless romantic. I've always loved steel wheels on tracks, especially trams. It's really a street railway, you know. When you think about it, we're the train drivers of the streets. It's quite special."

By 12.45 am, all the trams have stopped except ours; the only other passengers – a couple of middle-aged tourists – have staggered off into the night. Slowly we travel along faintly lit Clarendon Street, back to the South Melbourne Tram Depot, a giant old brick shed with a glass roof where Sheldrake, with the devotion of a parent tucking in a child, puts the tram away for the night.

There are diehard trammies, known as "gunzels", who, like Sheldrake, work on the system essentially to experience the daily joy of driving a W-class tram.

THE TRAM depots scattered across the city are like sets from the old television series *On the Buses*. Each depot has its own identity. South Melbourne is regarded as the gay depot, with a couple of transsexual tram drivers and male members of staff who wear tight green shorts complete with studded belts.

At North Fitzroy, there is a high proportion of Muslim employees who between shifts face Mecca on mats in the depot library, not much bigger than a tram driver's compartment but the only space available.

The old Malvern depot is something of an architectural showpiece and has a museum, rarely opened to the public,



More Fashion: trammer, South Melbourne depot

housed inside a cavernous school hall. There are faded black and white photographs of trammies, posing in groups outside their depots through the years, yellowing, esoteric handbooks on how to run a successful tram system, and wrinkled old destination blinds rescued from trams. The tram depots used to be highly sociable places. Between 1933 and 1937, a team of musicians from Melbourne's trams formed the Australian Champion Harmonica Band. Every depot could field at least a few football teams.

At Malvern, the museum's caretaker is a retired former secretary of the Tramways Union, 69-year-old Norm Maddocks, who guards the priceless collection like an irritable old hawk. If a fire, heaven forbid, raced through the archives, one of the nation's great private museum collections and a priceless record of Melbourne's history would be lost. No one, least of all the bosses at the Public Transport Corporation, has ever offered to install a sprinkler system, let alone properly house the collection.

Since childhood, Maddocks, whose father was a tram driver, has collected treasures of tram memorabilia that depict not merely the system's development but also Melbourne's.

"I started on the pick and shovel and worked my way up to be the secretary of the union," Maddocks says, hitching up his beltless trousers for the umpteenth time. "They were excellent years. The comradeship was wonderful. The system's unique, you know."

"It was begun in the late 1880s with horse-drawn vehicles. The streets were built to cater for the trams. It was recognised here how trams could move people better than buses," he explains.

"I feel for trams – when you travel on one, you sense the pride of the city. And, of course, as a Melburnian you know which kind of tram is coming without looking, just by listening to the noise it makes."

FROM BOURKE Street in the city, on a half-empty Z-class tram, the latest model, it takes about an hour to travel north to the lower middle-class suburb of Bundoora, the longest journey on the system. The conductor is Hobart-born Janelle Evans who, like most of her colleagues, is friendly and courteous. The "connies" of Melbourne have become symbols of reassurance.

"The passengers on this line are varied," she says. "You get the snobs who don't want to know you because you're just a trammie, people you can have a great conversation with, and then some real roughnecks who you wouldn't bother talking to. A tram, as opposed to a bus, brings out the best in people. There's a couple of passengers I look forward to seeing. I always used to have a chat with one woman in her 60s, no matter how many passengers were on the tram."

On this line you realise that three days ▶

FOR WHOM THE TRAM BELLS TOLL

on Melbourne's trams is not merely a journey through a city but, in a sense, an odyssey through cultures. On the way up to Coburg North, where the wives and girlfriends of prisoners are delivered daily to the front gate of Pentridge jail, the passenger travels through Arabic Melbourne, where men wear flowing headdresses and finger worry beads and heavily clothed women project a strict economy of visible flesh.

On the way to Wattle Park, the tram passes through Vietnamese Melbourne at Richmond, where the nasal chirp peculiar to the language reverberates along with the loud crinkle of plastic shopping bags full of fresh vegetables. Every tram line you take, Melbourne being Melbourne, can be through Greek Melbourne.

EARLY ON a Sunday morning at Ascot Vale, we meet a family of five English migrants: David Irving, his wife Sheila and daughters Amanda, 23, Joanne, 21 and Kristina, 19. Four of them work on the trams and the other drives a bus, but used to drive a tram. The Hills Hoist at the Irving home is laden daily with garments in the distinctive tramways' green.

The Ascot Vale depot is on the Essendon line, where Italian-born Lou Di Gregorio, the secretary of the Tramways Union, worked for many years as a driver and conductor. He came to Australia in the 1960s and soon became one of the thousands from all over the world who have found work on the tramways.

Back at South Melbourne, a young tram driver, Sarah Pears, a



trained photographer, has devoted much of her free time over the past six months to photographing in their homes ethnic tram workers from myriad backgrounds.

Although the tramways are a mobile melting pot, union official Bruno Rendino, who represents tram maintenance workers, believes that prejudice still exists.

"The tramways are still great employers of migrants," he says. "But the migrants who can't speak English still get the bum jobs. Certain depots still do have a bit of racial antagonism. At the moment it's the Indians and Sri Lankans who are copping it. Before them it was the Vietnamese."

It was decades after Lou Di Gregorio migrated to Australia that he became the mastermind of one of the country's most sensational strikes and a media identity.

A proud smile appears on Di Gregorio's face when the walkout is mentioned. He happily takes responsibility for the idea of the strike and marvels at the extraordinary images that it provided.

When the State Government threatened to shut off the power to the system during the conductors' dispute in January 1990, Di Gregorio ordered members to drive trams to the Central Business District to blockade the city. Ultimately, the jobs of the conductors, which were under threat, were saved.

Di Gregorio, shadowed by a burly though reasonably jovial minder, is aboard a tram heading back to the city, retracing the route he travelled back and forth for a couple of decades.

"We take the punters to the races on this line," he says, his Italian accent from the village of Pescara still largely intact. "They're never happy when they get back on the tram at the end of the day, especially if they've lost money. Along this route you pass the Essendon football ground, three shopping centres, the hospital and Moonee Valley Racecourse. You end up at Victoria Markets. I can still drive if I want to - I can just ask the driver to give me the tram and I take over."

IT'S 9 AM on a weekday and the Victorian Minister for Transport, Peter Spyker, is aboard a W-class tram travelling along Collins Street from his office near Spencer Street to Parliament House at the other end of town. Anywhere else this bald figure, dressed in a cheapish beige suit, might be dismissed as an odd-bod, someone upon whom other passengers might look askance. But someone as off-beat as Spyker seems appropriate as the man appointed to control Melbourne's tramways.

He, too, is a migrant who has found a job on the trams - well, indirectly. He came to Australia from the Netherlands when he was 13 years old and still bears a faint Dutch accent. Interrupting our conversation to chat with passengers, he agrees that it is difficult to run a system imbued with such emotion. "Who was that bloke?" a child asks his teenage brother. "He's the Minister for Transport - don't you know anything?"

EVERY CITY has its own distinctive sound: Paris its car horns, Beijing its bicycle bells, Bangkok its deafening hum of relentless traffic. But Melbourne's urban noise is somehow soothing, and not confined just to the city centre, for the noise of trams trundling along suggests some semblance of stability. At the end of three days riding them, you realise that Melbourne's rapport with its 633 trams is not just sentimental, it's poignant.

The removal of the trams would be akin to removing a vital organ, though such an idea was crushed long ago. They're even extending that giant spider's web of wire, taking trams to the outskirts of the city, as the burghers of other cities around the world, whose streets were once graced with trams, fantasise about reviving a system half as marvellous as Melbourne's. □

Anthony Dennis is a writer for *The Sydney Morning Herald*. His last story was on Griffith.

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