

LISTENING TO A TRAIN WRECK: A WARRNAMBOOL DRAMA IN SOUND¹

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In the early autumn of 1897, a passenger train derailed between Warrnambool and Allansford in the Western District of Victoria. Thankfully no one was badly harmed. This local scandal reverberated through the community and encouraged a range of responses. The dramatic clamour of colonial modernity literally coming off the rails provoked a local impresario to recreate this event in sound. The Warrnambool sound recordist Thomas Rome's construction of the train accident is one of the earliest surviving Australian-made recordings. In the spirit of Greg Dening, This paper offers a close re-reading of this micro-historical fragment, emphasising the motley of associations that accrued to early performances of recorded sound in colonial Australia. Thomas Rome's recording provoked listeners to attend deeply to their own local soundscapes. This hints at a longer trajectory for the concept of 'field recording' than is conventionally ascribed, and complicates neat distinctions between scholarly and creative approaches to history-writing.

On the evening of 11 March 1897, a small incident occurred near Warrnambool, in the Western District of Victoria. Sometime after eleven p.m., shortly after leaving Allansford, an express train to Port Fairy came off the rails and plunged some thirty feet down the embankment. The engine driver and fireman both suffered minor injuries and many people received a bad shaking and a shock, but thankfully no one was seriously injured. Life went on. The world was not changed. This was a profoundly local incident, a rude interruption of the everyday. We can imagine the story unfolding locally, spreading from the lips of shaken friends or family, along the well-trodden lines of gossip in a small town, perhaps over a shop counter or in church, across a farm fence or in the schoolroom.

Now it just so happened that the Warrnambool Industrial and Arts Exhibition, a local agricultural show in the proud little coastal town, was in its final week at the time of this train accident. Performing at this show was an ambitious

¹ I would like to express my thanks to Julie Fedor and Joy Damousi for inviting me to present at the 2019 Greg Dening Memorial Lecture, and to Donna Merwick for her generous support of this wonderful annual celebration of Greg Dening's work. I am also grateful to my co-presenters Fallon Mody and Nat Cutter, with whom I was honoured to share the stage.

young man named Thomas Rome. Rome was conducting demonstrations of the Edison phonograph, a sound recording machine less than a decade old, and still charged with the heady possibilities of a new medium. With the help of a group of friends and the touring percussionist George Twentyman, Thomas Rome recreated the sounds of this train accident on a wax cylinder record, in time to display his record to the Warrnambool public on the second last day of the Exhibition. This was a performative act of history-making, an idiosyncratic attempt to make public sense of the shared recent past, an act of what we might today call ‘contemporary history’.²

In the spirit of meditation on the theatrics of listening and sounding that form the theme for this year’s Greg Dening Memorial Lecture, I would like us to listen together to this ancient, bewildering, strange piece of audio, and to try to make sense of it on its own terms, in its own dynamic present: a world unfolding, a train permanently crashing. Despite this being the second-oldest surviving Australian recorded sound, to date this record has received almost no critical attention. The only serious account of this recording comes from the sound archivist Chris Long in 1985, and this is a survey of the recently discovered archival material, not an analysis of its historical meaning.³ As such, I think it is high time to revisit this recording in light of recent developments in thinking about sound and society in Australia. I want to push this record as far as it can go.

The exercise we are about to embark on together is also a test of a foundational precept of sound studies — the historicity and cultural situatedness of listening.⁴ Early sound recordings are too often dismissed by historians of sound recording as having very little interpretive value, as impossibly degraded, low-fidelity predecessors to the real business that unfolded in later decades.⁵ But those are the biases of late twentieth century ears. As we shall see, no account I have found of Thomas Rome’s train cylinder questions the clarity and realism of its representation; contemporaries took it seriously on its own terms, as what it purported to be: a representation of a recent train crash.

² Greg Dening, *Performances* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1996), 36.

³ Chris Long, ‘Australia’s Earliest Known Recordings: Thomas Rome’s Collection’, *International Association of Sound Archives (IASA) Australia Branch Newsletter* 19 (1985): 5–21. Long also produced an audio documentary about Thomas Rome’s life and work. See Long, ‘The Fabulous Phonograph of Thomas Rome,’ cassette tape, National Film and Sound Archive (hereafter NFA), 455235.

⁴ Michael Bull, ‘Introduction: Sound Studies and the Art of Listening’, in *Routledge Companion to Sound Studies*, ed. Michael Bull (London: Routledge, 2018), xx–xxii.

⁵ Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2003), 1–29.

This sound comes to us as cargo from the past, and we do it justice by listening to it on its own terms.⁶ This is as clear a reminder as we can have that the Australians of Warrnambool in the 1890s did not listen in the same way that you or I do; we cannot impose our own judgements on this recording.

I hope this is not asking too much of you, dear reader, but I invite you now to break out of the confines of this page for just a few minutes. It is time to let some sound into this journal's pages. Please pause to listen to the digitised recording of Thomas Rome's train wreck cylinder record before continuing. It is freely available online.⁷ Doing so will not only help to make sense of the discussion that follows, but it also helps to enforce a sense of the reality and dignity, as well as the radical otherness, of long past listening states. I hope Greg Dening would approve of this gesture. The frisson of the past — of a history — is available to stream through SoundCloud. Thank you.

Let's break down what we just heard. We first hear a rudimentary announcement, of the kind that appeared at the start of commercial cylinder recordings in these early years. We hear someone speaking but they're too far away from the phonograph's horn — garbled rustles are all that is left of a once strong voice, confirmation of the amateur quality of this recording.

We're now on the train platform. A railway staffer calls out the train's destination — Warrnambool — and collects tickets. Then some more indistinct chatter on the platform. We hear the blast of whistles and the rhythmic thuds of the drums, simulating the train beginning to roll over the sleepers and picking up speed.

As the train picks up steam, we hear a voice say 'Goodnight, Heaver'. This is a reference to the acting curator of the Warrnambool museum at the time, standing in for J.F. Archibald of *Bulletin* fame, whose time was often spent elsewhere on decidedly more bohemian pursuits. Mr. Heaver, who was on board during that fateful night, reportedly received the 'worst shaking' of all the passengers.⁸ This is the first of several pointed, and pretty cheeky, digs at local personalities in Thomas Rome's record.

⁶ Dening, *Performances*, 46.

⁷ 'Warrnambool Railway Accident (c.1897) by Thomas Rome', National Film and Sound Archive of Australia, <https://www.nfsa.gov.au/collection/curated/warrnambool-railway-accident-c1897-thomas-rome> [accessed 1 December 2019].

⁸ Long, 'Australia's Earliest Known Recordings', 13.

Soon things start to go wrong; we hear a whistle blast and a series of dramatic thuds as the train careens down the embankment. We then hear a woman's scream, a vocal utterance startling in its directness. Then a cantankerous man's voice: 'What the deuce is up?' Then a clamour of voices. Another woman screams, and we hear an observation that the train has left the line. We hear people asking their compatriots if they are alright. 'Let me out!' one man demands. 'Oh, where is my baby?' moans another.

We then hear a short conversation between two men. 'What's the matter, Tommy?' one voice asks. Perhaps Tommy is Thomas Brown, the train's driver. 'Oh, a little scratch', the staunch 'Tommy' replies.

The following exchange is impenetrable to me without the help of an insider, in the form of a description of the record in the Warrnambool *Echo*, one of the two local papers.⁹ 'Hello Greeny, are you hurt?' asks a voice. 'Greeny' is Mr. W. Greenwood, the well-known coach of the Warrnambool cricket club. The voice of Greeny responds 'Not much Dicky', but then adds, 'I've lost me hair!' Another voice then counsels Greenwood to send for the doctor about the missing hair.¹⁰

This is a kind of 'great cat massacre' moment for me: *why is this situation funny?* These people sound familiar to us, but we are dealing with a different cultural world, eavesdropping on a conversation we're only half familiar with.¹¹ Regrettably my search for more information about Mr. Greenwood's hair has thus far come up blank. Did he wear a badly disguised toupee or comb-over? Is this a mirthful send-up of the man's vanity? Or is it the opposite; is he known for a Byronesque piratical charm, is he, like Samson, nothing without his hair? We are not privy to this local meaning, an in-joke that describes the contours of its audience.

We then hear a final couple of screams, and lastly a shout of 'Murder!' before the cranking of the phonograph cylinder begins to wind to a wheezing, exhausted close. Hang on: murder? Let's think about this. What was going on here? Was this scripted? But ... we *know* that no one was murdered! No one was even badly injured! Is someone getting carried away in the hilarity of the moment? In its own present, in the world of the recording, this single, wildly out-of-place word opens up an interpretive moment of some depth.

⁹ *Echo* (Warrnambool), 18 March 1897.

¹⁰ As a side note, 'Dicky' could perhaps be Richard Scully, the train's fireman.

¹¹ Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 77–8.

Let's try to imagine the recording context, a tight scrum of men and women, recordist and drummer, packed closely around the horn of the phonograph to record this scene. At this time, early in the acoustic recording era, records were made by shouting and playing instruments directly down the very same funnel that would later be used to reproduce them.¹² We do not know whether the actual Mr. Greenwood, Tommy Brown or Richard Scully were present, or whether instead, as I suspect, these are impressions, pantomimes of the town's sober local personages given by a more irreverent youthful crowd. I imagine this was a situation of intense hilarity and fun, joy at the collaborative sonic creation in a new medium. Maybe everyone collapsed in laughter as soon as Thomas Rome's cranking of the record finished. We also do not know how many 'takes' this took, how many times the recording was ruined by someone flubbing their lines or bursting out laughing, necessitating Thomas Rome shaving another layer of wax off the blank cylinder and starting again. Rome's personal papers are silent on all of this. All we have is the audio, a grainy echo. This situation forces us to imagine the circumstances of the record's creation and intended reception.

More broadly, what else do we hear? We hear accents that are refreshingly direct — these are vernacular utterances, the voices of ordinary country people rather than more formal performances. We also hear in-jokes, clearly intended to be understood and provoke a shared chuckle among the community. The most time of all is devoted to the sounds of people taking care of each other. What's the matter? Are you hurt?

One of the most significant messages I take from this acoustic reconstruction, silly as it may be, is one of community. It makes me think of the observations made by Ross Gibson in his 2014 Greg Dening Memorial Lecture, regarding another kind of media practice in rural Victoria. Discussing the multigenerational cinematography of the Teasdale family of the Wimmera, Gibson argues that the Teasdales' creation and circulation of media within and across their community belies the existence of a 'suffusing, integrative urge' that pulses beneath the skin of the countryside, a sense of connectivity and relationality between people and place, and people and people, deepened, shaped and mediated by intimate sensory practices, by a love and respect for each other and for the environment.¹³ I get something similar from Thomas

¹² For an account of early sound recording that restores a sense of the Victorian antiquity of the medium, see John M. Picker, *Victorian Soundscapes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), Ch.4.

¹³ Ross Gibson, "'Who Knows the Weather?': The Memory of Greg Dening', *Melbourne Historical Journal* 43.1 (2015): 12.

Rome's record. While at times the voices are almost irretrievably jumbled and incoherent, the message is nevertheless unmistakably vivid.

I also think that Thomas Rome's selection of subject matter tells us something larger about his soundscape. A soundscape is simultaneously an acoustic environment and a way of listening: it is a shared cultural response to the sounds of a place.¹⁴ To get at this, we need to put this recording in its wider contexts. For Thomas Rome was neither the first, nor the most influential, demonstrator of the phonograph in Australia. He came along near the end of a heady phase of phonographic display and performance. Since the invention of the so-called 'improved' phonograph in 1888, a motley cast of self-styled impresarios, somewhere between scientific lecturers and magicians, toured the Australian colonies relentlessly. They followed well-established theatrical networks and introduced widely dispersed audiences to the science and spectacle of sound recording. This wave of displays immediately preceded the full-blown commercialisation of recorded sound, which was substantially in place by about 1905.¹⁵

Like Thomas Rome, each of the early demonstrators played meaningfully with the evocation of place and space through sound. Remember, this was a moment long before the primary meaning of recorded sound lay in the reproduction of music; this future was amorphous, one of openness to the world's soundscape, to connection and communication.¹⁶ There were many possible futures.¹⁷ The early demonstrators would routinely record such iconic local sounds as church bells, town criers, street music and famous voices, some of the most culturally charged sounds in the environment, and present them back to audiences that responded with wonder and delight. Further, the ongoing accumulation and curation of a library of recordings — here, listen to Auckland's cathedral bell! Now the Adelaide Salvation Army Band! Now the Mayor of Ballarat! — presented evidence of an ordered, systematic, familiar world to colonial listeners; the socially significant sounds of this wider colonial world were readily apprehensible, modern, and affectively charged.¹⁸

¹⁴ Emily Thompson, *The Soundscape of Modernity: Architectural Acoustics and the Culture of Listening in America, 1900–1933* (Cambridge, MA & London: MIT Press, 2004), 1–2.

¹⁵ Henry Reese, "'The World Wanderings of a Voice': Exhibiting the Cylinder Phonograph in Australasia', in *A Cultural History of Sound, Memory and the Senses*, ed. Joy Damousi and Paula Hamilton (New York & London: Routledge, 2017), 25–39.

¹⁶ Henry Reese, 'Colonial Soundscapes: A Cultural History of Sound Recording in Australia, 1880–1930' (PhD Thesis, University of Melbourne, 2019), Ch.3.

¹⁷ Denning, *Performances*, 125.

¹⁸ Reese, "'The World Wanderings of a Voice'", 33–4.

As media historian Lisa Gitelman has argued, these performances were

local experiences ... yet they had extralocal significance. Like the exchange columns and wire stories of the local press, phonograph exhibitions pointed outward, toward an impersonal public sphere comprised of similarly private subjects ... In their very recordability, people were connected. Audience members might imagine themselves as part of an up-to-date, recordable community.¹⁹

What does it mean to understand yourself as 'recordable'? Did 1890s listeners wonder at the onrush of a new sounding world? My research suggests as much.

Thomas Rome's record takes on additional resonance if we also understand it as belonging to a well-established, but now largely forgotten genre of early phonograph record known as the 'descriptive specialty'. Descriptive specialties were sonic reconstructions of famed and historic, but often profoundly ordinary, everyday events, from the battles of the Spanish-American War to a busy London street. They remained popular well into the interwar period. Countless examples survive and they are fascinating. Today these records often have a somewhat madcap, almost cartoonish quality to them, but these representations of acoustic reality were taken seriously in their time.²⁰

The descriptive specialty demonstrated the capacities of the new medium to its audiences — listen, we can do this with sound! — but it also worked to inscribe a set of affective associations. The realism of the descriptive specialty emphasises media historian Jonathan Sterne's understanding of the early phonograph as a 'partial machine', one whose meanings were not inherent but which were completed as a dyad, by the active engagement of their audiences.²¹ 1890s accounts of descriptive specialties demonstrate an intense desire or urge, on the part of audiences, to hear the events as real, or to invest them with meaning as though they were.²² I have found no report of Thomas Rome's train wreck cylinder that questions the success of his representation, the felicity of his sonic performance, its convincingness or fidelity to the

¹⁹ Lisa Gitelman, *Always Already New: Media, History, and the Data of Culture* (Cambridge, MA & London: MIT Press, 2006), 34.

²⁰ Elodie A. Roy, 'Worn Grooves: Affective Connectivity, Mobility and Recorded Sound in the First World War', *Media History* 24, no.1 (2018): 31–2.

²¹ Sterne, *Audible Past*, 247.

²² Gustavus Stadler, 'Never Heard Such a Thing: Lynching and Phonographic Modernity', *Social Text* 28, no.1 (2010): 87, 92, 95; Reese, "'The World Wanderings of a Voice'", 32–3.

supposed *real* sound of a train wreck; rather we see a willingness to take this record seriously on its own local terms.

So we have taken a deep dive into one attempt to recreate a socially significant local sound, in a busy field full of attempts to recreate socially significant local sounds. By exploring the wider circles of resonance around Thomas Rome's phonographic practice, I have striven to 'compose him in place' and in his 'present-participled experience'.²³ While Thomas Rome's performance was intensely local, I have suggested that it also gestured toward the wider colonial soundscape, and to Warrnambool's place therein. As Katie Holmes and Kylie Mirmohamadi have argued of settler constructions of the Victorian Mallee, it is important to explore 'how configurations of local place, colonial and national space intersect and interact'.²⁴ So, yes, on one level this construction of a minor train accident only makes sense if we know those affected thereby, poor shaken Mr. Heaven and hairless Mr. Greenwood. But on another level, what is being constructed here is a knowing contribution to an integrative national tale in sound, one of the emplacement of technological and industrial modernity in the bush.

Thomas Rome's recording practice thus represents the construction or ordering of an ideal colonial soundscape, as opposed to other, alternative soundscapes, with clear settler colonial implications. This, his work seems to say, is how a thriving, prosperous country town *should* and *did* sound, this is how our community sounds when brought together in a moment of crisis. It is an auditory snapshot of a bustling settler community, confident in its modernity and progress. Perhaps even when things go wrong, when the train goes off the rails, we can still hear something of the cultural power at work behind the sense of listening. If we listen through the patina of noise and grit and time, and take early sound recording seriously in its own present, then I think that we can learn a lot.

²³ Denning, *Performances*, 17.

²⁴ Katie Holmes and Kylie Mirmohamadi, 'Howling Wilderness and Promised Land: Imagining the Victorian Mallee, 1840–1914', *Australian Historical Studies* 46, no.2 (2015): 193.