

# GEORGE FRANCIS TRAIN: THE REAL PHILEAS FOGG?

The wealthy Boston-born businessman, George Francis Train, laid claim to being the inspiration of Phileas Fogg as he had made his own well-publicised trip around the world in 80 days two years before *Around the World in Eighty Days* appeared in *Le Temps*. The globetrotting Train had established shipping routes between Liverpool and Australia, introduced trams to Birkenhead and London, and, at the time of his journey, had recently been involved in the building of the transcontinental Union Pacific Railroad in the US. When Verne's book was published he protested: 'He stole my thunder. I'm Phileas Fogg.'



Promotional poster of Train, showing key moments from his life.



Pair of Street Railway Carriages patented by George Francis Train passing the Marble Arch in London, 1861 (Science Museum Pictorial/Science and Society Picture Library).

Unlike Fogg, Train travelled westward, starting out in New York and stopping in San Francisco, Japan, Hong Kong, Saigon, Singapore, Marseilles – via the Suez Canal – and Liverpool, arriving back in New York. His reckoning of an 80-day journey excluded the period he spent in a French jail for his involvement with the local Communards during their clashes with government troops – he had wrapped himself in the Tricolour and dared the soldiers to fire upon him. Like Fogg, he paid for private transportation when necessary and he had his own faithful companion, his long-suffering private secretary George Pickering Bemis. Train made two more round the world trips taking 67 days in 1890 and 60 days in 1892.

Train was born in 1829, orphaned at four years old, sent to Liverpool at the age of 21 to manage his family's steam packet business there and headed to Melbourne, Australia in 1853, where he worked as a shipping agent, merchant and foreign correspondent. A flamboyant character, an entertaining speaker and a brilliant self-publicist, 'Citizen Train', as he dubbed himself, supported radical causes, campaigned for women's suffrage and was a US presidential candidate. He was a man of contradictions, described by his biographer Allen Foster as 'a capitalist, communist, royalist, revolutionary, genius, lunatic, visionary prophet, fool, pacifist, warmonger...'.

In 1872 Train was jailed for four months on obscenity charges for his backing of the feminist Victoria Woodhull, an advocate of free love. The district attorney ordered him to be tried for insanity and although the jury declared him sane, his behaviour became

increasingly eccentric in his later years. Having signed all his assets over to his wife and taken up residence in a cluttered room at the Mill Hotel, he was said to have held Sunday 'services' in New York's Union Square for what he called the Church of the Laughing Jackass, passed out dimes in Central Park and refused to talk with anyone but children and animals. He died in 1904.



Portrait of George Francis Train (Science Museum Library/Science and Society Picture Library).

Although Verne never referred to Train as a source for Fogg, he may well have heard of his exploits, as it was Verne's friend, the elder Alexandre Dumas, who had helped to secure the American's release from the French prison. Another American businessman who may also have been a model for Phileas was William Perry Fogg who published a book in 1872 called *Round the*

*World*, an account in letters of his world trip undertaken between 1869 and 1871. Again, Verne never acknowledged this connection.