

Railways in Scotland

1825 Unit 3 reviewed

This is the latest in Francis Tresham's *1825* project and expands the area covered by the game into Scotland. The board stretches from Middlesbrough (at the bottom right) to Fort William (at the top left) with a small extension to include Aberdeen. Of course, *1825 Unit 3* is also a game in its own right – a two-player 18xx game. And it is as a stand-alone game that I'll write about it here.

First, I'd better introduce 18xx games to those who've not come across them before. 18xx games are, essentially, share trading games about the early days of the railways and each is set in a particular geographical area. Players aim to make the most money from their initial capital by buying and selling shares in railway companies. The companies – run by the biggest shareholder – generate income from the network of railway lines they build between towns and cities. There are a lot of tactical ploys in developing the railway networks to hinder or help other companies. Opportunities change, too, as the game goes through several phases of technological progress. Players gain dividends from their shareholdings and gain or lose as the value of a company's shares goes up or down. The relative emphasis on railway-building and share-dealing varies from game to game, but it is often possible to win without ever running a railway.

Never running a railway is not something that's going to happen in *1825 Unit 3*. Initially, two railway companies are available: the North British Railway and the Caledonian Railway. Both start in Glasgow, with one heading north and the other south. This gives each the opportunity to build its own network, apart from competing over the potentially very lucrative connection to Edinburgh. My



experience to date is that one player starts one company, the other starts the second. Both will then build their networks with an eye to capturing Edinburgh when this becomes possible.

The third company, the Glasgow and South Western Railway, also starts in Glasgow, though heading west. Not surprisingly, it has to turn north or south pretty sharply! Gaining control of this company seems to be key to the game. It will give one player control of two companies, which can complement each other's routes. It also allows this player the tactical options of transferring cash and assets between the two. The game has a relatively simple stock market, so there isn't the scope for manipulating share prices that exists in some 18xx games. With only three major companies in the game, it's more useful to have two companies running than to asset strip and dump one of them.

There are, however, three "minor companies" as well. These give players more options. First off, they are opportunities for investment and profit, of course. But they can also support the major companies. The rules for the minor companies are more restrictive, which reduces the tactical manoeuvres available. However, whichever player misses out on control of the G&SWR will certainly want a minor company to enhance their position. Whether all three will come in to play is debatable – the limits of capital and shareholdings generally stop this.

As the game proceeds, the networks integrate into one and provide all the major companies with the opportunity to generate plenty of cash. As with most 18xx games, another important part of the game is knowing when to retain a company's earnings to provide the capital for further expansion – at the cost of reducing the share price. A player who does this too late will find that the game is over before they reap the benefits. Not doing it at all risks losing out on the most lucrative stage of the game.

I thought at first that the two-player format might make this game a useful introduction to the world of 18xx games. In practice, however, the two-player format is particularly unforgiving. Any mistake by one player means an immediate gain for their opponent. Thus I feel that *Unit 3*'s place (as a stand-alone game) is as a concentrated, head-to-head struggle for more experienced 18xx players. Particularly those who prefer competition between railways to wheeling and dealing on the stock market.

1825 Unit 3 was designed by Francis Tresham and published by Tresham Games. It is a strategy board game for 2 players that takes at least 4 hours to play or can be combined with other *1825* units to enable more to play. It is available in specialist games shops in the UK.

Pevans rates it 7/10 on his highly subjective scale.

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