

Big Dreams, Big Deals: Americans Relentlessly Shaped The Land Into Their Own Image

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Recommended Citation

Hardy, James D. (2001) "Big Dreams, Big Deals: Americans Relentlessly Shaped The Land Into Their Own Image," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 3 : Iss. 2 .

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol3/iss2/5>

Review

BIG DREAMS, BIG DEALS

Americans relentlessly shaped the land into their own image

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Spring 2001

Ambrose, Stephen E. *Nothing Like It in the World*. Simon & Schuster Books, 2000-09-01. ISBN 684846098

This review is also available under the following title:

The Fabulous History of the Dismal Swamp Company: A Story of George Washington's Times

Make no small plans, ran British political wisdom, as they lack the power to move men's souls. Europeans in America took that advice to heart. From fountains of youth to cities of gold and continental fur trading empires, America stimulated gigantic dreams. Nothing seemed too large for ultimate accomplishment or too improbable for stupendous profit. These habits of thought, begun with exploration and discovery, continued into the 18th and 19th centuries, and are the common subject of two major works: Charles Royster's book on land speculation, **The Fabulous History of the Dismal Swamp Company**, and Stephen E. Ambrose's volume on the transcontinental railroad, **Nothing Like It in the World**.

The huge plans that both these books describe involved the exploitation of America's most valuable resource: land. The Dismal Swamp Company wished to drain the swamp, cut its trees, settle farmers on its soil, and dig a canal to connect the reclaimed lands to the Norfolk market. The Central Pacific and Union Pacific railroad companies planned to span the continent, open up the West to settlement, farming, timbering, and mining, and connect all America to the great markets in Chicago and New York. Both projects were undertaken with vastly inadequate capital and involved costs far beyond even pessimistic initial projections.

But the differences between the Dismal Swamp Company and the transcontinental railroad were more important than the similarities. The Dismal Swamp Company suffered from the use of slave labor, dated engineering technology, little of the governmental support vital to so large an undertaking, and management that was exceptionally inept and indolent. The transcontinental railroad benefited from substantial government help, had a free and disciplined labor force trained in teamwork by the recent war, enjoyed effective management, and utilized the latest steam-powered technology. Not surprisingly, the transcontinental railroad was completed in seven years, while the Dismal Swamp project lingered for years with little progress.

The Dismal Swamp Company was put together by a politically powerful coterie of interrelated Virginia aristocrats in 1763, though the concept had been around since a proposal from Colonel William Byrd in 1728. But the idea persisted, and on May 25, 1763, the Dismal Swamp Company presented a petition, with 151 signers, but only 12 partners, for a grant of the swamp. All of the partners were Virginia aristocrats or British merchants to whom the former owed money. George Washington was among the fortunate dozen. All assumed they would make a fortune. But things did not go well. The partners resisted sinking money or slave labor into logging, draining, fencing, and settling the swamp; they desired immediate profits. As the years passed with no effective or systematic exploitation, war and revolution disturbed Virginia, debt went unpaid, aristocratic families slid into bankruptcy, North Carolina poachers cut timber, and only during the administration of James Madison were any dividends paid. It was not an inspiring saga.

Royster has narrated this huge tapestry of domestic and public life across five generations of Virginians with affection and generosity, using the technique developed by Sir Lewis Namier in *The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III* (Macmillan, 1929). Namier argued that English politics, confined to a smallish group of aristocrats, did not deal primarily with ideologies, ideals, or issues but instead revolved around the familial and social connections of the Members of Parliament along with their financial, business, and agricultural interests. Virginia politics was also the activity of aristocrats connected by marriage, by a similar interest in land and tobacco, by mutual investments in numerous land speculations in the West, and by vast debts owed here and abroad. They possessed the right connections to enjoy inclusion in land schemes, to carry debt for generations, to serve in public office, and to make advantageous marriages. Royster traces these connections, describing the marriages, births,

deaths, bankruptcies, inheritances, offices, protested bills of exchange, and lawsuits. A huge cast populates the book, but two are central to this chronicle of well-connected cousins and in-laws: Mary Willing Byrd who died in 1814 and was related to virtually all of the Americans involved in the Dismal Swamp Company, and Samuel Gist, dead in 1815, a British merchant who held paper on virtually all of the Virginians involved in the Company. Debts, dreams, and generations, all written in the elegiac tones of a minor key.

Move ahead two generations from Federal Virginia to the Civil War, which created modern America out of blood and freedom and industry and technology. In the decade or so between the Mexican War and what my grandmother called the *recent* unpleasantness, a transcontinental railroad became an increasingly imperative national necessity. But, while the discovery of gold in California drove the project on, the politics of slavery held it up. The impossibly vexed issue was location. Ought the road to run through slave states or through free states? The Civil War simplified this issue, as it did so many in mid-century American politics. The route explored by Major General Grenville Dodge and supported by Abraham Lincoln prevailed, and the eastern terminus of the Union Pacific would be Omaha, Nebraska. From the west, the Central Pacific began in Sacramento and crossed the Sierra Nevada range along a route pioneered by Theodore Judah. They would meet somewhere, sometime, somehow.

Problems of government legislation and raising private capital became the constant nagging worry of the railroad builders. In the west, the Central Pacific partners, California's "Big Four" of Leland Stanford, Charles Crocker, Collis P. Huntington, and Mark Hopkins, raised enough in promises, paper, and cash to spike the first rail on October 23, 1863. The Union Pacific, dominated by Thomas Durant and run by Grenville Dodge, had sufficient difficulties with money, rails, ties, engines, and stock (both rolling and paper) that it laid no track until July 1865.

Once started, the Union Pacific pushed west along Dodge's route, spurred by the need to collect as much in government subsidies as possible. Corruptly managed by Durant, the road was a continuing miracle of technology, efficient engineering, and skilled labor. Trained to teamwork and industrial organization by the war, the free labor functioned superbly, if profanely. The work continued relentlessly, despite frequent wrecks that always produced casualties, in one of which "several ladies were badly mangled." Where towns were set up, temporary camps (cheerfully called "Hell on Wheels") appeared, containing taverns,

gambling dens, and brothels. Immensely hard work required occasional blow-outs. The Central Pacific, whose labor was largely Chinese, had different problems. One was food, which had to be Chinese, and a second was the mountains. But the workers cut tunnels through granite by hand, worked and lived in snow tunnels 10 feet deep, and slowly built the road over the mountains. In 1868 they broke through and began the push across Nevada to the east, toward the Union Pacific racing west.

On May 8, 1869, the two roads were joined at Promontory Point, Utah, in a celebration announced by telegraph to the entire country. In Salt Lake City, one John Taylor spoke about having been on the first railroad ever built, between Manchester and Liverpool. In one single lifetime . . .

Ambrose tells this tale of railroad building in terms of work, organization, discipline, and engineering, rather than the usual narrative of corruption, stock-jobbing, and influence peddling. He is interested in the terrain, the workers, and the engineers, and treats the transcontinental railroad as an heroic enterprise. He takes his tone from Vergil: "So hard and huge a task it was" to span the continent and bring together the new America. The railroads in the 19th century combined much of the best and the worst of America, and Ambrose concentrates on the best. Those looking to this powerfully written book for a standard screed against the robber barons will be disappointed; this book describes what makes America both an industrial and democratic success.

An English visitor to America, Charles William Janson, toured Virginia and the Dismal Swamp, and reported that "speculation" was "the life of the Americans." Attitudes had changed little between his visit in the 1790s and the 1860s, but America by then had acquired the capacity to translate huge dreams into technology and infrastructure, and entrepreneurs became rich while enriching the whole society. Royster and Ambrose describe these two eras in the American adventure, from when things could be dreamt but not done, to when the only limit was the dream itself.

James D. Hardy, Jr. is associate dean of the Honors College at Louisiana State University and has published several books on both history and literature, including one on baseball.