

A Most Magnificent Machine: America Adopts the Railroad, 1825-1862

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Review

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Miner, Craig *A Most Magnificent Machine: America Adopts the Railroad, 1825-1862*. University Press of Kansas, \$34.95 ISBN 978-0-7006-1755-5

Technological Advancement and Social Implications

Perhaps no technology remade antebellum America more than the railroad. The arrival of the first trains in the 1820s helped set in motion a transportation revolution that paved the way for great corporations, fostered new connections among different people, and enabled the United States to become an economic power by the end of the nineteenth century. Yet, as Craig Miner reminds us in this energetically written monograph, the iron horse also fundamentally redefined the lives of Americans beyond the commercial realm between 1825 and 1862.

To understand how railroads altered the social world of Americans, Miner relies on the unusually fertile literary culture that had blossomed in the United States by the 1820s. Through the magic of digital databases, he examines “about 400,000 articles from 185 distinct newspapers” and more “than 3,000 books and pamphlets on railroads from the early nineteenth century” (xiv). These sources allow him to paint a lively portrait of a nation searching for its footing in the Age of Steam. In the 1820s, the railroad seemed to promise wealth beyond imagining for eager investors and urban boosters who did what they could to draw trains home. By the 1830s, rail entrepreneurs dreamed of forging transportation networks that would bind the nation together and boost its economy. Not everyone, however, was optimistic about such prospects. In the face of credit defaults, the seemingly unshackled power of railroad corporations, horrific train accidents, and a constant specter of economic panic, many Americans questioned the wisdom of investing heavily in a transformative technology that they did not entirely understand. Still, these concerns did not halt the progress of the magnificent machine. By midcentury, ambitious planners north and south proposed building a transcontinental line that would annihilate distance and time,

linking the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. These grandiose plans never materialized until after the Civil War began. But one fact was clear. Even as Americans continued to argue over the deep social costs of railroading, they had adapted to trains by the 1860s.

The book's great strength is its inclusion of diverse editorial musings that show us just how conflicted many Americans felt when it came to antebellum railroads. Miner shares riveting snapshots of a society wrestling to document and comprehend the benefits and consequences of tracks and trains. His insightful discussion of early rail excursions, for example, demonstrates how the simplest acts involved in a railroad journey, such as boarding a locomotive or trying to enjoy a meal in a passenger car, often rattled travelers and left Americans generally uneasy about how this technological wonder would redefine their lives.

Miner's book also offers a judicious lesson to contemporary Americans wrestling to make sense of their own material world, one shaken terribly by the economic turmoil unleashed by the recent collapse of the housing market: your fears have a long lineage in the nation's history. Time and again, his detailed anecdotes demonstrate how wariness of corporate power run amok, government corruption, and shifty-eyed bankers was nothing new in 2008. He thus sheds fresh light on the nature of American capitalism generally, showing that people have long struggled to find a voice or express their concerns in shifting economic times.

Miner's book is not without problems. The stories he includes are often colorful and help illustrate how American editors and journalists struggled to explain the railroad and its place in the antebellum world. Too often, however, the author's reliance on the writings of highly educated, mostly white newspapermen who lived in the nation's major industrial cities raises questions about his claims to inclusiveness. He is careful to note that not every journalist agreed about the place of railroads in American life during the antebellum era. Yet his choice to focus so heavily on newspapers, books, and published pamphlets means that he rarely includes the words of disenfranchised African Americans, farmwomen, Irish laborers, dispossessed Indians, and other people who felt the impact of railroading before the Civil War, but who lacked access to the bully pulpit of the editor's desk.

At the same time, Miner's admirable ambition to tell a national story often has the effect of flattening his narrative. This general tendency is most apparent

in his discussion of southern railroading. He makes the sharp observation that southerners were simply not the economically backward rubes that many northerners (and many historians) believed; they were often just as eager as their fellow Americans to embrace the railroad before the Civil War. Yet he has little to say about how the all-encompassing institution of slavery shaped southern attitudes and how these attitudes, in turn, influenced railroading across the region. He points out, for example, that many southern states had an almost reflexive disdain for state or federal aid to build railroads. He does not, however, explain how this philosophical aversion to public investment may have been linked to broader fears about government meddling in the private affairs of slaveholders. In this case, Miner misses a chance to explore how the culture of the Old South may have actually stifled railroading in the region.

Even with such flaws, however, Miner tells an interesting tale about the impact of railroads on the nation and how Americans tried to embrace the benefits and navigate the social pitfalls of this bold, new technology. His book provides a nice beginning point for anyone fascinated by how the iron horse helped transform a fractious nation on the eve of Civil War.

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