

The Iron Way: Railroads, the Civil War, and the Making of Modern America

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Review

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Thomas, William G. *The Iron Way: Railroads, the Civil War, and the Making of Modern America*. Yale University Press, \$30.00 ISBN 978-0-300-14107-8

Revealing Technology's Role in Warfare

In *The Iron Way: Railroads, the Civil War, and the Making of Modern America*, William G. Thomas has deployed the latest technological tools of the early twenty-first century, those of digital history, to provide a nuanced and thought-provoking treatment of the most momentous technological development of the nineteenth century, the railroad. As the founding director of the Virginia Center for Digital History, he is well-suited to the task of applying the analytical tools of the digital age to examine the documentary record and elucidate the true complexity of the past. To this end, *The Iron Way* investigates the complementary and interrelated roles of the railroads and the Civil War in the creation of modern American society. His notion of modernity, however, is one in which contemporary Americans came to think of themselves as modern, as distinctly different from those who preceded them in earlier eras—different in their ability to move through space, different in their relationship with new technologies, and different in their ability to control and advance progress.

Thomas breaks his book into three parts. The first of these, "Tools," is devoted to the rise of the railroad in both sections of the country during the decade preceding the Civil War. In the South the new technology knit the disparate region into a coherent whole and worked to solidify and expand slavery as railroad companies bought or leased large numbers of slaves. In the North the railroad companies provided the foundation for a rapid expansion westward of the region's free labor society, putting northern society into direct competition with the ongoing expansion of the southern slave society. And in both sections, as Thomas points out elsewhere, Americans identified the railroad with progress and modernity, a tool for advancing their own version of American civilization, whether slave or free.

Next, the author turns to the intersection of war and technology in his book's second part, "Leviathan." Here, in five chapters that compose the bulk of the book, Thomas investigates the relationship between the Civil War and the railroads as well as their combined effect on American society. He begins this section by examining the role played by railroads in the coming of the secession crisis and the war's early months. He continues (in several chapters) with a discussion of how railroads influenced the war as commanders came to terms with the new technology and common soldiers and citizens alike experienced the conflict along the iron ways of the South. He pays particular attention to how what he calls the "South's second nature systems of rail, bridge, depot, and junction," slowly became the focus of Union military operations and gave the war its particular geographic focus (88). Thomas also traces how the areas of operation around the railroad lines, his so-called "railroad war zones," became centers of irregular warfare and African-American freedom. Since the southern railways were symbols of unification and modernity, their breakdown under the stresses of war marked the slow isolation and decline of the Confederacy, a process that accelerated late in the war with the rise of what Thomas dubs the "railroad strategy" of Ulysses Grant, William Sherman, and Philip Sheridan. In his final chapter on the war itself, Thomas describes how these three Union commanders, Sherman in particular, attempted to assert control over the Confederacy, its people, its landscape, and its second nature systems by following and controlling the railways.

In the third part of his book, "Vortex," Thomas devotes a single chapter to the postwar years. Here he examines the connections between the railroads and freedom for African Americans after emancipation. Railroads expanded the personal mobility of the freedpeople as they searched for distant loved ones separated from them by slavery, railroads provided work for many former slaves, and most importantly, they provided a contested space where the meaning and limits of black freedom were hashed out by conflicts between whites and blacks that established the parameters of postwar discrimination.

Thomas concludes his study with a brief epilogue covering the completion of the transcontinental railroad and its celebration. Here he returns to what is a frequent theme throughout the book: the modernity wrought by the railroads and the war. Together these two developments helped convince Americans that, through large and complex institutions wielding new technologies, nature could be conquered and made to serve human design.

In some ways, Thomas's book is an example of the best in historical scholarship today. It is an intriguing and thought-provoking book that enhances the current understanding of how modern America developed. Thomas has provided a subtle argument about the myriad complex social changes that can be driven by a new technology, the way it was used, and the way it was understood by those who used it. *The Iron Way*, however, is not without its flaws. There are some minor issues with the accompanying tables, which are located in an appendix at the back of the book rather than within the text where they are referenced. In a couple of instances, the tables do not display their data in such a way to support the points made in the text. For instance, on page 26, Thomas claims that "The two regions, the South and the Northwest, shared equally in the claims of vast progress" in railroad construction during the 1850s, and then he references Table 1. While the veracity of his statement is not in doubt, the table in question only compares railroad construction in the South and the entire North, with no accompanying breakdown for the Northwest. Presumably, the data could have been broken down to fully support the claim made in the text. Similarly, when discussing George McClellan's failure to grasp the importance of railroads during his 1862 Peninsular Campaign, Thomas notes that "'railroad' terms faded into almost total disuse" as the campaign progressed and then references Table 8 (91). This table, however, does not track the usage of railroad terms throughout the Peninsular Campaign; instead it compares the usage of these terms by Union officers in 1862 with that of 1864. But these problems appear to be only the result of how the data is presented, and as such they are only minor concerns.

Of greater import, but also more understandable given the book's focus, is what appears to be an occasional overemphasis on the significance and effect of the railroads. For instance, Thomas contends that the railroad war zones "witnessed new forms of violence in the desperate partisan resistance of the Confederates" (108). While Thomas is correct in his claim that the railroads became the location and targets of violence that was often outside the accepted usages of war in the mid-nineteenth century, this kind of partisan warfare itself was hardly new at the time of the American Civil War. Likewise, Thomas's discussion of Sherman's marches and Philip Sheridan's 1864 Valley Campaign seem to be skewed by his focus on the railroads. He argues that Sherman's goal on his marches was to destroy and then control the Confederacy's interior railroads, which were symbols of southern progress and modernity, but for Sherman the railroads were more a means to an end. He sought, first and

foremost, to undermine the southern commitment to the war by showing southerners that their government could not protect them while simultaneously depriving the Confederacy of the means necessary to prosecute the war. In that context, railroads were no more important than the military supplies or agricultural goods that Sherman's men either destroyed or consumed. At the same time, Thomas's characterization of Sheridan in 1864 as "seeking to raze hundreds of square miles in the Shenandoah Valley and capture its railroads," is directly at odds with the findings of historian Mark E. Neely, Jr., who demonstrates that the primary Union objective in that campaign was the defeat of Jubal Early's Confederate army (Mark E. Neely, Jr., *The Civil War and the Limits of Destruction*, Harvard University Press, 2007) (152). Thomas's mischaracterization of this campaign is particularly peculiar when one considers that in his reassessment of this campaign on page 110 of his book, Neely specifically lauded Thomas for pioneering a more accurate interpretation of Sheridan's operations in the valley with his essay in *The Shenandoah Valley Campaign of 1864* edited by Gary W. Gallagher (University of North Carolina Press, 2006). These flaws, however, may only represent differences of emphasis or interpretation and as such they do not detract considerably from the book's overall contribution.

In sum, William G. Thomas's *The Iron Way* asks penetrating questions and provides provocative answers about the role played by the railroads in the rise of a modern America. Not all will agree with his conclusions, but every historian of America interested in the Civil War or the years afterwards should be conversant with them.

Mark A. Smith is an associate professor of history at Fort Valley State University in central Georgia. His book, Engineering Security: The Corps of Engineers and Third System Defense Policy, 1815-1861 (University of Alabama Press, 2009), examines the national defense policy developed and implemented by the Corps of Engineers between the War of 1812 and the Civil War. He is currently in the preliminary stages of a study of Joseph Gilbert Totten, Chief Engineer from 1838 until 1864.