

Buried Dreams: The Hoosac Tunnel and the Demise of the Railroad Age

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Review

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Black, Andrew R. *Buried Dreams: The Hoosac Tunnel and the Demise of the Railroad Age.* Louisiana State University Press, 2020. HARDCOVER. \$34.95 ISBN 9780807173572 pp. 230.

In the antebellum decades, the Appalachian Mountains posed an immediate barrier to all efforts at knitting the commercial and population centers of the eastern seaboard to the opportunities of the open lands of the interior West. Within the confines of the young United States only one relatively easy route was available, up the Hudson River and across the Mohawk River valley, but even that pathway eventually required a monumental engineering effort in the Erie Canal. Elsewhere, there was the St. Lawrence River valley, but it was inconveniently mostly Canadian, episodically frozen, and replete with treacherous falls. Routes across Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Virginia presented all manner of technical and political problems as successive turnpikes, river improvements, canals, and railroads took decades to craft successful and reliable assaults of the ancient barrier. Much has been written of these efforts over the years, and of the antebellum mania for “internal improvements.” That coverage, however, tends to favor the stories connected to New York City, Philadelphia, and Baltimore, all rivals to Boston in linking to the vast interior.

Massachusetts was somewhat late to this process, as its colonial and early national commercial and financial development had been decidedly ocean-and export-oriented. The economic and political consequences of the War of 1812, new competition from fast-growing New York City, and a shift in national development away from export and toward internal production and consumption began to erode Boston’s once dominant role in the national economy. In *Buried Dreams*, Andrew R. Black chronicles the largely forgotten effort of Massachusetts to surmount the Berkshires and build a permanent link with the interior in order to retain the Commonwealth’s, and particularly the port of Boston’s economic prominence. This effort, the 4.75 mile-long Hoosac Tunnel, eventually took twenty-four years, ended over one hundred lives, and consumed more than \$20,000,000 in state funds. Born of a desire for

boundless western bounty, it never fulfilled the lofty expectations its supporters heaped upon it. Predicted by its early enthusiasts (tunnelites) to take but a few years, and presenting few if any engineering or geological challenges to complete, the tunnel proved its harshest and most persistent critics largely correct.

Black opens the book with a broad brush review of the market project that was Massachusetts, a project that was already fading by the 1820s accelerated by the completion of the Erie Canal. Believing (as so many did), that continued national economic significance would come from controlling its own pathway to the boundless traffic of the west, many in Massachusetts sought to build reliable railroad connections to the Hudson River. The Berkshires and parochialism sat athwart that possibility. By the mid-1840s, Boston had a direct rail connection to Albany, New York, but the route was controlled by two railroads that did not cooperate, had little interest in competing for the grain trade out of the West when more lucrative local traffic, and most importantly their shareholders and bond holders, sustained them and were disinclined to provide service in the commonwealth's northern tier. This line eventually became the Boston & Albany, and would eventually fall into the hands of Cornelius Vanderbilt's New York Central System.

The remainder of the book, while running generally chronologically from 1851 until the tunnel's completion in 1875, weaves a narrative from three broad themes. The first is political economy, in this case, the complicated story of both financing the tunnel's construction (largely through public funds to which was added some indirect private investment), and the nasty local politics of obtaining and preserving the commonwealth's support for the project. The second theme is the many engineering, technological, and managerial challenges that at several junctures halted the project and saw it nearly abandoned several times.

Black discusses the deeply fractured (like the mountain) political scene in Massachusetts before and after the Civil War. The project, utterly dependent on state aid, was a convenient target for those opposed to whomever was governor, or whichever faction of the Whig/Republican party was in power. Critics delighted in pointing out the vast gaps between the tunnelite's lofty rhetoric of moral and commercial uplift, and the political skullduggery and blatant corruption of the tunnelites desperate to keep the public spigot flowing. The deadly, slow, halting progress of construction only further fueled critics' anger. The critics were hardly above

blame, as most supported rival railroads that would eventually become the Boston & Albany, or were rank political opportunists.

As difficult as the political situation was, the engineering obstacles to the project were monumental. The mountain proved a nightmarish mishmash of incredibly hard granite, crumbly “porridge” stone, and areas where water flowed from the excavation faces by the thousands of gallons per hour. The tunnel could only be completed as the technology for tunnel excavation improved. The Hoosac tunnel provided ample incentive for desperate innovation and adaptation. Modern hard-rock excavation drilling techniques draw a direct lineage to the pneumatic drills eventually perfected for this tunnel. There were many mistakes along the way, including an unnecessary vertical shaft of over a thousand feet to open two new faces that became the site of the excavation’s deadliest accident. The engineering challenges did not end with the tunnel, but included miles of track on either side of the tunnel which witnessed repeated washouts and bridge collapses.

This is a charming book to read, the prose is crisp, and the excursions into subjects as diverse as the minutia of hard-rock drilling technology to the complicated factionalism of mid-19th century Massachusetts politics are deftly described. Black’s stated goal of lifting the Hoosac Tunnel from obscurity is largely successful. It is, however, quite an old book in its approach to historiography. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr, and George Rogers Taylor would have quite liked Black’s tale (and to be clear the reviewer did as well). For example, Black’s methodological approach is traditional top-down history—a tale of the engineers, elites, and politicians who desired the tunnel, but the several thousand workers, many immigrants, who toiled at the tunnel and its related works are largely ciphers. Workers gain names often only in the many horrifying tragedies of fire, collapse, and explosion that were part and parcel of tunneling in an age with limited respect for individual life. There is a wealth of recent social history on these workers and their families that would have enriched this book. A fine place to start would have been Ryan Dearing’s 2016 book, *The Filth of Progress*. While Black does set the saga of the Hoosac Tunnel’s construction within a larger tale of internal improvements, he does not engage with recent literature on the subject like that of John Lauritz Larson, relying instead on much older historiography.

Scholars will find little new to the work, aside from interesting insights into the resumes of figures like engineer Herman Haupt, and Republican firebrand Francis Bird, better-known for

other events and achievements. These criticisms notwithstanding, the non-specialist more generally interested in nineteenth-century transportation, or technology, or political economy will find much to enjoy in this book.

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