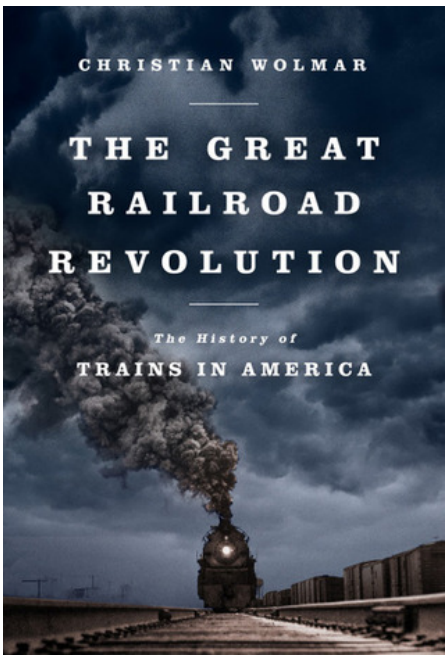

The Great Railroad Revolution: The History of Trains in America

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America was made by the railroads. The opening of the Baltimore & Ohio line—the first American railroad—in the 1830s sparked a national revolution in the way that people lived thanks to the speed and convenience of train travel. Promoted by visionaries and built through heroic effort, the American railroad network was bigger in every sense than Europe's, and facilitated everything from long-distance travel to commuting and transporting goods to waging war. It united far-flung parts of the country, boosted economic development, and was the catalyst for America's rise to world-power status.

Every American town, great or small, aspired to be connected to a railroad and by the turn of the century, almost every American lived within easy access of a station. By the early 1900s, the United States was covered in a latticework of more than 200,000 miles of railroad track and a series of magisterial termini, all built and controlled by the biggest corporations in the land. The railroads dominated the American landscape for more than a hundred years but by the middle of the twentieth century, the automobile, the truck, and the airplane had eclipsed the railroads and the nation started to forget them.

In *The Great Railroad Revolution*, renowned railroad expert Christian Wolmar tells the extraordinary story of the rise and the fall of the greatest of all American endeavors, and argues that the time has come for America to reclaim and celebrate its often-overlooked rail heritage.

The Great Railroad Revolution: The History of Trains in America Details

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From Reader Review The Great Railroad Revolution: The History of Trains in America for online ebook

Norman Metzger says

In the past few years I've been learning a lot about railroads, at least a lot for me.. My first lesson came from major tunnel construction in my neighborhood on Capitol Hill, in Washington, DC. -- http://www.virginiaavenuetunnel.com/. The more recent lesson came quite unexpectedly from this fine book by Christian Wolmar. "Quite unexpectedly" because -parochial would be a fair term -- I simply didn't expect the book to be as absorbing as it turned out to be. Mr. Wolmar writes in prose that is clear and always rich in content, and by every measure, meaning when I know a little something about the topic, has done careful and thorough research. The history of railroads in the United States is a complicated one, not least in understanding the intimate relationship between the development of railroads and the patterns of land and population changes in the US. He doesn't hold back on the corruption, often very costly governmental misjudgments, disastrous decisions by railroad owners. And he sets out the technological changes -- whether of track or engines or freight containers -- that transformed the economy and impact of railroads.

Al Lock says

Good overview of railroads and their impact on the United States. Sometimes seems to skip details on the assumption that they are known, but still gives a good overview on the rise and fall of American Railroads as well as their impact on politics, business and culture. The author's political biases show up sometimes, but that can be coped with.

George says

In *The Great Railroad Revolution*, Wolmar looks both at how the railroads helped to shape the United States and how social and regulatory forces ultimately curtailed their success. Wolmar is British, providing him with a certain distance that works for him at times and against him at others. He appropriately compares the railroads' development in the United States to their counterparts in Europe, but his depiction of certain events in American history aren't completely convincing and there were times when he seemed to dismiss too quickly the vastness of the American West.

The book begins with a brief overview of the European development of the relevant technologies, followed by their importation into the U.S. in the early 1800s and the ways in which the early railroads were developed on the cheap, a decision that would affect them for decades to come. It really takes off though in its exploration of how the railroads contributed to the Civil War and how the war, in turn, helped them to develop. From there, we enter Reconstruction and the rise of the notorious Robber Barons, whose railroad-related misdeeds Wolmar blames for the establishment of the book's main antagonist, the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC). In Wolmar's telling, the ICC's regulation is perhaps the main factor in the failure of the railroads to successfully weather 20th-century challengers like the emerging roads and airlines.

In the final section, Wolmar makes his case for how Amtrak is built for failure, lacking the support and resources it needs, and working from a flawed initial vision that has turned it into a non-factor for much of the country or, at best, a novelty for tourists with sufficient time to spend several days traversing a distance

that an airplane can cover in a matter of hours. If we want it to be self-sustaining, he argues, we need to put up more money now and to develop more relationships between city pairs that are spaced a couple of hours apart, a distance at which the advantages of the airplanes are diminished.

The book would have benefited from better editing, as Wolmar tends to repeat himself, particularly in the first half of the book. It is aimed at a general audience, but there are a few instances where terms are introduced with no explanation, which is always a challenge when someone who is as passionate and knowledgeable as Wolmar writes about a specialized topic. I did find myself thinking about the book on my most recent Amtrak ride (Philly to D.C.), and would be interested in diving a little deeper into some of the topics.

Kathleen says

“There was, of course, one group that was happy to sit in boxcars. There had been hoboes on the railroads ever since the American Civil War, but with the Depression the phenomenon increased exponentially. Moreover, it was not just adults but a vast horde of teenagers who were on the move, estimated by Errol Lincoln Uys to number a quarter of a million in the 1930s: ‘Often as young as 13, each one came from a different background, each left home to ride the rails for different reasons, and each had unique experiences. They were part of an army, estimated at 1.5 million during the peak years of the 1930s, who used the railroads to get around the country to seek work. They suffered a terrible toll. According to the Interstate Commerce Commission, in the decade to 1939, nearly 25,000 trespassers--seven a day--were killed and the same number injured, often losing a limb on the rail property. Although not all of these would have been hoboes, a great proportion undoubtedly were, as jumping on and off moving trains was a hazardous business, belying the romantic notion of the life often presented in films and books.”

Matthew says

When I worked at The Great Train Store at the mall in Cincinnati while I was in college, we had a book on the shelf that I'm still annoyed that I didn't buy with my employee discount about the history of the railroad--a systemic understanding of the phenomenon rather than an approach about individual deeds and misdeeds. Unfortunately, this is not that book.

Christian Wolmar has done his research, but his British-ness shows, I believe, in the way that he fails to grasp some of the finer points of American history and society. This is perhaps best shown in a map of the current rail network that includes all of the state capitals--many of which have never been important to the rail industry, or to commerce of any kind, something an educated American would know immediately. This is a minor detail, of course, but it exemplifies the lack of a guttural understanding of his topic that Wolmar demonstrates throughout the book.

This leads to an interesting question--can the history of a place only be written by a resident of the place? Certainly, if I were to write a history of France, I would be hampered by the fact that I've never been to France, don't speak French, and don't actually anyone from France very well. The cliche that the Americans and the British are two peoples separated by a common language is very clear in the case of this book--since the railroad is a 19th-century technology, much of its terminology is different in American and British English, and Wolmar fails to adequately make the distinction. Perhaps the problem is editing--I don't know if I've become more discerning over the years or if editing has gotten sloppier, but these things stick out to me more and more.

In all, a decent read, but often somewhat dry, with an approach to this sprawling topic that is dense, and at times haphazard. I think Wolmar has a good sense of what it was like to *ride* the rails in various eras, which is probably the most interesting component of his work.

Steve says

A fair amount of interesting information here, but too much of it repeated over and over to m,ake for a successful book. The author seems to have done no original research, other than ride trains, and relies almost exclusively on other authors' secondary studies. His judgements and general analysis is good and insightful, but also tends to be repeated. A little more detail and less repetition would have made it much better. In many spots incorporates the author's native British railroad terms (engine driver vs. engineer, points vs. switches, etc.) and generally shows the lack of proofreading and editing characteristic of modern publishing.

Stephen says

The United States’ history is one written with novelty: born in the dawn of the industrial age, America was a blank slate for technologies with the potential to transform societies – technologies like the railroad. Rail historian Christian Wolmar sees the history of railroads and the United States as inextricably bound to one another: they came of age and rose to power together. Their mutual ascendancy is the source of The Great Railroad Revolution, a marvelous history of both.

The story of trains begins not in the United States, but in England, where cars on rails pulled by horses were used to transport coal relatively short distances. Early in the course of the industrial revolution, however, a series of inventions allowed for the complicated and powerful system of the railroads to be born. The United States' need for efficient inland transportation made it an early adopter of the rails, and as the young nation pushed west it did so under the puffing smoke and whistle of a steam engine. In Blood, Iron, and Steel, Wolmar demonstrated how important the rails were to economic development and expansion. Here, he's able to drive home the same lessons, but at the same time give more coverage to smaller topics. He devotes a chapter to the rails' role in the Civil War, for instance, and argues for his belief that they allowed the conflict to metastasize from a small dust-up into a continent-wide brawl that consumed the lives of millions, by giving both governments the technology they needed to shift massive armies across regions and keep them supplied with food and ammunition. In "Rails of All Kinds", he covers trolleys, which were the first form of public transportation, and even the short-lived interurban lines, which were electric trains connecting cities short distances apart. Although a rail advocate, Wolmar doesn't shy away from the negative aspects of the railroads' legacy like the abuse of power that companies held over farmers in the midwest, who lived so far from population centers that they were dependent on the railroads to get their goods to market.

Americans have a curious relationship with railroad companies, Wolmar writes, describing it as an affair that began passionately and ended with enthusiastic rejection. The book's final quarter tracks the decline of the railroads as a reaction against their abuses and subsidized competition from the automobile. The decline wasn't inevitable, but Wolmar sees the rail companies as hampered by the baggage of their own history. In spite of their rapid decline, though, the American system is still one of the largest,and the best means of moving freight across the company. His conclusion urges Amtak to adapt to changing circumstances and give up the thought of long-distance passenger transport, which he views as a waste of their precious resources. Far better to play to the rails' strength, which is freight and regional passenger transportation.

The ending is mildly disappointing: in this age of rising oil prices and the contraction of automobile-dominated suburban sprawl, the rail lines's future seems more promising than just freight delivery. Even so, this is a delightful history of the railroads in the United States, one that demonstrates that their fall to the cars wasn't a foregone conclusion.

Selected Bibliography:

The Transportation Revolution, George Rogers Taylor
All Aboard: the Railroad in American Life, George H. Douglas
Passage to Union: how the Railroads Transformed American Life, Sarah Gordon
Enterprise Denied, Albro Martin
Railroads Triumphant, Albro Martin
Urban Mass Transit, Robert C Post
The Electric Urban Railways, George Hilton and John F. Due
Urban Mass Transit, Transport or Suburbia: Beyond the Automobile Age, Paul Mees

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Millan says

Incredible book giving a great look into the past of the American railways. Shows both sides of the story, but does not overemphasize the bad side (indentured servants, etc.) like Howard Zinn.

Carl says

As this book shows, the railroad is a prism to look at American history – it is deeply intertwined with American history. The railroad's infancy was near the beginning of the United States, when the country was agrarian, almost a wilderness of unconnected small towns. The railroad grew up along with the country, supplying transportation and supporting industrial development. The railroad was an important factor in the Civil War (the author speculates that the South might have broken away from the Union but for the railroad) and the settling of the West. The railroad was heavily involved with the robber barons of the Gilded Age, was crucial in the two World Wars, and is still a critical component in America's economy.

The book describes the changing relationship between government and the railroad. When railroads were beginning, there was a great deal of Federal and state aid to the companies. The railroads would not have existed without this aid. But, according to the author, the relationship between government and the railroads changed drastically around 1910. Government regulations, support of unions, and heavy taxation have greatly hindered the railroads in the past, and continue to do so. A serious misallocation of capital.

J.M. Hushour says

A perfectly fine history of the American railroad as researched and seen first-hand by a British historian. The cultural and national distance is actually one of the things that drew me to this work, since outside observers are usually not as tendentious and prickish as locals.
Goes through all the motions for the layperson: the development of the technology, the early leaps made in

New England and the greater northeast, then the 19th century heyday. The latter is the bulk of the book focusing on the scoundrels who made the American rail network what it was and who effectively ruined a good resource for transportation by sullying it in the public's eye. There is a great section on railroads and the Civil War, too, and the expansion west, but the real meat of this book is the antebellum period up to today where we see the real story of an industry hounded into the ground by regulation, never subsidized (while the highways were), where freight dominated over passenger travel and the final half death-knell, half-resurrection of rail through Amtrak. The future doesn't look so bleak, though, for rail in the US, since other countries' use of it highlights the wisdom of it as a technology.

Randy A says

An extremely educational book on how, why, when and where the railroads were built. The author does a great job of explaining the corruption behind the scenes both privately and politically. Yet still conveys the importance of the railroad. A real credit to the persistence of American drive and foresight. It is sad to hear that so much corruption existed back in those early years and still is rampant today. However, the impact that the railroad had in the development of this country and the impact it still has today is well worth knowing.

John says

Christian Wolmar is an expert on the railways but is also, first and foremost, a very good writer, who is able to bend what might be dry and technical material into an entertaining narrative, in which the technicalities are subservient to the story, and history is enlivened with many vignettes and anecdotes.

This is the case with his previous railway history books, but in his latest he has excelled himself. The book is a compelling read, offering as it does a whole series of insights into two hundred years or so of United States’ history, both economic and social. The close links between America and Britain were no closer than in the development of the railways in both countries, and he shows what these links meant but also contrasts the differences in how two major transport systems developed. He shows how in many respects the railways made the two countries into what they were, at least until the time of the railway heyday on both sides of the Atlantic. He also entertainingly shows how differences between the two systems (especially in the treatment of passengers) were emblematic of the two diverging cultures.

In contrast to Europe, the US railroads developed in an almost totally haphazard way, reflecting in part the reluctance of government to intervene but showing how judicious intervention might have benefitted everyone. To some extent this happened in the civil war, and Wolmar shows what a crucial role the railways played in it. His chapter on the scandals and achievements of the first transcontinental railway is also particularly entertaining.

To enjoy this book you don’t need to be a railway buff although they, of course, will enjoy it too.

Orion says

I'd like to rate this book as a 4.5 because it has some flaws, but since it was so interesting I rated it as a five rather than a four star book. It is flawed in that the author extensively quotes from other writers; if he had

done more independent research himself it would be a stronger text. The organization of the book is chronological, but certain eras are handled in much greater depth than others which makes the overall presentation somewhat uneven; coverage of the last few decades in particular is sketchy. But the book does something I've never seen before, which is, as the title indicates, to present a history of trains in the mainland USA. Other train books I have seen are either picture books or delve into details about locomotives. But this book describes the development of trains and railroad lines, and their critical relevance to the economic, cultural, and political development of the US. The writing style is almost conversational; it is easy and interesting to read. This book helped me better understand American history in general by filling in the blanks of what was rather tediously presented in social study texts regarding American expansion. It also helps me better understand where the railroads are today, how they got there, and their role in the future. I would like to read this author's other books, since this one was so good.

Converse says

The Great Railroad Revolution is a history of trains in the United States from their beginnings to the present day. The author, Christian Wolmar, also provides some background information about railroads in Britain early in the book, because steam trains originated in that country. The use of rails to reduce friction for moving heavy loads, such as ore from mines, has a long history. Horses were often use as the motive power before steam, and initially on railroads it was not uncommon for the horses to be used initially. The development of the railroad was not simply a technical one, but also required a shift in business thinking, away from the idea of moving a single commodity (such as coal) from a single source (such as the mine you owned along with the rail tracks), to a model in which you would take anyone (or their freight) who could pay. However, trains were different canals, their main competitor when they started out, in that the operator of the railroad provided the locomotive (not always the cars) and determined the schedule; with canals generally anyone could use their own boat and their was no fixed schedule.

The earliest functioning railroad in the United States seems to have been the Charleston & Hamburg in South Carolina, completed in 1833, though the Baltimore and Ohio usually gets the credit as its charter was issued first. The reason behind the formation of the Baltimore and Ohio is revealing and typical of the early railroads: the desire not to be left behind, in this case by New York City's link to the states beyond the Appalachians through the Erie Canal. As a canal seemed impractical for Baltimore, the local merchants opted to try a railroad instead, though their railroad did not actually reach the Ohio river until 1852.

Most early railroads were intended for only local uses. The railroads, like other transportation developments, often benefited from local and state (federal support for transporation projects was limited before the Civil War due to the constitutional views of the Democratic Party), though perhaps less directly than the direct subsidies given to canal building. The railroads used a large number of inconsistent gauges (distance between the rails) which made transfering passangers or freight difficult. In the years before the Civil War, passangers rather than freight seems to have been the major source of revenue.

In the 1850s some trunk lines, such as the Pennsylvania railroad, developed, creating unified systems running from the east coast to Chicago, which became (for no particular good reason) the end point for railroads from the east. For over a century, passengers wanting to travel from west of Chicago to the east coast, or vice versa, would have to change trains in Chicago. Chicago also became the center of the meat processing industry, with cattle (or later their refrigerated corpses) traveling to Chicago for packing.

Before the Civil War, northern railroads were largely built by the inhabitants of the locality in which the railroads were constructed. Southern railroads were generally built by slaves rented from their owners. After the Civil War, southern railroads were for some decades built by prison labor, usually African-American,

leased to the companies by the locality or state government. Conditions for these men were noticeably worse than they had been in the slave era (!) and the death rate was very high. In the north, the transcontinental railroads had to import the labor to build the lines from other parts of the United States or from overseas. The Union Pacific, building west from Omaha, benefited from the large number of men recently released from military service in the Civil War. The Central Pacific, working east from California, ended up bringing in large number of Chinese laborers, who were excellent workmen, and more to the point could be paid substantially less than white men. Chinese labor was common on all of the western railroads for the next several decades.

The railroads played the major role in supporting the Northern and Southern armies in the field during the Civil War. Although the Confederate forces initially had a better grasp of the use (and sabatoge) of railroads, the Union quickly became more skillful than the Confederates in the use of railroads, in large part because the Federal government had more success than the Confederate government in taking control of the railroads. The North also started with the great benefit of having most the railroads and supporting industries.

One noticeable change after the Civil War was that freight rather than passangers generated most of the revenue, a circumstance that has remained the same up to the present - though of course now there are few passangers and the passanger railroad, Amtrak, is government owned. The railroad gauge was gradually standardized, making it easier to move people and passangers without unloading and reloading trains. The industry also consolidated into fewer businesses. The railroads suffered from a poor public image in the decades after the Civil War, for good and bad reasons. In the decade after the Civil War, there were a number of battles for control over various railroads, such as the New York Central, which reasonably damaged the industry's image. The considerable financial deceit and intentional cost over runs in building the first transcontinental railroads, the Union Pacific and Central Pacific, also caught the public's attention. Labor relations were poor, and the public tended to be more sympathetic to the men (I think they were all men at this time) rather than the management. Less reasonably, but getting the most ink, was the alleged unfairness of the railroads dealings with western farmers, who tended to be dependent on a single railroad and who objected to volume discounts for large shippers. Most of the farmers financial problems seem to have been more due to the great expansion in crop production, which reduced prices.

the eventual result of this bad publicity was the establishment of the Interstate Commerce Commission in 1887. Though initially toothless, this agency did, starting in 1906, have a great deal of power over the rates the railroads could charge and routes they could use - indeed they had to get the Commission's approval to close a route. The Commission mandated price floors. The timing was poor, because the internal combustion engine and the automobile were just showing promise. Furthermore, the Federal Government would start funding road construction in the Wilson administration. So trucking got a subsidy (not that railroads had not received subsidies)and also could undercut the floor price railroad were required to charge, and later airlines would also be subsidized. Though the depression and Second World War would delay matters, railroads were in for a hard time.

After several decades of decline after the Second World War, freight railroads are now thriving. The main cause seems to have been killing off the Interstate Commerce Comission in 1980. Now, in an arena where trucking offered a viable competitor, so the problem of monopoly no longer existed, freight railroads could charge market prices, and proved to be able to thrive. Such passanger railroads as exist are run by the government-owned Amtrak. Americans appear allergic to subsidising railroads anymore, while still handing out indirect (but very big) subsidies to trucks and automobiles, airlines, and shipping on internal waterways.

HBalikov says

This is a fine read for anyone who wants to get a sense of how much of the USA's success as a nation can be attributed to the investment in railroads as a means of transportation. Wolmar does a fine job of carrying us from the initial development of railways, to their near collapse and current strengths.

I was enlightened by his spotlighting the Charleston & Hamburg's role in early railroad development and his insights into why Chicago became a hub, rather than simply a big station for railroads linking East and West.

Wolmar has a European perspective, so he misses some of the particular American nuances. For instance in one of his maps, he chooses to highlight the state capitals rather than understand that in many states, the railroads chose to ignore them in favor of economic centers. He does a great service in showing the reactions of Europeans, such as Charles Dickens, to the American way of railroading.

While many will point to his mistakes and quibble about his lack of detail in various sections, I think it is a great help in understanding the contribution of railroads to the development and success of the American economy.
