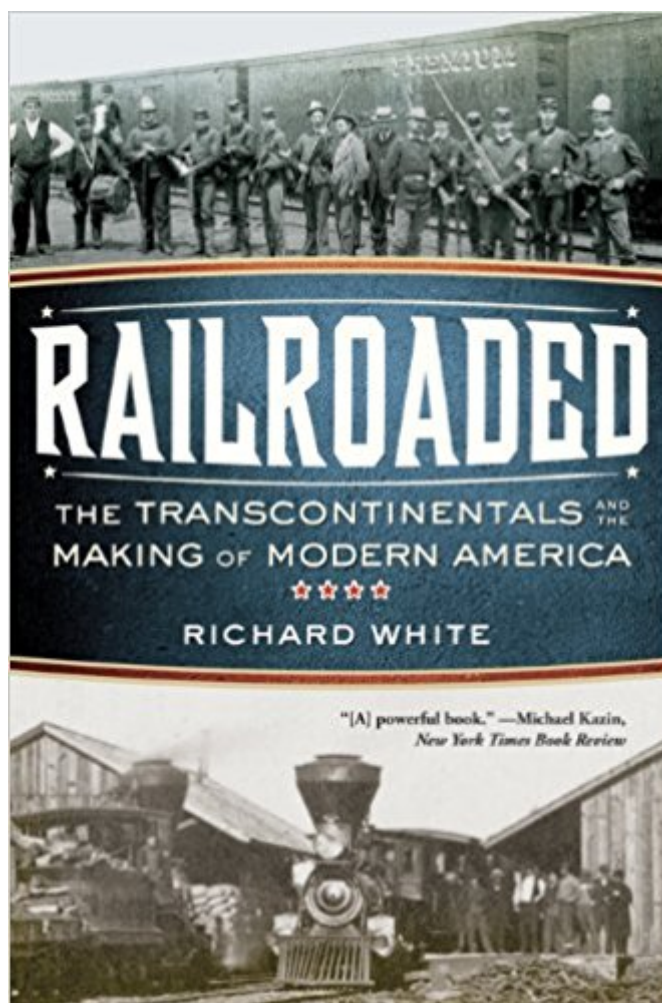


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Railroaded: The Transcontinentals And The Making Of Modern America



Synopsis

A Finalist for the Pulitzer Prize: "A powerful book, crowded with telling details and shrewd observations." —Michael Kazin, New York Times Book Review
This original, deeply researched history shows the transcontinentals to be pivotal actors in the making of modern America. But the triumphal myths of the golden spike, robber barons larger than life, and an innovative capitalism all die here. Instead we have a new vision of the Gilded Age, often darkly funny, that shows history to be rooted in failure as well as success.

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Customer Reviews

Railroaded offers a history of the Transcontinental railroads from both a historical and social perspective. One of White's main premises is that the Transcontinentals were built too early, and that their large subsidies were not needed. Most of the lines failed and went into receivership as there was no real demand for freight in the post Civil War west. This in turn, hurt small bond holders, and the government. Surprisingly, White describes how the large investors/insiders (Huntington, Stanford, etc) escaped this plight by forming third party construction corporations, which bled the

roads dry before they went belly up. Due to this, White concludes that the insiders had no interest in actually running a railroad for profit - most knew the lines were doomed from the beginning. However, due to the capital structure the insiders got rich as long as they could get funding (both public and private). Similarities to the dot com boom of the late 90's come to mind. Although well researched, White came across as too preachy and dry for me. His writing style doesn't really engage the reader, and some of the social conclusions he draws seem a bit too personal rather than scholarly. Overall however, *Railroaded* was a good primer on the subject.

On May 10, 1869 at Promontory Summit, Utah, the lines of the Union Pacific and Central Pacific Railroads were symbolically linked together to celebrate the completion of the first transcontinental railroad. An iconic photograph celebrates this event. Once viewed as a seminal moment in the making of the United States and the West, the events at Promontory Summit and their aftermath receive a great deal of critical attention in Richard White's provocative and polemical book, *"Railroaded: The Transcontinentals and the Making of Modern America"* (2011). White, the winner of a MacArthur Award and the Parkman Prize is the Margaret Byrne Professor of American History at Stanford University. He has written extensively on the American West. Much in this book will be familiar to students of the post-Civil War Gilded Age of American history. White's history differs from most accounts in its virtually unilateral criticism of the building of transcontinental railroads in the West. White claims the transcontinentals were built far too early when they were not needed, were drastically overbuilt, corruptly financed, and incompetently managed. They destroyed the environment and the Indian tribes, contributed to depressions and economic dislocation, and promoted poor land use and poor settlement patterns in the West. White concludes (p. 517): "The issue is not whether railroads should have been built. The issue is whether they should have been built when and where they were built. And to those questions the answer seems no. Quite literally, if the country had not built transcontinental railroads, it might not have needed them until much later, when it could have built them more cheaply, more efficiently, and with fewer social and political costs." White writes in detail about the financial and other corruption of the transcontinental railroads. Much of the book is devoted to the arcane and dismal world of railroad finance in the 19th Century. In White's account, the financiers played a shell game in building the railroads putting other people's money and the money and land of the Federal government at risk with little risk to themselves. They financed the building of the railroads through mirrors and construction corporations, such as the infamous *Credit Mobilier* during Grant's presidency, which they themselves controlled. The railroad owners proved markedly adroit in pulling out the capital the corporations were to receive to their

own personal accounts resulting in debts for money never received that the railroads could not pay. The system floundered while individuals grew rich, in White's account. The railroads were controlled by easterners such as Henry Villard, Leland Stanford, Jay Cooke, Collis Huntington, Tom Scott and not by people in the West whom the roads were ostensibly designed to serve. In White's account, the curmudgeonly figure of Charles Francis Adams (1835 -- 1915) stands out. Adams served as the president of the Union Pacific Railroad until forced out by the road's bankruptcy. Adams vainly and ineffectively railed against the system at times and tried to reform it while as an executive he all too often fell victim to it. In the final analysis, White finds little reason to treat Adams more kindly than his other characters or, as White frequently calls them, his "guys". Besides the emphasis of financial chicanery, White describes the close relationships between financiers and politicians in Congress and in the state governments. There was pervasive corruption in a culture White describes as being based euphemistically on the relationship of "friends." The book details the terrible human cost of the railroads in the form of accidents. It discusses the long misuse of the Chinese, both by the railroads and by their workers. A highlight of the book is a lengthy treatment of the Pullman Strike of 1894. White intensifies his historical analysis through the use of metaphors. The term "creative destruction" in the title of this review derives from the economist Joseph Schumpeter who saw the rise of 19th century capitalists as sweeping away the old to make way for the new. White fundamentally disagrees with Schumpeter on the positive achievements that allegedly resulted from the building of the transcontinentals. Another figure in the book is the "Octopus" derived from Frank Norris' famous novel about railroad abuses in California and the closely related term "Robber Baron". White rejects these terms as giving too much credit to the financiers and managers of the railroads. He argues that far from making the corporations instruments of power and efficient management, the owners gutted the railroads to their own ends. Their success as individuals, for White, masked their failure as entrepreneurs as witnessed most dramatically by the depressions of 1873 and 1893 and the receiverships which became the frequent fate of the transcontinental systems. Another frequent metaphor of White's is the "Sorcerer's Apprentice" by which he means that the railroad mongers unleashed forces that they did not understand and could not control. White does not use another figure which leaps to mind -- that of the formidable Wizard of Oz who proves upon close acquaintance to be "a very poor wizard." In his Introduction, White identifies several strands of the argument of his book. He argues that the transcontinentals were intertwined from the beginning with the largesse of the Federal government and that the story of private capitalism and initiative is largely a myth. Second, White argues that the transcontinentals changed the concept of "space" in the West to reduce it to the cost of shipping. The book offers a good overview of the

difficulties of cost pricing for services offered by the railroads. The difficulties of setting prices led to much abuse, favoritism, and economic dislocation. Third, White argues that the railroad corporations were not "harbingers of order, rationality, and effective, large-scale organization" but were instead incoherently and irrationally managed. Fourth, White offers qualified praise to the antimonopoly movements that arose in the Western states to combat the abuse of the railroads. As his final point, White tries to deflate the myth of the "Robber Barons" for reasons alluded to earlier. There is much to be learned from White's book. I found the book marred by its patronizing, overly casual writing style and by its aura of certainty. Although he acknowledges the risks of importing current values into a different time, the book seems to me to lack a full historical sense. White pushes on his readers issues such as Enron, the IT bubble, and the economic collapse which began in 2008 as parallels for understanding 19th Century transcontinental railroads. These analogies may be perilous. The book has provoked a substantial debate among my fellow reader reviewers here on . I found this a good, thoroughly researched study of the transcontinental railroads in which the author makes no secret of his opinions and possible biases. Students of American history, the West, and the Gilded Age will benefit from the book. A degree of skepticism and a willingness to withhold hasty judgment are valuable qualities to bring to the reading of this book. Robin Friedman

This is an essential book for anyone with a serious interest in late 19th century American history. Though it deals with the early transcontinental railroads it is a long way from your dad's heroic account of what was, indisputably, a notable engineering accomplishment. The blizzards, the dynamiting, the tunnel borings and the accidents are left to the many other books and films that cover them so thoroughly. The author traces the business and political aspects. This includes a very detailed account of the financing of the projects with their bonds and mortgages and the federal subsidies that came in various forms and that sometimes makes for heavy going. It is no revelation that the men who built these early transcontinental railways were crooks but what is new and interesting is the author's view of just how incredibly incompetent they were. They knew next to nothing about how to construct or operate railways and in many cases neither did the operating people they hired. Until I read this book I had understood that their modus operandi was to construct the railroads using dishonest financing methods, build them up until they were profitable and then realize on the value of their stock interests. They had a better system that did not depend upon the success of the venture. They would form construction companies that they, not the railroad's other investors,

owned and then contract with their own company at twice the going rate for the work to be done. The old dummy corporations/sweetheart contract scam for which people are still being indicted. On a more global level, the author believes that the many transcontinental railroads should not have been built until the increasing population and business in the areas served presented a demand. Some of them should not have been built at all. He stresses that the social detriments are too often ignored in evaluating the contribution of these businesses to the country. He notes that the choice was not between the transcontinental railroads as actually built and no railroads at all and that a more rational approach would have yielded better results. Still, it would seem that whatever the folly of the follow-on transcontinentals the original one had to be built. The country was just emerging from cataclysmic war between two sections with different economic systems and philosophies but which, were, at least, contiguous. Now the country had two sections, a potentially thriving West Coast separated from the rest of the country by 2,000 of what, for all practical purposes, could have been trackless wast. There was no reasonably rapid and safe way to get freight or passengers from the East Coast or from the Mississippi to California. Each of the existing routes involved long delay and deadly peril from the weather, hostile Indians, shipwreck or yellow fever. It was faster and safer to get to England from New York than to travel across the country and probably easier to get from San Francisco to China. This could not have been a politically acceptable situation for a growing country. The first transcontinental railroad was probably necessary as a symbol of a united country. There was not sufficient traffic to make it a viable business opportunity and governmental subsidy was necessary. It would seem just possible that the project required the kind of reckless chicanery and lies and broken promises that brought it to fruition.

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