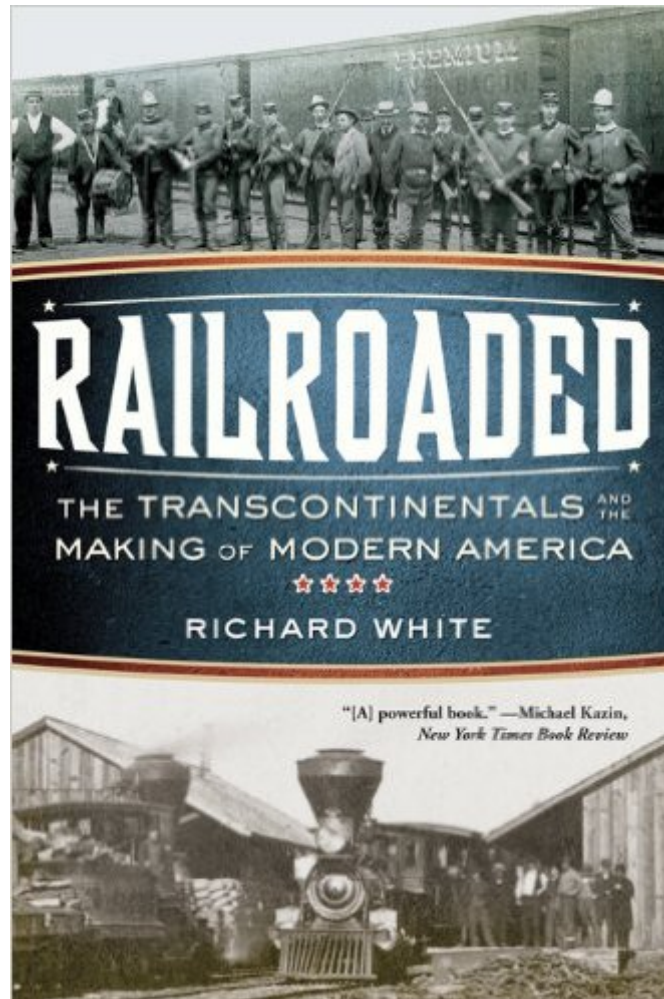


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Railroaded: The Transcontinentals And The Making Of Modern America



Synopsis

"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

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.

Most railroad books have far too little solid information about railroading, and far too much nostalgia about steam engines. Thus Mr. White's book comes as a refreshing and very welcome contrast. The book genuinely is about railroading, and it is an important book about understanding the origins of the big western roads. It considers railroading from many, many points of view. It also has - perhaps not entirely intentionally - stunning relevance to America's contemporary financial and political problems. On those grounds alone it can be recommended not merely to those interested in railroads, but to anyone interested in financial skulduggery and the corrupting effect it has on political institutions. Some things never change. This book is a good book, perhaps even a very good book. It could have been a great book, or maybe volume I of a great work on the railroads. Chapter 3, pages 93 - 133, entitled "Friends", is a thing of genius, and worth the entire price of the book. Chapter 4, pages 140 - 178, entitled "Spatial Politics" is very nearly as good. There are weaknesses, however. First, the story ends too soon. What happened afterward? No epilogue? How did those struggling roads of the 1890's become the powerhouses of the 20th Century? Volume II is clearly required. What about those other transcontinentals, the Canadian Northern and the Grand Trunk Pacific? The book discusses every other transcontinental. Second, the writing in the chapters concerning labour disputes might have benefited from greater restraint: The facts speak for themselves, very starkly. They would speak even more starkly without varnish.

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