

Book Reviews

Comptes rendus de livres

David Turnock, *An Historical Geography of Railways in Great Britain and Ireland*

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Turnock, David. *An Historical Geography of Railways in Great Britain and Ireland*. Aldershot, UK: Ashgate Publishing, 1998. xiv + 379 pp., cloth, US\$124.95, ISBN 1 85928 450 7.

There is a considerable literature on rail and its economic, social, and cultural impact. The sound, sight, and smell of steam locomotion even penetrated Thoreau's Walden-idyll and Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Sleepy Hollow," while its promises prompted Keefer's nineteenth-century panegyric, *The Philosophy of Railroads*.

More recently, several writers have commented on the direct and indirect influences of the quantum change in speed and universal connections provided by ubiquitous rail. Kearns's provocative study of the "culture of time and space" discussed the shattering of spatial and temporal constraints and the impact on the arts and philosophy as well as upon the economy and society. To this end, Schivelbusch focussed specifically on rail in his book, *The Railway Journey* and also recognized the effect of speed on travellers' perceptions at various scales. A similar tack is taken by Freeman's excursion into the Victorian imaginative engagement with rail. Nor has Canada been neglected. A. A. den Otter's *The Philosophy of Railways* argues convincingly that railways were at the heart of the "technology of nationalism" while Andreae's *Lines of Country* provides a definitive overview of rail and canal developments in the history of Canada.¹

So what should I expect from Turnock's "historical geography" of British railways? For long, some geographers have been concerned with space and its role in social organization. Clearly, the rise of rail and its impact in reducing time-space distantiation fits here. Simply put, improved communications eroded isolation and enhanced wider linkages with profound consequences on social organization. Other geographers have been more concerned with place-making,

the more experiential dimension of the shifts in the quality of life that attended efficient, reliable, and ubiquitous access to mass-transport systems. Simply imagine the transport regimen of the pre-rail age: muddy or snow-blocked roads and seasonal water transport — all at the speed of horses, wind, and current. Rail changed the very perception of where, when, and how often one could go to other places and, thus, altered the construction of local, regional, and national identities.

Does this come though in Turnock's study of the advent of rail in the British Isles? His objectives are clearly stated in the preface: to trace the development of the national railway network from the perspective of corporate interests; and to consider the impact of railways on everyday life in town and country (xi). What is to the fore is a detailed accounting of the expansion of the technological and corporate development of rail systems at several scales. But it is accompanied by provocative, even iconoclastic, assessments of the socio-economic significance of rail.

To this end, the volume is divided into two sections. The first comprises three chapters, each dealing with regional developments. The second section has three chapters that consider the impacts of rail on canals and ports, towns, and the countryside. But all of this is built upon a rich examination of the meaning of the "Railway Age." Not content with simply addressing the valves and cylinders of machinery, and the speculation and balance books of corporate capitalism, Turnock also reflects on the psychological impact of technological innovation. However, as befits a geographer, his spatial bent is to the fore in the mapping and analysis of railways systems and structures, emphasizing the paradox that while rail served to integrate regions into national systems, it also bolstered the economic autonomy and viability of distinct regions.

What, then, was the role of rail in the commercial empire of Victorian-Edwardian Britain?

First, Turnock emphasizes that rail was but one of several technological and institutional changes that produced this remarkable age. However, while he argues that railways may not have been “absolutely essential for Britain’s nineteenth-century growth,” they had a greater impact than other innovations (25). Thus, they had a clear economic-multiplier effect because they employed large numbers of workers, especially skilled ones, and consumed large amounts of coal, iron and steel, and other matériel produced by Britain’s burgeoning industries. Nevertheless, by 1870–1914, the very apogee of its role in national life, rail technology was already demonstrating structural problems of over-investment, declining profits, and prospects of corporate failures (23).

But as argued by others, the greatest effect was on the quality of life of the people with the advent of an efficient transport system that was accessible to the masses. Clearly, the speed and frequency of

rail transport did much to achieve the spatial integration of regionally dispersed populations. It did little, however, to attain social integration: concepts of first, second, and third class travel were a long-standing signifier and reinforcer of putative social differences that underpinned the realpolitik of British social control.

What is argued here is that the railway played an important role in the process of social and economic change that was diagnostic of nineteenth-century Britain. Indeed, for some of us, the material evidence of the railway age lasted well after the Second World War: the smell of steam and the sound of whistles; parlour-like accoutrements of compartments and waiting rooms; signal boxes and station masters’ watches; and the mega-projects of tunnels, bridges, and viaducts. They were all part of the bric-a-brac of railway culture and the iconography of a world replaced by motorways, electronic highways, and inefficient commuter lines.

NOTES

1. Thomas Cottrin Keefer, *The Philosophy of Railroads and other Essays*, ed. Henry Vivian Nelles (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972); Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space, 1880–1918* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983); Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, [1977], 1986); Michael Freeman,

Railways and the Victorian Imagination (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999); Andy Albert den Otter, *The Philosophy of Railways: The Transcontinental Railway Idea in British North America* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997); Christopher Andreae, *Lines of Country: An Atlas of Railway and Waterway History in Canada* (Toronto: Boston Mills Press, 1997).

Michael Brian Schiffer with Andrea R. Miller, *The Material Life of Human Beings: Artifacts, Behavior, and Communication*

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Schiffer, Michael Brian, with Andrea R. Miller. *The Material Life of Human Beings: Artifacts, Behavior, and Communication*. New York: Routledge, 1999. xiv + 158 pp; biblio., cloth, US\$80, ISBN 0415-20032-6; paper, US\$23.95, ISBN 0-415-20033-4.

Michael Schiffer’s theoretical treatise deals with one main approach to the study of artifacts: he appropriates communication theories — specifically the models of performance — to interpret artifacts. In doing so, two main questions can be raised in terms of his book: how does it fit within the previous scholarship on performance (both general studies and those relating specifically to artifacts)?

and, what insights do communication and performance theories provide generally for the study of material culture?

Writing this review from a folklorist’s background, the importance of these theoretical models is more than obvious. In the 1970s, folklore as a discipline set about redefining itself by stating that research should focus not just on items but on performance. Communication theories borrowed from writers like Ray Birdwhistel and Erving Goffman re-charted the course of the discipline, so that many folklorists argued that the focus of all research should be communication based in performances. An important collection of essays appeared in 1975,