

## Compte rendu de livre

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Review of

MacDonald, Herb. 2012. *Cape Breton Railways: An Illustrated History*. Sydney, NS: Cape Breton University Press.

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The challenge for people writing about railways is to resist the temptation to effuse and romanticize attractive and powerful machinery. There really is nothing like a locomotive and its train and, for many, it is difficult to speak dispassionately of this unique equipage and its broad economic, social, and physical impacts. To build railways requires heroic deeds by engineers, financiers, politicians, and labourers, but locomotives and rolling stock are, of course, only what people see of a railway. Depending on who is looking, railways were either part of the greasy, sooty industrial landscape, and something to be used, not venerated; or they were the conveyance of the promise of change and better days. Machines so big, mobile, and accessible could only become a vehicle for interpreting place. In *Cape Breton Railways: An Illustrated History*, Herb MacDonald does not hyperbolize the golden years of rail, nor does he descend to gratuitous comments about wrongheaded government policy. Instead, he takes a mostly distanced view of a significant transportation history and impresses on the reader the serious business of railways.

This is a meticulously researched story of the rail lines in the former mining and industrial centre of Cape Breton. An established railway historian, MacDonald has written extensively and is clearly expert on rail development beyond the borders of this Island. The book is thus strengthened by the author's contextual comments about railway builders and experiences elsewhere in Canada. He keeps the focus, however, on one place, and by geographically limiting his study,

he is able to knit together the strands that unite industrial development to transportation with clarity and detail. This is one of the finest qualities of this book. The industrial experience in Cape Breton has generated a large number of studies and introspective publications that can seem insurmountable to any student of industry or the region. Add to this the revolving door of ownership of mines, mills, and railways, and the story of Cape Breton's industries can appear to be a historical labyrinth. MacDonald succeeds in helping the reader to clearly understand the way railways sent their tendrils across a landscape littered with bankruptcies, corporate takeovers, international financiers, questionable promoters, government policy changes, and a plethora of potentially confusing name changes.

His study encompasses nearly two centuries of rail activity, beginning with animal-drawn railways and concluding with tourist trains and long-suffering short line operations. The first half of the book is possibly the stronger, covering the period from 1829, when the General Mining Association began mining coal and building rail lines, to the early 1920s when established mines and steel mills became themselves commodities. In Cape Breton, an area destined to be an energy powerhouse, the initial purpose of railways was to facilitate the movement of coal. After the turn of the 19th century, new steel plants created the demand for more rail services for both goods and passengers. MacDonald raises significant questions about the railways, and through clearly exhaustive research and use of a broad range of

secondary sources, he outlines which railways worked and how and why they stopped. For anyone looking for a readable, authoritative account of mine or rail development in Cape Breton, this book will serve very well.

Industrial archaeologists and historians of engineering, however, may be a little disappointed with the author's traditional emphasis on the corporate and economic elements of rail history. For example, tantalizing references are made to trestles and bridges that were obviously engineering challenges, but we only learn about the contracts or accidents that are related to them. There is scant information about the rail/ferry facilities at North Sydney, and despite a whole chapter being devoted to "Railways at the Strait of Canso," just how cars were handled at Point Tupper is left unexplained. Similarly, a discussion about roundhouses is limited to a list of activities that took place in these critical structures and their yards. Little is said about their architecture, layout, or the world of experiences they contained.

Railways, even short ones, are complex creations. It is probably impossible to adequately cover all the details of a rail line over decades of operation, let alone do this for several major railways in one area. This book does try to cover all the topics, but with mixed results. For example, MacDonald's chapter "Working on the Railway: Railways as Employers" neatly reviews the myriad of individual tasks needed to keep the trains operating, but keeps only to the surface of workplace issues. The culture of work, either for skilled drivers or for gang labourers, is hardly explored. For example, at one time crews of several hundred

men would move through Cape Breton Island building the roadway and infrastructure, but this phenomenon receives only a brief mention in the text, supplemented by an interview excerpt from one of the workers. Without a broader discussion of labour and its cultural traditions, this chapter can only be considered introductory to a major part of the story.

Herb MacDonald's diligence has resulted in a successful illustrated history. He includes pictures of almost all the locomotives and rolling stock used on Cape Breton and supplements these with specific photographs of rail museums. Most of his picture captions demonstrate a careful analysis of the image for details that may not be found in text documents. Locomotives seem to dominate the collection, and MacDonald usually provides a genealogy for the main engines, but even here technical details are limited. A few more maps and diagrams of rail yards, as well as architectural drawings, would have strengthened the overall presentation even further. Although the book is not printed on coated paper stock, the photographs are very well reproduced and the overall design incorporates the many pictures in an attractive, reader-friendly way.

Even with its obvious deficiencies, this book is well written, well researched and nicely laid out. These characteristics will make it accessible and useful to local historians and scholars for some time to come. Herb MacDonald has contributed to our understanding of regional railways and he points the way to future interpretations of a rich subject.