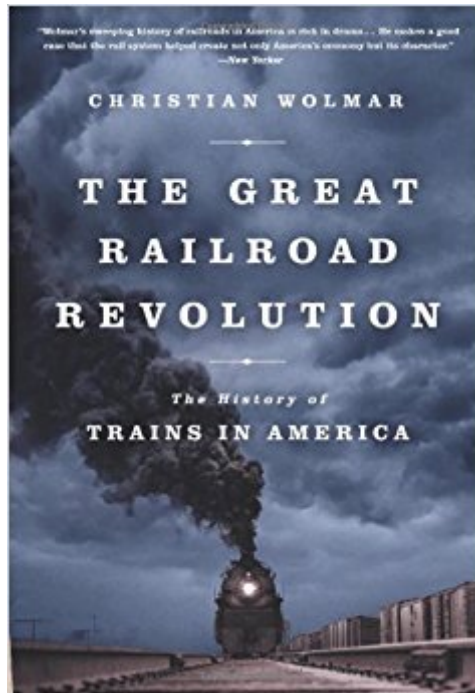


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# The Great Railroad Revolution: The History Of Trains In America



## Synopsis

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.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Wolmar, a noted historian specializing in the British railway industry, here turns his attention to American railroads (which, at their peak in 1916, covered 254,037 miles of track). He focuses mostly on the nineteenth century; the twentieth century, he notes, saw mostly “decline and waning influence,” but it was in the 1800s that railroads were born, grew to maturity, and became the country’s dominant form of transportation. Wolmar is clearly in love with his subject—it’s easy to imagine him as a sort of walking encyclopedia of railroad lore—and his enthusiasm for his material shines through on every page. He finds the decline and increasing irrelevance of the railroad—especially the passenger rails—a deeply saddening aspect of contemporary life, and he makes a convincing case that, in losing rail travel as a fundamental human experience, we’ve lost a hugely important part of ourselves and our history. --David Pitt --This text refers to an alternate Paperback edition.

Daily Telegraph (UK) “This is the ninth book that Wolmar has written about trains of various kinds. It is certainly among the best, incorporating, alongside some gripping and downright bizarre reports upon a century-long stretch of vastly improved transport and soaring economic growth| an account of the colossal, almost unbelievable scale of corruption and graft from which brutal opportunists like Huntington, Stanford and Gould minted their undeserved millions... Enjoyably anecdotal.” Sunday Times (UK) “A passionate and masterly history.” The Guardian “Christian Wolmar is in love with railways. He writes constantly and passionately about them. He is their wisest, most detailed historian and a constant prophet of their rebirth. So America, from 1830 on, from a few, tentative miles of track to a quarter of a million miles only 80 years later, is a story that grips his imagination| the tangle of failure, frailty and faint-heartedness he unpicks here goes far beyond mere romance: it resonates and crosses borders of national experience; it tells us something vital about the nature of railways we still struggle to learn to this day| If you love the hum of the wheels and of history, then Christian Wolmar is your man.” Camden New Journal (London, UK) “In his new book, his ninth, a comprehensive, compulsive and compelling epic story of the American railroad, Christian Wolmar reveals how that revolution actually fuelled the nation’s rise to a world-status power with its new found ability to glue itself together into a cohesive economic force|. Wolmar’s magnificent saga tells graphically how it all happened, then collapsed as man’s love affair with trains transferred first to cars, then to airplanes and possibly next lock on to rockets into space|. What is outstanding in his fascinating research is the detail, an encyclopedia of railway lore, myth and anecdote that could be and has

Wolmar sustained many a film, TV series and novel. Publishers Weekly "In a volume that will delight train buffs and hopefully others English historian and railway expert Wolmar examines the rise and fall of railroads in America, with a detailed look at how they influenced and directed the growth of the country for more than a century. The end result is a fascinating, even indispensable look at one of America's essential historical components." Kirkus Reviews "Wolmar, it seems, has no purpose other than crafting a critical but admiring study of a triumph of engineering, and in this he has succeeded. A solid and, yes, concise look at the railroad's past, with a rousing call at the end for a new and improved rail system to carry the nation forward. BOOKLIST "Wolmar is clearly in love with his subject it's easy to imagine him as a sort of walking encyclopedia of railroad lore and his enthusiasm for his material shines through on every page. He finds the decline and increasing irrelevance of the railroad especially the passenger rails a deeply saddening aspect of contemporary life, and he makes a convincing case that, in losing rail travel as a fundamental human experience, we've lost a hugely important part of ourselves and our history. Australian Financial Review "Without the railroads, Wolmar contends, there would have been no United States. The really interesting suggestion is that robber barons are a necessary evil, the drivers stoking the engine of American capitalism. Wall Street Journal "The Great Railroad Revolution succeeds in showing how, without the railroads, the United States would not have become the United States. Christian Science Monitor "Readers get to take a broad voyage through railroad vs. railroad battles (even including espionage), the Civil War (in which trains were crucial), and the ultimate decline of trains. Library Journal (starred review) "As he did for global railroad history in his Blood, Iron, and Gold, Wolmar masterfully condenses the history of American rail into a lively and lucid work that is highly recommended to all. Washington Independent Review of Books "Wolmar clearly wishes the railroads had remained more of a social, economic and transportation force in the United States. His fine book will likely make many feel the same way. The New Yorker "Wolmar's sweeping history of railroads in America is rich in drama. He makes a good case that the rail system helped create not only America's economy but its character. Oxford Times "Above it all is the pioneering vision that grips the reader. Wolmar is so passionate about his subject that one cannot help but be swept along. Certainly there was romance and great adventure, but this is also a story of danger as each section was laid across trestled bridge and wilderness. Minneapolis Star-Tribune "A highly readable history of an industry that

helped make America great. Providence Journal by Edward Achorn  
“Nevertheless, the book -- which captures the grand sweep of the railroads’ story from the beginning -- is hardly a screed against government intervention in railroads. To the contrary. Fredericksburg, VA  
Freelance-Star  
“As a concise history of American railroads  
it  
as an interesting trip. -- This text refers to an alternate Paperback edition.

Not a student of North American railroads, so have no critical input. This is an excellent accounting of the history of our railroads, what went right, what went very wrong, and why. Mr. Wolmar explains that our railroads today operate in plain view, yet in seeming obscurity. And, despite an annual infrastructure maintenance cost that is the highest in any business, make money. The near future of railroad growth would be in enhanced commuter transport, most especially inter-city, but, as Mr. Wolmar explains, this isn’t about to happen in the next generation (be "Z" in current parlance). New railroad construction requires an overwhelming investment, beyond private means. Even as President Obama tried to stimulate inter-city commuter railroads with a huge Federal influx of cash for four projects, the money was rejected by three Republican governors - Walker of Wisconsin, Perry of Texas, and Scott of Florida. Only the Los Angeles - San Francisco link is being pursued, but the cost is staggering - right of way, concrete rail beds to sustain high speed travel, elimination of grade crossings, environmental issues, and need to provide a nearly linear route with a near 0% grade multiply costs per mile. It can be done. But everyone must want to do it, and using the GOP response to the Federal stimulus package as a model, inter-city rail is batting .250. If you care enough about railroads to still be reading this, North American railroads handle about 40% of freight traffic. This percentage will assuredly grow as fuel costs rise, coupled with our decaying highway infrastructure. Trains take trucks off the road, making road repairs less necessary and less expensive. This is a great book for anyone with any level of interest, except, you know, the usual - unless you have read all the source material. Should you have, how’s your synthesis doing?

This is a very well written book, that really does an excellent job of summarizing America’s railroad history. Very important volume, that describes the entire progression of the American railroad industry from its infancy. That is significant as America took the English invention of railroads and ran with it to great prosperity up through the present. The writer, who comes from England writes clearly and to the point, as well as picking his factual points with finesse. As a former rail industry executive, I think that he does a nicely balanced job of covering both the railway labor and regulatory issues. Finally, the Author does not disappear into the nostalgia for the industry and the

rail fan orientation that railroads of the past inhabited some magical place. He writes in an overall balanced style that conveys the majesty and the impact and the pure innovation that made the American Railroad network and industry to best in the world. .

This book is about a lot more than railroading. While delivering on his title, Wolmar also draws together 19th and 20th Century American history; offers a worked example of the industrial lifecycle; and illustrates human-technology interaction. Wolmar is an award-winning British journalist and politician who has authored more than ten books on railroading. Before railroads, distance governed America, especially beyond waterways. Food and materials needed local production, and timely communications were unknown. Beginning in the 1830s railroads started a process of linking up America, first locally and ultimately nationally. Financiers and politicians saw railroads as an enabler for settling the country. They arranged huge land grants for railroads, who in turn sold the land to settlers. Railroads actively recruited new emigrants in England and Europe, creating demand for the land. Later, railroads enabled construction of bedroom communities, giving rise to an ongoing real estate boom and suburban sprawl. Wolmar asserts that America could not have developed as it has without railroads and that railroads were and are a driver/magnifier of our national wealth. At first, America fell in love with railroads. As time passed, the railroads matured, became a mainstay that ultimately brought Chesapeake Bay oysters to Kansas City. Railroads created thousands of jobs directly and in related industries. Timely transport and communications extended the reach of federal and state governments and enabled the rise of national businesses. Too, labor relations and strikes became issues as unions organized, seeking better wages and working conditions. A series of high-profile financial scandals, strikes, and railroad disasters soured the romance, and gave rise to the Interstate Commerce Commission's often misguided regulation, which did much to undermine American railroading. In one interesting thread, the author shows that the enormous carnage and destruction of the American Civil War would not have been possible without railroads to quickly move armies, munitions, and supplies over relatively long distances. The Union's superior railroad networks and expertise were key to winning the war. The Confederacy's preference for states' rights and fear of national government limited the South's railroad development and ability to fight as an integrated force. Another theme illustrates employment shifts in emerging industrial infrastructures. Initially, many functions were human centered, but as jobs were automated, the need for human labor declined. This pattern seems apparent in many other contemporary businesses, and managing the conflict between rising productivity and potential human labor dislocations remains a

significant social problem. Wolmar convinces me that much of what we love and hate about America started in railroading. Folks who engineer, regulate, and use modern enterprise should read Wolmar's account of this public-private technology. The story illustrated the downsides of both over and under regulation. Happily, modern freight railroading operates profitably and serves Americans' needs. There is hope that with thoughtful governance, passenger/commuter rail can play a larger role in reducing congestion on our crowded streets and highways and also in curtailing related emissions

What a fascinating tale is the history of the RR industry. As the author points out, the development of rail really was one of the foundational technologies that would be required for the industrial revolution to occur. Much of our modern technological infrastructure and organization can trace its roots to the evolution of the transportation system in general, and rail specifically. Contained herein is also a cautionary tale of overzealous, counter-productive, vindictive regulation, which killed off privately owned passenger rail in the USA. I heartily recommend this book  
Best Regards, Tom Delaney

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