

Passage to Union: How the Railroads Transformed American Life, 1829-1929.

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Passage to Union: How the Railroads Transformed American Life, 1829-1929 (review)

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REVIEW

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Reviewed by:

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Few technological systems have generated as vast a literature as the railroad. Much of this literature has centered on artifacts—the locomotives, cars, and structures that have entranced generations of aficionados. In contrast, Sarah Gordon's *Passage to Union: How the Railroads Transformed American Life, 1829–1929* considers the social, cultural, and economic consequences of the railroad. Of perhaps limited appeal to hardware buffs, the book will interest anyone concerned with the railroad's influence on the evolution of American society.

Some topics covered are not of vast consequence but make for interesting reading nonetheless, such as the chapter on the development of railroad travelers' luggage. Of greater significance is Gordon's discussion of the importance of reduced-price group fares in the formation of national organizations such as the Grand Army of the Republic. *Passage to Union* also devotes considerable space to passengers' experiences of train travel in everything from sumptuous private cars to grudgingly operated accommodation trains. Some of the book's most insightful passages note how the railroad affected American culture by creating a train-riding public that reflected the ethnic and class diversity of a rapidly changing nation.

Gordon has little to say about railroad technology per se, and when she does she sometimes gets it wrong. For example, the air brake developed by George Westinghouse and others was not a vacuum brake; in fact, the vacuum brake was rendered obsolete by Westinghouse's pneumatic brake. Discussions of railroad electrification and what the author calls “internal combustion engines” are sketchy and misleading. Some minor errors distract from the narrative, such as giving Civil War Gen. William S. Rosecrans the Shakespearean moniker “Rosencrans.” In several places, the book perpetuates an annoyingly common error by rendering “Santa Fe” as “Sante Fe.”

On a more substantive level, *Passage to Union* can be faulted for its failure to engage several key economic issues. No attempt is made to assess the claim of some economic historians that the railroad's contribution to the growth of the national economy has been greatly exaggerated. Other than making a passing reference to Alfred Chandler, the book does not consider the railroad's role in the development of large-scale business organization. The major economic thesis of *Passage to Union* is that the railroad was a major agency of centralization and standardization. This, according to the author, was at best a mixed blessing. In Gordon's analysis, the railroad's major contribution was the creation of a unified [End Page 581] national economy, but it came at the cost of a widening gap between small towns and the countryside on the one hand, and urban-centered capital on the other. From this perspective, railroads were the key agents of an internal colonialism that extracted resources and people from the hinterlands and provided little in return.

This is a plausible thesis, but it rests on a rather crude technological determinism. What Gordon takes to be consequences of the railroad might better be analyzed in terms of the advance of industrialization, capitalism, urbanization, and governmental expansion. There can be no denying that the railroad was a key participant in all these trends, but *Passage to Union* makes no effort to disentangle the influence of the railroad from the myriad other forces that transformed American life in the hundred years following its introduction.

Perhaps this is too much to ask; a comprehensive study of the reciprocal influence of the railroad and the society in which it operated could not be contained in a single volume. Although it does not quite live up to the promise of its subtitle, *Passage to Union* is a well-researched and well-written narrative that offers many insights into how the railroad affected American life. Economic historians and historians of technology will find it deficient in some places, but there is much of value that remains.

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