The Pennsylvania Railroad. Volume 1: Building an Empire, 1846–1917 by Albert J. Churella (review)

Jeff Schramm

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(Review)

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Technology and Culture

Technology and Culture will doubtless profit from Hui’s new angle of study into the history of psychophysics.

DAVID CAHAN

David Cahan is Charles Bessey Professor of History at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. He is writing a biography of Hermann von Helmholtz.


At the turn of the twentieth century the Pennsylvania Railroad (PRR), the largest private corporation on earth, employed hundreds of thousands of workers. It reached from the eastern tidewater metropolises of New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore to the midwestern agricultural and manufacturing heart of industrial America. It influenced the laws and regulatory policies of state and federal governments. It touched many lives, those who worked for the PRR (or simply “the railroad”) as well as those tens of thousands of daily travelers who continue to use Penn Station in New York and the Amtrak Northeast Corridor. The self-described “standard railroad of the world” set the standard for all other railroads and now, finally, has a standard reference book about its early history. Albert Churella has carefully crafted a comprehensively researched history that thoroughly analyzes the contributions of the railroad as a significant corporate and industrial entity. He successfully fits the history of the PRR into the rise of industrial America. Four major themes tie the book together and serve as the organizational framework: organization, labor, technology, and government. The author ably incorporates local, state, and national political events, the Civil War and Reconstruction, organized labor, and the rise of the regulatory regime.

While the subtitle indicates a start date of 1846 and an end date to this volume of 1917, the author looks far beyond. The origins of the PRR extend to the founding of Philadelphia and the colony of Pennsylvania in the 1600s. The early chapters explore the commercial rivalry between East Coast ports and the emergence of the PRR as Philadelphia’s way to tap the trade and commerce of the West. The intricate political maneuvering and some skullduggery that occurred make this an enjoyable read. Once the PRR reached Pittsburgh and secured access to the Ohio River, the engineer-managers at the helm of the firm looked to the fast-growing commercial and burgeoning industrial cities of Cincinnati, Saint Louis, and, most importantly, Chicago. The PRR gained access to those cities and the rich agricultural heartlands of the Old Northwest in a convoluted, but clearly if lengthily explained, process of partnerships, corporate control, and outright merger. Unfortunately for the PRR, the Panic of 1873 cur-
tailed efforts to gain access and control over railroads in the Trans–Mississippi West and the post–Civil War South.

Running the railroad proved perhaps even more difficult than construction. The author clearly discusses the complex problems of administering the system, especially with the rising power of organized labor, increasing government regulation, technological advances, and competition from other railroads such as the New York Central and the Reading. Churella chronicles technology such as air brakes, steel freight and passenger cars, and signal systems, discussing them not simply as anonymous tools, but as complex, interconnected, human-shaped developments that cannot be divorced from the broader context. While the early chapters on system building are important and an interesting read, the later chapters on running and adapting the system to changing circumstances are where the book really shines.

Churella used a wealth of sources to construct this monumental work. The state archives of Pennsylvania and the Hagley Museum and archives possess many of the PRR’s papers; however, the author went beyond the standard sources and examined newspapers and historical and contemporary printed works. Ample and extensive endnotes expand the work, but unfortunately the book provides no bibliography. While the author pays much attention to the presidents of the PRR and other corporate leaders, this is not a hagiography of empire builders, nor is it an indictment of robber barons. He provides a balanced and evenhanded portrayal of the many individual and collective entities involved in an enormous corporate enterprise. Historians of railroad and business history will find this work invaluable, as will serious amateur historians. Even more, anyone with interest in the rise of industrial America and the regulatory, technological, and labor ramifications thereof will find much to engage them. At nearly one thousand pages, the history of the PRR matches the grandeur of the book.

JEFF SCHRAMM


Carolyn Goldstein’s thoughtful study of the early development of home economics reassesses the significance of this often maligned discipline. In uncovering the pivotal role of home economists in the creation of our consumer economy, the author adroitly draws out the philosophies that shaped the field and the goals of the leaders who envisioned a new role for women