

The Big Roads: The Untold Story of the Engineers, Visionaries, and Trailblazers Who Created the American Superhighways, by Earl Swift. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011. 375 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$27.00 hardcover.

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There is good reason that road metaphors—including those that lead to Rome, to ruin, or to redemption—serve humanists so ably. Grounded, literally, in the empirical realities of their times and laden with the contingent choices of their creators—including the many “roads not taken”—public highways serve as visible, unavoidable reminders of values that long ago determined the shape of our nation’s economy, society, and natural environment. Earl Swift’s entertaining and informative survey, which details the provisional formation and ongoing evolution of the greatest public works project in American history, never loses sight of this fact.

Ostensibly focused on the \$130 billion “Dwight D. Eisenhower System of Interstate and Defense Highways,” better known as the national interstate highway system, Swift’s work is best understood as a study of national public transportation policy within the context of rapid technological and economic change. The book’s charm lies in the author’s skill as narrator. His story follows a familiar narrative arc, including the rising demands made by engineers, industrialists, and politicians for a national interstate highway system, the passage and construction (or, more accurately, redesign) of those thoroughfares, and the subsequent problems and opportunities made manifest by 47,000 miles of macadam.

Summarizing such a complex story is impossible, yet Swift chose his subjects carefully. The first third of the book fixes on the work of Iowa’s own Thomas H. MacDonald who, along with Carl G. Fisher, Logan Waller Page, and an army of professional civil engineers founded the American Association of State Highway Officials in 1914. Together, they drafted and helped to pass the nation’s first comprehensive highway bill two years later. Swift acknowledges that the bulk of their work was in “refining,” not building, new roadways, yet the Federal Highway acts ushered in an era of national planning, funding, and oversight not seen since the days of the great internal improvement debates of the early nineteenth century. The residual effect at the state level—including the need for state highway maintenance, professional highway departments, and effective policing—are still felt today by every auto commuter and taxpayer.

The middle third of the text explores the vexing social and political problems exposed by such ambition. By the start of the Great Depression—when, significantly, the U.S. Bureau of Public Roads began budgeting for transit planning and research, not simply road design and construction—the focus of interstates had settled not on the great stretches of rural roadway but rather on the gridlocked urban “corridors” that surrounded and often bound the nation’s major cities. Swift returns often to Baltimore and the work of Herbert Sinclair Fairbank as a useful case study. When coupled with the Federal Housing Act of 1949, these interstates effectively defined the geographic resources of 85 of the country’s largest cities. As Swift notes, their plans “were self-fulfilling” and used yardsticks that measured “the driving experience” (such as fuel economy and speed) rather than the expressed wants of the voting public. “The effects on those not using the roads,” he concludes, “were neither as easily tallied nor as eagerly sought” and “rested in a fundamental assumption that would soon prove flawed,” namely, that the urban cores would retain their magnetic attraction as the preferred places of work, residence, and play (147–48).

Critics and qualifying reforms dominate the final sections of the book. Leading a “Freeway Revolt” against a policy that he had done so much to justify, Lewis Mumford headlines a well-known cast who saw conformity and environmental degradation as the chief legacies of the interstate system. Sounding quite contemporary, Mumford and others lamented the “blithe and cocky” attitude of national planners, the “blunders of [their] one-dimensional thinking” that privileged Detroit’s “insolent chariots,” which served as the “second mistress” in every American household (242). Tellingly, their critique was not leveled solely against a system that chased pedestrians off the public thoroughfares but also, as Mumford wrote, bemoaned how “the building of a highway has about the same result upon vegetation and [local diversity] as the passage of a tornado or the blast of an atom bomb” (243).

Although *The Big Roads* is not the “untold” story promised in the subtitle—indeed, the one troubling aspect of Swift’s work is his willful evasion of a rich historiographical context, particularly Tom Lewis’s masterful *Divided Highways* (1997)—the book ultimately poses big questions about the relationship between modern public values and the tools we use to maintain them. Swift resolves this dilemma by bookending the text with his own personal driving experiences. He notes that he, like a large majority of Americans, accepts the numbing conformity of interstate travel and too often ignores the environmental costs of personal passenger automobile via the interstate system largely because of its speed, relative safety, and the fact that “it’s easy; and

some days, many days, that counts" (316). In the end we're left with our adages intact, and, as Swift shows, new roads made new ruts.

What the River Carries: Encounters with the Mississippi, Missouri, and Platte, by Lisa Knopp. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2012. ix, 230 pp. Bibliography. \$19.95 paper.

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Historians have long used personal narratives as historical evidence; think of the contributions of letters, memoirs, autobiographies, and oral histories. Why not include essays, such as this lovely collection, also? Lisa Knopp's reflections on the rivers that have run through her life are richly evocative. While they may someday inform a historian concerned with attitudes about a sense of place in the Midwest, they serve now to illuminate some new stories of the region, as well as revisit some well-known tales.

Knopp grew up in Burlington, Iowa, and the Mississippi is her "home" river. She also addresses the Missouri and the Platte, part of later stages of her life, and in several respects her essays on those rivers, which she came to know as an adult, are more informative than those on the Mississippi. Her essay on Missouri's "Little Dixie" and the story of Jesse James are really strong—personal and evocative stories told well.

It is perhaps in telling the lesser-known stories that Knopp's contribution to our understanding of the region is strongest. With personal essays, of course, the reader gets only what the writer wishes to convey. Her essay "The Taking," on the Pick-Sloan Act of the 1940s that established the system of dams that flooded many Indian communities in the Dakotas and Montana, does not replace the voluminous literature on that sad tale. That said, she does illustrate well a personal, more intimate, dimension to the broad narrative, thereby providing a point of entry for the nonspecialist to begin to try to understand a complex subject.

Of course we don't read essays for the same reasons that we read scholarly history. Knopp does not take up the issues and concerns that motivate scholars, thereby placing her book in conversation with public history, such as the interpretations given at historic sites and museums.

Knopp's subjects are place, self, and history—broad subjects, to be sure, but her choice of rivers as the organizing principle serves her well. Rivers cut through themes of the past; they inherently cross invisible boundaries and serve as connectors of things previously separated.