

The Colossus of Roads: Myth and Symbol along the American Highway, by Karal Ann Marling. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984. xii, 140 pp. Notes, illustrations, map, index. \$27.50 cloth, \$12.95 paper.

As we come across a previously unexamined phenomenon, each of us chooses a particular way of dealing with its presence and meaning. Some interpret it in economic terms; others prefer political, social, or ideological explanations. Historians, at least the more thoughtful of the breed, seek to understand the surrounding environment, the full variety of conditions influencing the creation or modification of the phenomenon. Historians of course place particular importance on timing, which is another way of saying the culture's stage of development when the phenomenon appeared. Detaching a phenomenon from its time and context renders it largely incomprehensible, if not totally meaningless, most historians believe.

Gigantic figures of Paul Bunyan, Babe the Blue Ox, the Jolly Green Giant, and other characters found along various Minnesota roadsides intrigued University of Minnesota professor of art history and American studies Karal Ann Marling. *The Colossus of Roads* is her largely ahistorical attempt to fashion an explanation for the presence of these curious monuments. Marling deals with these twentieth-century constructions as part of a timeless tradition of myth- and symbol-making as old as the ancient world's Colossus at the entrance to the harbor of Rhodes. Lumping together various literary, artistic, and material uses of heroic or exaggerated proportion through the ages obscures rather than explains the phenomenon. By also seeking to tie the Minnesota colossi to every modern example of size distortion from the Cardiff giant and world's fair statuary to Mount Rushmore, miniature golf, and billboard images in *The Great Gatsby*, the significance of location as well as time is lost.

To her credit, Marling does provide a good bit of interesting information about the Minnesota roadside colossi, even while she looks elsewhere for explanations of their existence. The reader learns, for instance, that during the winter of 1937 Bemidji businessmen came up with the idea of erecting a statue of the recently developed mythical figure Paul Bunyan and that other Minnesota communities followed suit with a wide variety of other immense objects. What is missing from Marling's account is an examination of the thinking and specific motivation of those Bemidjians, not to mention the response of their community. When Marling does briefly explore such questions—as with the marvelous story of the voyageur colossus erected in Sparta, Minnesota, to protest National Park Service land-acquisition

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policies—the results are illuminating. When she abandons this focus—as with the description of the Cambridge Swedish Festival which does not even involve a colossus—her discussion loses all point. The reader is left with the impression (confirmed by the book's many excellent photographs) that there is a wonderful subject here, but that the author does not really know how to deal with it.

The Colossus of Roads could have explored questions such as the evolution of advertising devices for capturing the attention of new high-speed automobile travelers and the struggle of small communities to gain notice in a mass society which increasingly bypasses them. These are important and very time-specific, place-specific questions. Rather than settle for an entertaining look at the use of distorted proportion through the ages as she did, Marling could have chosen to deal more thoroughly with circumstances of time and place and thereby provided considerable insight on the communities where modern colossi have arisen. These curious twentieth-century roadside structures deserve more substantial treatment. They represent, pardon the expression, a bigger subject than this author has acknowledged.

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Bonds of Enterprise: John Murray Forbes and Western Development in America's Railway Age, by John Lauritz Larson. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984. xiv, 257 pp. Notes, maps, bibliography, index. \$27.50 cloth.

Railroad Development Programs in the Twentieth Century, by Roy V. Scott. Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1985. xi, 231 pp. Notes, bibliography, index. \$24.95 cloth.

John Murray Forbes was born in 1813 into a prominent Boston trading family. He was introduced to the merchant's world at the age of eight when his brother sent him a shipment of Chinese trinkets, which John Murray is reported to have sold to his neighbors. By the 1830s, Forbes was deeply involved in the China trade himself. Despite his deep admiration for the mysterious Hong merchant Howqua, from whom he acquired his first precepts of business conduct, Forbes disliked China and the cutthroat practices of those who supplied the Canton traders. Forbes returned to Boston and, in the best tradition of Boston capitalists, soon launched another new career. Railroads and land speculation were the fields that attracted men like Forbes in the mid-1840s.

He first acquired the Michigan Central, a state venture that had become mired in the Jacksonian politics and glacial mud of frontier

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