

limit its appeal to the general reader or undergraduate, but advanced students will find much of value. Its strongest contribution is to the urban history of the period, because it moves us beyond nostalgic portraits of Main Street to consider the implications of the shift in power from the river town to the metropolis.

Empire Express: Building the First Transcontinental Railroad, by David Haward Bain. New York: Viking/Penguin, 1999. xvii, 797 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, bibliography, index. \$34.95 cloth, \$18.00 paper.

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Building the first transcontinental railroad was so heroic an achievement that it seems only fair to expect heroic exertions from readers wanting to know about it. David Haward Bain's magnificent *Empire Express* gives them their chance: more than seven hundred pages of drama, daring, and devious behavior, as promoters joined the Iowa prairies to the Pacific.

The author of *Sitting in Darkness*, a provocative study of American involvement in the Philippines, Bain has the best of help in crafting a good story: a cast of thousands, including madmen, dreamers, rogues, and finaglers. Told many times before, the story still dazzles: how visionaries, beginning with Asa Whitney and "Crazy" Theodore Judah pressed home the idea of building a passage to India by rail; how California shopkeepers and New England shovel-makers induced a nation to endow the project; how the Central Pacific and Union Pacific built their roads across a daunting landscape; and how, to a burst of cannon in eastern cities and a fanfare of publicity nationwide, the two lines met on May 10, 1869, at Ogden, Utah, and the last spike was driven. Irish and Chinese laborers battled the elements and, every so often, each other. They tunneled and inched their way through the Sierras, sometimes only inches a day, and laid rails across forty miles of desert in a fortnight. At the same time, high-placed allies with military influence (among them Iowan Grenville Dodge) helped pacify and, indeed, empty the land of Native Americans by treaty, prisoner exchanges, and intermittent war. Trains were ambushed, brakemen were shot, and a telegraph repairman, surviving one attack, came out with his scalp intact—though, having been removed, good for nothing except a spot on display in the children's section of the Omaha Public Library. Major Frank North, Buffalo Bill, friendly Pawnee and hostile Cheyenne, cholera, smallpox, whores, cannibalized railroad engines—what more can one ask of an epic?

But as Bain makes clear, the march of destiny traveled through wastelands by way of New York and Boston's boardrooms and Washington's cloakrooms. Without government aid and some very tricky financing, neither the Union Pacific nor the Central Pacific could have begun building, and directors found plenty of ways to milk the national treasury in the process. Even as toilers break rock and mushroom towns sprout on the prairie, only to vanish with the contractors' passing, we cut to the money-getting and money-laundering of Thomas Durant and California's Big Four and what, from Bain's reading, looks very much like a grafters' carnival in the Capitol, with the Crédit Mobilier contracting firm spreading its fabulously profitable stock far and wide among influential congressmen (including a few of Iowa's choicer statesmen). Understandably, editor Ambrose Bierce later described insiders as the Forty Thieves—and one rogue in particular as 36 of them—though Bain's dispassion, even admiration, for the builders gives them more sympathetic handling.

If even the financial jiggery-pokery and boardroom spats make lively reading, the credit is all Bain's. He has achieved that near miracle: a scholarly work, painstakingly researched, with the panache of great popular history. On political matters, *Empire Express's* portrait of the Great Barbecue looks old-fashioned and in some particulars dead wrong (did the Fourteenth Amendment actually give 700,000 blacks the vote?), but the story is more fun that way, and Bain marshals evidence so masterfully that even those who are skeptical that postwar politicians were such scapegraces may doubt their own assumptions.

The title notwithstanding, this book is no express; it is a local, making every stop that events or features of interest permit. Bain cannot resist a good story, even if sometimes it is only that. Every snowfall or run-off means trouble for the builders and incident for the book. Mile by mile, week by week, the book proceeds, leisurely, chronologically, always colorfully. That may be why we end not with the prosaic—a long-term reflection on how the railroads changed lives and livelihoods—but with one last melodrama, as the peculating politicians are brought to book. Many readers will miss it. Exhausted by endless advancing, they will disembark along the way. But even those who fail to make it to the end of the line will not begrudge having made a trip on Bain's *Empire Express*.

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