

Bedwell in Railroad Literature

Railroading never had a prominent role in American literature, nor in world letters. Compared to the sea, for example, there are no *Moby Dicks* or works like *Two Years Before The Mast*. Global-wise the industry has yet to produce a Joseph Conrad. It is only in the United States that railroads play even a significant minor part. For want of a better name we can call this thin slice of literature, the Railroad School. Harry Bedwell's role is important because he is the last of its "graduates." The Golden Age of railroad fiction is past. Whereas books on rail history are on the increase, you can count on one hand authors who write short stories or novels on the industry. A brief resume of the Railroad School, then, is necessary to assess Bedwell's contribution to specialized writing and to Americana.

Railroad fiction enjoyed its greatest popularity from about 1895 to 1915. World War I diverted attention from the subject, and after the conflict the automobile usurped the role of trains in short-haul travel. The interest in railroad stories never regained anything like its pristine glory. Bedwell came in at the tag-end of the era. He later carried on the tradition of the "old masters," if we can

call them that, to the mid-century.

The best known of the earlier "fictioneers" was Cy Warman, author of some ten books on rail themes, most of them being collections of short stories. He also wrote fair verse and penned the lyrics of that once-popular song, "Sweet Marie." The dean of railroad novelists and short story writers, however, was Frank H. Spearman. Oddly enough he was the only exponent of the School who never worked for a railroad. Spearman's *Held For Orders*, a volume of short stories, is a classic in its field. His *Whispering Smith* may well have set a peak in the sale of a rail novel. This "Western" was twice filmed in the silent pictures and in recent years appeared in technicolor.

Other representatives of the School include Herbert E. Hamblen, who made his niche in writing authentic railroad stories along with those of the sea and of fire-fighting. His *The General Manager's Story* is outstanding in its genre. Frank L. Packard, best known for his Jimmie Dale mysteries, also penned some fine stories on the industry. Among them are *Running Special* and *The Night Operator*. Finally, there's Francis Lynde, whose long list of romances frequently concerned railroad building.

By the twenties and early thirties the "top" railroad short story writers had thinned out. Bedwell was in the breach, but had not yet risen to his full stature. This period, nevertheless, did fea-

ture the remarkable yarns of A. W. Somerville, mostly confined to the *Saturday Evening Post*. William E. Hayes likewise wrote some creditable tales, as did one or two others. When these men ceased their story-writing the only rising star in the limited galaxy of rail fiction authors was the ex-boomer from Iowa.

That's how the picture looked when the forties rolled around, and it has not changed much since. To bring the record up-to-date, mention should be made of Albert B. Cunningham, prolific author of the Jess Roden "whodunits." Under the pen name of Garth Hale, the ex-railroad telegrapher wrote *This Pounding Wheel* and *Legacy For Our Sons*, both having high-fidelity depot settings. More recently James McCague produced *The Big Ivy*, a lusty novel of turn-of-the-century railroading; and Hollister Noble in his *One Way to Eldorado* had honest railroad realism in an otherwise hyper-melodramatic plot. As for short stories in periodicals, the heritage of the old Railroad School is virtually a memory. The only two writers in this category contributing tales with any regularity are Jack Clinton McLarn and John Rhodes Sturdy, the latter a Canadian.

Bedwell, then, is the end of the line of specialized writers who put the railroad into story. As David P. Morgan, editor of *Trains*, put it: "he was as capable a practitioner in the art of good railroad writing as lived in our times." Many of

his tales rank with the best the Railroad School produced. True, his cumulative writings may not come up to the standards of Spearman, but his finest can hardly be said to take second place to any of the "classic" railroad writers.

The Iowa storyteller, however, is at his best in presenting that colorful pilgrim of the rails — the boomer. Throughout his writings are shrewd bits of the itinerant's philosophy, pungent pages of the past, a nostalgic picture of a way of life — and of railroading — that was and can never be again. The day which Bedwell so fondly delineates is a time when man and beast, and the products of farm, forest, mine, and factory went almost exclusively by rail. Today the highway, airway, and, to a limited extent, the waterway, have taken their toll. The branch-line passenger train is practically extinct. Centralized Traffic Control, push-button yards, and diesel motive power make for efficiency but not for individuality. Harry Bedwell is one with the steam locomotive. May his memory live as a page of Americana which is turned forever.

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