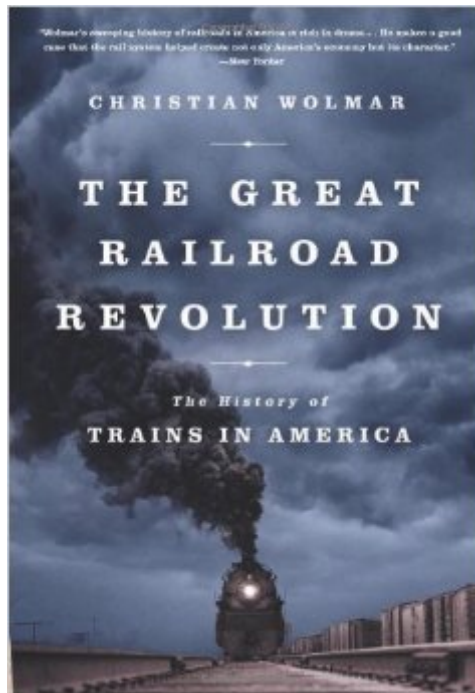


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# The Great Railroad Revolution: The History Of Trains In America



## Synopsis

America was made by the railroads. The opening of the Baltimore & Ohio line “the first American railroad” in the 1830s sparked a national revolution in the way that people lived thanks to the speed and convenience of train travel. Promoted by visionaries and built through heroic effort, the American railroad network was bigger in every sense than Europe’s, and facilitated everything from long-distance travel to commuting and transporting goods to waging war. It united far-flung parts of the country, boosted economic development, and was the catalyst for America’s rise to world-power status. Every American town, great or small, aspired to be connected to a railroad and by the turn of the century, almost every American lived within easy access of a station. By the early 1900s, the United States was covered in a latticework of more than 200,000 miles of railroad track and a series of magisterial termini, all built and controlled by the biggest corporations in the land. The railroads dominated the American landscape for more than a hundred years but by the middle of the twentieth century, the automobile, the truck, and the airplane had eclipsed the railroads and the nation started to forget them. In *The Great Railroad Revolution*, renowned railroad expert Christian Wolmar tells the extraordinary story of the rise and the fall of the greatest of all American endeavors, and argues that the time has come for America to reclaim and celebrate its often-overlooked rail heritage.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

As a serious history buff but a very amateur rail fan, I’ve always been a bit disappointed. There

always seemed to be no shortage of books out there that discussed all sorts of minutiae about obscure lines or particular engines or famous passenger trains. I could never really find anything, however, that got out of the trees and showed me the forest. Well, I think I finally found it. This book covers it all, from the technical innovations behind the Friend of Charleston to the political dimensions of the Acela. At the same time, it's a very easy read, as it's extremely well-written. It flows particularly well, and there are definite, well-argued themes that run through the whole thing. Here are some of the interesting things I learned:- The beginning of the railroad age as an interesting combination of technology and venture capital much like our present Internet age- The incredible degree of corruption behind the transcontinental railroad, the Central Pacific (Stanford, Huntington, Crocker, and Mark Hopkins), and almost all railroad development in the Gilded Age- How strapped the railroads were by the ICC- The experiment with nationalization that occurred during WWI- How much the government helped the auto industry and how little it helped the railroads- How healthy the existing railroads are with their concentration on freight- What a poor strategy Amtrak's long distance routes are (as compared to short routes between major cities like Houston-Dallas or Seattle-Portland)

Here is a well written, as in easy to read, capsulized accounting of American Railroad history. One reason for the reading compatibility is he uses the full name of the railroads throughout the book - not the initials. However, it would have been better if he followed that line with the characters. Too many of the RR books tend to be so over-indulged in detail that following/getting the "big picture" is lost. Though the author delves into some details, he keeps the story flowing. The only reason I'm giving it a 4 star instead of a 5 is he glosses over the favorable impact the legislation had on the trucking industry to the detriment of the rails and no mention of feather-bedding. Finally, in some of the sections he doesn't cite the dates forcing the reader to go back a few pages to sort out the time line. Anyone interested in this subject might try obtaining a copy of *Throttling the Railroad* by Clarence B. Carson (1971).

Wolmar sets out to describe the history of railroads in the U.S. and succeeds admirably. In particular, he presents and analyzes their impact of land development, the economy, and the radical change in our culture. Few people today are aware of how profoundly railroads changed our way of life, and Wolmar makes it clear. Well-written with an English accent. Of particular interest to me, a retired transportation policy professional, was the story of poor old Amtrak, which continues to limp along as a caricature of a rail system. The decline of passenger rail in the U.S. is a sad story, and

Wolmar captures it. There are a few factual errors, but none of any real significance. I'll leave them for you to find. This is not a book for those railroad buffs who want technical information. It's for the reader who wants to understand railroads, not locomotives and cabooses.

This is a very dense history of America's railroads from inception to the very current present. Mr. Wolmar is obviously a lover of the train. He starts - logically enough - with the invention and earliest uses of trains and then goes into a very detailed history of the railroad's uses, abuses, developments, strengths, weaknesses, growth and demise over time. Perhaps there is no industry that better encapsulates both America's industrial history and attitudes towards industry and growth. When I wrote "dense", I mean that Mr. Wolmar never puts in fewer than two examples for every point he makes. I felt for the first eighty per cent of the book, or so, this detracted and made it a burdensome read at times. Just as my frustration was mounting I hit the last 100 pages and was delighted to see more "big picture" analysis. Mr. Wolmar has some very cogent observations on the causes of the railroad's demise and partial restoration. Better, these observations can be taken as lessons for all three of the major facets of American industry: management, labor and government intervention. And, best of all, Mr. Wolmar does not come down on any one side. Each gets pilloried and praised as appropriate. This is a thorough history with the lessons of history brought to light in an educational manner without being preachy. Recommended, with the last fifth highly recommended.

• The Great Railroad Revolution • by Christian Wolmar  
Wolmar does an excellent job of presenting the history of our railroads • most notably by • showing them in three dimension •. That's to say he brings changing railroads and their changing times and fortunes to life. This book is a saga, not a dry recital of rail trivia and out-of-context factoids. Anyone with an interest in railroads should find this a thorough, and thoroughly interesting, treatise on an important player in our national development as a People as well as a nation.

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