Book Review: Profiting from the Plains: The Great Northern Railway and Corporate Development of the American West

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A former colleague of mine once remarked of James J. Hill, with some emphasis, that he was a "great man!" This statement seems subject to some qualifications, which my colleague did not provide, but which Claire Strom offers in Profiting from the Plains. Hill, the "empire builder," was a great man with many shortcomings, not the least of which was his conception of himself as a great man.

Strom focuses on the Great Northern's and Hill's interest in supporting agriculture on the northern Great Plains. Hill believed that the GN, built without land grants, had to depend on income from haulage in order to prosper. Though lumber and ore figured largely in the GN's profits, Hill's personal interests in diversified agriculture influenced corporate plans to encourage the development of a dense agrarian population on the Northern Plains. In his attempts to foster successful farming, Hill sponsored at various times demonstration farms, distribution of high quality livestock, support for agricultural colleges' research and demonstration programs, and federal irrigation projects. His interest in these programs varied with the political winds; he sought alliances with federal or state agencies or colleges if they agreed with his ideas, and, when they didn't, he established necessary agencies within the Great Northern. But as national politics turned toward Progressive ideas about expert scientific leadership in agriculture and federal control of western land use, Hill, agricultural amateur, lost political power and, ultimately, influence within the Great Northern corporation.

Strom has drawn on GN records, a variety of federal and state records, and Hill's papers to develop her argument that Hill failed to manipulate settlement and agricultural development to suit his own ideas about agriculture as well as the GN's business requirements. She succeeds in arguing that Hill's greatness as an entrepreneur both supported and conflicted with his attempt to cultivate a personal reputation as a visionary "gentleman farmer." Since Strom focuses almost exclusively on Hill and his son Louis, however, she leaves the reader wondering about how business decisions concerning agricultural practices were made by GN executives.

Readers will enjoy the book more if they already know something about Hill's personal life and the arguments raging around the politics and practices of agriculture in the Progressive Era. Strom might have devoted space in the footnotes to describing some of the terms she uses such as "scrip" (in exchange for land) and varieties of corn. In spite of these minor problems, the book makes important contributions to our understanding of settlement on the Northern Plains and the significance of railroads in western agricultural development.

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