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Review of Railroads Triumphant: The Growth, Rejection & Rebirth of a Vital American Force

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Railroads Triumphant: The Growth, Rejection & Rebirth of a Vital American Force. By Albro Martin. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992. Illustrations, maps, comments on the sources, index. 428 pp. \$29.95.

Albro Martin has authored a masterful account of the pivotal role of railroads in shaping American economic and social life. The foremost historian of American railroads, Martin examines the emergence of the railroad system in the antebellum era, the growth of the great transcontinental lines, and the numerous difficulties experienced by railroads in the twentieth century. He pictures the railroads as agents of change, noting that railroads were instrumental in opening the prairie states for settlement, facilitating industrialization, and forging a national market for goods. As America's first big business, the railroads also compelled the formulation of new legal rules for torts, labor relations, interstate commerce, eminent domain, and equity receiverships. Moreover, the author treats the strategic wartime significance of the railroads from the Civil War through World War II.

Martin is sharply critical of the increasingly hostile regulatory climate in which railroads had to operate after 1900. He contends that farmers and local shippers often unfairly blamed railroads for their economic distress. Martin takes particular aim at the Interstate Commerce Commission and the practice of fixing railroad charges at unrealistically low levels. He charges that the ICC consistently resisted technological innovation and sought to prevent price competition between railroads and truckers. "At no time," Martin concludes, "did the commission ever measure up to the concept of an economic policy-making body" originally envisioned by Progressive reformers. In this connection, he rejects the "capture" thesis advanced by Gabriel Kolko—that railroads controlled the regulatory process for their own benefit—as a complete misreading of the historical record.

The profitability of railroads declined after 1920 when the lines faced new competition from the publicly subsidized trucking and air-

line industries. To Martin the collapse of the Penn Central in 1970, which precipitated a crisis for the railroad industry, was the bitter fruit of decades of unintelligent governmental control. The partial deregulation of railroads in 1980, however, paved the way for a vigorous revival of rail transportation. Martin is guardedly optimistic that railroads will continue to occupy an important place in the movement of freight.

Written in a lively and engaging style, *Railroads Triumphant* provides entertaining descriptions of the leading railroad entrepreneurs, famous depots, and such prominent lines as the New York Central and the Pennsylvania. Although Martin on occasion may assume more knowledge about railroads than the general reader is likely to possess, he excels in telling the story of America's railroads. He makes a powerful case for the enduring impact of the railroads on American history. This superb book deserves a wide audience.

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