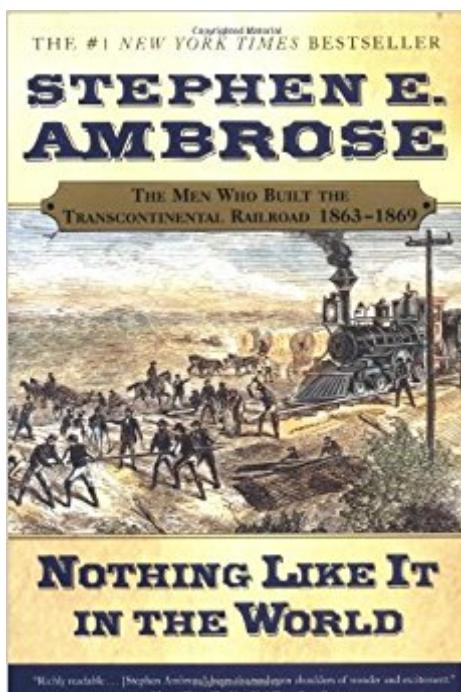


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Nothing Like It In The World: The Men Who Built The Transcontinental Railroad 1863-1869



Synopsis

Nothing Like It in the World gives the account of an unprecedented feat of engineering, vision, and courage. It is the story of the men who built the transcontinental railroad—the investors who risked their businesses and money; the enlightened politicians who understood its importance; the engineers and surveyors who risked, and sometimes lost, their lives; and the Irish and Chinese immigrants, the defeated Confederate soldiers, and the other laborers who did the backbreaking and dangerous work on the tracks. The U.S. government pitted two companies—the Union Pacific and the Central Pacific Railroads—against each other in a race for funding, encouraging speed over caution. Locomotives, rails, and spikes were shipped from the East through Panama or around South America to the West or lugged across the country to the Plains. In Ambrose's hands, this enterprise, with its huge expenditure of brainpower, muscle, and sweat, comes vibrantly to life.

Book Information

Paperback: 432 pages

Publisher: Simon & Schuster; 1st edition (November 6, 2001)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0743203178

ISBN-13: 978-0743203173

Product Dimensions: 6.1 x 1.1 x 9.2 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.2 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.2 out of 5 stars 441 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #24,138 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #3 in Books > Engineering & Transportation > Transportation > History > Railroads #3 in Books > Engineering & Transportation > Transportation > Railroads #86 in Books > History > Americas > United States > Civil War

Customer Reviews

Abraham Lincoln, who had worked as a riverboat pilot before turning to politics, knew a thing or two about the problems of transporting goods and people from place to place. He was also convinced that the United States would flourish only if its far-flung regions were linked, replacing sectional loyalties with an overarching sense of national destiny. Building a transcontinental railroad, writes the prolific historian Stephen Ambrose, was second only to the abolition of slavery on Lincoln's presidential agenda. Through an ambitious program of land grants and low-interest government

loans, he encouraged entrepreneurs such as California's "Big Four"--Charles Crocker, Collis Huntington, Mark Hopkins, and Leland Stanford--to take on the task of stringing steel rails from ocean to ocean. The real work of doing so, of course, was on the shoulders of immigrant men and women, mostly Chinese and Irish. These often-overlooked actors and what a contemporary called their "dreadful vitality" figure prominently in Ambrose's narrative, alongside the great financiers and surveyors who populate the standard textbooks. In the end, Ambrose writes, Lincoln's dream transformed the nation, marking "the first great triumph over time and space" and inaugurating what has come to be known as the American Century. David Haward Bain's *Empire Express*, which covers the same ground, is more substantial, but Ambrose provides an eminently readable study of a complex episode in American history. --Gregory McNamee --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Eminent historian Ambrose notes that he once viewed the investors and businessmen who built the transcontinental railroad as robber barons who bilked the government and the public. But in his rough-and-tumble, triumphant saga *As Sure to Appeal* to the many readers of Ambrose's bestseller *Undaunted Courage*, he presents the continent-straddling railroad, yoking east and west at Promontory Point, Utah, in 1869, as a great democratic experiment, a triumph of capitalist organization, free labor, brains and determination that ushered in the American Century, galvanized trade and settlement, and made possible a national culture. To critics who charge that the railroad magnates were corrupt and grew obscenely rich and powerful through land grants and government bonds, Ambrose replies that the land grants never brought in enough money to pay the bills and, further, that the bonds were loans, fully paid back with huge interest payments. But this argument fails to convince, partly because Ambrose does a superlative job of re-creating the grim conditions in which the tracks were laid. The Central Pacific's workers were primarily Chinese, earning a dollar a day. Union Pacific workers were mostly Irish-American, young, unmarried ex-soldiers from both the Union and the Confederacy. Accidental deaths were commonplace, and the two companies, notwithstanding strikes, slowdowns and drunken vice, engaged in a frantic race, mandated by Congress, as the winner got the greater share of land and bonds. As a result of the haste, an enormous amount of shoddy construction had to be replaced. Native Americans, who wanted the iron rail out of their country, hopelessly waged guerrilla warfare against railroad builders who talked openly of exterminating them. Drawing on diaries, memoirs, letters, telegrams, newspaper accounts and other primary sources, Ambrose celebrates the railroad's unsung heroes *As the men who actually did the backbreaking work.* 32 pages of b&w photos. 6-city author tour. (Sept.) Copyright 2000 Reed

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Really well written, like all of Mr. Ambrose's books. I live in California and couldn't wait for the next time I went over The Pass on I-80 to see the sites of this remarkable history. When I went over the mountains the next time, I stopped in some of the locations mentioned in the book and was rewarded with great museums, memorials and historic markers of the events and milestones chronicled here. read this book if you want the whole story in one volume.

This is a superb book by the consummate historian storyteller Stephen Ambrose. It is easy to forget now what a monumental task it was to build a railroad from the midwest to California during 1860's. It was almost like trying to put a man on the moon was a century later. The book is very easy to read, and will fill you with awe, particularly if you ever get a chance to ride the California Zephyr through the Sierra Nevada mountains, across the desert and over the hundreds of miles of mixed terrain that had to be crossed. The feat and the book are absolutely first rate.

Five stars says I "loved" it, and that's largely true. Frankly, I'm a train-lover who's even visited the fabled Promontory site, and I did enjoy Ambrose's consistently engaging storytelling. This wasn't an easy project for any writer, but Ambrose skillfully tells the story of a railroad being built literally from both ends toward the middle, without the reader losing a sense of time and place. He describes more than building a railroad; he peels back the layers of social, corporate and political intrigue that shaped a project as big as the Trans-Continental Railroad. Which exposed some of our nation's often inspiring but also ugly history: the greed and manipulation, the no-holds-barred competition, the smoke-filled room deals and steals, and the ugly racism that used Chinese (and other) workers as near-disposable parts of a building machine and shamelessly pushed native peoples out of the way. That's part of our un-sanitized history as a nation, and it deserves to be exposed to the light of day. Still, it's a great read. I never got bored. And I still love trains.

Excellent book. Thoroughly enjoyed reading it. Cast of many characters, sometimes hard to keep straight, but very informative. Disheartening to learn that politics played such a role in our country's early history, but eventually the job was done. Learned a lot and was entertained at the same time.

Mr. Ambrose writes a quite factual account of the building of the first transcontinental railway in the US. His writing is straightforward and he's a little "dry" in spots but altogether this book is an

interesting read. This book is one of his lesser known works, probably because it would only appeal to historians and train buffs. I bought it because I'm a train buff and didn't have an authoritative book on this subject. It's a keeper, in my opinion.

Too convoluted and confusing. Ambrose states that he was commissioned to write about HOW the transcontinental railroad project was done. He covered much of this but jumped around so much and belabored so many parts of the process it was difficult to follow. The only reason I finished it (with many hours of boredom) was because it was my book club's selection. Most in our group gave it a subpar rating. Two stars? Because I learned where the term "hell on wheels" originated and I learned why time zones were established.

I usually love Stephen Ambrose's books, but this seemed to drag on more than most. I was reading it on a Kindle so I am not sure if a hardcopy would have had better maps, pictures, etc so you could put some faces with names. It is a pretty amazing story considering it was happening during the Civil War. I live in Seattle where we have been trying to dig a tunnel under the city for almost 3 years now but the tunneling machine breaks about every 10 feet so the book made me think that we would have better luck doing it by hand. Unfortunately I am sure that would fall on deaf ears.

Celebrity-historian, Stephen Ambrose, was already well known when he wrote, *Nothing like it in the World*. With brief detours he was famous for his World War II based books. He idolized Ike & did the obligatory Normandy & D-Day landing books. I feel this might be his best. It is a subject that has not yet been written about to excess. It has, therefore, lots of new information. It was in fact high on Lincoln's agenda as he was running for president. I could see similarities to JFK's challenge to go to the moon. The railroad was the future of this country & everybody knew it. Of course, right from the beginning, in Congress, politics raised its ugly head. That the government would be involved was assumed. Capitalism had not yet advanced so far as for something so big as the transcontinental railroad could privately finance. This project, of course, would change that. The route west was to be hotly contested. Would it go through southern & presumably slave territories or a more northern route? The Civil War intervened. The Confederate states left the Union & without much opposition left, a northern route it was. During the war the technology of railroads grew as it never would have in peacetime. Also the infrastructure & the men to build it in the east as well as in California grew. Lincoln never saw it. But the building of a coast to coast railroad transformed the United States in so many ways. The act of physically building the project was only part of it. The hard drinking, hard

working Irish, many of them Civil War vets, rushing west to meet the mysterious, equally hardworking Chinese, many fresh from China, rushing east must be saluted. It was a convergence of nationalism, the industrial revolution & a realization that we were a continental nation. It was a project of national good. It was the beginning of a new type of capitalism & cooperation between private interest & government. It was also time of unbridled greed & a wealthy class that has remained.

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