What is this railroad to do for us?

By William Deverell

In the spring of 1868, Mark Twain and Bret Harte sat before the proofs of a new and soon-to-be-important literary magazine. The Overland Monthly was in the final stages of design and content production.

Cover art stumped the two writers—even though there was artwork tentatively chosen. A young California grizzly, the state mascot, stood in the center of the cover, snarling over his shoulder. “He was a good bear,” Twain remembered later. “He was a success.” But he was, Twain added, “an objectless bear—a bear that meant nothing in particular, signified nothing.” What to do?

Taking a pencil, Bret Harte then did something Twain regarded as “nothing less than inspiration itself.” With two hastily drawn parallel lines, Harte drew railroad tracks beneath the grizzly’s feet. “Behold he was a magnificent success!” Twain wrote. Now the cover of the journal said something: now it had power and meaning. In Twain’s eyes (though, being Twain, he might have been kidding), the picture now depicted an epic contest between the future and the past, between nature and inevitable human progress. Here was “the ancient symbol of California savagery snarling at the approaching type of high and progressive Civilization, the first Overland locomotive!”

That is but one way to look at the railroad. If, instead, you assume that the overland locomotive represented anything but high and progressive civilization, you have a different vision of that important drawing. If the transcontinental railroad represents something different, something far lower on the ladder of progress, something darker, even more obscure, then maybe that grizzly is the noble actor in the picture. Maybe that grizzly is defending a status quo forever to be doomed by the railroad’s arrival.

Think about the picture yet a third way. If the bear straddles the tracks not in defiance of the coming railroad, if the bear stands there out of loyalty or even friendship to the railroad, if the bear and the railroad are meant to suggest that nature and technology could be coexisting halves of a Gilded Age California coin, then what? And what’s the bear snarling at?

That’s easy: the bear is snarling at Richard White.
THE MOST POTENT AGENCY

In the fall of 1866, Southern Pacific Railroad executive Alban N. Towne wrote a twenty-five-page letter to California historian Hubert Howe Bancroft. Bancroft had recently visited S.P. headquarters in San Francisco. Now Towne obliged Bancroft’s request for “information which would better enable you to write up more fully in your great historical work the rise and progress of Railroads in California.” Where to begin? Towne admitted that regarding railroad “evolutions” and their “extent and importance” to “commercial transactions,” he could hardly segregate California from the nation as a whole.

Towne got right to the task, grappling with the unquestioned, even inevitable, greatness of the railroad enterprise and its history in the far West. He briefly reviewed early support of a transcontinental route across the nation, though he didn’t take that history back as far as he might have. He began in 1854 and advanced quickly to 1856 (he could have begun a full generation earlier had he wished, but that might have doubled the length of his long letter). He touched upon the young state of California’s interest in a transcontinental “to more strongly cement the bonds of union between the Pacific and Atlantic states,” noting not the rising sectional tensions between North and South but, peculiarly, the necessity of such a bond should the United States go to war with any European nation.
As he did in many a railroad letter, Towne turned quickly to numbers, detailing declining freight shipment charges for transcontinental traffic thanks to the coming of the railroad and displacement of the overland roads. He elaborated upon federal and state statute history, specifying various legislative benefits to railroad construction coming on the heels of the Civil War-era Pacific Railroad acts. Incorporation particulars followed: the tales of little railroads that eventually, inexorably, got eaten by the Southern Pacific or, in some cases, withered away from lack of traffic or use.

Noting that “few persons not actually engaged in the construction or management of railroads can form a correct opinion as to the enormous amount of material required in the construction and maintenance of the same,” Towne hinted at the miles and miles of bridges, trestles, rails and ties, fences, telegraph lines, snow sheds (nearly forty miles alone in the Sierra Nevada), and other support facilities erected by the railroad corporation.

The railroad accelerated the timber industry. The railroad opened up the mines. The railroad moved people. The railroad developed water storage and delivery systems. The railroad was a prime mover—the prime mover—in western growth and development. On and on and on: And it was all to the good.

Though they may have looked like simple numbers on the pages of a long letter, Towne’s data were couched in hubris: we did this, we did that, we did a lot. It is not that such claims were invented without foundation; it is, rather, that Towne offered them up so straightforwardly, as if the railroad traveled in only one absolute direction toward inevitable progress.

As the head of his busy history factory, Hubert Howe Bancroft generally did not have the time or inclination to stand in critical posture to his subjects or informants. The railroad and Towne himself were no different; Bancroft restated the railroad executive’s claims with little to no distance from his boasts. “In the progress of the United States in the last sixty years toward the first place among the nations of the earth in material wealth, enlightenment, and power,” Bancroft wrote at the end of the nineteenth century, “[the railroad] has been the most potent agency.”

“VAGUELY REALIZING WESTWARD”

Richard White is no Hubert Howe Bancroft. Where Bancroft chronicled minutely (and is undeniably important for so doing), White analyzes and interprets, and does so with an impressive degree of scholarly detachment, even suspicion bordering at times on cynicism. White actually may be that grizzly on the tracks snarling at the oncoming train. That is his scholarly stance toward the railroad, and it’s hardly chimerical. He has taken on the western transcontinental railroads, especially their corporate expression through individual lives and institutional growth, and found them all sorely, even absurdly, wanting. White’s disciplined embrace of irony, hard-won historical evidence, and ever-present critical analysis have swept the scholarly table clean of the caricatured notion of the triumphal transcontinental railroad tales—the triumphs of engineering, of horizontal or vertical integration, of management innovation, of post–Civil War reunion—all delivered via transcontinental iron rails “vaguely realizing westward.”

And by and by, White’s is not simply a great big to-be-reckoned-with railroad book. It is that, and it is appreciated immediately as that. But it is a Gilded Age book as well, a robber baron book, a post–Civil War capitalism book, a book that tilts friendship on its ear, that shadows the present in crafty ways, that explores the implicit connections between modernity and failure, modernity and
This iconic image of a Southern Pacific Railroad train in an orange grove suggests the role California farmers played in the state's exports upon completion of the transcontinental railroad. When Southern Pacific Railroad executive Alban N. Towne wrote his letter to the historian Hubert Howe Bancroft documenting California's railroads, fruit was a principal commodity export by rail. As White illustrates, in the late 1880s, nearly 200 million pounds of fruit were shipped eastward by rail from California.

Orange Train on Southern Pacific Railroad, ca. 1900, California Historical Society, CHS2011.658.tif

greed, modernity and corruption, and modernity and the cornucopia of natural resources that was the post–Civil War West.

It's a tall order to make a book do so much work, or to snarl at the past and present both. But that is what Railroaded does.

To further explore these and other dimensions of Railroaded, and the author's expectations of it, are four superb commentators, and I am grateful to each of them for helping us further appreciate, understand, and process the many layers of argument and nuance in this challenging work of historical scholarship. We turn in sequence to Professors Daniel Carpenter, Steven Usselman, Naomi Lamoreaux, and Eric Rauchway. Each has been invited to range widely in their response to the book, and each also will focus with some specificity on issues pertaining to governance and the nation (Carpenter); technology and railroad history (Usselman); railroad economics (Lamoreaux); and the railroaded American West (Rauchway). White will then offer his response to these comments.

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NOTES

RAILROADED: INTRODUCTION, BY RICHARD WHITE, PP 5–11

5 Most American historians have relegated the study of corporations to the subfield of business history. Business historians have thrived on the neglect of their colleagues and created an impressive body of literature that should be better integrated into the larger narratives of American and Canadian history.
9 I would like to thank Woody Powell for this formulation.
13 Roy, Socializing Capital, 4.
14 David Howard Bain, Empire Express: Building the First Transcontinental Railroad (New York: Viking, 1999), 711.

WHAT IS THIS RAILROAD TO DO FOR US?, BY WILLIAM DEVERELL, PP 12–15

The title is adapted from Henry George’s 1868 essay on the impact of the transcontinental: “What is the railroad to do for us?—this railroad that we have looked for, hoped for, prayed for so long?” George, “What the Railroad Will Bring Us,” The Overland Monthly, 1, no. 4 (Oct. 1868).

Caption sources: “Etc.” Overland Monthly, 1, no. 1 (July 1888), 99–100; White, Railroaded, Appendix, 524 (Chart B: Fruit and Sugar as Proportions of Eastbound Freight).
2 A. N. Towne to Hubert Howe Bancroft, Oct. 9, 1886; Collins P. Huntington Archive, The Hispanic Society of America: my thanks to Shelley Bennett for bringing this letter to my attention.
3 Ibid. An early sentence spoke of “the great work,” “the great struggle,” and “the great enterprise” in one breathless, long clause; the tone throughout is of self-congratulatory grandeur.
4 It isn’t surprising that this assessment came in the pages of Bancroft’s evaluation of Towne himself; see Bancroft, History of the Life of Alban N. Towne: A Character Study (San Francisco: The History Company, 1891), 197.

CAPITALISM, COUNTERFactualS, AND THE NATIONAL STATE: REFLECTIONS ON RICHARD WHITE’S RAILROADED, BY DANIEL CARPENTER, PP 16–27

2 The economist Milton Friedman, recipient of the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences, was a proponent of the free-market philosophy and of “monetarism.”
3 Charles Crocker, Collis P. Huntington, Leland Stanford, and Mark Hopkins, board members of the Central Pacific Railroad Company, collectively were known as the Associates.
4 In Voltaire’s satirical novella, Candide, the tutor Dr. Pangloss is a caricature of optimism who espouses the philosophy that the world he lives in is “the best of all possible worlds.”
5 I refer here to Max Weber, the German social theorist whose writings on “bureaucracy” defined a model of social, governmental, and economic organization. In Weber’s perception, bureaucracy was a mode not only of government but a mode of humans ruling over one another in the economic, social, cultural, religious, and political spheres. Weber, Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft [Economy and Society], 2 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 956–1003.