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Railway heritage and tourism

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Book Review

Railway heritage and tourism: a global perspective, M.V. Conlin, R.B. Bird (Eds.). Channel View, Bristol (2014). ISBN: 978 1 84541-438 2

It is indisputable that there is a nostalgic romance of historic railways that appeals especially, but not exclusively to older men, as freely admitted by one of the editors, whose youth was spent train spotting. The history of railways, the objects associated with them and, the ultimate model railway, the restored line supported and often manned by enthusiastic volunteers, 'playing trains for real' has a powerful appeal. Such railways and especially if they are steam trains, are what could be termed 'generic heritage' that is they are, alongside other such objects, such as Victorian cast iron street lamps or Mississippi stern wheel paddle boats, a universally recognised statement of being heritage. They are not the heritage of any specific period or event and do not evoke any particular heritage experience or emotion, but are just in themselves, heritage. I must admit to sharing this enthusiasm by wallowing in railway history, enthusing at railway memorabilia and gravitating to any restored railway. However herein lie my difficulties with this book.

The first major problem lies with the attempt in the title to link railways and tourism. To establish my own credentials on this point, I read this book, with considerable pleasure, partly on the new Paris- Barcelona TGV (claimed to be the fastest train service in Europe) and partly on a Spanish *trenhotel* meandering through Galicia. This underlines the point that railways can play a major, and I would hope growing, role in tourism but through the expanding continental high-speed network, the inter-airport rail links and the car-trains, winter sport trains, land cruises and the like. Aficionados might recognise this as 'the man in seat 61' tourism. The restored historic railways of amateur hobbyists are at best marginal and at worst a distraction to the potential of railways in contemporary tourism. This book ignores the important roles of railways in tourism as irrelevant to its focus of interest.

Secondly, and even more fundamentally, the book claims to be about heritage but the nature of this heritage of railways is never examined. The 17 substantive chapters introduce almost any conceivable aspect of railway history, down to the menus of dining cars, the nature of railway hotels and the reuse of disused rights of way. Examples of the history of railway building is related over five continents, justifying the 'global perspective' in the title. However at no point is the heritage experience explained. The important questions such as, why such railways should have become heritage, what heritage experience is evoked, by whom and for whom and what is the potential social, political or cultural impacts of this, are neither posed nor answered. Heritage, as an unexplained given state, is just assumed to exist: something is or is not heritage. For anyone immersed in the field of heritage, which does not include

the editors or contributors of this book, this is just a monumental failure and above all missed opportunity.

Railways have indeed a major heritage role which this book misses altogether. They have been credited with a nation building role archetypically the Canadian Pacific with together with its hotels play a major part in Canadian self-identity. The role of railways in colonial development (the Uganda and Benguela railways comes to mind) raises fraught interpretation issues. Equally railways can be a dissonant heritage. The heritage of the infamous 'Burma railway' through Thailand, which evokes Australian nation building but equally Japanese and Thai discomfort, is mentioned briefly in the introduction but not examined. The monuments to the many, mainly Chinese, labourers who died in the construction of the North American trans-continental lines (in Toronto, Vancouver, Auburn, California and no doubt elsewhere) are also a dissonant heritage needing examination. All these opportunities are missed because they do not fit the purpose and ethos of the book.

So the important question must be posed, 'for whom is the book intended and who should read it? This book is not for tourism specialists curious about the role railways do and might in the future, play in contemporary tourism. This topic is just ignored and details about tourist use of specific restored rail lines have no wider context enabling their significance to be assessed. The book is firmly rooted in the past with no interest in the present or future. The book also is not for heritage specialists. It makes no attempt at examining historic railways and all their associations and appurtenances as a heritage resource. The questions relating the potential resource to the experience, such as how, why and for whom, are never posed. The book is however intended for, and will be much appreciated by, those enthusiasts for railway history, who clearly wrote it.

The quite fundamental and puzzling, error lies in its inclusion in the series 'Tourism and cultural change'. The book not only does not make any contribution to either tourism or to contemporary cultural change, it does not set out to do so. Its correct niche would be a series (such as traditionally David and Charles) where its content and approach would be more at home. Its inclusion in the wrong series does the book and its contributors no service, disappoints those who may read it with the wrong expectations and misuses its readership who would have obtained much pleasure and entertainment from it.

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