

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

By Stephen E. Ambrose

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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.

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Nothing Like It In the World: The Men Who Built the Transcontinental Railroad 1863-1869 By Stephen E. Ambrose Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #20974 in Books
- Brand: Simon Schuster
- Published on: 2001-11-06
- Released on: 2001-11-06
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 9.25" h x 1.10" w x 6.12" l, 1.18 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 432 pages

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

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

From Publishers Weekly

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 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--the men who actually did the backbreaking work. 32 pages of b&w photos. 6-city author tour. (Sept.)

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From Library Journal

The transcontinental railroad was the greatest American engineering feat of the 19th century. It awed legions of reporters, photographers, and others in its own day and historians thereafter for its scale, innovation, and sheer brute strength. Ambrose (*Undaunted Courage*) is among those latter-day admirers. Relying on newspaper reportage, he presents the project through the eyes of the men working for the Union Pacific and Central Pacific and marvels at the blasting, gouging, grading, hauling, and more that transpire as the rival railroads punched through mountains, straddled gorges, and strode across the Plains in the race to link the continent. The cast is large: armies of skilled and eager Chinese workers, visionaries like surveyor Theodore Judah, and engineers and builders like Grenville Dodge, who marshaled huge sums of capital and solved intricate technical problems. Ambrose adds little to a much-told tale (his book does not supplant David Haward Bain's *Empire Express*, *LJ* 10/1/99), and he blinks at the ruthlessness and misery that made fortunes for the train barons. But in his hands every sledgehammer blow hits hard and every blast echoes.

Recommended for public and academic libraries.

-Dr. Randall M. Miller, Saint Joseph's Univ., Philadelphia

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