



2014-018

William G. Thomas, *The Iron Way: Railroads, the Civil War, and the Making of Modern America*. New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2011. Pp. 281. ISBN 978-0-300-18746-5.

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In *The Iron Way*, William G. Thomas (Univ. of Nebraska) goes far beyond traditional accounts of railroads and their logistical impact on military operations in the Civil War. He highlights the role of rail transport in bringing about the conflict, changing how Americans thought about modernity, and even binding the nation's wounds after the war. As such, the work defies simple categorization: it combines military, environmental, political, intellectual, and social history with the history of technology. Thomas is especially concerned with exploring the attitudes of both blacks and whites toward the railroads, their impact on the sectional crisis and Americans' conceptions of themselves. Some traditional military historians may lament the absence of statistical tables of car-loadings or more detailed accounts of troops arriving in the nick of time by rail and swaying events on the battlefield. Proponents of the "new military history" will appreciate Thomas's demonstration of how the railroads both strengthened and undermined the institution of slavery, gave rise to unconventional warfare in the form of operations against rail lines, and reinforced the belief within the Confederacy that a country unable to protect and maintain a modern rail system was doomed to defeat.

Thomas argues that one cannot separate the development of the railroad from the coming of the Civil War—the growth of the rail network closely paralleled the rise of sectional tensions. Railroads might have bound the nation together more firmly; instead they intensified sectional differences in various ways. Notably, they offered a ready means of escape for fugitive slaves, including Frederick Douglass, whose journey north from Baltimore receives detailed treatment. Douglass became one of the abolitionists' most effective voices, forcing others to wonder how many more superior intellects were submerged under the yoke of slavery below the Mason-Dixon Line.

While many in the North saw railroads as a sign of progress, southerners were adapting the new technology to their own peculiar institutions: some rail companies even purchased slaves as construction and maintenance crews. Finally, northern railroads linked the northeast and midwest, moving raw materials and manufactured goods across the region. Southern railroads had a single purpose—to move cotton from fields in the interior to ports and transportation hubs along rivers and on the Atlantic and Gulf coasts.

Northerners ... looked at railroads, and the labor and industries that sprung up with them, and concluded that they were so advanced as to preclude slavery. Southerners looked at the same things and drew the opposite conclusions—surely their railroads proved the advanced state of their society and showed no incongruity with slavery and its extension.... Yet, as we will see, these associations were equally suited to vastly different potentialities: secession, separate development, competition, war, destruction, and conquest could and did flow naturally from these common wellsprings. (60)

Thomas sees the influence of railroads everywhere before the war—in the many officers on both sides with practical experience in the industry and in the sectional debate over the route of the Transcontinental Railroad. For him, the ideas of railroads and the war are inseparable.

If the railroads heightened prewar sectional stresses, they were also an early focus of military operations. The South could be brought to its knees by the destruction of the few vital nodes connecting the populous and prosperous seaboard to the trans-Appalachian west. The names of the locations of vital railroad junctions—Corinth, Chattanooga, Petersburg, and Atlanta—are very familiar to historians of the Civil War, as are the battles fought at or near them at Shiloh, Chattanooga, and Chickamauga, and in Georgia and Virginia during the decisive 1864 campaign. Thomas greatly clarifies the place of railroads on the level of grand strategy during the war.

Railroads have been seen as constituting a new, “built” environment specifically targeted by Union forces. In this regard, Thomas’s descriptions of devastation across the South (see, e.g., 88) mirror the pioneering work of Lisa Brady.<sup>1</sup> Elimination of railroads severed vital lifelines to the outside world and threatened to return many regions to wilderness. The North aimed to deny “the Confederacy its claims to progress, civilization and modernity. Dominating the Confederacy’s railroad systems, indeed turning them against the Confederacy, was not only a military objective, it was also a social and political one” (149). Cut off from the broader world, and especially the material goods that sustained them, southerners would sink into despair and lose faith in their cause.

Thomas also describes the “uncivil war” of vicious partisan fighting behind the lines.<sup>2</sup> As northern armies advanced, the areas they occupied resembled long fingers reaching for the heart of the Confederacy, fingers supported by tendons and ligaments of vulnerable rails. Confederate raiders concentrated on these tempting targets and made them, Thomas argues, virtual “war zones” unto themselves. However, he neglects to give proper weight to similar attacks made by Unionist partisans on the even more valuable Confederate rail lines; such attacks often resulted in bloody reprisals, like the attempted bridge burnings throughout eastern Tennessee in late 1861.

Just as railroads hastened the coming of war and determined its geographic course, so too they guided the nation through reconstruction and reunification. In a brief epilogue, Thomas argues that completion of the Transcontinental Railroad had as much to do with joining North to South as East to West. Railroads continued to play a defining role in the nation’s affairs, not least in the turn from Reconstruction to Jim Crow laws. For freedmen, “riding the railroads, going when and where one pleased, was a demonstration, a rehearsal, of what it meant to be free” (179), but, Thomas rightly notes, this very act was the source of a half-century of segregation after Homer Plessy’s unsuccessful 1896 lawsuit against the East Louisiana Railroad.

Thomas invites readers to check his sources, noting that “nearly every document and piece of evidence, as well as the tools used to examine the sources behind this book, are all publicly available through the Digital History Project (<http://digitalhistory.unl.edu>) and the ‘Railroads and the Making of Modern America’ digital project (<http://railroads.unl.edu>)” (11). Such electronic archives are of immense value for scholars. Though the collected documents themselves are fairly standard, their availability in toto rather than as entries in a bibliography is revolutionary.

William Thomas makes the web connecting railroads, American society, and the Civil War so obvious that one wonders how it escaped detailed attention until now. *The Iron Way* is a meticulous,<sup>3</sup> forcefully argued, and enjoyable study that well deserved its nomination for a Lincoln Prize. It certainly explains just how the war caused such a level of destruction owing, in great part, to both sides’ reliance on “rail systems ... to make the logistics for [their] huge armies possible” (152). But it says much more about how America’s rapid embrace of technology and modernity determined its course on the iron way across the landscape of time.

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1. *War upon the Land: Military Strategy and the Transformation of Southern Landscapes during the American Civil War* (Athens: U Georgia Pr, 2012).

2 See further Robert R. Mackey, *The Uncivil War: Irregular Warfare in the Upper South, 1861–1865* (Norman: U Okla Pr, 2004).

3. Though the book is virtually free of factual errors, Thomas lists the Civil War-era tribes removed to Kansas as the “Delaware, Kickapoo and Shoshone [read *Shawnee*]” (202).