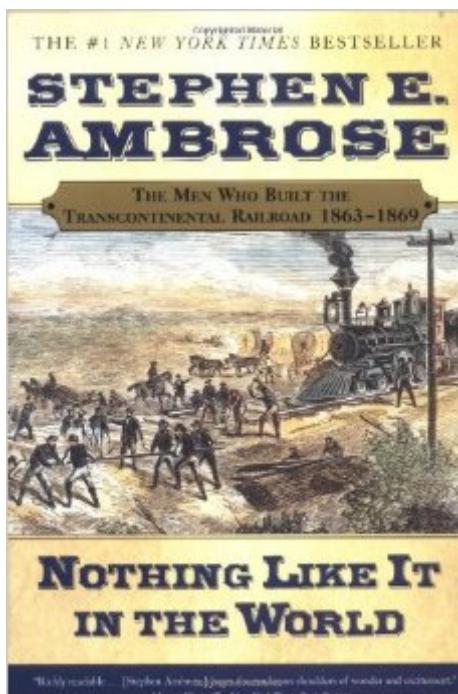


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Nothing Like It In The World: The Men Who Built The Transcontinental Railroad 1863-1869



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 railroadâ "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 companiesâ "the Union Pacific and the Central Pacific Railroadsâ "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

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Customer Reviews

The subject is grand and the author is respected and prominent, so why has this book failed in its stated purpose? It reminds me most of the college student realizing at the last moment that his semester paper is due the next day and then scrambling to throw material together without regard to scholarship. I can only ask, "who really wrote this book?" and I speculate that it was written by Professor Ambrose's students in History 101. Either that or the author has resorted to churning out material just to capitalize on his popularity. Ambrose's cheerleading of the accomplishments of the common American man - he does it in his WWII books and others - makes him seem a little like the

Tom Clancy of the history field. Clancy succeeds because of his terrific imagination and captivating style. Ambrose succeeds when he backs it up with good writing but in this book the poor scholarship and terrible editing is a real downer! How can any modern historian state, "The Chinese . . . needed little or no instruction in handling black powder, which was a Chinese invention . . ." (p.156). Really now! Perhaps all Chinese are good at flower arranging as well. How can an historian of Ambrose's stature totally invert a well known event of the Civil War as he does on p.292 with the statement that "George B. McClellan's uncoded orders were captured by the Confederates before the Battle of Antietam, giving Robert E. Lee a chance to read them." For those who are unfamiliar with this incident, it was Lee's orders that were discovered by Union troops near Frederick, MD, providing the bumbling McClellan with the information he needed to head off the attempt to invade Pennsylvania. Ambrose needs a new editor if this is what his current handler does. He tells us time and time again of the process of moving rails into place as the teams of Irish, Chinese, or Mormons try to beat some production goal. Other material is tediously repeated as though he was trying to meet his own mileage goal, further suggesting the college student padding his term paper to meet the professor's required number of pages. And little facts change from page to page - at one point the CP is 590 miles from Sacramento on April 9, while a page later the end of the CP tracks are 578 miles from Sacramento on April 27 - did they really regress during those 18 days? Maps! Wow, would they be helpful if they were positioned relevant to the material around them. The CP work in California is discussed early in the book, so why is the map of their route placed at page 342 where the discussion is about the CP and UP competition in Utah? And even if you locate the map you want, they frequently do not show the locations that Ambrose has identified as important milestones in the progress of the transcontinental project - the lack of detail is appalling. Professor Ambrose should have stuck with his first instincts as expressed in the acknowledgements. When his editor suggested the subject matter to him, "I hesitated. . . I wanted nothing to do with those railroad thieves." My response is only to note that when I see the Ambrose name on books in the future, I also will hesitate.

I've read, enjoyed, and valued other histories by Ambrose, but this is not one of his best efforts. If you are seriously interested in the building of the first transcontinental railroad, get and read David Haward Bain's monumental *Empire Express: Building the First Transcontinental Railroad* (Viking, 1999, 797 pages), the result of fourteen years of research and the definitive modern treatment of this subject. Ambrose's book has the misfortune to follow on the heels of Bain's, and it cannot seriously compete with it. Bain's book is truly comprehensive and thorough, a labor of love; in

comparison Ambrose's seems somewhat perfunctory and superficial, just another installment in the assembly line of books Ambrose has been cranking out in recent years. If you will compare the two books you will see what I mean.

At one point in the book Ambrose tells us that railroad historians are prone to exaggerate. I may be a railroad historian (he cites me in a footnote), but it is no exaggeration to say that this may well be the worst book ever written about the first American transcontinental railroad. True, Ambrose does tell the great story of a monumental event. And he even gets some of it right: two rival companies starting from either end and meeting in the middle. But the errors that fill these pages destroy any value the book may possess. Ambrose admitted in the introduction that he knew nothing about the subject. Is it any surprise then that he uncritically accepted and repeats fables about the construction of this railroad? But Ambrose can take credit for many original mistakes. He moves the California gold discovery site to the west of Sacramento, has the Humboldt River rise in northeast Utah, and stretches the Forty-Mile Desert to 100 miles. Theodore Judah is mistakenly credited with building the suspension bridge at Niagara Falls. Central Pacific construction supervisor J.H. Strobridge is presented making decisions for the rival Union Pacific. Some mistakes--like the eight-foot long bunk cars for the workers, or the stories repeated in different chapters--might be the result of poor editing and proof reading. But other statements make one wonder if even the author read this book before sending it to the printer. Perhaps the most ludicrous image in the book is Ambrose's description of Central Pacific workers drilling holes in the granite for blasting. He tells us men standing on step ladders pounded away with sledge hammers on a long drill held steady by three men--one holding it as high as he could reach, another in the middle, and the third down by his toes. All this to produce a hole one and a half feet deep! If this really happened (and I seriously doubt it), anyone smart enough to bore a tunnel would figure out that one could cut the drill into thirds and drill three holes with the same number of men in the same time (and have fewer injuries from men falling off ladders). But the book's greatest affront is its cavalier disregard of scholarship. Ambrose invents a brother for Mark Hopkins to take Charles Crocker's place as CP director. Statements from good primary sources are misquoted or presented out of context. One quote from a Mark Hopkins letter is so seriously rewritten as to be meaningless. And these are passed off as authentic quotations, apparently to make the work appear well researched. A line from a photo caption in a secondary source of little historic value is actually presented as the very words of Charles Crocker himself. Ambrose should be embarrassed by this book. Especially so in light of his recent essay in an October 2000 issue of Forbes ASAP in which he implies that he can be trusted

as a seeker and teller of the truth of our past. This book is not well crafted. It is not well researched. Sadly, children will read this; teachers will teach this. "Sadly", because this book tells a story that is like nothing that ever happened in the real world. Perhaps someday we will learn that a rough first draft was sent to the printers by mistake and we can all breathe a sigh of relief.

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