

European Capital, British Iron, and an American Dream: The Story of the Atlantic and Great Western Railroad. By William Reynolds, Edited by Peter K. Gifford and Robert D. Ilisevich. (Akron: University of Akron Press, 2002. 288 pp. Hardcover, \$44.95, ISBN 1-88483-691-7.)

First, a fair warning to readers, *European Capital, British Iron, and an American Dream: The Story of the Atlantic and Great Western Railroad*, is not, as the title would imply, a secondary history of the Atlantic and Great Western Railroad. Instead, this is the story of one of the railroad's earliest leaders, William Reynolds, and how he viewed the organization and construction of the railroad from 1851 until his resignation from the road in 1864. Reynolds' recollections, written some forty years after his departure from the railroad, provide an interesting glimpse into the problems with 'empire' building in 19th century America.

Like most early American railroads, the Atlantic and Great Western came together not as a single unit, but as a series of smaller roads ultimately connected, somewhat haphazardly, into a larger transportation system. The impetus for the Atlantic and Great Western emerged in 1851 in Kent, Ohio, known at that time as Franklin. Marvin Kent, one of Franklin's leading businessmen, pushed heavily for the small village to receive a rail line after rivals in nearby Ravenna were connected by the Cleveland and Pittsburgh Railroad. Through a few dubious political maneuvers, Kent managed to receive a charter from the state of Ohio for the Franklin and Warren Railroad, designed to connect the growing town of Akron to Franklin and the Pennsylvania border. This stretch of road through east Ohio would eventually become the Ohio Branch of the Atlantic and Great Western.

Soon a New York branch was added, connecting with the broad gauge Erie Railroad at Salamanca. Connecting the two branches almost became problematic, as opposition from several Pennsylvania communities and rival railroads prevented the Atlantic and Great Western from receiving a charter through Pennsylvania. This opposition was overcome through the use of a branching option granted to an already existing railroad, the Pittsburgh and Erie. The Pennsylvania branch, when finally constructed, ran through the oil rich region of northwestern Pennsylvania, and Reynolds frequently discusses his desire to control this lucrative traffic. This was William Reynolds territory; not only did he grow up in Meadville, an important stop on the Pennsylvania branch, but he also led the organization of the Atlantic and Great Western in Pennsylvania and served as the road's president.

Reynolds' primary focus throughout his narrative is the financial problems faced by the Atlantic and Great Western. These tales are of great interest; money is constantly changing hands throughout the book, and at times it is difficult to follow the trail. Here readers get a first hand account of how railroads of the 19th century were built and operated.

Reynolds' writing is overly dry and at times pedantic. As the editors point out he was not a writer, nor was he a historian. At times he seems complacently disinterested in the world evolving

around him. For example, his entry dated April 15, 1861, only a scant three days after events at Fort Sumter, deals with typical railroad business - "The chairs and spikes are arriving, and the rails are expected in a few days" (131). The narrative is at its best when Reynolds leaves the minutia to focus on the road itself and the people that built it. Reynolds' comments on his British partners are very telling of business relationships in America during the 19th century. American railroads depended very heavily on foreign investments, and the relationship between 'European capital' and the 'American dream' could often be tenuous. At one point, Reynolds candidly refers to James McHenry, his British partner, "There is something *not right* with McHenry. I am certain the company must look to their own interests for McHenry will only look to his." (137) From a chronic lack of funds to burning bridges to internal bickering to hostile takeovers, the Atlantic and Great Western experienced no lack of drama, and Reynolds' retelling of these "railroad tales" is the high point of the book.

This edition of Reynolds' memoirs of the Atlantic and Great Western includes a comprehensive introduction and afterward by Peter Gifford and Robert Ilisevich, which attempts to place both the Atlantic and Great Western and William Reynolds into proper historical context. If there is any fault in this book, it lies in the introduction. Gifford and Ilisevich take the reader through an unnecessarily complicated discussion of early American transportation systems and sectional conflicts that have, at best, a marginal application to the construction of the Atlantic and Great Western. Those already familiar with antebellum issues involving transportation, including canals, roads, and railroads, can easily skip the first twenty-five pages of the introduction. But this minor problem is more than made up for by a well written afterward that summarizes the inevitable demise of the Atlantic and Great Western and its eventual inclusion in the Erie Railroad. Along with the afterward, the editors have included a helpful biography of major participants, a time-line of major events, and several photographs. As complicated as the construction of this railroad was, the editors chose not to include a map of the Atlantic and Great Western system. This is the book's only glaring omission.

Any reader interested in 19th century business practices, the processes of railroad building, or Midwest railroading in general, will find *European Capital, British Iron, and an American Dream* an excellent source.

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