

Review

Christian Wolmar. *British Rail: A New History*. London: Penguin Michael Joseph, 2022. 416 pp. ISBN 978-0-24145-620-0 \$34.00 (cloth).

The “British Rail sandwich” and the “wrong kind of snow” have always been aggravating metaphors of Britain’s nationalized railways, so it is positive to see that Wolmar’s book *British Rail: A New History* begins by systematically dismantling these media narratives. Wolmar’s book serves, in part, as a punch against the often persistent narratives of stagnation and decline that have dominated perceptions of rail transport in Britain. In *British Rail: A New History*, Wolmar argues that, despite its many imperfections, Britain’s railway in the postwar period was a responsive and forward-thinking organization, maintaining that it was a “victim of its history and of the whim of politicians who had little understanding about its achievements and, indeed, its real failings” (xv). Ultimately, Wolmar contends that British Rail’s downfall was a result not of managers but of politicians. Managers had, after a number of years in the immediate postwar period and particularly after the 1965 modernization, learned to respond to political flak and efficiently defended the organisation. By privatization in the 1990s, British Rail was operating a successful nationalized industry that was sensitive to both service quality and profit, and the process of privatization was ultimately forced upon British Rail without reason or sense.

Wolmar divides his book into two sections: “British Railways” and “British Rail.” The first half examines the newly nationalized industry through postwar austerity, arguing that it suffered from an “inheritance” of materials from World War II that made managing the “asset-heavy industry” difficult (55). Much of the first part of the book is centered around the events surrounding the two major plans for British Railways: the Modernization Plan and the Reshaping of British Railways. Despite the flawed “Modernization Plan,” which had undermined confidence in railway management and its abilities to deliver a modern railway, management faced an ongoing struggle against a growing deficit through rising staff costs as well as increasing competition from cars and lorries. The eventual “Reshaping of British Railways” report, known as the “Beeching Report,” was, like many of the political decisions made about Britain’s railways, ultimately a “failure to grasp the principles of railway economics” (75).

The second half of the book demonstrates that the newly branded “British Rail” had a renewed outlook on its public service duties. Some of the most well-known chairpersons, in particular Peter Parker and Robert Reid, confidently reorganized and restructured British Rail. Although this did not eliminate all of the problems, managers grew wise to the shift to Thatcher economics rather than resisting it. Part of the reorganization was the process of “sectorization,” which represented a form of “creative accountancy” (309) that grouped

together routes, like InterCity and Network Southeast, in order to maximise profits, and “dumping costs” onto more poorly performing sectors like Provincial Railways (306). By the 1990s, Wolmar argues that British Rail was an excellent industry, one that “did not deserve the fate it suffered” throughout the privatization process (329), and that it was government intervention that slowed British Rail’s development toward the end of its life.

The writing here is excellent, likely because it is written in a straightforward and logical manner, much like Wolmar’s many other works. There is a fantastic introductory history to Britain’s nationalized railway here, one that is inclusive of managerial and technological detail, in particular as Wolmar regularly explains complex technical terminology for non-railway oriented readers, such as the railway “bogie” (160) and the “pantograph” (170), terms familiar to railway savvy readers but not necessarily to everyone else. In fact, there is a very real effort to inject color and vibrancy into the history of Britain’s postwar railways here, with a striking sense of design and presentation that brings readers into the history of Britain’s railways in an engaging way.

The “victim of its history” argument is certainly a clear and powerful one that pulls together the essence of what many railway studies scholars have been arguing, but it is important to remember that they made this case before. Big names in the history of railway studies are referenced throughout, including Terry Gourvish, Tanya Jackson, and Simon Bradley, to name a small number. These scholars have, at least in part, made the “victim of its history” argument in other ways before, often with greater detail and with a wider array of primary materials. Therefore, on balance, *British Rail: A New History* is not a completely “new history.” Rather, it brings together the thoughts and arguments of some of the biggest names in the field and presents them in a more precise way. This is not to suggest that there is nothing new here. I was struck by the brief story of homosexuality on the railways in which Wolmar describes railway workers taking out the light bulbs of carriages at night (42), offering a rare and fascinating intersectional history that is yet unexplored in railway scholarship. It is disappointing not to have these examined in greater detail, but their inclusion highlights the potential of these underwritten narratives of Britain’s nationalized railway.

Overall, Wolmar’s *British Rail: A New History* is an excellent read, one that is open about both the challenges and the successes of Britain’s railways, and the essence of the argument is one that needs to be promoted above all others. Although not particularly “new,” its presentation certainly is, and there are glimpses at some really innovative material that make for an engaging read.

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