North Dakota Law Review

Volume 56 | Number 3 Article 10

1979

Book Review

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BOOK REVIEW

THE OLD PATAGONIAN EXPRESS; BY TRAIN THROUGH THE AMERICAS, by Paul Theroux, Houghton Mifflin Company, Inc., Boston, Mass., 1979, Pp. 404.

"Yet there isn't a train I wouldn't take,
No matter where it's going."

—Edna St. Vincent Millay[1]

Each year during the six-month chilly season, when shoveling out my driveway seems fit retribution for my wastrel youth, the same fantasy grips me. I would throw off the ties of career, family, cats, and other hostages to fortune, board the *Empire Builder* for Chicago, change to the *Inter-American* for Laredo, cross the border to board the *Aguila Aztec* of the Ferrocarriles Nacionales de Mexico, and continue toward the fugitive sun until I could lose myself in some bucolic Central American village, where I could pick up shells and live on good seafood and cheap whiskey until Spring returned to the Red River Valley.

At one time or another, this dream has captivated all of us who live in the center of the continent. In 1906, North Dakota investors formed the Midland Continental Railroad, which would build from Winnipeg to the Gulf of Mexico somewhere near Galveston. Construction actually started from Jamestown in 1909, and the railroad operated out of Jamestown north to Wimbledon and south to Edgeley, but that was as far as it got and the Midland

1. E. MILLAY, *Travel*, in COLLECTED LYRICS OF EDNA ST. VINCENT MILLAY 78 (1943).

Continental languished until 1969.[2] Even this was small potatoes compared to the dreams of the Inter-American Railway Commission, which 100 years ago laid plans and conducted a survey for a railroad linking the Northern Plains with Buenos Aires. The plan of the Commission came to naught, but much of the survey was utilized in the building of the Pan-American highway.

Surprisingly, in these days of truncated passenger service, it is still possible to travel by train from Hudson Bay to the Panama Canal, if you include a bus portage between Winnipeg and Grand Forks and between various lines in Central America. For some time I had amused myself, fancying that I was the only person who would want to do such a thing. Now here comes Paul Theroux to disabuse me of such notions. He not only planned such a trip, but expanded its horizons to actually travel by train between Boston's South Station and Esquel, Argentina. The *Old Patagonian Express* is actually the name of the train on which he completed his journey, and Theroux celebrates this journey in a book which repeats the triumph of his earlier recollections of a rail trip across Europe and Asia, which he recorded in 1975.[3]

A continuous journey is, of course, impossible. There is no continental system of Latin American railroads. Most lines were built by foreign (usually British) capital and served the extractive function of connecting commercial centers to port cities. The carriage of passengers and local freight was a duty imposed upon the foreign companies by the local government, but the main function of the lines was to get bananas or bauxite from producing areas to shipside as quickly as possible. South of the Rio Grande, only Mexico, Argentina, and Brazil have more or less complete railroad systems. This, then, may be the only picaresque book in which an Amtrak journey is actually the high point in luxury.

Since World War II, the nations involved have taken over the railroads from their foreign owners. Nationalization was no panacea; the railroads had reached the end of their economic life when they were taken over. United Fruit Company's International Railways of Central America was nationalized by the Méndez regime in Guatemala in 1968,[4] and separately by the Salvadoreans

2. Mitchell, *About a Railroad You May Not Have Heard Of — And That Is No More*, TRAINS, June, 1972, at 20-25. Some of the tracks of the Midland Continental are still in service, hauling coal to the North Dakota State Hospital.

3. *See* P. THEROUX, THE GREAT RAILWAY BAZAAR: BY TRAIN THROUGH ASIA (1975).

4. El Imparcial de Guatemala, Sept. 25, 1968, at 1. For an account of the Méndez nationalization of the Guatemalan railway, *see* W. Thoms, Civilian President Julio César Méndez

a few years later,[5] thus ending the only railway system South of the Border to cross a national frontier. Theroux mentions that in Argentina the railways "were built and run by the British, until, in 1947, in what was surely one of the worst business deals ever, Juan Perón bought them. If he had waited a few years, the British railway companies — which were losing money — would have given them to him for nothing."[6] The last Yankee-owned railway was the Panama Railroad, which passed to Panama as part of the Panama Canal treaties of 1978, but which until then had been operated as a government entity by the United States within the Canal Zone.

Passenger trains in Latin America are used mostly for local travel, handling few intercity passengers, and are neither as fast nor as comfortable as buses. In many of these countries there are few middle-class citizens, and those who exist are not found on the railways. In one of his few generalizations, Theroux notes:

> I had been in Latin America long enough by now to know that there was a class stigma attached to the trains. Only the semidestitute, the limpers, the barefoot ones, the Indians and the half-cracked yokels took the train, or knew anything about them. For this reason, it was a good introduction to the social miseries and scenic splendors of the continent.[7]

So off the author goes, not south on the *Southern Crescent* through New Orleans, but westward on the *Lake Shore Limited* through Cleveland and Toledo, in the company of fellow-travelers who rejoice at a late arrival in Chicago, because Amtrak will have to spring for an overnight stay at the Holiday Inn. He states his premise from the start: although most travel books start with the protagonist at his destination, this book is to be all about getting there. Destination: the farthest reaches of Patagonia. The advantage of train travel is that Theroux and the rails are the only constants: all of his fellow-passengers are short-distance travelers.

There is a whole genre of magazines published today that deal with descriptions of train travel, aimed at aficionados of the rails.[8]

Montenegro and His Guatemala, at 65-73 (Apr. 8, 1977) (unpublished Master of Arts thesis in Tulane University Graduate School Library, New Orleans, La.).

5. R. ZIEL & M. EAGLESON, THE TWILIGHT OF WORLD STEAM 287 (1973).
6. P. THEROUX, THE OLD PATAGONIAN EXPRESS 353 (1979).
7. *Id.* at 283.
8. Among the currently available periodicals published in the United States are such titles as

But it is clear from the start that Theroux is not along for the sound of the diesel horn or the clicking of the rail joints. Rather, he lets the characters he encounters tell their stories and, being a good listener, allows the reader to project himself into the aging coaches and the sense of suspended time that comes with a long overland journey. It is a different type of journey than that experienced by the casual traveler who despairs at Amtrak or revels in the delights of the Trans Europ Express. South of the Rio Grande, it is a world of questionable information, non-existent timetables, depots whose whereabouts no one can ascertain, and a surprising variety in quality of life.

Only the veneer of the Spanish language (and that pretty thin) links the nations which he traverses. Mexico, which seems so poor to us, is regarded as "The Colossus of the North" in Guatemala and points south thereof. Costa Rica is an armyless oasis in an isthmus of military regimes, with clean, electrified trains to boot. The Panama Canal Zone was visited during the last hurrah of the Panama Canal Company and its company towns, and was a transplanted bit of the American South. As Theroux notes:

> It was like being in Louisiana, not merely because of the blacks and their radios and that music, but because most Zonians had been recruited out of New Orleans, and this passage was practically identical to crossing the long lacustrine bridge on Lake Pontchartrain on the Chicago train called, not entirely by coincidence, the Panama Limited.[9]

After one leaves the Canal the Darien Gap is encountered. No railroads, no highway, no nothing.

On the South American mainland, after a brief flight to Colombia, things get worse. Theroux indicates that "Barranquilla was inconvenient and filthy, and I was at an additional disadvantage in arriving in this rat hole the day before the national senatorial elections."[10] Conditions were no better in Peru:

> Peru is the poorest country in South America. Peru is also the country most visited by tourists. The two facts are related: even the dimmest tourist can count in

Trains, Railfan, Rail Classics, Passenger Train Journal, and Railway Quarterly, not to mention specialized publications dealing with specific carriers. Only the motorcycle enthusiast has a wider selection.

9. P. THEROUX, THE OLD PATAGONIAN EXPRESS 223 (1979).

10. *Id.* at 231.

> Spanish — low numbers especially trip off his tongue — and he knows that Peru's gigantic ruins and threadbare currency are a bargain.[11]

The author suffers the tortures of altitude sickness, which he hopes to alleviate by breathing out of oxygen balloons handed out by the conductor, while crossing Bolivia, a country whose scenery he compares to kitty litter.[12] Whatever he may feel in discomfort, however, is overwhelmed by the human misery and sheer squalor which he passes on the trip. The tone is not condescending, but compassionate; there are people inside and outside the train who are badly treated, and their only possible reaction is fatalism and apathy. Meanwhile, with gentle humor he introduces us to the various weird and wacky characters he meets on his Dantesque journey.

Things change when he reaches Argentina. Here is a country where trains run more or less on time, beef is cheap and plentiful, cities are vibrant, and the people have a melting-pot consciousness similar to that in the United States. The high point of his visit was obviously his interview with the great Argentine laureate, the blind novelist Jorge Luis Borges, who shows him a Buenos Aires which exceeds in detail Theroux's other stopping-off places. But after a while, the traveler tires of Argentina:

> With the highest literacy rate in Latin America, and one of the highest in the world (91.4%), there was really no excuse for Argentina to be a tyranny. Even the most charitable witness had to find a carelessness in the attitude that tolerated authoritarianism and said that the alternative was anarchy.[13]

One knows, then, that it is time to go home. But there is still one more trip to make, through the pampas south of Buenos Aires to the Patagonian desert, and finally the narrow-gauge, steam-powered train that takes Theroux south to Esquel, where American rails come to an end. Ahead lies Tierra del Fuego — and the South Pole. He suddenly recalls that nothing really bad has happened to him, that he has sailed through misery unscathed.

Reading the book through at one sitting, one ends up tired. Possibly a journey through the Americas by rail is not the

11. *Id.* at 300.
12. *Id.* at 345.
13. *Id.* at 359.

desideratum I had once thought. But then, I began to dream again. The author passed up the chance to cross the Andes to Antofogasta, Chile. And what about Brazil? The Railway of Death on the Upper Amazon? The Teresa Cristina Railway in southern Brazil, where North American-looking great steam engines still roll long heavy freight trains down to the South Atlantic? And Somoza is gone, so you don't have to overfly Nicaragua any more. There's still a lot to see down there, and many more undiscovered corners. But Theroux has, without once describing what kind of locomotive pulled the train, used the device of a railway journey to compress a continent into one book and make us think about the human condition and the journey in which we are all involved.

"But no good train ever goes far enough, just as no bad train ever reaches its destination soon enough."[14]

—William E. Thoms*

14. *Id.* at 223.

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