



The Philosophy of Railways: The Transcontinental Railway Idea in British North America

A. A. den Otter

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When, in the late 1980s, the federal government initiated a plan to deregulate the Canadian railway system, lobby groups protested the betrayal of a national mandate. They asserted that the railway was founded to promote a sense of national identity, to provide access to isolated regions of the country, and to ensure a transnational exchange of goods and ideas. In *The Philosophy of Railways*, A.A. den Otter considers the relationship between nationalism and technology, and shows how the popular rhetoric surrounding the evolution of the Canadian Pacific Railway has mythologized the role of a private corporation and its technology. He questions the notion that the railways were built as an antidote to American manifest destiny, suggesting instead that the widespread adoption of railway transportation as a civilizing mission impelled Canadians to bow to technology's integrating effects, including confederation and closer ties with the United States.

The study begins by looking at the intellectual climate that spawned the Canadian railway idea, revealing that this idea was strongly influenced by a combination of British and American liberalism, a philosophy that saw technology as the means to destroy trade barriers. In fact, during the mid-nineteenth century, Canadians preferred to build transportation links to the American seaboard rather than to Saint John or Halifax, and this created a deep-seated alienation in the country's peripheral regions. Not only does den Otter include the Maritimes in his analysis, but he employs a careful reading of national documents including assembly debates, the private correspondence of major political figures, and newspaper commentary to contextualize the public debate.

By investigating the complex and ambiguous process by which the Canadian railway system both consolidated national identity and facilitated continental integration, *The Philosophy of Railways* establishes that isolationism, until relatively recently, was not the unilateral stance of those committed to the growth of the railway.

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