RAILWAY AGE

# Book Review: An anti-passenger-rail manifesto

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November 13th, 2018

It was a sunny Friday morning on the Colorado prairie. Amtrak Train #3, the *Southwest Chief*, was making good progress along the historic Santa Fe Raton Pass Route on track rated for either 60 or 79 mph along that part of the route, and this writer was aboard. Amtrak has proposed turning that portion of the route into an 11-hour bus ride; a sure-fire formula for killing it entirely. Surrounded by this pastoral battleground in the struggle to save our skeletal Amtrak long-distance train network, this writer set to task and began to peruse Randal's Rant.

It began seductively, with a cover sporting four photos that provided great eye candy for railfans: the *Burlington Zephyr* of the 1930s, a partial consist of the Great Northern's *Empire Builder* (1950s version, including four domes), a hostess in a dome car on the legendary *California Zephyr* (1949-1970) and a Peter Witt streetcar in the "rocket red" of the Toronto Transit Commission. The title, *Romance of the Rails*, was written in large, white script. This was the deceptively inviting cover of a railfan's odyssey into the magnificent past of passenger trains and transit, except for the disquieting subtitle: "Why the Passenger Trains We Love Are Not the Transportation We Need."

If it were not for that ominous subtitle, the cover would have been completely misleading. What followed is a 328-page diatribe that condemns all passenger transportation on rails, from the Amtrak that kept a few long-distance routes alive for the past 47 years, to the emerging light rail systems and streetcars that are returning to America's cities. According to Mr. O'Toole, trains and rail transit comprise only a corrupt, wasteful exercise in incompetent or malicious urban governance.

He has absolutely nothing positive to say about anything that runs on rails, and he claims that buses fill all of the nation's transit needs outside the New York area (at 261-62). He would tear up the tracks in Chicago, Boston, Philadelphia, San Francisco and a host of other cities, and replace them all with more roads for buses (at 264-65). He would spare the rails only in the New York megalopolis, with its uniquely high population density. This writer has written and spoken repeatedly of the problems that New Jersey Transit's customers face, but even that level of mobility is better than being thrown off the train and onto a bus, along with thousands of other powerless riders.

Mr. O'Toole chronicles the decline of America's passenger trains and rail transit, sometimes in railfannish detail, but always with the assumption of inevitability (Chapters 5 through 9). He then takes his readers on a long journey through the corrupted halls of politics that have allegedly wasted the time, money and communities of powerless urban dwellers with the folly of sticking them onto trains, streetcars or other rail vehicles, and moving them slowly and inefficiently. His problem: subsidies for transit and Amtrak (Chapter 15). His solution: autonomous motor vehicles (at 323-25). He presents his auto-utopia as a sweeping generality, without considering the bumpy road on which it rides. When will such vehicles, like the one that killed a woman in Arizona

earlier this year, be available to today's non-motorists, as well as motorists? When motorists can have them, would they surrender control of their vehicles, which would negate one of the primary selling points of the auto industry? When today's non-motorists eventually buy them, where could they be stored and used? Every vehicle takes up more room per person than a seat on a train or a streetcar. What would this scenario do to the urban environment and landscape? Would these additional vehicles exacerbate the effects of climate change?

He does not say. Instead, he repeatedly lambastes trains and transit as wasteful because they do not make a profit. That seems to be his only measure of success.

Mr. O'Toole does not claim to possess a degree in economics or business, so his opinions on the subject must be considered those of a lay person, no matter how many quotes he uses to support his assertions. Not every work that looks like scholarship is truly scholarship. Mr. O'Toole did not publish his opinions in a peer-reviewed journal or with a well-known publisher. The Cato Institute publishes his opinions because they agree with each other.

Transit is a public utility, like police or fire protection. At one time, fire insurance companies supported firefighters, who only fought fires on policyholders' property. They allowed other people's houses or buildings to burn to the ground. Is this the model that Mr. O'Toole deems appropriate for transportation?

Trains between cities and transit within cities are more than merely a matter of profit and loss. Good transit makes people want to live and work in or near cities. It liberates them from having to watch the road, so they can enjoy their devices. It allows them to enjoy an urban environment without having to pay for or store an automobile. Rail transit brings people together and fosters community. Mr. O'Toole does not mention these or any other benefits of transit. It appears that, to him, they do not matter.

He ridicules Jane Jacobs and the "New Urbanism" that was inspired by her efforts (at 175-77). Her greatest accomplishment was to unite her fellow Manhattanites to prevent Robert Moses from building three highways that would have cut swaths through the land so wide that a map of Manhattan would look like it were sliced like a layer cake. Would Mr. O'Toole have preferred a New York like that? Presumably he would not care, since he lives about 3,000 miles away.

New York City climbed out of its financial morass of the 1970s and resumed its rightful place as our nation's cultural capital. Transit has kept the city moving for much of its history. Transit is keeping other cities moving, too: Dallas, Seattle, Portland, Denver, Salt Lake City and others. Even downtown Detroit is coming back with a construction boom almost comparable to New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. There is a streetcar on Woodward Avenue again, for the first time since 1956. One of the slogans that the American Public Transportation Association (APTA) uses is "Transit Means Business." A new streetcar has brought plenty of business to downtown Kansas City, while Over-the-Rhine in Cincinnati is now a prime neighborhood, full of newly re-established activity and connected to downtown by a new streetcar. "OTR" used to be one of the city's most dangerous places, but local advocates say that the upgrades began in anticipation of the streetcar and accelerated after it was built.

It is not only corporate employment and money that keep a city going. So do tourists, and rail transit can be a strong tourist attraction. Mr. O'Toole would spare the New York subways, but the elevated trains on Chicago's Loop, the cable cars and streetcars of San Francisco, and the

1923-vintage streetcars on St. Charles Avenue in New Orleans attract tourists and locals alike. Yet, Mr. O'Toole derides these systems, even though they are fun to ride, bring business to their cities and help city residents get around.

Mr. O'Toole criticizes the "urbanist" view that cities are "monocentric" or "polycentric" as a remnant of the long-distant past (at 320-21). Yet, it was rail transit that moved people into and out of the central cores of our cities efficiently, and it is doing so again. He abhors "smart-growth corridors" and champions the "nanocentric city" *(Id.);* a concept that sounds much like suburban sprawl. Los Angeles took a major step toward his concept of "nanocentrism" in 1940, when it decentralized city functions; a move that began to disrupt the "smart-growth corridors" (the term did not exist then, but it describes the areas) along the Pacific Electric rail transit lines. It only took about 20 more years to kill the rail system entirely, and Los Angeles sank into a deep decline. When this writer first visited there in 1979, the buses were slow and unappealing, and downtown was deserted. Today, rail transit is back, and so are the people. The city had previously developed according to Mr. O'Toole's vision, but abandoned it recently for something more successful.

Mr. O'Toole says: "Nearly everyone today has access to a car" (at 241). This appears to be his core assumption. It is untrue, and it is contemptuous. There are millions of Americans: seniors, persons with disabilities, persons who cannot afford an automobile, and others who choose to live a car-free lifestyle, who do NOT have "access to a car." There are millions of us in that situation; perhaps as many as 20% of adult Americans, and increasing as we grow older. Mr. O'Toole would leave us with no mobility at all, except a few bus lines that private-sector corporations would consider sufficiently profitable. Otherwise, he would not permit us to venture further than we can walk.

Mr. O'Toole lives in Camp Sherman, a town of 233 (2010 census) in Jefferson County, Ore. Madras, the county seat, has some demand-response transportation from Cascades East Transit on weekdays. Camp Sherman has none. Mr. O'Toole can deride transit all he wishes; he does not need it, or even have it. He can use his automobile to go everywhere, including to the airport. Yet, he never complains about the enormous federal and state subsidies to automobile transportation since 1919. He only vilifies the much-smaller subsides per passenger-mile that go to public transportation, which he chooses to avoid and disparage.

Sadly, it appears that Mr. O'Toole is caught up in his own nostalgia. He loves his "Streamliner Memories" (although his name does not appear on the www.streamlinermemories.info web site). It is true that privately owned railroads ran the great streamliners of the past, but those same railroads killed them, too. I am four years older than Mr. O'Toole and have my own "streamliner memories." There is a difference, though. He wants to relegate trains to the dustbin of history. I and many others want to ride them now and in the future. We want to go places, and we want trains to take us there. We also want transit to take us around, once we get there. Whether we like it or not, the private sector gave up passenger trains and transit, and only the public sector has kept operating what few trains and what little transit we still have.

Mr. O'Toole's ideas about trains, cities and transit may be governed by a similar sense of nostalgia. During the "Golden Age of the Streamliners," Alfred P. Sloan and his followers were destroying rail transit in the cities, while private railroads were killing passenger trains. The preferred location was the transit-free suburb, the transportation was the automobile and nothing else, the oracle was the General Motors Institute, and the cities were on their way to becoming

the “nanocentric” sprawl that he continues to praise—despite the recent decline in automobile use and migration to the cities, especially among young people. It appears that Mr. O’Toole’s nostalgia for the trains of the 1950s and 1960s mirrors a similar nostalgia for the transportation planning of the same era. He and other anti-transit warriors like Wendell Cox will continue to fight against anything on rails as long as they can draw breath, but we must bear in mind that Mr. Cox could not keep St. Louis’s Metrolink light rail out of Belleville, Ill., his home town. Mr. O’Toole cannot hold back the tide, either. People want trains and people want transit, and we will get them; if not now, then someday.