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‘Romance of the Rails’ Review: Hear That Lonesome Whistle?

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In 2006, the city of Nashville, Tenn., built a new commuter-rail system—christened the Music City Star—for \$41 million. At the time, the Regional Transportation Authority of Nashville called it “the most cost-effective commuter rail start-up in the nation.” When it comes to rails, though, no term is more fungible than “cost-effective,” as Randal O’Toole notes in his eye-opening “Romance of the Rails: Why the Passenger Trains We Love Are Not the Transportation We Need.”

The Nashville train, which operated only on weekdays, took 50 to 55 minutes to complete a trip that a car could make in 35 minutes. Cost overruns ran to 25% beyond projections. Planners predicted 1,900 riders a day; a decade after the system opened, ridership hovered around 1,000. Operating costs were estimated at \$3 million a year; by 2016, the author calculates, that number was \$8 million. “It would have cost less,” Mr. O’Toole writes, “to buy every daily roundtrip rider a new Toyota Prius . . . every other year for the expected life of the train.” The train is still running and continues to struggle financially.

Nashville’s story is all too typical, as Mr. O’Toole shows in this exhaustively researched exploration of America’s passenger-rail story. Some might dismiss the author, a senior fellow at the libertarian Cato Institute, for having a built-in grievance against a form of transit that so often requires government money. But Mr. O’Toole loves trains. A lot. In the past he has joined in the hands-on restoration of locomotives, and he is a collector of train memorabilia. He’s simply a reluctant realist among dreamers.

He begins with an in-depth history of American transportation, reminding us that every new technology outperforms the status quo: horse-drawn coaches replace walking; steamboats replace the sailing ship. By the mid-1800s, rail had largely supplanted canals, the favored, government-subsidized, means of moving goods and passengers. Mr. O’Toole concludes that, except in New York, Chicago and a few other densely populated cities, today’s rail systems—both long-haul passenger rail and local commuter systems—should go the way of canal travel.

Rail certainly had a good run. Long-haul trains peaked in the 1920s—the Golden Age—when rail cars comfortably served business travelers as well as tourists, who could visit once-remote national parks in the West. By 1926, however, more than half of American families owned cars, and more than 6,500 bus companies offered more flexible service than the railroads could provide.

Passenger rail attempted a heroic comeback in the 1930s with trains like the Zephyr: gleaming, streamlined, stainless-steel behemoths featuring plush, air-conditioned Pullman cars and domed observation decks. (Readers will delight in the train names: the Empire Builder, El Capitan,

Super Chief.) But by that time the Interstate Commerce Commission, which oversaw railroads, was dictating fares and rates as well as imposing safety regulations that slowed the thundering Zephyrs, robbing them of whatever chance they had of retaining ridership. Meanwhile, federal and state governments were spending billions of dollars on airports and highways. “Railroads discontinued thousands of passenger trains during the 1950s,” Mr. O’Toole writes; “the 9,000 daily trains operating in 1920 had dwindled to fewer than 3,000 in 1958.”

With city dwellers fleeing in their cars to the suburbs, city planners saw “urban renewal” as a way to revive downtowns, in part by reimagining inner-city rail. Congress passed the Urban Mass Transit Act in 1964, providing generous subsidies to cities to improve their transportation systems, such as the future Washington Metro and BART in San Francisco. In cities and towns everywhere, the money grab was on to get their share.

Alas, as Mr. O’Toole shows, cities and towns everywhere are notoriously creative about underestimating their rail costs—by an average of 40%; and they overestimate future ridership by 60%. Because state and federal subsidies pay only for development and expansion, and not maintenance, local taxpayers are stuck with the bill for depreciation of equipment and deterioration of rails and tunnels. Note, for example, New York’s decision to build the Second Avenue subway line even as the existing system deteriorates because of neglected maintenance.

The maintenance problem is among the many that have bedeviled Amtrak, the author’s exemplar of government incompetence and wasteful spending. Now and again there has been talk of privatizing Amtrak’s Northeast Corridor between Washington and Boston. But, Mr. O’Toole asks: What private company in its right mind would want it? “Amtrak may claim a maintenance backlog of around \$6 billion,” he writes. On top of that are backlog projects to repair bridges along the Corridor that will cost an additional \$3.6 billion.

It’s long past time, Mr. O’Toole believes, to drive a golden spike into the heart of passenger railroads. Other, more nimble, transportation modes—like the inexpensive BoltBus and Megabus systems, popular with a younger generation, as well as ride services like Uber and Lyft and possibly driverless cars—could absorb lost train ridership. The federal government, he notes, no longer subsidizes dirigibles and Conestoga wagons. It’s time to move on.

“I write this book,” Mr. O’Toole says, “as a love letter to a dying friend.” But perhaps he is being too hasty. The so-called Green New Deal proposal, conjured in a rapture of utopian bliss and soon to be launched by the Democratic House, will cost, by one estimate, \$700 billion to \$1 trillion annually and includes funding for high-speed, zero-carbon rail. Senate Democrats, too, are floating a proposal that calls for \$25 billion in mass-transit spending to build, or expand, subway and light-rail transit systems nationwide. Mr. O’Toole’s dying friend appears far from the end of the line.