

It is to be highly complimented. *Houses and Homes* is well worth its cost and the time it takes to read it.

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Railroads and the Character of America, 1820-1887. By James A. Ward. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1986. Pp. xii, 200. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$14.95.)

By the character of America James A. Ward means "a distinctive aura that envelopes the United States and its people" (p. 3), an aura that is made up of myths and images, as well as reality. What Americans thought about the railroads was both the product of that aura and contributed to it. Ward's book is a series of essays, each of which examines a body of railway literature that illustrates an aspect of that exchange.

The essays fall into two groups. The first comprises three-quarters of the text and covers the 1820s to the 1840s, when Ward sees the railroads as projecting an image of national unity for the fledgling United States. The second set of essays concerns the period from the 1850s to the passage of the Interstate Commerce Act in 1887, a time of rapid growth of the railway network and, on the political level, of sectional conflict, civil war, and reconstruction. In this period Ward finds railroad promoters and executives abandoning the image of national unity for one of large, competitive companies as corporate states with the attributes of political entities. The incompatibility of the latter with a politically reunited nation in the 1880s contributed to federal regulation of interstate commerce.

The first essays are especially appealing, for here Ward deals with subjects that are less familiar than the "robber baron" image of latter nineteenth century railroad leaders. For instance, a chapter on "Taming the Iron Horse" traces early railroad promoters' use of the locomotive as "a metaphor for what they thought Americans were and what they were becoming" (p. 28). Another chapter concerns the image of the railroad as peace-keeper, given the potential ease of military transport as a deterrent to enemy invasion. A third chapter examines the effect of "railroad time" on American mores and *mentalité*. All chapters of the book repay a careful reading, but the book as a whole fails to hang together.

For the early period, Ward draws his material very largely from the promotional literature of railroad publicists. Thus he usually sees the railroads from outside the owners' point of view. This leads him into error when he moves from the mythical to the real

world, as on page 70, where he avers that most early railroad leaders "believed that they were furthering the national, state, or municipal good first and foremost; they considered any personal returns in such a speculative security as lagniappe." The letters of Erastus Corning, John Murray Forbes, and other shareholders in the first railroads prove that those early investors sought personal profit as avidly as later ones. Similarly, Ward's claim that early railroad promoters "positively blanched at any mention that their projects might be weapons designed for use in urban commercial wars" (p. 15) would certainly have been modified by a more extensive appeal to local sources, including newspapers and merchants' correspondence.

More damaging to acceptance of Ward's thesis that there was a distinct change in the myth-making of railroad promoters in the 1850s is the author's switch from chief dependence upon promotional literature before that decade to a wider survey of sources, including company records and the correspondence of railroad executives, from that time onward. Was early railroad imagery markedly different from that of later decades? Doubtless it was, but is Ward's perceived difference a valid one, or, rather, does it reflect the limitations of his sources? This question remains unanswered.

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History of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad. By John F. Stover. (West Lafayette, Ind.: Purdue University Press, 1987. Pp. xiv, 419. Tables, illustrations, maps, appendixes, notes, bibliography, index. \$29.50.)

A statement on the dust jacket of this volume serves as a succinct but accurate summary of what is inside: "John F. Stover packs this narrative history with careful scholarship and colorful description which will appeal to the railroad buff and the professional historian, as well as to any reader who wishes to travel with the 'Mother of Railroads' through an exciting period in United States History." Such, of course, is to be expected of a writer with the credentials of Stover, professor emeritus of American history at Purdue University and one of the foremost American railroad historians. As an experienced practitioner of the art of culling through mountains of data to distill the essence, Stover knows how to find something of interest to each of his several "audiences," and at the same time how to come forth with a presentation that has the ring of authority.