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Building Railroads

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Building Railroads

Die Geschichte des Eisenbahnbaus ist voll technischer Großtaten, voll Erstdurchquerungen und voll Veränderungen. Kurz: ein romantisches Abenteuer.

Frederick Talbot's 1911 book, *The Railway Conquest of the World*, struck a chord with me. The rail tycoons of his day were, no doubt, a rapacious lot – called robber barons for good reason. But they didn't build the railroads. Talbot's point is that labourers and engineers built them. His very first words tell of the unfathomable fascination of romance in railroad building. He keeps stressing that word romance:

Outside a few highly populated areas, much of the world was still *vast expanse*. If we wanted to move goods over land before we had motor trucks, roads were slow and difficult. The road trip from Pittsburgh to Philadelphia took two-weeks before the Erie Canal was built. It was still four day trip once we had the Canal. The overland journey from San Francisco to Chicago could take months.

So, Talbot says, the railroad *surveyor* was as much an *explorer* as an engineer – working in *uncharted* places. Even my own early jobs on road *survey* crews had that quality, sixty years ago. We worked off in the brush. One did not first lay out roads or rails where they already existed. Try to imagine laying out the first railroads in Wyoming or the Yukon – in China or Africa.

As Talbot tells of rail surveyors, he sounds like the writers who *churned out* boy's adventure stories a century ago. He tells of surveyors dying in floods and *avalanches* – attacks by natives, suffering heat and cold, and having to *subsist* for months largely on what fish they could catch.

The actual construction was equally hair-raising. That fact sinks in as we trace this book – richly illustrated with century-old, tipped-in photo plates. They display two things that words could never *reveal* in such stark terms:

First, the hair-raising impossibility of building in the trackless *wastes* of so much wilderness. We see rail being laid through mountains and across deserts – over rivers and open water – *dodging* floods, sandstorms, and avalanches.

We're also caught off-guard by the complexity, elegance, and *ingenuity* of construction. A steel *truss* bridges the canyon cut by the Zambesi River below Victoria Falls. Heroic *timber trestles* carry rail over the rugged Alaskan

	never-ending
	*see list
takeover	
touched a string	
industrialist ... greedy	
	only
	*see list
incomprehensible	
huge area	
*see list	
discoverer	
unknown	
*see list	
produced	
landslides	
survive	
show	
emptiness'	
avoiding	
creativity	
support	
wood	*see list

terrain. The Oroya Railway ran in *perpetual* snow at 16,000 feet, in the Andes. A *cantilever* bridge over China's Namiti Gorge appears to spurt outward from solid rock.

Something else emerges: Rail will now serve more than commerce. A chapter: The Holy Railway to Mecca, tells of a thousand-mile run from Damascus through Palestine and Arabia to Mecca and Medina. Its *sole* purpose: to take believers on their Hadj to Mecca.

So rails *ribboned* the world and changed it utterly. Cars, trucks and planes would dominate the next century, but only by continuing after the heroic – romantic – business of laying track. The continents first had to be shrunk by iron bands. ■

Prof. Dr. John Lienhard, University of Houston

<i>avalanche</i>	Lawine
<i>cantilever</i>	Ausleger, Kragarm
<i>churn sth. out, to</i>	am Fließband herstellen
<i>conquest</i>	Eroberung
<i>dodge, to</i>	vermeiden, ausweichen
<i>expanse</i>	Fläche, Weite
<i>explorer</i>	Erforscher
<i>ingenuity</i>	Einfallsreichtum
<i>perpetual</i>	ewig, dauernd
<i>rapacious</i>	habgierig
<i>reveal, to</i>	zeigen, offenbaren
<i>ribbon, to</i>	bebändern
<i>sole</i>	alleinig, einzig
<i>strike a chord, to (struck, struck)</i>	eine Saite berühren
<i>subsist, to</i>	sich ernähren, unterhalten
<i>survey</i>	Vermessung, Aufnahme
<i>surveyor</i>	Landvermesser
<i>timber</i>	Bauholz, Balken
<i>trestle</i>	Gerüst, Gestell
<i>truss</i>	Ausleger, Fachwerk
<i>tycoon</i>	Großindustrieller, Magnat
<i>uncharted</i>	unbekannt, unerforscht
<i>unfathomable</i>	unfassbar, unbegreiflich
<i>vast</i>	enorm, riesig
<i>waste</i>	Abraum, Müll

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