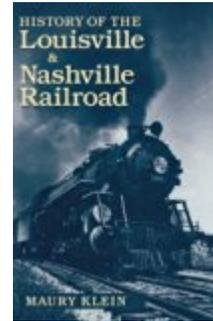


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Maury Klein. *History of the Louisville and Nashville Railroad*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2003. xxi + 572 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8131-2263-2.

Reviewed by Aaron Marrs (Department of History, University of South Carolina)
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The L & N Don't Stop Here Anymore

In his 1994 essay, "The Unfinished Business of Railroad History," Maury Klein wrote that "if the general literature on railroads could fill a warehouse or two, the general histories could fit snugly in a drawer." [1] Scholarly monographs on southern railroad history would occupy an even smaller space. Given the lack of attention that southern railroads have received, the republication of Klein's *History of the Louisville and Nashville Railroad* (originally published in 1972) is a welcome move by the University Press of Kentucky.

While Klein's book is a solid narrative of the history of the road, readers of H-Tennessee should be forewarned that there is not much material in the book on Tennessee itself. Klein acknowledges that Nashville had little influence in the road's affairs by the 1870s (p. 139). Given that the road only began operations between Louisville and Nashville in 1859 and was immediately interrupted by the Civil War, this was a short time indeed. Power on the railroad was clearly centered in Louisville. Tennesseans were irked in the 1850s when the majority of early construction appeared to be taking place in Kentucky (p. 10), and the first few chapters of Klein's book illustrate the fact that the Louisville business community focused much of its competitive attention on Cincinnati. By 1880, financial control of the road was drifting toward New York, and the L&N's expansion program turned its attention to states south of Tennessee, particularly in developing Birmingham, Alabama. Thus, Nashville does not loom large in Klein's account. Tennessee appears to be largely the ground over which the road had to pass in order for the L&N to secure its larger ambitions.

Therefore, readers hoping for a detailed treatment of the railroad's impact on Tennessee and the everyday lives of its residents will have to turn elsewhere. To be fair, Klein's other writings make it clear that he is aware that these issues are important, but they simply do not play a role in this book. [2] Only in the later chapters, in Klein's description of the battle over short-haul rates or the strike of 1955 does the state get some due.

But if the book does not offer much on Tennessee in particular, the impact of the road in general remains undeniable, and the book tells this story quite well. Klein gives us a detailed managerial and financial history of a railroad that was clearly important to Tennessee and controlled routes into Memphis, Nashville, and Knoxville. Klein's book proceeds in straightforward chronological fashion, outlining the factors necessary to begin the road, and its unique position at the end of the Civil War: it found little reconstruction necessary and was therefore well positioned to embark on an energetic program of expansion (p. 60).

Here Klein excels, for throughout the book he does a wonderful job of illustrating the "defensive expansion" policy that drove the L&N's growth. The railroad's tendency to see itself as constantly needing to ward off rivals to prevent collapse contrasted neatly with the public's perception of the railroad as an all-controlling corporation run by distant robber barons who greedily squeezed local producers for higher shipping rates. This disconnect fueled disagreement over the role of railroads and the increased regulation of corporations. Although Klein's fo-

cus is on the corporation's perception of the problems, he gives ample time to both sides of this complex debate. As consolidation drove down the number of railroads in the country, those railroads that emerged on top, such as the L&N, turned their attention from battling each other to battling the regulatory oversight of government.[3]

In addition to the managerial history, Klein also spends some time on labor issues, such as the company's development of a pension plan and the lengthy strike of 1955. Klein gives a great deal of space to the strike, but his retelling of the story left me wondering about the implications of race (if any). Eric Arnesen has noted that the L&N successfully used black strikebreakers at the end of the nineteenth century, so an exploration of racial issues and how they affected the strike would have been a welcome addition to the discussion of the strike.[4]

For the reprint, Klein has written a new introduction, bringing the story of the L&N to the end of the twentieth century. There is not a great deal to tell: the fate of the L&N after the book was published mirrors that of many other roads as it was eventually rolled into CSX (p. xvi).

In sum, Klein's book still stands both as an excellent example of what business history can accomplish and as an illustration of the work that remains to be done in the field. His solid telling of the railroad's history deserves to be complemented by future studies that incorporate the social aspects of railroad history that Klein has called railroad history's "unfinished business."

Notes

[1]. Maury Klein, "The Unfinished Business of American Railroad History," in his *Unfinished Business: The Railroad in American Life* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1994), pp. 168-169.

[2]. *Ibid.*, p. 168.

[3]. Although acquired by the Atlantic Coast Line in 1902, the L&N continued to operate essentially as a separate company for decades (p. 313).

[4]. Eric Arnesen, *Brotherhoods of Color: Black Railroad Workers and the Struggle for Equality* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 30.

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