



John H. White. *Wet Britches and Buddy Boots: A History of Travel in Victorian America*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013. xxvi + 512 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-35696-3; ISBN 978-0-253-00558-8.

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Published on H-SHGAPE (January, 2014)

Commissioned by K. Stephen Prince

From Taxis to Transatlantic Ships: A Quick Look at Travel in Nineteenth-Century America

John H. White Jr., one of the deans of American transportation history, has produced a fascinating and frustrating synthesis of public or shared transportation in and to the United States during the nineteenth century. It is a fascinating work because of its ambitious breadth: in a mere fourteen chapters and in under five hundred pages, White attempts to tell the story of every form of transport, from taxis to canal boats to transatlantic passenger ships to trains, and he succeeds admirably in parts. It is frustrating because key conceptual issues are not explicitly confronted and, not surprisingly, the scope and coverage of the chapters are extremely uneven. In the end, one is left wondering what is the intended market for this volume and whether it serves that market.

In many ways, White is the perfect author to undertake a broad synthesis like this one. His combined public and academic history backgrounds (including a long stint at the Museum of History and Technology at the Smithsonian) have allowed him to think and to write about these issues for over fifty years. His books on the technology of American railroads are classic in the field. But even White had his doubts about this project. In the acknowledgments, he notes that “[w]henver I was ready to abandon the project” a librarian insisted that he continue and “[b]ecause she would not stop, I was forced to continue as well” (p. xxv).

The use of “Victorian America” in the title indicates the first conceptual problem with the work: what period does it cover? In White’s introduction to the book, he claims that “[t]he purpose of this book is to describe

the travel experience in nineteenth-century America” (p. xiii). Although some historians still object to the imported term “Victorian” to describe any period of American history, the current scholarly consensus accepts the use of the term. Unlike in Britain, however, the term usually has to be defined when applied to the United States. Does the author mean Queen Victoria’s reign (1837-1901) or a later period? Typically, historians of the United States use “the Victorian era” to denote periods starting as early as 1850 and continuing as late as 1920. White never explicitly defines the term “Victorian America” but his book looks at a long nineteenth century, from about 1800 to the first few decades of the twentieth century. There is nothing wrong with White’s chronological coverage; it is just that it is not “Victorian America.” It is, in fact, much more.

Does White focus on the “travel experience” as he claims? The work is divided into fourteen chapters and most chapters focus on a transportation technology used in the nineteenth century. There are chapters on taxis, stagecoaches, omnibuses, streetcars, ferries, steam ships, sailing ships, and trains. Some topics have multiple chapters: there are four on steam ships (river, lake, coastal and sound, and ocean-going) and two on train travel (coach and first class). This chapter layout hints at what is really central to White: the technology used and not the experience of the traveler. The structure of most chapters confirms this focus. Most chapters begin with the development of the technology prior to its use in nineteenth-century America. White then analyzes the technology

as used in the nineteenth century in some detail. It is only at the end of the chapter that he studies the actual travel experience. Unfortunately, the first chapter (on taxis) is truly the oddest. The chapter is a mere fourteen pages long and begins the story with human bearers (wealthy people being carried by other people) in the ancient world and takes six pages to arrive at a taxi in anything like its nineteenth-century form. Although interesting, most of this story is largely irrelevant to the nineteenth-century travel experience. In fact, the only discussion of what it was like to ride in a taxi (either horse-drawn or motorized, as the chapter ends with a brief discussion of Checker cabs that were introduced in 1922) is in the final six or so pages, but these are still more focused on the technology than the traveler.

One aim of White's volume seems to be to bridge a long-standing divide in the history of technology between scholars who focus on the technology itself and how it works (traditional historians of technology) and those who focus on how people use the technology in everyday life (social or cultural historians of technology). When I was a graduate student, my mentor used the black box metaphor to explain this schism. Some historians wanted to open the black box and figure out how it works and others did not care what was inside and wanted to see what people did with the black box. White seems to want to do both, and this attempt may be the work's greatest strength. Whether he succeeds, however, is open to debate. The work's biggest weakness, for social historians of technology, is the decision to organize the chapters around the technologies. The result is that the technology and how it works are foregrounded and the human experience of using the technology becomes secondary.

Overall, this work is strongest in its treatment of the development of the technology of nineteenth-century transportation. White illustrates the building of systems, how those systems worked, and the physical natures of the technologies used. For me, the book was at its best in areas where I was at my weakest—sailing ships—but in areas I knew well, urban transit and trains, I found little

new.

The book is far weaker on the actual experience. Depending on the chapter, descriptions of how people used the technologies and what those people thought about the experience could range from just a few pages (taxis) to about ten pages (most of the chapters). The problem, of course, is that in a history that purports to examine the national experience, even twenty pages would be just a thin sampling for most forms of transportation. White uses some sources well but I wanted to see more.

This is an interesting work with many strengths and weaknesses. On a very basic level, I like it. White writes well and uses some interesting sources. When I finished it, however, I was left pondering the book's intended market. It has few citations, so scholars would have to work (using the suggested readings) to find all of White's sources. I found nothing new or innovative in the chapters covering technologies with which I had a great familiarity. This suggests that the book may be targeted at the undergraduate text or general history market. Its time frame—nineteenth-century America—makes an awkward fit for typical survey classes that divide mid-century, and many of the major undergraduate texts cover transportation reasonably well. I cannot see this being used in an upper-division undergraduate course as there are more detailed works for almost every chapter and most instructors, I suspect, would continue to assign them. Even though this work is synthetic, there is no real overarching thesis or interpretation to link all the stories together and add value to the work as a whole. For the general transportation history market, however, White does a good job of telling a variety of stories and every reader would learn something from the work.

As an aside, White was done no favors by his press in the layout and design of this book. The cover is busy with primitive art and difficult-to-read text. Each chapter's title page combines two typefaces and a number of visual devices that make for a busy layout. For me, these design decisions give the work a nonscholarly look and feel, which is unfortunate.

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Citation: John Hepp. Review of White, John H., *Wet Britches and Buddy Boots: A History of Travel in Victorian America*. H-SHGAPE, H-Net Reviews. January, 2014.

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