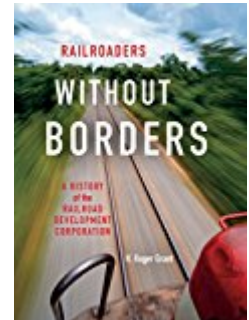


**H. Roger Grant.** *Railroaders without Borders: A History of the Railroad Development Corporation.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015. xii + 238 pp. \$45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-253-01798-7.



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The overall global trajectory of railroads over the last half-century has often been portrayed as one of decline. The great “iron horse” of the nineteenth century has been largely supplanted by other forms of transportation, such as the trucks that ply the road networks, which are so much more extensive than railroad lines in many regions. Air travel is far faster and often more comfortable and cheaper for today’s long-distance traveler. Yet the romance of the rail remains alive. To an arguably unique extent, particularly for a technology that is sometimes considered obsolete, railroads have maintained their grip on the popular consciousness as well as the devotion of their enthusiasts.

Some of this is pure nostalgia, of course. As deeply etched into the public memory as the railroad was from the early days of the Industrial Revolution onward, it is not surprising it has left such a lasting image. There is another category of train devotees, however, who reject the idea that rail travel is moribund, and who seek to revive it. The prominent and prolific railroad historian H.

Roger Grant’s newly published *Railroaders without Borders: A History of the Railroad Development Corporation* chronicles one of these railroad revivalists, Henry Posner III, along with the company he founded and heads, the Railroad Development Corporation (RDC). Posner has used the RDC to promote his efforts to restore railroad use and profitability on multiple continents since 1987.

The Pittsburgh-based RDC has been involved in numerous ventures to restore troubled or defunct railroads both in the United States and worldwide. In addition to its US activities, Grant describes the RDC’s global ventures in such countries as Guatemala, Argentina, Peru, Colombia, Malawi, Mozambique, Estonia, Germany, and France. The RDC’s international scope in pursuing targeted railroad restoration projects wherever there were promising opportunities provides the book with its title.

In order to evaluate this book, it is necessary to examine its origin and goals. As Grant men-

tions, he was approached by Posner himself and asked to write a history of his company, for which purpose he was offered extensive personal access to Posner and others involved in the company, as well as full access to the RDC's and Posner's personal papers. It is easy to see that Grant, someone who has written so widely on railroads, would recognize the importance of the RDC project and see in Posner a kindred spirit, a true believer in the future of rail with the means and a plan to bring this future about. While Grant denies that his book is a work of public relations, and insists he was given a free hand to be critical, he also admits "during my research I found little to criticize" (p. xi). Grant appears quite sincere in this assertion and his book, while quite informative of the history and various projects of the RDC, often reads like a 209-page fan letter to its founder. The book may, thus, be of the greatest interest to railroad buffs and, certainly, to the Posner family. Railroad historians, as well as those with a broader interest in cross-cultural technology studies, will not find in-depth analysis. They may, however, find useful departure points for their own projects.

Grant convincingly portrays Posner and the RDC's commitment to restoring railroads to their former glory, defined in terms of preserving or restoring service and ensuring profitability. While the RDC (like any company investing in a risky venture such as restoring out-of-use or failing railroads) ends up backing its share of white elephants, Grant shows the company as successful enough to make a solid argument for the continued, if selective, usefulness of short-line railroads. With its mix of idealism and pragmatism, the RDC story can give insight into the art of the possible regarding the future of railroads.

Throughout the book, Grant chronicles the RDC's various efforts, both successful and unsuccessful. After a false start with an unsuccessful attempt by the Pittsburgh-based company to acquire a recently failed historic local railroad, the

Pittsburgh and Lake Erie (which, to the RDC's chagrin, most of the railroad's creditors decided was "worth more dead than alive," p. 33), the RDC had its first, and thus far greatest, success in reviving the Iowa Interstate, the Iowa portion of the storied Chicago and Rock Island Railroad. Among the factors which turned this particular railroad into a success was the rising demand for ethanol, which only accelerated following the RDC's acquisition of the Iowa Interstate in 1990. Grant explains the advantages of trains in transporting this valuable but hazardous material, which requires transportation under very specific conditions (p. 83). Grant is successful in demonstrating what the RDC knows, that in certain cases rail transport can still be the best option by far.

Apart from the successful Iowa Interstate, most of the RDC's subsequent investments have been international. After the first chapter involving the Iowa Interstate, most of the book details the RDC's transnational and transcultural projects. Generally, these enterprises are launched as joint ventures with local partners, both state-owned and private companies. Many of the details about the varying conditions of railroads in these countries are among the most interesting aspects of the book. Obviously, the conditions under which RDC projects operate as well as the outcomes vary greatly with such a variety of business environments. While not the focus, some insight can be gained into comparative world railroads from Grant's summaries of railroad history of these various nations. The footnotes reveal that Grant consulted an impressive number of general histories and railroad histories of the relevant countries, which could be a starting point for those interested in launching their own comparative research.

Comparing railroads is not, however, Grant's main concern. The description of railroad histories and current conditions is unfortunately more superficial than it could be when not discussing matters related directly to the RDC. Grant's narra-

tive remains so focused on the company and the personalities of its officers, especially Posner, that the local contexts often seem mainly backdrops for the continuing corporate history. In a book so sharply focused on one company, much of the potential of a comparative project is not realized in any deeper way than to serve as a backdrop for the actions of the RDC. Local differences are most relevant for their illustrations of obstacles that the RDC must overcome, such as clashing local cultures, corruption, resistance to foreign ownership or privatization, dealing with the remnants of Soviet organizational and political culture in Estonia (although apart from its mention as something the RDC must deal with few details are given), as well as physical deficiencies or threats to the rail infrastructure or rolling stock, such as political violence in Colombia or the widespread and dangerous presence of squatters along the railroad in Guatemala (p. 126). In not addressing socioeconomic conditions leading to squatters living in substandard self-constructed structures practically on the railroad tracks in more than a cursory manner, Grant is neglecting the story of those whose lives are, almost literally, intertwined with the rail. Similarly, Grant mentions the theft of metal from the rails by locals after the RDC's Guatemalan venture failed, and provides two pictures captioned "a tragic sight" (i.e., the damage done to the rails, p. 137) without exploring what could potentially be an interesting angle of local re-use and repurposing of technology in an improvisatory developing-world economy.

Essentially, Grant has written a top-down corporate history, regardless of whether he is dealing with the RDC's US or foreign ventures. The first chapter begins, rather problematically to anyone interested in social history of technology, US labor history, and any other discipline that engages in grassroots analysis, with the statement, "Throughout American history individuals have single-handedly created a variety of railroad companies" (p. 1). Grant's meaning is not to be taken literally but rather to highlight the crucial role of Posner's

force of personality. Still, this obviously inaccurate statement is fairly indicative of a book which discusses labor, but then focuses exclusively on the management perspective. Indeed, almost no employees of the RDC below upper management are mentioned. The only memorable example cited by Grant comes in the mention of a track maintenance worker who was killed during a rebel attack on a Colombian railroad in which the RDC was a partner in a restoration venture. The context of this mention, however, is a quote by Posner. The man's death then, is only deemed relevant in order to describe Posner's reaction and sympathy for the loss of his employee, as well as to demonstrate his resolve in the face of adversity (p. 190). One need not insist that every book that mentions labor focus on the rank and file, but, since in several cases unions and their actions and positions are described, it would be possible to mention the names of at least the leaders and officers negotiating for these unions. We do not get these, but we get the minutiae of the thoughts, personalities, and even sartorial preferences of the managers.

In the book's brief postscript, Grant muses on the future facing the RDC, since "Henry Posner and [his main lieutenant and collaborator] Bob Pietrandera will not remain active forever." In the end, he is optimistic that the company will continue, as "RDC is not a cult of personalities" (pp. 208-209). Perhaps not, but the reader cannot help having the overall impression that this book is. Still, in Posner, Grant clearly sees a kindred spirit, a railroad enthusiast who is interested more in the future of the railroad than in its past, and he clearly admires Posner's vision and willingness to take risks. While there are surely other stories to be told about the RDC's international joint ventures, cross-cultural railroad encounters, and railroad revivalism more generally, Grant offers a focused and sincere business biography of a company which has been involved in exceptionally interesting ventures over the last thirty years.

Despite its shortcomings, there is much in *Railroaders without Borders* that researchers with appropriately focused questions may find valuable. In addition to secondary comparative sources mentioned above and the specially arranged interviews with and access to the papers of Posner and other RDC officers, these sources include an impressive collection of documents from local archives and general publications, such as newspapers and many railroad trade publications, spanning the period from the beginning of the railroad age to the present. While Grant's work is narrowly focused, it is quite broadly researched and, as such, suggests many avenues to explore for others interested in railroad history, either of the United States or internationally.

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