In *Can’t Get There from Here: New Zealand Passenger Rail since 1920*, André Brett attacks the history of and shifts away from passenger rail in New Zealand. He does not seek to provide an all-encompassing picture of those railways but instead works to ask questions about their appearance and demise. Brett's project is bold. New Zealand's many experiments with public works infrastructure, as necessary arms of development (settler colonialism) in the twentieth century, warrant close attention by historians of the British Empire and infrastructure. These systems bridged government, corporate, and public authority. The railroad, particularly in the wake of the auto and aviation transportation options, makes an excellent case study for how technological structures give us a lens through which we can unpack, derail, and redirect the assumptions people make about the inevitability of certain forms of transportation and instead show that no such system is intransigent; they are what they are made to be.

Before exploring the content of the chapters, I want to signal my appreciation and admiration for both the author and the cartographer, Sam van der Weerden, for their extensive use of maps and ephemera. On the surface, it makes for a more immersive reading experience and demonstrates thoughtful engagement with the many material products of rail. More importantly, it supports Brett's arguments about the layers of authority, systems, and people involved in making and un-making rail transport in New Zealand. It problematizes how people might approach the size of the islands and makes the distance between the rural and urban (and indeed the Māori and Pākehā) all the more apparent. The maps will give readers unfamiliar with New Zealand's geography and terrain a sense of place. They will challenge those who are familiar to reconsider what has been and what might be when it comes to public transportation questions.

The first chapter sets up the origin of passenger rail through Julius Vogel's Great Public Works Policy in the 1870s, which, among many other things, sought to knit the country together through trunk routes and, of course, solidify the settlement.
of Māori lands through infrastructure. Mining companies, the Public Works Department, and private railway corporations built transportation links between growing conurbations like Dunedin, Christchurch, and Auckland. By the 1920s, motorized road transport threatened to stall railway expansion, and automobility thrived despite the funding for rail. Chapter 2 unpacks the decline of regional rail on the North Island as commuters and Public Works officials hopped on to the idea of busing.

In addition to covering the arrival of the bus, chapter 3 explores the political departures between the Reform Party and the United Party, which struggled to address what to do about railways. They represented a major expense and could contract even more due to the economic forces of the Great Depression. Ultimately, rural connections suffered and shrank, and little to no growth happened between 1943 and 1935 during some of the harshest economic years in New Zealand. The fourth chapter follows with an excursion through the reinvigoration of pre-Depression projects, new electric rail cars, and the pressures created by involvement in World War II, namely, material and labor shortages.

Chapter 5 addresses the postwar transition, the use of rails throughout the war, the need for maintenance around the country, and new concerns about energy availability. The chapter interestingly ends with the expansion of roads in Auckland, the country’s largest metropolis, as a way of showcasing how the state had begun to turn away from the rail by the 1960s. Chapter 6 explores the contraction of the many proposed railcar networks, the “Fiat Fiasco,” which left many places, particularly rural North Island communities, without access to the main lines using rail. Buses continued to thrive, and the mainstreaming of air travel further disincentivized the expansion of the number of train options. The seventh chapter likens the decline of New Zealand rail to similar disappearances in the United States as investment in roads, air travel, and ferries ate into the country's transportation networks. Despite nostalgia for the rail, decades of diminished public and political support, not to mention the railway’s reputation for less-than-satisfactory service (undeserved or not), seemed to herald an end to passenger transport.

The eighth chapter tracks the many debates during the 1990s around privatization and public works concerning the rail and many other formerly public infrastructures. The debates culminated in reduced government funding for rail around the country, except some growth to Auckland commuter rails in the early 2010s. The conclusion addresses the status of the rail in cities around the country while proposing existing, at least as of 2020, commuter rails and rejuvenation projects for major trunk lines. More interestingly, Brett tackles the numerous myths that circulate among those who resist the revival of rail, such as track gauge standardization, the need to modify transformers for major AC and DC transmission lines, the relatively small population of the country, and the islands’ often “extreme” topography. He effectively shows that many other countries deal with similar issues, and they do not functionally prevent the rejuvenation of the rail. Instead, Brett argues, rail must become a public good that levels the transportation playing field and reforms the inequitable realities created by “stranded” rural (often Māori) communities.

Historians of technology, transport, and New Zealand, as well as urban and environmental historians, will find this book incredibly valuable. Brett pushes back against the environmental determinism that so often plagues historians as we wrestle with “frontier narratives.” New Zealand’s public transportation infrastructure hinged on varied visions of a successful colony, dominion, and nation that all at once sought to create physical connections between its disparate conurbations while sometimes making those same connections increasingly inaccessible. Brett joins the many his-
torians of public works systems who connect infrastructure projects to lengthier projects like settler colonialism. His framing of the state of transportation at the end provides an interesting model for how historians might more thoughtfully engage in ongoing policy debates. As a historian of New Zealand who spent many months in Wellington, I can say that after reading this book, walking by the massive bus terminal a few blocks from the capitol buildings takes on a new meaning.

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