



READING THE ENTRAILS: AN ALBERTA ECOHISTORY

by Norman C. Conrad

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TROJAN, IRON, WAR AND OTHER HORSES

IRON HORSES



he first commercial train chugged into history in 1825, steaming from Stockton to Darlington, England. By the 1840s, the “decade of the train,” all Europe clamoured to get on track. Snorting, smoking, chugging, charging steam engines terrorized the quiet countrysides of Europe’s newly industrializing northwest. None had more iron will about iron horses than England. Folk of the heath and moor cringed when first they saw these smoke-billowing, whistling and wailing mechanical monsters, railing determinedly on to the next factory or town. At the dawn of the Industrial Revolution, country folk might have marvelled at how the future was becoming “now.” Everything about them and many things within them were changing.

Trains chugged through Palliser’s mind as he surveyed the “Great Lone Land” from 1857 to 1860. As imperial emissary to probe the western reaches of Rupert’s Land, he concentrated on the land’s riches and ways to exploit them. His party assayed Earth’s surface as a medium for agriculture; the rocks, a bed of valuable minerals; the forests, lumber; and all of it for sources of energy. While Palliser’s expedition rejected the idea of rail from Canada to the Pacific, a shadowing Canadian expedition led by Hind and Dawson did not. Hind promoted the west’s “fertile belt” as abundant and rich. Rail, he said, provided the means to settle and exploit it. Others agreed.

Just as new sailing technology had opened high seas and distant shores to European voyages of discovery, railway technology opened up remote heartlands to European capital and exploitation. Whether by sail or rail the rule remained the same—the first to seize, grabs the rights to exclusive pluck and plunder. American ambitions and resentments (Manifest Destiny, the Monroe Doctrine, the residue of anti-British sentiment from the American Revolution and the Fenian antipathy) wanted British influence out of the Americas, firmly supplanted by Uncle Sam’s neighbourly

persuasion. They saw Rupert's Land as a nice fit in their holdings. Once they stopped fighting each other in their Civil War (1861-65) their ambitions would likely again turn north. For that reason British and Canadian interests hastened to bind Rupert's Land closer.

Binding west to east, permanently securing the remainder of British North America to the empire, capturing a capacious land with enormous resources and gigantic opportunities, all required a railway. Despite great distance and daunting geophysical barriers, with scarce regard to low population, and hardly a glance at cost-benefits, Canada induced the west coast colony of British Columbia to enter Confederation in 1871. To secure this deal and cement a nation, Canada promised to build a railway from Canada to British Columbia within 10 years, joining sea to sea. Rail would channel across Canada's newest province, Manitoba (1870). From there it would track over an ocean of plains to the Cordillera, then over breakers of shining mountains and on down to the Pacific. This aggrandizing stroke bound British Columbia to the Canadian packet, catching and containing all between them in the sandwich.¹

As beaver and bison perished in pelts and profit and with no new beasts to plunder, new resource ventures were required. With Native people effectively eliminated, new people were needed. Most would come in by rail. According to the plan, immigrants would pay passage and flood the prairies. The inputs required for a world-scale agricultural industry and all the material needs of a burgeoning population would be carried in by rail. On the way out, cars would be filled with the grain and cows of the prairies. Rail would farm the farmers. Trains would train the land.

RANGE COWS

Between the time of committing to the railway and its construction, ranching briefly blossomed in Alberta. Just after the 1877 signing of Treaty 7, about 1,000 head of Montana cattle were herded into Alberta to test its suitability for overwintering. Would not the long, nutritious and ungrazed western grass fatten cows as well as the bison? The cattle thrived and so would ranching, Canada informed its friends and supporters. The demand for cattle was increasing at the time with the general prosperity that followed the end of the American Civil War. With wallets peacefully bulging, expanding populations of Yankees and eastern Canadians ordered more beef. The *Dominion Lands Act*, 1872, as amended in 1881, permitted 21-year leases of up to 100,000 acres (40,500 ha) per applicant for a penny per acre per annum. With security of leasehold estate and extremely modest costs for such vast lands, interest buzzed among eastern politicians and



lawyers, many of whom came to be owners and directors of first Alberta cattle companies.

In 1881 and the years following, droves of cattle flowed into Alberta. During 1882 Canada granted leases covering more than 4,000,000 acres (1,620,000 ha), most of it in southwestern Alberta. In what was fast becoming its habitual *modus vivendi* government actively involved itself in transportation, product quality, marketing and the general promotion of the beef industry. But open-range ranching was only fine for the moment. It, like the bison, stood in the way of grand, more intense plans for the west. Even as Canada got into it, the cattle business was fast changing. New breeds and breeding practices, need for predictable feed, intensive land use practices, and the desire for fee simple land ownership, all encouraged the slicing, fencing and boxing of the west. But first the railroad must be built.

DERAILED

In 1871, immediately upon British Columbia joining Canada, John A. Macdonald started groundwork for this great railway. But what railroader would commit to such a colossal venture, the world's longest railway project to date? Inducements to undertake the continent-spanning project were commensurate with its scope—vast and uncertain. Government had construction money, a huge inventory of land, monopolies, subsidies and just about anything else required to get the job done short of a general increase in taxation. As further incentive, profits from running the railway were potentially enormous. If part of the railway went through the United States, American railroaders would gladly commit to such a project; but that might leave Canada open to American exploitation, perhaps extortion, and ultimately annexation (that seems no longer a concern). No, it must be built on Canadian lands by Canadian or British railroaders. Macdonald quickly offered the project to Canada's preeminent businessman, Hugh Allan. Macdonald hoped to have a satisfactory agreement to build the Pacific railway in place before going into the 1872 general election.

Despite rumours, Canada's second national election seemed fair and proper. In appearance the enfranchised citizens (few that they were) re-elected Macdonald's Conservative government by a thin margin after a tight race. It looked as if Macdonald's railway would be laid. Later, rustling behind the veils of power spilled out for all to see. Macdonald's Conservatives, it seems, may not have won the election as much as purchased it. And the money source was American funds laundered through Hugh Allan. For this it was agreed that Allan would lead the new Pacific Railway consortium.



He would also draw Americans into the venture. As the Pacific Scandal regurgitated, people wondered whether the new nation's "directing mind and will" was its publicly elected officials, the business community, Americans or the highest bidder. Perhaps it was all of them? None of payoffs, collusion, delay or the appointment of a Royal Commission populated by compliant judges could erase the worst political evil of all—getting caught. For that, a scarcely repentant Macdonald resigned and the great railway derailed for the moment. The collapse of his government in 1873 and the election of the Liberals in 1874 put Macdonald in opposition.

Meanwhile, the *Dominion Lands Act*, 1872 authorized the division of the western lands. Over the next decade surveyors pegged, chained and carved the large portions of the western plains and parklands into quarters, sections and townships in preparation for the free land feast to follow. The NWMP were created by legislation in 1873 and trooped west in 1874. In 1875, the *North-West Territories Act* provided government for matters of a local or private nature. Authorities cleansed the lands of Native people in the following years, so that little remained to derail the great Pacific Railway escapade.

BACK ON TRACK

Re-election in 1878 revived Macdonald's National Policy, his national dream and his succubus, the railway. The Canadian Pacific Railway Company (CPR) would construct it. The founders included an American railroader, an HBC official, a Member of Parliament, and a banker of national reputation. This Anglo-Canadian-American syndicate of businessmen and railroaders sublimated the National Dream into the great Canadian road. The Canadian Pacific Railway steamed from dream to reality, off the plans and onto the land. A railroad to build, a land to conquer and money to be made. The CPR raced to do it all.

In railway construction, the end-of-line is an assault on the senses: a melee of machines, hardware, smoke, noise, rails and engines, with dirty, rough, busy people herding clamorous teams of animals, all frenetically rushing about in myriad tasks. Its vulgar mechanical way is nearly organic. The resources required to move the end-of-line forward flowed up the line, as if through a vascular system, to the linear thrust at its lead edge. Its meristem, the growing tip of the Industrial Revolution, pressed onward, penetrating further and further into the virgin land.

Up and around, down and through, across bison lands, Native lands, hour by hour, mile upon mile, this gigantic rhizome probed westward. It thrust through the last outpost of the empire established yesterday, onto



the new last outpost of the empire, christened today. Nodules on the rhizome became villages on the line. Rail placement generally, and sidings, storage or stations specifically, germinated the locations of future cities and towns, and determined the first lands for farming. A decision of CPR management created a new settlement or assured the survival of an old one, sometimes changing its alignment or layout and always changing the land's future.

The rail line came to Alberta from out of the east in the spring of 1883, on its westward thrust toward the mountains. June found it in the tent city of Medicine Hat and by August it had driven past the little ramshackle village that had sprung up around Fort Calgary. With cunning, the CPR directors placed their new station a mile west of the fort, apparently handing the largesse in land to their friends. Justice J. C. Major of the Supreme Court of Canada commented on the arrival of the railway in 1883 and its effect on James Lougheed, grandfather of former Alberta Premier Peter Lougheed:

From the time of his arrival, Lougheed commenced speculation in Calgary real estate. The CPR owned the section of land on which Calgary was located. Public records show that five lots purchased by him in 1883 for \$300 were, within a few years, worth \$50,000. As solicitor for CPR, it has been alleged that he had inside information on where the CPR planned to build its station and thus determined the direction of expansion. The railway eventually built its station one block away from his lots and his fortune was assured at age 29.²

The next succession of exploiters understood how railways worked. Railways were the philosopher's stone that turned the base to precious, wilderness to wealth. From then on things would be done in the new ways. In that summer the die was cast and the game played—"The game is done! I've won! I've won!"³

Like Native people, fur traders disappeared from sight, supplanted by railwaymen and real estate speculators, the first succession of new-age exploiters. Not far behind were settlers and their attendants, the rural merchants, to share in taking the land. Waterborne transportation, the way of the west for hundreds of years, dried up. The canoe sank into obscurity. Fort Benton on the Missouri in Montana, formerly cheap and convenient, now obsolete, became a supply connection of an obscure bygone era.

Even time changed with rail's advent. Sanford Fleming, CPR's chief engineer, fathered the Universal Time system, dividing planet earth into 24 hours. Regular schedules required standardized times; trains would run on time in the new West. Nature's smooth continuity was displaced by the jumps in time



that machines favour, time-slicing seconds, minutes and hours. The jerky new discipline of industrial time came into effect on November 18, 1883.

Rail's design and technology gave the humanscape in the west its skeletal infrastructure. Auxiliary lines would be laid to enable remote exploitation, all radiating out from the central rhizome, the axis of the attack. The vascular system branching and spreading out from the line would pump and suck until all about it was transformed. That summer, Alberta joined the agricultural and industrial revolutions. It pledged its future to primary industry and international trade. Its role was to be a supplicant, a provisioner for the empire and the east. With fur, game and Native people effectively gone, its purpose now was to be a breadbox for imperial appetites; it would feed their multitudes.

One last spasm racked the land. A deeply troubled Riel returned from exile to lead a protest over Canada's handling of the North-West territories and its resident peoples, the Native and Metis remnant. As in 1869-70, failure of pleas, petition and protests lead to the declaration of a provisional government. But things had changed since the Red River Rebellion in 1870, including Riel himself. Stanley describes Riel's most significant error:

Riel, in his weakness, made one great mistake; the situation in 1885 was vastly different from that of 1869. In 1869 the North-West had not belonged to Canada, there were no military forces in the country, and Red River was effectively isolated from Canada by the formidable barrier of geography. In 1885 everything had changed. The North-West had been transferred to Canada and was now Canadian territory, there was a strong force of Mounted Police in the country, and the barrier of geography, which had made the North-West the "Great Lone Land," had been penetrated by the Canadian Pacific Railway.⁴

With the signal of Major Crozier, "Fire away, boys,"⁵ at Duck Lake on March 26, 1885, the ill-fated North-West Rebellion ignited. Those shots ensured that there would be funding to complete construction for the financially troubled CPR. The CPR carried the military resources necessary to overwhelm Riel's provisional government. Later, some irreverently suggested CPR should erect a statue to Riel.

Immediately on hearing of the Duck Lake bloodshed White people coalesced to oneness. With scant regard for the issues and less for the principles, White people lined up with their tribal colour. Nearly a thousand Alberta Whites, virtually everyone able, joined militias to fight the uprising. Almost



all were recent arrivals having come with or after the rail 18 months earlier. But off they went, as if defending homelands held from time immemorial against an evil new invader.

Rail put down this rebellion. CPR carried the 5,000 volunteer troops over thousands of miles and transported marvellous new weapons, including the machine gun, to overwhelm the several hundred insurgents. With Big Bear's final surrender on July 2, 1885, the rebellion was over. White militiamen obtained their reward in lands. For assisting Canada in defeating Metis and Native people, White warriors received 320 acres (130 ha) of land or \$80 in land scrip, the same things for which the Metis and Native people had themselves been struggling.

Later, at Eagle Pass in British Columbia's Monashee Mountains, CPR drove the last spike finishing the railway, November 7, 1885. Days later, November 16, Canada hanged Louis Riel and eight Native people, driving deep and deadly another last spike. With a last shudder and sigh the collective ghost went up. It was done.

LANDLORDS

The Canadian Crown was now the greatest landlord; it held most of Alberta's lands under the Rupert's Land purchase. It also suffered the greatest obligations and burdens. It must settle with Native people and Metis, establish military and government control, police, survey and allot lands. Its staggering immediate obligation was paying for the railway. It would be a long time before the west would produce sufficient tax or tariff revenues to pay for that even under the most aggressive development scenarios. For government it was essential to sooner turn the land to profit, to develop the west as rapidly as possible.

CPR was the next great lord of the land. When Donald A. Smith drove the last spike on November 7, 1885, CPR earned its 25 million dollars and 25 million acres (10 million hectares) of western lands "fairly fit for settlement."⁶ Those lands would be selected from the odd-numbered sections in a 24-mile-wide (39 km) belt on either side of the railway lines. These lands were the best by stipulation and design. CPR selected lands most likely to be enhanced by the layout of their railway. CPR received much more than statute provided. Newman in *Merchant Princes* claims:

The syndicate was granted an eventual \$206 million in cash, subsidies and stock guarantees in addition to 25 million acres in land grants According to John Gallagher, a historical researcher, when all the tax benefits and value of the land



exchanges are taken into account, the CPR received gifts from the country worth \$106,300,000.⁷

CPR also owned the railway. Whoever and whatever came and went, arrived and departed through them. If reputation is right, neither their lands nor their services came cheap.

One other great laird of the land was the more retiring HBC. It continued its declining fur and merchandising business, focused on the far north, while passively awaiting fruits of CPR and Canadian efforts in enhancing the value of its southern lands. Their one-twentieth of the fertile belt (lands south of the North Saskatchewan River)⁸ and a combined 4,000 acres (1,600 ha) surrounding each of their posts, would be held scrooge-like with a flinty eye, and a close accounting, patiently waiting for the efforts of others to deliver them bonanzas. Business as usual for the “Bay.”

Joined to these several huge landlords were the colossal institutions of empire, government and church. Otherwise the land was bare. The institutions taking root in the west wanted more of their foundation stock—White Christian Europeans. Churches wanted more souls, empire and nation wanted more soldiers and workers, business wanted more resources, producers and consumers. For racist reasons among others, they would not rely on the land’s Native residents to exploit the west. They demanded a different race of people. That meant immigration from Europe. Languishing without serfs, the local lords had the lure—land, land, land—and now a railroad to get them to it. 

