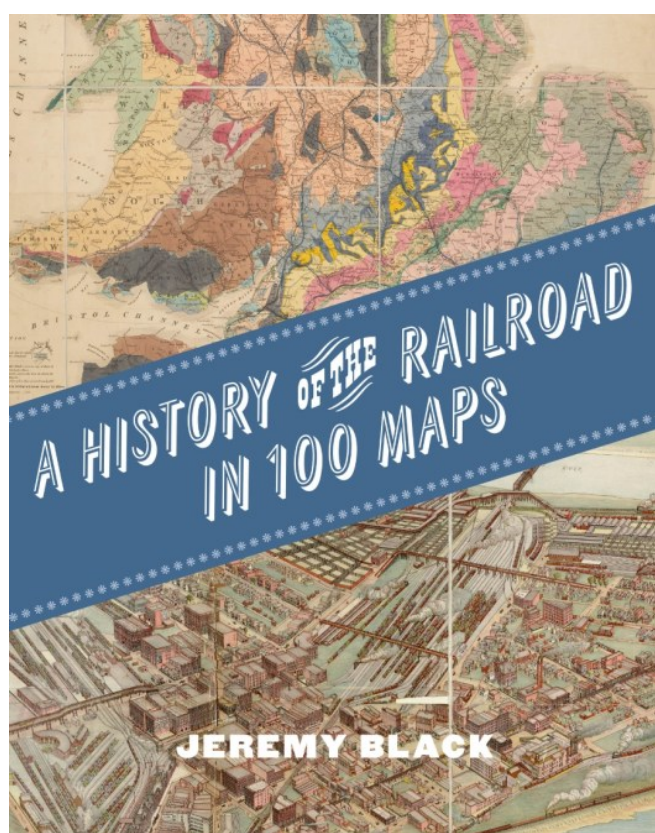




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Book review: A History of the Railroad in 100 Maps

reviewed by Tim Kiser



Black, Jeremy. *A History of the Railroad in 100 Maps*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2024. 288 p. \$40. LC: 2024587105. ISBN: 0-208-01522-1 978-0-226-83788-8.

British historian Jeremy Black is emeritus professor of history at the University of Exeter. This book, positioned as “the first international history of railroads and railroad infrastructure told through maps,” follows Black’s *History of the Second World War in 100 Maps* (2020) and *History of Britain in 100 Maps* (2022), among his numerous other works on wide-ranging topics in history, including the history of



cartography. The maps are presented in six chronological chapters, ranging from the origins of rail transport to the present, followed by two brief chapters on future developments and rail maps as popular culture artifacts, respectively. Each chapter includes an introductory text laying out the major themes and developments of the period covered. In the book's introduction, Black makes clear his equal and complementary attention to the histories of railroads and cartography.

Most of the maps are presented in a two-page spread (occasionally four pages to accommodate detail enlargements or additional maps or illustrations), which includes four to ten paragraphs of text. Maps are sometimes paired for comparative discussion or added context, such that more than one hundred are formally presented, by my count. The maps have been thoughtfully curated to support pithy discussion of diverse geopolitical, economic, technological, military, and/or social developments embodied by the map or the railroads depicted (often both), including anecdotes that are illustrative of larger historical trends. Throughout the book, Black calls attention to cartographers' design decisions, the impacts of changes in printing technique, and the intended audience for the maps. He often takes care to emphasize what is not shown on a given map; it is an effective technique for transitioning to discussions of exactly those missing contexts. Though the text afforded each map is fairly brief (and often closes abruptly), in the whole the reader comes away with a satisfyingly diverse view of two centuries of railroad history, including considerations of railroads' positions vis-à-vis industrialization and deindustrialization; colonization; various levels of politics; public vs. private ownership; urban planning; business consolidation; international relations; and war.

As is often the case with books that reproduce printed maps at a smaller size than originally published, I found it useful to have a magnifying glass on hand. The maps chosen are predominantly from the British Library, but numerous other institutions are represented, including the Library of Congress, the David Rumsey Collection, and several national libraries. As might be expected, the book has a decidedly British emphasis: By my count, 25 of the maps depict British locations; many others are focused on locations within the British empire and commonwealth, and on projects driven by British industrialists and investors. (For comparison, the U.S. is represented by 14 maps.) All regions of the world are represented, but Britain is treated more granularly overall: For example, a similar amount of coverage is devoted to a proposed terminal station for the Chunnel as to the entire railroad history of the nation of Portugal from 1853 to 1977.

As a fine example of map interpretation in the service of historical understanding, of



the interaction of cartographic history with other historical themes, and simply as an engaging collection of high-quality map reproductions, I recommend the book to all map libraries. It will also be of interest to academic libraries that support relevant areas of historical study, and to large public library systems.

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