

Profiting from the Plains: The Great Northern Railway and Corporate Development of the American West. *By Claire Strom*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003. x + 228 pp. Photographs, illustrations, maps, bibliography, notes, index. Cloth, \$35. ISBN: 0-295-98348-5.

Reviewed by Ryan J. Carey

Farming in the northern plains states has never been easy. Even during the “wet years” of the late nineteenth century, yields on the northern plains were relatively low compared with the harvests of their southern neighbors. If farmers on the northern plains had one advantage, it was the railroad. By the turn of the century, the Northern Pacific Railroad, the Great Northern Railway, and a host of smaller local roads helped farmers move their produce to market. Yet even this “advantage” cut both ways. High fixed costs for the roads, a small consumer market in the rural farming areas, the roads’ relentless search for profits, and shareholder demands to keep dividends high helped create railroad rates that often proved a burden to farmers. It was not uncommon for a farmer’s grain to cost more to ship than the grain was worth at market. The situation was precarious both for farmers and for the railroads built to profit from them.

In *Profiting from the Plains*, Claire Strom narrates the response to these problems by one powerful individual, James J. Hill, president of, and motivating force behind, the Great Northern Railway. Although Hill’s strategies to turn the northern great plains into a densely settled agrarian Eden often met with failure, the institutions with which Hill cooperated, particularly state agricultural colleges and the new federal land management offices, dramatically altered the social and natural landscape of the region. Underneath this fascinating story of corporate failure and rising state authority were the farmers themselves. “Although largely anonymous,” Strom argues, the farmers “profoundly affected the success of the railroad’s program” (p. 10).

Strom hangs her narrative on the character of Hill himself, relying primarily on Hill’s archives at the James J. Hill library in St. Paul, which she supplements with newspapers, government documents, and the corporate papers of both the Great Northern and Northern Pacific Railroad. Hill envisioned himself a gentleman farmer, the

ideological descendent of Thomas Jefferson's agrarian republicanism. That Hill was a wealthy financier in charge of a heavily capitalized, industrial transportation network did not bother the "empire builder," as Hill was known. According to Hill, whose success rested upon the Great Northern's ability to develop the rural landscape through which the road ran, the twin ideologies of agrarian republicanism and industrial capitalism went hand in hand.

Strom briskly demonstrates how Hill's initial pleas to farmers often fell on deaf ears, as they distrusted his claims to agricultural knowledge. Failing in these unilateral corporate attempts, Strom shows how corporate capital, embodied by Hill, turned to the state for help in convincing plains farmers to alter their farming methods. Hill enlisted the new agricultural land-grant colleges and officials in the Department of the Interior to use both their resources and their agricultural authority. These efforts culminated in the successful passage of the influential Newlands Act in 1902, which federalized irrigation projects—an outcome that Hill supported because it removed the power of development from the hands of his economic opponents. Only after cooperating with influential politicians, members of the federal government's new land-management bureaucracy, and agricultural experts in state universities did Hill achieve any measure of success.

After 1902, however, Hill found himself behind the times. Corporations, Strom argues, were no longer able to persuade farmers to cooperate with them. More important, as Strom shows, when industrial magnates like Hill courted the state to aid in western development, they undermined their own authority, ultimately nullifying the ability of the railroads to determine agricultural development.

Essentially, corporations lost the battle for authority and authenticity in agricultural knowledge. On the one hand stood "practical experience," which Hill claimed by right of his pursuits as a gentleman farmer. On the other hand stood the new Progressive academics, who based their claims of authority on scientific research. The problem, Strom's narrative suggests, is that corporations put their support behind this new generation of educated agricultural scientists and then lost control of them. The corporations were not sufficiently generous patrons, it seems, to have much influence with the new scientists. In losing that battle, men like Hill lost what little ability to influence farmers they once might have had. In their stead, academics in land-grant

universities and the federal Department of the Interior were able to determine policy, and hence rural development for the region.

Strom's narrative is well written and engaging. She does a good job in drawing her characters and dramatizing the battles between corporate barons and the new breed of Progressive scientists. That said, her use of Hill as the narrative center limits Strom's story. The time period Strom covers, 1878 to 1916, saw the rise of myriad oppositional political movements, loosely defined in the aggregate as the Populists. Much of this political protest arose in direct opposition to men like Hill. In the northern Great Plains and Pacific Northwest, Hill *himself* was the political target. Yet in Strom's tale of corporate tycoons, managers, academics, and government officials, agrarian protest is largely missing. Strom's claims to the contrary, farmers themselves are nearly absent except as a passive constituency being fought over by corporations and academics. What active role the farmers themselves played is largely lost in this formulation.

The most recent scholarship on the late nineteenth century suggests that social forces played a much larger role in shaping the Progressive movement, even in political battles between corporate, political, and academic elites. By tying Hill's motivations to corporate profits, and linking the scientists' goals to "good development," Strom misses an opportunity to see these battles in relation to the political tumult and unrest of the period. Might Hill's attempts to control the development and settlement of the region have been a response to the criticism levied against him by the very farmers he was supposedly trying to help? Hill's initial failure to influence agricultural development along the Great Northern line was not just an economic failure; it also represented a crisis of authority in an era when groups of agrarian radicals, organized as the Patrons of Husbandry and the Farmer's Alliance, were questioning the legitimacy of men like Hill on all fronts. The constant criticism levied against railroad men like Hill weakened their authority and helped bring about the rise of agricultural scientists (even, as Strom suggests, when the farmers had reasons to find fault with the scientists as well).

These criticisms are not meant to detract from the book's successes, but rather to suggest another character in the larger narrative of the political economy of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For Strom engagingly reveals the close cooperation *and conflict* between the state and capital in industrializing the American

West. The author convincingly shows how corporations, after nearly forty years of unlicensed power, began to encounter the cultural limits of their authority and the economic limits to their operational scope. These unaccustomed curbs actually forced them to begin courting the federal government in what had always been a cooperative project of “developing” the American West.

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