



Eleven Minutes Late: A Train Journey to the Soul of Britain

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Britain gave railways to the world, yet its own network is the dearest (definitely) and the worst (probably) in Western Europe. Trains are deeply embedded in the national psyche and folklore—yet it is considered uncool to care about them. For Matthew Engel the railway system is the ultimate expression of Britishness. It represents all the nation's ingenuity, incompetence, nostalgia, corruption, humor, capacity for suffering, and even sexual repression. To uncover its mysteries, Engel has traveled the system from Penzance to Thurso, exploring its history and talking to people from politicians to platform staff. Along the way Engel finds the most charmingly bizarre train in Britain, the most beautiful branch line, the rudest railway man, and—after a quest lasting decades—an individual pot of strawberry jam. *Eleven Minutes Late* is both a polemic and a paean, and it is also very funny.

Eleven Minutes Late: A Train Journey to the Soul of Britain Details

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From Reader Review Eleven Minutes Late: A Train Journey to the Soul of Britain for online ebook

Will says

A fascinating reflection on the history of UK rail and what it says about life, politics and culture here in the UK

Harvey Tordoff says

"Brilliant" said the Independent. "Very funny" said the Daily Telegraph. I beg to differ.

This is one man's account of the muddle and eccentricities of the railways in Britain. As such, perhaps it is no surprise to find that the book itself is muddled and eccentric. What starts out as a journey from one end of Britain to the other soon becomes a catalogue of odd facts, figures and opinions. And then, as if realising that he has shunted himself onto a siding for a couple of hundred pages, the author bestirs himself and finishes his journey. The dry, gentle humour helps, but it doesn't disguise the fact that the politics and economics of our railway history are innately boring.

The title refers to the somewhat whimsical definition of a late train. If the train arrives within ten minutes of its scheduled arrival time, it is classed as on time. Late trains are an embarrassment to the operator, and so generous allowance is built into the scheduling to ensure that unless foiled by autumnal leaves on the track, or the wrong kind of snow, the majority of trains do arrive on time, albeit at a much slower speed than they managed in days gone by.

If you were an avid train-spotter in the 1950's, your nostalgia and love of railway detail will probably make this book a must-read. For anyone else, unless you too have been shunted onto one of life's sidings, I recommend giving it a miss.

Ant Koplowitz says

Eleven Minutes Late by Matthew Engel is billed as a train journey to the soul of Britain, but that's not a very accurate sub-title. Although it starts out describing an actual journey up and down the UK, after about a quarter of the way through it shifts from mildly entertaining travelogue to a mish-mash of railway history and ramblings about the reasons (in Engel's view) for the national joke status that British railways have enjoyed for so long.

This isn't a bad book, but on the whole I found it difficult to engage with the subject, despite my general liking for the subject. It was a bit rambling in parts and for the most part, the observational humour was laboured.

Fergus Moffat says

...a railway history that is both salutary and funny. A great read. I recommend it. Here's a review...
<https://www.theguardian.com/books/200...>

Gareth Evans says

This book is many things: a potted history of railways in Britain; a reasonably detailed look at the later days of British Rail and its privatisation; a short rail travelogue; and, perhaps best of all, a bloody good whine. This history is entertaining (engel picks the juiciest parts). The privatisation section is well done and the interviewees are impressive. The rail travelogue is informative although he is not in the Bryson class. The whingening is sharp, funny and well aimed. Excellent.

Jennifer says

Not quite what I expected but I enjoyed it just the same. This was more historical than geographical. The book opens with a jaunt from Penzance to Thurso and doesn't quite hit the sweet spot in terms of atmosphere and description (but then, we are talking the modern British railway experience) Most of the book however is an account of railway system (not so much railway engine) history ancient and modern and only at the end do we get back to using Engel's fortnight go-anywhere pass. I was quite surprised to discover which line and which destination he thought most vile - I am almost tempted to go and see for myself. This revised paperback edition brings us further up to date but not quite as far as the declaration of the HS2 route.

I did laugh out loud several times which has got to be good and I liked Engel's tone, exasperated though it sometimes is. Beeching comes across as neither the Anti-Christ nor as misunderstood and maligned. His views on John Major, who agreed to be interviewed for the book despite knowing that they did not share a perspective, were generous. I was especially interested in his many comments about the office of Minister for Transport since my own MP is the present incumbent.

Derek Collett says

As a life-long user (and lover) of the railways, I began reading this with great keenness and anticipation. I have derived huge pleasure over the years from travelling up and down the country by rail but have also suffered my fair share of annoyance and frustration (and I'm not just talking about leaves on the line or the wrong sort of snow). Matthew Engel would appear to be in much the same boat (sorry!) as me and, unless I have totally misunderstood his intentions, wrote this book both to celebrate the up side of rail travel and to try to explain why things go wrong when (inevitably) they do.

Eleven Minutes Late opens brilliantly with an account of a train journey from Penzance to Dundee, which at the time of writing was the longest non-stop journey that one could take on the British railway network (I believe they've since tacked a bit on at the Scottish end). This sounds like train heaven to me but it quickly

became more like hell for Engel and I can understand why (mainly down to his fellow passengers). Right at the end of the book, Engel returns to his exhilarating travelogue but the vast majority of the text in between is occupied by a highly readable and entertaining history of the evolution of the British railway network. This is absorbing, extremely interesting (one learns something revealing on almost every page) and, because the author writes exceptionally well, never dull. However, as other Goodreads reviewers have pointed out, this is not what I was expecting having read the (distinctly deceitful) blurb. I was expecting something akin to 'Bill Bryson on rails' and, although I'm not a great fan of Bryson's travel writing, I think this book would have been much better had Engel written something that agreed with his publisher's blurb. There would seem to be no reason why he couldn't have travelled around the country exploring the rail network and dispensing the history in bite-sized gobbets as he went along as opposed to the one large dollop we get in this book.

There are entertaining asides on subjects such as Reggie Perrin (hence the title) and Brief Encounter and a sting in the tail when a Virgin Trains employee working in what that company laughingly refer to as the 'shop' (a copy of Closer and some flapjacks does not constitute a shop Mr Branson!) appears to call a dithering Engel a very rude word. On the whole, Eleven Minutes Late is an excellent read for both casual rail travellers and hardened commuters alike but I have to subtract one star because it certainly does not do what it says on the tin.

Andy Malcolm says

An interesting and broad history of the British railway system, mostly focusing on how incompetent our governments have been over the years (no surprise there). However, I preferred the sections of the book that were more about the current railway and Engel's travels. Unfortunately, the historical sections dominated.

Brian Clegg says

I felt distinctly misled by the blurb on the back of Eleven Minutes Late. I picked the book up from a pile occupying a whole table in a large bookseller, so it must be doing well (especially as I later discovered the book first came out in 2009, and this is only a lightly updated version) and thought it sounded ideal. The blurb made it sound like 'Bill Bryson does the railways' - as a lover of both, I thought it would be excellent. It was very good, but it didn't do what it said on the tin.

The author Matthew Engel, a journalist with the right kind of connections to be able to interview John Major for the book (probably because Engel had been editor of Wisden's, the cricket almanac) starts in the expected vein, taking us on a trip from Penzance to Thurso with a week's railrover ticket in hand. Just the idea of the ticket really brought back the memories - when I was 15, two friends and I bought these and spent almost all of a week on the railway network. However after a couple of shortish chapters, the book settles down to being an analytical history of the messy development of Britain's railways and it is only a good 200 pages later that he finishes of his journey.

Having said that, if you are interested in railways, the history part is very good. It takes a distinctly cynical dive into the politics of railways and is more about that aspect than the nuts and bolts of the permanent way - which is likely to make it interesting to a wider audience than those who just like trains. Engel gives the reader real (and painful) insights into who the railways are in the shape they are in today by tracing a rarely planned and often brainless set of decisions and ideas, from the original railway mania through to the

harebrained privatisation that separated track and trains and constantly pushed train operators to apply higher fares.

In fact, when I read the final section where he returns to travelogue mode, I realised I was glad most of the book was the history, because Engel isn't actually great at the Brysonesque bit. He has a couple of tiny vignettes that are entertaining, one featuring what must be the rudest buffet car (sorry, The Shop) attendant ever, but that apart we just get rather dull descriptions of his journey. Provided, then, you come at this book not expecting what it says on the cover, it is great. I would highly recommend it for its history, although it does leave the regular train traveller so frustrated as it becomes pretty obvious that the British political system is never going to get trains right.

I don't know why, but books about rail disasters have always made great reading. (I'm thinking particularly of Rolt's classic *Red for Danger*.) This is a book about a different kind of rail disaster - the politics, planning and management of railways and is equally compelling. I realised as I typed that sentence why the blurb was made a bit misleading. Would you sell many books about 'the politics, planning and management of railways'? But in its entertaining, curmudgeonly way, this book does the topic justice while keeping the reader happy.

Karan Singh says

The most English of books, equal parts loathing, nostalgia, affection and disgust.

Benjamin Richards says

I have to admit that the back cover blurb does not allude to just how much Matthew Engel would elaborate on his justified hatred of privatisation. But, I did not mind one bit. I found this book after becoming interested in the notion that renationalising the railways is not only possible, but could provide a cornerstone for a Labour victory at the next elections. Reading of how careless, neigh, calculated the tearing down of British Rail makes my blood boil. I recently read another book called, 'The Blunders of our Government' and quite synchronistically the subjects and direction of both of these books are aligned.

'Eleven Minutes Late' is political, it also a tremendously witty piece of travel literature and historical text. I laughed so much, out loud, reading this book. Something of a shared Britishness with Engel just appealed to the higher sense of fun and self-mocking of who we are as a nation.

Lastly, when finishing the book and reading the tragedy of what had happened to the Engel family endeared the book to my heart; and the cold fire that stoked the engines of his, and my own, righteous analysis of our post-1997 railway debacle.

James Cridland says

This isn't a journey of Britain; more a long history of the train system and the issues of privatisation. It was interesting, but not entirely as advertised. And enjoyable read, though, even if you may feel a little short-changed.

Andy says

This book is a cross between the the development of the railways from the 1830's with the social and political factors that drove the expansion of the railways right up to the present day. I also learnt a fair bit of history and in particular the attitude to progress of the British politicians over the years.
As a regular rail user, I really enjoyed this book and from the comments of several conductors on the train I was reading it on, they enjoyed it too.

Armelle says

While I'm not sure where the "very funny" comments come from, I enjoyed this book. It was very interesting - and as we had just returned from our first visit to England since 1975 - it was fun to read about the stations we had passed through on our own journey.

I, too, thought it would be more of a travelogue than it turned out to be, but I still enjoyed it. There are a lot of facts, but the tone is light and fairly conversational. It wasn't a difficult read and it could have been considering how much history (which I like), and politics (which I don't like very much) are included.

Phil Vivian says

Another re-read. Very readable, relaxed and humorous but well-informed reflections on our rail service, aspects of its history, not least the politics that have dogged its development. Underlines the gulf between the service it could be and what it actually is while reminding one of some of the architectural, geographical and other joys of travelling by train.
