



Steel Drivin' Man: John Henry, the Untold Story of an American Legend

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The ballad "John Henry" is the most recorded folk song in American history and John Henry--the mighty railroad man who could blast through rock faster than a steam drill--is a towering figure in our culture. But for over a century, no one knew who the original John Henry was--or even if there was a real John Henry. In Steel Drivin' Man, Scott Reynolds Nelson recounts the true story of the man behind the iconic American hero, telling the poignant tale of a young Virginia convict who died working on one of the most dangerous enterprises of the time, the first rail route through the Appalachian Mountains. Using census data, penitentiary reports, and railroad company reports, Nelson reveals how John Henry, victimized by Virginia's notorious Black Codes, was shipped to the infamous Richmond Penitentiary to become prisoner number 497, and was forced to labor on the mile-long Lewis Tunnel for the C&O railroad. Nelson even confirms the legendary contest between John Henry and the steam drill (there was indeed a steam drill used to dig the Lewis Tunnel and the convicts in fact drilled faster).

Equally important, Nelson masterfully captures the life of the ballad of John Henry, tracing the song's evolution from the first printed score by blues legend W. C. Handy, to Carl Sandburg's use of the ballad to become the first "folk singer," to the upbeat version by Tennessee Ernie Ford. We see how the American Communist Party appropriated the image of John Henry as the idealized American worker, and even how John Henry became the precursor of such comic book super heroes as Superman or Captain America.

Attractively illustrated with numerous images, Steel Drivin' Man offers a marvelous portrait of a beloved folk song--and a true American legend.

Steel Drivin' Man: John Henry, the Untold Story of an American Legend Details

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From Reader Review Steel Drivin' Man: John Henry, the Untold Story of an American Legend for online ebook

Chris says

Nelson does a pretty good job of convincing the reader that he is gotten to the root of the John Henry question - who was he really.

This is a rather enjoyable and very quick read that examines not only what Nelson believes to be story behind the legend but also a study of how the story was used in America.

Nelson's writing is engaging, and he talks not only about John Henry but about American ballads and folklife. Admittly, Nelson seems to go into too much detail about trains, but it is John Henry we're talking about.

Though, Nelson, you could've mentioned he had a racehorse, a very famous one, named after him. John Henry, the horse, was great too.

Pen says

I really loved this book when I started it, because it sets out to be both about the historical John Henry and about the way historians "do" history in a way that captured the puzzle-solving feel of it and the click when things fit together quite well.

But the second half of the book was sort of a different book, one about the legacy of John Henry, or the story of his legend, perhaps, written with a much broader brush. I know, they're related, and they sound like they should go together, but they're very different flavors and approaches. Not that the legacy story isn't a perfectly legitimate history book, it just wasn't the one I started reading.

As a whole, though, this is a very approachable book that traces an American tall tale both directions: back to its roots and forward to see how it's been appropriated, and by whom, and to what purpose, for the last 140 years. Worth reading if you're interested in the history of folk lore, race relations, railroads, convict labor, music, the WPA, art deco, Communism, superheroes, or any combination thereof.

Syd Logsdon says

Immediately after the Civil War, white southerners found a way to get back some of their power and some of their slaves. They simply arrested and imprisoned newly freed blacks, then rented them out. They invented the chain gang.

What does this have to do with John Henry? In searching for the man behind the legend, writer Scott Reynolds Nelson demonstrated this pattern of abuse as he came to believe that the real John Henry was one of these convict-slaves.

Dave says

This book starts with a story the author's academic hunt for The Real John Henry: the truth behind the man, and the circumstances that brought him to the famous steam drill battle and death. The reader gets a slice of life look at trackliners, how they used song in their work, and the initial dirgelike, cautionary tone of 'John Henry' -- a tale of a man working too hard, and the impending danger of machines.

Next, the author traces the groups and individuals along with their motivations (social, political, business, personal) that brought the song and the mythic figure to widespread cultural popularity--and how John Henry's legend evolved into what it is today.

Joe says

Disclaimer: Scott was my advisor in grad school

It still impresses me, even after my third time reading *Steel Drivin' Man*, how solid this book is. Centered on the John Henry of both reality and legend, it is a political, cultural, and social history that covers a lot of ground in under two hundred pages.

Nelson takes you along on his journey of discovering the prisoner/worker John Henry, placing the five-foot, one-inch teenager squarely in the context of the Redemption South's reliance on convict labor to expand its "railroad octopus" in the pursuit of greater speeds, efficiencies, and profits. Just as importantly, he shows how "infinitely mutable" the song and legend of John Henry have been over time. A chant/song regulating trackliners' work tempo that eventually influenced blues, country, and folk performers of various stripes, the myth of John Henry became a touchstone for Depression-era public art, leftist radicals, and beyond.

This tension between a human worker and his larger-than-life legacy is striking and makes for great reading, but I think Nelson is right when he closes the book: if anything, John Henry would want us all to slow down.

Amanda says

initial thoughts

The topic of this book is fascinating, and I commend the author's hard work researching and discovering who most likely was the real original John Henry and revealing his tragic (even more so than the song) end of life. But in spite of finding the topic interesting, I still kind of thought of this as "the neverending John Henry book" while I was reading it. I'm not sure what about the writing didn't work for me, but something didn't.

I also found the ending to really pale in comparison to the beginning of the book. While the book follows first the real John Henry then the path of the song (and John Henry) in American popular culture the post World War II part fizzles out, relying on anecdotes of the author and his friends rather than sound research with the entirety of post-1970s America summed up in one paragraph.

Also, after the entire rest of the book is devoted to how John Henry demonstrates racial injustice in America,

I thought it was very odd that the final sentence of the book suggests that John Henry's bones would simply tell us "slow down." What an odd luddite message to end a book about racial injustice with!

Laura says

A fascinating work of real-life detection, showing an expert historian at work. Nelson makes a strong and persuasive case for having discovered the identity of the real John Henry. He sets this tale of personal tragedy against the backdrop of the Reconstruction-era South - and then traces the evolution of the song (in its many permutations) through the 20th century as it came to hold different meanings in radically different communities. Full of interesting tidbits, such as the influence of old Welsh mining songs on John Henry and Nelson's own personal background and connection to the legend, this is a book worth reading for those interested in the American South, African American history, civil rights, and the study of folklore. I also highly recommend the young people's version of this book, "Ain't Nothing But A Man: My Quest to Find the Real John Henry," for shattering the misconception that history is a dull pursuit.

Daniel Silliman says

This is an excellent, excellent book.

Yasmin says

The untold story is also one that is not familiar to me. As a child I was familiar with Casey Jones, the song I've Been Workin' On the Railroad and a few others, but oddly John Henry the Steel Drivin' Man wasn't one of them. This was a very interesting book about the real life and legends of John Henry and how the songs about him inspired and created new things in peoples lives and cultures around them. It was said that John Henry was 5 foot and 1/4 inch in height, over the years he grew to epic portions in height and body mass. The original incredible hulk perhaps, but without the green pigmentation! Whatever the reason out of countless other men John Henry became the lasting known figure in song history and then into visual history. On the back flap of the book it said that Cott Reynolds Nelson was going to appear on a PBS documentary about John Henry, I don't know if the documentary was made or not. I hope it was for as well as an interesting read the basis would make for tremendous viewing.

Graham says

Reynolds using the John Henry American Myth to unite American industrial, social and ethical consciousness in one brilliant study. This book is about more than trying to unearth a man behind a legend -- although Reynolds asserts to literally do just that -- it explains how the nexus of reconstruction, railroad construction, and southern resurrection affected American culture and stratified the nation in several ways: ultimately giving birth to the industrial revolution, the civil rights conflicts and perhaps rock and roll. John Henry is a microcosm of American History -- with a theme song. Fantastic book.

Azar says

Like a steam engine pulling cars uphill from a cold start, this small but mighty book starts out slow. Don't put it down -- because as this "train" gains speed, you will NOT want to put it down.

Yes a John Henry (possibly THE John Henry of legend) DID exist - his photo graces these pages. His betrayal as a black man in Richmond VA during the early days of Reconstruction, his imprisonment, his work laying track, and his ultimate burial near "the White House" amounts to a fascinating story of hard work, brutal treatment of Henry and his fellow man (and women) -- convicts (many wrongfully convicted) who were forced to build the railroads, lay track, and sleep in miserable little huts.

John's demise is described. The songs that honor him are also in this book (some of which can be heard on You Tube), the beautiful yet sad and bleak painting of "the Gandy Dancer's Gal" and the actual location of "the White House" with a mass grave -- bring more mystery, tragedy and sadness to this excellent narrative

Margaret Sankey says

This is one of my favorite historical research genres--taking a well known popular culture pieces (in this case, John Henry of folksong) and reconstructs the real story--the south during Reconstruction, the easy way a corrupt government agent could make sure many able-bodied men went to jail for minor (or fabricated) offenses, and the bribes to be had from renting out prisoners to 1870s railroad projects. Nelson tracks down the real person on whom the story is based, a Virginia prisoner working on the Lewis tunnel for the C&O railroad (and the chain gang DID work more efficiently than the steam drill) and then follows the spread of the story and differing lyrics as they adapted to the particulars of the audience. The companion book, meant for children, is a model of historical methodology and would be a good piece for an undergraduate class--Ain't Nothing but a Man: My Quest to Find the Real John Henry.

Cvillejon says

Truly impressive work of scholarship bringing to life an old folk / blues/ country song while uncovering unconscionable crimes perpetrated by the commonwealth of Virginia under the guise of law in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War. A great read.

Todd Stockslager says

Natural man to man of steel

Nelson does the near impossible: He finds the real, documented man in the folk song, places him in his actual geographical setting (not where all the roadside markers are by the way) and tells us his history in life and death.

I was surprised to learn that John Henry did actually exist, and did actually compete against a steam drill in

demonstrating the value of human labor over the mechanized variety in digging railroad tunnels through the Blue Ridge mountains of Virginia and its newly-named neighbor West Virginia in the decade after the Civil War., This part of the story reads like a cold-case mystery as Nelson tracks down old government archives, railroad engineering studies and project documentation, Civil War records, and archeological findings that helped him find the living John Henry--and the site of his death and burial after that famous contest.

Then Nelson brings John Henry the legend up to date, showing how the legend became song, spread across the country (and oceans during World War I), was co-opted into early "folk" entertainment and then politics, and finally even became part of the stream (through the graphic-arts work of the Depression-era WPA) that became comic-book superheros like the "Man of Steel" Superman.

Unlike some books in this genre, Nelson sticks to his sources, letting them tell the story without trying to make it seem mystical or hip. This gives this short history a true power and makes it worthy of five stars.

Another book in this genre that I found similarly worthy and maybe of interest to readers who liked Steel Drivin' Man: Chasing the Rising Sun: The Journey of an American Song

Victor says

While I am not surprised to discover that the real John Henry was nothing at all like the legendary John Henry, it is interesting to learn just how different the two men were. I mean, how did a guy who was 5'1 from the north that was a prison convict become the hero he was. This book tries to answer that, though it spends a lot of time discussing what an historian has to go through to get a decent story. A good book, but honestly speaking, only a small portion of it is about John Henry. The rest of it is about how people have viewed Henry, changed him over time, and why.
