

## **Author Lays Tracks for Fascinating Read**

Naomi Lakritz

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*Gravity, Steam and Steel* is such a slim book that it's easy to mistake it for something belonging to the young readers' category, and pass on it. That would be unfortunate. The book is slim, but it is so crammed with fascinating information about the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway that it picks up beautifully where Pierre Berton's two-volume epic on the CPR leaves off. Graeme Pole takes the technical stuff, turns it into plain English that never fatigues the reader, and gives a marvellous, jaw-dropping rendering of the monumental effort it took to lay the tracks through Rogers Pass.

Take the avalanche that came roaring down to cover 180 metres of track in March 1910. Sixty-two men were sent to help a rotary plow clear the tracks, but a second avalanche hit, which "ripped the locomotive and the rotary plough apart and had flung the 62-ton plough onto the roof of the snowshed, 40 feet above and 60 feet away from the line. . . . Rescuers found many of the dead still standing. One group of three faced each other, caught in mid-conversation."

Then there are the trestled Loops, where "masons laboured for almost six years with train traffic over their heads, creating what now endure as monuments to human industry and ingenuity." The purpose of The Loops was to "double the length of a section of track to reduce the grade by one-half" which "to railroaders and passengers alike . . . were an engineering marvel." In fact, "the steep grades between Calgary and Revelstoke taxed the efficiency and safety of the CPR's mountain operations."

Pole is extremely generous with photos and anecdotes, balancing his riveting prose with stories that convey the sublime beauty of Rogers Pass and the awe-inspiring efforts of the men. In January 1929, "engine 5779, with 5767 coupled behind it, led the way onto the 455-foot span of the Surprise Creek bridge," which creaked as the train crossed it. About to clear the bridge, the engineer "heard a bang from behind and felt a sharp backwards tug." Moments later, looking back, he saw "the track behind had disappeared, as had a section of the bridge and engine 5767 with its crew, engineer Bert Woodland and fireman Jeffrey Griffiths."

And yet, in all this fierce battle between man and mountains, Pole stops for moments of spiritual loveliness in passages such as the one about the skunk cabbage whose "striking yellow bloom . . . emerges from tall, hooded leaves called spathes, which themselves are remarkably coloured --burgundy with yellow mottling or stripes." Their odour caused Sandford Fleming in 1884 to describe the Illecillewaet Valley as "acres of stinking perfection."

Pole has written a wonderful book, a must-read for anyone who has watched a train chugging along deep in the Selkirk range and wondered at the effort it took more than a century ago to make that happen.

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