

**RAILROADS, THEIR  
ORIGIN  
AND PROBLEMS**

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Railroads, their origin and problems by Charles Francis Adams

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**CHARLES FRANCIS ADAMS**

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BY THE SAME AUTHOR  
NOTES ON RAILROAD ACCIDENTS

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"By this very attractive little volume Mr. Adams has increased the obligations the public owes him for the many aids he has furnished to the comprehension of railway problems. . . . The reader feels that he is assisting at a scientific consultation on a subject which affects the safety of himself and his neighbors . . . dignified by the clear purpose of humanity and progress . . . so that we have the attractiveness of a novel with the value of a work of science. It ought to be universally read."—*The Nation*.

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THE GENESIS  
OF THE  
RAILROAD SYSTEM.

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THERE are not many stories that are either more interesting in themselves or better worth telling for the lesson they convey, than the story of George Stephenson and his invention of the locomotive engine. It has been told, too, in a manner which upon the whole leaves little to be desired; and the great and long continued popularity of Smiles' biography is one of the most encouraging symptoms of the better and healthier education of the times. In the course of his narrative the author describes with great literary skill the genesis of the locomotive. In doing so he carries his readers along with him through episodes of opposition, discouragement, disappointment, almost defeat,—the interest in the narrative and the fortunes of its hero continually growing until it exceeds that of any work of fiction of the day, even though Walter Scott himself was then a living author,—until at last the great dramatic

climax is reached in the memorable pageant of September 15th, 1830. That day,—the day of the formal opening of the Manchester & Liverpool railroad,—was for Stephenson more than an ovation, it was literally a triumph. Guiding his locomotive, the *Northumbrian*, at the head of the train, not only was he, even though the Duke of Wellington himself was there, the conquering hero observed of all, but there were also many circumstances about the occasion suggestive of other and less attractive features of the classic triumphs. Reminders of public distress and private want, of the fickleness of popular favor and of sudden death itself, all were there. The season was favorable, the skies were clear, the occasion great; but things would not move smoothly. It was a day of *contre-temps*; a day to be remembered and described, but one which nevertheless must ever after have left a bitter taste in the mental mouths of those who took part in its observances. Unfortunately, when he came to giving an account of it, Smiles' appreciation of the dramatic fitness of things proved too strong for his fidelity to facts. He thought his hero deserved a day of triumph unalloyed, and so he gave it to him—as nearly as he could. The terrible episode of Mr. Huskisson's death it was not possible to wholly pass over; but whatever else was there to mar the pleasure of the day could be ignored, and was ignored accordingly. The liberty with facts which Smiles thus allowed himself to take, was long since pointed out by Jeaffreson, in his excellent life of



Robert Stephenson ; and in that work will be found a much more correct account than is given by Smiles of the events of the Manchester & Liverpool opening. Even Jeaffreson's account is, however, not wholly satisfactory. It was written too long after the event. He sees what he undertakes to describe with eyes accustomed to railroads and locomotives and trains of cars. He has with great industry gotten all his details together and woven them into a skilful narrative, but it is, after all, not the narrative of one who himself was there. Now the great peculiarity of the locomotive engine and its sequence, the railroad, as compared with other and far more important inventions, was that it burst rather than stole or crept upon the world. Its advent was in the highest degree dramatic. It was even more so than the discovery of America. Of this last we know every detail, and nothing is wanting which could lend an interest to the event. Picturesque and absorbing as the story is, however, the climax did not work itself out before the very eyes of an astonished world. Columbus and his crew alone on the morning of the 12th October 1492, saw the shores of the new world. And yet, next to the locomotive engine, this was probably the most dramatic of all those discoveries which have marked epochs in human history. The mariner's compass, far more momentous in its consequences, crept silently on a world which to this day does not know when or from whence or how it came. It was much the same with gun-powder. In the case of

printing it is somewhat different, for though its invention has been a fruitful source of controversy, something at least is known of it. Hallam, indeed, in his *Literature of Europe*, indulges in a flight of rhetoric somewhat unusual with him and which reads queerly, as he speaks of Fustenburg's Mazarin Bible, the first printed book. "It is," he says, "a very striking circumstance, that the high-minded inventors of this great art tried at the very outset so bold a flight as the printing of an entire Bible, and executed it with astonishing success. It was Minerva leaping on earth in her divine strength and radiant armor, ready at the moment of her nativity to subdue and destroy her enemies. . . . We may see in imagination this venerable and splendid volume leading up the crowded myriads of its followers, and imploring, as it were, a blessing on the new art by dedicating its first fruits to the service of Heaven." "In imagination" perhaps, "we may see" all this, but assuredly the cotemporary world neither saw nor dreamed of it; on the contrary, imaginary processions apart, few things less inspiring can be conceived than the unnoticed homely toil of those poor German mechanics at Mentz, who four centuries ago launched upon an unconscious world the great motive power of all modern life. So with the loom, the steam engine, and electricity. Each and all, they struggled into existence slowly and painfully. The world never stopped to look, much less to wonder at them. We cannot know what people's sensations

were when they first realized that a new power had appeared, for there was no particular moment at which they ever realized it. The locomotive engine alone as soon as it was seen was acknowledged; for it must be remembered that its one essential feature—the multitubular boiler,—was first used in Stephenson's experimental locomotive, the *Rocket*, on the Rainhill trial course in October, 1829, and never after that time was the importance of the new discovery denied, while the interest felt in its further development each day widened and became more engrossing.

It was this element of spontaneity, therefore,—the instantaneous and dramatic recognition of success, which gave a peculiar interest to everything connected with the Manchester & Liverpool railroad. The whole world was looking at it, with a full realizing sense that something great and momentous was impending. Every day people watched the gradual development of the thing, and actually took part in it. In doing so they had sensations and those sensations they have described. There is consequently an element of human nature surrounding it. The complete ignoring of this element by both Smiles and Jeaffreson is a defect in their narratives. They describe the scene from a standpoint of forty years later. Others described it as they saw it at the time. To their descriptions time has only lent a new freshness. They are full of honest wonder. They are much better and more valuable and more interesting now