

Railway Reading

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DURING the early nineteenth century, steam power affected few industries more than transportation and publishing. Both the steam-powered locomotive and the steam-powered printing press are profoundly important to American industrial history in themselves, but, understood in terms of their relationship to one another, the two take on additional importance for the history of the book. Not only did the freight train allow books to be cheaply and widely distributed, but also, the passenger train provided new contexts for reading, contexts that were ideal for the inexpensive books produced by the steam-powered press. The development of passenger railways combined with the widespread availability of inexpensively-produced books significantly influenced what people read, how they obtained what they read, and, indeed, how they read.

The steam press led to a new kind of book, the pamphlet novel, which proved to be an ideal format for people to take travelling. When Nathaniel Hawthorne noticed a train pulling into a small New England station, for example, he saw several passenger cars, each filled with people 'reading newspapers, reading pamphlet novels, chatting, sleeping; all this vision of passing life!'¹ Pamphlet novels were popular works closely printed in small type on inexpensive paper and published in paper covers.² Though steam-

1. Nathaniel Hawthorne, entry of May 5, 1850, *The American Notebooks*, ed. Claude M. Simpson (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1972), 488.

2. Hellmut Lehmann-Haupt, Lawrence C. Wroth, and Rollo G. Silver, *The Book in America: A History of the Making and Selling of Books in the United States*, 2d ed. (New York:

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powered presses, in combination with similarly-powered paper-making machines, permitted large quantities of paperbound books to be produced at little cost, such 'cheap literature,' as critics derogatorily called it, did not emerge immediately with the new printing and papermaking technologies. Additional factors—the absence of an international copyright, lively competition between the various print media, and lax postal regulations—each facilitated the production of cheap literature.

Before pamphlet novels, the mammoth papers—so called because of their sheer size with pages as large as four feet and eleven columns wide—first began pirating and serializing British novels and English translations of Continental novels. The two most important mammoth weeklies, *Brother Jonathan* and the *New World*, were both the work of Park Benjamin and Rufus Griswold. After starting *Brother Jonathan* in 1839, the two men turned the paper over to its publisher, Wilson and Company, before year's end. The following year Benjamin and Griswold teamed up with Jonas Winchester to begin the *New World*. These two mammoth papers pirated and serialized the popular British and European novels, but they ran into problems competing with book publishers. Serial publication took time whereas the book publishers could rush an entire work into print as soon as the first copies of the to-be-pirated work arrived from Europe. So the *New World* and *Brother Jonathan* rose to the competition and began issuing complete novels as 'extras.' The publishers sent men to meet arriving steamships before they docked in order to obtain the earliest possible copies of the newest English novels. Employing numerous typesetters and working them day and night, they could have a complete work set in type, printed, and on the streets within twenty-four hours.³

R. R. Bowker, 1952), 130; Frank Luther Mott, *Golden Multitudes: The Story of Best Sellers in the United States* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), 77; Frank L. Schick, *The Paperbound Book in America: The History of Paperbacks and Their European Background* (New York: R. R. Bowker, 1958), 48; Raymond Howard Shove, *Cheap Book Production in the United States, 1870-1891* (Urbana: University of Illinois Library, 1937), v-vii.

3. Frank Luther Mott, *A History of American Magazines 1741-1850* (1930; Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1966), 360.

Cheap literature reduced the triple-decker Victorian novel to a pamphlet of perhaps thirty to seventy pages, closely printed in small type with multiple columns per page which sold from 6¹/₄ cents to two bits. During his second visit to the United States in the mid-1840s, British geologist Charles Lyell found that the same works that in England required a significant amount of money to purchase could be had for pennies in America. Even Dickens's often derogatory *American Notes* could be had in a cheap American edition. Another British traveller who crossed the Atlantic a few years after Dickens, recorded purchasing a copy of *American Notes* in New York for 12¹/₂ cents and taking it with him on his westward travels.⁴ So many people read cheap books that widespread ocular damage was feared. Lyell further wrote, 'Many are of opinion that the small print of cheap editions in the United States, will seriously injure the eyesight of the rising generation, especially as they often read in railway cars, devouring whole novels, printed in newspapers, in very inferior type.'⁵ The remark reflects a common concern, but advantages in convenience and thrift permitted by these new formats overcame fears of eye injury. As one contemporary American critic of cheap literature remarked, '[I]n this country, there are few words that have so attractive a sound as "cheap."⁶

In his travel narrative Lyell briefly described the authors people read on the train. One author Lyell mentioned, Charles-Paul de Kock, was an immensely popular Frenchman who wrote sentimental, picaresque novels liberally sprinkled with bawdy humor. Many of de Kock's works were available in cheap English translations during the early 1840s. *Sister Anne*, for example, was published in 1843 as 'Brother Jonathan Extra no. XVII.' The following year, *The Six Mistresses of Pleasure* and *The Student's Girl*

4. Archibald Prentice, *A Tour in the United States with Two Lectures on Emigration . . . Fifth Edition* (London: John Johnson, 1840), 51; advertisement, *New World* 6 (Jan. 14, 1843): 63.

5. Charles Lyell, *A Second Visit to the United States of North America* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1849), 2:251, 253.

6. 'Editor's Table,' *Arthur's Ladies Magazine* 2 (Nov. 1844): 242.

appeared in cheap editions.⁷ One vociferous opponent of cheap literature recalled its beginnings and harshly criticized the dissemination of such seemingly vulgar French literature: 'Dumas, De Kock, and a hundred others, whose very brains ran to seed with their rank growth, were vomited forth ubiquitously in all parts of our land. The distorted, unreal, grotesquely horrible creations of perverted French taste, became as familiar as Robinson Crusoe.'⁸ Lyell also mentioned works of Eugene Sue and Edward Bulwer-Lytton. Sue's *The Wandering Jew* went through numerous editions during the middle years of the 1840s, including a cheap edition published by Jonas Winchester's New World Press. Bulwer's *Zanoni* was published as an extra to both *Brother Jonathan* and the *New World* and also by the Harpers in 1842, and *The Last of the Barons* was published the following February by the Harpers in book format and by *Brother Jonathan* and the *New World* as extras.⁹ Occasionally, American books were similarly published. James Fenimore Cooper's *Le Mouchoir; An Autobiographical Romance*, for example, was published separately as 'Brother Jonathan Extra Sheet Number XXII.' Nevertheless, pirated imports formed the bulk of the published extras, and then popular but now neglected British writers such as Catherine Crowe, Frederick Marryat, and W. Johnson Neale were read more often than contemporary American writers. Crowe's *Susan Hopley, or, The Adventures of a Maid-Servant*, Marryat's *Percival Keene*, and Neale's *The Captain's Wife* each appeared as *Brother Jonathan* extras.¹⁰

Novels published in the form of extras to these mammoth newspapers were largely a fad of the 1840s. When they first began to be published, the extras had gone through the mail as

7. *The National Union Catalog: Pre-1956 Imprints* (hereafter, *NUC*), 754 vols. (London: Mansell, 1968-81), nos. K0220550, K0220553, K0220560.

8. X.L.O., 'The Mission of Novelettes,' *Holden's Dollar Monthly* 1 (April 1848): 218.

9. Lyell, *A Second Visit to the United States of North America*, 2: 251; Luke White, Jr., *Henry William Herbert & the American Publishing Scene 1831-1858* (Newark, N.J.: The Carteret Book Club, 1943), 17; *NUC* L0594480-L0594481, L0592864-L0592866.

10. Jacob Blanck and Michael Winship, *Bibliography of American Literature* (hereafter, *BAL*), 9 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955-91), no. 3902; *NUC*, nos. Co809296, N0085888, Mo242225, Mo242226.

newspapers, but in April 1843, the post office reclassified them as pamphlets and thus subjected them to much higher postal rates. While the new regulations somewhat hindered the sales of the newspaper-sized pamphlet novels, they still continued to be published. Halfway through the decade, however, public interest in the newspaper novel appeared to be waning—or so it seemed to the vocal opponents of cheap literature. Evert Duyckinck, referring to cheap books by the color of their paper covers as “the crimson and yellow literature” . . . the hues of blood and the plague,’ found that the ‘cupidity of publishers had overstocked the market, and the traffic fell.’¹¹ While the craze for the ‘extra’ novel faded, it nevertheless had a significant impact on the book industry and the book-buying public because for the first time it made books so inexpensive that they were affordable to virtually everyone in the country. Once books had been made cheap, they could not return to being expensive. Cheap books were here to stay.¹²

Of course cheap books were not unique to the nineteenth century. After all, chapbooks had been around for centuries, but the pamphlet novel differed significantly from the chapbook. Chapbooks contained stories, often centuries old, that had been revised, abbreviated, and simplified during the course of their transmission. Chapbooks with more recent themes were either sensational nonfiction or fiction feigning veracity. During the early decades of the nineteenth century, chapbooks became more and more associated with children’s books. Pamphlet novels, however, were adult books. The tiny printing and crowded columns would have dissuaded young readers. Besides, pamphlet novels reproduced complete texts of modern works, not abbreviated and simplified versions. The pamphlet novel gave cheap books a respectability which chapbooks never had.

Publishers—from the respectable firm of the Harpers to the less

11. ‘Literary Prospects of 1845,’ *American Whig Review* 1 (Feb. 1845): 148.

12. Mott, *Golden Multitudes*, 79.

respectable T. B. Peterson—vigorously marketed their books to rail travellers.¹³ Recognizing the lucrative market, other firms began issuing series of books specifically for train travellers. British publisher George Routledge began his ‘Railway Library’ series in 1848, and, upon opening a branch office in New York City in 1854, Routledge began distributing ‘Railway Library’ editions in the United States. Of a significantly higher quality than the American pamphlet novels, volumes in Routledge’s ‘Railway Library’ were generally well printed and published in colorful, ornately decorated paper boards. Some of the authors Routledge published in the series were the same authors who had sold so well a decade and a half before as *Brother Jonathan* and *New World* extras. For example, several of the works of sea novelist W. Johnson Neale appeared as part of the ‘Railway Library’ series, as did the works of Bulwer and Marryat. While the series reprinted much nineteenth-century literature, it occasionally included British literary classics such as Samuel Richardson’s *Clarissa*, available in Mrs. Humphry Ward’s abridged edition, *Clarissa Harlowe*. Routledge had originally established his reputation as a publisher of inexpensive reprints; the ‘Railway Library’ became the most successful series of all the Routledge reprints.¹⁴

To compete with Routledge, the American firm of G. P. Putnam & Company began issuing its own series of railway books, ‘Putnam’s Railway Classics,’ in 1857. Though specifically designed for portability, Putnam planned his series to be a cut above the cheap pamphlet novels. One advertisement for ‘Putnam’s Railway Classics’ described them as ‘neat compact volumes for travellers’ and ‘economical and portable editions . . . in a very convenient size for the pocket.’¹⁵ A British reader found

13. Mott, *Golden Multitudes*, 84.

14. F. A. Mumby, *The House of Routledge 1834–1934* (London: George Routledge & Sons, 1934), 39, 139–41; James J. Barnes and Patience P. Barnes, ‘George Routledge and Sons,’ *British Literary Publishing Houses, 1820–1880*, ed. Patricia J. Anderson and Jonathan Rose (Detroit: Gale, 1991), 262.

15. Advertisement, *American Publisher’s Circular and Literary Gazette* 2 (April 25, 1857): 270. The same advertisement appears throughout the spring and summer of 1857.

them a model of good bookmanship: 'So far as type, paper, binding, and shape of volume are concerned, Putnam's series of re-publications might be imitated with advantage by our manufacturers of handy-books for travellers.'¹⁶ The books were issued in both cloth and paper. Clothbound volumes retailed for sixty cents, books in paper boards were ten cents cheaper.¹⁷ Though half as much as other editions of the same titles that Putnam published, his 'Railway Classics' cost at least twice as much as the pamphlet novels.

The first three volumes in the 'Putnam's Railway Classics' series were works by Washington Irving: *Salmagundi; or, The Whim-Whams and Opinions of Launcelot Langstaff, Esq., and Others*; *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon*; and *Tales of a Traveller*. Advertisements for the *Sketch Book* and *Tales of a Traveller* were puffed as 'Complete in one volume,' thus emphasizing that, though the volumes were less expensive and contained fewer pages than other Putnam editions of the same works, the Railway Classics were not abridged versions. The advertisements for the three Irving volumes closed with the statement: 'It is proposed to issue other choice and popular works in the same form.'¹⁸ The phrase 'choice and popular works' suggests that besides such 'choice' works by highly respected authors which had been around for decades, Putnam would also publish such 'popular' works as recent novels. Publishing some choice works first, Putnam sought to give the series a kind of bourgeois respectability. The marketing strategy was not effective. The Irving volumes attracted little attention, and additional titles were not immediately forthcoming. The series apparently failed shortly after it began in 1857.

Titles in Routledge's 'Railway Library,' however, continued to sell steadily during the next decade, and, perhaps encouraged by

16. *Athenaeum*, no. 2069 (June 22, 1867): 821. I would like to thank my student Jacquelyn Leonardi for this item.

17. These works were less than half the cost of the same work in Putnam's standard clothbound editions, which sold for \$1.25 per volume.

18. Advertisement, *American Publisher's Circular and Literary Gazette* 2 (April 25, 1857): 270.

Routledge's ongoing success, Putnam resumed the 'Railway Classics' after the Civil War. Early in 1867 Putnam advertised the same three Irving works in 'neat pocket editions at "popular prices"' that would sell for seventy-five cents each in paper covers or \$1.25 for clothbound. It is unclear, however, if the Irving volumes were actually reissued as part of the series in 1867.¹⁹ Three volumes which did appear in the 'Putnam's Railway Classics' series that year consisted of additional 'choice' works, thematically organized reprints of essays and stories that had first appeared in *Putnam's Monthly Magazine*; *Maga Excursion Papers*, a collection of travel stories; *Maga Social Papers*; and *Maga Stories*, a collection of short fiction. A fourth volume in the series, *Maga Papers about Paris*, was somewhat different (though it still would have been considered 'choice' literature). It was a collection of essays by a single author, Henry Theodore Tuckerman, originally published in *Putnam's* as well as other popular magazines.²⁰ The 'Putnam's Railway Classics' series was apparently unsuccessful again. Though Putnam continued marketing the *Maga* books, he stopped promoting them as part of the series. When *Maga Stories* was advertised in September 1867, for example, it was available only as a clothbound volume, and, though the title page of surviving copies shows that it was part of the 'Railway Classics,' it was not even promoted as such in the *American Literary Gazette*.²¹ The railway reader, it seems, was uninterested in the series. The demand for cheap, portable literature was being met by others. As Putnam's was advertising his 'Railways Classics' for seventy-five cents, T. B. Peterson was selling both literary classics and current sensational and romantic fiction in cheap editions for one-third as

19. An advertisement for the three Irving works appearing in the *American Literary Gazette and Publishers' Circular* 8 (Jan. 15, 1867) stated that they 'will be issued about the 25th January.' On Feb. 15, the same journal announced that the first volume, *Tales of a Traveller*, was 'ready' and that 'Railway Classics' nos. 2, 3, and 4 would appear shortly. I have looked in the *NUC* and on the Research Libraries Information Network (RLIN), but neither list 1867 issues of any of these three Irving works in the 'Putnam's Railway Classics' series.

20. *BAL*, no. 20703.

21. Advertisement, *American Literary Gazette and Publisher's Circular* 9 (Sep. 2, 1867): 247.

much. Also, a new format, the nickel and dime novels, had begun to emerge and were further undercutting Putnam's potential sales.²²

The pamphlet novels called for new methods of retail distribution, and the passenger railway fostered new venues for marketing books. Before the 1840s novels had been sold to the public largely through bookstores, but pamphlet novels could be purchased anywhere newspapers and magazines were sold. One pamphlet novel published in New York stated that it could be had 'at all periodical depots.' The title page of another stated that it was available at 'Holland & Glover's depot for cheap publications.'²³ Bookstalls became part of the passenger railway station. In his mid-nineteenth-century treatise on railway economy, Dionysius Lardner described the typical amenities of the station waiting room: 'Here he [the passenger] finds, if he have a few minutes to wait, innumerable conveniences, such as guide-books, journals, and periodical publications, of the kind most in demand by travelers, offered for sale.'²⁴ The lightweight, compact pamphlet novels made them convenient for newsstands to stock and easy for people to carry while travelling. Though the page size of the pamphlet novels was fairly large, their slimness and the paper covers made it easy enough for readers to fold them in half to fit into their coat pockets.

Through the middle of the nineteenth century, the railway-station bookstalls were, for the most part, independently owned and operated, but in 1864, William Henry Williams began the Union News Company, an endeavor which grew into an extensive chain of retail stores located at railway stations in major cities

22. The nickel and dime novels are beyond the scope of the present study, but see Michael Denning, *Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working-Class Culture America* (New York: Verso, 1987).

23. Charles-Paul de Kock, *Six Mistresses of Pleasure* (New York: Holland & Glover's depot for cheap publications, 1844); Kock, *The Student's Girl* (New York: for sale at all periodical depots, 1844). See *NUC*, nos. K0220553, K0220560.

24. Dionysius Lardner, *Railway Economy; A Treatise on the New Art of Transport* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1855), 122.

GENERAL RULES.

CONDUCTORS.

They have charge of the trains and, in the absence of a superior officer, are to decide all questions relating thereto.

They will be at the station with their badges on, to attend to their duties, at least twenty minutes before the time designated for the train to leave.

They will conform strictly to the rules issued for the running of trains, &c., and report to the Superintendent any neglect thereof, by any officer of the company that comes to their knowledge.

They will see that a suitable number of cars are provided, and that they are clean and in safe running order, and report any deficiency to the Superintendent.

They will see that the alarm lines on the cars are in connection with each other, and with the engine.

They will see that passengers are accommodated with seats, and give them all necessary information in relation to the trains.

On arriving at the stations, they will announce the name of the station, so as to be heard throughout the car, and give the passengers proper time to get in and out before the train is put in motion.

They will see that the men on the trains are prompt and faithful in the discharge of their duties, and that the rules of the road are courteously enforced.

They will allow no smoking in or upon the passenger cars, or passengers to stand on the platform of the cars, while the train is in motion.

They will not permit the sale of books, papers or refreshments in the cars, without a license from the Superintendent.

In cases of difficulty or danger, they will always advise with the engine-men.

They will compare their time, daily, with their enginemen, keeping their time regulated with Boston time.

Fig. 1. The sale of reading matter and food on trains was regulated by licensing the vendors. *Rules and Regulations of Portland, Saco and Portsmouth Rail Road for Running Trains &c. Commencing April 4, 1859* (Portland: N. A. Foster, 1859). American Antiquarian Society.

throughout the United States.²⁵ The Union News Company became affiliated with the publishing and distribution firm, the American News Company, and together they significantly influenced the publishing industry. The Union News, therefore, repeated in the United States what had happened not long before in England, when W. H. Smith gained control of the bookstall concessions on Britain's principal railway lines.²⁶ The Union News gave the railway newsstand a professionalism and uniformity that its haphazard predecessors had lacked. Under the man-

25. American News Company, *Covering a Continent: A Story of Newsstand Distribution and Sales* (New York: American News Company, 1930), 48.

26. For an overview of W. H. Smith, see Jeffrey Richards and John M. MacKenzie, *The Railway Station: A Social History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 300-2. Richards and MacKenzie identify a similar process taking place in India's railway stations.

agement of the Union News, the railway newsstand became more lucrative than newsstands located anywhere outside the railway station.²⁷

The portability of the new format allowed passengers to carry books on board, but it also let newsboys ride the rails and peddle cheap books. The unique design of the American railway car, largely standardized by 1840,²⁸ made the newsboy's trade possible. Unlike European railway carriages, which consisted of multiple compartments accessed from the side of the train, American railway cars were designed with exits at each end of the car, a long aisle spanning its length, and rows of upholstered seats on either side of the aisle. The newsboys could thus enter a car through the doors at one end, walk down the aisle, easily serve each passenger, exit through the doors at the other end, and repeat the process in the following car. The newsboys were so commonplace that American travel-writers seldom mentioned them in their accounts, but British travellers, unused to the unique design of American railway carriages and their ubiquitous newsboys, often described them in detail. Indeed, most of the surviving evidence concerning the on-board newsboys comes from accounts by British travel-writers, many of whom did not appreciate the convenience. British newspaper correspondent William Howard Russell, describing a railway journey from New York to Philadelphia and complaining of the numerous times the doors at either end of the railway car were noisily opened and even more noisily slammed shut found that the nerve-jarring nuisance was often 'the work of a newspaper boy, with a sheaf of journals and trashy illustrated papers under his arm.'²⁹ Another British traveller referred to an American railway journey as 'one continued slamming of doors.'³⁰ The marketing of cheap books on the train

27. *Covering a Continent*, 49.

28. John H. White, *The American Railroad Passenger Car* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 8-18.

29. William Howard Russell, *My Diary North and South* (Boston: T. O. H. P. Burnham, 1863), 31.

30. Henry A. Murray, *Lands of the Slave and the Free: Or, Cuba, the United States, and Canada* (London: G. Routledge, 1857), 28.

had a significant impact on the retail book trade. Describing his American travels, Anthony Trollope wrote, 'I do not know that anything impresses a visitor more strongly with the amount of books sold in the States, than the practice of selling them as it has been adopted in the railway cars.'³¹

As travellers first settled into their seats, the newsboys would board the train to sell them reading material for their trip. Sometimes the boys would remain on the train during the course of its journey, while other times they would base themselves at one railway station. Alfred Bunn found that 'the moment the cars stop, a string of filthy lads stream in, offering for sale sweetmeats, apples, newspapers, books, and other important ware.' Mary Duncan, another British traveller, also situated the newsboys at each station: 'Boys with candies, fruits, ready-cracked butternuts, pop-corn, books, pamphlets, railway guides and newspapers pass through the cars at all stopping stations.' Lyell observed 'that the railway cars are every where attended by news-boys, who, in some places, are carried the whole stage, walking up and down "the middle aisle" of the long car. Usually, however, at each station, they, and others who sell apples and biscuits, may be seen calculating the exact speed at which it is safe to jump off, and taking, with the utmost coolness, a few cents in change a moment before they know that the rate acquired by the train will be dangerous.'³²

Lyell, travelling in the mid-1840s, suggested that the newsboys more frequently left the train than stayed on, but as the trade developed during the next decade and a half the newsboys more often remained on the train from one stop to the next. Thomas Low Nichols described a process in which the same young vendor would sell reading material and sweets in a specific order: 'the

31. Anthony Trollope, *North America*, ed. Donald Smalley and Bradford Allen Booth (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1951), 273.

32. Alfred Bunn, *Old England and New England, in a Series of Views Taken on the Spot* (1853; reprint, New York: Benjamin Blom, 1969), 146; [Mary Duncan,] *America As I Found It* (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1852), 380; Lyell, *A Second Visit to the United States of North America*, 2: 40-41.

newsboy comes along loaded with daily and weekly newspapers; then he comes with books—all the newest publications—and then with oranges and confectionery.³³ One of Lyell's most delightful anecdotes concerns a newsboy who remained on board during the course of a journey from Columbus, Georgia, to Montgomery, Alabama. While describing the passage through the Alabama pines, Lyell was struck by the incongruity between the rugged surroundings and an enterprising boy selling French novels. He 'was calling out, in the midst of the pine-barren between Columbus and Chehaw, "A novel, by Paul le Koch, the Bulwer of France, for twenty-five cents—all the go!—more popular than the Wandering Jew."³⁴

Though these newsboys performed a service which provided travellers with a way to occupy their time during the long hours of rail travel, their ubiquity and tenacity bothered some travellers. Measures were taken to try and limit or prohibit train vendors, but these efforts were largely ineffective. If anything, the newsboys' strategies for hawking literature became even more aggressive and sophisticated. The boys who sold newspapers, magazines, and novels profited far more than those who sold only candies and apples. On a 1861 railway journey, British essayist Walter Thornbury stated that of 'the railroad petty traders . . . the flying stationer is now the acknowledged chief.'³⁵

Some newsboys developed a specific routine for selling printed material. On a train ride starting from Cincinnati, William Chambers found 'a number of pedlers, who, with basket in hand,

33. Thomas Low Nichols, *Forty Years of American Life 1821-1861* (New York: Stackpole Sons, 1937), 75.

34. Lyell, *A Second Visit to the United States of North America*, 2: 41. Ronald J. Zboray, *A Fictive People: Antebellum Economic Development and the American Reading Public* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 74, quotes this same episode, but confuses Columbus, Georgia, with Columbus, Ohio.

35. [Walter Thornbury,] 'American Sleeping Cars,' *All the Year Round*, no. 90 (Jan. 12, 1861), 329. The essay is unsigned, but it was written by Thornbury, who later reprinted it in *Cross-Cross Journeys* (London, 1873). Thornbury's essay is partially reprinted in August Mencken, *The Railroad Passenger Car: An Illustrated History of the First Hundred Years with Accounts by Contemporary Passengers* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1957), 137.

went from car to car, while the train was in motion, offering books and newspapers for sale. One of these travelling merchants went to work in a methodical manner. First, in making his rounds, he left with each passenger a circular descriptive and recommendatory of a particular book, and in due time returned for orders, which he executed on the spot.³⁶ On a trip from Rome to Rochester, New York, Charles Mackay found that 'a book-hawker made his appearance, and left a prospectus with every traveler, to study or to cast upon the floor, and after a sufficient interval returned for orders. But the book-trade did not appear to be very prosperous, and he gathered up his prospectuses to do service on a future occasion. Then, changing his literary business for that of a dealer in maple-candy, peppermint-drops, cakes, and apples, he allowed us no cessation from importunity until we arrived at the city of Rochester, where a new set of plagues of the same class took possession of us, and accompanied us the whole way to Niagara.'³⁷ Herman Melville made literary use of the familiar image of the book-peddler and his ubiquitous handbills. In *The Confidence-Man*, Melville describes an old poet who distributed copies of an ode among steamboat passengers: 'On the floor are many copies, looking as if fluttered down from a balloon. The way they came there was this: A somewhat elderly person, in the quaker dress, had quietly passed through the cabin, and, much in the manner of those railway book-peddlers who precede their proffers of sale by a distribution of puffs, direct or indirect, of the volumes to follow, had, without speaking, handed about the odes, which, for the most part, after a cursory glance, had been disrespectfully tossed aside, as no doubt, the moonstruck production of some wandering rhapsodist.'³⁸ Thornbury similarly explained

36. William Chambers, *Things as They Are in America* (1854; reprint, New York: Negro Universities Press, 1968), 161.

37. Charles Mackay, *Life and Liberty in America: Or, Sketches of a Tour in the United States and Canada in 1857-8* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1859), 50.

38. Herman Melville, *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade*, ed. Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University Press and The Newberry Library, 1984), 52-53.

that multiple handbills advertising works from different publishers were distributed to rail travellers whether they wanted them or not: 'Presently, you fall asleep, and awake covered with a heavy snow of handbills about Harper's excellent reprints, and Peterson's vulgar and unscrupulous robberies from English authors.'³⁹

This new method of selling books via handbills effectively gave the traveller more time to decide what to read. Before the handbill was used, newsboys would simply walk through each railway car with a basket full of magazines or novels, and readers would have to decide immediately what to purchase. Unlike buying confectionery, deciding what reading material to purchase was difficult to do hastily. If the lemon drop a traveller bought was a little too sour, it might be disappointing, but both the candy and the disappointment would quickly disappear. A novel, on the other hand, might, and ideally would, take the whole day to finish. Disappointment with a chosen book, therefore, could linger throughout the day and into the next, depending on the length of the book and the length of the journey. Reluctant to take a chance on another piece of literature, thrifty American travellers may have continued reading the disappointing volume simply to 'get their money's worth.' Circulars or handbills, however, gave travellers more time to decide which book to buy and thus shifted the responsibility of choice from the seller to the buyer. A purchased novel still might be disappointing, but at least the circulars gave travellers time to make a considered and informed choice about what to read.

While these new marketing techniques allowed passengers more time to decide among the different titles the newsboy sold, choice was still limited. Inside the bookstore, the traditional outlet for reading material, readers could spend as much time as they wanted lingering over a wide variety of titles. Obviously the newsboys couldn't carry such variety. Buying a book on board a train, the reader could only choose from the most popular and recently

39. Thornbury, 'American Sleeping Cars,' 329.

printed works. A bookstore allowed readers to experiment, to wander from the most highly visible shelves to the hidden shelves in back to choose a less popular book. Both the railway bookstalls and the on-board newsboys helped create a market that encouraged large sales of a limited number of titles rather than smaller sales of a larger number of titles.

Anthony Trollope described a different process of selling books on board American passenger trains which virtually eliminated the reader's opportunity to choose from different possible works:

A young man enters during the journey,—for the trade is carried out while the cars are travelling, as is also a very brisk trade in lollipops, sugar-candy, apples, and ham sandwiches,—the young tradesman enters the car firstly with a pile of magazines or of novels bound like magazines. These are chiefly the 'Atlantic,' published at Boston, 'Harper's Magazine,' published at New York, and a cheap series of novels published at Philadelphia [i.e., by T. B. Peterson]. As he walks along he flings one at every passenger. An Englishman, when he is first introduced to this manner of trade, becomes much astonished. He is probably reading, and on a sudden he finds a fat, fluffy magazine, very unattractive in its exterior, dropped on to the page he is perusing. I thought at first that it was a present from some crazed philanthropist, who was thus endeavouring to disseminate literature. But I was soon undeceived. The bookseller, having gone down the whole car and the next, returned, and beginning again where he had begun before, picked up either his magazine or else the price of it. Then, in some half-hour, he came again, with an armful or basket of books, and distributed them in the same way. They were generally novels, but not always. I do not think that any endeavour is made to assimilate the book to the expected customer. The object is to bring the book and the man together, and in this way a very large sale is effected. The same thing is done with illustrated newspapers. . . . I do not doubt that I had fully fifteen copies of the 'Silver Cord,' thrown at my head in different railway cars on the continent of America.⁴⁰

Trollope's lengthy anecdote provides a fascinating glimpse into the effects which these newsboys had on the reading process of train travellers. Trollope portrayed himself at the moment a skill-

40. Trollope, *North America*, 273-74.

fully-tossed magazine lands atop the volume he is already reading. The newsboy, it seems, did not exclude as a potential customer someone engaged in the process of reading. With such forceful sales tactics, the newsboy deliberately attempted to supplant a passenger's previously chosen reading material in favor of an alternative book or magazine. While Trollope's description and tone reveal his disgruntlement with such pushy sales tactics, he admitted that they were often effective. Unlike handbill distribution, the process Trollope described prevented readers from choosing which book to read, but it did allow time enough for the potential buyer to decide whether to purchase one. The passenger might have fifteen minutes to half an hour to begin reading a pamphlet novel and decide if it was worth buying. Trollope's multiple experiences with Shirley Brooks's *The Silver Cord*, a British work published in the United States in an inexpensive double-column format by the Harpers, further emphasizes that the on-board newsboys' trade promoted large sales of a limited number of titles.

British magazine correspondent Edward Dicey similarly described a marketing technique of the on-board newsboys during an 1862 journey:

It is an odd trait, by the way, of the national character, that if the sale of the newsboy's wares is flat, he will come and lay down a copy of his magazines or illustrated papers alongside of every passenger in the car, and leave it with him for half an hour or more. You may read it meanwhile, and if you return it to the boy on his coming round again he will thank you all the same. Most of the passengers, of course, return their copies, but, every now and then, someone, who had no intention of purchasing beforehand, becomes interested in a story he has taken up, and buys the book or paper. There is nothing, absolutely nothing, to hinder anyone from appropriating the work without paying for it. But in this, as in other matters, it is the custom to repose great confidence on the average honesty of the public, and that confidence is rarely found to have been misplaced.⁴¹

41. Edward Dicey, *Spectator of America*, ed. Herbert Mitgang (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1971), 38.

Dacey's newsboys are more courteous than Trollope's, but the key difference between the two accounts is that Trollope's newsboys begin their sales tactics by providing passengers with reading material whereas Dacey's newsboys only resort to the tactic when regular sales are slow.

The on-board newsboy continued to practice his trade through the nineteenth century. One traveller from the 1880s, for example, described the boys in much the same way as the rail travellers of the 1840s and 1850s had, telling how 'boys ply a brisk trade in papers, books, figs, and candies.'⁴² Ultimately, however, the newsboys, too, came under the control of the Union News. The boys, like the newsstands, were cleaned up and regularized. A 1930 volume promoting the American News Company explained, 'Thousands of magazines are sold every day by "news butchers," a nation-wide staff of uniformed newsboys maintained on many local and long distance trains by The Union News Company.'⁴³

The easy availability of books in the railway station and on board the passenger train obviated the need for travellers to pack books before travelling and eliminated the problems associated with bringing books from home. Books were expensive, and travellers who could afford their own may have been reluctant to bring valuable books from home and subject them to the abuses of travel. Less affluent American readers could afford few books of their own, so they relied on the circulating libraries to satisfy their reading needs. Borrowed books, however, put constraints on readers. They had to read the book within a certain period of time, return it to the same place they borrowed it from, and treat the volume with care while it was in their possession because the circulating libraries held patrons liable for any damages.⁴⁴ Cheap literature removed such constraints. Readers no longer had to read a book within a certain time (though the pamphlet format

42. Emily Faithfull, *Three Visits to America* (New York: Fowler and Wells, 1884), 49.

43. *Covering a Continent*, 49.

44. For the best treatment of the circulating library, see David Kaser, *A Book for a Sixpence: The Circulating Library in America* (Pittsburgh: Beta Phi Mu, 1980).

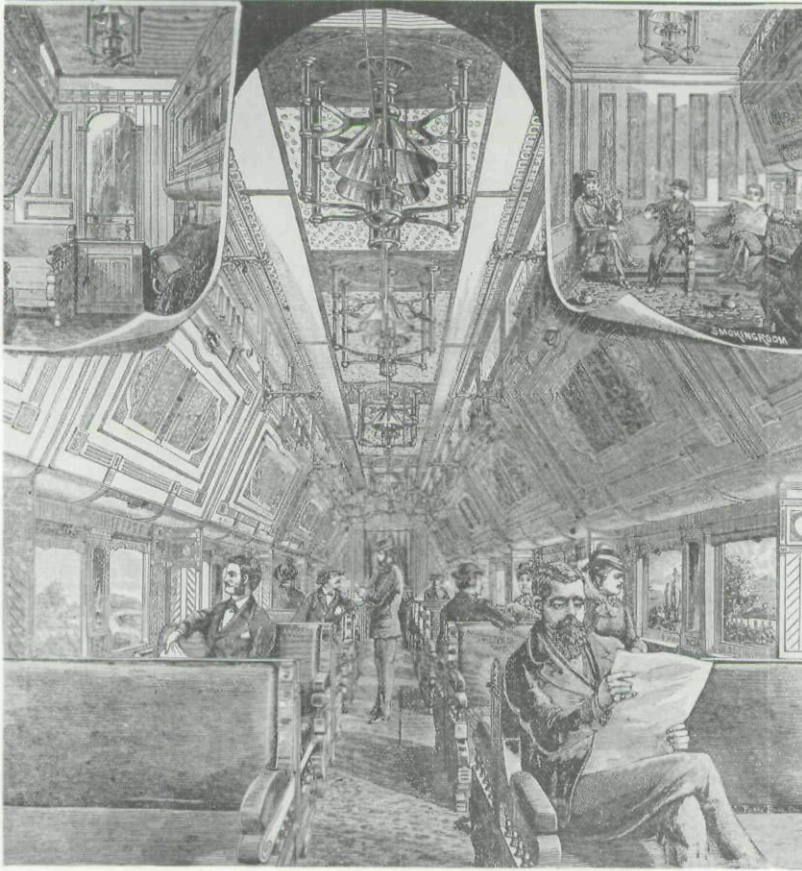


Fig. 2. The passengers in Northern Pacific's elegantly appointed Pullman cars and sleepers were also shown as newspaper readers in an illustrated brochure advertising 'the new route across the continent' linking St. Paul, Minnesota, with Washington, California, and British Columbia. Northern Pacific Railroad, *Short Line to the Pacific Coast*, No. 20 (Chicago: Rand McNally & Co., printers, March 1884). American Antiquarian Society.

generally accelerated rather than slowed the reading process). Since readers owned the pamphlet novels, they did not have to worry about returning them.

The pamphlet novel devalued the book as a material object. No longer was the book—at least in the form of the pamphlet

novel—something to cherish after reading but rather something to discard, use as scrap paper, give away, or trade for another. The essential disposability of pamphlet novels also helped make them ideal for railway reading. During the course of a trip, more valuable books quickly became excess baggage because travellers had to save and carry them as they continued their journey even after they had finished reading them. A pamphlet novel, on the other hand, could be discarded after it was finished. When readers finished cheap pamphlet novels, they gave them to other travellers or left them behind on their seats. Subsequent travellers could simply take the discarded books for themselves, read them, and, in turn, leave the disposable volume behind.

Besides their value, books from home presented other problems for the travelling reader. They were bulky and took up crucial luggage space which might more usefully be devoted to other essentials such as extra clothing. Pamphlet novels freed up luggage space, but they also made packing for a journey more convenient in another way. Knowing they could buy books at a railway bookstall or on the train, travellers no longer needed to spend time considering what books to bring with them. Book-toting travellers might have held lofty ideas about the great books they would read on their journey and, therefore, might have devoted considerable time deciding which books to take with them. Once on board among crowd, noise, and soot, the inspired choice might have seemed more than a little out of place, and the traveller might have been in the mood for something completely different. The on-board newsboy provided reading to suit the whim of the moment.

Not only did the ready availability of pamphlet novels affect the traveller's reading, but railway travel itself influenced the reading experience. Formerly, the closeness of the space within a horse-drawn coach, the difficulty of reading inside the dark, crowded interior, and the overall length of a coach journey forced passengers

to get to know one another during a trip, but trains permitted travellers more personal space. In a fanciful essay comparing stagecoach travel and train travel, C. J. Peterson suggested that the greater personal space was both advantageous and disadvantageous as it indiscriminately eliminated both wanted and unwanted experiences which the stagecoach's constricted interior had made possible. No longer did the traveller have to be 'jammed up betwixt two fat matrons,' to have a squalling baby at his elbow, or to have corpulent gentlemen tread on his toes, but no longer did he have the opportunity to 'sit on the back seat betwixt two pretty girls' who might fall asleep on his shoulder with their warm breath playing across his cheek.⁴⁵ Another American traveller, identifying the collateral benefits of rail travel compared to the stagecoach, found that the 'easy and rapid movement' of the rail car made it possible to read while travelling.⁴⁶

The upholstered benches on either side of the aisle were designed to accommodate two people apiece, but when a train was not filled to capacity, each traveller would take his or her own bench. Though the backs of the benches could be repositioned in opposite directions to allow passengers in one bench to face the passengers seated behind them, solo travellers seldom used the feature. Groups of people travelling together such as families or friends would switch the seatback positions, but strangers generally would not switch the position of the seatback to face another traveller. Most left the seats facing the same direction.

An illustration of an American train interior from the mid-nineteenth century that appeared in the *Illustrated London News* shows most passengers occupying their own benches and facing the same direction. The young woman at the forefront of the picture sits facing the opposite direction from many of the other passengers, but apparently she has not changed the position of the seatback for social reasons. She too sits alone with her satchel

45. C. J. Peterson, 'A Railroad Dream,' *Ladies National Magazine* 12 (Nov. 1847): 158-59.

46. 'Advantages of Railroads,' *Niles' National Register* 74 (Nov. 8, 1848): 298.



Fig. 3. 'Interior of an American Railway Car,' *Illustrated London News* 20 (April 10, 1852): 285. Courtesy, Boston Athenæum.

placed on the bench next to her as if to prevent another traveller from taking the empty seat. Her planned activity for the journey is obvious. The book she holds appears prominently in the illustration. A gentleman traveller sitting across the aisle has maximized his own personal space by flipping one leg over the nearest seatback.⁴⁷ The illustration provides visual evidence to confirm the remarks of English traveller Alfred Bunn: 'It is utterly impossible to mistake an American for any one else, *en route*—he has either his feet upon the seat . . . next to him, which he turns over for the purpose; or if it be occupied he sits with his knees "let in" to the back of it; he either sucks a piece of sweetmeat, bites a piece of wood, or chews a bit of tobacco, keeps on continually spitting, and invariably reads a newspaper.'⁴⁸ Bunn's typical American does reposition the seatback, but only to maximize his personal space,

47. 'Travelling in the United States,' *Illustrated London News* 20 (April 10, 1852): 284–86. The illustration is reprinted in White, *The American Railroad Passenger Car*.

48. Bunn, *Old England and New England*, 146n.

not to accommodate other travellers. J. Milton Mackie, describing his experience on a Georgia railway, similarly detailed how American travellers positioned themselves on board the train:

Fortunately, the small number of passengers in the train gave to the gentlemen the opportunity—so gladly improved in this part of the country—of sitting on their backs; for travellers here seem naturally to fall into sprawling attitudes. Before me sat, or rather lay, quite regardless of the presence of ladies, a gent in black broadcloth, with both feet projecting out of the window, his arms thrown back over his head, and his five-dollar beaver resting on his stomach. At my side lay another, with legs crossed, one foot resting on the seat before him, and the other raised halfway to the carriage roof. A tall Kentuckian managed actually to extend himself over three seats; his head resting on one, his back partly on the next, and partly on his portmanteau, which had been so arranged as to bridge the interval; while his legs, extending through the open back of the second seat, were long enough to bring his feet comfortably upon the third.⁴⁹

Mackie's story may be apocryphal—the image of the tall Kentuckian had already become a stereotype—but the implications of the story remain. Mackie's Kentuckian, like Bunn's American, took advantage of the movable seatback to enhance his comfort and extend his personal space.

While the *Illustrated London News* sketch as well as Bunn's and Mackie's accounts are caricatures, all three nevertheless capture the behavior of American rail passengers. All portray train travellers taking advantage of the opportunities for increased personal space and using the time to read or to snooze. These humorous depictions of mid-nineteenth-century American rail travel illustrate a serious point. By making reading easy and convenient, trains helped depersonalize travel. Once established, these railway reading habits became self-reinforcing. In other words, once a passenger had carved out his or her personal space within the train interior and had begun reading, he or she nonverbally expressed the message, 'I'm reading; don't bother me.' It became a

49. J. Milton Mackie, *From Cape Cod to Dixie and the Tropics* (New York: G. P. Putnam, 1864), 125–26.

point of courtesy not to disturb a person who had managed to establish their personal space within the public space of a train interior.

The speed of rail travel also helped make travelling more impersonal. People spent much less time with one another on the train than they formerly had in a horse-drawn coach. Rail travel was at least three times faster than stagecoach travel. Two passengers sitting near each other likely boarded the train at different stops, and, just as likely, left the train at different places.⁵⁰ The different stops not only lessened the travelling time passengers spent together but also minimized their contact in another way. Shared starting and stopping points strengthened the shared experience between two travellers and provided them with an easy, natural topic for conversation. With fewer shared experiences, initiating conversation became more difficult. Furthermore, the sheer noise of the locomotive often made polite conversation impossible. Reading became a more natural way to beguile the time than conversation.

The opportunity to carve out a personal space from a larger public space while travelling away from home provided a unique reading opportunity. The easy availability of cheap, popular literature combined with the increasing depersonalization of travel allowed people to read works while travelling alone which they might not ordinarily read at home. A British traveller noted that 'persons who apparently would be ashamed to be found reading certain works at home have asked for publications of the worst character at the railway book stall.'⁵¹ Railway travel allowed people the opportunity to experiment with their reading.

Such an opportunity may help explain why Putnam's 'Railway Classics' failed and why travellers often preferred the newsboy's cheap novels over books they brought from home. Such 'choice' literature was unsuited to railway reading. An advertisement for

50. Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey: Trains and Travel in the 19th Century*, trans. Anselm Hollo (New York: Urizen Books, 1979), 71, quotes a contemporary French account that identifies a similar phenomenon occurring on European passenger trains.

51. 'The Literature of the Rail,' *Times* [London], Aug. 9, 1851, 7.

one volume in the 'Putnam's Railway Classics' puffed the work with a quotation from the expatriate journal, the *New York Albion*: 'It is just the thing to put into the pocket when going on a journey; but it is more than that—it is a book to read at one's leisure in a winter's evening, or the long, bright, lazy afternoons of summer.'⁵² Suggesting such multiple contexts for reading, the *Albion* shows that the work was less suited for the specific context of railway reading. The *Albion* review, though complimentary, suggests the essential problem with Putnam's 'choice' works. Quite simply, people did not want to read the same books while travelling that they read at home on a winter's evening. The train allowed people to take chances with their reading which they would not have taken at home among friends and family. While making travel to distant places more convenient, trains also allowed travellers to achieve an intellectual and cultural distance from their communities. The latest romance or sensational novel which someone had secretly wanted to read but had avoided at home could be read comfortably among strangers on a train.

The pamphlet novel changed the idea of the book. Formerly, the book was a fairly expensive item that required a certain amount of skill and craftsmanship to produce and which people displayed prominently in their homes. With the pamphlet novel, features such as gilt and tooled bindings and generous leading were irrelevant. Cheapness and easy availability became more important. The pamphlet novel made the book less a material object and more a vehicle for a work's text. Well-printed and well-bound books continued to be produced through the nineteenth century, but the material quality of a fine volume was the *only* thing which separated it from the pamphlet novel, for both could contain the same text.

The easy availability of these cheap books in railway stations and on board trains meant that people could obtain and carry

52. Advertisement, *American Literary Gazette and Publisher's Circular* 9 (May 15, 1867): 57.

books wherever they went. No longer were people's books just a part of their home furnishings. Books joined people's personal furniture, those items they carried on their person—pocket watch, wallet, handkerchief. To be sure, people carried books with them before pamphlet novels, but early portable books were usually limited to either almanacs or, among the devout (or the superstitious), small Bibles, psalters, or other devotional works. As the pocket Bible placed its owner among the devout, a pocket novel reminded its owner of his or her place within the literate culture.

Expanding the kinds of books people carried with them, the cheap, steam-produced book reinforced their reading habits. People who carried books, after all, were likely to read them. Reading habits first established on the train during the nineteenth century continued into the twentieth. Though airplane travel largely has replaced train travel, airline reading differs little from railway reading, and, like the railway station bookstalls, airport newsstands also stock cheap novels. Alas, one thing has changed. The on-board newsboy is no more.

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