

The Empire Builder oo

By

Edward Sheehy

WHY WE LIKE IT: *A seat on Amtrak becomes more than a cross country trek for this passenger/author as he deftly explores the character and legend of the man behind the nickname.*

We not only like the idea but also the way Sheehy brings to life the fascinating minutiae he encounters along the way and the vividness character sketches of those he meets on his journey—one that is proceeding forward and the other back into the past. Dialogue is believable, prose lazily crisp. All Aboard!

Empire Builder

The *Empire Builder* is delayed an hour arriving from Chicago. Computer problems said a woman in the waiting room who received a text from her boyfriend on the train. Computer problems, I thought. Some empire.

Empire Builder of course was the magnificent moniker bestowed upon James Jerome Hill (JJ to friends). A pint-sized, barrel-chested dynamo who worked his way up from a shipping clerk along the St. Paul docks to buying a railroad and dynamiting a cheaper and faster route over the Rocky Mountains, finally reaching Seattle in 1893 *Anno Domini* (in the year of the Lord) from whence all time before and after began. A transcontinental route to spread the gilded gospel of Christianity and Commerce—with a capital C!

A large oil painting of Hill occupies a wall in St. Paul's Union Depot. I gaze at the three-quarter profile of the bearded empire builder in a top hat and overcoat, hand resting on a cane, and wonder what the businessman sees, staring off into an unseen but limitless horizon. I get as comfortable as I can on the hard wooden bench, and as fatigue takes hold, my head falls to my chest...

And lo and behold! Here comes JJ now, swaggering down Summit Avenue. A man on a mission. Too late, he's already seen me. Step closer my good man, don't be shy. Why, do you know that it is through Commerce that civilization and Christianity have spread to the remotest parts of the world. Indeed, it was the railway that made it all possible. Next to the Christian religion and public schools, the railway has been the largest single contributing factor to the welfare and happiness of the people. And you want to be part of that success, don't you? Of course, you do. Yes sir, commercial expansion is the lifeblood of these divinely blessed United States of America.

And it wasn't just about moving passengers from point A to point B. The passenger train is like the male teat, Hill says, neither useful nor ornamental. No sir. The real money is in moving freight, and here Hill waves a dollar bill under my nose then stuffs it in my shirt pocket. And that's not all. Hill boasts that he helped settle the country along his tracks by building towns that flourished with businesses that generated goods that needed the railroad to deliver those goods to markets across the burgeoning nation. A perpetual motion money-making machine moving the country ever forward. Growth, expansion, and the triumph of capital. The truest index of progress, By George! And we must do what we must do by whatever means necessary. Seize the homelands of indigenous nations. Exterminate the Indian menace and the risk to investors. Drive the Golden Spike through the hearts of the savages: the Cheyenne, the Lakota,

the Arapaho, and the Pawnee. Give me snuff, whiskey, and Swedes, and I will build a railroad to hell, Hill bellows, as he flicks tribal blood off his lapel like cottonwood fluff, then turns, and continues on his way.

Yes sir, JJ Hill...

Patriot

Pathfinder

Pioneer

Empire Builder!

All Aboard!

#

Behold, the *Empire Builder*, Amtrak train #11 departs St. Paul blazing westward toward a golden Providence shining a benevolence on all who answer her call. We shoot buffaloes by the hundreds from passenger windows. The rotting stench rises to high high heaven as the iron horse races across the tallgrass prairie leaving behind a rich manure of lies and betrayal. We retire to the club car for whiskey and cigars. I raise my glass to Manifest Destiny and as I do the conductor interrupts my reverie, Excuse me sir, but is your seat ok?

My seat? Come to think of it, it did feel a little damp. The conductor explains that a little girl had just wet the seat and offers to relocate my seatmate and me. My seatmate's seat was dry, so she did not need to relocate but did anyway. So I slid over to her dry seat with more room to spread out. Crisis averted. Empire dreams resume with intermediate stops in:

Staples, MN

Detroit Lakes, MN

Fargo, ND

Grand Forks, ND

Devils Lake, ND

Rugby, ND

Minot, ND

Stanley, ND

Williston, ND

Wolf Point, MT

Glasgow, MT

Malta, MT

Havre, MT

Shelby, MT

Cut Bank, MT

Browning, MT

East Glacier Park. MT

Essex, MT

West Glacier, MT

Whitefish, MT

Libby, MT

Sandpoint, ID

Spokane, WA

Ephrata, WA

Wenatchee, WA

Leavenworth, WA

Everett, WA

Edmonds, WA

Seattle, WA

End of the line.

I'm staying at the Hotel Max, an ultra-hip spot for techie millennials near Pike Place Market, light rail, and several dispensaries—all critical necessities for a base camp (minus the headlamp). They allow me to register as long as I promise to not hang out in the lobby.

Stopped by Metsker Maps to get the lay of the land and am confronted by geothermal heat maps devouring the earth. So if contemplating a move anytime over say the next ten, twenty, or fifty years, my advice: avoid the hot zones they will depreciate quickly and permanently with devastating effects sending caravans of seekers, upriver, closer to the headwaters, to settle along the banks in tiny homes with High-Def and 5G.

I'm in search of provisions for the next leg of my journey. Across the street from the ferry terminal, a walkway of modern urban design rises above a narrow street lined with homeless encampments where you can toss coins down onto the tarps and make a wish.

At the corner of Denny and Westlake, the Whole Foods Market is an island of serenity and fresh peaches. A hate-free zone. No racism is allowed behind the yellow line. Cross that line and you're on your own. No false gods allowed either, except for the one on the greenback that JJ stuffed in my shirt, the one with the eyeball floating over a pyramid. What deity is that thing supposed to be and why don't I already know the answer to the most fundamental of all life's questions.

For answers, I turn to the Buddad at the bar, nursing a gin and tonic. The Buddad blows a smoke ring in my face and sez to me in a voice that rings tired and raw from too many unfiltered Camels: the what and why come together metaphorically speaking as a duality to form one unified deity.

Sounds heavy, man, I say, but what exactly does it mean?

Look closer, my pathetically ignorant friend, above the pyramid, read it.

I study the greenback and read aloud: *Annuit Coeptis*

Now the Buddad smiles and remembers like it was yesterday: Ah yes, Virgil. Twenty-nine years before Jay Cee came on the scene. Latin epic poem. Hero's journey. Read Joseph Campbell. The line is from a prayer by Ascanius, just before he slays an enemy warrior, he cries: *Jupiter Almighty, favor my bold undertakings.* The Buddad holds up his empty glass to the bartender.

Yeah, I say, but I still don't get it.

The Buddad exhales a weary sigh. Try and keep up. Fast forward eighteen centuries. A learned gentleman in a very itchy wig had a brilliant inspiration. You see, he was privileged to be taught Latin and Greek in a fine all-boys boarding school. He remembers the line from *The Aeneid* and slaps it on the back of the American Federal Reserve Note (dropping *Jupiter Almighty*--too pagan). He briefly considered adding a cross instead of a pyramid, but that was too obvious and over the line. So they went with the floating eyeball thing. The Eye of Providence to the uninitiated, over the unfinished pyramid—a symbol of strength and duration. A harmonic convergence of righteousness of cause, the defeat of all enemies, and a triumphant return from battle. What else would help you understand it? The Buddad's lips curl in a sneer: A movie starring Captain America?

I give nothing back but a blank stare.

The Buddad looks at me as if I am an idiot. For God's sake, man! It's a direct philosophical link to the founding myth of the Roman Empire. We bring down the sword on the neck of our enemy and cry: *Providence favors our undertaking*. Now do you fucking get it?

I shrink back on my bar stool. Maybe I am an idiot. Maybe I was absent from school on the day when the ultimate truth was revealed. *Providence favors our undertaking: Exterminate the Indian Menace*. Got it.

I step away to make a not so graceful exit when the Buddad stubs out his cigarette and sez: But wait, there's more! Check the scroll underneath the pyramid.

Without my glasses, I squint and read: *Novus Ordo Seclorum*

Virgil again, sez the Buddad. Eclogue 4, in which a small boy is believed to be the savior, and one day when he is of age he will become divine and rule the world. Sound familiar?

I'm not sure what to say, afraid to show off more of my stupidity.

The Buddad screams. Heads turn to see what the commotion is all about. It's the origin myth, you simpleton! Virgil had it first long before the apostles ripped him off. *The ages' mighty march begins anew*. A Sunday hymnal pleaser for sure. Open your wallet, young man. The collection plate is coming 'round.

Lesson over, the Buddad throws back his drink and stumbles out of the bar, leaving me with the check. The sucker always pays in the end.

On my return trip, the landscape rushes by like a movie shown in reverse. We're rolling now, somewhere between Cutbank and Havre, picking up speed along a straight track cutting through the prairie of north-central Montana where Lewis and Clark once trekked. The *Empire Builder* roars through nameless towns that vanish as quickly as camp smoke in the wind, past yards of discarded dreams and boarded up shops clinging to the land like glacial till from a receding lover. Roots and vines climb rusted junk to flower along trash-strewn tracks. Eventide paints the underbelly of the clouds in pastels of pink and purple like soft cotton flannel. A discordant juxtaposition of majesty and misery. The American Era yet unfurls in perpetual prosperous perpetuity, fulfilling JJ Hill's prophesy, as the *Empire Builder* plunges headlong into a tunnel painted onto the side of a mountain.

End

AUTHOR'S NOTE: When I had the opportunity last summer to ride Amtrak's *Empire Builder* to Seattle, I just had to know more about the man who earned that nickname and use that as inspiration for my trip journal. The history of railroad building across the continent is replete

with tales of incredible engineering feats, greed and corruption and atrocities against indigenous people. My musings and fantastical conversations reveal the depths of my ignorance.

AUTHOR BIO: Short stories by Edward Sheehy have appeared in the Boston Literary Magazine, The Write Launch, and Lake Street Stories (Flexible Press). A novel, *Cade's Rebellion*, was published in 2018 (Dog Ear Publishing). A selection of his poetry was featured in Jerry Jazz Musician magazine celebrating the music of Miles Davis. He was baptized in the Delaware River before the eyes of the Lord and several catfish. He lives in Minneapolis.