

***Metropolitan Railways: Rapid Transit in America.* By William D. Middleton. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003. 275 p. ISBN 0-253-34179-5 US\$59.95)**

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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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Metropolitan Railways: Rapid Transit in America. By William D. Middleton. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003. 275 p. ISBN 0-253-34179-5 US\$59.95)

Without question, William D. Middleton is a recognized authority in the field of urban mass transit. A self-described transportation historian and journalist, Middleton has written some eighteen books on this topic since the early 1960s, most of which have been aimed at what might best be described as the transit enthusiast market. Within that niche, his books have been well received and are highly regarded. My own interest in this area was sparked by a combination of my experiences with public transit in Toronto in its myriad forms (streetcars, subways, trolley buses, and buses) and a careful reading of Middleton's *The Interurban Era* during my teen years.¹

Metropolitan Railways is a richly illustrated volume, containing 368 black and white photos and diagrams, and 41 maps. Organized chronologically into eight chapters, it provides a useful survey of the evolution and spread of urban mass transit in North America from the nineteenth century to the present day. Much of the material, however, has been covered, often with greater thoroughness, elsewhere. This is particularly true of the evolution of the extensive systems in New York, Boston, and Philadelphia.² Separate appendices deal with the technology of rail transit and the current status of metro (subway) and light rail systems in urban North America. Readers of *Scientia Canadensis* should find the former appendix of particular interest, for it is quite well organized, illustrated, and presented. The latter appendix, while not perfect, provides a map and discussion of the extent of the network, current ridership levels, and likely expansion scenarios for each of 40 North American cities. Such information would be useful for undergraduate students involved in courses with some emphasis on urban transportation, or even urban studies.

Quite a few things concern me about this book, most of which could be excused had it been published by a non-academic press. First, the very title, *Metropolitan Railways*, is quite troubling, given the content of the book. In his Preface, Middleton defines this concept as "the all embracing term I have chosen to represent the rapid transit subways, elevated railways, and light rail lines that now bind so many of our cities together" (p. vii). It is not at all clear why commuter railroads should be excluded from this mix, especially when the word "metropolitan" is employed. Surely systems such as GO Transit in the Toronto region help to bind that growing urban area together, and should have been included in any discussion of "metropolitan railways."

The level of research upon which *Metropolitan Railways* is based also should trouble academic readers. There is a rich and growing academic literature on urban mass transit, virtually all of which escapes Middleton's bibliography. His sources lean heavily towards enthusiast and industry publications—neither of which is known for a critical perspective, though he by no means includes all possible examples of important works from these realms. The text contains just eight footnotes, all of which provide elaboration on material presented in the text. As a result, a reader can never be entirely sure of either the accuracy or the source of the author's arguments; and the text is not without mistakes. In this regard, his comments about Toronto's transit system are instructive. For example, Middleton suggests that "the Toronto transit system had been publicly owned and operated ever since 1920" (p. 95). In fact, the Toronto Transit Commission came in to being on 1 September 1921; it was the vote in favour of a public takeover that took place on 1 January 1920. In other places, Middleton offers enticing statistics and assessments that may or may not be true: "total development between downtown Toronto and the [Yonge] subway's Eglinton terminal reached some \$10 billion, and property values in the corridor increased by as much as ten times" (p. 207), and "Toronto's new Harbourfront [light] rail line similarly helped the city convert its lakefront into a major residential and entertainment district" (p. 208). No sources are cited in support of these statements, and all three of the items listed under the "Toronto" section of the bibliography were published before the Harbourfront line had been conceived, let alone opened to transit users. While he mentions the completion of the new Sheppard subway, he makes no acknowledgment of the failure to date of this line to generate anything approaching the predicted development projects. This would not be acceptable in an undergraduate student essay. I am astounded that it would be tolerated by the editors working for the Indiana University Press.

Metropolitan Railways also suffers from some organizational problems. The text is often repetitious, and its flow is badly interrupted by Chapter 7, "Conveyances for the Multitudes: The Cars We Rode," which is placed between chapters on "Light Rail Transit" and "A Metropolitan Railways Renaissance." It repeats much of the material covered in earlier chapters, though with new illustrations. Moreover, a portion of this chapter deals with the locomotives used on early elevated lines, which surely could not be counted among the cars that people rode. While the real strength of the book lies in Middleton's selection and use of illustrations, these are not numbered and there is no composite listing of them, which makes them less useful to readers than they could be. Unlike the text, however, Middleton does give full credit for each of the book's illustrations.

All in all, then, William D. Middleton's new book should be of much more interest to mass transit enthusiasts than to academics. Both audiences, however, will appreciate the illustrations and appendices found in *Metropolitan Railways*. Middleton clearly is a fan of urban mass transit, especially if it is powered by electricity. Over the years, he has developed considerable expertise about this area. Unfortunately, his enthusiasm sometimes clouds his judgment. As a result, all urban mass transit projects are seen by him to be successful, even when ridership figures—as with the systems in Detroit and Miami—state otherwise. Given the problems I have noted, therefore, Middleton's latest book should have been published, but by a non-academic press.

Michael J. Doucet

1. William D. Middleton, *The Interurban Era* (Milwaukee: Kalmbach Publications, 1961).
2. See, for example, Charles W. Cheape, *Moving the Masses: Urban Public Transit in New York, Boston, and Philadelphia, 1880–1912* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980).

Biographical Note: Michael J. Doucet is a Professor of Geography at Ryerson University in Toronto. He has written extensively about a variety of aspects concerning the growth and development of Toronto, including the evolution of its transit system, its changing retail structure, and its demographic structure. His latest project is called "Defining Toronto," which is an attempt to chronicle the various geopolitical and other definitions of the Toronto region over the last fifty years. *Address:* Geography Department, Ryerson University, Toronto (Ontario) M5B 2K3, Canada. *Email:* <mdoucet@ryerson.ca>