

**Bobrick, Benson. *Labyrinths of Iron: A History of the World's Subways*. New York: Newsweek Books, 1982. Pp. 352.  
Illustrations, endnotes, bibliography**

Norman R. Ball

Volume 12, Number 3, February 1984

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1018950ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1018950ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine

ISSN

0703-0428 (print)

1918-5138 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Ball, N. R. (1984). Review of [Bobrick, Benson. *Labyrinths of Iron: A History of the World's Subways*. New York: Newsweek Books, 1982. Pp. 352. Illustrations, endnotes, bibliography]. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 12(3), 85–86. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1018950ar>

younger sons among the propertied classes often fail to appear in their fathers' wills, possibly because earlier provision had been made for them as well. The fact that the wealthiest men in Bury mention the largest number of children may well indicate not that they had more children but only that they were rich enough to divide their legacy, while lesser men could not afford to. In sum, while there are indications that fertility rates dropped, the degree to which they did so is debateable, and the possibility remains that the basis of the population's decrease and long-delayed recovery lay in sustained mortality of the young, the potential parents, through repeated epidemics.

Gottfried has also reconstructed the careers of some of Bury's fifteenth century elite. Their successful, prosperous lives and their smooth-running corporate and fraternal networks are in sharp contrast to the narrative of violent fourteenth century revolts against the Abbey with which Gottfried concludes. It would have been well to have known of these tremendous hatreds somewhat earlier on in the book, for surely those comfortable merchants and rentier monks we have encountered did not forget them. And what, if any, were the wider connections and shared interests that enabled the rebels to smuggle a kidnapped abbot to Brabant and conceal him there for months? *There* is evidence indeed for the ties to London and the Low Countries which Gottfried has noted in the cloth trade. It would seem that Bury politics were significant enough for these commercial associates to involve themselves in considerable risk.

Robert Gottfried has provided a comprehensive and highly readable picture of a late medieval English town thriving when most others were faltering, and has used an effective mixture of techniques to explain why it was Bury which succeeded. In doing so he has written a book valuable for the insights it provides into some of the major questions of economic and civic life of the period.

Rhoda L. Friedrichs  
Department of History  
University of British Columbia

---

Bobrick, Benson. *Labyrinths of Iron: A History of the World's Subways*. New York: Newsweek Books, 1982. Pp. 352. Illustrations, endnotes, bibliography.

Benson Bobrick was born and educated in New York City and so it is not surprising that he should regard subways as both important and fascinating. Bobrick saw

the remarkable fact that a large and increasing proportion of the world's population had come to travel every day in tunnels and underground. The degree to which this

development was regarded as normal I found very surprising. Quite simply, I wanted to know how it had all come about (p. 9).

The result is an admirable introduction to the history of tunnelling and subways which combines the history of ideas, engineering and urban studies.

The obvious fact that a subway is underground has two very important consequences. First, it is linked to the older and much wider stories of tunnelling and a variety of underground activities including transportation and mining. Associated with these are a number of ideas, images, stereotypes, attitudes and fears which re-emerged and had to be dealt with before the modern subway could be accepted. The second important feature of a subway is that its construction and operation present very real conceptual, construction and operating problems not shared by surface transportation systems.

*Labyrinths of Iron* begins with the widespread pre-nineteenth century tunnelling which was associated primarily with mining and to a lesser extent transportation and military operations. It was also a very crudely developed empirical pursuit often characterized by one or more of prison labour, inhumane working conditions, simple hand tools and explosives (after 1613), danger and high rates of death or debilitating injury. The images of the underground were uninviting or worse and any subway proposal and system would have to cope with both public fears and technical problems.

The prodigious growth of nineteenth century commercial and industrial centres created hitherto unknown concentrations of population, extreme overcrowding and environmental degradation, as well as varying degrees of dysfunction in what passed for urban transportation. The nineteenth century was also a glorious era of inspired engineering. Marc Isambard Brunel, one of the most brilliant engineers of the day, turned to the problems of boring in soft ground which, unlike hard rock, is too weak to support itself when tunnelled. The combination of a great deal of work, determination and Brunel's invention of the tunnelling shield made the opening of the Thames Tunnel possible in 1843. It had taken 18 years and only went 1,200 feet but it was the first successful subaqueous tunnel and it led the way for many others. Magnificent and much praised achievement that it was, the Thames Tunnel also had its critics and detractors and Bobrick successfully presents a cross section of opinion.

One of the important results of the Thames Tunnel was that "it introduced tunnels — particularly transportation tunnels — into the urban environment as a solution to traffic congestion" (p. 87). The remainder of the book gives a fascinating and detailed account of how major cities turned to

subterranean travel as a means of coping with urban traffic's increasing congestion. London led the way followed by Paris and New York. In each case, Bobrick has assembled an enjoyable collage of the political, social, financial and technical components which reveal the subway as one but not necessarily the only and obvious solution to overburdened transportation facilities. In addition he has shown how chockingly inadequate the early, euphemistically labelled, ventilation systems were and why subways were not as popular or as healthy as subways now found throughout the world.

The Moscow Metro, opened in 1935, is the most modern of the subways given detailed treatment (pp. 271–282). It is a chilling chapter quite unlike the others. The Moscow Metro “service is exceptionally humane: fast, comfortable, relatively quiet, glamorous, and reliable” (p. 281). It was built to impress the world as well as move people. “In the stations’ spacious vestibules and along their lofty vaulted halls, lights flashed and coruscated from carved crystal chandeliers of a magnificence not likely to be encountered in the capitalist world outside the mansions of the Vanderbilts and Astors” (p. 280). However, the crass brutality and needless human suffering that are its true foundations are a reminder of the thin veneer of civilization, how little separates modern technology and the millenia-old images and collective memories of the horrors of the underground world.

It is when Bobrick turns to the more recent global proliferation of subways that *Labryinths of Iron* is weakest. It is too large a topic to cover quickly, particularly after he has shown in earlier chapters how complex the path is from idea to opening date. However, this is a minor criticism of a topic which is introduced primarily to lead to the question of whether or not we should be creating an increasingly underground civilization, and whether a society which moves in this direction is healthy.

*Labryinths of Iron* represents an approach to history which the reviewer would like to see more often. The fascination found in the intelligent treatment of components of the now commonplace is shown. The illustrations are carefully chosen and generally informative. Although aimed at a popular audience, it does not eschew endnotes. In brief, it is not the definitive scholarly treatment, but it is a readable and informative account. Bobrick suggests further questions and areas of inquiry at numerous levels and through the endnotes and bibliography he provides guidance to readers who wish to explore the subject further.

I will not loan this book to my friends; it would be too hard to get back.

Norman R. Ball  
Public Archives of Canada