

## COMMENTARY ON GRANT AND KENNEDY

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Both these papers deal with rail enterprises during approximately the same time period. Once past that observation, they seem to have nothing else in common. One is set in the Midwest, the other in New England. One traces the rise of a company which enjoyed prosperity as a shortline and terminal enterprise after repeated failures to transform itself into a larger, more ambitious line; the other reviews the process by which a major system forged a regional transportation monopoly which soon collapsed in ruins.

Even the approaches taken in the two papers differ sharply. Professor Grant presents a descriptive narrative entirely innocent of larger generalizations until the last paragraph while Professor Kennedy introduces a new voice into an old historiographical debate. Each of these approaches in its own way poses difficulties for a critic, especially one who from his own research is not licensed to treat railroads north of the Mason-Dixon line. For all these reasons, it seems advisable to comment separately on the papers.

The difficulty posed the critic by Professor Kennedy's paper is that posed by any historiographical debate: one hesitates even to enter it just as one hesitates to intervene in a neighbor's domestic quarrel. No amount of experience in one's own family disputes qualifies one to adjudicate the particulars of someone else's disagreements. However, since Professor Kennedy promises us "New Light on the New Haven--Boston & Maine Merger Battle," it is reasonable to examine the nature of that fresh light and see what it illuminates.

Even this modest objective proves difficult because Professor Kennedy scatters his beams to a point where they seem to lack clear focus. He begins by characterizing what he calls the two existing versions of the merger--which we may call for convenience the Brandeis and the Abrams versions--as "quite inadequate." In so doing he assumes the burden of demonstrating these inadequacies and offering some new or better perspective in their stead.

The "inadequacies" revolve around two different and distinct points which, though overlapping, must be discussed separately. First, Professor Kennedy argues that neither of the existing accounts properly

recognize the role of William B. Lawrence and instead give Louis Brandeis undue credit for organizing and leading the anti-merger movement. Secondly, Professor Kennedy disagrees with several of the statements and conclusions made by Professor Abrams. He argues that the Brandeis position (much of which was developed by Lawrence) was a sound one and that the phalanx of Massachusetts business and civic leaders supporting the merger was not so solid as Abrams would have us believe. Finally, within this framework Professor Kennedy seeks to re-evaluate the process by which the Boston & Maine succumbed to New Haven control, a process which he thinks Abrams does not account for satisfactorily.

Professor Kennedy's conclusions on all these points may be entirely correct; the problem is that he does not make a very clear-cut case for them in the paper. The principal source for his appraisal of Lawrence's role consists of the Lawrence papers in Baker Library, a collection which does not appear in the Abrams article. The collection includes the Massachusetts legislative committee hearings in which Lawrence had much to say about the merger, its origins and its probable effects.

Now both Mason-Staples and Abrams mention Lawrence as a prominent opponent of the merger, though neither goes much beyond the mere acknowledgement. If Professor Kennedy feels that Lawrence's role has gotten short shrift, he must explain the dimensions of that role in detail. But no clear explanation emerges from the paper. It turns out in fact that Lawrence's role resembles a non-role in two respects: it consisted more of words than of deeds and, being played out in the service of a losing cause, it had relatively little immediate impact or lasting effect.

Professor Kennedy argues that although Lawrence's influence "cannot be measured," it was "very important." But upon whom or what, and how is it to be estimated if it cannot be measured in some manner? Perhaps one method is to survey what exactly Lawrence did. The problem here is that Professor Kennedy says much about what Lawrence said or thought but little about what he actually did. The hero of the piece remains offstage so much as to refute the importance of his role. When so much of the action takes place in the wings, one begins to wonder how crucial it is to the ongoing drama or whether in fact anything is actually going on out there.

As gleaned from Professor Kennedy's account. Lawrence's activities consisted of the following: he inaugurated the anti-merger movement and remained active in it for two years; he asked Brandeis to serve as his personal counsel in the affair and thereby brought him into the matter; he testified and wrote often on the issue; he apparently exchanged ideas with Brandeis and also made his own careful study of the New Haven; he uttered several predictions and warnings which apparently proved accurate; he pleaded for revision of existing legislation governing the Boston & Maine; and he tried unsuccessfully to persuade Charles Mellen to sell him the New Haven's Boston & Maine stock holdings.

If we measure Lawrence by his deeds he comes up short in that he achieved none of his objectives and left no lasting influence on the final outcome of the battle. That leaves only his oral and written arguments

which Professor Kennedy concedes were largely ignored or dismissed. He admits that both legislators and newspapers were captivated by Brandeis and Mellen and completely ignored Lawrence. What then is significant about Lawrence's role, and how does proper recognition of that role alter the existing accounts of the merger struggle?

On this point ambiguities abound because Professor Kennedy never quite brings his differences with the earlier accounts to center stage. Like Lawrence and his role they seem to hover in shadows on the periphery, obviously tangible but maddeningly elusive. It is obvious, for example, that Professor Kennedy takes issue with the Abrams account on several points. Instead of engaging Abrams directly, however, he relegates this debate to the footnotes. Even there the differences do not emerge as sharply as one would wish.

In failing either to make a convincing case for the importance of Lawrence's role or to develop his objections to Abrams' argument, Professor Kennedy falls short of providing a fresh version of the merger controversy. Yet one cannot escape the feeling that material for a new or at least revised interpretation of the Boston & Maine struggle lurks just beneath the surface of Professor Kennedy's paper. It is not potential evidence that is lacking but a clear concept of what to make of it.

One fruitful approach might be Professor Kennedy's own observation in his closing paragraph where he suggests viewing Lawrence's role as illustrative of a broader phenomena whereby "regional financial industrialists" were being crowded by larger, more powerful interests from outside the region. This theme seems to be a most promising and fascinating avenue for the paper to have followed, but unhappily it was a road not taken.

Professor Grant's study too has a tinge of promising something it does not deliver. His preliminary description of the paper spoke of exploring the problems faced by rail promoters in attempting to build a reasonably large road at a late date. Specifically he considered comparing the AC & Y's experience with other roads and examining different aspects of Akron's demands for better rail service.

Of course Professor Grant's preliminary description is not under review here, and he is in no way bound by it. Yet it raises some attractive possibilities which either failed to get into the paper or were not discussed in any context broader than the AC & Y. More's the pity, for the AC & Y's experience seems to lend itself nicely to consideration of some larger topics.

Professor Grant's account of the AC & Y is both interesting and informative. Working from a base of relatively virgin corporate papers, he has fashioned a solid, lucid monographic article which covers well the ground he has chosen to cover. My quarrel is with the ground itself, or rather the modest way he has defined his turf. It is hard to find fault with what is in the paper and always a risky business to complain about

what is not there. But risky or no, the question is worth taking up in this instance because it involves a point too seldom discussed even though it speaks directly to the purpose of these sessions and others like them.

The problem posed the critic by Professor Grant's paper is of course that it leaves him little to say. Once past the general comments made earlier, one is left with an unappealing set of options. The first and most unappetizing is to attempt an internal dissection. Few critics care to pursue Professor Grant or anyone else into his archives to replot the research ground in the hope of unearthing oversights of fact or detail. Nor do minor ambiguities or inconsistencies of statement make satisfying meat for prolonged discussion.

A second option is to ferret out some careless generalization or perhaps a historical model or analogy of dubious parentage. The unfenced realm of ideas always leaves the critic plenty of room to roam, but in this case Professor Grant has been too careful. His concluding remarks are modest enough to fend off all but the most strained controversy. His philosophical guns spiked, the critic may elect to expand the specific case detailed in the paper into some larger generalizations. This is always a tempting course but it harbors two drawbacks: it can quickly become tedious and it invites the critic to write a paper of his own, to assume in effect the role he was not originally called upon to play. However beguiling the critic's speculations, it is hard to persuade anyone that the session requires a third major paper.

One classic device in this vein is for the critic to use the paper as a launching pad for an essay on some topic of his own choosing. There are several variations on this theme. One may retreat to the high ground of first principles by using the original paper as a positive or negative model of what research in the field should be. This technique often includes a pronouncement as to what topics in the field require further study or have already been worked to exhaustion and are better left fallow for a time. In other cases the critic may strike off in some whole new direction, using only the flimsiest of threads to connect his remarks to the original paper.

Beyond these options the critic finds himself strapped to provide a useful service. He might throw caution to the wind and attempt a comedy routine or a song and dance or even bring in a dancing bear if budgetary considerations permit. None of these evasive actions can obscure the fact that it is difficult for the critic to engage a descriptive monograph in a manner that will generate a lively dialogue among either the panel or the audience.

The audience usually shares this frustration because it is to difficult to follow a detailed narrative no matter how well written. One might as well try to give a dramatic reading of a roadmap, in which it is hard to escape the suspicion that by the time you reach the end, the listener has long since lost track of the beginning.

One obvious solution lies in presenting papers which do not tell a story but instead challenge the listener with ideas. Where provocative theses or bold generalizations tend to stab the mind and remain impaled there, even the most interesting narrative rolls by like swiftly moving waters leaving little more than an impression of sound and flow. Long after the session the stab wounds linger vividly for both participants and audience, if only as scar tissue, while the flow of narrative goes unvexed to the sea and is quickly forgotten.

If these remarks seem unfair to Professor Grant they are not meant to be so. To say these things is not to deny the merits of his paper or the worth and validity of such research projects; their value is self-evident. The point is rather to raise the question of what constitutes the most effective type of paper for these sessions.

The question is a perplexing one which, in my experience, hangs obstinately over all our professional meetings. Certainly the time for reconsidering the traditional format is long overdue. It may be that the profession has grown so particularized even within its areas of specialization that mere exchange of information is at best no longer useful and at worst self-defeating. Perhaps what we need most are forums for the thrashing out of more general interpretive essays and provocative theses. Perhaps we should be providing limbs for the more daring among us to venture out upon even while saws are distributed to the audience. Certainly this type of program would more likely command close attention and excite lively debate among both participants and listeners.