# John Henry: From folk legend to Communist superhero

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Scott Reynolds Nelson, *Steel Drivin' Man: John Henry: The Untold Story of an American Legend*, New York, Oxford University Press 2006, 214 pp.

Scott Reynolds Nelson's illuminating history, *Steel Drivin' Man: John Henry: The Untold Story of an American Legend*, combines detective-like investigation along with cultural research to trace the real John Henry behind the popular folk song that evolved into a larger-than-life working class hero.

John Henry is often thought of as merely a legend about a railroad worker whose sheer strength beats a steam drill racing against him to dig a railroad tunnel, but dies in order to triumph. There are nearly 200 recorded versions of the ballad, making it the most recorded folk song in American history, yet who the real John Henry was (or if there was such a man) has never been clear.

Nelson begins seeking John Henry by following the Chesapeake & Ohio (C&O) Railroad from Virginia's Tidewater into the Appalachian Mountains of West Virginia. He notes that railway baron Collis Potter Huntington, who accumulated one of the greatest fortunes in the world, acquired the C&O Railroad from the state of Virginia in 1869 for nearly nothing. Huntington "was accustomed to buying legislators, inspectors, even U.S. Congressmen to get what he wanted." It is widely believed that Huntington's Big Bend Tunnel near Ronceverte, West Virginia was the tunnel where John Henry died in his contest against the steam drill.

The state-funded rail system was privatized as a literal giveaway, enriching Northern elites while leaving the Southern states with the debts. [1] Critics called the rail system "the Octopus," and they saw how the power of big capital was such that "congressmen always came hat in hand to visit the offices of the octopus...awaiting decisions about matters large and small."

To create more favorable conditions for profit making in the South—and to quell the mounting social struggles there—the former Southern slavocracy was granted extensive political concessions, while the rights of the freed slaves were severely curtailed. Reforms instituted under Reconstruction were to a large extent rolled back, Northern troops were withdrawn from the South and Reconstruction officially ended.

To speed the building of his railroad, Huntington employed both cheap convict labor and steam drills. Many black and white workers struck against the low pay, the long hours and the hazards of blasting through the mountains. As a result, black convicts were conscripted. There were strikes, escapes and reported "mutinies." More than a hundred men died completing the project. Nelson notes reformers who had once thought it beneficial to employ prisoners realized the catastrophic results of convict labor, both in its patent inhumanity and its use as a weapon to drive down the conditions of free labor.

While researching another book on the Southern Railway, Nelson discovered reports of the Virginia State Penitentiary, which documented the high mortality rate of the 380 black prisoners who were leased in the C&O's construction.

Nelson discovers that the "white house" mentioned in the ballad was actually part of the Virginia State Penitentiary in Richmond. The song says John Henry was buried at this white house. Indeed, a black prisoner burial ground was unearthed there. At the Library of Virginia, Nelson was given access to never-before-seen penitentiary documents, which actually list a "John Henry," a black prisoner from Elizabeth City, New Jersey, age 19 years, 5 feet 1 inches tall, who was sentenced to 10 years for house breaking and larceny in 1866. The prison register records him being leased to a railroad contractor for the C&O in 1868.

Nelson's research also led to the discovery of sealed railroad engineering reports proving that steam drills were not used on the Big Bend Tunnel as believed previously, but on the Lewis Tunnel close by. According to Nelson, John Henry raced and beat the steam drill there from 1870 to 1871. At the Lewis Tunnel, John Henry's hammer would not only become legend, but it in fact broke through the mountains that separated the eastern U.S. from the west, integrating a national market, which at that time was being forged by new means of transportation and communication.

After the war, thousands of blacks went to Virginia's Prince George County to act as laborers or gravediggers for the dead that littered the battlefield at City Point. Nelson believes that John Henry arrived as a laborer, and became a victim of the "black codes." These "black codes" were Southern laws passed after the Civil War to punish and subjugate the newly freed slaves who had fought and triumphed with the North's Union Army. The law made being out of work, termed vagrancy, a crime. It also banned blacks from testifying against whites. This law targeted blacks with a "special police" that would round up "vagrants," who would then be auctioned off for labor. Nelson calls it a "resurrection of the old slave patrol." In addition, the sentences were made harsher, turning misdemeanors into felonies.

John Henry was arrested by Lt. Charles H. Bard, who would later be discharged for corruption and cruelty. He would sell his police services, and was known to use them to break strikes organized by both poor whites and blacks.

This is the context within which John Henry was arrested. He faced a particularly cruel judge; the charges against him were arbitrarily changed from shoplifting to housebreaking to inflict a harsh 10-year sentence. A new judge subsequently remarked that Henry's case seemed tom have been handled with particular severity.

Nelson posits that John Henry could have been arrested for participating in the stevedore strikes, which had been going on at that time. The real cause of his arrest, if there was any real cause, may never be known, nor would the cause of his death be documented (though many would die from breathing silica dust from mining). He disappears from the prison records after 1874 with no word of a pardon or release. Nelson believes Henry was transferred to the mass grave at the penitentiary. The penitentiary kept no record of the 300 skeletons buried there.

John Henry, however, would be remembered because his story began

circulating as a song among working people. Cal Evans is one worker who claimed to know firsthand the John Henry story. He was a cook on the C&O, and he spread tales about the railroad worker. John Henry entered history as a ballad sung by workers in plain phrases rather than exact melody, and mimicked the work they performed. Nelson explains that the line breaks were to be punctuated with a drop of a hammer. Thus, the songs functioned to harmonize the pace of work. Moreover, the rocking and rolling action used to handle the steam drill would later give expression to the musical term rock-and-roll.

Nelson meticulously traces the spread of the John Henry ballad as well as its many variations. The ballad was sung by convicts, miners and railroad workers for around 35 years, from the 1870s to 1909, without being written down. It was sung as a reminder of the dangers of working too fast, "[b]ut workers also understood what laborsaving tools threatened: either replacement or a deadly contest, a race to the bottom."

Since many early miners were Welsh, the John Henry tune was set to old Welsh/Scottish/English tunes as well as being influenced by plantation songs. Convicts made the John Henry tale focus on the longing for love and unfaithful women. Railroad workers, whose job required youthful strength, made John Henry into an unbeatable strongman, the kind of man they were required to be.

Between 1915 and 1918, the Great Migration took place in which some half a million black workers moved north to meet the increasing demands for factory labor in the industrial cities. These workers brought their music with them. Nelson observes that railroad track songs, and the John Henry ballad in particular, would heavily influence jazz, blues, and country music. In 1922, W.C. Handy would copyright the first sheet music of John Henry. Fiddlin' John Carson, a white performer, made the first recording of the ballad in 1924, which is viewed as one of the first country songs ever recorded. The second recording by a black Cleveland street musician named Sam Jones is among the first blues recordings.

The poet Carl Sandburg became one of the first self-styled "folk singers" in the US, and he did much to popularize the John Henry story in the language of average workers, while combining it with socialist-sounding ideals. The John Henry of the Great Migration and as represented by Sandburg resonated with a certain romantic nostalgia for a simpler time before the terror of the machine age.

Nelson relates how he learned about John Henry at his Sunday school in 1969 through an album by Burl Ives. He recalls conservatives calling folk music "Communist," and how this actually increased its popularity.

The author charts how John Henry was treated during the Great Depression, the era of the Roosevelt administration's Works Progress Administration relief program.

Both Democratic Party New Dealers and the Stalinists of the Communist Party were to appropriate John Henry for their own political purposes.

The Communist Party's Workers Music League produced folk songs about John Henry as a form of "proletarian music," in line with the conceptions of "proletarian art" that were being promulgated by the Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union. It was during this same period that the Moscow bureaucracy celebrated its own version of John Henry in the person of Alexei Stakhanov, the Soviet coal miner who was reported to have mined a record 102 tons of coal—14 times his quota—on one shift, and then was turned into an icon for other workers to emulate in speeding up production.

Most interestingly, Nelson writes of Hugo Gellert, the Hungarian-born Jewish artist and muralist, who popularized the John Henry icon in radical magazines such as th*e New Masses* and then in the CPUSA's newspaper, the *Daily Worker*. During the period of Popular Frontism and the CP's support for the Roosevelt administration, John Henry's image was used to promote the New Deal.

The Stalinists, along with official US government propaganda during World War II, reworked John Henry from a symbol of working class struggle and opposition to racial oppression into an icon of America's "multiracial democracy" fighting against the racist tyranny of the Axis Powers.

Nelson argues that the CP's promotion of John Henry as strong "democratic" working class hero also inspired comic book artists, such as the CP fellow traveler Jacob Kurtzberg (aka Jack Kirby) in the eventual creation of the superheroes Captain America and Superman.

After the war, this same symbol would then be attacked during the anti-Communist witch-hunts that followed in the US.

There are inevitably political and historical issues over which Nelson stumbles. His discussion of the Communist Party is limited by his liberal viewpoint. He refers to the terrible mistakes made by "Communists," but he never refers to a critique of Stalinism from the left.

Even though Nelson mentions poor blacks and whites on strike (while being pitted against each other) and being denied the right to vote, he steers the reader back again and again to racial identity politics and reformism.

His overall approach is no doubt conditioned in part by present-day intellectual conditions. Nelson is legitimately disturbed that the story of a working class figure like John Henry has been emptied of subversive meaning, but he cannot really account for this phenomenon. To do so would involve a more critical examination of the history of the class struggle in the US, including organizations and parties responsible for betraying workers.

In fact, at the time of John Henry's exploits, the beginnings of the American labor movement were underway in eastern Pennsylvania where the so-called Molly Maguires fought the mining operators and the government, which were determined to eliminate them. What's become of the "American labor movement"?

Nelson's book is informative and a joy to read, but it suffers in the end from some of our present difficulties.

**Notes:**

[1] Historian Anthony Bimba notes in his book *The Molly Maguires: The True Story of Labor's Martyred Pioneers in the Coalfields* that: "The origin of most of the important American capitalist fortunes can be traced to the Civil War and the period following it. The bases for such powerful interests as steel, railroads, banking and oil were laid during this struggle. The Civil War finally established the supremacy of the capitalist class in America. While tens of thousands of workers and poor farmers were dying at the front to save the Union and destroy chattel slavery, the northern capitalists were busily building their fortunes. At war's end they were masters of the country." [return]