

EMPIRE BUILDER

Edward Sheehy



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Cover: The Empire Builder crossing the Stone Arch Bridge in Minneapolis

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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 trans continental 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 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 rolls in my head falls to my chest

And lo 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 test 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 Protect the risk to investors Exterminate the Indian menace. Drive the Golden Spike through the hearts of the savages the Cheyenne the Lakota the Arapaho and the Pawnee Give me snuff whisky 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 whisky 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

Come to think of it my seat 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

Malia 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



Arrived July 2021 Anno Domini

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 BG

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 Budda at the bar nursing a gin and tonic The
Budda blows a smoke ring in my face and sez to me in a voice that rings
tired and raw 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 greenbook and read aloud *Annuitt 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 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 an empty glass to the bartender

Yeah I say but I still don't get it

The Buddad sighs 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 course the defeat of all enemies and a triumphant return from battle

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* How do you fucken get it

I shrink back on my bar stool Maybe I am an idiot Maybe I was absent on the day when the ultimate truth was revealed *Providence favors our undertaking* *Protect the Risk to Investors Exterminate the Indian Menace*

Got it

I step away to make a not so graceful exit when the Buddad 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 Grab 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

On my return the landscape rushes by like a movie shown in reverse The
train blows a blue note horn in forests of deep pine 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 native
spirits once roamed 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 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 Hills prophecy as the *Empire Builder* plunges headlong into a tunnel
painted onto the side of a mountain



California Zephyr

California Zephyr
with sweet breath
the embers fan
a recent burn zone
past charred pines
in ghastly repose
from inglorious battle
fire hazard is high
river level is low
in the American River Valley
down the road
from Sutter's Mill
where to this very day
golden nuggets tumble down cataracts
and streams
irrigating fields
of endless growth
and dominion

Roll on Zephyr

Roll on Zephyr
roll on
past the sentry
sleeping by the gate
past prefabricated dreams
ready to be disassembled
shipped and reassembled
anywhere
anytime
at one low cost to you
roll on Zephyr
blowing hot and dry
ash and smoke
smudge the sky
roll on nomads
sagebrush prophets
pack up those prefab dreams
and bring them with you
down the highway
of majesty and misery
roll on Zephyr
roll on

Deseret

The Great Salt Lake
shimmers and shines
like a silver dollar
in the pocket of a thirsty pioneer
seeking ancestors
in the market square
to hold hands
across the void
to consecrate baptism
and beehives
lead us Deseret
lead us all
to that sweet honey from the rock

Eye of Providence

Here I stand
on the 13th step of the Colorado State Capital
exactly 5280 feet above sea level
shielding my eyes
from a blazing sun
striking the golden dome
the Eye of Providence
rises in the west
beyond snowcapped mountains
hear her in the wind
the sigh of pines sing
this way to salvation
this way to prosperity



Next Stop Chicago

Next stop Chicago
city of broad shoulders
rising from the rails
connecting east and west
the cash and the flow
a grand cauldron
of wealth and industry
and moral purpose
insatiable
ferocious
patriotic progress
J J Hill would be proud
please check
to see if you have all your luggage
Chicago next stop



Short stories by Edward Sheehy have appeared in the *Boston Literary Magazine*, *The Write Launch*, *Pop the Culture Pill*, *FauxMoir*, *The Book Smuggler's Den*, *Potato Soup Journal*, *Frontier Tales*, and *Lake Street Stories* (Flexible Press). A novel, *Cade's Rebellion*, was self-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.



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