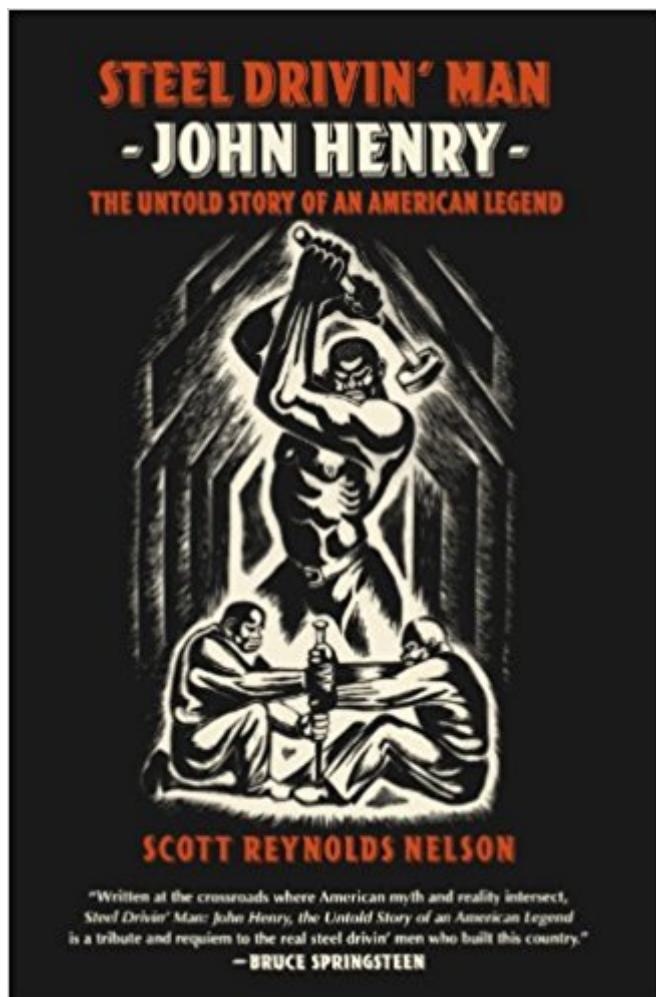


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# Steel Drivin' Man: John Henry, The Untold Story Of An American Legend



## **Synopsis**

The ballad "John Henry" is the most recorded folk song in American history and John Henry--the mighty railroad man who could blast through rock faster than a steam drill--is a towering figure in our culture. In *Steel Drivin' Man*, Scott Reynolds Nelson recounts the true story of the man behind the iconic American hero, telling the poignant tale of a young Virginia convict who died working on one of the most dangerous enterprises of the time, the first rail route through the Appalachian Mountains. Using census data, penitentiary reports, and railroad company reports, Nelson reveals how John Henry, victimized by Virginia's notorious Black Codes, was shipped to the infamous Richmond Penitentiary to become prisoner number 497, and was forced to labor on the mile-long Lewis Tunnel for the C&O railroad. Equally important, Nelson masterfully captures the life of the ballad of John Henry, tracing the song's evolution from the first printed score by blues legend W. C. Handy, to Carl Sandburg's use of the ballad to become the first "folk singer," to the upbeat version by Tennessee Ernie Ford. Attractively illustrated with numerous images, *Steel Drivin' Man* offers a marvelous portrait of a beloved folk song--and a true American legend.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

Starred Review. According to the ballad that made him famous, John Henry did battle with a steam-powered drill, beat the machine and died. Folklorists have long thought John Henry to be mythical, but while researching railroad work songs, historian Nelson, of the College of William and Mary, discovered that Henry was a real person--"a short black 19-year-old from New Jersey who was convicted of theft in a Virginia court in 1866. Under discriminatory Black Codes, Henry was

sentenced to 10 years in the Virginia Penitentiary and put to work building the C&O Railroad. There, at the Lewis Tunnel, Henry and other prisoners worked alongside steam-powered drills, and at least 300 of them died. This slender book is many-layered. It's Nelson's story of piecing together the biography of the real John Henry, and rarely is the tale of hours logged in archives so interesting. It's the story of fatal racism in the postbellum South. And it's the story of work songs, songs that not only turned Henry into a folk hero but, in reminding workers to slow down or die, were a tool of resistance and protest. This is a remarkable work of scholarship and a riveting story. 25 b&w illus. (Oct.) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

"Readers looking for the roots of African American popular culture in the Jim Crow South, for the relationships between work like and popular culture, for the ways in which such popular culture is re-created and transformed over time, can do no better than Steel Drivin' Man.--James R. Barrett, *Peace and Change*"A fine example of engaged writing, one that deserves to be read and used to understand the world of the hammer men."--Rosemary Feurer, *Reviews in American History*"Written at the crossroads where American myth and reality intersect, Steel Drivin' Man: John Henry, the Untold Story of an American Legend is a tribute and requiem to the real steel drivin' men who built this country."--Bruce Springsteen" Nelson manages to piece together a portrait of Henry -- a black convict laborer who died drilling railroad tunnels -- offering an illuminating course in Reconstruction history along the way. Part biography and part cultural history, this slender volume, nicely illustrated with maps and photographs, is at heart a detective story by a sleuth with a PhD and a healthy dose of skepticism."--Washington Post Book World"A beautifully written, unique essay in social and cultural history that tells a multilayered story about labor, race, and railroads in the era of Reconstruction.... Elegant, accessible, and engaging [it] reveals the archaeological process of historical research and history writing, compelling readers to understand how all of us come to understand the past. Based upon astonishing research, Nelson tells an eloquent story about injustice, racism, and most important of all, why we study history and how those in the present become engaged with the past."--Merle Curti Prize Committee [Henry Yu, Professor of History, UCLA,; Mary Murphy, Montana State University; Mae M. Ngai, Columbia University; Hal Rothman, University of Nevada, Las Vegas; and Jeffrey Sklansky, Oregon State]"It is thrilling to follow the exegesis of the 'John Henry' lyrics through to the discovery of John Henry's identity. Many disciplines are necessarily examined in the course of this detective tale: history of course, but also geology, forestry, engineering, anthropology, anatomy, sociology, law, music, literature, poetry, art

and popular culture. Yet Mr. Nelson stirs the brew with the effortless touch of a master chef, deftly adding ingredients at just the right temperature (a dash here, a sprinkle there) to serve up a most enticing gumbo."--National Awards for Arts Writing Committee [Alan Cheuse, Professor of English, George Mason University; Rita Dove, Former Poet Laureate of the United States, Joyce Carol Oates, Professor of English, Princeton University]"Steel Drivin' Man begins as a fine historical detective story. Through dogged work and serendipitous strokes Nelson, a labor historian, pieced together the story...a wonderful bit of sleuthing and a fascinating tour of life on the lower fringes of the post-bellum South."--Elliot West, Professor of History, University of Arkansas [review in History Book Club]"It is a grim story...a black man who fought for the Union is convicted of a petty theft...Nelson's reconstruction of John Henry's identity from prison records, railroad archives, and census data is fascinating, a remarkable feat of historical sleuthing."--Henry Louis Gates, Alphonse Fletcher University Professor, Harvard University [in speech for the Anisfield-Wolf award]

The story of John Henry -- a real person, a victim of race and economics, yet a tragic hero -- is unearthed through original research and what appears to be a bit of serendipity. But that is only a small part of what Professor Nelson does in a scholarly but entirely unassuming fashion. After telling the story of the actual John Henry, he explores the musicology of the folk story that became the ballad and hammer song of John Henry, tying its use and development into the history of late nineteenth and twentieth century America. This is an engaging story that I recommend to just about anyone. Who does not know one version or another -- or at least a verse or two -- of the song? Students of American history, politics, the railroads, critical race studies, music or just anyone who wants to read a good story will not be disappointed. Colloquial as the author's style may be, it is published by the Oxford University Press and the scholarship is substantial.

Although I am a Civil War aficionado, I had rarely read about what happened directly after the war. However, this book has changed my reading habits!! From the time I was a child, I had a special affection for the John Henry songs and "legends". Well, I had no idea he was REAL-- flesh and blood! This book not only brought him alive for me, but the research and presentation was EXQUISITE. Dr Nelson -- in my eyes you have done a tremendous job of bringing alive not only John Henry, but the terrible wrongs done to thousands of African-American freedmen (and women) in Richmond, by the corrupt "Freedman's Bureau". By reading this book, in my mind's eye AND ear, I could see the men and women who toiled in the often brutal conditions, to dig tunnels and build track. I could almost hear the weird and wonderful chants that helped lay the track and ease the

brutal conditions and physical pain that these people, mostly (wrongfully convicted in many cases) convicts endured, usually until they dropped dead from the years of toil and/or silicosis. Could that photograph of a John Henry (page 46) in Bealton VA (not that far from Richmond) really be him? Truth is stranger than fiction - perhaps we ARE looking into his smiling face. And one question I have-- how does the Smithsonian REALLY know which bones are his? (maybe I missed something) The author's narrative, interspersed with highly pertinent photographs AND song verse kept me riveted to this very complex and highly interesting book. Although to some readers the book may seem to start out slow -- it's like a steam train -- it eventually picks up speed and keeps one fascinated. The book's narrative gives great detail to that era in Richmond that John Henry lived, as well as the "white house" by the tracks (Federal Penitentiary where so many of these Freedmen and women were wrongfully incarcerated) and as it winds past John Henry the individual, it reveals the highly pertinent correlation with those railroad songs handed down by word-of-mouth and then collected and sung by the like of people such as Carl Sandburg, folk singer as well as poet, Pete Seeger, Burl Ives. The book then shows how the John Henry story and ballads found their way into art, and life as well - expressed in the artwork and subject matter in Marvel Comix; expressed in the song and art of striking workers, the WPA, Karl Marx, the Communists and Socialists in America in the 1930's, the "radical and liberals of the 1940's", the Black Worker Protest Songs -- and more. Of great interest also was the way the South incorporated (and the way it did NOT incorporate) black history regarding John Henry and other related Afro-American folk heroes and song into its school textbooks and library books back in the 40's and 50's. I borrowed this book from the library -- but I was so impressed with it that I bought one for myself. I want to do my own research (in fact I'm playing some CD samples from right now, having to do with John Henry and word of mouth folk songs) on these ballads, and those who sang them as well as those who still sing them today. I cannot find any fault with this book. The fact that I am now hooked on the John Henry ballad and all the history (past AND present) that goes with it is proof enough of this book's influence. Does Dr. Nelson have a web site that relates to this book? I guess that's one more bit of research that I will undertake!! (I hope he does!) PS - the "Gandy Dancer's Gal" on page 131 is a tremendous summation on canvas, of the strength and hardships, as well as the joys that were part of these track workers' lives. And on my occasional travels on AMTRAK's Capitol Limited, when the train slowly winds thru some of those hand-hewn tunnels and past rough old forest growth, I look for the marks of 19th century tools on the rocks, and think back on those days of almost 150 years ago, when these men (and some women) worked side by side, sweating, hurting, working to their deaths, laboring for the railroad.

I enjoyed reading this book for its delineation of the history of reconstruction Virginia, its investigation of who John Henry was and what tunnel he really dug or died in, and for its picture of the history of railroad building in the Appalachian South. These are the real strengths of the book. The author is not a folklorist and spends little time talking about the exact evolution of the songs or their dissemination. That might matter to a folklorist like myself, but will not appear at all to be a deficiency to other readers. He writes clearly, with interest, and pays attention to aspects of the labor and racial history that most people are unaware of. More than that, in sketching the 20th Century history of the song he provides a rather clear picture of the origins of the "folk music" milieu that I haven't seen written down anywhere else, only suggested in discussions among scholars. He also touches on the changes in the John Henry image as it was taken up by the Stalinized Communist Party of the 1930s and shows us how this John Henry was an ancestor of Superman and similar comic book superheroes. The book is much more entertaining and intriguing than my review suggests. Especially at the remaindered prices, this book is a great deal. Read, learn, and enjoy

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