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Fiction: An Abridged History by Andrew Drummond; The Blackpool Highflyer by Andrew Martin

REVIEWED BY PETER PARKER

AN ABRIDGED HISTORY
by Andrew Drummond
Polygon £9.99 pp326

THE BLACKPOOL HIGHFLYER
by Andrew Martin
Faber £10.99 pp336

The prospect of two historical novels about railways does not necessarily lift a reviewer's heart. Thankfully, they are both very well written and you don't have to be a train-spotter to be swept up into their narratives. The pawky humour of Andrew Drummond's novel begins with its title, which is in fact: *An Abridged History of the Construction of the Railway Line between Garve, Ullapool and Lochinver; And other pertinent matters; Being the Professional Journal and Regular Chronicle of Alexander Auchmuty Seth Kininmonth*. As this suggests, we are in pastiche territory here, and the book comes with a foreword by the supposed publisher of 1901, and several pages at the end listing recondite titles from the same house and advertising dubbin, patent medicines and the like.

Kininmonth is a railway engineer whose attempts to build the new line are severely hampered by a difficult terrain, appalling weather, swarming midges, a lack of funds and the antics of a religious sect. He has the vision, energy and high moral seriousness of a true Victorian, but the reader recognises long before he does the downward trajectory of his career. A Scottish Mr Pooter, he clings to his tattered dignity in the face of ever more preposterous plot developments, including a farcical accident which results in his being mistaken for a fiery angel out of Revelations. Drummond perfectly captures the ponderous tone of this strangely endearing character, with his heavily signalled attempts at wit and his determination to take his place in history. Some of the comedy is a little heavy-handed and the narrative is occasionally a little sluggish, but this is an engaging debut.

Andrew Martin's latest railway excursion is set some eight years later than Drummond's, in the long hot summer of 1905. A woman passenger dies when a special train to Blackpool, laid on for the workers at a Halifax mill, is derailed. When a millstone is found on the line the train's fireman, Jim Stringer, becomes obsessed with discovering the identity of the wrecker. Narrated by Stringer (the protagonist of Martin's previous novel, *The Necropolis Railway*), *The Blackpool Highflyer* is partly a thriller, which twists and turns most satisfactorily before reaching an exciting climax. It is also a wonderful evocation of working-class England before the first world war.

This is a novel in the tradition of Henry Green and William Sansom. Like these two exceptional writers, Martin captures the texture of everyday life, and the language of his characters is both laconic and richly colloquial. There are some superb set pieces — the Sunday quiet of Halifax during Wakes Week, the waiting-room atmosphere of the inland port of Goole — and on almost every page an image strikes the reader by its originality without interrupting the narrative flow.

Martin has apparently learned to drive a steam locomotive and this shows in his descriptions of the Highflyer hurtling through the North of England. His research is worn lightly, and both the exhaustive but enthralling account of railway ticketing and the fascinating glimpses of the history and techniques of ventriloquism are integral to the book's plot. Looking at a tropical scene depicted on a cigar-band, Stringer sees "a whole other world: half an inch square".

This characteristically droll nod towards Jane Austen might also stand as a description of this marvellous novel, which with admirable economy brings an increasingly distant society vividly and exhilaratingly to life.

Available at the Sunday Times Books First price of £8.49 and £8.99 (Martin) plus 99p p&p on 0870 165 8585

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