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Off the rails

Books: An abridged history by Andrew Drummond (polygon, £9.99)

Reviewed by George Rosie

There's an essay by Hugh Miller entitled *A Vision Of The Railroad* which has to be one of the oddest things the great man ever wrote. It was penned in the 1840s when railway lines were sprouting all over Britain and when many people - Miller included - were fretting about the changes they might bring. It starts with the narrator dozing in front of the fire in a cottage on Skye and being racked by a dream (the "vision") in which the countryside west of Edinburgh is laid waste and littered with corpses.

Miller writes: "Half buried in furze and sloe-thorn there rested on the rails which had once been a train of carriages; the engine ahead lay scattered in fragments, the effect of some disastrous explosion ... The scene bore all too palpably the marks of violence and bloodshed."

What brought this apocalypse down on central Scotland? The decision by the Glasgow and Edinburgh railway companies to run their trains on the Sabbath.

I kept being reminded of Miller's loopy but compelling piece as I read Andrew Drummond's ambitious novel. As a lengthy sub-title explains it's the journal of an engineer building an (imaginary) railway line into the far northwest of Scotland in the 1890s. Drummond uses the story to explore the social, moral and religious angst that such a railway project might have unleashed in these remote and hyper-religious parts of Scotland. If there's a modern resonance it might be around the internet. Who knows what demons are lying waiting for us out there in cyberspace?

Drummond's hero is an ambitious, idealistic but somewhat naive Edinburgh-born railway engineer called Alexander Kininmonth. His goal - obsession might be a better word - is to make his mark as one of Britain's great engineers along with Telford, Stevenson or Brunel. Fired with ambition he takes a job with the Great North West of Scotland Railway Company to drive a line across the bleak territory between Garve (in Easter Ross) and Ullapool (in Wester Ross) terminating at Lochinver (in Sutherland).

Which, of course, is heavy going. Kininmonth has to grapple with a hostile boss, stropmy navvies, endless rain and, of course, midges. "If there is one creature calculated to turn the gentlest human being into a reckless destroyer of natural life, I surmise it must be the Ross-shire midge," Kininmonth tells his journal. "To enter some of the more secluded groves to answer the call of nature is to enter a veritable fog of biting jaws and irritating wings ... There are times when parts of a man's anatomy which are best left unbitten have been subjected to a cruel and unprovoked attack ..."

Even worse was the cost-cutting management. "Mr MacAulay from the Company was here on Friday and took me to one side to explain that the Company would turn a blind eye to a thinner layer of ballast, or the use of one bolt less in each of the sleepers, or the use of iron rather than steel on the upper works of the bridge ... I reminded him of the disaster on the Tay and vowed that the name of Kininmonth would not come to be reviled like that of Bouch!" (Sir Thomas Bouch engineered the ill-starred railway bridge over the River Tay.)

After much heroic effort Kininmonth gets his railway as far as Braemore before the Company runs out of money and the project screeches to a halt. After which our hero takes himself off south to help build a railway in the Borders where he falls in with a strange set of evangelical Christians led by the charismatic Mulchier Rinck. After a spell in the Lowlands he ends up in Wester Ross as engineer to the Railway League Of The Godly and helping Rinck and his followers to build the Citadel Of The Elect in Ullapool. As one of the characters - the navy Maclvor - warns the project was a "ship of fools" destined to "founder at the first storm".

It's a strange tale. I suppose one description might be picaresque. There's not much of a plot but it's packed with incident and fable. The writing is convincingly late-19th century in tone and Drummond catches the hardship that must have been involved in these remote projects. My own instinct would have been to build Kininmonth's story around a real railway (say the Dingwall to Kyle of Lochalsh line) but that would have been wrong. Drummond's imaginary railway line terminates in the imaginary ending with engaging weirdness.

I thoroughly enjoyed this rich admixture of social history, 19th-century engineering and fantasy. But I only wish Drummond had made more of his "journal within a journal" in which Kininmonth sets out to write the history of his descendants.

There's a lovely passage in which he imagines the Highlands in the year 1994 when "a sturdy network of railway lines" (which he has engineered) has transformed Highland society.

There's a railway bridge from Skye across to Lewis, railway lines reach into every glen, and "the throbbing heart of commercial development now beats in the north, fed by the arterial web of the North Atlantic Bridge Railway Company lines".

And midges have been almost eradicated. If only.

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