

Railway Books Share Story of Rogers Pass and the Spiral Tunnels

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The Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) was a monumental undertaking right from its beginning, but none of the parts across the country were perhaps as difficult or important as the stretch of line that crossed the Rocky Mountains and the Columbia Mountains. Within this stretch sit two of the largest challenges the railroad builders faced as they constructed the trans-continental line – the Field Hill (Kicking Horse Pass) and Rogers Pass.

Both passes pushed the builders to the limits of their abilities and their budgets, but with a decision to follow the Bow Valley, they had no choice but to persevere. The CPR succeeded in pushing the line through both mountain chains and, in the process, the railway engineers and construction crews created railway infrastructure that became a part of Canadian heritage and lore.

To celebrate that heritage, Graeme Pole, a Hazelton, BC writer and paramedic – and former resident of Field, BC – has released two books this summer that document this railway history. *The Spiral Tunnels and the Big Hill: On the Canadian Pacific Railway* (Centennial edition), self-published under Pole's imprint, Mountain Vision Publishing, and *Gravity, Steam and Steel: An Illustrated History of Rogers Pass*, published by Fifth House, share the story of these two passes, what it took to surmount them, and the legacy that each created.

"As much as the Spiral Tunnels are a tremendous engineering feat, the Field Hill – in terms of technological challenges – pales compared to what they [CPR construction crews] faced in Rogers Pass," he said Monday (July 28). As illustrated histories, the books focus primarily on these engineering feats but, through the photographs, Pole is also able to focus on the subtler story of the men who built them.

"These guys are 140 miles from Calgary, they're sleeping in tents in the clothes they're wearing day after day and you see all this wet snow piled around them, and mud, and you're thinking: whatever I do in terms of hard labour in what I work on today, it's nothing by comparison. These guys are making 50 cents, 75 cents a day. They're not eating great. They're cold and they're wet and they're doing just incredible work. It's the equivalent to building the Pyramids in the mountains. At the same time we tend to undervalue the technical ability of workers 100 years ago. They did very well with what they had at hand, but the fact they were doing it in those remote locations is something I find quite staggering."

Pole fell into railway history while living in Field. With the history in his backyard, he became intrigued by the fact that people found it challenging to understand how the Spiral Tunnels work. "I would hear this big question mark hanging over the whole thing. In the last few years Parks Canada has redone the installation and they've done a really good job, but 15 years ago, other than a little diagram, people couldn't take anything from that fixed installation and transpose it to the landscape to understand how the tunnels work."

The first edition of *The Spiral Tunnels and the Big Hill*, suggested by the Friends of Yoho as a pamphlet, became an 80-page book, buoyed by the volume of information Pole began to find. It was the same with the updated and expanded Centennial edition – new information and new photographs. "Because of the centennial and because there is more information available now, especially photographs, I decided to retell the story and expand it," Pole said. "The first edition awakened an interest in me in the whole story of how the railway was built through the mountains."

Gravity, Steam, and Steel, meanwhile, is a new book. Pole is surprised by the fact that he is the first to tell the Rogers Pass story in a stand-alone volume. "There are a couple of comprehensive books that include the Rogers Pass story, but there is no book dedicated to the Rogers Pass alone," he said.

While Pole is interested in the technological achievements that came with the railway, he also sees the overall effect the railway

has had on the landscape and the wildlife. But within that dichotomy is the reality that without the railway, the national parks [Banff, Yoho, Glacier, Mt. Revelstoke] may not have come in to existence. "Regardless of your views of how the railway affects the parks today, it is true that the parks wouldn't be here had not the railway come through the way it did, and when it did."