

## **Sia latha tro na Stàitean ‘s air ais/Across the U.S. and Back Again in Six Days**

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(Translation of Gaelic original)

Although I was born and raised in America, I left when I was 21 years old, having seen very little of the country. I had been on both the east and west coasts, but had never been anywhere in between, and it was for this reason that I recently decided to travel by train from the west coast to the east and back again. It would take six days and six nights in total, and would finally give me a chance to see some of the vast continent that lay between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans.

I do not know what I was expecting, but after travelling through nineteen states, I can only say that nothing looked as I had imagined it would. On the outward journey I followed a northern route through states such as Montana, North Dakota and Wisconsin – hitherto little more than names on a map to me. I’d imagined that Montana would be green with tall mountains, but at break of day it was instead a snow-covered sea of white, a vast empty ocean stretching out on either side of the train as far as the eye could see. There were no trees, but occasionally I saw mountains on the horizon. What towns I saw were tiny scatterings of wooden houses and outbuildings seemingly assembled at random. Much of the landscape looked desolate, strewn with rusting farm equipment, broken cars and rubbish. The buildings seemed poor and flimsy, as if they could be swept from the fields by the first strong gust of wind.

The train was equipped with an observation car with large windows through which I could watch the world go by. I had no real destination – my only aim was to be on the train – and as I sat there, a feeling of peace descended upon me. Wherever I was, be it Glasgow, Montana or Rugby, North Dakota, it was exactly where I was supposed to be – and I hadn’t felt like that in a long time.

I met many fellow travellers on the way. My first companions were Jerry and Jimmy. Jerry, from Oklahoma, wore a cowboy hat and was a truck driver; Jimmy was a farmer from North Dakota. They had brought no provisions with them other than a cooler full of Budweiser beer, which they drank at a steady pace. When they kept offering me beer and continued talking and occasionally singing late into the night, I began to wonder if I would ever get to sleep. But then, after a late stop at the station in Spokane, Washington, Jimmy reboarded the train and handed me a bottle of fruit juice which he'd bought me unasked for, and all was forgiven. They did finally doze off, but through my broken sleep I noticed that each time Jimmy awoke he would reach for another Bud and drink it before sinking back into a stupor. Perhaps he was right: the seats were uncomfortable and maybe a constant dose of Budweiser was the only way to guarantee slumber.

There was no snow in Wisconsin. Instead the grass was still green and the landscape was all rolling hills, full of stereotypically red American barns and farm houses and fields which had already been harvested. All I could have told you about Wisconsin before I saw it was that they produce a lot of cheese there. Once again most of the houses I saw were made of wood, and although they had a more prosperous look than in Montana, there was still a feeling that these wooden structures and all signs of habitation could be removed from the landscape with ease.

The train was crowded between Chicago and Washington, D.C., and although I was tired after two nights on the train, I could not stretch out to sleep: there was a man in the seat next to me. After travelling for forty-eight hours, one finds it easy to converse, and even easier to converse with a stranger. My seatmate was a retired math professor, just back from visiting his son in California. He told me he hoped his son would propose marriage to his girlfriend soon; but as far as his daughter was concerned, he was afraid she would never marry. This was all the more troubling for him as he and his wife were still very much in love after many years, and it pained him to think that his own children might not be as fortunate in life as he had been. Later that night, the retired professor went to the back of the compartment where there was some extra space and curled up on the floor to sleep.

After three days, I arrived in Rockville, Maryland, on the east coast. My mother was waiting for me on the platform, and as my feet touched the ground it seemed strange to me that I should be able to board the train on the western edge of the continent and disembark on the other side. Suddenly America seemed smaller than it ever had before.

Still, it is a big country. On my return journey I travelled by way of the Rocky Mountains and the wild west, and although I saw the bright lights of Chicago and Denver, it is the wide open spaces that will remain with me. I do not know who lives in those little wooden shacks scattered across the plains or in the trailer homes at the base of the mountains, or who it is that works the fields of wheat and corn and pumpkins. These are the Americans I have never met; and this is the America where nothing looks familiar.