Book Review

“They Call Me George: The Untold Story of Black Train Porters and the Birth of Modern Canada”

by Cecil Foster

Review by Eric Basir, Train Operator, ATU Local 308

At first glance, a reader could easily misjudge this book as a biography about a train porter named George. When in fact, it is a uniquely composed history book about many men with different names and their place in the Black Canadian struggle for equality.

Canada was envisioned to be a country for white people. The era of Indigenous people and the strict quota permitting immigration of non-white workers was blatant through most of its history. This book is about how that began to change - and the struggle of Pullman porters is the lens through which it is projected.

Who is “George”? Simply put, is an epithet for the n-word or slave. Named after the industrialist George Pullman - who created the Pullman Company in the United States - a “George” was a Pullman Sleeping Car porter. These well-dressed and hard-working men were found on Canadian Pacific and Canadian National passenger trains.

This book ties the struggle of Black Canadian railroad workers with Indigenous, immigration and civil rights struggles throughout North America as well. It chronicles the tenuous relationships of Pullman porters with their employers for dignified working conditions and to join the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porter Union.

One criticism of the book is that it spends a great deal of time on background history and not enough on the day-to-day struggles of the porters. However, since the audience are those interested in civil rights and Black Canadian history, it does an excellent job.

The stories of how porters struggled to earn a living - albeit a better standard of living than many non-white Canadians at the time - are fascinating. So many of the porters had to work longer hours just to earn tips. They really struggled. However, they also established a foundation for Black and other non-white Canadians today.

After finishing the book I could not help but wonder if there had been more energy focused on strikes and public action, would they have made faster progress? However, considering that Blacks in North America, in general, were fighting for more than just better working conditions and pay, focusing on political solutions may have seemed their best option.

There were mentions of strikes, but not by porters, as they were shunned by the racist unions of the day. Even during the historical Pullman workers strike of 1894, porters and sleeping car conductors did not strike. That strike was viciously put down by the Illinois National Guard, and it resulted in the dissolution of George Pullman’s oppressive company town.

By the time the Canadian Pullman porters won working condition and wage improvements, together with the right to apply for and be hired as conductors, the passenger rail industry was in decline. The conclusion of the book was bittersweet in that regard. Yet, the real story was how citizenship, civil rights and better opportunities for non-white Canadians was won thanks to those porters. One of them, Stanley Grizzle, ended up becoming a judge who ruled in favor of equality for minorities.

Canada was forever changed thanks to the struggles of the Pullman porters.