The pioneer of the railfan picture book, Lucius Beebe was once hailed as the best and most popular chronicler of trains. Today his books are mostly out-of-print. But the formula he created lives on.

By TONY REEVY and DAN CUPPER
ew railroad writers were as prolific as Lucius Beebe, the snooty heir of Boston wealth who found a niche in an improbable role. In the 1930s and 1940s, he almost singlehandedly lifted railroad photography and writing from the obscurity of blue-collar pulp magazines and hobbyist clubs to broad public exposure and acceptance. In his heyday, one writer quipped, Beebe ran his own railroad called the “Nostalgia & Pacific.”

After his death in 1966, his impact on travel writing and railroad history was given high marks by David P. Morgan, editor of Trains magazine. “We knew it from the day in 1938 when he founded the American popular railroad book market with High Iron,” Morgan wrote. “Thus emerged the man who would enthral the largest book audience in railroading for more than a quarter century.”

Beebe’s star, however, has been on the wane ever since. His books – 21 on railroad topics alone – have been faulted for superficiality, factual errors, carelessness, and repetitiveness. At the same time, his brand of flamboyant writing has fallen out of favor. Small wonder that he is often viewed as a dusty relic of another age.

But it is a mistake to confine Beebe to the past. If his books have been dismissed by some critics and forgotten by the public, his influence on publishing remains strong for better or worse. In an otherwise scathing assessment of his work in this publication in 1980, Carl Condit admitted, “The literature of the railroad buff was initiated by one man.”

Condit called Beebe’s genre of railroad book the “pictorial album” that served up “odds and ends” of colorful anecdotes, but whose appeal was to those who “would far rather look at pictures than read words.” While the art-work and printing of such books were sometimes of high quality, “their value as historiography is minimal,” Condit asserted.

That’s unfair. At his best, Beebe was evocative and genuinely exciting. What’s more, his formula of large-format photographs of locomotives and trains typically spaced one to a page and tied together with long descriptive captions made a connection with readers. The medium is as popular today as it was in his lifetime. At least 100 pictorial albums on railroading are produced yearly, and most hobby magazines adhere to Beebe’s photo-essay format.

In short, the railfan’s need to look at, as well as read about, railroads seems to remain unsated. Many members of this organization likely got their first taste of railroading from pictures that Beebe either photographed or promoted during the years when his books and his celebrity status were hard to miss.