

David Thoms, Len Holden and Tim Claydon, eds., *The Motor Car and Popular Culture in the Twentieth Century*

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Thoms, David, Len Holden and Tim Claydon, eds., *The Motor Car and Popular Culture in the Twentieth Century*. Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 1998. 307 pp., 11 illus., cloth, US\$89.95, ISBN 1-85928-461-2.

A collection of eighteen brief essays, *The Motor Car and Popular Culture in the Twentieth Century* owes much to De Montfort University in Leicester, England, which provided editors and half of the book's contributors. Despite its sweeping title, the book focuses primarily on England, as thirteen of the articles never stray from that green and pleasant land even to forage in Wales or Scotland. Thus the popular culture being described is English, save when Paul Wells and Duncan Heining write about the depiction of cars by American animated films and pop music after 1950, or Sebastian Lockwood writes briefly about the psychic role of cars (for his own life in Toronto and the United States), Ken Gelder explains that Australian road movies, such as the Mad Max trilogy, are so conservative that they omit Aborigines in order to make "a claim for white Australians' repossession of [their] country," or Len Holden attempts to correlate such marques as Volvo, Ferrari, and Rolls-Royce with the technological styles and values of their homelands.

When Gelder draws on an article by Grayson Gerrard (*Mankind*, 1989) to discuss the "decommodification" of the "mutika" in the Aboriginal community of Arnhem Land, he clarifies for the reader that the popular culture in this book's title is English and not universal. The people of Arnhem Land, according to Gerrard, "humbugged" whites into permitting their vehicles and driving services to become communal property. By contrast, the English car that appears in these essays is private property (there being nothing here on rental cars or taxis), used by its owners, mostly middle-class, and its builders, mostly working-class, to seek respectively personal status and autonomy.

The book divides its analysis of English motor culture into three parts or "major themes": first, "the car as image;" second, "the role of the car in the development of entertainment and leisure;" and third, the "social and economic issues related to the production and sale of cars." This third category predominates, especially if one concludes that it could also have included the essays by Steven Morewood and Steve Koerner on the sports car and motorcycle industries. These seem to have

been inserted in the second section because the editors perceived them as pleasure vehicles, even though the motorcycle originally found its market amongst those unable to afford a light car.

As the book is interdisciplinary, it will have different strengths for different readers. For myself, I found the essays by Sean O'Connell and Tim Claydon especially interesting. O'Connell has contributed a piece on the interwar years, probably the best-known era of British automotive history. What new, then, can be learned about the 1920s and 1930s? A lot, it seems, once we appreciate the peculiar — when viewed from North America — English reluctance to buy on "hire purchase," that is, on credit. Manufacturers found it awkward even to advertise the possibility of hire purchase, lest their middle-class customers fret about their neighbours' wondering whether they had the financial means and rectitude always to pay cash. Status considerations seem to have been especially debilitating to the development of a mass market in automobiles in England, as it required companies to build too many different models to permit mass production methods, and to neglect the low income market thanks to a refusal to recognize the opportunities for them in joint ownership of cars by extended working-class families. O'Connell's approach is one that should be duplicated for other countries.

Tim Claydon's work is more distinctively British, as it looks at three London newspapers to argue that they used the automobile industry strikes of the 1950–1979 era to develop a meta-narrative of social disorder and destructive trade unionism that justified Britain's abandonment of "liberal collectivism" and its embrace of "liberal individualist principles" wisely rejected more than a century ago. O'Connell is convincing when he argues that labour strife in the British motor industry was a key factor in the right turn in British politics after 1979, but less persuasive when he tries to explain away 600 work stoppages at an auto plant in less than five years.

In O'Connell's essay, and in those by Brad Beaven on shop floor culture in Coventry's motor industry, by Paul Thompson on auto workers' leisure activities, or by Tom Donnelly on the impact of the Second World War on auto making, one finds a noteworthy aspect of England's motor culture, and that is a refusal of British academics to hold auto workers to account for their role in

the collapse of this key British industry. Middle-class Englishmen are chided repeatedly for their status-seeking and failure to buy the most utilitarian models on offer, but working-class Britons continue to get a free ride from these cultural historians. Quick to condemn middle-class snobbery, the authors are remarkably indulgent when it comes to auto workers who cheated the time clock, drank or gambled on the job, stole parts, or repeatedly went out on strike against the advice of their own unions.

Women also get a free ride in this book. Oddly, but predictably, they are never chastised for their role in the asphaltting of England. Instead, it is social progress each time a woman builds, buys, or drives a motor car. Those interested in gender as a category of analysis will find intriguing Kathleen Bell's observation that "one of the motor car's chief functions" in *The Wind and the Willows* (a classic tale about a joy-riding, aristocratic toad) is "to bring Toad's feminine side into the open... so that it can... be dispensed with, reclaiming Toad for masculine values."

Is the motor car feminine? Not according to the postwar car songs analysed by Duncan Heining,

for they generally equated the car with money, sex and male potency. Heining, however, makes the same error as the editors, in assuming that one culture, American in his case, sums up the gender implications of the motor car for popular culture. It is unlikely that the males who purchased American muscle cars viewed the automobile's gender in the same way as did the males who bought British mini cars. It is probable that gender had a different social dynamic in England than in North America.

In English car culture, women have traditionally been expected to prefer small cars and cycles. In the essay that makes the most use of semiotics in this collection, Jenny Rice and Carol Saunders complain that "gendered advertising discourse" still tries to confine women "to the small car market." As Rice and Saunders urge British car companies to target women as potential buyers for their bigger, more expensive models (in order to "offer female car consumers, a marginalised group, access to more positive images"), one cannot help but be struck that the most abiding aspect of England's car culture has been its social snobbery.

Witold Rybczynski, *One Good Turn: A Natural History of the Screwdriver and the Screw*

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Rybczynski, Witold. *One Good Turn: A Natural History of the Screwdriver and the Screw*. Toronto: Harper Flamingo Canada, 2000. 173 pp., cloth, \$24, ISBN 0-00-2000031-8 or 0-00-638603-2.

I was asked to write this review because my Ph.D. thesis was on the scientific applications of precision screws. Hence, when I received this diminutive book my first reaction on scanning it was that it was going to be a bit of fluff. However, on sitting down and reading Rybczynski's *One Good Turn*, I was surprised at how readable and entertaining it was. Though an academic, Rybczynski has employed a journalistic writing style but he has also documented his work well though not as fully as a dissertation. He and his researchers have done a remarkably good job at ferreting out and referencing interesting and relevant facts that anyone interested in technology will find

fascinating. The references he cites are standard works but for someone not familiar with the literature of tools and craftsmanship, Rybczynski's work will provide a useful entrance to and a bibliography for the topic of screws and screw drivers. However, it is clear he did not do a thorough on-line search for recent studies on the topic and, as a result, he has missed some interesting materials and modern applications. As well, he missed the one essential and beautifully illustrated 1962 reference on screws, Rudolf Kellermann and Wilhelm Treue's *Die Kulturgeschichte der Schraube*.

The starting point of Rybczynski's book was an editor's request to write a contribution to the *New York Times* special millennium issue. On pondering the "best tool of the millennium" the author goes through the merits of everything from the hammer, to the level, to the brace and bit but when it comes to making the decision, the obvious choice — but one to which his