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Car Culture [Book Review]

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Abstract

Since their development precisely spans this century, it seems to me no coincidence that there has been a renewed interest in cars at this time. The ways that the automobile has been celebrated as a 'birth' at the end of the last century, and the dystopian future that it has more often come to represent at the end of this one, bracket the extremes of optimism and pessimism that the technology can evoke.

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CAR CULT

reviewed by GEORGINE CLARSEN

Since their development precisely spans this century, it seems to me no coincidence that there has been a renewed interest in cars at this time. The ways that the automobile has been celebrated as a 'birth' at the end of the last century, and the dystopian future that it has more often come to represent at the end of this one, bracket the extremes of optimism and pessimism that the technology can evoke.

So brace yourself for a season of commemorations, re-enactments and exhibitions. We have just had the celebration of fifty years since the first all-Australian Holden rolled off the assembly lines at Fisherman's Bend. Still to come are the centenaries of state auto clubs early next century; the re-enactment of the first long-distance drive in an Australian-made 'steam phaeton' from Bathurst to Melbourne

in April 2000; a revamp of the National Motor Museum at Birdwood Mill in South Australia; a Ford Heritage Centre to be established in Geelong; and a major exhibition at Sydney's Powerhouse Museum this year.

Such commemorations are about much more than hardware and mobility of course. They also serve as technological props or as

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theatrical settings for 'myths of origin' stories that allow individual life stories to be connected—through the medium of car ownership and motoring memories—to larger, more abstract histories of global and national change. In many histories of motoring, such global and national stories are given an immediacy through personal identification with particular cars or makes of car and with particular motoring activities. They provide a widely understood semiotic whereby individual and family memories of cars owned and trips made are experienced as the stuff of national life. It is a familiar, everyday domain where people can insert themselves into a broader Australian picture.

Environmental concerns provided one of the first alternative stories that cut across the standard, celebratory one of steady progress from

DON LOFFLER

She's a beauty!

The story of the first Holdens

Wakefield Press, 1999

pb, 246pp., \$39.95

JOHN WRIGHT

Heart of the lion:

The 50 year history of Australia's Holden

Allen & Unwin, 1999

hc, 359pp., \$45.00

CHARLES PICKETT (ed.)

Cars and culture:

Our driving passions

HarperCollins/Powerhouse Publishing, 1999

pb, 144pp., \$29.95

ALLAN NIXON

Beaut utes

Lothian Press, 1999

pb, 160pp., \$16.95

RICHARD STRAUSS

Up for rego:

A social history of the Holden Kingswood

Pluto Press, 1999

pb, 106pp., \$24.95

ungainly horseless carriages for the rich to sleek body prostheses for the masses, but there are many more, including stories of racial privilege expressed through motoring, and cars as a technology of gender. For my money, the best accounts of motoring start with a modest ambition. They seek to tell particular stories from precise locations, and are not afraid to declare their passions and reveal their investments. And the very best of them understand that their narratives are not just about cars.

Don Loffler, in *She's a beauty! The story of the first Holdens*, has presented a comprehensive and carefully researched study of the original two Holden models. His story begins with a schoolboy obsession with the first Holden and is traced through his family's increasing prosperity during the 1950s and 1960s—as remembered through the purchase of new Holdens—to a kind of nationalist nostalgia triggered by research for his son's school project. All aspects of the design, production, testing and marketing of the cars are given importance in his story, from the postwar politics in Australia that made the building of an Australian car a Chifley government priority to the relationship of GMH's Australian managers and engineers with their American bosses in Detroit; from the precise specifications of the vehicles to details of country-town launches.

She's a beauty! is a coming-of-age story of postwar optimism, resistance to American attempts to make Australia in its own image, and 'men of vision' who proved that Australia was capable of its own (mini) industrial revolution. Through pride and pleasure in the own-

ership and production of Holdens, it traces a broadening middle class, brought together by a sense of economic democracy that promised to efface memories of the Depression and World War II. Apart from its archival detail and personalised narrative, the most striking value of this book is its splendid design and the numerous photographs and illustrations that are reproduced throughout.

A much more comprehensive history of Holdens, beginning with the original Holden carriage and saddlery business in Adelaide in the 1850s, is offered by John Wright in *Heart of the lion: The 50 year history of Australia's Holden*. Although it is not acknowledged as such, it presents as a semi-official history of the company and at times feels a little like a hagiography. The book is more than that, however, presenting a view of the development of the company, particularly in design and management policy, as a metaphor for the history of postwar Australia's 'monumental growth and broadening of our national vision' (ix). In that story, the company's success is attributed to the lessons learnt from American and Japanese management practices and production techniques, while holding fast to Australian values in car design. It is a story largely told 'from the top', where economic rationalism has turned a naive company producing cars that were 'local heroes' in the 1950s into 'grown-up international travellers' in the 1990s. The lion of the title is now on the prowl as a hungry international competitor seeking foreign markets.

Cars and culture: Our driving passions, produced in conjunction with the Powerhouse

Museum, is also beautifully designed and illustrated, with the style of an art catalogue. It comprises a series of essays on aspects of car culture in Australia written by staff of the museum, interspersed with interviews and photographs of Australians and their cars. As the borrowing of the book's title from a British study suggests, the authors have transposed a number of earlier cultural histories of the car into an Australian context. Unlike the other books discussed here, the authors tend to take a distanced, expert commentator's view of the technology and express some ambivalence towards and hesitant passion for it.

The essays in *Cars and culture* set out to explore our attraction to cars, how that attraction has been expressed in styling, art and advertising, and how we have been able to ignore the negative consequences of cars. While the book is valuable for bringing together Australian material for the first time, particularly material on women and cars, its broad terms of reference are perhaps its weakest feature. It is a difficult task to cover road rage from the 1910s to the present, for example, without overreliance on rather simplistic notions of social stereotypes; and the chapter on women and cars overlooks some critical changes over time in the extent to which women were considered important participants in the motoring experience (92). These chapters suffer from a lack of historical specificity and rely on generalised categories such as 'Australians', 'men' and 'women', which obscures other important dimensions. Just who the 'our' in the book's subtitle refers to is not easy to fathom.

The most successful chapters are those that deal with a much more circumscribed field. Ann Stephen's essay, for example, offers 'a cruise through some of the more memorable routes of Australian car advertising, with a particular focus on certain photographers' (105), and Charles Pickett's discussion of Australian forms of roadside architecture and Australian debates about roadside modernism provide a fresh analysis of a particularly local experience.

A major problem with the book lies in the distinction it makes between technology and art—a distinction long questioned in both fields of study. Cars are taken to be 'a pre-eminent marriage of technology and style' (12), where 'technology' refers to advances in hardware, such as engines and electronics, and 'style' refers to the look of the car, or its sculptural form. That assumed opposition is most apparent in Richard Wood's essay, 'The car of the future', where technology and shape appear to be locked in a battle to dominate car design ('technology once again superseded shape': 53). Rather than critically examining those commonly accepted oppositions—particularly the implied distinction between male technology that becomes 'married' to female style—the book tends to perpetuate them, and misses opportunities to explore what else they can tell us about social assumptions, and relations of power played out in motoring technology.

A world apart from an art catalogue is *Beauties* by Allan Nixon, an unashamed celebration of one version of white, working-class masculinity. It provides an affectionate portrait of the kind of men who put stickers on their utes

for fun, go to swap meets, and say 'Geez mate, take the house, the missus and the kids, but leave me dog and ute!' (5). The book (without using these terms) treats utes as a popular art form through which such men can express their individuality, their defiance of dominant social conventions, their resistance to change, and their membership of particular groups. It seeks to articulate a new myth of the laconic, freewheeling bushman (though certain city men may join the club) and takes a stand against yuppiedom and cosmopolitanism. Women, too, are given a place in 'ute culture', but on limited terms, being inclined towards the 'special' ute, which 'attracts admirers who drool over its qualities' (5).

Beaut utes consists of excerpts from interviews and descriptions of interviewees and their utes, with each one illustrated by wonderful photographs. The sections have names such as 'Bluey', 'Queen of Speed', 'Frank the Rabitter', 'the Flying Sculptress' and 'the Bloody Mongrel'. The text and photographs are characterised by a nostalgia for simpler, more homogenous times, 'where there were no locked doors, you could trust your neighbours' (4), and a man and his dog were the basic social unit. Women seem slightly scary in this masculinist vision of Australia. The best type of girls are 'Bush sheilas' who will 'shove a sticker on their vehicle and share a swag under the stars. Not so the city girl. City girls like comfort and cocktails and spirits with a bang; the country girl will be just as comfortable with a beer or a fluffy duck' (7).

The difference between *Beaut utes* and more formal managerialist histories is perfectly cap-

tured in its cover photograph, which features the picturesque Guildford General Store on the road between Daylesford and Castlemaine in Victoria. The store is also featured in Wright's *Heart of the lion*, but where the *Beaut utes* photograph celebrates informality, chaos, a ragged assortment of working and show utes, scruffy dogs and Aussie blokes (people, cars and even dogs are named and thanked for turning up for the photo shoot), the *Heart of the lion* photo is a controlled, tidied, idealised version of Australia with just two perfect cars—the first Holden and the latest Commodore—in the foreground and no identifiable people. In that photograph there is no lively integration of car and country life, and the store is just a pretty backdrop.

Not far below the surface of Nixon's book is a vision of an urbanised Australia that has lost its vitality, and where the ute, 'arguably an Aussie invention', is 'under threat of being swamped with models from around the world', including the current new invasion of 'big bloody yank tanks' (5). The characters in the book are positioned as a sort of rearguard resistance movement, heirs to the Eureka Stockade, who call upon every nationalist symbol to halt the globalisation that threatens their world. That resistance, the book seeks to suggest, will exist 'as long as the kookaburra sings, the magpie carols, and Skippy reigns. And as long as the throbbing bark of a V8 Holden or Falcon rings out across the land' (5).

A quite different kind of nostalgia for past versions of Australian masculinity and social life can be found in Richard Strauss's *Up for rego: A social history of the Holden Kingswood*.

Strauss is strictly a Kingswood man—'the biggest, the cheapest, and the most Australian of Australian cars' (101). This is a highly personalised account of auto love, where Strauss's battered Kingswood, 'Travis', stands for all Kingswoods, where trips taken in Travis tell the archetypal Aussie road story, and where Strauss himself is the Australian baby-boomer male seeking a place in national and global stories of changing masculinity—a parallel chronology of technology, nation and self.

The restricted scope of the book allows Strauss to outline the social context of the 1970s, which broadens the picture beyond a focus on the car itself. It ensures a strong sense of the historical moment—youth culture, full employment, suburban sprawl, a masculinist myth of upward mobility measured through commodities, dreams of national self-sufficiency in the period before globalisation, and the advent of the women's movement with its critique of ocker maledom. Strauss's new generation of Holden lovers are the heirs of the economic optimism experienced by the heroes in Loffler's *She's a beauty!* Noticeable by its absence, however, is any sense of the conditions of production of the Kingswood—the assembly-line work that produced the 1.5 million Holdens over that decade. This is particularly striking given the antagonistic relationship between management and auto workers unions at the time.

Design takes a back seat in *Up for rego*, which is crammed with personal photos, reproductions of advertisements, manufacturers' publicity photographs, graphs, quotes from the

motoring press, and boxed interviews with other Kingswood lovers and men associated with its manufacture. The design style and two-column format calls to mind the strictly utilitarian car manual—a thesis turned into a book, in which the text came first, then the graphics, and then the design.

Unlike the stand taken by Nixon in *Beauties*, Strauss's response to social change since the decade of the Kingswood is neither to try to hold the line nor to give up his petrol-head pleasures, but instead to reinvent forms of masculinity that can accommodate and find new ways to live that change. His nostalgia is not oblivious to the shortcomings of 1970s nationalism, nor to the exclusions it was built upon. It is a story of an Aussie bloke, who continues to love the blokiess of the 1970s Aussie dream, but has been able to move with the social changes of the 1980s and 1990s. As such, it strikes me as a celebration of Strauss's place in the Australian national story as much as Travis's. It is a story that evokes a great deal more pleasure than some of the self-conscious, anxious 'men's movement' books that seek to accommodate masculinity to those same changes.

These five books not only multiply the available narratives by which we can remember the past, but to varying degrees provide a critique of the unacknowledged relationships of power and control that find expression in automobiles and the cultures that have been built around them. In doing so they can help us articulate possible futures for that simultaneously most pleasurable, most enraging, most enabling and most destructive of technologies.