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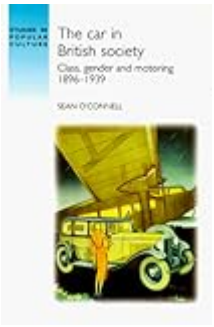

Sean O'Connell. *The Car in British Society: Class, Gender and Motoring, 1896-1939.* Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998. xi + 240 pp. $79.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7190-5506-5.

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Delights of transport history in Britain during the second half of the last century, at least that dignified by academics as "scholarly" to distinguish it from the outpourings of dedicated "enthusiasts," was dominated by economic issues in general and by the railways in particular.[1] Motor transport, though clearly established as the dominant mode by the time professional transport historians were emerging, was somewhat neglected by them; and where it was studied in any depth, the emphasis on economic and business history again prevailed. Such studies, though often outstanding examples of their kind, were scarcely, as Theo Barker has pointed out, transport history at all, focusing as they did on the manufacture of cars rather than their part in human lives beyond the factory gates.[2] It was historians in the United States such as John B. Rae and James J. Flink who began to focus scholarly attention on their own "car culture" from the early 1970s.[3]

Perhaps appropriately, given the lag in the United Kingdom's embrace of what Flink called "automobility," more than a quarter of a century has elapsed before the appearance of Sean O'Connell's academic monograph on the social history of the motor car in Britain before the Second World War, as well as a collection on the motor car and popular culture to which Dr O'Connell has contributed.[4] The main reason given by Professor Barker for the neglect of the social history of motor transport was the greater accessibility of sources, such as company and family records, for the history of manufacturing and entrepreneurs. A similar explanation applies to the neglect of the social history the railways: studies have only recently appeared that attempt to fill that void.[5] For any transport mode, there is a genuine difficulty in making well-founded generalizations about its effects on culture and everyday life in Britain. There is only so much enlightenment that series of more or less reliable or complete passenger statistics, sales and registration figures or traffic counts can convey.

How has Sean O'Connell dealt with the difficulty of source material for the social history of the motor car? The documentary basis of this study, which has emerged from a University of Warwick doctoral thesis, includes a wide range of national and local newspapers, motoring magazines such as *Autocar* and *Motor*; trade journals such as *Motor Trader* and *Garage and Motor Agent*, guide books, touring itineraries and motoring maps, and archives such as those of the Automobile Association, the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents, and the University of Warwick's Modern Records Centre. He has also sampled the published tales and reminiscences of pioneer motorists, such as Dorothy Levitt's *Woman and her Car: a chatty little book for women who motor or want to*

motor (1909). A distinctive flavour is added to these traditional sources in the form of seventy-six (p. 7) – or is it seventy-five (p. 32)? –people's first-hand experiences of motoring before 1939, collected by the author through correspondence, questionnaires and in seventeen cases by oral history interview.

Dr. O'Connell also includes representations of the car in fiction, artworks and film, and these are sources that surely must be tackled if historians are to get past the silence of the vast majority of travellers about their experiences. These representations are, however, are mainly cordoned off in a final chapter, perhaps because of certain quite reasonable reservations expressed about their reliability (p. 185). But in an earlier chapter the author makes use of a novel to underpin his point about the commodification of the countryside by the motoring community (pp. 157-8); the question therefore arises whether the material in the final chapter might have been better distributed among the preceding ones, since so much of it returns to previously discussed issues of class, gender, sexual relations, crime and road safety. In short, these sources might well have been made to serve the themes of the book, rather than the other way round; he risk of sectioning off the treatment of the car in imaginative sources is that the aims of the book are rendered more diffuse.

Be that as it may, one of the main strengths of the book is its empirical foundation in an impressively wide range of sources. Not only that, but Dr O'Connell has looked at his subject from the perspectives of contemporary theory on consumption (notably the work of Mary Douglas and Pierre Bourdieu), class and gender. Although his analyses are generally clear and inviting, there are sometimes theory-laden statements such as "the car, like any technology, was subject to contestation amongst a variety of social, economic and political factors" (p. 1); "this discussion has attempted to fuse [economic and business] perspectives with a more sociohistorical analysis in order to initiate a new interdisciplinarity to the question at hand" (p. 31); and "each set of owners mediated their relationship to the car in the context of their own discrete economic and social position" (pp. 77-8). Such opaque and occasionally solecistic declarations threaten to cloak in ungainly abstraction the human realities they purport to illuminate.

Nevertheless, the application of theoretical perspectives in this study has enlightened more than it has obfuscated. It is refreshing to find at the outset Saul's condemnation of the conservatism of the early motor manufacturers preferred to the Panglossian complacency of so many econometric analyses. Similarly, by attending to the symbolic value of the car as a consumer object, Dr O'Connell is able to explain why fewer cars were sold in the interwar years than purely economic considerations would indicate. Such considerations of taste and status affected manufacturers' production strategies, and consequently the sale of vehicles: in 1938, it was reckoned by the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders that although ownership of cars had reached some two million, another half a million could have afforded to buy a car (p. 31). In one of the best and most original parts of the book, this shortfall is partly explained by the shame felt by the leisure motorist about buying cars on hire-purchase, and the ways in which the shame was covered: in particular, how provincial buyers would resort to London showrooms in order to conceal such disreputable transactions.

Acknowledging his general debt to Judy Wajcman's feminist account of technology, and specifically building upon the work of Virginia Scharff on the first decades of motoring in the United States [6], the author rightly claims to be the first to present a British case study of the gendering of car design, purchase, ownership and control. He presents a picture that is equally ambiguous as Scharff's: he reinforces her conclusion that the gender relations of the home were reinscribed in the car culture – "separate spheres on wheels," as Scharff put it.

He shows that in Britain too a culture of masculinity – reinforced by a torrent of propaganda from newspapers and the motoring magazines – served to deny women the driver's seat. We learn in particular that despite the currency among males, and indeed not a few women, of bogus scientific theories and jokes about women's inferior driving ability, the analysis of accident statistics by insurance companies revealed as early as 1935 that women were safer drivers than men (p. 58). But he also shows how design innovations presented as concessions to women, notably annual styling changes and increased comfort, were secretly welcomed by males less rugged and more style-conscious than their stereotype, despite protestations about the "feminisation" of the car. It is notable that Dr O'Connell omits from his discussion of gender more fundamental innovations like the electric self-starter and the enclosed, all-weather car body, which Virginia Scharff deals with at length in her U.S. study; one can only infer that these features were imported without much comment in the British motoring press.

The car is considered not only as a consumer object, but also as a technology that is "socially constructed through cultural and political factors as much as by tech-

nical necessity or scientific discovery" (p. 3). The author is inclined to characterize the latter view as "technological determinism," and is not alone in so doing, although such a reading represents a shift from the original meaning of this cumbersome term, that technological change is the ultimate driving force of social change. A view of technology that stresses the inevitability of its development is better captured by Langdon Winner's "autonomous technology," or perhaps Thomas Hughes's "technological momentum" (though the latter is intended not as a general feature of technology, but as a property of mature technological systems). Such ambiguity about basic terminology goes to show that social historians of technology have some way to go before taking debate beyond the thesis and antithesis of autonomous technology/technological determinism and social constructionism.[7]

That said, this reviewer finds congenial the stance taken in this book on the social relations of technology: as the author succinctly states, and amply demonstrates in this work, "a technology, such as the car, is not only socially constructed; it is also society-shaping" (p. 112). Leaving aside the theoretical issues, there is much fascinating social history uncovered by the more pedestrian, empirical means of trawling the documents and recording oral history. Among the topics covered in the book other than those already discussed are: the second-hand car market, and other means, such as joint purchase and second jobs, through which lower-, middle-, and working-class people, often intermittently, participated in the car market; a wide range of leisure issues, such as the increasing social segregation of holiday resorts as the middle classes looked to the car to escape the railway-borne hordes; the rise of picnicking, camping, and caravanning, much to the chagrin of hoteliers; and the proliferation of motor clubs; the phenomenon of the "joyrider," a term that was coined before the First World War, but was only in the inter-war period turned to cover the new offence of borrowing a car without the owner's permission (a practice often connected with another motoring reinterpretation of an old theme, "gutter-crawling"); road safety, in which the author points to the early function of the AA in helping their members to avoid speed traps.

One or two earlier reviewers have criticized the book for neglecting the impact of the motor car on socio-spatial relationships in general, and towns and cities in particular. There is some consideration of the urban environment, to be sure, but in the highly specific context of road safety, and it could certainly be argued that it gets short shrift when compared with the author's much more comprehensive account of rural uses of the car.

The countryside, as well as getting a substantial, multi-faceted chapter to itself, is also prominent in an earlier chapter on leisure, albeit as a consumer object for middle-class urbanites and suburbanites. This reviewer might well have felt such an imbalance keenly, as chair of an Open University course on the historical relations of cities and technology, and general editor of a series of associated textbooks and readers, which naturally devote much space to the implications of the car for urban form and planning, buildings, the design and location of retailing outlets, and so on.[8] Much of this material, however, insofar as it deals with the first half of the last century, focuses on the United States. Although British planners like Unwin, Bressey and Lutyens anticipated the potential impact on British cities during the interwar period, the real effects of mass private car ownership were only felt after the Second World War.

In his own period, as Dr O'Connell makes abundantly clear, apart from the special cases of doctors, commercial travellers and farmers, the motor car was mainly a vehicle for leisure pursuits, often used and therefore taxed for half a year only from the "Glorious 25th" of March (p. 84). It was not until the car became the main vehicle for shopping and journeys to work that the fabric of some of Britain's larger towns and cities was torn asunder.

A study of this kind is long overdue, but it has been well worth the wait. In its marriage of cultural theory and empirical research, Sean O'Connell's book points the way to the further development of the social history of motor transport. As well as taking the story into the era of mass car ownership, transport historians need to widen the focus of this particular study. Though this is far from being a criticism of such a groundbreaking piece of research, it could be said to exhibit the bias to private cars that has led motor historians to neglect other passenger modes based on the internal combustion engine, notably taxis, buses, char-a-bancs, coaches, motor cycles and scooters.[9] As Dr O'Connell points out himself, in the years immediately following the First World War, two-wheelers generally outsold cars in Britain; but more importantly, throughout the inter-war period it was in the form of public transport that the internal combustion engine exerted by far its greatest effects in everyday life.

Attention to buses, as well as to motor cycles and cyclecars, and to economic and cultural considerations, is surely necessary to explain the limited size of the car market in Britain before the Second World War. The

question of the relationship between the private car and public transport is tantalizingly touched upon in the chapter on road safety, where the author recounts arguments in Manchester over a tram-stop bye-law, intended to make motorists pull up behind trams when passengers were alighting (pp. 138-40). This and many other issues raised by this book need to be explored further, and it is a mark of the excellence of Dr O'Connell's work that such paths of research are made that much more inviting.

Notes

[1]. John Armstrong, "Transport History, 1945-95: the rise of a topic to maturity," *Journal of Transport History*, 19 (1998): 103-21.

[2]. T. C. Barker, "Slow Progress: forty years of motoring research," *Journal of Transport History*, 14 (1993): 142-65.

[3]. John B. Rae, *The Road and the Car in American Life* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1971); James J. Flink, *The Car Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1975); idem, *The Automobile Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1988).

[4]. David Thoms, Len Holden and Tim Claydon, ed., *The Motor Car and Popular Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998).

[5]. Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey: the industrialization of time and space in the 19th century* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980); Jack Simmons, *The Victorian Railway*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1991); Ralph Harrington, "The Neuroses of the Railway," *History Today*, 44 (7 July 1994): 15-21; Michael Freeman, *Railways and the Victorian Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).

[6]. Judy Wajcman, *Feminism Confronts Technology* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991); Virginia Scharff, *Taking the Wheel: women and the coming of the motor age* (New York: Free Press, 1991).

[7]. See Merritt Roe Smith and Leo Marx, ed., *Does Technology Drive History? The dilemma of technological determinism* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1994), for some attempts to move beyond this dichotomy.

[8]. Colin Chant and David Goodman, ed., *Pre-industrial Cities and Technology* (London: Routledge, 1999); Goodman and Chant, ed., *European Cities and Technology: industrial to post-industrial city* (London: Routledge, 1999); Gerrylynn K. Roberts and Philip Steadman, *American Cities and Technology: wilderness to wired city* (London: Routledge, 1999); Chant, ed., *The Pre-industrial Cities and Technology Reader* (London: Routledge, 1999); Goodman, ed., *The European Cities and Technology Reader: industrial to post-industrial city*, (London: Routledge, 1999); Roberts, ed., *The American Cities and Technology Reader: wilderness to wired city* (London: Routledge 1999).

[9]. Barker (1993), pp.157-9.

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