

Proceedings of  
Automotive Historians  
Australia  
Volume 2

Edited by  
Harriet Edquist  
with Helen Stitt

**AHA 2018**  
**Autopia:**  
**The car**  
**and the**  
**modern city**



**AUTOMOTIVE**  
**HISTORIANS**  
**AUSTRALIA INC**

## Proceedings of Automotive Historians Australia Inc. Volume 2

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The papers in this volume were presented at the 3rd annual conference of Automotive Historians Australia Inc. held on 11-12 August 2018 at the University of Melbourne. It was supported by Australian Centre for Architectural History, Urban and Cultural Heritage and was convened by Helen Stitt.

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Image: K's Hotel drive-in bottle shop, Dandenong (1967)  
Photograph by Simon Reeves

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**Edited by  
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In his award-winning book *Car Wars* (2004), Graeme Davison explores the complex and entangled relationship between the modern Australian city, its inhabitants and the motor car. He notes that, were our civilization suddenly to be destroyed 'future archaeologists will surely find no more significant ruins than the highway flyovers and clover leaves, parking stations and drive-in shopping malls of a society whose most valued tool, and most valued status symbol, is the automobile'.

The book's subtitle *How the car won our hearts and conquered our cities* summarises the competing public and private interests that lie at the heart of Davison's study. With the arrival of the affordable family motorcar we entered into, Davison argues, a Faustian bargain: 'By attempting to universalize individual mobility the car created congestion. By building freeways to bring communities closer together it often endangered the cohesion of the communities themselves. By feeding the desire for speed it caused death and injury'.

*Car Wars* is a compelling study of a changing metropolis and the forces, political, cultural and social that shaped it. The automobile has defined the experience of most twentieth-century urban and rural dwellers in Australia; it has shaped our cities, linked them to the interior, spearheaded industrialisation right through the automotive supply chain and provided amenity and pleasure to millions of people.

With Davison's study in mind the focus of the 3rd Annual Conference of Automotive Historians Australia is the relationship between the car and the city and papers were invited that considered the impact of the automobile on all aspects of urban life.

Hosted by the Australian Centre for Architectural History, Urban and Cultural Heritage (ACAHUCH) at Melbourne School of Design, the conference papers understandably had a strong urban and architectural focus. Davison's keynote address provided a framework for the two-day discussions as he reminded us how significant the motor car was to twentieth-century Australian life 'with its promise of freedom, opportunity and prosperity, [it]

became the most potent symbol of the social and cultural paradigm we call, too simply perhaps, modernity'.

The papers presented took up the theme of the car and the city in different ways. One notable theme that struck a chord with the conference audience was the changing function of the road which became not simply a motor way but the site of new architectural typologies catering to motorists. Davison referred to the various forms of post-war drive-in amenity in his keynote address while Simon Reeves elaborated on the phenomenon in his study of the drive-in cinema and bank (1954), 'the drive-in shopping centre (1954), drive-in bottle shop (1955) and drive-in restaurant (1957)'. Philip Goad and Andrew Murray were more specific, focusing on one particular type, the drive-in restaurant - Robin Boyd's Fishbowl on the one hand and American fast food chains and their Australian progeny on the other.

Norm Darwin introduced an urban overview to the conference in his discussion of Fisherman's Bend as Australia's Detroit, home to a car industry far larger than GM-H, that is now almost gone. Giorgio Marfella on the other hand examined the technology transfer between the two major twentieth century industries - automotive and building - where innovations in windshield design made their way into new glazing techniques in architecture.

Moving away from the built environment, three papers dealt with texts related in one way or another to automobiles. Harriet Edquist examined Eleanor Dark's *Return to Coolami* arguing that it is both Australia's first road novel and a critique of modernity; Stephen Banham discussed the relationship between design and profit in *Morgan's Street Directory* from its beginnings in 1917 to the moment when it was overtaken by *Melways* while AnneMarie Brennan showed how *The Practical Australian Motorist Illustrated* gave the suburban car owner the confidence and skills to maintain their vehicle and drive it correctly.

Together the papers in this *Proceedings* offer new research into automotive history and contribute new insights into its relevance to Australian architectural history, urban history and culture.

**Stephen Banham**

The accidental cartographer:  
The design of the *Morgan's Street Directory* (1917-1976)

**AnnMarie Brennan**

Creating the educated driver:  
*The Practical Australian Motorist Illustrated*

**Norm Darwin**

The Automobile and Fishermans Bend – Did the  
automobile make Fishermans Bend or did Fishermans  
Bend make the automobile?

**Harriet Edquist**

*Return to Coolami*: History and the crisis  
of modernity in Australia's first road novel

**Philip Goad**

Featurism and the Fish Bowl: Robin Boyd's  
'Drive-in' Design for 1969

**Giorgio Marfella**

Behind the shield: glass as vehicle of technology  
transfer from the automotive industry to the  
International Style.

**Andrew Murray**

One Hawaiian pack to take-away: The evolution  
of the Australian roadside restaurant.

**Simon Reeves**

Downtown by DeLorean: A road trip through  
some drive-in typologies, 1955-1985

**Keynote:**  
**Beyond Nostalgia:**  
**Rethinking the history**  
**of the car in a post-**  
**Fordist world**



For almost a century Australia has enjoyed a long love affair with the car. When I was a boy we used to say that Australia rode on the sheep's back but we could just as well say that it rode in the cabin of a Holden ute. The car transformed the ways we lived. Making cars provided hundreds of thousands of Australians, including many immigrants, with good livelihoods. Cars widened our horizons, shrank distance and enhanced personal freedom. The automobile, with its promise of freedom, opportunity and prosperity, became the most potent symbol of the social and cultural paradigm we call, too simply perhaps, modernity.

To be modern, writes Marshall Berman in *All that is Solid Melts into Air*, 'is to be in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and of the world— and the same time, threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are.' When Berman wrote those words in 1983, he was thinking mostly of the threat of nuclear war; when we read them now it is the threat of global extinction through man-made climate change that leaps into our minds.

For much of the twentieth century, Australians were bit players in this global drama, eager consumers of cars designed and built elsewhere. Only occasionally, as, for example, in the 1960s and 70s when Jack Brabham and Ron Tauranac, who we honour in this lecture, combined their talents to win the Formula One championship, did Australia claim the international

spotlight. They are giants in a story mostly played out by mere mortals. There are still Australian drivers winning Formula One races, and Australian engineers and entrepreneurs making components for a global car-making industry. The occasional Australian, like Michael Simcoe and Jac Nasser, even makes it big in the international motor industry. With the closure of the Holden Ford and Toyota plants, however, the best days of the Australian car industry appear to be behind us. We look back on those years with a sense of nostalgia, mixed, perhaps, with anxiety about the hard choices that our long dependence on the car has now created for us.

Nostalgia can sharpen, but also distort, our understanding of history. Remember Hegel's famous aphorism: 'The owl of Minerva flies at dusk.' Or to say it more simply: wisdom comes just at the moment when a culture or institution passes away. The nineteenth century was the great age of steam; our century is the digital age while the twentieth century, which witnessed great technological advances in many fields, was pre-eminently the age of the automobile. As they are superseded, the essential features of the paradigm that sustained us for most of the last fifty years—the Fordist system of assembly-line production and its cousins, the urban freeway, the drive-in and the low-density suburb with its sprawling owner-occupied houses—are thrown into sharper relief.

Histories of the car tend to fall into one of two shapes, or what we sometimes call master narratives. For

a long while it looked like a success story, a narrative of progressive technological improvement, material comfort and human advancement. In his recent brilliant book *The Rise and Fall of American Growth*, the economic historian Robert J. Gordon places the automobile at the centre of his explanation of why the middle of the twentieth century delivered unparalleled and widely shared prosperity to the American people. Neither the first industrial revolution of the late eighteenth and nineteenth century, nor the digital revolution of our own times, have delivered the benefits of economic growth on the same scale or to as many people. That 'great leap forward', to use Gordon's phrase, seems both unprecedented and unlikely to be repeated.

In its heyday, the car inspired visions of a world of limitless mobility. One of the most enthusiastic Australian prophets of the new age was the early twentieth century journalist, planner, aviator and wireless enthusiast George Taylor. 'Modern times are especially reflective of the human tendency to progress', he declared in 1918. 'This perpetual forward motion is common to every sphere of life: domestic, commercial, artistic, scientific.' In his *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* (1971) Reyner Banham memorably dubbed this imagined world of perpetual forward motion 'autopia', a word no sooner coined with playful intent than Walt Disney gave it form in his American playground, Disneyland.

Autopia may be a fantasy but it has a tenacious hold on our imaginations. As I remarked in *Car Wars*: 'If cars were worshipped, it was in part because they delivered real benefits and enlarged people's lives in highly valued ways. The freedoms that came with the car were real freedoms. They can only be understood if we first appreciate the more limited and regulated world from which the car delivered us.' If we are to understand the appeal of modernism we first need to think ourselves back into the constrained postwar world of petrol rationing, rundown and overcrowded public transport, muddy heartbreak streets, and weary housewives lugging their shopping home in buggies and string bags.

Right from the beginning, of course, there were those who viewed the arrival of the car as a disaster and its unstoppable progress as a road to ruin. What looked like life-enhancing freedom from the driver's seat could look more threatening to those on the kerb or caught in its path. One of the first to sound the alarm – in the most amusing way – was the writer Kenneth Grahame in his wonderful children's story *Wind in the Willows*. *Wind in the Willows* was published in 1908 and the story's most memorable character, Mr Toad, personifies the mixture of innocent pleasure and lethal danger that the pioneer motorist represented. Intoxicated by the freedom of the road, Toad is contemptuous of everyone and everything in his rampaging way. He has only to start his car's engine and he is rapturously transported:

As the familiar sound broke forth, the old passion seized on Toad and completely mastered him, body and soul. As if in a dream he found himself, somehow, seated in the driver's seat; as if in a dream, he pulled the lever and swung the car round the yard and out through the archway; and, as if in a dream, all sense of right and wrong, all fear of obvious consequences, seemed temporarily suspended. He increased his pace, and as the car devoured the street and leapt forth on the high road through the open country he was only conscious that he was Toad once more, Toad at his best and highest, Toad the Terror, the traffic queller, the Lord of the lone trail, before whom all must give way or be smitten into nothingness and everlasting night'

When Mr Toad crashes his car, squanders his inheritance and gets into trouble with the police, his friends extract a promise not to touch a motorcar again. But his penitence is only momentary. 'Then you don't promise,' said the Badger, 'never to touch a motor-car again?' 'Certainly not!' replied Toad emphatically. 'On the contrary, I faithfully promise that the very first motor-car I see, poop- oop! off I go in it!'

Over the course of the twentieth century, as cities became more congested, the toll of death on the roads increased, and especially from the 1970s, as the twin threats of peak oil and carbon pollution loomed larger,

visions of the automobile itself became bleaker. Australian filmmakers created some memorably dark images of the automobile age. George Miller, who had witnessed the results of road carnage as a doctor in St Vincent's emergency ward, produced the apocalyptic road movie *Mad Max* while Peter Weir gave us the weirdly dystopic *The Cars That Ate Paris*. The car also inspired some engagingly romantic movies like *FJ Holden*, *The Big Steal* and Ray Argall's beautiful *Return Home*.

There is now a small library of books expounding or analyzing what the American historian Brian Ladd (2008) calls 'autophobia', a fear or hatred of cars almost as excessive and irrational as the 'autophilia' of its admirers. Piles of battered car bodies, like the carnage from some technological plague, decorate their lurid covers.

'Autophobia' comes in as many versions as there are reasons for fearing or hating cars: Marxist, environmentalist, sentimental, technophobic. One of the first anti-car writers was the Soviet propagandist Ilya Ehrenburg whose 1929 novel *The Life of the Automobile* portrays the car as an agent of American imperialism. 'Ford is everywhere', he writes. 'The automobile has come to show even the slowest of minds that the earth is truly round, that the heart is just a poetic relic, that a human being contains two standard gauges: one indicates miles, the other minutes.' It was still common in the 1960s and 70s to see mass automobilisation as the product of a

sinister conspiracy between American oil and car companies, seeking to dominate the world by buying up and closing down the perfectly serviceable public transport systems, sending their emissaries around the world and seducing politicians and technocrats with free trips to Detroit.

There was undeniably an element of truth in such accounts. In *Car Wars* I tell how pro-American businessman, like Kenneth and Baillieu Myer, sponsored scholarships for young Australia engineers to study American techniques of highway design and traffic engineering at the Yale Summer Schools run by Wilbur Smith, the leading consultant to Australian transport authorities, including the Melbourne and Metropolitan Transport Study which gave us the 1969 freeway plan. In my recent book *City Dreamers* (2016) I recount the story of the 1964 RACV conference encounter between Burton Marsh, an emissary of the American Automobile Association and advocate for the American recipe of full automobilisation, and the gentlemanly British engineer, Colin Buchanan, who advocated a more adaptive approach. I don't altogether discount the idea that there was a fair amount of hucksterism and sometimes straight-out bribery in the way the car lobby won over our politicians and officials. But during the 50s and 60s, when many of the critical decisions were made, the convenience and pleasure of motoring were so self-evident that most people needed little convincing. It was only when we got further down the path towards full

automobilisation that the costs began to mount. That's why I describe it, in *Car Wars* as a Faustian bargain – like Dr Faustus we were seduced into a way of thinking and organising our world whose longterm costs we could only partly see.

Narratives of the car in postwar Australia are now framed by the curve of its heroic rise and sad decline. The iconic foundational image is of Labor Prime Minister Ben Chifley standing rather stiffly amongst and handful of company men as the first FX Holden rolls of the production line at Fisherman's Bend in 1948. The Labor government had made zealous efforts to generate a local car industry, even including a scheme to bring the British Rootes Group to Bendigo. But within months, as we all know, Chifley was to be defeated at the polls by Bob Menzies' resurgent Liberals who promised to 'empty out the socialists and fill the bowzers' by ending petrol rationing. In the famous *Bulletin* cartoon Going my way on a full petrol tank it is Menzies who is helping the voter into his Holden while poor Ben Chifley stands disconsolately beside his old jalopy. There would be other ceremonies on the Holden production line, for example when the company produced its millionth vehicle, but none as sad as last year when the last locally made Holden rolled off the production line at Elizabeth. There were no politicians in attendance on that day, although Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull sent his condolences. Jimmy Barnes, an old Elizabeth boy, sang 'Working Class

Man' for the workingmen and women who would lose their jobs when the plant closed down.

Although its death had been long expected, the end of the local car industry produced some strong responses. Anger and indignation from some who suspected, not without reason, that it had been sacrificed to the god of competition policy rather than succumbing to an inevitable demise. In his Penguin special *End of the Road* Gideon Haigh notes that most countries with successful car industries offer various forms of protection and ask why Australia felt compelled to remove the very modest levels of subsidy that remained. More common, especially among those who have been involved in the industry in some way, is a sense of nostalgia. The rise and decline of the car industry has coincided more or less with the baby boomer generation and responses to the decline of the car industry are mingled with that generation's complex accounting for the mixtures of luck, guilt and foreboding in their own lives. There has been a rush of books, films and exhibitions celebrating the history of the car in Australia. I got mixed up in some of this myself. I co-wrote some episodes of Paul Clarke's ABC doco *Wide Open Road*, something I put on my resumé with some hesitation. The narrative curve in my first drafts of the series is still vaguely recognizable in the final product, but along the way the old rev-heads that Clarke and his mates employed to tone up my rather too nuanced academic prose changed

it out of recognition. Not deterred by the experience, I also contributed some prose to Simon Catterson's nice picture book *Behind the Wheel* and I'm to be a talking head in yet another documentary on the rise and decline of the industry. More recently, I have joined a team based in Adelaide and Monash conducting an oral history project on the history of Holden. The project is being generously funded as a linkage grant by the ARC and, as a goodbye goodwill gesture by General Motors but with participation by the union and other interested groups.

I'm just starting to think about how such a story should be told and what mixture of pride, sorrow, anger and nostalgia one might bring to it. I don't altogether disparage nostalgia although I believe it's not enough to make good history. As I found in writing *Car Wars*, where I tell a bit about my own family's encounters with the car, nostalgia can be an effective hook for drawing readers into the story of the car. Because I'm not actually a baby boomer but a war baby I have witnessed a good deal of the story myself.

I have visual evidence for this: a family photograph taken in 1942 depicts me as a baby standing in the backyard of our house in Banchory Street Essendon. In the background you can see my Dad's car, a 1928 Essex, in our makeshift garage – notice I don't say carport, a term that didn't arrive in Australian English till the 50s. You can tell it's wartime because the mound of earth you see in the foreground is

actually the roof of our air-raid shelter – remember we live close to Essendon airport, then an American airforce base – and my Dad, who is a plumber as well as a local air raid warden, has erected that tank to ensure that we don't die of thirst if the Japanese bombers have destroyed our water supply. For much of the war, the Essex was put upon blocks as dad cycled to work in the Maribyrnong munitions factory. When peace came at last he stripped it down and turned it into ute by removing the rear seats and sliding a timber tray of his own design onto the back. I can still remember the joyous day when he drove it back from the shed at the back of my grandmother's house where he assembled it.

Even then Dad had his sights on a new car but the dollar shortage meant that the American cars and trucks that Australians preferred were in short supply. The only new ute on offer was a British Bedford. As the son of English immigrants, Dad might have been expected to have a preference for the British product but the tray was really too small and nobody much liked its boxy English style. One day in 1950 I was walking home from school down Buckley Street with my friend Maurice Johnson. Like schoolboys everywhere we liked to spot cars. Maurice was the first to spot the sleek new cream Chevrolet ute but I was the one to cry out with surprise when I saw my father at the wheel. If there a moment when the Davisons became modern this was it. The ute doubled as a workhorse for the family business and the family car. Mum and Dad sat in front across the

bench seat with my little sister while my older sister and I sat on one of the Essex's old horsehair seats under a canvas hood in the back. With a caravan behind it took us to the far corners of the state. It took my junior cricket team to away matches. Mum long insisted that the Chev was the best car we had ever owned.

In 1950 you still couldn't get a Holden ute or station wagon. Later on in the early 1960s, after briefly trying Ford Mainline ute, Dad purchased a Holden station wagon. He had paid just over £1000 for the Chev but by the early 60s he could buy a Holden for about half that price and wages in the meantime had risen appreciably. Mum actually never learned to drive herself but by the time we kids left school, buying a car was high on our agenda. My secondary teacher's scholarship not only paid all my university fees but my stipend of seven pounds a week was enough to buy and maintain a second-hand car. I bought my first car, a 1948 Triumph Roadster from my Uncle Jack McConnell. Jack was the Secretary of the Victorian Liberal Party and in the magnificent Triumph he must have cut quite a dash as he toured electorates during the 1949 election promising to throw out the socialists and fill up the bowsters. By the time I bought it, for £100, the canvas hood was torn and the beige duco was fading. But I repainted it in British racing green and bought a new hood. That's my little sister Jan, not my girlfriend, standing with the family dog outside our house. Powered by an old Vanguard wet-sleeve engine, the Triumph belied its speedy looks. One

evening I was driving my girlfriend to a friend's twenty-first birthday party in the hills when the brakes failed. Only the sudden and providential appearance of a runoff saved us from disaster. Word of the episode travelled back to the girl's father who delivered the ultimatum: get rid of that car or stop taking out my daughter. He kindly offered to intercede with a neighbor, a local used car dealer, who found me an excellent replacement, a one-owner FJ Holden which I later wrote off in a head-on collision on the way to uni after a teaching round.

Any baby boomer, I daresay, could offer a similar narrative of the mixed pleasure, opportunity, danger and disaster in their encounters with the car. The Morris Mini of our early married years, the sturdy Toyota station wagon of our kid's schooldays, the little Honda Civic I drove to Monash, and the Prius of our retirement years: these cars marked the stages of our lives.

Personal narratives like this have a place in the broader history of the car, for they reveal the powerful emotions that have shaped, and still do shape, our encounters with it. But if our histories are to escape the self-indulgence of nostalgia, they need broader bearings and sharper questions. So, in the second part of this talk I want to suggest some lines of thought and investigation that acknowledge the post-Fordist world in which we now find ourselves yet also move beyond the unproductive binaries of autophilia and autophobia. This may require to think more critically about the complex

package that we call the automobile: to recognise *both* its liberating and its confining effects; to acknowledge the ways in which we have learned to control it and the ways in which it, and the fabric of ideas and institutions that have built up around it, still control us. As its high noon passes, the voids created by its disappearance reveal the nature and extent of its power. The abandoned factories with their vacant car parks; the automobile dependent suburbs, marooned from the new frontiers of opportunity; the aching void at the heart of a nation that only seems to dig things up and no longer to make them: these are among the symptoms of a rift in our society and culture that we are still struggling to absorb.

We can approach this question from different angles and in the time that is left I'd like to offer some thoughts about three topics: the place of the car, especially the Holden car, in the national imagination; about its influence upon Australia's social structure, especially its class structure; and finally – since this conference is sub-titled 'The Car and the Modern City' – about the car and the changing structure of our cities.

When the first Holden rolled off the production line, the Australian car industry was already almost half a century old. But the decision of General Motors to manufacture a car designed for Australian conditions in Australia was a significant moment in our national life. For the first time there was to be a mass-produced car manufactured entirely in Australia and

settings. The image of the Holden as 'Australia's Own Car' was something that GMH methodically cultivated by a campaign that, in method as well as substance, was as modern as the manufacture of the car itself. One of my hopes is that, with access to GMH's own records, our project will be able to better understand how Holden was able gradually to win a place in the nation's heart, so completely that when, at last, Detroit pulled the plug, its closure seemed more like an Australian failure than an American betrayal.

*Car Wars* is mostly about how the car, considered from a consumer's point of view, changed the city. I devoted only about half a dozen pages to its impact on Melbourne's industrial geography, workforce and social structure. You can't cover everything in a book of that length and reviewers hardly seemed to notice my omission but in retrospect I think it was a serious one. I later cowrote a history of Monash University, an institution intended by its founders to provide the scientific and technological know-how and training for a new industrial region anchored by the automobile industry. Looking from the windows of the Ming Wing towards the saw tooth roofs of the Holden and Nissan plants I began to see connections between the car plants and the campus that had previously eluded me.

Places like Dandenong and Broadmeadows exhibited the integrated pattern of economic, industrial and cultural characteristics known as Fordism. The key features

made, at least so it was claimed, for Australian conditions. The claim that the Holden was Australia's Own Car, of course, was always a debatable one since the company that made it was a wholly-owned subsidiary of an American one and while Australians were involved in its design, it remained an identifiable product of GM's international design stable. From the outset, GMH realised that it would need to persuade Australians to adopt the car as their own. At the end of the war Australians' attitudes towards the United States remained ambivalent. American troops and ships may have saved Australia from the Japanese but many Australians still looked to England as the Motherland and half-resented American success and technical know-how. Aware of how public attitudes could influence their business success, GMH commissioned Roy Morgan, who had acquired a franchise to conduct public opinion research from the Gallup organization, to survey Australian attitudes towards America and towards their own company. They also surveyed the features that Australians wanted in a family car – six cylinders, five or six passengers, bench seats, column gearshift, rugged lightweight construction. In its publicity the company shrewdly sought to reflect back the features that drivers identified as characteristically Australian. Early advertisements display the Holden in typical bush settings, amidst flowering wattles, in country towns, on farms and sheep stations and even on the top of the nation's tallest mountain. More rarely, and usually only from the 1960s, do they place it city, suburban or beach

of the paradigm may be briefly summarised:

- Large-scale manufacturing plants located usually on greenfields sites on the urban periphery using Fordist production line technology;
- The application of functional design and 'flow technology' to many other features of industrial, domestic and social life;
- Interventionist government action to foster the development of industry, including tariff, housing, migration, planning and infrastructure policies.

By the 1960s the Melbourne suburbs with the fastest rates of industrial growth were concentrated particularly on the city's northwestern and southeastern fringes. While Dandenong and Broadmeadows both had access to rail, many of the new plants were located on extensive greenfields sites reliant on the new forms of automobilised freight transport, such as the semi-trailer and the forklift truck. Ford and Holden, along with other American companies such as agricultural machinery manufacturer International Harvester and food preserver H. J. Heinz, anchored suburbs that also hosted a range of subsidiary industries.

One of the most perceptive observers of these developments was the German-born photographer Wolfgang Sievers. Sievers' familiarity with the aesthetic principles of the Bauhaus and respect for industrial technology enabled him to discern the inner logic, as well as the functionalist aesthetic, of

the new industrial landscape. In stark black and white he captures the smooth, sweeping lines of its architecture, the intimate communion between humans and machines, and the ceaseless rapid motion of the production line.

Sievers' photographs inspire both admiration and disquiet. Who are these workers apparently so silently and compliantly wedded to their machines? Are they happy or sad, willing workers or dumb industrial slaves? Were the immigrants who supplied much of their labour force on the bottom rung of a ladder of opportunity or were they, in a word often used at the time, simply 'factory fodder' for greedy American capitalists? In 1973 I was teaching a fourth years honours course here at Melbourne University on the history of postwar migration, when workers at Ford's Broadmeadows factory, led by militant trade unionists, embarked on what turned out to be nine week strike. One of my students John O'Hara, later a TV producer, went out to interview them. The unions had many grievances: low pay, bad working conditions, insensitive and humiliating treatment by English-speaking supervisors. 'Working on the [production] line, it dominates your life', one worker complained. 'You simply can't afford to get behind.' According to a Turkish, member of the strike committee, Ford was 'absorbing migrant blood and making millions'.

Fifty years on, with the great car plants now abandoned, many of those car workers look back on the 1970 as the glory days of the car industry. Recently I read an interesting book, *An Economy*

*is Not a Society*, written by a former graduate of my own department, the historian and novelist Dennis Glover. Glover grew up as the son of British immigrants in Doveton, the Housing Commission suburb built to supply housing for the nearby Holden car plant in Dandenong. He later took a history degree at Monash and a doctorate at Cambridge and became a speechwriter for Labor politicians. He looks back fondly on his childhood in Doveton, a working class community which offered secure relatively well-paid employment for both his parents, decent public housing and state education. Mark Peel, another son of British migrants, presents a rather similar picture of Elizabeth, another General Motor's town, in his fine history, *Good Times, Hard Times* Perhaps you will say that Glover and Peel – who escaped to successful academic careers—have a rosier view of these places than other less successful children of migrants. If you want a bleaker view of life as a migrant child in Elizabeth read Jimmy Barnes' brilliant autobiography *Working Class Boy*. But Glover's picture of Doveton accords pretty well with the account of two Monash University sociologists who studied the suburb in the 1970s for their book *An Australian Newtown*. Looking back, Glover and Peel, both avowed Leftists, see much to admire in the Fordist compact of capitalist manufacturing and state-provided tariff protection, transport, housing, education and social welfare that undergirt the prosperity of these places through the long postwar boom, and much to lament in the neo-liberal revolution that has swept it away. What

the striking workers of 1973 saw as capitalist oppression we may now see as something more benign.

New migrants still come to Australia, but from different sources and by different means. The skilled migrants who come, often from Asia, with tertiary qualifications either or in prospect or already under their belt, are readily absorbed into the post-Fordist economy of professional and service occupations. But those, like refugees from Sub-Saharan Africa or the Middle East, may well end up in places like Doveton or Elizabeth where there is cheaper housing but no longer the factory jobs, public housing or state-provided services that made them habitable for a previous generation. The decline of manufacturing, exemplified by the car industry, has also contributed to the phenomenon the economist Bob Gregory calls 'the disappearing middle' – the layer of skilled and semi-skilled manual occupations—which contributed, so it is argued, to Australia's democratic ethos. If Australia is now becoming a more unequal society it is, in part, because of the shrinkage of the car industry.

Let me turn, finally, to my third theme: the effects of the rise and relative decline of the car on the changing shape of our cities. In 1951 social researchers employed by the Board of Works, then Melbourne's main planning authority, conducted a survey of the people's transport habits and residential preferences. They asked people two questions: Where do you want to move from? Where do you want to move

to? Overwhelmingly, they wanted to move out of the inner city and to the suburbs. Some of the places they hoped to move to were well serviced by public transport: there was some spare capacity in the excellent train and tram systems that Melbourne had inherited from the colonial period. In that year, public transport was still the main way in which people got to work. Almost as many walked or rode a bike as travelled by car. Some autophobes think that the car created the demand for suburban living. But Melbourne had been suburbanizing for over a century the car was just the apparently heaven-sent means for a new generation to enjoy it. The 1954 Melbourne Planning Scheme forecast that the city would expand rapidly, especially to the southeast, along its existing travel corridors with only modest additions to the public transport network and more rapid increases in the volume of road traffic. By the 1960s suburban development was breaking free of the old public transport network and the highest rates of car ownership were concentrated in a belt of low-density southeastern suburbs stretching from Oakleigh to Mount Waverley and from Moorabbin to Doncaster I call 'the cream brick frontier'.

Between the rows of cream brick houses with their drives and carports there sprang up a new kind of drive-in landscape inspired by the same Fordist logic as shaped the car plants where many of their residents spent their working days. This was the land of the used car lot, the service station, the drive-in bottle shop, the beer barn, the

drive-in cinema and the motel. Plot them on the map and they form a rough north-south line between Blackburn and Springvale Roads between Burwood Highway and Dandenong Road. The Oakleigh Motel, Melbourne's first, was opened early in 1957 just near where the Olympic marathon runner had turned and headed back to the MCG just a few months earlier. The Metro Drive-In was just a mile or so further east on the corner of Wellington Road and Blackburn Roads. The Burvale, the most striking of the new drive-in hotels, was strategically located on the corner of Springvale Road and Burwood highway. The project builder A.V. Jennings, who applied the lessons of Fordist production to the housing industry, also took the first step towards drive-in shopping when he built Pinewood as part of his new housing development on Blackburn Road. When the Myer brothers, Kenneth and Baillieu failed to convince the company's board to build a shopping centre on land they had purchased on the corner of Blackburn Road and Burwood Highway, they sold it to Coles who established their first K-Mart. Myer later hired American consultants who mapped the distribution of car ownership in the eastern suburbs before recommending a new regional shopping centre as close as possible to the junction of Warrigal and Springvale Roads. Chadstone, now the nation's largest mall, was consciously designed around the car. It included a driving school so housewives could qualify for a licence and angled parking so that they avoided embarrassing confrontations with other shoppers. Monash, Australia's first

drive-in university, was established in the same year, 1960. Its founders had tried unsuccessfully to acquire a site on a major public transport route but had to settle for one about a kilometre and half from the rail and a with a promise, yet to be fulfilled, that it would be connected by a branch line. Monash applied the same Fordist logic that had shaped the car plants and drive-ins to the business of higher education. Linking the floors of its most prominent landmark, the nine-storey Menzies Building, was a series of escalators. I like to think of them as a kind of academic conveyor belt, drawing in raw high school students and turning out well-trained graduates.

In the 1960s it looked very much as though the cream brick frontier would become the city's favourite place to live. The region already boasted among the highest per capita incomes in the city. But, as we know now, the belief that the frontier would continue to expand and that its residents to grow ever more prosperous, was doomed to disappointment. Already, by the 1970s, the drift of population back towards the centre had begun to gain momentum. Now if you map the distribution of high-income households, you find that the metropolis has almost turned itself inside out. In the 1960s a social researcher who sought to map the most livable suburbs of Melbourne might have looked for the areas with the biggest houses and gardens, the biggest shopping centres and playing fields and the best road system. When the Age maps Melbourne's most livable suburbs today, however,

what it looks for is not freeways and shopping centres but parks and cafes, not automobility but walkability, and it finds, predictably, that the most livable suburbs are concentrated around the city's rich endowment of pre-automobile buildings and infrastructure. Meanwhile the cream brick frontier, once seen as a frontier of opportunity, looks more and more like a danger zone. Researchers at Griffith University have ranked Australian suburbs on their fearsome sounding VAMPIRE Index which measures their vulnerability to the twin hazards of automobile dependence and mortgage stress. The most vulnerable suburbs are those on the edge.

With the hindsight of this great reversal, we may be inclined to look back on the history of autopia with mixed feelings. Was it a nice ride while it lasted, or a great mistake? Should we now erect a mental Wrong Way Go Back sign and attempt to retrace our way towards the compact, well-integrated European style city we might have been if the automobile had not seduced with its beguiling promise of 'adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and of the world'? These, perhaps, are questions to which we will return in the course of the day. In conclusion I'd like to offer just a few cautionary thoughts.

First, while once should never flinch from whatever lessons history may have for us, I am reluctant to see the era of heyday of the car as a great mistake. The gains it brought in human living standards and social opportunity were significant – perhaps the greatest leap

forward in the history of the world – and if they could not be sustained in the long run, perhaps we should not be too regretful for, as J.M Keynes famous remarked, in the long run we are all dead.

Second, we should not under-estimate the enduring appeal of automobility or its amazing powers of recuperation. When we look back over the past sixty years of mass automobilisation, many of the hazards that threatened its progress have been ameliorated if not overcome. The truly horrendous loss of life through traffic accidents in the 1950s was substantially cut by a combination of better-designed roads and vehicle and intelligent regulation, such as the blood alcohol and seat belt laws that Australia largely pioneered. In the 1960s planners predicted that without 300 miles of new freeways Melbourne traffic congestion would bring the city to a halt; in fact, only a fraction of that system was actually built but the city did not grind to a halt, thanks largely to the little heralded efforts of traffic engineers to manage the existing road system more efficiently, although some observers might now say that congestion has now reached intolerable levels. (Congestion, after all, is an inevitable and necessary feature of any traffic system.)

Meanwhile, autopians imagine a future in which electric autonomous vehicles managed by ride-sharing technologies will overcome the environmental dangers that now block its path. I'm not as optimistic as they are for I suspect that the shift in attitudes towards the car that is now under way is not simply

a response to environmental hazards, but part of a more general questioning of the social benefits of unrestrained mobility.

Almost as fanciful as the autopians vision of a city of limitless mobility is the now fashionable planning ideal of the twenty minute city in which everyone can find everything they want –jobs, shopping, education, medical care, cafes, concerts –in a twenty minute walk or bicycle ride. It is a worthwhile aspiration as long as its advocates don't think that wishing, in our highly complex ramified kind of city will make it so. Digital technologies may ease some forms of communication but the evidence so far is that the kind of complex and flexible division of labour it stimulates actually increases the need for face-to face communication.

My hunch, for what it's worth, is that automobility, in some form or other, will be with us for some time yet, probably in combination with a range of other forms of communication and transport (and I haven't even mentioned goods transport). We may feel, with some justification, that we have had a good run with the motor car, put a lot of carbon into the atmosphere, and that it's now time to behave ourselves and go easier on the planet. But elsewhere, I fear, the automobile age has only just begun and as soon as we First Worlders get out of the driver's seat millions of others will be ready and willing to take our place.

## BIOGRAPHY

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Graeme Davison is emeritus Professor of History at Monash University. He has taught at Melbourne and Monash Universities and held visiting appointments at Harvard, Edinburgh, ANU, Tübingen and King's College London. He has written widely on Australian urban and cultural history and has been active as an advisor and commentator on heritage, museums and urban policy. His books include *The Rise and Fall of Marvellous Melbourne* (1978 and 2004),

*Car Wars: How the Car Won Our Hearts and Conquered our Cities* (2004) and *City Dreamers: The Urban Imagination in Australia* (2016). He was a member of the expert working group overseeing the recent ACOLA report on Sustainable Urban Transport. He is a Fellow of the Australian Academies of Humanities and Social Sciences and an Officer in the Order of Australia.

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Helen Stitt, Convenor

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### About

Following the highly successful Shifting Gear exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria, Automotive Historians Australia was founded in Melbourne in 2015, to promote the understanding and enjoyment of automotive history through scholarly research, discussion and events. As such, the Automotive Historians Australia vision is:

**To promote research, education, archival collection and dissemination of knowledge about the history of the Australian automotive industry, and to involve members, industry and others in this history through publications, events, meetings and conferences.**

Therefore, Automotive Historians Australia aims to:

- Create communication and facilitate discussion, criticism and debate between people active in automotive history and archiving in Australia
- Promote research in the subject of automotive history
- Hold a regular conference and other related events
- Produce a scholarly journal
- Encourage student participation activities
- Support the teaching of automotive history



