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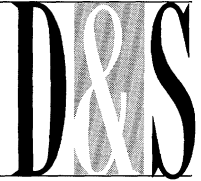
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SEAN O'CONNELL, *The Car in British Society: Class, Gender and Motoring 1896–1939*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998. 240 pp. £14.95 (pbk)

The automobile is arguably the most iconic consumer good of the 20th century. As this century comes to a close it is only befitting to investigate how it has been shaped by patterns of automobile production and consumption and how these patterns themselves have been moulded by class and gender ideologies and the discourses surrounding them. The history of the car has of course been written so frequently and in so many different genres – popular (e.g. Georgano, 1992) and scholarly ones (e.g. Sachs, 1992) – that this may not seem like an innovative proposal. However, these accounts are usually full of narratives about resourceful male engineers and entrepreneurs and they mostly feature teleological accounts of inevitable and unproblematic technological developments. Investigations into the ways how technological developments and consumption patterns are influenced by ideologies (e.g. Scharff, 1991) and discourses (e.g. Piller, 1996) are indeed a very young and interdisciplinary field, which has strong roots in women's studies (e.g. Wajcman, 1991). So far, these ideas have hardly been brought to bear on an investigation of British motoring at all.

O'Connell sets out to explore 'the complex processes by which social relations shaped the design, marketing and uses of the car' and the ways in which 'the car, and legal and physical frameworks which developed in its wake were . . . expressive of class and gender relations' (p. 218). His account is based on the 1896–1939 editions of the journal *Autocar* and interviews with 76 people about their pre-1939 motoring experiences. Additionally, contemporary letters to the editor of various papers, fictional and non-fictional accounts, legislation and court cases are brought in where appropriate.

The method used to explore this rich and diverse corpus is content analysis. The volume is divided into six chapters plus an introduction which reviews the

literature. Chapter 1 ‘“By their cars ye shall know them”: class, status and the spread of car ownership’ (pp. 11–42) explores the hierarchical consumption of the car and the way how taste did not only influence its design but also the ways in which it could be sold. Although hire-purchase, for instance, played a major role in extending car ownership, it was only mentioned in 4 percent of contemporary ads and marketing experts considered it as delicate a topic as ‘intimate personal hygiene’.

Chapter 2 ‘“A myth that is not allowed to die”: gender and the car’ (pp. 43–76) provides a fascinating account of the way in which driving skill became identified with masculinity and how the masculine language and symbolism of the new technology prevented female access. O’Connell describes in detail the debates that made the driver’s seat ‘a naturally male position’ (p. 45). The fact that in contemporary Britain only 32 percent of women drive cars, while 58 percent of men do (p. 220) shows that essentially Victorian discourses about women’s ‘natural ineptitude to drive’ continue with us even at the close of this century.

Chapter 3 ‘“The right crowd and no crowding”: leisure and the car’ (pp. 77–111) relates class ideologies to automobile consumption and use and shows that the car was not only put to different uses in different strata of society but that it also served to sharpen the boundaries between these strata. This theme is continued in chapter 4 (‘“These things will right themselves”: road safety and the car’, pp. 112–49), which demonstrates the transfer of social relations into geographical space and explores the contestation of responsibility for accidents. Automobile clubs, producers, race drivers and politicians teamed up to deflect agency away from drivers and to scapegoat pedestrians, children, women drivers and foreign chauffeurs. Chapter 5 ‘Dealing with a contradiction: the car in the countryside’ (pp. 150–84) links the car with discourses of ‘Britishness’ and chapter 6 ‘Representations of the car’ (pp. 186–217) reports on symbolic uses of the car in literature, film and the arts.

O’Connell has produced a fine-grained analysis of a very specific aspect of the dialectic relationship between discourse and society, which will make his book of interest to many readers of this journal.

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