

Eat My Dust: Early Women Motorists

Review Number: 748

Publish date: Thursday, 30 April, 2009

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ISBN: 9780801884658

Date of Publication: 2008

Price: £26.00

Pages: 216pp.

Publisher: John Hopkins University Press

Place of Publication: Baltimore

Reviewer: Sean O'Connell

Georgine Clarsen has produced a fascinating account of women motorists in the first three decades of the automobile age. Her crisp and elegant prose takes the reader on a speedy trip over a wide range of terrain, indicating the importance of the car in the cultural politics of the early 20th century. In doing so, her book serves as a reminder to cultural and social historians that they should attend to this iconic vehicle's role more diligently. Whilst acknowledging her debt to Virginia Scharff's pioneering work on gender and the car in the USA, Clarsen pursues a variety of issues and themes that have not been explored fully in the historical work that has been inspired by Scharff.⁽¹⁾ Clarsen does so by taking a transnational approach to her research, examining women motorists in Australia, Britain, the USA, as well as British colonial Africa. Cumulatively, this approach adds complexity and depth to the findings of each case study.

Complementing the influence of Scharff is the work of Clarsen's compatriot, the sociologist Judy Wacjman.⁽²⁾ The latter's influential thesis delineates the fashion in which the social construction of technology, as masculine, limited women's involvement in practices such as motor mechanics. To engage in this activity required women to divest themselves of attributes that society deemed appropriately feminine. Or as one pioneering female motorist put it (anticipating the work of Wacjman): 'I wonder why no tool ever looks really at home in a woman's hand?' (p. 17) Notably, Clarsen has had personal experience of this relationship between women and technology, having worked as an apprentice motor mechanic in the 1970s. At that point, she assumed herself to be part of a pioneering group of young women who were breaking down gender barriers that had prevented earlier generations of females from taking part in similar activities, because to do so would have been deemed unwomanly. Ironically, then, the young Clarsen effectively accepted the early 20th century view that even the term 'women motorists' suggested that they 'were supplementary to the main game' (p. 2).

Following trails of evidence left in newspapers, motoring magazines, advice manuals, autobiographies and novels, the book examines how females asserted their role in the early automobile culture, not simply as owner drivers, but as taxi drivers, motoring instructors, garage owners, and mechanics. She also examines the car's role in the politics of the suffrage movement, as well as in the wider cultural politics of class, gender, and race. This enables an exploration of the extent to which these female motorists' words and actions were 'creative acts' that were part of a 'political quest' to 'alter women's lives in fundamental and far-reaching ways', that should be situated in the history of feminist activism: even if the language and

understandings employed by many of her subjects were not explicit always in that respect (p. 8). Furthermore, many of Clarsen's subjects were not 'pure feminist heroines', and indeed many are featured heavily exploiting their class and racial positions. Thus we meet the American Hilda Ward, author of *The Girl and the Motor* (3), who recorded her particular annoyance that chauffeurs – her social inferiors – presumed to have better motoring knowledge: 'costly machines should not be entrusted to the detrimental hands of unscrupulous hirelings!', she opined (p. 28).

The assumption of social superiority was the most obvious tactic to be essayed by privileged women when laying claim to technical mastery of a new technology in which women's bodies were widely viewed as being out of place. However, the success of this strategy was not always guaranteed. The accomplished Edwardian racing driver Joan Cuneo, for example, was banned by the American Automobile Association from competing against men. In London, when Sheila O'Neil became a taxi driver, in 1908, she was refused a license to operate from public ranks and reporters quipped that her training as a nurse would be useful when she knocked over pedestrians.

O'Neill's story is one of those in the book that indicates that women were not simply leisure motorists: many viewed the new technology as a route to employment opportunities. In pre-1914 Britain, a small army of women established driving schools, repair shops, and worked as chauffeurs. They provided a ready resource of skilled drivers and mechanics that was drawn upon during the Great War. The national emergency then swelled their ranks, as British women encouraged their middle-class sisters to follow them onto the road and into the business and economic opportunities that the car offered. Clarsen regards this as of the most crucial dynamics in her account car culture in Britain, as privileged women saw that the car not only allowed them to circulate more freely in the public sphere, but was also as a tool through which to redefine female identity in the world of work. Feminist organizations set up schemes for women to obtain training in taxicab driving, as part of their wider right to work campaigns. By the end of the 1920s, however, the scattering of professional women motorists that Clarsen describes had lost their public profile, although she feels that they had made a significant contribution to the feminist struggle to redefine everyday understandings of femininity and masculinity, particularly in the UK and Australia.

A striking theme throughout the work is the role of the female body as a site of struggle in the automobile culture: a culture that required a new technical, social and bodily vocabulary. The book is insightful on women's battles to deport themselves appropriately. Their comportment on the road was a 'speaking act' that resisted the view of many observers that their actions were at odds with natural feminine attributes. They strove to present energetic, competent female bodies, which negated weakness and were well suited to the technical and purposive world of automobile technology, and capable of travelling safely not only in the British countryside but in remote areas of Africa, Australia, and the USA. Thus Clarsen provides great insights into the acts of dress, deportment and even the meanings of getting dirty: something that carried very different social messages that were heavily predetermined by class and gender. Wearing masculine clothing at the wheel was part of a strategy of deportment designed to assist women in being taken seriously, as people who were legitimate participants in the world of motoring work. The autobiographical sources mined by Clarsen indicate the extent to which the women she studies were aware that they were being closely monitored whilst out motoring. They also provide colourful evidence of the energetic sense of embodiment that women experienced at the wheel, as well as the delight they took in the liberty and mobility that the car presented.

This aspect of the automobile culture was common in each of the three major nations studied by Clarsen. In other respects there were important differences in terms of women's engagement with motoring. In the USA the Great War did not bring about the level of gender dislocation experienced in Britain and had less impact on gender and the car culture. The form of 'female masculinity', associated with 1920s London bohemia, and in particular with the Radcliffe Hall novel *The Well of Loneliness*, was also not a strong factor in the States. More influential was the role of the automobile in defining an American democratic consumer republic, with potentially empowering links between feminism and consumer culture being expressed forcefully. The USA also appears to have had a lower incidence of the female entrepreneurship involving

motor cars that Clarsen discovered for Britain in the years on either side of the Great War. There was, however, significant commercial exploitation of the feats of female motorists in the USA, as motor companies sponsored women's transcontinental trips for their own publicity purposes. These journeys were often linked by the press to the suffragette movement, as women's political and motoring aspirations were clearly associated as part of the dynamic of social and political change. Clearly, images of the independent, mobile female motorist chimed a strong symbolic chord. Feminist organisations also recognised this symbolism, arranging a number of motorised suffrage tours in the 1910s and, thereby, linking the ability of women drivers to navigate the difficult back roads of the USA with their entitlement to political rights. Clarsen argues that those involved in these campaigns made a deliberate choice to exploit the connections between consumer and political cultures. However, this was again an exclusionist strategy that removed many women from the language of political entitlement that was being expressed via car ownership (p. 101-2).

Most significant in Australia was the role played by female motorists in the cultural symbolism of nation building, particularly their role in the construction of a vision of a new white society in an old country. As in Britain, women, such as Alice Anderson, established female operated repair shops in inter-war Australia, but their visibility was also to decline in the 1920s as the tone of Australian gender politics became more conservative. Importantly, as the motor related industries became more institutionalised, mechanical knowledge became formally masculinised and associated with working class men. Thus greater cultural significance was achieved by those Australian women who motored into the forbidding terrain of the outback. The trips of these heroines were widely reported in the popular press and provided a sense for readers that, if women could make these trips around the nation, the country was securely under white domination. In one telling advertisement for motor oil (one of many fine illustrations reproduced in the book), Mrs Marion Bell – who drove around Australia with her young daughter in 1925–6 – is featured driving as an Aboriginal man is seen retreating in trepidation from Bell's automobile. Such motorists symbolised a new form of femininity whilst also re-affirmed white possession of the land, via their sense of technological superiority.

The progressive nature of the first three decades of motoring, as described by Clarsen, did not continue in 1930s. In a more conservative climate, a younger generation of women were less able or willing to advocate gender equality in public spaces. Clarsen believes that increasingly critical voices were heard on the topic of the woman driver, as evidenced by a rise in 'humorous' stories about them. She sees the 1950s and 1960s as particularly guilty decades in this respect. The less privileged women motorists of the mid 20th century did not have the social cache of their predecessors, with which to effectively dismiss these criticisms. Although in the USA women became the key drivers, in terms of household duties, in mid-century, they usually relinquished the driver's seat to their husband for longer trips. Thus in the 1930s 'competent female motoring had become, in large part, a practice without a discourse' (p. 163).

It would have been useful to learn more about Clarsen's sources for some of these final claims. It is not clear, for example, how she has assessed the nature of women motorist jokes, or what methods she has used to contrast those from the Edwardian years with those of the 1950s. I am sure her conclusion is accurate: but it would be interesting to see how the claim was calculated and perhaps, also, how the jokes and stories differed from those from earlier years, such as those told by reporters about female taxi driver, Sheila O'Neill. Clarsen is correct to conclude that changes in 'women's engagement with cars from the 1930s and beyond can only be clarified by careful empirical research'. The question for social and cultural historians is: where is that research? The significance of the car - and access to it - for late 20th-century femininities and masculinities can not be understated and, yet, historians have hardly raced to take up the challenge of researching this theme. It is time that they did.

Notes

1. Virginia Scharff, *Taking the Wheel: Women and the Coming of the Motor Age* (New York, 1991).
[Back to \(1\)](#)

2. Judy Wacjman, *Feminism Confronts Technology* (London, 1991).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Hilda Ward, *The Girl and the Motor* (Cincinnati, OH, 1908).[Back to \(3\)](#)

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