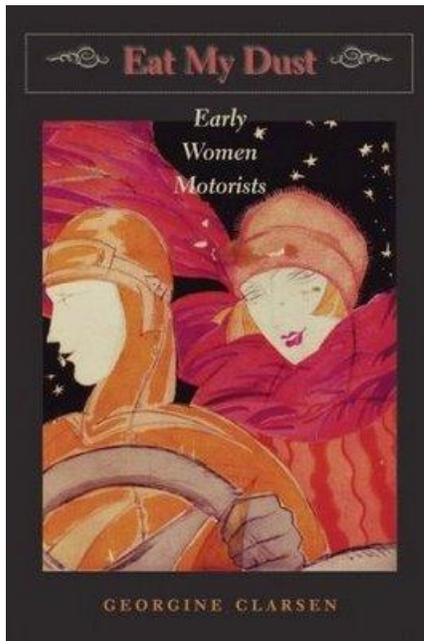


Eat My Dust: Early women motorists by Georgine Clarsen. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008, pp. xi + 196, AUD \$76.00 Hardback, ISBN: 9780801884658.



Clarsen's study of the 'forgotten history of women automobilists in the years surrounding WWI' (x) offers much more than a history of women's motoring. Women's efforts to create a legitimate place for themselves as 'mechanics, taxi drivers, garage owners, driving instructors, automobile engineers, long-distance adventurers, or just knowledgeable everyday motorists' (2), within an automobile culture prescribed as a masculine preserve, was part of a larger political project for social reform. Women took pleasure in the possibilities for greater mobility, physical and financial independence and meaningful employment offered by automobile technology, from the time motor vehicles first appeared. This coincided with the first-wave feminist movements, in which women signalled their desire for greater public visibility, while challenging and redefining notions of both femininity and masculinity. In exploring

women's relationship with the emerging automobile technology through stories of women in Britain, the United States, Australia and colonial Africa, this work illuminates the changing dynamics between gender, technology, sexuality, class, race, nation and empire across the early decades of the twentieth century.

At the core of this analysis are shifting meanings of both female identity and the automobile itself. The central question posed by New Yorker Hilda Ward in her book, *The Girl and the Motor*, published in 1908, was: 'I wonder why no tool ever looks really at home in a woman's hand'. (17) The new actions, knowledge and modes of dress that motoring demanded took on different meanings depending on whether a male or female body performed them. Yet, women's keen interest and involvement with automobility changed the very nature of the technology, as manufacturers responded to women's demands, making cars easier to drive and maintain, more comfortable and hence more accessible to a wider section of the population, both male and female. Many women, like Ward, wrote about their experiences in published narratives, novels, journals, how-to manuals or advice columns in the press. Female bodies, their actions and appearances, as well as representations of such were sites of struggle for a central and respected place in automobile culture. One of the many strengths of this book is Clarsen's close, perceptive analysis of what women wrote, wore and did and what was written about them, and the wider social, cultural and political implications of those representations.

Clarsen presents a richly nuanced examination of how women's motoring aspirations took on different expressions and meanings in different national contexts. In Britain, World War I was a defining period, opening up opportunities for more women to train as drivers, mechanics and engineers. Military work and dress helped women to define a uniquely British version of chic 'female masculinity' (44), closely linked to patriotism, professionalism and modernity. Aligning their interests with the feminist right-to-work campaigns, aspiring British women motorists expressed their desires in terms of a

collective feminist enterprise, epitomised by the all female factory in Tongland, Scotland producing the Galloway motor vehicle – ‘a car made by ladies for others of their sex’ (46). By contrast, American women’s motoring experiences were framed within the discourses of female suffrage campaigns, modern consumer culture, and the Hollywood film industry in the years surrounding World War 1. Women expressed their personal and political ambitions as consumers of automobiles and particularly through their transcontinental journeys, which harnessed support for the suffrage movement, attracting media attention and sponsorship by automobile manufacturers. Such highly visible women motorists making incursions across public space were celebrated for their bravery and adventurous individualism, resonant with Hollywood serial heroines, and the ethics of free market capitalism. They created an image of ‘technologically sophisticated women of the future at the wheel of their own destinies’ (80). In Australia, women’s transcontinental motoring journeys were viewed within the context of creating a new unified nation in the years following Federation. Encircling and crossing the nation by car was the means by which Australian women could be part of a pioneering, nation-building project, inscribing white ownership onto the whole continent.

The final chapter of the book focuses on a transnational journey by two South African women of British descent travelling in a small second-hand Morris Oxford car from Cape Town to Cairo, thence via Paris to the motor factory near Oxford in 1930. Contrasting Margaret Belcher’s narrative of the trip through Africa with earlier accounts of similar journeys, Clarsen reveals the changed colonial context: an emerging ‘British colonialism that was aware of the empire’s dwindling global status’ (148) and the growing African nationalism in the interwar period. Belcher and her companion, Ellen Budgett, were less confident of British racial and technological superiority and knowledge, and more conscious of the ‘ironies of colonial adventuring’ (148) as women travelling in a country that was clearly not their own, often dependent on local knowledge and assistance. Clarsen’s arguments for the influence of gender here would have been strengthened by further examples and comparisons with contemporary narratives written by men.

The story of women’s changing relationship to automobile technology is not a neat, progressive one. The advances made by women in the first decades of the twentieth century were not sustained into the 1930s due to changes in both definitions of female identity and the nature of automobile technology. Sexual conservatism, employment crises of the post-war and Depression eras, and changes of focus within the women’s movement meant that what was once progressive, modern femininity, expressed through new modes of work, dress and behaviour, became defined as suspicious, old fashioned, even deviant. Similarly, as cars became more accessible across social classes and easier to drive and maintain through the democratising effect of mass production, many of the skills and professions that had once given middle class women such satisfaction and power as chauffeurs or mechanics, became either irrelevant, or redefined as working class, unglamorous, unskilled and undesirable. Automobile technology continues to be contested ground, but through the compelling analysis of women’s efforts to establish an equal position within that culture, Clarsen makes a valuable and original contribution to both automobile and gender histories.

ROSEMARY KERR
University of Sydney