



Clay McShane. *The Automobile: A Chronology of Its Antecedents, Development and Impact.* Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1997. xiv + 222 pp. \$69.50, cloth, ISBN 978-0-313-30308-1.



Reviewed by Roger B. White

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Few timelines of American automotive history exist in book form. The most familiar one, *Automobiles of America* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1968), was compiled by the staff of the Automobile Manufacturers Association, and while it provides some useful insights into the automobile's influence on social and economic change, it focuses primarily on the growth of the manufacturing industry and the technical design of bodies and chassis. Clay McShane, a noted urban historian and Professor of History at Northeastern University in Boston, has prepared a timeline that is fuller, more comprehensive, and more sensitive to social issues than *Automobiles of America*. A look at McShane's contributions to urban transportation history, notably his book *Down the Asphalt Path: The Automobile and the American City* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), leaves no doubt that he is among the few scholars who truly understand the complex issues surrounding the adoption of automobiles by urban, suburban, and rural Americans and the enormous changes that have taken place in the lives of automobile users and their habitats. The results of his many years of research and contem-

plation are reflected in this concise but lengthy timeline, which is distilled from notes that he prepared for a course in automotive history at Northeastern University.

Year by year, McShane takes the reader from horse-drawn and human-powered antecedents of the automobile through nineteenth-century experiments with self-propelled vehicles to twentieth-century milestones in production by Henry Ford and others. He cites important stages in the evolution of bodies and chassis, the growing market for automobiles, reshaping of communities, changes in production and marketing, and the automobile's influence on popular culture. The entries are brief—one to three lines—and there is no organizing principle other than the chronological breakdown and chapter headings arranged by significant eras. The strength of the book lies in the author's systematic pursuit and careful selection of "firsts," milestones, turning points, significant facts, and telling moments that reveal how addicted we Americans have become to our automobiles. Most of this subject matter has been covered in landmark books by automotive historians such

as James J. Flink, John B. Rae, David L. Lewis, Reynold M. Wik, and others. But it is revealing to see this complex body of knowledge reduced to a stark, simple chain of events that march relentlessly from pre-automotive days to the mix of nirvana and bedlam that is today's auto-dependent transportation system.

Helping the reader understand the sweep of change is this book's strong point. The lay reader can obtain at a glance a stimulating if sketchy introduction to automotive history. This book is also useful for noting anniversaries; the centennial of the mass-produced automobile in America logically may be defined as the period from 1896 to 1913, from the beginning of production at the Duryea factory to the installation of Henry Ford's moving assembly line. McShane cites many important centennials within this time period. The appendices also contain much useful information in the form of graphs and lists. Appendix A includes graphs showing automobile prices, horsepower, sales, market share, and registration, as well as petroleum production, consumption, and prices. Appendix B is a list of automobile museums in North America; this information has appeared in book form elsewhere, but a concise list is nevertheless useful.

The book's greatest weakness is a result of the timeline format's limitations rather than any deficiency in the author's scholarship and comprehension. Taken out of context, each entry does not say enough about the circumstances it tries to describe and only hints at its larger significance. The word *first* is used liberally and not always convincingly; this reviewer is skeptical when a *first* is claimed without ample definition and justification, for there were so many minor experiments and developments in automotive history that almost every innovator was preceded by others whose work was similar, or in some way contributed to the innovation. A few entries are so brief that they leave the reader wondering what exactly is being described. There are no footnotes, cita-

tions, references, or bibliographic notes to offer links to fuller information about each topic. As a result, the book leaves the reader with a desire to know more about each topic, but does not offer the means to find additional information. Automotive historians will understand the context and meaning of each entry, but to the average reader the book is a tray of appetizers that leaves one wanting to know (in radio commentator Paul Harvey's words) *the rest of the story*.

Give McShane an *A* for effort, but like the movie *As Good As It Gets*, this intriguing but limited book could be titled *As Far As It Goes*. A revised edition with longer entries and in-text bibliographic references would be a welcome contribution; or better yet, how about a CD-ROM version that produces a page or more of in-depth information for each clickable entry? Let's hope that Professor McShane or another scholar will take this next step in the design and production of automotive timelines.

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