

H-Net Reviews

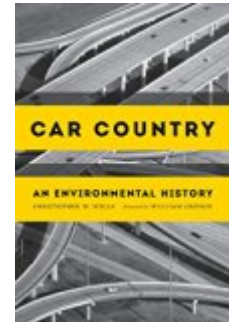
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Christopher W. Wells. *Car Country: An Environmental History*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2014. xxxiv + 427 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-295-99429-1.

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In this book, Christopher Wells reinterprets one of the twentieth century's most important developments: the automobile's transformation of the United States. Synthesizing an enormous literature with imaginative and accessible prose, he reveals how the nation became a "car country" before 1960 and how it reoriented Americans' relationship with nature. Automobiles themselves, Wells argues, did not originate and sustain today's environmental problems. A complex technological system of automobility reconstructed our environment and locked us into an automobile dependency.

Much of *Car Country* reprises the narrative of Americans' embrace of the automobile through the twentieth century. In the first chapter, Wells reveals how the fundamentals of car country began even before the advent of internal combustion engine vehicles. The forces of modernity—industrialization and urbanization—demanded an improved and controlled transportation network. Scientifically trained planners desired to overcome the problems nature imposed and reengineer rural and urban spaces. Part 2 presents problems the rapid expansion of automobile use created. Both in rural and urban areas, chaotic traffic and deplorable road conditions motivated progressives to begin laying the physical and policy bases that shaped the auto landscape. After 1908, when the arrival of the Ford Model T sparked the Motor Age, efforts to regulate and improve auto transportation greatly intensified as officials contended with congestion on proliferating roads and streets. The heart of Wells's book, part 3, discusses the interwar era. Aided by governments—increasingly the federal government—reformers struggled to subdue environmental constraints and bring rural roads, city streets, and human behavior into a national transportation sys-

tem. Before World War II, the technologies previously pieced together began to solidify into an American car landscape. Though planners imagined the efficiencies of a national freeway network in the interwar period, this transformation did not occur until the federal government allocated vast resources through the 1956 Federal-Aid Highway and Highway Revenue Acts. Ending in 1960, part 4 establishes that the interstate highways irrevocably inscribed auto dependency onto the land, embedding automobility into American geography. Now Americans cannot escape their need for automobiles or the environmental consequences that accompany them.

Mobility by automobiles changed Americans' relationship to nature. Speedier transportation compressed time and distance, reorienting how Americans experienced these essentials of nature. The new understandings particularly favored rural people, who with automobility could focus their social and economic lives on centralized towns. In the West, with the highest concentration of cars, this reinforced the pattern of concentrated urban areas surrounded by relatively townless hinterlands. In urban areas, however, the ability to shorten time and distance impelled decentralization as wealthier folks used their vehicles to escape the city's congestion. Cars and their manufacture also united the urban and suburban landscapes with unseen, despoiled, distant environments where derricks pumped oil in Texas, miners dug iron ore in Michigan, and natives tapped rubber trees in Brazil. Automobiles were responsible for environmental degradation, but they were also as much products of nature as transformers of nature. More obviously, mobility and roads changed how Americans interacted with nature, bringing them closer to the natural ecosystems of scenic national parks and wild places that gave them

succor from the industrial world autos helped create.

Wells highlights how private enterprise and the federal government contributed to the nation's auto-dependent geography. But he also emphasizes ways the environment itself influenced automobility. In my favorite chapter, "Automotive Pioneers," Wells shows how nature influenced automobile technologies. In mechanics and style, the Model T evolved in response to the rough roads and changeable weather of the American environment. With the vehicle's light weight and durable, flexible chassis, it outcompeted other vehicles in effectively handling the mud, potholes, and ruts of the nation's rudimentary roads. With it, Ford found his "universal car." Thus, nature indirectly influenced mass production, Fordism, the Five Dollar Day, and multitudes of factory workers' bodies. In this way, the American environment shaped the modern era.

Environmental historians will easily recognize Wells's contributions, especially to the subfield of envirotech, the study of interactions between nature and

technology. Had Wells taken his argument past 1960, he might have extended his argument to newer, emerging subfields like human bodies and health, mobility and road kill, and racial geographies. He could have examined further the unpredictable ways nature resisted its transformation and the constant battle to physically maintain automobility. But these extensions are not Wells's focus; no other work so clearly lays out the physical creation of America's modern automobile-dependent landscape.

General US historians should pay attention to *Car Country*. It joins a growing body of environmental history that is revising the traditional narrative of US history. Nature and the material world impel historical change as much as government policy, economics, and social beliefs. And this has implications for the contemporary world. Since the land itself—the geography of automobility—lies at the base of our contemporary car-related problems, only through radically transforming our modern landscape will we successfully grapple with our reliance on automobiles, fossil fuels, and their attendant problems.

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