ANDREW PHILLIPS  
University of Melbourne


Urban history often discusses one of two things: the city or the people, i.e. the container or the contained. Davison’s book is a synergy of both, with the car eluding an assignment to either category. In sections, the car is part of the apparent static city environment providing ‘little oases of privacy’; in other sections, the motor-vehicle is personalised such that it is difficult to separate the car from the owner, the city-landscape is moulded to the cars’ ‘insistent demands’ and automobiles’ are symbols of power and status. Davison’s story covers the period between 1945 and 1985 in Melbourne, Australia. Ironically, during this period, the automobile experienced no technological advancement, but as Davison highlights, it was the biggest invasion of the car into Australians’ personal lives, their homes and cities. The last chapter, ‘On the Move?’ covers the 1990s, when Jeff Kennett’s Liberals pursued a ‘dream’ of the largest private road-building program in Australia. This dream is explored as a time of government that was characterised by downsizing, privatisation and cronynism. Moreover, four main themes are explored through the ten chapters of the book: car affordability, styling and production; gendered drivers, power and sex; drive-in urban landscapes, ‘automobilism’, ‘autopia’ and ‘Austerica’; and grass-roots politics and road-building.

Davison’s book joins a collection of similar works about the impact of the motor-car on a city - most of these American, such as Scott Bottles work on Los Angeles. Car Wars is unique in that it explores an Australian city, a nation somewhat neglected in academic automobile research - this neglect by academics, despite Australia’s great distances and the country’s passionate uptake of the motor-vehicle which has so much defined the nation in the last half-century. The sub-title, how the car. . . conquered our cities, is misleading, as Davison’s cities only exist within Australia, and really, only Melbourne. Unlike the United States, where Henry Ford’s Model ‘T’ made cars affordable during the 1920s, Australia’s mass-auto affordability eventuated after World War Two (WWII). This lateness of mass-motorisation, in combination with Australia’s small population and great distances caused different road infrastructure, and public transportation to eventuate, than those in Europe or North America. Furthermore, during the great freeway building era of the 1970s and 80s, the adoption of American ‘know-how’ encountered great resistance in Australia where people had not experienced mass-relocation (p.187), and the home was, as exalted by
Prime Minister Robert Menzies, the ideological building block of the nation (p.237).

The title of this book is contentious. First, it smacks of *Star Wars* – enough said. Secondly, this title is shared by two other books: Jonathan Mantle’s *Car Wars* (1991) and John Butman’s *Car Wars* (1995). Both books examine the corporate environment of car building, marketing and international domination. Furthermore, Davison’s predecessors describe epic battles; whereas, he describes the battles and skirmishes carried out on the Melbourne home front, which are often eclipsed and overlooked by academic’s focus on the larger war. These home front battles, however, have allowed the car to dominate as a personal mode of transport, which sometimes has moved far beyond obsession. This obsession is elaborated by ‘automobilism’ (the unfettered rights of motorists) and ‘autopia’ - Reyner Banham’s description of the motor-cars’ impact on Los Angeles. Robin Boyd coined the word ‘Austerica’ which combined Australia, America and automobile to give a local context, which Davison explores in Melbourne (p.78). His story is a passionate one, told by a veteran who witnessed and lived through the period described.

The title *Car Wars* depreciates much of the books historical value. It de-emphasizes the mid-twentieth century desire for a better mode of transport, which is Davison’s primary argument. He dismisses the debate surrounding better public transport, and, had more people utilised this public service it would be better today. Rather he spotlights the 1950s reality for suburban housewives. Suburban housewives often left alone, with small children in prams far from shopping conveniences at a time when shopping was a daily task, were in essence, marooned. This daily task was done because refrigerators, like cars, were expensive and not yet commonplace. Also, deliveries from the local shops were declining. Most burgeoning suburbs were poorly serviced by public transport, and expansion often failed to meet passenger needs. For most contemporary readers, a ten-kilometre intra-city journey takes minutes, even on public transport, whereas pre-1960 journeys, in developing suburbs with lacking public transport, often took hours (p.41). Purchasing and adopting a motor-car, therefore, was not so much about conflict, but a quest for better mobility.

Many Australian families between the end of the 1920s and post-WWII, almost two decades, postponed marriage, a home and a family because of the depression and the war. Most sought these assurances after the war, and as Davison points out, the car was the largest, most visible and status-laden appliance a family could own (p.57). The discussion of gender and motoring highlights the enhancement of man’s masculinity by car ownership; whereas it was less important for a woman to own a car, although it was essential for her to be with a man who possessed one (p.50). Power, prestige and supremacy are often associated with war, whereas the adoption of the car as a form of transport was often not a gender battle of supremacy, but rather, a need and desire for mobility. Women were not always helpless in their *choice* for family and mobility.
Further, Davison explores Victoria’s battles waged on the road toll; however, this too, is antithetical. Troop movements and armament are not generally associated with stemming death. During the late 1960s, however, Victoria’s death toll neared one thousand, and the State pioneered legislation which required mandatory seat-belt use, and a short time later random breath-testing for alcohol, in an attempt to reduce the occurrences of drink-driving (p.163). Again, Davison pays particular attention to the gender of drivers and how this affected road safety. These measures in combination with tougher policing, and many graphic advertising campaigns reduced the number of deaths on Victoria’s roads to less than four hundred fifty by the early twenty-first century.

Graeme Davison’s *Car Wars* is a high-calibre work, joining the ranks of his previous books. *Car Wars* is buoyed by over sixty black-and-white images; although, these may leave the reader with a sense that this book may not be so much about battles and war, but a lament for a simpler time when the car was hooked to the caravan, and family vacations were spent exploring the Grampians.

**Rick Clapton**
*University of Melbourne*


Melbourne’s architects, architecture and town planning have received little attention from architectural historians generally. However, recent studies within the discipline of social and biographical history are starting to fill this void. Texts such as Phillip Goad’s *Melbourne Architecture* and *Australian Modern: The Architecture of Stephenson and Turner* are examples of such work and provide a valuable catalogue of Melbourne architecture. Biographical studies such as Geoffrey Serle’s *Robin Boyd: A Life* also fall into this category as does Miles Lewis’ urban history that was written in conjunction with Phillip Goad and Alan Mayne entitled *Melbourne: The City’s History and Development*, which are also influenced by a social history approach.

Harriet Edquist’s new study of the architect Harold Desbrowe-Annear continues this biographical and social history approach while adding to it an analysis based in the art history tradition. Her study fills a general void as well as, more particularly, a void regarding the personality, professional and academic career and patronage of an architect who as she writes has been overlooked while receiving early recognition from the architect and critic Robin Boyd. Harriet Edquist’s empirical and description narrative is not a critical study of projects based on formal, comparative and theoretical analysis. Her study is a balanced and coherent narrative of a life of a multifaceted personality, which was considered an innovator and pioneer of modernism, and which provided a comprehensive archive of projects and personalities.