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Car Country: An Environmental History by Christopher W. Wells (review)

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Car Country: An Environmental History. By Christopher W. Wells. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2013. Pp. 464. \$40.00 cloth)

In *Car Country*, Christopher Wells calls for a broad reexamination of the material roots to American automobility. Admitting the importance of themes typically used to explain modern car culture—that Americans retain a powerful affinity for *individual* automobility, that industrial capitalism has profoundly influenced our choices for national resource utilization, and that transit engineers and policy-makers crafted effective short-term solutions in the face of rapidly changing technological needs—Wells suggests more useful metrics. Chief among them, land-use patterns and other remnants of the built environment serve as more functional historical measurements of a changing transportation system. Wells is a fine writer and effectively uses a personal narrative to introduce the central historiographical paradox of *Car Country*. Having experienced (and enjoyed) life in both pedestrian-friendly Madison, Wisconsin, and auto-centered Atlanta, Georgia, he asks how can the supposedly universal forces of American individuality, profit, and progressivism have not spawned near-identical driving conditions? Resolving this paradox, he concludes, requires going beyond the “false boundary between *how Americans feel* about transportation technologies and *why Americans drive* so much more than people elsewhere in the world” (p. xxiii). The result is an interdependent narrative about technology systems, politics, engineering, taxation, and resource utilization from a new perspective. Wells’s clear prose and deft review of the well-studied material realities (more cars, more miles, more speed) threaten to overshadow just how intelligently he blends the past four decades of automotive scholarship. Indeed, *Car Country* is an encouraging sign to those anxious over the balkanization of cultural, political, and social history.

Make no mistake, material changes wrought by the automobile lie at the heart of his study. Divided into three main sections, Wells’s

approach is to identify the problem, the pattern, and then the paradox. In the first three chapters, he reviews the amazing versatility, power, and range that the automobile brought to the complex transportation systems of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era. Wells pays particular attention to rural and urban differences; yet we see similar problems develop from the rapid growth of car ownership and use. The next three chapters, all paced by compelling primary sources, witnessed a repetitive pattern, from 1920 to 1940, where reformers worked to solve temporary problems (such as highway access to the central business district) while making long-term decisions about land use for future commerce, labor, and residency. “[Reformers] focused,” Wells writes, “overwhelmingly on adapting the existing infrastructure to meet the demands of traffic, *not* on ambitious attempts to . . . unlock the full potential of automobiles to enhance personal mobility” (p. 126). Once set aside for the purposes of automobility, the built environment provided the free market ample space through which to accentuate the auto-centered experience, from service stations to highway rest-stops. The final phase, which Wells addresses in the last chapter and a brief epilogue, brings us to our current dilemma. While most Americans can appreciate the absurdities of our current system and its hard-wired, deterministic law of diminishing returns, the fact remains that the first sustained widespread opposition “against the social and environmental costs of car dependence did not gain national prominence until after the nation’s political economy” committed to “car-dependent growth” (p. 287). So here we sit, stuck in traffic.

Using an analogy that befits the subtitle, Wells concludes that “Car Country” is akin to a brittle commercial monoculture—very efficient in its one function (*automobility*) yet profoundly susceptible to external threats. Its “one-size-fits-all landscape does not, in fact, fit all,” Wells writes, “it only fits cars” (p. 289). This aspect is particularly evident in the transformative relationship of the automobile with nature. In the car, nature becomes something to visit—by interstate highways and contained within National Parks—rather than a daily component of everyone’s life. As with other transit re-

forms, this relationship allows Americans to “cultivate the illusion that, by climbing into a car and driving out ‘into nature,’ individuals can escape, even temporarily, the environmental consequences of modern urban-industrial society” (p. 227). While there are minor criticisms—including the voices omitted from his narrative—Wells has produced an important and persuasive new chapter in the history of American car culture.

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Destination Dixie: Tourism and Southern History. Edited by Karen L. Cox. (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2012. Pp. 320. \$74.95 cloth)

Karen L. Cox’s edited collection joins the recent proliferation of scholarship on southern tourism exploring the contested terrain of history and memory, culture and commodification, and economic development and environmental conservation. The essays of *Destination Dixie* cover a diverse, though not exhaustive, range of topics, geographical locations, and methodological approaches, reflecting the multivocality of southern history and tourism.

The collection is divided into four overlapping thematic sections: “People and Places” focuses on sites of commemoration, with essays chronicling the controversies and contestations surrounding the creation and preservation of Mark Twain’s boyhood home in Hannibal, Missouri (Hilary Iris Lower), the Jesse Owens Memorial Park in Lawrence County, Alabama (Barclay Key), the Margaret Mitchell House