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Review: 'Wheels of Change: From Zero to 600 m.p.h.: The Amazing Story of California and the Automobile'

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Wheels of Change: From Zero to 600 m.p.h.: The Amazing Story of California and the Automobile. By Kevin Nelson. Berkeley, CA: Heyday Books, 2009. Bibliography, illustrations, index, and source notes. 405 pp. \$24.95 paper.

Reviewed by John A. Heitmann, Professor, Department of History, University of Dayton.

Histories of the automobile in America often begin with the all-too-familiar observation that “the Automobile is European by birth and American by adoption.” And while that generalization certainly is useful in explaining things to undergraduate students, it rings particularly true in the case of the state of California, where beginning with the car’s appearance on the streets of Los Angeles and San Francisco, late nineteenth-century society and culture were rapidly and markedly transformed into a twentieth-century machine age. Indeed, the automobile is the perfect technological symbol of American culture, a tangible expression of our quest to level space, time, and class, and a reflection of our restless mobility, social and otherwise. It transformed business, life on the farm and in the city, the nature and organization of work, leisure time, and the arts. Further, the automobile transformed everyday life and the environment in which we operate. More specifically, it influenced the foods we eat, music we listen to, risks we take, places we visit, errands we run, emotions we feel, movies we watch, stress we endure, and the air we breathe.

That part of the story seems obvious to anyone who has ever visited the state. A related story, however—namely one of how Californians contributed to the evolution and diffusion of the automobile in American (and indeed global) life—has never been carefully compiled. However, the recent publication of *Wheels of Change* does explore how Californians shaped the larger history of automobiles in American life. For example, Carl Breer, Harley Earl, Frank Howard, and Earle Anthony were critical to the engineering and design of the automobile, notions of planned obsolescence, and the formulation of sales strategies. The business of speed was very much a California enterprise, as witnessed by the work of Harry A. Miller, Leo Goossen, Fred Offenhauser, Stu Hilborn, Mickey Thompson and many, many others. California contributed more than its share of the greatest race drivers of the twentieth century, from Jimmy Murphy, who was the first American to win a European Grand Prix race in 1921, to the late and incomparable Phil Hill. And finally, several generations of Hollywood actors and actresses, to a degree unwittingly, did more to glamorize the automobile than all the Madison Avenue advertising agencies combined, intimately connecting this inanimate and often mass-produced object to wealth, status, and individuality.

While *Wheels of Change* is author Kevin Nelson's first work dealing specifically with automobile history, it demonstrates the author's surprising command of the topic. Harnessing a considerable variety of sources, Nelson skillfully spins a tale that centers on individuals but weaves these figures together almost seamlessly. And with each of the figures, Nelson develops fabulous and at times humorous stories and adventures, as these characters come alive on the page. Further, the narrative moves at a fast pace. Nevertheless, there always seems to exist a context bigger than the automobile and California, as Nelson reminds the reader at several junctures of concurrent events nationally and globally. In terms of chronology, the story is strong and comprehensive to the late 1960s. However, it then falls off as almost every auto history does, perhaps because of the end of the automobile's Golden Age, perhaps because it is easier to write enthusiastically of its positive virtues than the critiques and problems that followed Oil Shock I in 1973. Yet the 1970s are now forty years removed from us, and historians need to conduct more work on this recent past.

While my overall evaluation of this book is most positive—I would argue that it would be a great addition to an undergraduate course reading list in 20th century history, the history of technology, or California history, it does have its shortcomings. Most significantly, *Wheels of Change* reconstructs an expected past. By drawing so much from newspapers and journalistic literature, this story is one that has been told in various places far and near, but it does not probe beyond the largely known. Nelson provides a wonderfully readable synthesis, but there are no surprises or new insights. Second, the citation format of this book is awkward to say the least. Source notes exist in the back of this book, but conventional footnotes or endnotes would have been more helpful to this reader. Placing these criticisms aside, however, *Wheels of Change* is a great read that makes the history of the automobile come alive with human interest and a rare energy.



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