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Women Take the Wheel

Margery McKenna was furious. She had been surveying the glistening array of motor power in a Melbourne used car yard when a sign on the windscreen of a small car, the tiniest in the yard, caught her eye. 'ONE FOR MUM' it said. 'So much for the emancipation of women!' she retorted. 'To think the suffragettes chained themselves to the railings for this little beat-up bomb!'[1]

In the dream world of postwar consumerism the car was not only a symbol of male power and mastery. It also symbolised women's incomplete emancipation. Cars were gendered objects, conventionally dubbed 'she', and often designed in the voluptuous shapes of male desire. But cars had never been exclusively a male possession. In 1968, the year of Margery McKenna's annoyed outburst in the car yard, women for the first time outnumbered men among new applicants for Victorian driver's licences, although they remained a small minority of car owners. The liberated journalist had bridled at the insult of that condescending sign but to many Melbourne mums even a 'little beat-up bomb' could become the passport to a new sense of personal freedom.

Over a century earlier Victorian moralists had declared that 'a woman's place is in the home'. Men belonged to the workaday world of the city, with its money and materialism, its storm and stress. Women represented the domestic virtues and inhabited the tranquil and secluded world of the home and garden. Men, by implication, were mobile: they ventured out of the home each day, going wherever ambition and the market took them. Women, as the stable centre of

domestic life, were more stationary: their expeditions for shopping or sociability were conventionally short and localised.[2]

This symbolism did not mirror life exactly, of course, and even in the Victorian era significant breaches were made in the wall between the two spheres. From the 1870s department stores sought to attract women customers by constructing ferneries, arcades and ladies' lounges designed to create a feminised semi-public zone in the midst of the city.[3] In the 1890s women cyclists made a daring foray into the streets, drawing the jocular disapproval of males. (Mockery would later also become the defensive male's favourite weapon against the female motorist.) The automobile promised a new era of female independence, although for twenty years or more, the costs and hazards of motoring restricted it to a minority of well-to-do lady adventurers. The *motoriste*, as she sometimes called herself, was a figure of self-conscious emancipation, whose mechanical enthusiasm, zest for speed and power, and sometimes mannish dress, set her apart from her more conventional sisters.[4] Male motorists hesitated to welcome women to their ranks. The Royal Automobile Club, unlike its New South Wales counterpart, had admitted female members from 1909, but closed its ladies' lounge in 1918, a move that precipitated the formation of a separate ladies' automobile club. The breach was not healed until 1928 when women were readmitted to the club.[5]

In times of national peril men voluntarily lowered the barriers to female mobility. During both World War I and World War II hundreds of women were recruited into the armed forces to drive and maintain delivery vans, buses and taxis on the home front. In the late 1940s many women also drove for voluntary civilian services or as private company employees. Under stringent wartime regulations, women had become better drivers than men, some observers believed.[6] In 1943 the RACV had predicted that, come peacetime, 'old jokes about the woman at the wheel would have to be revised'.[7] But a volunteer dressed in a glamorous uniform was more easily accepted than a female private motorist dressed in 'civvies' and by the 1950s, as servicemen were demobbed and women returned to their domestic role, the old tiresome jokes were still in vogue.

In the 1950s the female driver was still a lonely figure in a public world of men. Only about 43 per cent of Victorian adults held a licence but among women the proportion was fewer than one in ten.[8] The proportion of women among car owners surveyed by market

researchers was lower still, about 8 per cent in 1952, 10 per cent in 1957, although many cars owned by men were probably regularly driven by women.[9] By 1961, however, one licence-holder in three was a woman and by the end of the decade the proportion had risen to 40 per cent.[10] Car ownership was more common among the middle aged and middle class, both male and female, than among either the old or the young. Country women were probably quicker than their sisters in the city to become automobilised.

The 'woman driver'—a term coined in 1920s, and often used pejoratively—was still a target for patronising advice, ridicule and outright hostility. She appeared as a stock figure of low humour in daily newspapers, the new locally published motor magazines and 'barber-shop magazines' like *Man*, *Pix*, *People*, *Smith's Weekly* and the *Sporting Globe*.[11] While the male reader was addressed, man-to-man, in technical articles on new car models or do-it-yourself car maintenance, the surrounding pages were sprinkled with cartoons, jokes and photographs lampooning the mechanical ineptitude of women drivers.

The dotty, mechanically ignorant woman motorist remained a staple theme of cartoons in motoring magazines into the 1960s. (Royalauto, 1966)

In the pages of the 1950s motoring magazines, women appear in three stereotypical roles. Buxom blondes sit next to the male driver, or recline languidly across the bonnet of his dream car, their curvaceous bodies reinforcing the sexual symbolism of the car. The stereotypical woman driver, on the other hand, is middle-aged, clumsy and confused. 'It's not the parking I dislike', says a woman motorist in one cartoon. 'It's the crunch while I'm doing it.' In another, a husband opens the garage door to find his car parked upside down. The one-word caption is 'Agnes!' If men patronised the woman driver, they were even more contemptuous of the third stereotypical figure: the hatchet-faced back-seat driver. In cartoonist's shorthand, the blonde on the bonnet is the motorist's lover, the dotty woman driver is his wife and the back-seat driver his nagging mother-in-law.[12] Forty years later, it is the obsessive repetition, as much as the offensiveness, of these stereotypes that strikes us. Designed to reinforce the authority of the man at the wheel, the misogynous humour of the motoring press also hints at the unacknowledged, even unconscious, fears and fantasies aroused by female drivers in some men's minds.

From the early 1950s female drivers began, quietly but firmly, to answer back. In feature items and letters, they asked, 'Who said we can't drive?' and pleaded with men to 'give the women a fair go'. Women contributed articles telling men what women thought of *their* driving and advising them to 'Lay off women drivers!' In 1959, a correspondent scolded the editor of the *Royalauto* for continuing to publish those 'funny sketches' depicting 'women drivers as nincompoops'.[13] Ann Clifford, the RACV's female motoring journalist, noted the male reaction to the new-found sense of power and freedom felt by many of her peers:

> When women drivers were fewer, men treated them with more courtesy . . . Nowadays we girls are brazenly hi-jacked out of parking spaces, bullied out of our right of way, abused, glared at and shouted down by so-called 'courteous' men . . . Maybe we have asked for it, daring to swarm into a male field like car driving. Still, my guess is that women drivers are here to stay.[14]

The RACV itself had come to see the wisdom of changing its tune. Already its allies and advertisers, the automobile manufacturers and retailers, had recognised the female driver as a market to be cultivated rather than a minority to be stigmatised. Once every dad had a car, business logic dictated that mum would eventually also get her chance.

Liberty and Utility

From the first, women had recognised the liberating potential of the car. In the intimate politics of the suburban household, however, the freedom to drive was won only slowly, and often begrudgingly, from the 'man of the house'. The first tactical advances came as women demonstrated the utility of the car as a kind of household appliance, enhancing her traditional role as homemaker; only later did people recognise its effect in widening women's horizons and challenging their traditional role.

In 1947 an article in the RACV's journal *The Radiator* entitled 'Car as Blessing to Housewives' showed how driving helped the housewife. 'It is a toy, a necessity or an incomparable amenity, which lends colour and movement to her rather monotonous existence as a home-keeping body.' For a few well-to-do women it was a toy—'indispensable for prestige, and for fulfilling an intricate programme of social engagements'. But for the majority whose lives were devoted to 'home duties' it was 'almost a necessity'.

> Not only does it take her places, but it takes her away from 'the place'—that little plot with its house and garden, its clothes line, telephone and neighbours. All are very dear and necessary but they are not enough to fill the horizon from year's end to year's end . . . Most women these days find that the married state is no sinecure. There is plenty of work all day, every day, and even such labors of love for husband and offspring do weary even the most well-disposed wives and mothers, so that a car, once a luxury, is now almost a necessity.

It turned shopping from a chore to a pleasure, and helped to reconcile the physical and economic demands of the housewife's role. 'It is after all rather too much even for feminine versatility to play two roles so opposed as pack-horse and more or less glamorous wife and mother full of understanding for husband and children.' With a car at her disposal, she could take a neighbour along for company. Or she could take the children on a picnic, or her elderly parents on a trip 'to see the things that they read about in the papers—the new houses and bridges, the crowds at the sports meetings, the city streets and shops'. In 1947, as the context makes plain, the car was only '*almost* a necessity'. The writer assumes a world of limited mobility in which the lucky motoring housewife plays lady bountiful by expanding the horizons of parents, neighbours and children as well as her own.[15]

Of the housewifely roles described here, none was enhanced by the car as much as shopping. In 1947 Maie Casey, pioneer motorist and pilot, and wife of Liberal politician R. G. Casey, gave a stirring Mother's Day address. 'The women of Australia are not nearly well enough looked after', she claimed. A 'flood' of supportive letters poured into the *Argus*, mainly from middle-class readers from the eastern suburbs. Seventy-five per cent of women and 60 per cent of men identified household shopping as the most exhausting responsibility of the Melbourne 'housewife'.[16] Rationing was still in force, and few families had refrigerators or motor cars, so many women shopped almost every day.[17] Women judged each other largely by their success as economical and discerning shoppers.[18]

Depression austerity and wartime rationing had revived an older tradition of domestic self-sufficiency, reinforcing women's identification with home. Housewives sewed clothes for the family and soft furnishings for the house, baked cakes, ran 'chooks' and grew vegetables in the backyard, and made jams and preserves.[19] Many essentials such as milk, bread, ice, firewood and pharmaceutical prescriptions were delivered to the door by local tradesmen, riding bicycles or driving horse-drawn carts. But by the 1950s this localised system of home delivery was under challenge. Door-to-door deliveries of meat, vegetables and groceries were already in decline. The family grocer was being undercut by the 'cash-and-carry' and soon the neighbourhood shopping centre would be under pressure from the supermarket chains. Housewives in the new outer suburbs were poorly served by local tradesmen. For essentials she might go to a general store or milk bar but for fresh meat and vegetables, haberdashery and phamaceuticals she was obliged to look farther afield. Pioneer housewives in Mount Waverley and Clayton, on the city's south-east frontier, took advantage of trips to visit relatives in the inner suburbs, or occasional rail journeys to the city, to stock up on essential items.[20]

Shopping was hard work, especially for young mothers pushing prams over unmade roads with one or two crying children in tow.[21] The incentive to buy—or at least borrow—a car was correspondingly strong. 'With a car, even the most humdrum shopping expedition is a comparative pleasure', the *Radiator*'s correspondent had cheerfully observed. 'This is, of course, specially true when young children are to be considered.'[22] Unhappily, the new suburbs beyond the reach of tram and train were often the very places where husbands were also heavily dependent

'It is on the housewife that falls most of the burden of shopping', the Melbourne Metropolitan Planning Scheme observed in 1954. (MMBW PHOTO)

on the car, and young families most heavily mortgaged. In these hard-pressed households the car could easily become a bone of domestic contention, rather than a symbol of liberty.