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Review: Car Country: An Environmental History
By Christopher W. Wells

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Wells, Christopher W. *Car Country: An Environmental History*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2012. 464 pp. ISBN 9780295992150. US\$40.00, hardback. Alkaline paper.

Christopher W. Wells starts his narrative with an anecdote about his experiences with cars. He describes the joy of first owning an automobile, the inconvenience and disinterest in driving while living in towns with easily accessible amenities, and the necessity of a vehicle in major metropolitan areas. In other words, although Wells treasured his first car, his surroundings helped define his attitude about automobiles. He expands this view throughout *Car Country*, arguing that car dependence in America is not part of a love affair, but rather intimately connected with the built landscape. Wells shows that policies, technologies, and social forces promoted car use and infrastructure development that made driving easier and more prevalent. In doing so, he highlights how cars grew into the fabric of the landscape to form what he calls “Car Country” and altered the environment and Americans’ interactions with it.

Wells illustrates that the foundations for car dependent landscapes began before automobiles. He details how the late-nineteenth century good-roads movement shaped the environment and changed how individuals viewed roads. As reformers aimed to order nature and create a more moral society by improving transportation infrastructure, they showed that roads were not just a product of local conditions, but rather economic and social tools. For Wells, this change in thinking was vital, as it opened the door for government financing and the centralized administration of roads. By the second decade of the twentieth century, engineers called for road improvements to accommodate the rising traffic that arrived with the popularity of cars.

Wells also highlights how economic, policy, and behavioral changes helped create an environment conducive to easier car use. States introduced gasoline taxes to maintain street and highway systems for high volumes of automobiles. Retailers and commercial businesses started reshaping their buildings and adding parking lots to tap into the preferences of drivers. And by the mid-twentieth century, the U.S. federal government funded the construction of an interstate highway system, leading to low-density, car-oriented commercial and residential growth. As Wells notes, this suburban landscape soon dominated all others, signaling that the “United States completed its transformation into Car Country” (255).

Car dependence caused environmental and social ramifications that went beyond roads and subdivisions. Wells shows that car-friendly landscapes increased mobility, granted people convenient and non-linear access to different places, and fostered a sense of freedom sometimes missing with public transportation. Yet he also details the darker and contradictory consequences of car-oriented landscapes. They led to the creation of harmful logging and gravel operations, sparked cottage industries around designing roadside aesthetics, and introduced urban residents to nature outside of town, allowing them a temporary escape from their car dependence. Wells ultimately concludes that the greatest success of “Car Country” is its own failing, as Americans overcame transportation restraints, but became bound inexorably to cars.

The strength of *Car Country* lies in its mix of concrete data and historical narrative. Wells employs numerous maps, charts, and geographic statistics along with stories, including John

McAdam's quest to build roads for traffic, to make his narrative appeal to both general readers and diverse academic audiences. He also does well to clearly and cleverly point out the intricacies of "Car Country," though sometimes his use of the term becomes repetitive and seems to diminish its uniqueness. Then again, that also helps make his argument compelling, as he shows that car dependence is both complex and ubiquitous. In all, Wells provides historians with a new perspective on environmental and urban history and offers almost everyone a new way to view the landscapes they encounter on a daily basis.

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