

*Car Nation: an Illustrated History of Canada's
Transformation behind the Wheel* By Dimitry Anastakis

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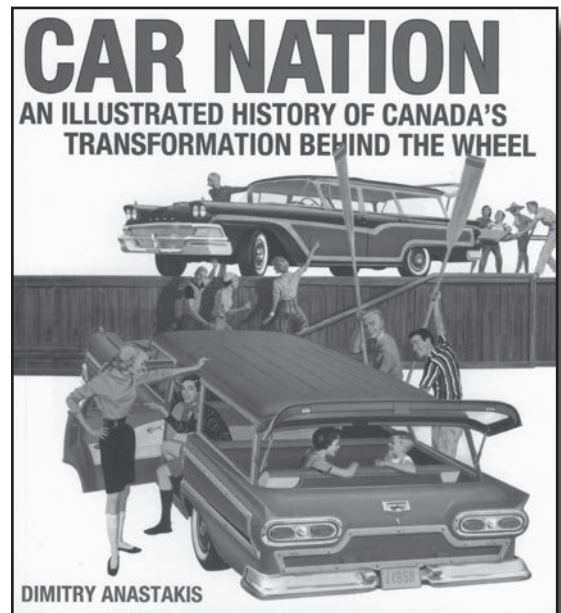
Car Nation: an Illustrated History of Canada's Transformation behind the Wheel

By Dimitry Anastakis

Toronto: James Lorimer and Company, 2008. 96 pages. \$24.95 soft-cover. ISBN 1-55277-005-2 (www.lorimer.ca)

When he was first approached to write a short history of the automobile in Canada, Trent University history professor Dimitry Anastakis was unsure if such a feat could be accomplished given the scope and complexity of the story. He nonetheless forged ahead and selected a number of characters, events, pictures and explanations that he has woven into *Car Nation*, a compact book of fewer than one hundred pages.

As suggested by its sub-title, *Car Nation* is more than an account of the technical features of automotive vehicles produced or assembled in Canada. The book begins with a general discussion of the origins of the 'horseless carriage' and of the role of men such as Gordon McGregor of Windsor and Sam McLaughlin of Oshawa. These two entrepreneurs, coming respectively from long lines of wagon makers and carriage manufacturers, were instrumental in the opening of Ford and General Motors branch plants in their hometowns. Anastakis, however, quickly shifts gears and branches into discussions of the technical and cultural impact of the automobile on Canadian psyches, landscapes and social struggles. The reader thus learns, among other things, about the use of the Ford Model T as a farm implement; the impact of motor cars on societal norms in the 1920s and 1930s; labour unrest during the Depression and 1940s; the conversion of car plants into tank shops during the Second World War; highway construction, suburban sprawl and the demise of the streetcar following that war; oil shocks in the 1970s; the arrival of Japanese manufacturers in Ontario



in the 1980s; and recent attempts to revive the century-old electric car.

Anastakis' sensibilities are clearly to the left of the political spectrum, a fact that influenced his selection, emphasis on and interpretation of past events. For example, George Burt, the Canadian director of the United Auto Workers (UAW/CAW) from 1939 to 1968, receives distinct mention at least five times, and numerous labour struggles are described in much detail. On the other hand, highly successful parts companies such as Magna International and Linamar Gear—perhaps the most significant Canadian achievement in the auto industry—are barely acknowledged; their founders and

workers are ignored altogether. Union activities are described throughout the book as unmitigated goods, but the administrative rigidities, confrontational mindsets and role they might have played in the downfall of the Big Three manufacturers—**General Motors, Ford and Chrysler—are not discussed.** Anastakis further asserts several times that Henry Ford and labour leaders (who otherwise despised each other) were able to create economic prosperity by making sure that car workers' wages enabled them to buy back their products, but fails to raise the classical rebuttal to this perspective. Does this imply that the makers of cheap dresses should get paid only enough to buy back their products too? Or should Cadillac assembly line workers have been paid more than their colleagues who assembled Ford Crestline convertibles? In the end, of course, the high purchasing power of Canadian car workers reflected their capacity to produce efficiently consumer goods for which there was a real market demand. Overcompensating workers (and managers) who failed to deliver a car for a price anybody was willing to pay could only result in the demise of their employers and the rise of competitors, mostly non-unionized.

Another recurring theme in Anastakis' narrative is the environmental and safety problems created by the car industry—from noise, smoke and rapidly increasing numbers of deaths among children in the early days to global warming concerns in the present age. But while these are serious issues, one could also argue that the true measure of technological advances should be their capacity to create problems of less consequence than those they were meant to address. In this light, it seems hard to argue with the fact that the provision of early cars was a net improvement over dealing with horses' excrement, decaying bodies, and the large amounts of land required to feed them and provide them with bedding, even when they were not working.

Ideological differences aside, *Car Nation* is an enjoyable book to read, in no insignificant part because of the quality of its production and abundant illustrations. The author has also had the good sense of providing a comprehensive list of related sites and museums that Canadian car history aficionados will appreciate.

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York University: The Way must be Tried

By Michiel Horn

Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009. xii + 316 pages. \$49.95 hardcover. ISBN 978-0-7735-3416-2 (www.mqup.ca)

Michiel Horn's meticulously detailed history of York University is a fitting tribute to the institution's fiftieth anniversary. Commissioned by former York president Lorna Marsden in 2002, this lavishly illustrated book is both a factual and an anecdotal narrative tracing the origins of the university as a dream of North Toronto citizens, built

on a farmer's field, to its current prominence as one of Canada's largest and most diverse universities.

This book joins a corpus of university histories stretching from Victoria to St. John's, the majority of which deal with much older and longer-established institutions. Horn, Professor Emeritus of History, himself