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Davis, Donald Finlay. *Conspicuous Production: Automobiles and Elites in Detroit, 1899-1933*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988. Pp. XXI, 282. 15 black and white plates, tables. \$29.95 (U.S.)

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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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historical geography; Szuchman's conceives urban history as urban sociology, and, above all, tries to recreate family history. As such, it is a major pioneering study in a field of Latin American research hitherto largely ignored.

By and large Szuchman is successful, given the difficulties preserved by the data and the general absence of previous works. In the first chapter, entitled "Home, Neighbourhood, Power," he states his goals, first "to integrate traditional evidence and quantitative evidence" and secondly "to reconcile social history with issues of political legitimacy and social control."

It is, of course, notorious that most Latin American societies have signally failed this second test, and one of the most interesting features of Szuchman's book is the way he shows how some of Argentina's deepest social malaises can be traced to the early 19th century — plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.

Szuchman's work may be appreciated on two levels. It rewards a person with only a passing interest in things Argentinian because it is clearly presented and quite readable. Here the choice of illustrations is especially felicitous. At the other level, Szuchman's work is a detailed microstudy aimed specifically at Latin American specialists, especially those whose field is Argentina. Here he attempts to integrate the traditional evidence with statistic of data. The approach is by topic: "Disorder and Social Control," "Growing up in the City," "Youth and Challenges to the Moral Order," "Children, Politics, and Education," "The Political Dimensions of Household Changes," and then a conclusion on "Masses and Political Obligations."

Some of these topics are rather more straightforward and self-contained than others, and again the nature and detail of the extant data make some themes easier to comprehend. In general terms, Szuchman has done a good job in melding a mass of

material into a coherent whole. My only reservation, albeit a personal bias, is against his occasional use of sociological jargon, which is never elegant and frequently incomprehensible to the non-specialist.

Taken together, the works of Scobie and Szuchman are complementary. Both are major contributions to scholarship and are recommended to any Canadian who wants to learn something of Argentina — a country which, after all, is one whose historical development is frequently contrasted with that of Canada, not always to the benefit of ourselves.

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**Davis, Donald Finlay. *Conspicuous Production: Automobiles and Elites in Detroit, 1899-1933*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988. Pp. XXI, 282. 15 black and white plates, tables. \$29.95 (U.S.)**

As Eugene Ferguson cautioned more than a decade ago in "Toward a Discipline of the History of Technology," historians must never "fail to note the importance of enthusiasm that is evoked by the technology." In the example of the automobile, such enthusiasm was not merely for the vehicle's technological capabilities but also for the social meanings the automobile represented. The automobile's social meaning, as Donald Davis argues in *Conspicuous Production*, had a profound influence not simply on the automobile industry itself, but also on the very community in which such industry was located.

In a tightly written and well-documented account, Davis bridges both urban and business history to examine Detroit's automobile elite up to 1933. Relying on a wide variety of corporate and personal biographies, as well as statistical profiles, he

demonstrates how a study of the industry cannot be divorced from a study of the wider community. The rise of the automobile industry was inseparable from the growth of Detroit, for, as Davis argues, the "gasoline aristocracy" that guided the industry exerted influence beyond the boardroom and into the community itself.

An important contribution of *Conspicuous Production* is to dispel the myth that the early automobile industry was a meritocracy. It was not, Davis contends, an industry led by self-made men, reflecting the openness of the social structure. Entry was not necessarily restricted, but success was predetermined to some extent by wealth, and not all aspiring manufacturers had the same chance to succeed.

According to Davis, the quest for social prestige by early automobile entrepreneurs carried over into their marketing strategies, such that social ambitions often dictated model policy. The social prestige hierarchy of the community served as a model for the price-class hierarchy that developed within the automobile industry. When Detroit's pre-automobile elite became involved in automobile manufacturing at the turn of the century, the status connotations of the product could not be ignored. The pressure was on the early entrepreneurs to build a vehicle worthy not only of their own name, for most early makes bore a family surname, but also of their social peers. While the search for social prestige caused the public to purchase costlier automobiles, it also pushed the manufacturers to build more expensive vehicles. That process, which Davis terms conspicuous production, forms the central theme of the book.

Central to this process, and thus to Davis's argument for conspicuous production, is the conviction that the automobile was a consumer product unlike any other. Following its introduction in the 1890s, the automobile was, Davis contends, the most important status symbol among consumer

goods. Comprehending the unique position of the automobile as a product is crucial to understanding the close relationship between industry and community which this study highlights.

The early domination by Detroit's elite did not, however, last. The impact of conspicuous production was such that although the old elites originated the automobile industry, their social prejudices eventually cost them control over it. As Davis argues, the inability to move beyond their status anxieties concerning the automobile was a key factor in undermining their control of the industry. Most importantly, the old elite failed to recognize the growing consumer strength of the middle and lower classes.

In a strong chapter on Henry Ford, Davis depicts Ford as the exception among Detroit's automobile manufacturers, being the first to break the monopoly of the old elite. The success of Ford by the 1930s, as well as that of GM and Chrysler, was marked by an ability to escape the binds of the price-class hierarchy, marketing a full range of products in defiance of the industry's class barriers.

Given the unique symbiotic relationship of city and industry, the inability to escape the status connotations of the automobile would ultimately prove detrimental to Detroit as a whole. The implications of conspicuous production for the wider community had taken a serious turn by 1933. Davis shows how the decision not to build lower-priced models led not only to a loss of control of the industry by the elite, but also to a loss of control of the local financial institutions, thus rendering them helpless to prevent the subsequent bank collapse in 1933. This decision to pursue conspicuous production made the Detroit of 1933 a city characterized by "an enfeebled upper class, crippled banks, and an economy largely dominated by absentee interests."

Technology possesses a personal human dimension which cannot be ignored. In this admirable study Davis has demonstrated how an innovation's social meaning remains as important as its technological meaning. The study is equally significant for the manner in which sub-disciplines are incorporated. Crossing smoothly from one to another, Davis also shows how arbitrary, and at times artificial, the distinction between urban, business, and technological history can be.

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**Buttenwieser, Ann L. *Manhattan Water-Bound: Planning and Developing Manhattan's Waterfront from the Seventeenth Century to the Present*. New York: New York University Press, 1987. Pp. xxii, 243. Black and white photographs, maps, index. \$35.00 (U.S.).**

There are probably only a handful of ports in the world where as much cargo — both human and other — has been handled as at the Port of New York. The movement of goods and people from ship to shore and back again became the basis for a massive urban economy in which the shoreline and the artifacts constructed on it became central features in the growth and prosperity of Manhattan and eventually of the greater New York City region.

A history of the way in which the shoreline of Manhattan has changed in shape and size to accommodate the burgeoning New World trade economy is therefore warranted. It adds to a surprisingly small but growing library of recent, specialist works on New York's past that includes Robert Caro's *Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York* and James R. Hudson's *The Unanticipated City: Loft Conversions in Lower Manhattan*.

Adding to the historical relevance of the work is the fact that, like many waterfront cities, New York is in the process of reclaiming — or perhaps more accurately, discovering — the waterfront for public access and recreational use. Like other waterfront cities, Manhattan can surely benefit from an accurate review of the development of its shoreline in order to provide a historical context to the impending resuscitation of the area. Buttenwieser's work follows the obligatory chronology of the port, beginning with mythical bargaining with the natives on Manhattan's shore. What follows is a clear and concise account of the evolution of the port and the city that attached itself to it. We follow with fascination the continual process of port expansion, pier construction, infilling waterlots to create more dock space, and the relentless urbanization northward on the island.

In the course of the chronological journey, we encounter a number of interesting issues played out for us. The first is the struggle of private versus public control and regulation of the waterfront. Allied with this is the complex process, unique to federal states, of determining which government controls the shore and who would do its planning. Inevitably compromises are made that promise to choke the creative planning and development of the waterfront with layers of agencies, commissions, and boards.

Despite the red tape, numerous plans for the harbour and the waterfront emerged from the offices of public authorities as well as private agencies. Grand schemes for resolving problems of sanitation, land-based transportation, and many other prominent difficulties associated with rapid urban growth were put forward. But, however grand the schemes proved to be, they were rarely able to keep abreast of the relentless growth and changing technology of shipping.

No sooner had piers been extended to accommodate the ever-growing length of ships than they were made obsolete by the