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Consuming passions

Auto Mobile: How the Car Changed Life

Ruth Brandon Macmillan, 468pp, £20

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For someone rapidly approaching their 34th birthday, as I am, the most startling statistic in Ruth Brandon's account of the way the car changed the world comes in the final chapter: she quotes the findings of a scientist who argues that a child born in about 1970 will see most of the world's reserves of oil and gas consumed in his or her lifetime. So far, we have burned about 900 billion barrels of oil; about 1,000 billion barrels remain, meaning that the point at which world production will peak is not far off – “the Big Rollover”, as it's known, is expected to occur sometime between 2003 and 2020. Thereafter, though supplies will still be plentiful, production will begin to decline at a rate of as much as 3 per cent a year, while demand will probably continue to rise.

The idea that my projected spell on the planet coincides quite so neatly with the plunder of one of its most valuable resources came as a surprise, though there is another school of thought that says we will never run out of oil. Sheikh Yamani, Saudi Arabia's oil minister between 1962 and 1986, points out rather facetiously that the Stone Age did not end because people ran out of stones; he believes that hydrogen will supplant oil as an alternative source of energy long before the world's reserves are depleted. He may be right. Yet Brandon believes that we are so wedded to our cars – hers is a soft-top Peugeot 205 – that we will not seriously consider alternatives until we have to; and by then, it will be too late.

The final chapter, in which Brandon speculates on what might happen when the oil runs out, is the most thought-provoking and absorbing in the book. That it accounts for fewer than 30 of its 468 pages is testimony to the car's enduring ability to galvanise our imaginations: architects, designers, writers, politicians and businessmen have been inspired to recast the world in many ways to accommodate the car, but comparatively few have attempted to imagine the world without it. When new Labour came to power and cancelled many of the road schemes it had inherited from the previous government, it seemed to be acting on the fashionable belief that you can't build your way out of gridlock. However, its inaction over the past few years suggests that it has no other solution – or if it does, it is scared to act on it.

Even Brandon finds it hard to write against the current of our infatuation with the car – *Auto Mobile* is a polemic of sorts, but an uncertain one. It is at its weakest when it rails against the car, and at its best when animated by the car's exotic history. Brandon writes particularly well about the careers of the men who made and, in some cases, lost a fortune in the car business – such as Henry Ford, who preached anti-Semitism and practised a kind of industrial fascism. Ford was also a passionate idealist, possessed of “a deep romantic conviction that he alone could set the world to rights”. One of his preoccupations was with soya beans, and a photograph in the book shows him “elegantly soy-suited”, taking a sledgehammer to the “supposedly unbreakable” car that he had built from soy. To his disgust, the car did not withstand the blow. In the last few years, though, a derivative of soy called biodiesel has been proposed as a possible replacement for petrol. It would be remarkable if the man who precipitated the first great age of the car should also have anticipated, albeit indirectly, its second coming. Rapeseed, sunflower seeds and peanuts are other possible fuels; in the future, our cities may smell of burning animal fats and vegetable oils.

Edward Platt's Leadville: a biography of the A40 (Picador, £7.99) won the 2001 Mail on Sunday/John Llewellyn Rhys Prize and a Somerset Maugham award



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