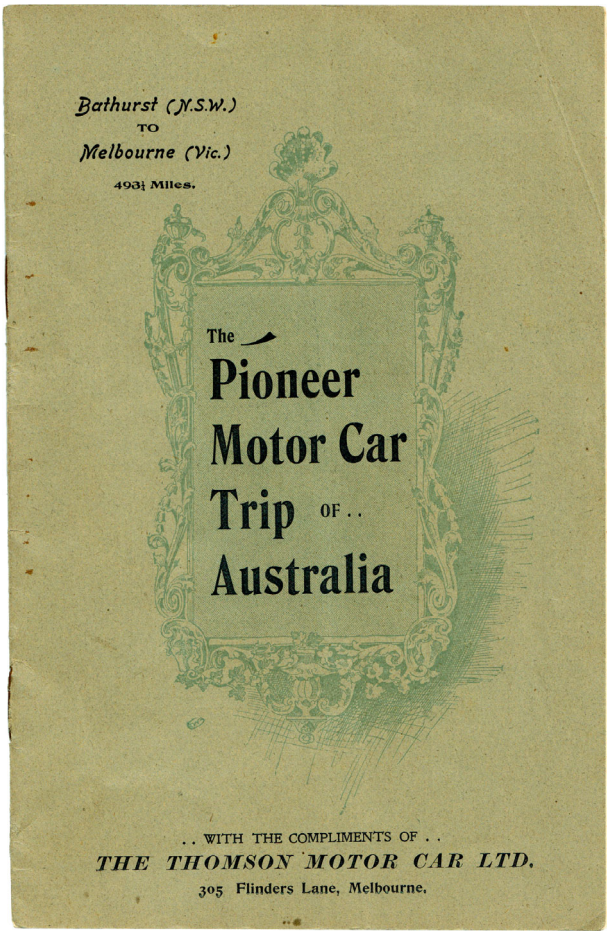
‘Exploring the Limits’

Pioneering Australian Motor Car Travel

During the last decades of the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth there was something of a world-wide cycling craze. Extraordinary feats of endurance were undertaken: continents crossed, mountain ranges conquered, races from capital to capital, even round the world tours. Australians contributed their modest share to the literature celebrating these trails of endurance: Jerome Murif (*From Ocean to Ocean: Across a Continent on a Bicycle. An Account of a solitary ride from Adelaide to Port Darwin.* Melbourne, George Robertson, 1897), G.W. Burston and H.R. Stokes (*Round about the World on Bicycles: the pleasure tour of G. W. Burston and H. R. Stokes, Melbourne Bicycle Club, Australia.* Melbourne, Sydney and Adelaide, George Robertson and Company, 1890), Albert Macdonald (*The Book of Albert MacDonald of Orroroo. By One Who Knew Him.* Sydney, Syd. Day for The Austral Cycle Agency, circa 1898 – 1900), Arthur Richardson (*The Story of a Remarkable Cycle Ride: an account of Arthur Richardson's plucky pioneer ride around Australia as related by him to “Pedal”, of the “West Australian”, Perth.* Melbourne, The Dunlop Pneumatic Tyre Co. of Australasia, 1900), and the better-known Francis Birtles (*Lonely Lands: Through the Heart of Australia.* Sydney, N.S.W. Bookstall Co., 1909).

The achievement-proud nineteenth century public had a fascination with the modes of transportation that they had pioneered and brought to near perfection, perhaps hymned most famously in Jules Verne’s *Around the World in Eighty Days*, in which every conceivable form of mechanical transportation is taken to its limits. With the advent of the automobile, too late for Verne to celebrate, the cycling craze morphed seamlessly into a new craze.



The earliest Australian book of automobile endurance was published in 1900. *The Pioneer Motor Car Trip of Australia* (Melbourne, The Thomson Motor Car Ltd., 1900) by Herbert Thomson, of Armadale, Victoria, is the earliest known book on the motor car in Australia, recording, with photographic illustrations, Thomson’s pioneering journey of nearly 500 miles in an Australian-built motor car, from Bathurst (N.SW.) to Melbourne (Victoria) in 1898. The overland journey was made via Blayney, Cowra, Young, Cootamundra, Junee, Wagga, Wangaratta, Benalla, Seymour, and Broadford; the car was driven by the inventor, with E.L. Holmes keeping the running record.

The pamphlet was published to promote Thomson’s car as much as his motoring feat, as the first page reveals (quoting the “Melbourne Press”): “The Thomson Motor Car, which was awarded first prize at the Sydney Agricultural Show

held during the Easter holidays, is to be put to a crucial test by the intention of the patentee to drive it overland from the northern capital. The road, which is not by any means a good one, is bound to bring out any weak points (if there are any), and should it come through the ordeal in a satisfactory manner, a prosperous future can safely be predicted for it". The car itself still exists and is preserved at the Museum of Victoria; it is illustrated on the back wrapper of Thomson's pamphlet.

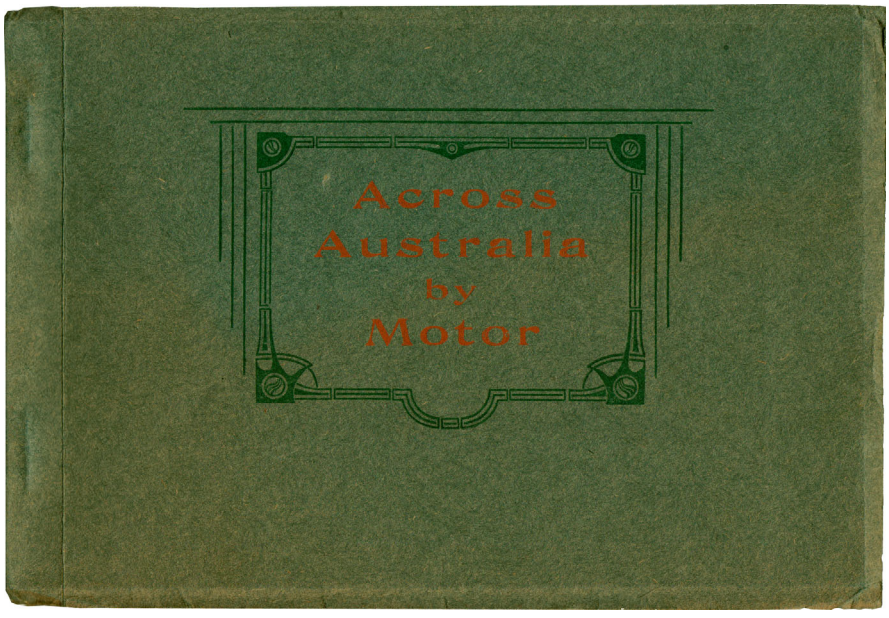
The 16-page pamphlet is rare, perhaps less so than one might expect but rare enough for a fake to have been produced, probably in the early 1970s. Although this photo-lithographed facsimile gives no indication that it is a reprint, it may be distinguished from the original edition by its size (height 197 mm whereas the original is 212 mm). Also the wrappers of the facsimile are blue paper but the paper wrappers of the original are pale greyish green. Also, if one is familiar with the appearance of the piece, one can tell at a glance, since the title on the front wrapper is printed within an elaborate pale green frame in the original, while the facsimile has no frame at all.

As the premier Australian book on the motor car, Thomson's pamphlet is widely sought after by collectors of Australian travel, social history, Australian motoring history, world motoring history, and even collectors of Victorian books. Accordingly, it tends to be valued in the thousands and is invariably hotly contested.

When Albert MacDonald "of Orroroo" rode his bicycle across the continent, following the Telegraph Line from south to north, between 22 August and 24 September 1898, he was not testing the limits of geographical knowledge but the limits of his own endurance. The second book published in Australia on the motor car records the same cross-continent trip, this time undertaken by Henry Hampden Dutton with mechanic Murray Aunger, and again this first crossing of the continent by automobile tested endurance, mechanical as much as human.

Dutton, a scion of the notable Adelaide family, made this historic trip from Adelaide to Port Darwin accompanied by his mechanic, Murray Aunger, in a 25-horsepower Clement-Talbot over 51 days between 30 June and 20 August, 1908. Dutton and Aunger had attempted the crossing the year before in another Clement-Talbot, "Angelina", but had to abandon the attempt and the car at Edinburgh Flat, south of Tennant Creek. Their successful car, first named "474" and later "Overlander", was driven again in 1958 by Dutton's two sons, John and Geoffrey, to repeat the journey, this time in ten days over made roads. "Overlander" is preserved in the Birdwood Mill Museum in South Australia.

After his successful attempt in "Overlander", Dutton produced a rare private publication for family use as a record of the first crossing of the continent by automobile. *Across Australia by Motor* (Adelaide, J.L. Bonython & Co., Printers, circa 1909) is a small oblong duodecimo. In a way, it was designed as a small photograph album, comprising a title-leaf, a folding route map, and 51 leaves of captioned photographs taken by Dutton as a narrative record of the trip. Among other features of interest, the photographs include a number of early photographs of Central Australian Aborigines, many of whom had still been very little influenced by European civilisation.



In 1985 Dutton's son, Geoffrey, wrote an account of his father's two trips in an article published in *Pegasus* XXVIII (London, Mobil Services Co. Ltd, 1985). Geoffrey still had, as late as the 1990s, a small stock of his father's book and occasionally gave copies to friends until he sold the remaining handful to a Brisbane antiquarian bookdealer. Copies in fine condition do, then, turn up from time to time, some from that final dispersal, some from Geoffrey's friends – a few years ago, for example, Barry Humphries's copy was sold at auction when he cleared his Sydney apartment.

Interestingly, Geoffrey Dutton had some of his father's original photographs taken during the trip; these were also sold (or given away?). One of these, not published in the book, is visual evidence of one of those improbable co-incidences

that are not allowed in fiction. In 1907 Francis Birtles began his famous ‘Lonely Lands’ bicycle journey. Starting from Sydney he rode to Burketown, then Port Darwin, Alice Springs, Adelaide, then Melbourne, to Sydney. Astonishingly, Birtles and Dutton bumped into each other, in the centre of the continent, near Tennant Creek. Dutton took a fine photograph of Birtles, posing with his bicycle and with the Clement Talbot in frame, to mark the remarkable occasion. The original sepia silver gelatin print is authenticated on the reverse by Geoffrey Dutton.

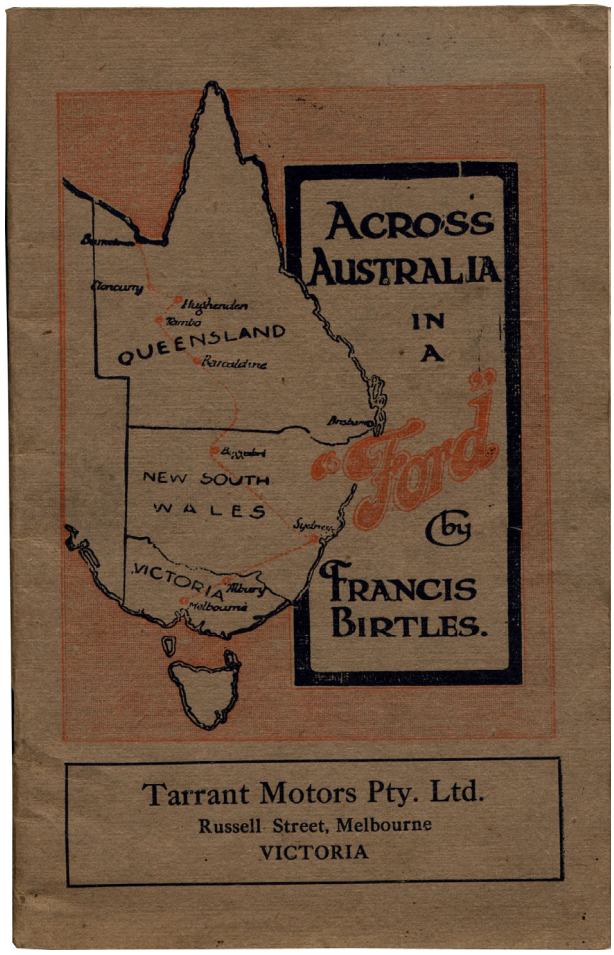
Crossing the continent from south to north having been conquered, crossing from west to east was the next goal to be achieved by a pioneer motorist. John Leslie Burton’s *Across Australia in Seven Days. J.L. Burton’s Story of his Record Drive on a Hupmobile shod with Barnet Glass “Boomerang” Tyres* was published to mark the remarkable tour in a Hupmobile from Fremantle to Sydney in February 1918 he made with his mechanic, T. Smith, in a record breaking seven days, by way of Norseman, Eucla, Port Augusta, Broken Hill, and Cobar. When one compares Burton’s seven days across the continent from west to east in 1918 with Dutton’s 51 days crossing from south to north in 1908, one is struck by the huge mechanical advances in motor car manufacture and design over the intervening ten years.

Burton’s very rare oblong quarto of 24 pages (including the titling-wrappers) is illustrated with a series of dramatic photographs taken on the way. The booklet has no publisher’s imprint, although the colophon on the back wrapper indicates that it was “Wholly set up and printed in Australia by Marchant’s Patent ‘Highlight Ltd.’ Direct Offsett Process. 433-7 Kent Street, Sydney”. From the brazen mention of Barnet Glass Boomerang Tyres on the front titling-wrapper and the advertisement for the same on the back wrapper, it is evident that Burton’s trip, and almost certainly this publication, were sponsored by that manufacturer.

Interestingly, this continues the tradition found with similar cycling publications in earlier years – Albert Macdonald’s book was published by the Austral Cycle Agency, and Arthur Richardson’s by the Dunlop Pneumatic Tyre Co. – with manufacturers or retailers of motor cars and related products sponsoring or publishing these ephemeral pamphlet accounts to advertise the virtues of their products, so well demonstrated by the marathon feats of the adventurous drivers. In the years that followed pamphlets were published or sponsored by Ford, Oldsmobile, Pontiac, Vauxhall, Dort Motor Cars, Reo Motors, British Imperial Oil, and no doubt others.

It was Ford that sponsored what is undoubtedly the most widely-distributed of the cross-continental motor car tours. Francis Birtles, the cyclist, was an enthusiast for almost every form of land transport – he was also an air enthusiast, accompanying Francis Briggs on the first flight to Alice Springs in 1921, a flight Birtles had proposed with a view to preparing a motion picture documentary. His transition from bicycle marathons to motor car marathons was a swift one.

Having just published his marathon cycling narrative, *Lonely Lands*, in 1909, he published his first motor car endurance account in 1914. *3,500 Miles across Australia in a Ford Car from the Gulf of Carpentaria to Port Phillip Bay* was published by various Australian Ford Motor Car dealerships. Birtles's car trip was undertaken from August to December 1913 beginning in Burketown in the Gulf of Carpentaria then across outback Queensland through Cloncurry, Hughenden, Tambo and Barcaldine, thence through outback New South Wales via Boggabri to Sydney, then from Sydney to Melbourne, via Albury. The published account was extracted from Birtles's diary, "without alteration" by G.W. Whatmore, who compiled the publication.



Whatmore's introductory note is dated from Brisbane, and all variants of the 64-page illustrated pamphlet have the printer's colophon of "Valley Art Printing Co. Limited Brunswick St., Brisbane". The variations between the several issues do not affect the bulk of the pamphlet and all were clearly printed at the same time. In each variant the wrappers are identical, differing only in the dealer's imprint (The Queensland | Motor Agency | Ltd… Brisbane; Davies & Fehon Motors Ltd… Sydney, and at Lismore; Tarrant Motors Pty. Ltd… Melbourne; Duncan & Fraser Ltd… Adelaide; R. Nettlefold… Hobart). The last six unnumbered pages of the piece also vary between variants in accordance with the advertising requirements of the individual dealerships on whose behalf the pamphlet was prepared. All issues are rare, although the Victorian issue seems marginally more common. The Brisbane, Hobart, and Adelaide issues are particularly rare.

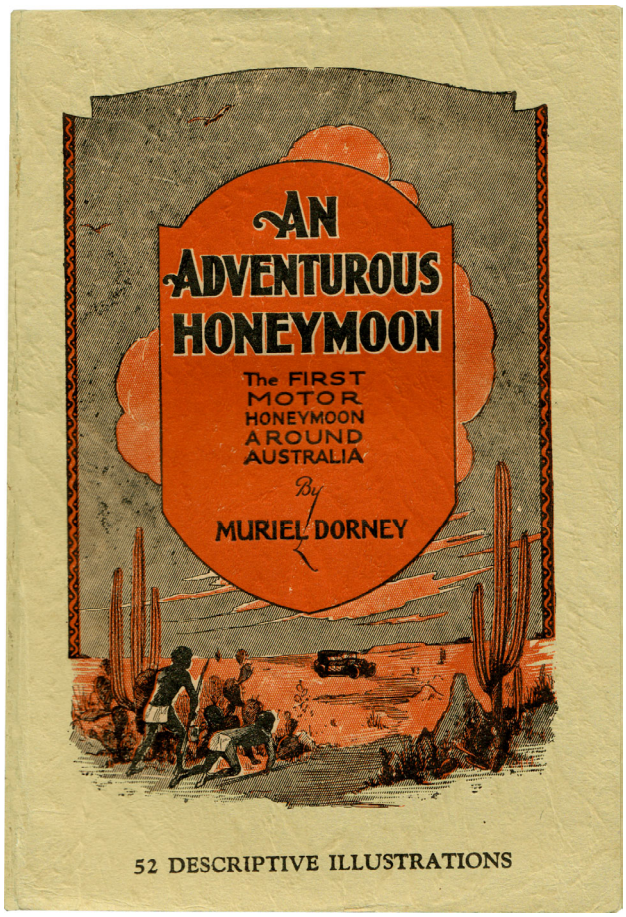
Birtles's next feat to be recorded in print was another north-south trip across the continent, this time from Adelaide to Darwin in "9 days, 9 hours, 15 minutes [!]" with one companion, Rud Miller. The trip via Daly Waters, over the MacDonnell Ranges to Alice Springs, Oodnadatta, and Lake Eyre covered difficult terrain including storm channels and quicksand, mountains ranges, sand hills, and salt lakes. Publication of Birtles's ephemeral account of this trip was sponsored by British Imperial Oil Co. Ltd. *Darwin to Adelaide 9 Days, 9 Hours, 15 minutes. Francis Birtles' History Making Journey 18th – 27th Nov. 1924*, a 16-page illustrated oblong octavo, was published in Melbourne around the end of 1924 and early 1925.

Another, extremely rare, version of this account was published, with direct quotation from Birtles and some publisher's editorial, by the manufacturer of Oldsmobile, the model used by Birtles and Muller in their journey. General Motors Corporation, who had taken over the Oldsmobile brand some years before, sponsored a 16-page pamphlet that promoted the brand. Entitled *Conquering the Australian Bush, with Other Chapters of Oldsmobile Achievement*, it was published without imprint – the wrapper colophon, "Printed in USA" is only minimally informative. The Australian portion of this promotional publication (pp. 3 – 10) comprises the bulk of the piece. It was edited from Birtles's narrative and was illustrated with his photographs and a small map. The extended Birtles account is followed by four short illustrated accounts of similar feats: "Oldsmobile Equal to Brazil's Worst Roads", "Oldsmobile 30 in High Gear Defies All Mountains near Sydney", "From New York to Los Angeles in High Gear". The Sydney endurance trial reported here, undertaken by Sydney Oldsmobile dealers Messrs Boyd Edkins, was supervised by the Royal Automobile Club of Australia. While not adventurous, this "high gear run of 2,044 miles – including all steep grades within 100 miles of Sydney" was nonetheless demanding.

Oldsmobile were not alone in their interest in the Australian market, or more probably in Australia as a proving ground for the durability of their brands. Dort Motor Company sponsored another extremely rare and ephemeral piece, *Into a Land Unknown and Out*, a 18-page illustrated octavo. Concentrating on 'wild and undeveloped' Central Australia, the pamphlet describes the return motor car trip in three Dort cars from Melbourne to Darwin via Adelaide, covering 5,546 miles in 67 days. It was printed in Chicago by Bert L. White for the Dort Motor Company in about 1923-4.

In the mid-twenties the early motor car publications undergo a gradual shift of emphasis. The first sign of this shift is probably found in a pamphlet by Murray Aunger, who had accompanied Henry Hampden Dutton as mechanic in his trip by car across Australia from South to North in 1909. His account of another Central Australian car trip, *Vice-Regal Trip in three Dort Cars to Central Australia Oodnadatta Alice Springs*, describes a trip to determine the best route for the proposed North-South railway. That the trip had some purpose, apart from record-breaking or record-setting competitiveness, seems to mark a change in the way the motor car was viewed more widely. It had now become a significant and, above all, a practical modern means of transportation and just not a hobby-horse for the rich and adventurous. Aunger's anonymous pamphlet – printed by Falcoln Press, Melbourne, in about 1924-5, twelve illustrated pages in titling-wrappers – is extremely rare.

After Aunger's piece was published there is a clear shift away from the bold adventure narratives of the earlier years. The work that underlines this shift most uncompromisingly is Muriel Dorney's *An Adventurous Honeymoon: The First Motor Honeymoon Around Australia*. This was also the first published account of a long-distance Australian motor car trip by a woman.



A Brisbane-born school-teacher, Muriel Dorney and her new husband, John, a Brisbane motor car dealer, undertook a six-month trip around Australia as their honeymoon in 1926-7, publishing an extended account on her return. Having just been disappointed in her application to teach in Papua New Guinea before she met her husband, Muriel was clearly an adventurous young woman as her cheerful account of this difficult, even foolhardy, trip shows. At the time, the Dorneys achieved celebrity status and a photograph on page 208 shows a large and thrusting crowd greeting them on their return to Brisbane at the end of the trip.

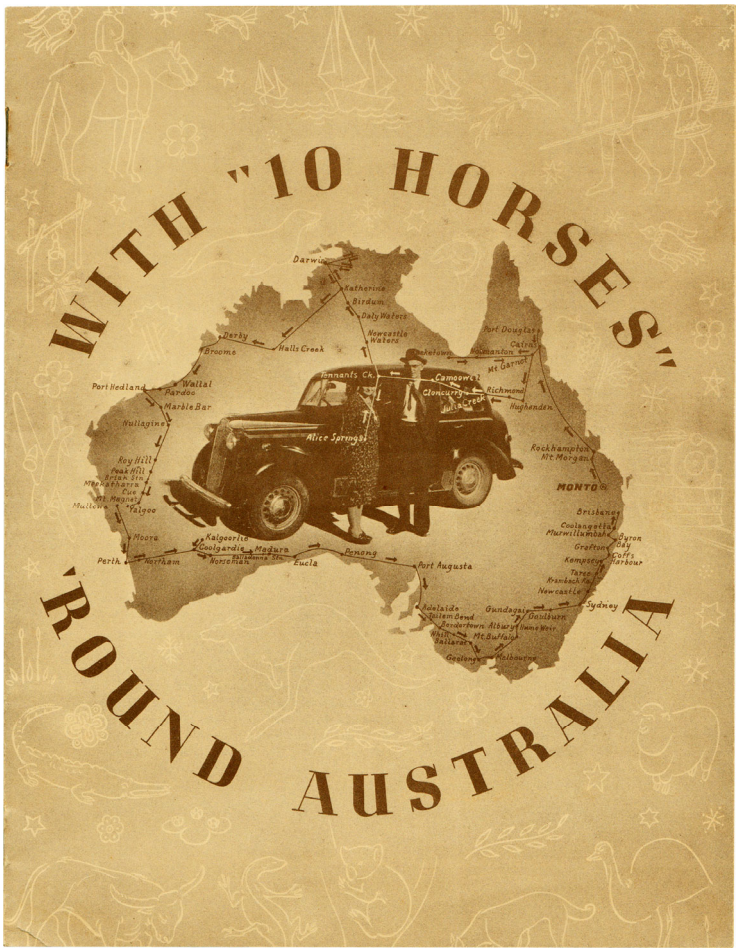
There is, naturally, much on outback Australia and the Aborigines – little of it sympathetic. The trip began in Brisbane then north-west to Longreach, Cloncurry, Avon Downs in the Northern Territory, Victoria River Downs, Daly Waters, Katherine and on to Darwin, then west to Broome in Western Australia and south to Perth via Marble Bar and Peak Hill, east to Coolgardie and Kalgoorlie, across the Nullarbor via Fowler's Bay to Port Augusta in South Australia, thence to Adelaide, Mt. Gambier, Melbourne, Bendigo, Albury, Canberra, Sydney, Newcastle, Armidale, Grafton and ending in Brisbane. While there is still adventure in the air, it is no longer the spirit of the bold pioneering adventurers but the personal adventures of – dare one say – the 'ordinary' motorist that is celebrated, not so much what the machine is capable of but what people are able to do in it.

With Dorney's book we see not only a change of emphasis in the tone and substance of the motor touring narrative but also in its form. Printed in Brisbane by Read Press in 1927, her 210-page illustrated narrative was issued in colour illustrated wrappers and, unlike the earlier wrappered works, marks the transition of early Australian motoring publications from ephemeral pamphlets into 'real books'. While that change of format is worth noting, the extension of long-distance touring to the more well-to-do elements of the general public is arguably more socially significant. Other accounts of personal adventure followed.

A rare early example published at the same time, which, unlike Dorney's extended narrative, is a pamphlet in the same style as those already mentioned and was published almost certainly under the sponsorship of a motor car dealership, Reo Motor Sales, Adelaide. Titled on the wrapper *3,300 Miles through Eastern Australia in a Reo*, this 16-page illustrated pamphlet is an anonymous account "by one of the party" of a 1927 trip in a Reo Bus and car owned by C.S. Rattew from Port Pirie via Broken Hill, Walgett and Toowoomba to Brisbane for a Y.M.C.A. athletics competition. The 22 passengers returned along the east and south-east coasts, through Sydney, Canberra, Albury, Melbourne, Portland and Adelaide. Half the text and most of the plates depict the outback section through Wilcannia, Bourke, Walgett and Goondiwindi.

The chatty account is written in the somewhat naïve and unliterary style one might expect. It conveys a good impression of the difficulties experienced by cross-country motorists travelling early in the century through largely unsettled areas while, paradoxically, demonstrating the comparative ease with which such a trip could be undertaken where just over fifty years before explorers had lost their lives.

Another piece, published a few years later, evidences an emphatically practical view of the motor car. Written by a distinguished public man, Charles Price Conigrave, *Around Australia in a Pontiac* is an illustrated 32-page pamphlet, printed by Commercial Copying Company, Sydney, and almost certainly privately published by the author. Conigrave was the correspondent for the *Sydney Morning Herald* on the Pontiac-N.R.M.A. Round-Australia Motor Survey, 11 August – 25 September 1936, which tracked anti-clockwise around Australia from capital to capital.



In about 1938-9 another motor car trip around Australia was undertaken by the "adventurous tourists" Mr. and Mrs. R.O. Marshall. *With "10 Horses" 'Round Australia*, printed in Brisbane by Jackson and O'Sullivan (J & O'S"), comprised eight illustrated pages. Issued without wrappers it is again an ephemeral pamphlet in keeping with the genre, and again very rare. The account of this trip in a Vauxhall Wyvern around Australia from Monto, Queensland, was written up by journalist D.W. Picking, based entirely on an interview with and extensive quotations from Mr. and Mrs. Marshall. The piece was prepared and issued as a form of advertisement for the Vauxhall Wyvern motor car.

And with the adventurous Marshalls an era seems to end, perhaps due more to the advent of war than anything else. In all the works mentioned so far the motor car was very much the central feature around which everything else revolved. In part this is due to the advertising nature of many of these publications but it is also simply a fact that the motor car and motor car travel were a novelty in themselves. By war's end that would never again to be the case.

As with all lines of historical demarcation, that a line may be drawn at the year 1939 to mark the end to the early period of the Australian motor car book is something freely open to argument. Indeed ephemeral pamphlet accounts of endurance drives, tourist trips, even expeditions of geographic and scientific exploration continued to be published well past that half-arbitrary date. Nevertheless, the years of the Second World War brought, along with its horrors, such technological changes that the world after 1945 would have been unrecognisable to the eyes of 1939 and the only technology that could then excite with its novelty was atomic, supersonic, or interplanetary. The motor vehicle was by then just a tool.

Checklist of Books Mentioned

[1] THOMSON, Herbert.
Bathurst (N.S.W.) to Melbourne (Vic.) 493 1/4 Miles. THE PIONEER MOTOR CAR TRIP OF AUSTRALIA With the Compliments of The Thomson Motor Car Ltd. 305 Flinders Lane, Melbourne. [1900].
Octavo, pp. 16, with illustrations throughout, the text printed in blue; titling-wrappers.

[2] [DUTTON, Henry Hampden].
ACROSS AUSTRALIA BY MOTOR.
No imprint; colophon on back wrapper recto: J.L. Bonython & Co., Printers, Adelaide [n.d., circa 1909]
Oblong duodecimo, pp. [2] (title-page, verso blank) + 51 leaves of captioned photographic plates, and a folding map (before the title); wrappers with overlapping edges.

[3] BURTON, John Leslie.
ACROSS AUSTRALIA IN SEVEN DAYS. Price 2/- nett. J.L. BURTON'S STORY OF HIS RECORD DRIVE ON A HUPMOBILE SHOD WITH BARNET GLASS "BOOMERANG" TYRES.
Colophon (back wrapper verso): Wholly Set Up and Printed in Australia by Marchant's Patent "Highlight Ltd." Direct Offsett Process. 433-7 Kent Street, Sydney [circa 1918].
Oblong quarto, pp. 24 (including wrappers), numerous photographic illustrations in the text; illustrated titling-wrappers.

[4] BIRTLES, Francis Edwin.
3,500 MILES ACROSS AUSTRALIA IN A FORD CAR FROM THE GULF OF CARPENTARIA TO PORT PHILLIP BAY By Francis Birtles. Edited and Compiled by G.W. Whatmore. Aug. to Dec. 1913 [circa 1914].
Imprint: "Presented with the compliments of The Queensland Motor Agency Ltd., Adelaide Buildings, Adelaide Street Brisbane, Sole Agents in Queensland for Ford Cars". Colophon (verso of the back wrapper): "Valley Art Printing Co. Limited Brunswick St., Brisbane".
Octavo, pp. 58, [59 – 64], illustrations throughout; decorated wrappers.
Brisbane issue, probable primary issue.
At least four variant issues were published by various Ford dealerships throughout Australia, in each case printed by Valley Art Printing, Brisbane, and were, with the exception of the unnumbered individualised advertising pages at the end, with identical text and wrapper design. The variants known are "Presented with the compliments of": Messrs. Davies & Fehon Motors Ltd., Sydney; Tarrant Motors Pty. Ltd., Melbourne; Duncan & Fraser Ltd, Adelaide; R. Nettlefold, Hobart.

[5] BIRTLES, Francis Edwin.
DARWIN TO ADELAIDE 9 DAYS, 9 HOURS, 15 MINUTES. FRANCIS BIRTLES' HISTORY MAKING JOURNEY 18th-27th Nov. 1924
Imprint: "With Compliments British Imperial Oil Co. Ltd." [Melbourne, circa 1924].
Oblong octavo, pp. [16], illustrations in the text; wrappers.

[6] BIRTLES, Francis Edwin, and others.
CONQUERING THE AUSTRALIAN BUSH, WITH OTHER CHAPTERS OF OLDSMOBILE ACHIEVEMENT.
No imprint: [Michigan, General Motors Corporation, n.d., circa 1924]
Colophon (on back wrapper verso): Printed in USA.
Octavo, pp. 16. (last blank), illustrations and map in the text; wrappers.

[7] DORT MOTOR COMPANY.
INTO A LAND UNKNOWN AND OUT.
Colophon: Chicago, Bert L. White [for Dort Motor Company, circa 1923].
Duodecimo (?), pp. [18], illustrations and a map in the text; titling-wrappers.

[8] AUNGER, Murray.
VICE-REGAL TRIP IN THREE DORT CARS TO CENTRAL AUSTRALIA OODNADATTA ALICE SPRINGS.
Colophon: Melbourne, Falcoln Press, [n.d., circa 1925-6]
Octavo, pp. 12, illustrations in the text; colour pictorial titling-wrappers.

[9] DORNEY, Mrs Muriel.
AN ADVENTUROUS HONEYMOON THE FIRST MOTOR HONEYMOON AROUND AUSTRALIA… Wholesale Supplies Distributed by John Dorney First Avenue, Eagle Junction, Brisbane Printed by The Read Press Ltd. Douglas Chambers, Adelaide Street, Brisbane [n.d., 1927]
Octavo, pp. [2] (blank, pasted to the front wrapper as stiffening, conjugate with pp. [v-vi] following), [vii], 210, [4]

(advertisements), [2] (blank, pasted to the back wrapper as stiffening, conjugate with pp. [1-2} of the advertisements), illustrations and route map in the text; stiffened illustrated wrappers, printer's imprint on the back wrapper in black.
The *Australian National Bibliography 1901-1950* has two entries, 13255 and 13254, for this book. No. 13254 is a ghost, due to an erroneous reading of the imprint – "Adelaide Street"; a common enough fault in ANB.

[10] [ANONYMOUS]
3,300 MILES THROUGH EASTERN AUSTRALIA IN A REO
No imprint: [Adelaide, Reo Motor Sales Limited?, n.d. circa 1927].
Colophon: Sharples-Printers-Ltd., 98 Hindley St., Adelaide.
Octavo, pp. [16], photographic illustrations and a route map in the text; wrappers.

[11] CONIGRAVE, Charles Price.
AROUND AUSTRALIA IN A PONTIAC
Colophon (back wrapper recto): Commercial Copying Company 28 Martin Place, Sydney
Octavo, pp. 32, illustrations in the text; titling-wrappers.

[12] [MARSHALL, Mr. and Mrs. R.O.] PICKING, D.W.
WITH "10 HORSES" 'ROUND AUSTRALIA
Colophon: J & O'S (i.e. Brisbane, Jackson and O'Sullivan). [n.d., circa 1939].
Small quarto, pp. [8], with illustrations in the text, printed in dark sepia on cream paper; issued without wrappers (i.e. self-wrappered).