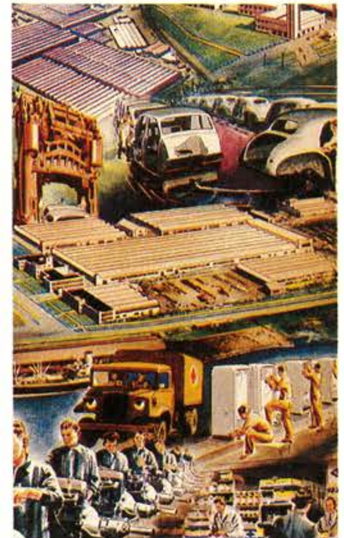
CHAPTER 6

# CARS FOR THE PEOPLE

PETER SPEARRITT

LIKE MOST Australians born after World War I, I have never known a world without cars. The streets of my childhood—I was born in 1949—were filled with them. I spent the first five years of my life with my parents in a rented cottage sandwiched between Port Phillip Bay and the Nepean Highway which curls around the bay to Mordialloc, Frankston and Mornington. Some of my earliest memories are of my parents warning me never to venture on to the highway. Australians over 70 do remember a time when cars were scarce, the possession of an envied minority.

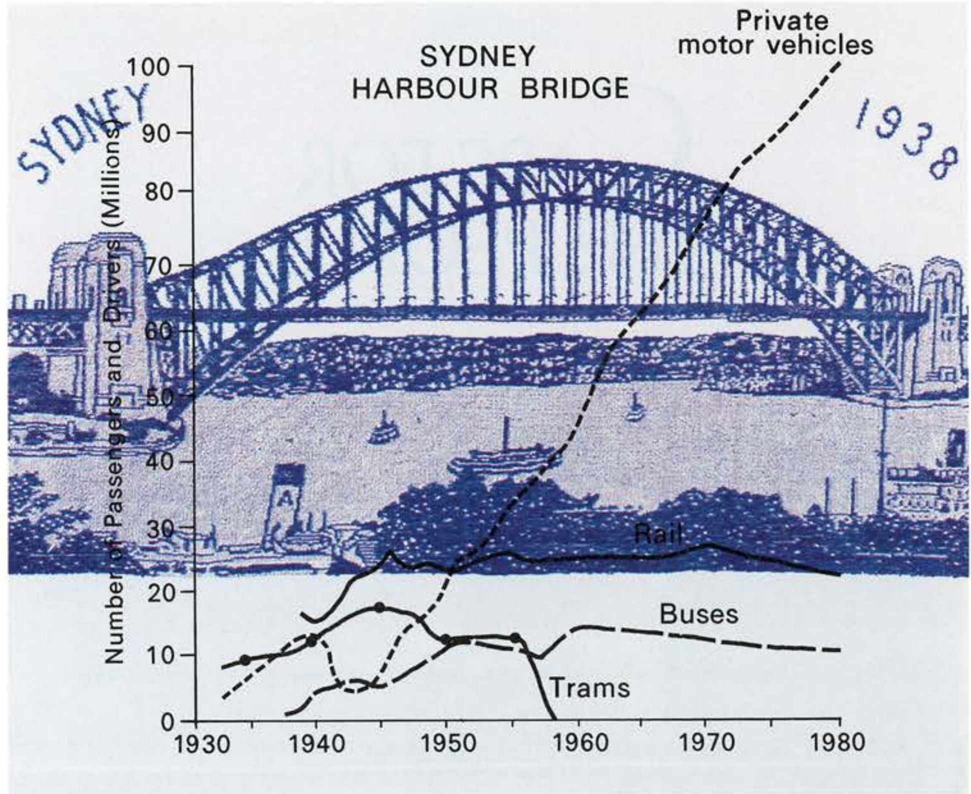
Cars came to Australia in the 1890s but remained rare before the 1920s. In that decade the American firm General Motors and the Ford Motor Co of Canada set up small assembly plants in all states except Tasmania, importing engines and most parts. In 1931 GM's subsidiary, GM Australia, acquired Holden Motor Body Builders of Adelaide to form itself into General Motors-Holden's. With the help of state governments anxious to hasten industrialisation, both GMH and Ford expanded their plants and opened new ones.



*In November 1948 GMH, a wholly American-owned firm, produced the 'Holden' which they marketed as 'Australia's own car'. This advertisement explains how GM took over Holden Motor Body Builders of Adelaide in 1931 to create GMH.* Australian women's weekly, *6 Aug 1952.*

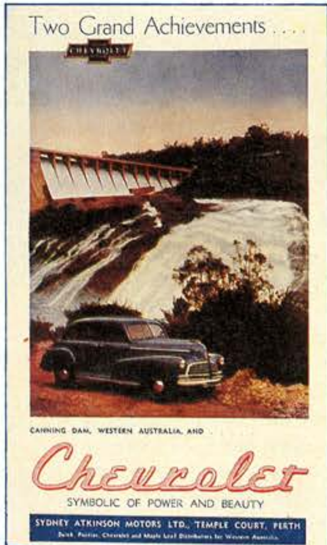
Cars were welcomed by forward-looking Australians as harbingers of modernity, having a special appeal in a continent of such vast distances. Car and truck dealers displayed American and British brand names—Ford, Chevrolet, Oldsmobile, Austin and Morris—in suburbs and towns across the nation. So did the petrol companies—Shell, Texaco, COR, Atlantic—and the tyre and spare part firms—Goodyear, Dunlop, Olympic and Repco, the only wholly Australian-owned firm. Yet by 1939 only one in four Australian families had a car. New cars were uncommon, and only the better-off, such as doctors, solicitors and some businessmen, were able to afford new models regularly.

World War II caused a temporary setback to the assemblers and sellers of motor vehicles. By 1942 car registrations had fallen to the level of the late 1920s. Petrol rationing and restrictions on production and sales reduced the number of cars on the roads. Many men with licences to drive—women with licences were rare—joined the armed services and put their cars up on blocks for the duration of




*Information collected about the Sydney Harbour Bridge enables us to compare the patronage of private motor vehicles with that of various forms of public transport. Buses and trains account for about the same number of crossings in 1985 as in 1960, but in that time the population of the city increased from more than two million to more than three million. In 1939 private motor vehicles accounted for one-fifth of all crossings; today they account for three-quarters. Source: P. Spearritt,* The Sydney Harbour Bridge: a life, *Sydney 1982.*

*Until the 1960s most car manufacturers liked to show their vehicles in scenic settings.* Western Mail annual, *1947.*




the war. The major car manufacturers turned to guns, aircraft components, engines, munitions and military vehicles. In 1943 GMH produced a pamphlet called *War production*, invoking the rhetoric of 'we're all in this together' so popular with firms making money out of the war. GMH told members of its family—'employees, share-holders, distributors and dealers'—that 'the war effort comes first'.

The wartime decline in the production and use of cars led to renewed demand for public transport as the accompanying graphs show. Every Australian city with a population of more than 35 000, including Ballarat, Bendigo and Geelong, Newcastle and Launceston, boasted a tramway system. Sydney, with the highest population, had the largest system and the most passengers, with Melbourne not far behind. These tramways, established between the 1870s and the 1920s, served inner and middle-ring suburbs. Trams were electrified long before trains and were therefore cleaner but often no more comfortable. All the state capitals had suburban rail systems, and Sydney and Melbourne had just finished electrifying their lines. Steam trains, which showered their passengers with soot, were still to be seen in the other capitals and on all country routes. The rail and tram lines converged on the central area of each city and served the population well, for most jobs, large shops and commercial entertainments were concentrated in or near the city centre.

Trams and trains faced competition after 1920 from privately owned buses. By 1939 private bus operators served hundreds of routes not catered for by the government-owned, fixed-track systems. Buses were cheaper to operate and able to travel wherever there were roads. But most state governments legislated to prevent private buses competing with existing tram and train routes.

Trams were under threat in other parts of the world. In the 1930s and 1940s a subsidiary of General Motors bought up many of the electric tram and trolley-bus

networks in American cities, demolished them, and substituted buses. Nothing so sinister happened in Australia, where public transport administrators looked more to Britain for their lead. And there, London's transport planners decided in 1946 to scrap trams and trolley buses in favour of the oil-powered diesel bus. Following British precedent and advice the New South Wales Labor government decided to abolish the state's tramway systems. The trams had been regularly attacked by the National Roads and Motorists' Association (NRMA) since the early 1930s. In June 1950 Newcastle saw its last tram, while over the next few years Sydney's trams were replaced with buses. In November 1955 the NRMA's journal *Open road* told readers that 'the tram is the greatest single cause of hold-ups in any city'.

Adelaide and Perth abolished their trams in the late 1950s, while Brisbane hung on to trams and trolley buses for a bit longer. In 1962 one-fifth of the Brisbane tram fleet was destroyed by fire, and the Brisbane City Council, the operating authority, had to borrow buses from New South Wales. A 1965 report recommended the replacement of trams with buses and a massive program of road building, freeway construction and motor bridges. Adelaide kept one tram line open, to Glenelg beach. Melbourne was the only capital city to retain its tramway system. As its Tramway Board explained in May 1966,

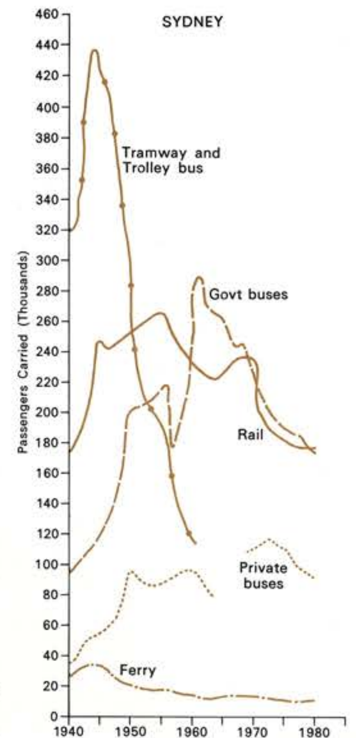
> Melbourne is well suited to trams. Its broad layout and wide streets, especially in the city, give it a place well ahead of congested cities—with narrow, twisting streets like Sydney and London.

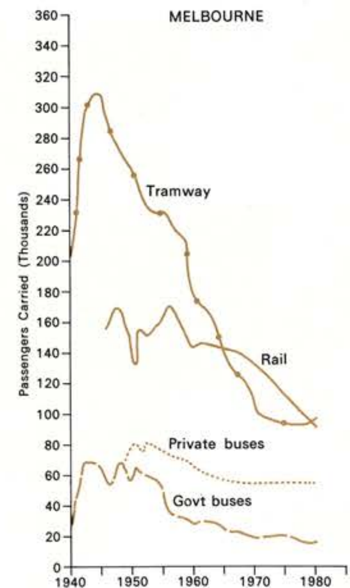
Patronage on Melbourne's trams declined from 284 million a year in 1954 to 102 million in 1972 and has risen little since. Melbourne's trams have their critics, but they are now so central to the city's tourist image as well as to peak hour travel that their future seems assured. A number of lines have even been extended in the past decade.

Australia's public transport systems carried more people in the war years than ever before, and they coped remarkably well. But public transport was a state, not federal, responsibility. While state politicians and public servants were wondering about its future their federal counterparts were contemplating the industrial potential of private transport. In 1943 the Labor government decided that the motor vehicle industry would be the cornerstone of postwar employment and industrial expansion. A Secondary Industries Commission was created to advise on wartime and postwar industrial development. The commission encouraged L.J. Hartnett, managing director of GMH, to put up a proposal for the manufacture of an Australian car. In January 1945 Hartnett submitted GMH's proposal to produce a medium-sized and medium-priced sedan with metal fabrication at the Woodville, Adelaide, plant and mechanical parts from Fishermen's Bend, Melbourne. On 3 February Curtin accepted the proposal, almost in its entirety. Ford, Chrysler–Dodge, Nuffield and Rootes also put in proposals, but it was too late as the GMH offer had already been accepted by the government. GMH decided to call the new car the 'Holden' to distinguish it from the company's American products.

Motorists' organisations supported the government's plans to produce an Australian car. In 1947 the Australian Automobile Association published T.G. Paterson's *The voice of the man at the wheel*, in which he argued that if Japan and Germany could produce a 'people's car' then Australia must do likewise. Paterson envisaged a future where 'John Motorist and his family' would be able to travel 'unimpeded around their own country'.

The first Holden cost £675 plus registration and insurance, £760 in all. At almost twice the average male wage and three times the average female wage, it was not available to many. Limited production, restrictions on imports and intense




*P. Spearritt and J. Wells, 'The rise and decline of the public transport city, 1900–1980',* Australian historical statistics bulletin *8, 1984.*

competition for used cars kept the price of cars high until well into the 1950s.

My parents got their first car, a Prefect, as a wedding present, from my mother's father who was a Ford dealer. We drove to Queensland and back at least once a year to visit relatives. We could not afford to stay in hotels, so we slept in the car on the side of the road or in a local showground. Camping grounds were scarce and usually filthy. Most garages did not provide toilets for their customers, and as the males in my family have always been renowned for their weak bladders we knew, in my mother's words, 'the whereabouts of every public toilet in every country town'. We got to know all the best picnic places on the Hume, Princes, Pacific and New England highways. For much of their length these 'highways' were gravel roads, with fords, one-lane bridges, level crossings and vehicular ferries to negotiate. The Pacific Highway between Brisbane and Sydney was not completely sealed until 1958. The trip to Brisbane took at least three days, and although my mother had a licence my father did all the driving.

We had no car radio, but both my parents enjoyed singing and my mother—trained as a kindergarten teacher—had a fine repertory of songs. We sang our way through Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland, and on a trip to Adelaide. Like most other Australians who were acquiring cars at the time—usually on hire purchase—my parents spent at least one day every weekend exploring the hinterland—in their case such 'beauty spots' around Melbourne, as Mornington, the Dandenongs, Lake Eildon and the 'Puffing Billy' railway from Ferntree Gully. Every Australian capital soon had a book like Gregory's *100 miles around* series.

Like most men my father did not take his car to work. Jobs in Melbourne, as in the other capital cities, were usually in or near the city centre; petrol was expensive, and public transport—on a weekly or monthly ticket—cheap. Rail services, even to outer suburban Melbourne, were frequent, especially at peak hours, and using the express services was quicker than taking the car. These savings could be put towards using the car for weekend and holiday travel.

The Holden quickly established itself as the premier Australian car. Motoring writers fawned over it, and GMH advertised it everywhere. Each new Holden was itself a moving advertisement, and by 1958 GMH controlled half of the vehicle market. In 1953 novelist Frank Clune went on a car journey around Australia in a Holden provided by GMH. Clune presented himself at the GMH plant at Fishermen's Bend to see his Holden coming off the assembly line. In his *Land of Australia: roaming in a Holden* he wrote:

> Among the bodies travelling now on the conveyor line was my Icy Blue ... At the close of the day on which I picked my colour Miss Icy Blue was ready for the road. I sat proudly in her upholstered lap. I don't know the actual number of man hours that went into her manufacture ... But I know that the same day when I chose her body she was ready for me—a complete car.

Many men thought of cars as female. Clune found his Miss Icy Blue 'a prim and proper person, stylish and fast, but reliable, and she knows how to keep out of trouble'.

My parents finally got a Holden in December 1956. An FJ, three years old, it cost £750 and my father signed a hire purchase agreement with the Australian Guarantee Corporation to pay it off within three years. He kept the car for a decade, selling it in December 1965 for £85. It served us well. Families were proud to get a car, whether new or second-hand. Family photographs of the 1950s often feature a newly acquired car prominently placed in the photograph.

The GMH annual report for 1962 proclaimed the production of the one millionth Holden along with news of the new plant at Elizabeth in South Australia

*In 1952 even the Hume Highway was not 'sealed' in the modern sense; the bitumen often broke up in hilly parts of the road and flood-prone areas. In the next 35 years almost all the unsealed routes shown here were sealed and the sealed routes were upgraded.*

*Below.*
*The Hume Highway near Albury in October 1956. Although road maps showed it as sealed it was almost like a country track in some places.* Pix *magazine.*
MAGAZINE PROMOTIONS

GMH
FIRST HOLDEN NOV 29TH 1948
500,000TH HOLDEN OCT 22ND 1958

*A dramatic way of publicising the 500 000th Holden.*
GMH ARCHIVES

*Left.*
*GMH stressed its contribution to the Australian economy, including the fact that it had established plants in the five state capital cities. Three of these factories closed in the 1970s and 1980s, when GMH decided to concentrate its production in Adelaide and Melbourne.* Australian women's weekly, *8 July 1953.*

*In 1958 a timber-jinker sideswiped our Holden on a road in the Victorian alps. My father documented this attack on family property with his recently acquired 35 mm Kodak slide camera. Like countless other Australian families we sat around the projector on slide nights reliving our life on the road. Photographs by Don Spearritt, 1958.*

and extensions at Fishermen's Bend plant in Melbourne. Ford established a new plant at Broadmeadows, on the northern outskirts of Melbourne. Adelaide and Melbourne continued to dominate motor car production and the South Australian and Victorian governments granted many concessions to keep it that way. Sydney and the other capitals kept their plants but did not figure in Ford's or GMH's plans for expansion. In the rationalisation forced on the car industry after 1970 by Japanese competition, tariff changes, alterations to local content provisions and unpredictable sales, most of the plants in Brisbane, Sydney and Perth closed down, reinforcing the dominance of Melbourne and Adelaide.

As a schoolboy in Melbourne and then Sydney I found no place more exciting than a new car showroom. Though not an assiduous reader of new motor magazines such as *Modern motor* and *Wheels*, I tried to pretend I knew a lot about cars. Fortunately one of my uncles was in the motor business and had a penchant for flash cars, so I could at least brag that I had travelled in a Ford Thunderbird. I longed for the day when I could get my licence and have access to all those car-based activities like the drive-in and distant surf beaches. Advertisements made it plain that it would be hard to find a girlfriend let alone keep one if you didn't have a car.

The entire country was seduced by the car and yielded to its greedy demands for space. New oil refineries opened in most states as British and American firms competed for the growing Australian market. Huge suburban shopping complexes were created to cater for car-based shopping trips. Surrounded by acres of car parks, they were disconcerting to approach as a pedestrian. Service stations appeared almost overnight—every suburb had to have one. Within ten kilometres of the GPO in mainland capitals almost every service station was built on the site of a building demolished for it, usually a house. Some members of the Labor party

complained that it was ridiculous to let so many oil companies build so many service stations, often next door to each other.

Garages, virtually the preserve of the middle class until the 1940s, were added to many a home, and few new houses were built without them. The carport came to the rescue of those in older suburbs on narrow blocks. People felt sorry for flat dwellers who had to leave their cars on the street. A car was an object to be respected, lovingly washed and polished. One town planner remarked that many Australians would park their cars in the loungeroom if it were physically possible. In some new homes the garage became the central architectural feature, as if the rest of the house were an afterthought.

*GMH often pointed out how the price of the Holden had fallen over the years.* GMH annual report, *1965.*

As the number of cars multiplied, so did demands for bigger and better roads. The inner areas of the larger cities had long been congested, as cars and lorries attempted to negotiate narrow roads and lanes built for pedestrians and carts. The more generously laid out cities, such as Adelaide and Melbourne, coped best with the influx of vehicles; cities restricted by topography and waterways, above all Sydney, did not fare so well. In the 1950s long stretches of all the interstate highways, except the Hume, were unsealed so the car companies often advertised their vehicles as strong and durable. Round Australia Redex Reliability Trials, begun in 1953, thrilled the nation; fathers and sons closely followed the fortunes of this new breed of pioneers who pitted their minds, bodies and machines against the rough Australian roads. But these conditions had little appeal for the increasing number of family holidaymakers travelling by car. Nor did they appeal to truck drivers, whose numbers were also rising. Governments got the message: more money had to be spent on roads.

*GMH cashed in on the popularity of the surfing cult by portraying its station wagon as a perfect vehicle for a young man on the move.* GMH annual report, *1963.*

While the highways were being slowly upgraded, country people were lobbying shire councils and parliamentarians to improve local roads. Rich shires often chose to put a great deal of their annual budgets into roads; poorer ones had to rely on state government assistance. State governments were also having demands placed on them by city dwellers. As car ownership increased, so did the proportion of people using cars to get to work, creating traffic jams in all the mainland capitals. Traffic lights sprouted on busy intersections, parking restrictions and parking meters were introduced, and roads were widened. Householders on busy roads might lose their nature strips, then their front lawns and their houses.

Urban motorists, whipped along by their motoring organisations, demanded wider roads. Television programs portrayed mobile Americans speeding along expressways in flash cars. State government departments of roads, dominated by engineers, rejoiced in the ever-growing demand for their product. Chief engineers went on study tours to the USA and came back to design elaborate freeway systems. State governments, usually with the support of local councils, created freeway corridors in cities, buying up land where they could and placing restrictions on its redevelopment where they could not. In the 1960s every capital city except Hobart embarked on the massive demolition required for inner-city freeways, cutting swathes so wide that they chopped some suburbs in half. Groups were formed to oppose the destruction of their inner residential areas for the convenience of motorists and truck drivers. In Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide they managed to prevent some freeway construction, but they had little success in their campaign to redirect spending to public transport. Freeway systems on the outskirts of all the cities went unchallenged.

*The REDeX Trial Game satirised conditions on Australian roads, which often defeated even the most rugged vehicles. Dice game board, c1956.*

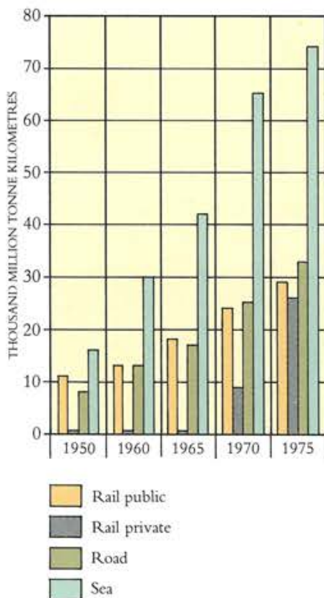
BOOROWA PRODUCTIONS

Freeways usually reduced travelling time. Out of peak hour—and a substantial proportion of urban workers had jobs to and from which they could travel out of peak hour—even the inner-city freeways usually worked well. During peak hour they merely served to make the old congestion appear more orderly. But the freeways came into their own on intercity routes. In the early 1970s it took at least five hours to travel from Sydney to Canberra. Fifteen years later, with most of the Hume Highway from Liverpool to Goulburn a divided road, it took only three to three and a half hours. The rail trip still took five hours and at least another hour to make connections at each end. Journey times between Sydney and Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane, and most other intercity routes have also been reduced by freeways. More than 90 per cent of all travel between cities in the east is by car.

*In the 1960s and 1970s city planners and road engineers were intent on catering to motor vehicles. The Cahill Expressway above Circular Quay in Sydney, which was opened in 1956, was a precursor of similar structures in other cities. The ugliest in Australia is the freeway (right) along the Brisbane River, built in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Photograph by Leo Meier, 1985.*

WELDON TRANNIES

ESTIMATED FREIGHT TRANSPORT, AUSTRALIA




Trucks carry most smaller items of freight, with long-distance transport remaining the preserve of trains and ships.

Source: P.J. Rimmer, 'Transport' in D.N. Jeans (ed), *Australia: a geography*, Sydney 1977.

In the country the train had little competition before or during the war. The railway station was a focus for most towns and the reason for many a village. Trains took produce from country settlements to market, bringing back mail and a range of city goods. Trains allowed country and city dwellers to visit each other. By 1939 many Australian farms had some kind of a motor vehicle, but it was more likely to be a utility or a small truck than a car, and was normally used for short-distance freight. Long-distance haulage of freight and people remained the preserve of the railways.

After 1950 trucks took more and more freight away from the railways. Trucks had been used in more prosperous regions since the 1920s to ferry cattle, sheep and agricultural produce to the nearest railway station. With improvements in truck carrying capacity most farmers found it cheaper to use a truck for the entire journey, except for bulk goods such as grains. Between 1950 and 1980 scores of branch rail lines were closed down across the continent, surviving only when they served passengers in marginal electorates or still generated enough freight—principally wheat or coal—to break even. The only new freight lines built—in New South Wales, Queensland and Western Australia—were designed to service the lucrative extraction industries, principally coal, iron ore and bauxite.

The number of country rail passengers fell from 32 million in 1947 to 23 million in 1957, remained static in the 1960s and fell again in the 1970s. The railways sustained huge losses, and all state governments looked for ways to decrease this burden on their budgets. By 1977 country rail passengers had all but disappeared. Most turned to their cars, and the few who could afford it flew. Private bus companies such as Greyhound and Pioneer competed with the railways on some intercity and interstate routes.

Railway travel in Australia has long been hindered by different gauges between

and even within states. Sydney and Melbourne were not linked by a single gauge until 1962. For 80 years passengers had had to alight at Albury to change trains. The initiative came too late. The railways failed to win new customers for interstate travel, despite a valiant advertising campaign extolling the virtues of the *Southern Aurora*, created for the Sydney–Melbourne run. The *Aurora* failed to attract the widespread excitement generated by the *Spirit of Progress* in 1937, when a new train had just as much glamour as a new car.

Suburban railways fared better. Although the number of passengers fell, the decline was less severe than in the country. In Sydney and Melbourne, and to a lesser extent in Brisbane, Adelaide and Perth, suburban rail services were still efficient at delivering people to work in the city and to those major suburban centres served by rail. Brisbane started to electrify its suburban lines in the late 1970s, 50 years after Sydney and Melbourne. In the early 1980s Melbourne opened a modest underground loop in the city centre, about the same size as the one Sydney established 50 years before, while the renamed Vic Rail embarked on its first major refitting program since the introduction of blue suburban trains in the 1950s. In 1984 Melbourne's last pre-World War I carriages went out of service.

*Air travel has grown steadily since the late 1930s. Most internal embarkations involve return trips, so about 7 million return trips are made each year. About the same number travel on country rail. Overseas embarkations have grown from 102 000 in 1954 to 1 295 000 in 1974.*

PASSENGERS CARRIED ON AIR SERVICES

| Year ending 30 June | Internal embarkations |
|---|---|
| 1939 | 146 000 |
| 1944 | 236 000 |
| 1949 | 1409 000 |
| 1954 | 1772 000 |
| 1959 | 2235 000 |
| 1964 | 3257 000 |
| 1969 | 5185 000 |
| 1974 | 8857 000 |
| 1979 | 10 724 000 |

Source: Commonwealth year books

In the 1920s and 1930s Australians thrilled to the exploits of aviators and the promise of the aeroplane to conquer distance. As a boy my father watched Bert Hinkler, after his solo flight from England to Darwin, land in his home town of Bundaberg in 1928, just as young and old across the continent welcomed airmen on their record-breaking flights in aircraft with names like *Southern Cross* and *Faith in Australia*. Heroes—Hinkler, Kingsford Smith and Ulm—perished in attempts to create new records. They were a twentieth-century equivalent of explorers.

Air travel was expensive, and some who could afford to fly were inhibited by fear. Before the war fewer than one in 25 Australians had been in the air. Many got their first taste of flight in the armed services during the war, which demanded the upgrading of airports all over the continent. After the war both governments and private entrepreneurs were determined to foster the expansion of air routes. A battle took place between Australian National Airlines (ANA) and the government-owned Trans Australia Airlines (TAA), established in 1946. The High Court prevented the Labor government—which saw domestic air travel as another form of public transport—from creating a 'monopoly'. In 1952 the Liberal–Country party government established a two-airline policy, legislating for the sharing of trunk routes. Five years later Ansett Transport Industries (controlled by the aggressive Melbourne entrepreneur Reginald Ansett) acquired ANA to create Ansett-ANA. Ever since then our domestic airways have been dominated by these two airlines. In 1980 Ansett fell into the hands of two of Australia's best-known businessmen, Rupert Murdoch and Sir Peter Abeles. The two-airline agreement has guaranteed the financial success of both operations and prevented such newcomers as East West from gaining much of the market. The agreement has created a fare structure whereby the most patronised routes in the nation (between the east coast cities) subsidise country services.

*The two major airlines have always portrayed themselves as serving Australia.*
Australia to-day, *Oct 1949.*

For 30 years the two airlines have portrayed themselves as the vital link in the nation's communications system, moving goods and people, especially important people. And important people they are. Two-thirds of all air trips in Australia each year were made by male businessmen and senior male public servants. The aeroplane has enabled middle-class men to take to the air; if their organisations

*Until the late 1950s camping grounds were often very informal, with few if any facilities. Campers at Safety Bay, WA, 1939.*
BATTYE LIBRARY

won't pay they claim the fare as a tax deduction. The remaining third of all domestic flights were made by people who pay their own fares; men, women and children going on holidays or to visit relatives or friends. Most of these people could afford to fly only once or twice a year, often on a package deal. They crowded the airports at weekends and holiday times, though most families still drove to their annual holiday spots—even on long interstate journeys—because it was cheaper and often more convenient, especially if there was little public transport at their destination.

By 1980, 80 per cent of Australian households had at least one car and one-third had two or more. That left one-fifth of the nation's households without a car. These men, women and children were forced to use public transport whether they wanted to or not. Some, living in the large cities, did not want a car because public transport was adequate for their needs. Others, on the fringes of the cities, could not afford a car and the cost of registration, insurance, petrol and repairs. Motoring organisations calculated that in 1985, to run a car 10 000 kilometres a year cost about $60 a week—only a little less than unemployment benefit for a single person and almost half the benefit paid to a supporting parent. With rent, food and clothing to pay for, most of the half-million Australians and their dependants living on social security payments had no choice but to go without a car.

Cars provide a level of mobility, privacy and flexibility unattainable on public transport. Out of peak hour, the car is usually the quickest way to get between two points in any city. Most of Australia's coastal resorts are readily accessible only by car or aeroplane. Individuals, couples and families can pack themselves off for an outing at a moment's notice. Motels and caravan parks have been developed for car travellers. Fast food outlets and service stations beckon. Acquiring a licence and a car has become the most important ritual in the transition from childhood to adulthood in our society. Men and women who do not or cannot pass this basic test are thought to be weak and dependent.

At my Melbourne primary school in the mid-1950s we were shown movies of what happened when a normal father suddenly became reckless and overtook on a double line. He survived but his wife and family were killed. Policemen and the occasional policewoman addressed us on how to conduct ourselves as pedestrians and as cyclists. In the flat Melbourne suburbs most of us walked or cycled to school. Owning a bicyle conferred status on both boys and girls, and although the brand names have changed—from Malvern Star in the 1950s to BMX in the 1980s—it still does.

As even suburban roads became more and more clogged with cars, pushbikes and motor cycles gained a reputation for being unsafe. Their riders usually had no head protection, and the few designated cycleways were abandoned in the 1950s to make way for road widening. Bicycle sales fell, then recovered as town planners and transport planners finally realised that it is not only possible but also cheap to construct cycleways. Canberra, the city most dependent on the car, has also the most comprehensive system of cycleways; other cities and towns are making some provision for this non-polluting form of urban transport.

Road fatalities rose in Australia in the 1930s, fell during the war and rose again with the coming of mass car ownership in the 1950s. Police were urged to enforce

*Victor Rubin,* Auto-complex, *1984–85, Oil on canvas.*
AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL GALLERY

the speed limit and arrest drunken drivers, who spilled on to our roads under the influence of six o'clock closing. With the gradual extension of trading hours for clubs and hotels, concern about drunken driving waned, to be revived in the late 1970s when researchers proved that about half of all fatalities involved at least one driver being under the influence of alcohol. Between 1975 and 1982 most states introduced random breath testing, whereby police could stop any motorist and check his or her level of intoxication. RBT, as it is popularly known, appears to have kept the road toll in check, but not reduced it. Seat belts, which became compulsory in the early 1970s, have also saved lives.

*Cartoonist Michael Leunig's wry comment on the Christmas road toll, 1980.*
SANDERCOCK COLLECTION

The other toll wrought by Australia's eight million cars and trucks receives even less publicity and debate than the fatalities: the damage the car inflicts on the atmosphere. The motor and oil companies have always played this down, and since our largest cities are on the seaboard their residents have hoped that the winds would blow it all away. Tests in the 1960s and 1970s showed just how poisonous car pollutants were. Lead levels in schoolchildren were found to be dangerously high. Labor governments made half-hearted attempts to introduce lead-free petrol, but they came up against the combined opposition of the car manufacturers, the oil companies and the Liberal–National party coalition. Lead-free petrol did not become available until 1985.

Australia now has more cars than dwellings. We have become a car-owning democracy, where the interests of the car manufacturers, the retailers, the financiers, the government road authorities and the oil companies apparently coincide with what the car-owning majority wants. Barring another oil crisis we will continue to be a car-owning democracy in which the costs of the car—in terms of lives, congestion and pollution—are likely to remain high.

*Garry Duncan,* Kakadu, *1986, oil on canvas.*
BARRY NEWTON GALLERY, SOUTH AUSTRALIA

# III

# Aboriginal Australians

Machinetime Dreamtime, Wandjina—*the spiritual landscapes of Australia as seen by South Australian Aboriginal artist Trevor Nickolls. Oil on canvas, 1981.*
AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL GALLERY