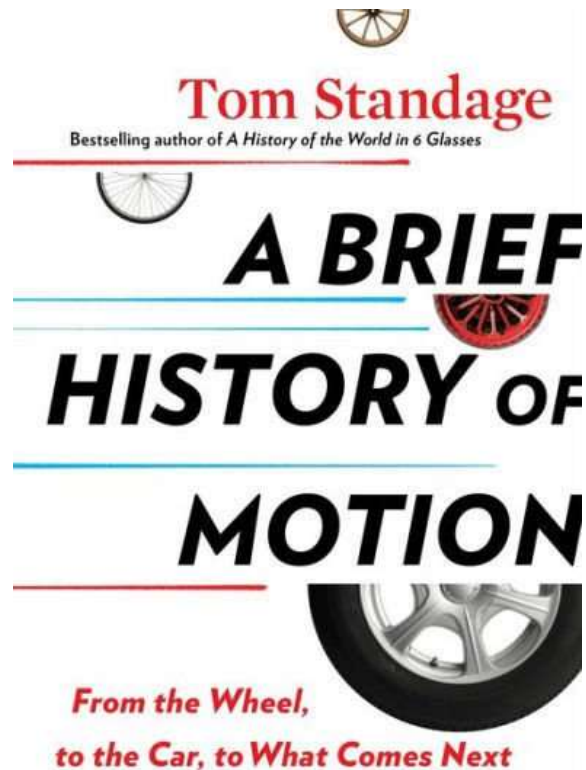


‘History of Motion’ deceptively mesmerizing

Posted: Sunday, January 16, 2022

“*A Brief History of Motion: From the Wheel, to the Car, to What Comes Next*” by Tom Standage.
New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021, 272 pages, \$28 (hardcover).



“It all starts with the wheel,” Tom Standage explains near the beginning of “A Brief History of Motion: From the Wheel, to the Car, to What Comes Next,” his book on a pivotal innovation that has defined human civilization since its inception. “Today, in a world that has literally been built to accommodate wheeled vehicles, it is difficult to imagine life without them.”

“The story of how such vehicles transformed the world begins around 3500 B.C.E., with the invention of the wheel,” he continues. “It is an idea whose power seems obvious in retrospect. Yet the notion that the wheel is the greatest invention in history is recent. Only in the past century or two, in a world that runs on wheels, has its usefulness become universally apparent. Wheeled vehicles faced a surprising amount of resistance. Enthusiasm for them went through many ups and downs over thousands of years. And many cultures, despite knowledge of the wheel, declined to use it at all.”

The past several generations have grown up, lived, grown old and died in a world characterized by ever-increasing numbers of cars and trucks – and all they

have spawned over the last century or so. Much like kids today have never experienced a world that wasn’t digitally connected via the internet, few are alive who can recall the days when automobiles didn’t dominate our way of life in one way or another. My grandfather was born in 1900; he used to tell stories of how the courthouse in our hometown was surrounded by hitching rails. Honestly, as far as I was concerned, he could have been talking about ancient Greece.

Structurally, the manuscript consists of an introduction and 12 relatively succinct chapters; the narrative is also infused with several old black-and-white photographs and illustrations that serve to bring Standage’s storytelling to life in a way that would not have been possible without their inclusion. I found his literary style to be smooth and engaging; his background as a journalist definitely contributes to the fluidity of his prose. Moreover, the chronological progression he presents helps the reader better understand the innovations he is describing within the context of the era in which they occurred – and how they are still manifest in today’s more technologically-based incarnations.

After a relatively brief historical perspective on the pre-automobile era, comprised of the first three chapters, Standage spends the rest of the book exploring virtually every aspect of how the “horseless carriage” came to control our lives in ways most of us are blissfully unaware of. Indeed, for many, the make and model of car or truck you drive communicates something fundamental

about who you are – and your place in the societal pecking order. Consider the following from “You Are What You Drive,” the fifth chapter and one I found particularly enlightening.

“Cars are, after housing, the most expensive things most people buy, which means that the kind of car you choose to buy can be a reliable indicator of wealth,” the author observes. “Cars are also, by their nature, visible in public with their owners in a way that washing machines or widescreen televisions, say, are not. ... Billionaires generally drive fancier cars than the rest of the population, but they carry the same smartphones. Yet even in these most quintessentially-modern products, the far-reaching influence of the car industry of the 1920s can still be seen. Smartphones are built on assembly lines that Henry Ford would recognize – and their marketing follows the rules laid down by Alfred Sloan.”

A deputy editor of *The Economist*, where he also serves as editor-in-chief of their website, applications and digital platform, Standage has a degree in engineering and computing from Oxford University. He began his career as a science and technology writer for *The Guardian* and *The Daily Telegraph*; his articles have appeared in *The New York Times* and *Wired* (among other prestigious publications). His previous books include “Writing on the Wall: Social Media – the First 2,000 Years,” “The Victorian Internet: The Remarkable Story of the Telegraph and the Nineteenth Century’s On-line Pioneers” and “The Turk: The Life and Times of the Famous Eighteenth-Century Chess-Playing Machine.” Oh, and according to his website, he likes to play drums and video games, and drink wine – but not at the same time.

One feature of the book that I found especially appealing was the way his account often mirrored the prevailing cultural mores that we tend to associate with a particular moment in time. Marketing to a particular subset of the population seems to go hand-in-hand with the ongoing evolution of the automobile, as is made clear in the ninth chapter, “The Fall and Rise of the Electric Car.”

“In the years that followed (post-1900), as more people bought private cars, electric vehicles took on a new connotation: as women’s cars,” Standage notes. “This association arose because they were suitable for short, local trips, did not require hand cranking to start or gearshifting to operate, and were extremely reliable by virtue of their simple design. ... The implication was that women, unable to cope with the complexities of driving and maintaining petrol vehicles, should buy electric vehicles instead. Men, by contrast, were assumed to be more capable mechanics, for whom greater complexity and lower reliability were prices worth paying for powerful, manly petrol vehicles with superior performance and range. It was the medieval arrangement of horse-riding men and carriage-riding women all over again.”

An overarching theme of the book is the disruptive nature of the automobile – a defining characteristic that continues right up to the present moment. As the global demand for energy continues its exponential (and existential) assault on our existence, as society debates how climate change will ultimately impact competing modes of transportation, and as the potential for future crises like the pandemic exacerbates the need for more practical alternatives on a number of fronts, our collective dialog will no doubt intensify. And you can rest assured that a significant part of that conversation will revolve around the automobile and the preeminent role it plays in our lives. The genie is not going back in the bottle.

In short, I found “A Brief History of Motion” to be deceptively mesmerizing on several levels. It has something for everyone: engineers, techies, historians, psychologists, sociologists, philosophers and car enthusiasts of all varieties. My sense is that many readers would find it difficult to put down. Highly recommended.

Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, University Distinguished Professor, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.