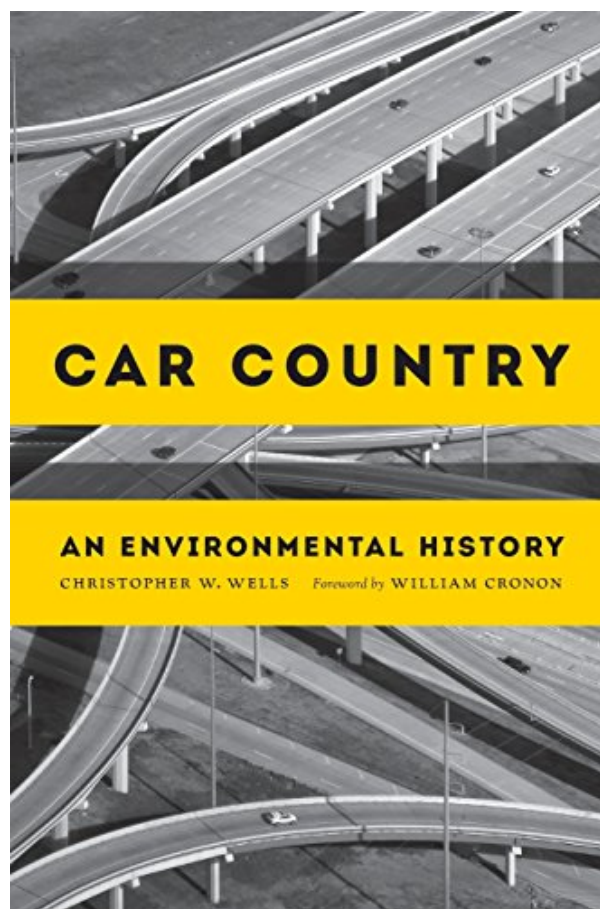
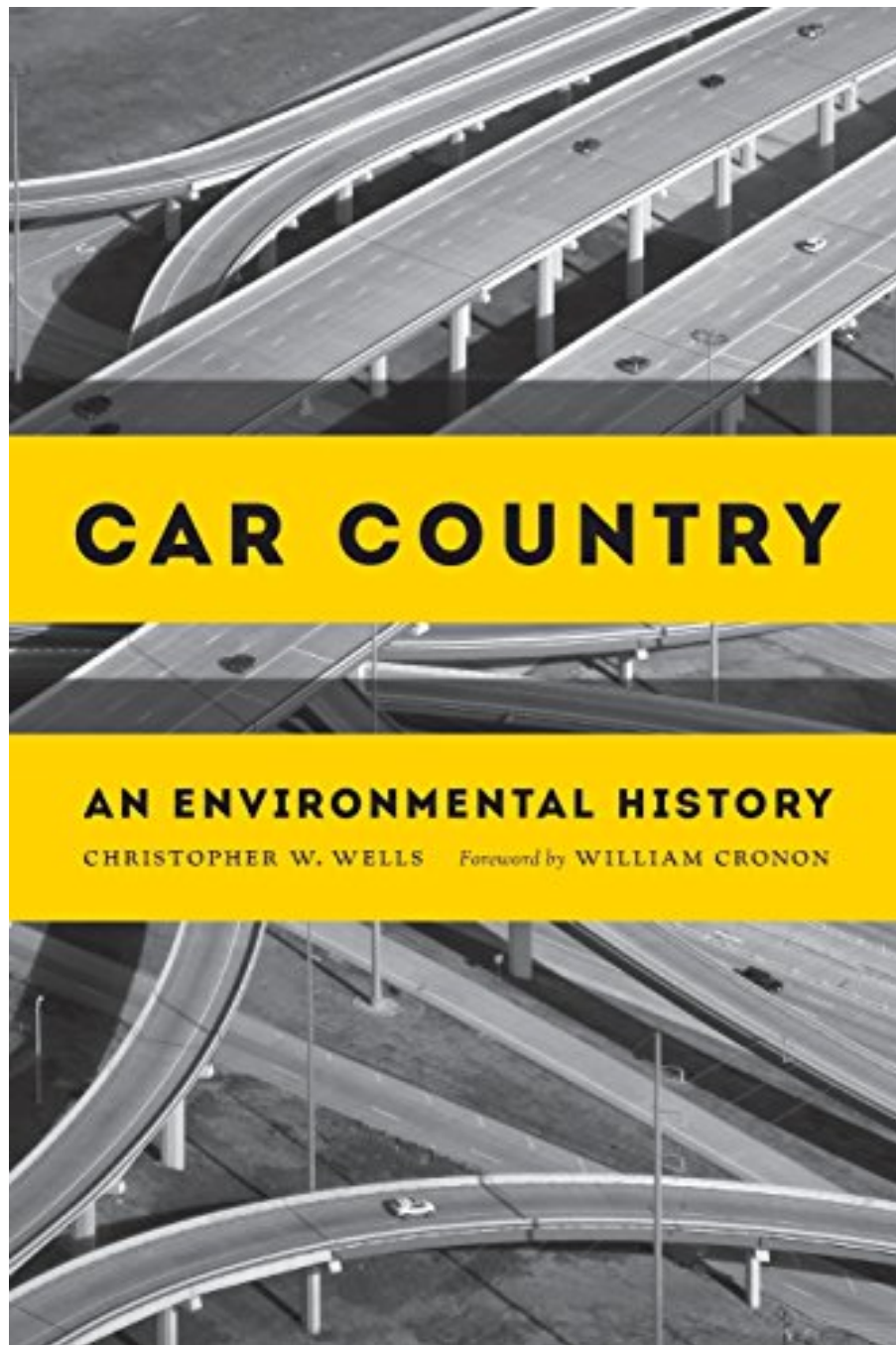


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For most people in the United States, going almost anywhere begins with reaching for the car keys. This is true, Christopher Wells argues, because the United States is Car Country—a nation dominated by landscapes that are difficult, inconvenient, and often unsafe to navigate by those who are not sitting behind the wheel of a car.

The prevalence of car-dependent landscapes seems perfectly natural to us today, but it is, in fact, a relatively new historical development. In *Car Country*, Wells rejects the idea that the nation's automotive status quo can be explained as a simple byproduct of an ardent love affair with the automobile. Instead, he takes readers on a tour of the evolving American landscape, charting the ways that transportation policies and land-use practices have combined to reshape nearly every element of the built environment around the easy movement of automobiles. Wells untangles the complicated relationships between automobiles and the environment, allowing readers to see the everyday world in a completely new way. The result is a history that is essential for understanding American transportation and land-use issues today.

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Christopher W. Wells is associate professor of environmental history at Macalester College in St. Paul, Minnesota.

Most helpful customer reviews

6 of 6 people found the following review helpful.

A real gem

By Jim

Car Country is a remarkably thorough book about embracement of cars in the USA starting in the late 1800s. The historical perspective weaves various elements of rural and urban developments that enlighten and reveal how our road system evolved with significant environmental impacts at various times. The description of the Ford factory in Detroit is particularly powerful and contrasts with the light hearted pictures routinely observed of folks with their Model T. It is full of facts and scholarly documentation so would not be a quick read for most folks. However, this is the kind of book I enjoy. I came away with a much better appreciation and knowledge of how we got our car country.

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful.

An Asphalt Ecology

By Taylor rose

In *Car Country*, Christopher Wells attempts to answer a seemingly simple question about modern American life: Why is it so difficult to go anywhere without the use of an automobile? Over the course of 300 pages, Wells convincingly argues that our auto-dependence is less about cars themselves and more about roads, spatial arrangements, and land use.

Interest in automobiles began in the late nineteenth century with the advent of safer, reliable technology. The real watershed event, however, came with the release of the Ford Model T in 1909. As demand increased, then, supply developed around efficient production of vehicles. By the end of World War I, cars were everywhere, but in many ways, drivers had nowhere to go. Cars, Wells would correctly argue, were not the only thing consumers demanded. Drivers require unobstructed, smooth rights-of-way. They also need somewhere to park. Perhaps most importantly, they need social and legal arrangements that clearly delineate auto space from pedestrian space (i.e., human space)—as well as fast from slow, stop from go, that way from this way, etc. At a number of levels, American society in the 1920s and 30s brought those arrangements into being. From stoplights to one-way streets to gasoline filling stations, *Car Country* began to take shape during the first decades of the twentieth century. The author's emphasis here—as throughout the book—is on the incremental development of the built environment to accommodate the proliferation of privately owned vehicles.

The importance of *Car Country* (the book) is twofold. First, it dissipates blame for the retrospective ills of a car-dependent landscape. Rather than wallowing in streetcar conspiracy theories or condemnations of aggressive motorists, the book provides a balanced, comprehensive narrative of automobiles as a pervasive historical force. Second, the book spells out the self-perpetuating cycle that has created (and continues to create) car dependency. Unlike most consumer products, automobiles demand vast networks of public infrastructure for use on a mass scale. In *Car Country*, Christopher Wells demonstrates that historically, Americans have been more than willing to promote that type of development, with the effect that we are only now beginning to recognize its consequences.

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful.

he sets the stage for how the automobile showed up and why cars like the Ford Model T were big hits

By KAV

Over many years of reading non-fiction, two books stand out in my mind. One was entitled *The Age of Reagan* and the other was a biography of the Beatles. Most of what I read in non-fiction books is quickly forgotten as I move on to another book. But these two books stuck because the authors embedded the story within a larger context, and thus, I was able to connect new information to what I already knew. *The Reagan* book simply set the stage for Ronald Reagan by explaining American politics after WWII. While there was little Reagan biography, the reader could see just how he appeared on the scene. We know about Reagan, but we know little of what was happening around him. In the *Beatles* book the musical landscape in Europe and America was discussed and the emergence of the Beatles fit in perfectly. We expected to see Reagan and the Beatles because we could see the progressions.

Christopher Wells has done the same thing in his book *Car Country*. In teaching my course the *Automobile and American Culture* I have read numerous books about car makers, car companies, and car culture. I have also read books about the development of our road system, which not page turners by any stretch of the imagination. While I have learned about Henry Ford, James Ward, and Albert Sloan, each book is too narrow in focus to look at the big picture. So, I quickly forget the details and then the point altogether. *Car Country* does it differently. Christopher Wells synthesizes cars and culture in a way that is both interesting and thought-provoking. Instead of starting the book with a look at the first car, he begins with people and dirt roads. By explaining the actions of people in the country and the big cities, he sets the stage for how the automobile showed up and why cars like the Ford Model T were big hits. I find myself reading a passage of

this book and saying, "No kidding. I did not know that." I never saw the connection between the 1901 Mercedes and the Model T for example.

I initially overlooked this book because I thought it would be another assault on our automobile and how they are so bad for the environment, blah, blah, blah. But what Christopher Wells has done is introduce the automobile, nuts and all, to the reader in the context of early 20th century America. It is a fascinating book and will be highlighted and dog-eared for years to come.

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