By the 1920s, the automobile had become the “magic carpet of modern times” for millions of families in the United States and, to a lesser extent, in Western European countries.

Almost a hundred years later, Steven Parissien reminds us, the world seems to be as enthralled with gasoline-powered cars as ever. Nine of 10 American households own an automobile, 65 percent have a second car, and China now constitutes the largest market for cars.

In “The Life of the Automobile,” Parissien, the director of the Compton Verney Museum and Gallery in Warwickshire, England, provides an encyclopedic world history of the car.

Parissien begins with the appearance of powered quadricycles in the 1880s, brings to life the extraordinary cast of characters (Henry Ford, André Citroën, Louis Renault, Karl Benz, Sir Henry Royce, and Ferdinand Porsche) who gave cars their names, and takes the industry through suburbanization, booms, busts, bailouts, oil shocks, ecological concerns and global mergers, before moving into the 21st century.

The great virtue of this book — its command of detail — is also a vice.

Parissien does not spend much time on big questions, including the rise and fall of car companies in the United States and Europe. And he tends to attribute successes and failures to the actions of one person (blaming the erosion of the market position of General Motors in the 1980s to the company’s chairman, Roger Smith) without examining underlying structural forces.

Most important, out of a commendable desire to be comprehensive, Parissien often includes too many details about too many cars, engineers, entrepreneurs, and CEOs.

Only a few readers, I suspect, will want to know that Citroën’s DS19 had a wraparound wind-screen, a...
detachable glass-fiber roof, a large glasshouse, a single-spoke steering wheel, radial ply tires from Michelin, high-pressure hydraulics, nitrogen springing, disc brakes in the front and quick-release wheels.

Or that NSU’s R080, which was plagued with “faults and failures” and found few customers, had a “sleek, subtle aerodynamic wedge shape and quadruple headlights” that echoed the Triumph 2000, power assisted rack-and-pinion steering, front-wheel drive, independent suspension, heated rear windows, a rear ski hatch and a rotary engine designed by Felix Wankel.

That said, “The Life of the Automobile” is a treasure trove of information. Parissien documents, for example, the affinity of Ford, Renault, Porsche, and Fiat’s Giovanni Agnelli for fascists and Nazis. And he indicates that Ford Motor Company had calculated that the cost of each fatality (assessed at $200,725) and each injury (burns were estimated at $67,000) from crashes of its Pinto were less than the cost of making the car safer.

Parissien ends his book by emphasizing that the most pressing issue for motoring in the 21st century is “fuel flexibility.” Bio-fuels, like ethanol, he declares, are, at best, “a short-term palliative.” And the obstacles to electric cars “remain formidable.”

Salvation, Parissien suggests, may lie in cars fueled by hydrogen cells. He may well be right. But, as he has demonstrated, change does not come easily or quickly to the automobile industry.

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