

Craig
Brown

Book of the week

Leadville - A Biography Of The A40

Edward Platt
ISBN 0 330 32 58 3/9 (pb) 03 165 0070

The British travel writer generally prefers to journey 3,000 miles to describe a dirt track in Eastafrica rather than take a look outside his front door.

Publishers' catalogues are jam-packed with books about going down a Zambesi in a dinghy or up Everest in flip-flops, about trying to track down the rare Grey 'Troad of the moors, endangered because it is o dull to attract a partner, or about 'ing for three years on Mount Ararat with the Beech-Borer tree to live on cabbage, always pay air bills on time and have 23 different phrases meaning 'musta' 'smile'. But there is a peculiar sort of books about what life is in or British now.

Perhaps all reading is to some extent escapism, and we think we prefer know enough about ourselves. Certainly, Leadville: A Biography Of The A40 might at first sight seem like the prize-winning entry in competition for the most off-putting book title in the world. It is not to imagine it will sell as many copies as, say, a half and dirty book about your ancient Aberdein route through a particularly sandy part of a Australian desert. This is a sin. For Leadville's author, Edward Platt, has uncovered a consulting story, peopled by hundreds of zany and baffling characters, right under his very nose.

Platt literally so: Platt lives just under the corner from the A40, in northern Bath, the A40, or Western Avenue, is the gritty highway it takes you into, or out of, West London. Like many of us, Platt opens a youth and childhood being driven out, and suburban roads like it, and giving them much thought is the car travelled towards the centre of the city, the one which is the opposite direction, dirty and anonymous, pinched and choked by endless, ragged chains of cars, and, they, they look unimpressive, yet so blackened cars parked on the streets suggested otherwise. It seemed incredible that there were people living within ten metres of the A40 in which it was sitting.

In 1965, he decided to put his car out and out more about this strange, strange land on his doorstep. It emerged that the tale of Western Avenue began after the First World War, when Lloyd George decided to change the housing problem from an extreme it had become a threat to the stability of the state. Between 1919 and 1925, local authorities built 60,000 new houses in England, and 'for Heroes' proved to be a 'role proof' of the irrelevance of war. During roughly the same period, the population of central London dropped by 400,000 and more than a million people moved into the suburbs.

Western Avenue was initially hailed as a seriously reasonable 'stretching from Acton across the fields of West End', wrote the *Times* but of road, it is probably the finest bit of road he would ever dedicate to lonely 'backlight' walks for a car. The road's car or car being brought to Western Avenue. 'Trees have already been planted at the side of the foot, it is showing that the road is to be of the nature of a boulevard. It is hard for us now to comprehend



CONTEMPORARY/ GARY SICKLER

You are now entering the rain-light zone

the joy with which the car was once greeted, particularly by environmentalists. In 1901, H.G. Wells felt that it would spell the end to the pollution, congestion and death caused by the horse and cart, delivering the city from 'battering horse-shoes, the perpetual filth of horse traffic and the clumsy waddles of London carts'. But cars bred more cars. In 1907, there were 32,000 cars on British roads, increasing to two million by 1931 and 23 million by 1995. Within a decade, the dream of Western Avenue had edged rather closer to a nightmare, with casualties an almost daily occurrence. As early as 1938, a poster erected by people living on Western Avenue announced: '100,000 killed and three million injured on the roads of GB since the war'.

The great suburban idyll of a home looking out towards open countryside 'yet backing on to a city had almost turned sour. As each new house was built, the edge of the countryside was pushed further and further away

from the houses already there. Before long, Western Avenue had become a grizzly battlefield in the war between the city and the car. When Edward Platt first got out of his car to explore Western Avenue on foot, he discovered that the fumes are so thick it is as though a warm, wet hand has been clamped over my

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face'. One man he encountered had estimated that 80 million cars passed his door every year. Inside the houses, pollution had rotted the curtains, and the whole structures would vibrate when lorries passed. 'You know it's ten past five,' said one woman at the start of each morning's rush-hour, 'because you're just shaking practically out of bed.' In her

home beside one particularly chaotic junction, another woman keeps a blanket ready, just for covering up crash victims.

One of the glories of this book is that Platt never allows it to descend into simply a boring piece of anti-car propaganda, like the crass Heathcote Williams 'poem' of some years ago. In many of the homes, he finds people who have become very attached to Western Avenue, some of them so accustomed to the noise of the traffic that they can no longer hear it.

Like the much-lamented Tony Parker - who also realised that Britain offers richer rewards for the truly curious writer than any number of distant lands - Platt refuses in finding people who have refused to allow their characters to be usurped by their environment. He has an acute nose for eccentricities, such as the remarkably pedantic town planning officer who was inspired in his career by playing with Dinky toys as

child, and a Barbara Vignette collection of squatters - Baggie, Don, Techno Dave and Shay - for whom lethargy is always one step ahead of ambition. 'Don wants to stay until the apples are ripe so he can sell them,' notes Platt, 'but I do not believe he will do it; many schemes are conceived in the squatters' garden, but few of them come to anything.'

Writers tend to thrive on other people's bad fortune. Only when he had started writing about Western Avenue did Platt discover that half of it was about to be destroyed. After thirty-odd years of thinking that something had to be done, the authorities had finally decided to knock-down 200 houses to create a flyover. Over the next six months, Platt watched as the inhabitants were evicted and their houses vandalised by the bullies, boarded up and bulldozed.

This makes Leadville a rare and pleasing mixture of diatribe and elegy. 'When I came to Western Avenue, I did not expect to find a poster who felt they belonged here,' writes Platt. 'Many of the people who regarded the road as their home have been forced to leave, but even now, Western Avenue seems a better place than I have ever allowed it to be. The story is given an added twist to its final act by the brief announcement in 1997 by the new British Government that, after £20 million and 200 houses destroyed, the proposed flyover was being cancelled.'

Platt has penned a brilliant dispatch from a modern British battlefield. It is all very car-crazed. In 1995, the Department of Transport decided that it would be all right to knock down the houses on Western Avenue because 'the noise climate would improve', meaning that fewer houses would mean fewer people affected by noise. Two years later, having knocked down these houses, the same department said that it was abandoning the proposed flyover because it would have the effect of encouraging car commuting where the traffic that they can no longer hear it.

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***** Excellent **** Recommended *** Good ** Adequate * Dismal