

Book Reviews

Don Cox and William Hagon, *Australian Motorcycle Heroes 1949-89*, (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1989). Illus., index, tables. \$34.95.

World champion Wayne Gardner might seem to have been the first Australian ever to race a motorcycle overseas, so meagre is the popular press reporting which has tended to be given to expatriate Australian riders. Australians have in fact been racing with success in Europe for a long time, S.L. (Les) Bailey from Newcastle for example reportedly winning an Isle of Man TT and a French Grand Prix in the course of a remarkable European career between 1910 and the mid-1920s. That we know so little about Bailey is the other side of the coin. With the exception of Peter Jones' 1978 softcover scrapbook-style *Historical Motorcycling* and the more recent Gardner books by his publicist Nick Hartgerinck, Australian motorcycling itself has not been greatly concerned with its own history. *Australian Motorcycle Heroes 1949-1989* goes a long way towards changing that. It's primarily a fan's book but sport historians would find it a valuable starting point. It lists chronologically the 150-odd riders who raced overseas between 1910 and 1988, noting years raced, classes contested and in which countries, plus the rider's home town. This is the first time such a list has been published. The careers of Australian riders in Europe in the post-war years are then further tabulated in highlight form. There is also a very well detailed index. The bulk of the book, however, concentrates on 21 riders who are the authors' self-chosen 'heroes'. Four of those riders, reasonably, are the four past Australian world champions: Keith Campbell (350 Guzzi in 1957), Tom Phillis (125 Honda, 1961), Kel Carruthers (250 Benelli, 1969) and Wayne Gardner (500 Honda, 1987). The remainder were less famous, but no less interesting.

The book's real strength, beyond doubt, is that its authors have enough knowledge of motorcycle road racing to let the riders themselves do most of the talking, and then to know which bits of the conversations to use. We are spared the tedious race-by-race diaries which achieve so little, and instead we have a marvellous compilation

of anecdotes - triumph and tragedy, mateship and bastardry. The idea of following the European race season in a van with your motorcycle on the back can seem very romantic from 18,000km away. The reality is that it is tough, particularly when the results and the money aren't coming and when homesickness pulls at the heart, the authors write in their preface. The riders - sparing with words, frankly self-critical, often drily humorous - confirm this completely. There are some lovely stories.

So there ought to be, not just because of the subject but also because of the authors, both of whom have a long involvement with motorcycle racing and backgrounds in professional journalism. The latter, if not also the former, allows their book (despite its title) to rise above Stoddart's base-level category of 'heroic view' history, if only because of the willingness of the authors and their sources to reveal the riders as less than supermen.

Outsiders might wish for more detail of the structures on which Australian overseas racing expeditions were based. As it is, the book explains only briefly the starting money system which was the foundation for every privateer's budgeting, before the massive sponsorships of modern racing effectively swept away the privateers' circus. Likewise the book no more than outlines the system, once a routine part of every racing year, whereby clubs collectively subsidised the fare for a selected rider - later a team - to race as Australia's representative at the Isle of Man. A rider could use this trip to springboard himself into a full European season, and would return bringing new skill, hard-to-get spares and at least one current racing bike for eventual sale, all with benefit for the local racing scene.

The book contains some less-than-perfect old black-and-white photographs, obviously chosen for their content rather than their prettiness. Thank heaven the intrusive effect of the publishing art director has been resisted here. Perhaps the trade-off is the book's misspelling of specialised names - few publishers feel motorsport requires a careful editor.

On two, three or four wheels, motorsport seems not to have attracted great attention from sports historians. Maybe that will change: as this book shows, there's a lively sub-culture in there. The

problem with most racers has always been their indifference to record-keeping, to anything to do with yesterday's matters. It's the next race that's important. That is the real value of this book Cox and Hagon have got at least some of yesterday's racing down on paper before it is all too late.

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