

HOW CARS CHANGED OUR WORLD



by Bronwen Wall

The first motor cars arrived in New Zealand more than 120 years ago. There were just two of them, and they came from France on the steamship Rotomahana. The cars reached Wellington on 19 February 1898. Their new owner was a man named William McLean. It must have felt like Christmas to William when he saw his two shiny, new machines!



A car similar to one of the cars that William McLean brought to New Zealand

One of the cars was small, with a top speed of 16 kilometres an hour. The other was larger and could go almost 50 kilometres an hour! That was faster than any horse and cart could travel. William decided to call the big car *Lightning*.

William wanted to show everyone how good a motor car could be, so he took the mayor of Wellington for a drive. Things were going well until William lost control and ran into a fence. The mayor hurt his nose, and onlookers were shocked. They had just seen New Zealand's first car accident!



LOOK OUT – IT’S A CAR!

Soon more people began importing* cars. Others built their own. A lot of people weren’t sure about these strange, new machines. Motor cars were fast and smelly and loud. They scared horses – and their owners!

The first traffic ticket

In 1901, Nicholas Oates was caught driving his car over the speed limit of 6 kilometres an hour along Lincoln Road in Christchurch. His car scared some horses. Oates received the first traffic fine in the country.



*importing: bringing something in from another country

Cecil Woods was one of the people who built their own car. He was very proud of his invention, but one day, a butcher chased him and threatened to chop the car to pieces with his meat axe. The noise of the car had startled the butcher and his horse. Cecil had to turn off the engine and push his car home so it wouldn’t frighten anyone else.

Fred Dennison was a bicycle mechanic and engineer working in Christchurch in the late 1890s. He decided to make his own motor car, too. In June 1900, he drove his “Dennison car” from Christchurch to Ōamaru. In a modern car, the 250-kilometre trip might take about three hours. In 1900, it took Fred five days, and the journey wasn’t easy. The roads were rough and dusty. At one point, the car got stuck in a riverbed and Fred had to take it to pieces to get it out again. Then, on his way back to Christchurch, the car caught fire. Fred wasn’t hurt, but he lost all his luggage in the blaze.



LIFE BEFORE THE MOTOR CAR

Before William McLean brought his two cars into the country, life was very different for New Zealanders. In early times, Māori got around by waka or on foot. Most people lived close to lakes, rivers, or the sea. It was usually faster and easier to travel across water than to struggle through the thick bush and over the steep hills.

When Pākehā arrived in New Zealand, they brought animals to carry things. Bullocks could haul heavy loads on sleds, and wheeled wagons and horses could carry people. This allowed people to travel further and faster. They could now keep in touch and find out what was happening around the country more easily. In the 1850s, horse-drawn coach services began. They carried people, parcels, newspapers, and letters.

Most people worked closer to home in the days before the motor car. Local communities usually had their own shops, doctor, police station, post office, and school. There were no buses or cars to carry children between home and school – children walked, cycled, or rode the family horse. In the early 1900s, there was about one horse for every three people in New Zealand.



EXPLORING THE COUNTRY BY CAR

Cars made it even easier to move around and keep in contact, but they were very expensive. Only wealthy people could afford one.

The first motoring club began in 1903. Club members would go for drives together. To make driving safer and easier, they made direction signs and warning notices and put them along the roads. They also drew road maps to help motorists explore more of the country. The clubs encouraged local councils to improve roads and to build more.



Building roads was hard work.

ONE CAR, TWO CARS, THREE CARS, AND MORE

As the years went by, cars and petrol became cheaper. People could buy second-hand cars, too. These days, there are well over three million cars in New Zealand.

Lots of New Zealanders own a car. Many people rely on their cars, especially if they have to travel long distances. Cars are useful, but they have their downside too.

Cars make it easier to carry heavy things.

In New Zealand, hundreds of people are badly hurt or killed in car crashes every year.

Cars help us to get to places more quickly.

Cars can make us lazy. We stop walking and cycling and become unfit and unhealthy.

Cars help us travel long distances.

Some cars can be expensive to run and maintain.

Cars give us shelter from the weather while we travel.

Exhaust fumes from some cars can pollute the air.

Electric cars are cleaner to run than petrol cars.

If there are more cars, we have to build more roads.



Cars are important in our daily lives, but there are other options for getting around. Maybe we don't need to use cars as much as we do.

What do you think?

illustrations by Scott Pearson

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