

tions against "psychoanalytic speculation" and "meaningful discussion" of his familial traumas that left them ready in his psyche as raw material for his art. (Importantly, all witnesses agree that Gleason, who had a habit of claiming responsibility for everything he touched, was for once right in claiming "authorship" of the Kramdens.) The old Gleason flat became the Kramden apartment (that description above will surely have rung a bell with lovers of the show). Pa and Ma and Jackie in some sense resulted in the Kramdens. This is how artists work; they transmute private—and, as such, uninteresting—suffering into public shapes. They do not get in touch with their "inner selves"; they ferociously yank about and lyingly reshape their shameful memories. Psychobabble is the death of song. And happy endings can be not moronic, but profound.

As for the dearth of topicality in Kramdenland . . . Look at TV today, where each episode of "L.A. Law" or "Murphy Brown" or "Beverly Hills, 90210" must—is it in the contract?—deal with either AIDS or racism or condoms or sexual harassment or the televisually challenged or (get ready) the L.A. riots. Prime time is blatant *Kulturkampf*. Never mind "The Honeymooners." Only compare yesterday's "Mary Tyler Moore Show" (hardly the brainchild of traditionalists) to "Murphy Brown" to gauge the damage wrought in popular art by ideology. The first clone of "The Honeymooners" was "All in the Family," inferior or not least because ideologized. Imagine Ralph Kramden arguing with Norton about Suez or Little Rock. In this sense, the restraints exercised by the networks in the 1950s on what was publicly sayable made for healthy art, just as today's license makes for the reverse.

The rest of Gleason's life—apart from such bright spots as his performance in *The Hustler*—is a monotonous and stupefying parade of megalomania, gluttony, and drink, with fitful gleams of grace. His is not a story particularly worth knowing (any more than is, say, Hemingway's). Henry slogs dutifully on (though without, be it noted, the possibly softening contributions of Gleason's daughters or wives) but might have made better use of some of his space giving dates, casts, and plots of the Golden Thirty-Nine (at least). Trust the tale, not the teller, as D.H. Lawrence said. □

## VEHICLES

Nigel Hawkes

Macmillan/240 pages/\$39.95

reviewed by BROCK YATES

**T**he Almighty blessed the English with countless laudable traits, but humility was not among them. Not only does English sagacity permeate the world of literature, politics, philosophy, and medicine, but according to London *Times* science editor Nigel Hawkes, the anointed of Old Blighty also dominate the realms of technology and high adventure. His book *Vehicles* recounts, according to its own jacket blurb, "the most extraordinary achievements since the invention of the wheel." Particularly "extraordinary" is that twenty-three of his fifty-two listed triumphs originated in the United Kingdom, and most of those in England.

Even keeping in mind the English penchant for self-worship, Hawkes soars to heights that might redden the cheeks of the most pukka grenadier. (While I demur from implying that the Brits are mountebanks and fibbers, one cannot forget the observation that the sun never set on the British Empire because God did not trust them in the dark.) Hawkes waxes eloquent about Sir Thomas Sopwith's America's Cup challenger *Endeavour 1*, which he describes as "the most graceful racing design for the America's Cup" while dolefully noting that, like legions of hapless British challengers for over a hundred years, this aesthetic triumph was waxed by the American defender.

**V**ehicles is a weird and illogical pastiche of human adventure and technological advance divided into five sections: the sea, automobiles, rail travel, conventional aircraft, and space. Many of the subjects, accompanied by superb maps, photographs, cut-away drawings, and diagrams, are auto-

*Brock Yates is the author, most recently, of Enzo Ferrari: The Man, The Cars, The Races (Doubleday).*

matic qualifiers for every such anthology: Magellan's circumnavigation, Joshua Slocum's similar singlehanded voyage in 1895, the USS *Nautilus*'s first subpolar voyage, the 1907-08 Paris-Peking and New York-Paris auto races, the Lindbergh flight, Chuck Yeager's breakage of the sound barrier, Yuri Gagarin's brief ride, and the *Apollo 11* lunar landing.

But other chapters seem to have been added solely to propagandize the reader with the idea that England was the major player in the technological rough ride through the centuries. Hawkes deals, for example, with the British clipper *Cutty Sark*, which was surely a magnificent vessel, but notes only obliquely that the clipper ships were American in origin and that Yankee versions like the famed *Flying Cloud* dominated the seas until steam power and Suez ended the glory days of sail.

Hawkes lavishes considerable verbiage on a 1930 race from Cannes to Calais between the legendary Blue Train and a Bentley Speed-Six coupe driven by gentleman racer Woolf Barnato. The little skirmish was based on an informal wager that Barnato, three-time winner at Le Mans and chairman of the Bentley company, could not only beat Le Train Bleu from Cannes to the Channel, but could be at his club in St. James's before the old huffer pulled into Calais. This he succeeded in doing—without, by the way, the proprietors of the Paris, Lyons, and Mediterranean Railway having the vaguest idea they were in a contest of any sort. The little feat created a considerable stir among the aristocratic motorists of the Royal Automobile Club, but was soon forgotten by all but the most devoted aficionados. Truth be known, the Bentleys were—and remain—overweight arks that rely on brutishly large engines for performance. Ettore Bugatti, whose machines are artistic and engineering masterpieces,

was heard to sniff, "Bentley builds the fastest trucks in the world."

Similarly ridiculous is the chapter on Donald Campbell, son of land- and water-speed record-holder Sir Malcolm Campbell. Young Donald, who may epitomize the old canard, "Give an Englishman a piece of metal and he'll do something stupid with it," set out to one-up his late father's two records, and did. After crashing numerous times and bankrupting his successful machine-tool business, Campbell managed to career across the Big Finish Line in the Sky in January 1967, when he nose-dived his jet-powered *Bluebird* into Lake Coniston at an estimated 320 mph. The boat was ten years old, hopelessly outdated, and a good 30 mph beyond its design speed. We also learn of the British dirigible R101, a 732-foot behemoth designed to overtake the Germans who, thanks to Count Zeppelin, had long enjoyed a lead in rigid-airship design. After its sister ship R100 had made a rocky and harrowing transatlantic crossing to Canada, Lord Thomson, Labour's first "secretary of air," attempted in 1930 to inaugurate regular dirigible service between London and India. Loaded with dignitaries who rode in an elegant two-deck gondola hung beneath five million cubic feet of explosive hydrogen, R101 departed into the teeth of a rising gale. It wobbled over the storm-tossed Channel at about 30 mph, then nose-dived into the rain-soaked French countryside near Beauvais and exploded. Forty-six of those on board were killed, including Thomson. So much for Britain's enthusiasm for dirigibles.

The book's British provenance no doubt prompted Hawkes to stress the Far Eastern seaplane route of Imperial Airways—began in 1935 with Short S-23 C-Class Empire flying boats—over Pan Am's fabled Pacific Clipper service, which started a few years later. While Charles Lindbergh gets full coverage, the Wright Brothers are dismissed in a few hundred words. Jaguar's 1989 victory at Le Mans—its first in thirty-two years—is described in terms befitting a moon landing, while Porsche, which *owned* the event throughout the 1970s and '80s, is barely mentioned.

German cars get amazingly short shrift. Only the 1955 Mille Miglia-winning Mercedes-Benz 300SLR receives the ink it deserves, probably because it

was driven by English superstar Stirling Moss. Two other German offerings, the Volkswagen Beetle and an early '30s steam locomotive, make the addenda at the back of the book. What happened to Karl Benz and Gottlieb Daimler's first cars, the Me262 jet fighter, and the classic BMW twin-motorcycle—not to mention the *Bismarck* and a host of other German planes, trains, and ships—is a mystery. Perhaps Hawkes is still pouting over the Luftwaffe's raids on Coventry.

Inevitably, trying to select the most significant, monumental, pivotal, earth-shaking of anything—be it the world's grandest hotels or the greatest double-play combinations or best opera tenors or finest pizza parlors—only causes arguments. What Hawkes has selected—narrow, quirky, and wrapped in the Union Jack as it is—is neatly packaged and brightly presented. Chauvinists of other nationalities might blanch at the omissions, but Englishmen everywhere will hoist one to Mr. Hawkes. On the oth-

er hand, Russian readers might reach for another liter of vodka when they read Hawkes extolling Nicholas II's imperial fleet's 16,000-mile voyage into the battle of Tsushima in May 1905, considering that the Japanese sunk thirty-four major Russian warships and killed 4,830 crewmen while losing but three torpedo boats and 110 sailors themselves. Although Americans are generally treated well, some might puzzle over the inclusion of a Civil War incident in which a small band of Union soldiers stole a Confederate train and ran it from Atlanta to Chattanooga, burning wooden railroad trestles along the route. That eight of the expedition's leaders were hanged and the rest imprisoned would seem to impose certain limits on the mission being described as an "achievement." Given such standards, one wonders why Hawkes chose to ignore such epic triumphs as Amelia Earhart's wide miss of Howland Island, the *Titanic's* maiden voyage, Scott's Antarctic trek, and the brilliant French employment of their Maginot Line. □

## AFTER HENRY

Joan Didion

Simon & Schuster/319 pages/\$22

reviewed by CHRISTOPHER CALDWELL

In her last essay collection, *The White Album* (1979), Joan Didion went gardening with the wife of the governor of California and found her melodramatic:

Nancy Reagan says almost everything with spirit, perhaps because she was once an actress and has the beginning actress's habit of investing even the most casual lines with a good deal more dramatic emphasis than is ordinarily called for on a Tuesday morning on 45th Street in Sacramento.

That's Joan Didion's problem, too. Inca-  
*Christopher Caldwell is assistant managing editor of The American Spectator.*

pable of turning down the volume, she ultimately makes even the most occasional essay sound like a chapter out of Hesiod or Samuel or *Burnt Njal*. "They float on the landscape like pyramids . . ." begins a piece on shopping malls. "Once, in a dry season . . ." begins her *Vogue* essay on not making Phi Beta Kappa in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (1968). As Louis MacNeice put it in "The Drunkard":

The barmaid was a Madonna, the  
adoration  
Of the coalman's breath was myrrh, the  
world was We,  
And pissing under the stars an act of  
creation . . .