

‘A beautifully written masterpiece ... Moran has a knack for weaving together fascinating nuggets with a rare lightness of touch ... genius’ Bee Wilson, *Sunday Times*

‘Every page contains something enthralling or bizarre or funny or perceptive. Like the best kind of artist, Moran lets you into a parallel world you had never previously noticed ... Moran finds the remarkable in the commonplace’ Craig Brown, *Mail on Sunday*

‘Terrific ... what Moran manages above all, is to reclaim the road as a country of its own: a terrain vague, as worthy of exploration and study as a moorland or wood-pasture’ Robert Macfarlane, *Guardian*

‘Superb, there’s considerable beauty in this book. Moran has a poet’s eye for detail and expression and an astonishing range of cultural reference ... he brings the romance of the road to life’ Martin Fletcher, *Independent*

‘Richly enjoyable ... Moran has an eye for the everyday, the easily overlooked and the downright unlikely’ Stephen McClarence, *The Times*

‘Moran steers effortlessly away from jargon, and his tone maintains a delicious balance ... sparkling’ Tom Fort, *Sunday Telegraph*

‘Fresh and original’ Matthew Engel, *Financial Times*

‘Moran charts not just our love and loathing of motorways but everything that goes alongside, across and with them ... fascinating’ Linda Christmas, *Daily Telegraph*

‘Outstanding ... one of the most surprisingly enjoyable and informative books of the year, a highly original work’ Andrew Holgate, *Sunday Times*

‘A beautifully written, funny and original book to place alongside the psycho-geographies of Iain Sinclair’ Harry Eyres, *Financial Times* books of the year

‘The optimism and sense of wonder of the era is evoked brilliantly ... an elegant piece of scholarship’ Alasdair Reid, *Sunday Herald*

‘Packed with fascinating detail ... hypnotic’ Brian Morton, *Herald*

‘A wonderful new history’ Rory Sutherland, *Spectator*

‘So balanced and erudite that it might tempt some of us into getting on to the M25, or at least on to some of the lesser-known roads Moran writes about so elegantly’ Owen Hatherley, *New Statesman*

‘Read it before a long journey, and you may regard the boring old motorway with a new appreciation’ *Economist*

‘Very readable, often witty and turns up fascinating facts and ideas on every page’ Ian Irvine, *Prospect*

‘A fascinating insight into everything from motorways to byways by one of Britain’s best cultural-studies academics ... one wonders why it hasn’t been done before’ Giles Foden, *Condé Nast Traveller*

‘Part-bonkers, part-brilliant ... as many of the best books are’ Jonathan Wright, *Tablet*

‘Wonderful. Whoever could have known that roads were so fascinating?’ Dominic Sandbrook

‘It is hard to say which is the more remarkable here: the astonishing range and variety of what Joe Moran knows, or the easeful, evocative, luxuriously entertaining way he parcels it up and puts it across’ David McKie

JOE MORAN is a reader in cultural history at Liverpool John Moores university. He writes regularly for the *Guardian* and the *Financial Times*. His research is on everyday life, and he is the author of *Queuing for Beginners*, also published by Profile. He lives in Liverpool.

On Roads

A Hidden History

Joe Moran

P

PROFILE BOOKS

This paperback edition published in 2010
First published in Great Britain in 2009 by

Profile Books Ltd
3A Exmouth House
Pine Street
Exmouth Market
London EC1R 0JH
www.profilebooks.com

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Copyright © Joe Moran 2009, 2010

The moral right of the author has been asserted.

All rights reserved. Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise), without the prior written permission of both the copyright owner and the publisher of this book.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 84668 060 1
eISBN 978 1 84765 203 4

Typeset in Sabon by MacGuru Ltd
info@macguru.org.uk

Printed in the UK by
CPI Bookmarque, Croydon, Surrey



Mixed Sources

Product group from well-managed
forests and other controlled sources
www.fsc.org Cert no. TT-COC-002227
© 1996 Forest Stewardship Council

For all my friends on Cable Road

CONTENTS

1	In road country	1
2	The motoring we used to dream about	19
3	Hatfield and the North	53
4	Please don't be rude on the road	91
5	22 years in a Travelodge	125
6	Fast cars, slow lanes	163
7	You can stuff your motorway	197
8	The end of the road	235
	Notes	260
	Acknowledgements	289
	Picture credits	291
	Index	292



IN ROAD COUNTRY

My idea of a piece of sculpture is a road. That is, a road doesn't reveal itself at any particular point or from any particular point. Roads appear and disappear. We either have to travel on them or beside them. But we don't have a single point of view for a road at all, except a moving one, moving along it.

Carl Andre¹

If you walk down to the bottom of the street on which I grew up, you turn into one of the most famous roads in Britain: the Snake Pass, the winding route over the Pennines in Derbyshire's Peak District. Built by Thomas Telford, the Snake looks as though it has been there for ever, as much a part of the landscape as the millstone grit. But like most roads it is a palimpsest, laid on top of earlier versions like overwritten text. It used to start in Ashopton, a small village now buried at the bottom of the Ladybower reservoir. So the new road begins on the reservoir viaduct, then climbs slowly up to the barren plateaux of Kinder Scout and Bleaklow, before beginning its snaking, vertiginous descent into my hometown of Glossop. As you pass the final few hairpins, the Longdendale Valley spreads out beautifully along your windscreen – almost as though the road came first and the view has been supplied for the benefit of motorists by its benevolent engineers.

When I was young, I overheard a grown-up saying that the Snake

ON ROADS

was a great ‘driving road’, and I was puzzled by the adjective. Weren’t all roads for driving on? Eventually I came to realise that the Snake, like all great driving roads, existed as much in the mind as on the earth. It was a fantasy road – the lovely, desolate, winding one in the motoring programmes and car commercials. The Snake also had an exciting air of mystery and danger, because it was always being blocked by snow and landslips, cutting Glossop off from civilisation – or, at least, from Yorkshire. It had, and still has, only one phone box along its entire length (and it’s now one of the last frontiers of the mobile phone signal) so if you broke down or crashed you might have to walk for hours to get help. Hairy bikers came from miles around to race along its open straights and careen around its sinuous curves in search of the perfect cornering line, before rewarding themselves with an all-day breakfast in the greasy spoon at the bottom of our road. Nowadays they film the ride from their handlebars and post the results on YouTube, for the envy and delectation of other members of the biker fraternity. The Snake remains a collective work of fiction, driven mainly in anticipation and remembrance.

An ordinary road is nothing like that: it is just part of the invisible landscape of the everyday. You will probably see those white lines stretching into the distance, and hear the sound of tyres on tarmac, every day of your life. Everyone eats, sleeps, talks, works and loves within about a hundred feet of a road. But a road is not there to be dreamt about, feared or remembered; it is there to be driven along forgetfully on the way to somewhere else. A road is overlooked and taken for granted because its shared routines seem to offer little opening for individual creativity or invention. We see most of our journeys on roads as dead time, just a rude interruption of the proper business of living. These everyday roads have penetrated our imaginations obliquely, not through the myth and folklore of the great driving roads but through the compulsive habits and accidental poetry of the commonplace – or a reflex moan about the M4 bus lane.



All roads lead to other roads. The Snake is part of the A57, which runs

IN ROAD COUNTRY

across the width of the north of England, all the way from Lincoln's railway station to Liverpool's dock road. These long A-roads are like the road system's unconscious, often stretching for miles without being signposted or acknowledged, disappearing into street names and getting caught up in one-way systems but still always there, connecting up different areas of our lives serendipitously. If you follow the A57 into Manchester, for instance, it becomes the first edifice I remember actually noticing as a road. During school holidays, my dad often had to take me into his office at work, and the walk from Piccadilly Station involved us going under an urban flyover. I must have said something about how odd it was to have a road suspended in midair, because I remember him telling me that this was a special kind of road, a 'motorway'.

Some years later, this road – the A57(M), or Mancunian Way – played a key role in the first episode of the BBC's time-travelling drama series, *Life on Mars*. DCI Sam Tyler (John Simm) is run over by a car on a slip road of the Mancunian Way and knocked unconscious, before waking up in 1973 on a motorway construction site. Leaving the site in a state of shock, he passes a hoarding that marks his entry into the past: 'Coming Soon! Manchester's Highway in the Sky.' It is clear straightaway what this exercise in historical surrealism means: we're being primed to enter a recent era that now seems quite remote in its blind faith in novelty, its naïve hope that a sunlit future can simply be planned and built. 'Am I mad, in a coma, or back in time?' asks Tyler. 'Whatever's happened, it's like I've landed on a different planet.' The Mancunian Way is treated as a dead fashion, a piece of embarrassing 1970s kitsch, the concrete equivalent of loon pants and lava lamps.

History, as usual, is more complicated. The local press did indeed once call the Mancunian Way a 'highway in the sky', even though it rises less than 30 feet from the ground. But not even in the salad days of flyover building did they announce new roads like forthcoming cinema attractions. And anyway, the Mancunian Way was built in 1967. If they had waited until 1973, it would probably not have been built at all.

ON ROADS

When it comes to roads, it's hard to separate the facts from the folk memory. Every modern road carries a freight of ideas and meanings about postwar British history – none more so than these urban flyovers, lumbering overhead sculptures that seem to symbolise the mistakes of 1960s planning and the car-clogged world it bequeathed us. Our addiction to roads comes with some of the self-disgust and self-delusion more associated with chemical dependencies. Like many addicts we like to weave stories that blame our habit on something outside ourselves: in this case, we rely on a plausible but partial narrative about the errors of our immediate ancestors.

The real story of the Mancunian Way begins with the City of Manchester Plan, published a month after VE Day in June 1945. This aimed to rebuild Manchester over the next fifty years, sweeping away its obsolete Victorian infrastructure and allowing the city to enter 'a nobler, braver age in which the human race will be master of its fate'. The most ambitious part of the plan was a massive new road system that would set the traffic free and defer for ever 'the evil day of complete strangulation'.² The city would be threaded with a vast network of orbital and radial roads – mostly elegant parkways, lined with trees and flowers – including an inner ring road reaching right into the centre. The River Irwell would be covered over with a giant roundabout, and whole streets flattened to make a processional route to the town hall, as grandly elegant as one of Baron Haussman's Parisian boulevards.

But the council was broke, and carried on being broke, and none of these roads was ever built. The first major road to be constructed in the city after the war was the A57(M), and it was meant as a stopgap, relieving the city centre until the inner ring road was built. In an inter-school competition to name it, five children came up separately with 'Mancunian Way' and, on 5 May 1967, they all met the prime minister, Harold Wilson, at the official opening. The road was made of state-of-the-art prefab sections that could be hoisted into place with cranes and snapped together like Scalextric, a popular slot-car racing game of the time. In 1968 the newly formed Concrete Society (motto: *Concreti Corroboramus*, or 'having come together we strengthen')

IN ROAD COUNTRY

chose the Mancunian Way as the recipient of its first annual award for ‘outstanding merit in the use of concrete’.³

The inner ring road remained on the drawing board well into the 1970s, by which time it was nicknamed the ‘eternity ring’ and urban motorways were terminally passé anyway. Unborn roads weigh invisibly on the landscape like stories without endings. Manchester’s unbuilt inner ring road created a city centre scarred with derelict sites, as the land remained in limbo until the plans were officially cancelled in the 1980s. Some buildings in the city centre are still set back from the road line, awaiting the ring road’s arrival, like a planning-blight version of *Waiting for Godot*.⁴

You can learn to read roads like any other part of the landscape, but often what is most revealing is what isn’t there. The British road system is an unfinished symphony, made up of the modest remnants of never-realised utopian schemes. At the eastern end of the Mancunian Way, for instance, one of the ramps comes to a sudden stop in thin air. This bit of the road was meant to lead all the way into the city centre, sweeping away much of Chinatown in the process. Now the stump is half-hidden by an advertising hoarding and its thick iron bars cut short any motorist who has been cruelly misinformed that it leads somewhere.

The space beneath the A57(M) used to be common ground open to everyone. The road’s undercarriage had a vast network of pedestrian subways and the grassy bits in-between were meant to be mini-parks, little oases where inner-city residents and students from the nearby Polytechnic could bask together in the road’s bountiful shade. But the subways soon declined into dank, piss-stained, graffiti-sprayed theatres for casual muggings that symbolised the failures of urban planning from that era. Now the undercarriage is mostly cordoned off by railings and chain-link fencing, and has been recycled as a giant private car park, protected by CCTV cameras and anti-intruder paint, with room for a few tiny football pitches and skateboard runs.

There is another symbol of changing social attitudes to roads at the western end of the Mancunian Way: a horseshoe-shaped pedestrian bridge, a piece of post-millennial signature architecture meant

to heal the rift made by the motorway between the rejuvenated city centre and the stranded ghetto of Hulme. In another sign of the times, it has been built not from concrete but Cumaru, a sustainable Brazilian hardwood. Underneath the bridge are the remains of a subway, now walled in with concrete blocks and clumsily plastered over.

The Mancunian Way may not be a great driving road, but ten yards of it will tell you more about recent British history than all 14 miles of the Snake Pass. Its tapered stanchions and flowing cantilevers are part of our cultural mythology, a cautionary tale in concrete and steel. Even people who have never heard of this road know the story, because every British city has a similar one to tell. When, a few years ago, the Birkenhead MP Frank Field championed a scheme for anti-social families to be moved into vandal-proof steel containers, he volunteered his own constituency for the pilot scheme. 'They can put them up underneath the motorway flyover,' he suggested.⁵ Everyone knew what he meant: 'underneath the motorway flyover' was universal shorthand for the abandoned and godforsaken. There used to be a National Lottery television gameshow, *Winning Lines*, in which the booby prize for answering only one question correctly was a holiday to Spaghetti Junction. I don't know if anyone ever won the prize, or claimed it, but the conceit was clear enough: this convoluted maze of airborne concrete was the last place anyone would choose to linger.

You will look in vain on an A-Z for help in guiding you through the *terrain vague* underneath and around our urban motorways. Exploring this liminal land on foot may mark you out as a dangerous eccentric, an unauthorised person – although it is more likely you will simply be ignored because everyone else is inside a vehicle, looking only ahead. The land surrounding rural motorways is even more vast and unknown. If you're ever on the run from the law, I would strongly recommend that you hide in the wooded motorway verges of our oldest motorways, like the M1 or M6. There is just enough room for a tent in the half-century of undergrowth and you could surely live like Stig of the Dump, undisturbed for months or years, in this uninhabited wilderness just a cone's throw from the road.



IN ROAD COUNTRY

According to the Department for Transport there are 245,366½ miles of motorable road in Britain,⁶ and most of us spend large parts of our lives moving along them. If you drive an average of 10,000 miles a year, at an average speed of 40 miles per hour, then you will spend the equivalent of four-and-a-half working weeks on roads. In origin and destination surveys, traffic experts use the term ‘desire lines’ to describe these daily movements of drivers along roads. The term derives from the shortcuts made by pedestrians between paved pathways. When applied to motorists the phrase is pleasingly poetic but quite misleading, because so many road journeys are necessary rather than desirable ones. When computer programmers draw thousands of these motoring desire lines on to a single map, they show patterns that seem as silently inevitable as the mass migrations of birds, albeit ones driven by everyday obligation rather than the seasons.

As the Oxford zoologists Tim Guilford and Dora Biro have shown in their studies of homing pigeons, birds use roads as tracking devices on their migratory journeys. Although they have inbuilt magnetic compasses, they tend to fall back on the known landscape when they are in familiar territory. They follow the lines of motorways and trunk roads, almost as though they have checked the route beforehand on the *AA Route Planner* – and even if it means going miles out of their way. Working with the BBC’s natural history unit, Guilford and Biro strapped tiny cameras and GPS devices to pigeons’ backs with a Velcro strip and tracked them as they followed the A34 Oxford Bypass, turning at traffic lights and curving round roundabouts just like motorists. So homing pigeons do not make their way as the crow flies – and the jury is still out on whether crows do. In fact, you don’t need a mini-GPS to find the circumstantial evidence. You will often see seagulls in landlocked Birmingham because they have flown up the Bristol Channel and followed the M5, mistaking it for a river. Drive north on the same motorway on a Saturday and you may be tailed by flocks of pigeons who have just been released from the Royal Pigeon Racing Association’s Cheltenham HQ on racing day.

As with homing birds, so it is with motorists. After a fashion, roads allow us to follow our desires, but these personal itineraries

ON ROADS

amass to produce collective configurations as striking as any in nature. Look at a road from the window seat of a plane and you will see the compelling patterns made by converging cars; or take a picture of a motorway from an overbridge at night with a shutter delay and it will show trails of red and white light tracing the road's curvature, the visual remnant of countless identical journeys. If we are ever visited by aliens from other planets, and there are any natural scientists among them, they will surely find parallels between these human movements on roads and the behaviour of shoaling fish or flocking birds – those spellbindingly synchronised patterns that look like the work of superorganisms, but are just lots of individual animals following their own self-absorbed agendas. Motorists similarly behave like a micro-society, without ever imagining themselves as one.

The road is almost a separate country, one that remains under-explored not because it is remote and inaccessible but because it is so ubiquitous and familiar. Some roads are literally enclaves, like the checkpointed autobahn from Helmstedt to West Berlin that was an umbilical cord to the walled city during the Cold War. But even without passport controls or border police, a road has rules and often a price of admission. In Britain, there are not many tolls (yet) and the motorway's entry requirements aren't very exacting: as long as you've passed your driving test and aren't driving a moped or a Reliant Robin, you're in. But once you are inside the road system you will find that there are laws, rituals and codes of behaviour, many of them unwritten and unspoken. Roads are mapped as carefully as countries, while retaining their uncharted outposts like verges and the insides of roundabouts. There have been wars over road country – the fractious but usually non-violent ones about whether it should have its frontiers pegged back, and the often fatal, undeclared ones between the people who occupy it. Like most countries, the road is a synthetic and recent creation that its inhabitants have come to see as natural and eternal.

The anthropologist Marc Augé, a diligent student of the French autoroutes, argues that we should explore daily life in the western world with the same kind of careful attention that ethnographers once reserved for tribes in remote societies. For him, the toll-road

IN ROAD COUNTRY

habitats of French car commuters are as rich an environment for anthropologists as the tribal villages he stayed in on his field trips to the Ivory Coast in the 1960s and 1970s. What would we discover if we applied what Augé calls the ‘anthropology of the near’ to the British road?⁷ Could we look beyond its surface sameness and re-imagine it not as a monotonous line interrupted occasionally by Little Chefs, but as the real, concrete space in which we spend much of our lives?



Most of us contemplate roads only when we’re in motion, and we simply want them to be smooth, unvarying and amenable to distracted driving. Although cars are one of the most semiotically rich objects we own – loaded with the symbolic baggage of money, status, sexual competitiveness and aesthetic pleasure – roads, without which the cars would be almost useless, are simply part of our unnoticed collective life. But this ignoring of the road is a modern luxury. Before Thomas Telford and John Macadam’s revolutionary roadbuilding techniques solved the problem of bogs and wheel ruts, British travellers complained unremittingly about what Daniel Defoe called ‘the exceeding badness of the roads’. When the historian Edward Gibbon made his last journey in 1794 to see his surgeon, along what is now the A22 from East Grinstead to London, the road nearly saved his surgeon the trouble because he was ‘almost killed ... by hard, frozen, long, and cross ruts, that would disgrace the approach to an Indian wigwam’.⁸

In its early days, the motor car made the road horribly visible again by turning its untarred surface into a dustbowl. In *The Wind in the Willows*, Ratty, Mole and Toad first encounter the motor car as ‘a small cloud of dust, with a dark centre of energy, advancing on them at incredible speed, while from out of the dust a faint “poop-poop” wailed like an uneasy animal in pain’.⁹ Virtually all Britain’s roads were tarmacked after the First World War, the Tarmac company having perfected its methods in France, helping to build semi-permanent roads to supply the motionless trenches. Roads that had once assumed the colours of their local geology, from Devon’s pinkish soil

to Lancashire's grey grit, were buried under anodyne tar. But the load-bearing surfaces of tyre and road remained in treacherous misalignment until the ingenious design of the radial-ply tyre after the Second World War. Its intricate zigzags solved the eternal problems of skidding and aquaplaning and finally brokered the peace between rubber and road that we now take for granted.

The arrival of the motorways transformed the road into a place of pure mobility. The first section of the M1, opened in 1959, had maintenance depots spaced about 15 miles apart. Legions of workers emerged from them, using secret junctions and dive-under tunnels, to tidy up the road and its edges invisibly and thanklessly, like real-life Wombles. Their job was to keep the motorway free of litter or objects falling from lorries, and, when the road froze over, to decant rock salt from huge hoppers and spread it over the tarmac. The point of the motorway was to banish idiosyncrasy, to create uniform spaces for the ceaseless flow of traffic. When a new section of the M6 opened in 1963, the architect W.G. Howell complained that 'unless you are a connoisseur of bridge design, you could be anywhere from Watford to Preston'. The pleasant drive in which 'we look out through our windscreen and see the drunken English road-geometry staggering away in perspective' was 'more and more becoming a fantasy'.¹⁰

For drivers, the new motorways were a strange mix of the perilous and the tedious, of jangled nerves and straight-line monotony. Like fighting in a war, driving on a motorway consisted of long periods of boredom punctuated by brief moments of life-threatening danger. Ambient music suited this day-dreamy mode of driving – before the motorways arrived, only 4 per cent of British cars had radios but by the time a thousand miles of motorway were completed in 1972, about 30 per cent did.¹¹ The growing reliability of cars also meant that drivers were less likely to have this semi-hypnotic experience interrupted. Even after 1961, when the MOT test was introduced because our half-timbered, superannuated cars could not cope with fast roads, cars were regularly beached on hard shoulders. But today's cars are so dependable that drivers are almost as likely to stop on the hard shoulder as they are to camp on a roundabout.