

Bruce D. Epperson (2014) *Bicycles in American Highway Planning. The critical years of policy-making 1969-1991*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland

Reviewer Peter Cox (University Of Chester)

In this book, any historian of transport, bicycling or planning is sure to find something to intrigue, fascinate and infuriate. Epperson has a forensic enthusiasm for exposing the minutiae of meetings, discussions and jockeying for position that precede decision making, and the gaps between planning and implementation. The meticulous details presented give plenty of scope for all three reactions.

The book's central contention is that a general absence of distinctive infrastructure should not be interpreted as a lack of planning. Rather, there *is* system of American bicycle planning, but it should be understood as one reliant on existing roadways and developed not through a singular or coherent strategy but the "disjoint incrementalism" that has been such a notable feature of all city planning in America" (p.4). Thus he explains the rise of 'vehicular cycling' not as a policy but through "the absence of policy" (p.6.).

In order to substantiate this analysis, the book firstly provides a broad historical overview of traffic planning in the USA and Bicycle planning in Europe, to provide a context and to illustrate the variety of ways in which bicycling came to be regarded (or not) as traffic and the place and role of infrastructure within this. Noting the paucity of systematic analysis in this area Epperson usefully gathers together data from numerous studies but reaches no broad conclusions. Instead he demonstrates the lack of significant agreement of the role and place of bicycles in traffic in most territories and the deeply contingent nature of much policy formation.

This theme of contingency recurs in the middle section of the book, covering the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s. Here, the availability of money for recreation-oriented investment becomes a key to understanding where, why and how investment was made in cycling. Consequently, Epperson argues, the basis was set for the emergence of a cycling-as-transport backlash which forms the basis of the later chapters, culminating in a well titled chapter 7 "Unexpected Consequences, Big and Small 1970-1983". The final conclusions are presented in enumerated form for ease of interpretation, but the effect reads somewhat deterministically, ironic given his rightful insistence in the first of these that "the study of the political history of bicycle planning is still in its infancy, so almost every historical categorization and definition is still flexible and contingent" (p.189).

In the detailed sift through highly contested material, its navigation through bewildering numbers of primary sources, and some invaluable first-hand interviews with notable protagonists, the book provides an important contribution to the literature. Occasionally, movement back and forward in time in order to keep a regional focus, or switching regions to maintain chronology can become slightly bewildering. Because the foremost task of the book is to chronicle events, this reader longed for greater evaluation of its source material in places, and conversely, at other points, for greater engagement in the academic discussion of topics that are mentioned almost as background asides. Despite his emphasis on not taking sides in the arguments, some very strongly normative statements appear when evaluations are made and it is at these points one can almost detect another, more polemic work lurking beneath the surface.

Although it achieves its own set task well, one wonders whether increased dialogue with broader studies on roads and roads policy would not have given both context and depth to the study. There are a few gaps in the literature in this area and accident of timing means that Epperson's book was published almost simultaneously with Carlton Reid's 'Roads Were Not Built for Cars'. Although two more radically different approaches could not be envisaged, a dialogue between them would be fascinating. Given the importance of American highway planners in the developments in road planning in Europe shown by recent studies, and the international role of several of the key players such as Forester and Franklin, this study begs the question of how other states responded to similar ideological and economic pressures, and how the tensions in American policy were negotiated elsewhere. Overall however, this is an enlightening study and a steady navigation through strongly contested waters.