

**COMPLEXITIES OF A BEAUTIFUL WOMAN AND A BEAUTIFUL CAR**

*The Bugatti queen.* Miranda Seymour, 2004. London: Simon and Schuster; ISBN 0743231465, 301 pp. £15.99, cloth.

Bugatti cars (probably the most beautiful ever made) driven by an exotic dancer in pre-war Paris make an exciting and glamorous combination. Miranda Stewart's biography of Hélène Delange (known as Hellé Nice), a postmaster's daughter from a small village in France, who supported herself, first by dancing and later by racing Bugattis, captures some of this excitement.

In Paris in the 1920s, an easy way for an attractive girl to make a living was as a cabaret dancer. This was the era of Isadora Duncan, and Josephine Baker. Delange used what talents she had, especially her looks, to make a living. In 1929, Delange entered, and won, the Grand Prix of the third Journée Feminine at Montlhéry, and in December that year she drove a Bugatti type 35c, supplied by Ettore Bugatti himself in speed trials, also at Montlhéry.

After 1926, the engine size for Grand Prix cars was reduced to 1.5 litres and some manufacturers (notably Alfa Romeo and Sunbeam) ceased to enter their cars. Bugatti and Delage still participated, but attention was focused on a variety of different races, which were also open to privateers, who owned and drove their own cars. Women competed in these events, racing alongside their male colleagues on an equal footing. Delange relied on friends and lovers to sponsor her and help maintain her cars, and there is no doubt that she must have had both stamina and skill to drive as she did.

Seymour handles the period of Delange's racing career effectively; the pace is fast and the descriptions of the races convey the speed and excitement well. However, there is little background information with which to contextualize her achievements. Other women drivers are mentioned, but there is no sense of whether they were considered unusual or outstanding in any way, or of how they were viewed by society at that time. A contemporary newspaper article, cited by Hargreaves (1994), described Violette Morris, who raced with Delange, as having muscles and nerves of iron, and concluded, 'she is one of the finest-built women on the face of the earth', thus emphasizing the importance of appearance and femininity for women in sport. Stewart details Delange's use of her appearance: 'Perfect photographic opportunities presented themselves, as they always did when Hélène was around' (p. 158), but she does not take this further, which is a pity.

The handling of her early life and dancing career is less successful. Reading the notes, it appears that there is little factual information

about this period and most of the detail is inferred or fictitious. Descriptions of Delangle watching a motor race that we have no real reason to believe she ever saw (Chapter 3, pp. 12–19) and of her walking through Paris (pp. 40–41) do not add to our understanding of her character, but do create confusion. There is little differentiation between fact and inference, and the reader is left not knowing what to believe. In the ‘Author’s Note’, Seymour states that ‘having been immersed in H el ene’s story for several years, I am probably better qualified than most to make such assumptions’ and that, hopefully, it is clear where ‘fact dissolves into speculation’. Regrettably, this is not always so.

Seymour’s objectivity towards her subject is also questionable. Ettore Bugatti would not invite her to stay at his house; her sister, apparently, would not allow her name to be added to the family gravestone; Louis Chiron (the racing driver) denounced her as a collaborator; and other women racers, allegedly, loathed her. These incidents are recorded but, again, not examined in any depth.

The book is worth persevering with, however. Seymour summarizes the war experiences of H el ene Delangle with skill and sensitivity. Again there are few facts, but she resists the temptation of embroidery and fantasy, and allows the reader to appreciate why little is known about this time. The same sensitivity is applied to Delangle’s old age and decline.

Probably the most important aspect of Stewart’s biography is that it serves to resurrect a forgotten life. Many women drove racing cars between the wars, but their contribution to the sport has been almost obliterated with the passing of time. Motor racing has always been a sport dominated by men and in any history of the sport there is little, if any, mention of the courageous women who also raced. A few names are known, such as Gwenda Stewart, who raced Morgans, and Elizabeth Junek, a Bugatti driver, but the inspiration of their ground-breaking achievements has largely been lost to future generations of women. In the ‘Afterword’ (p. 262), Seymour states: ‘A heroine who rose from obscurity ... deserves to be honoured and recalled as she was once described, as a champion of the world.’ This is a flawed, but entertaining book that, for me, raised more questions than it answered.

## REFERENCE

Hargreaves, J. 1994: *Sporting females*. London: Routledge.

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