

THE AGE OF SPEED

At a time in the 1920s when aviators and motor drivers like Charles Lindbergh, Malcolm Campbell and Australia's own Charles Kingsford Smith were the dashing, daredevil heroes of the day – their awesome machines the Blue Bird, the Southern Cross, the Golden Arrow, the streamlined avatars of fast-coming, brave new modernism – Norman 'Wizard' Smith (1890–1958) was our premier speed ace.

In 1929, after the Wizard had broken and re-broken practically every Australian motor record there was, he joined forces with the almost equally celebrated Sydney engineer and fellow record breaker Don Harkness (1890–1972), to mount an audacious challenge on the world 'flying mile' (or sometimes 'all-out', meaning 'outright') land-speed record. At the time the record stood at 231 mph, to the credit of Englishman Henry Segrave, who in early 1929 had driven his Golden Arrow special to the mark at Daytona Beach in Florida.

Today, top-fuel dragsters regularly best 300 mph inside a standing-start, three-second quarter mile! During the great Age of Speed between the wars, when the technology was primitive and the tracks soggy stretches of beach that concealed all sorts of perils, the flying mile (so named because competitors were allowed a run-up to the starting line) was a race into the unknown – the future! – and the event was the most dangerous and glamorous of them all. It gave a sense, as Malcolm Campbell once put it, of 'supernatural forces at work', and it captured the world's imagination in much the same way the space race would a few decades later in the 1960s. Many people simply didn't believe you could go so fast on God's good Earth.

'Is 200 mph possible?' English magazine *Motor* asked in 1925. People feared that either vehicle or driver or both couldn't take it, would just break up in the face of unknown new forces like wind resistance. But as the speeds inexorably, screamingly rose and the men

and machines held together – just, most of the time; the body count was high – it was all over the front pages. No one could look away from the newsreels. People gasped at these extraordinary feats of daring that, like the contemporaneous Einstein, were challenging the very reality of the universe itself.

When Norman Smith was dubbed the Wizard in 1922 after winning his third major garland, Victoria's celebrated Alpine Rally, it wasn't due to his personality but rather the uncanniness of his ability behind the wheel. Smith was the antithesis of dashing – he was lumpy and diffident, dour even. But when he climbed into the cockpit, he took on special powers. In league with the more classically rakish Don Harkness, such an Australian could quite readily become the fastest man on Earth.

Harkness designed and built two cars for the Wizard: first, in 1929, the Anzac, which got the Australian and New Zealand all-out records; and then, starting in 1930, to tackle 'the big job' – the world record, the race to 300 mph – the Enterprise.

The Enterprise, however, betrayed her name to become a Fiasco. Even when the car finally blew up after five months of inertia on New Zealand's Ninety Mile Beach in 1932, it still wasn't over. The whole thing was a national scandal and it ruined Smith and Harkness alike. This is doubtless the reason they got written out of history. But it's also part of the reason I was drawn to their story in the first place.

Australia has a great tradition of our innocents washing up on foreign shores, sometimes literally the beach, and falling over. With my own identity, like the nation's, bound up with an almost pathological sympathy for the underdog, the noble loser, I could never see why the lost legend of Wizard Smith wouldn't be as telling as any of the more familiar chapters in this extensive Australian catalogue, whether Gallipoli, Les Darcy or Phar Lap or, going inland, Burke and Wills, or Lasseter's Reef.

This book is about two men, not only the Wizard but also Don Harkness; it is the story of their partnership and how, after it all started so well, it ended so badly.

I'd never heard of Wizard Smith either, until I stumbled across

him in the course of other research. The *Australian Dictionary of Biography* concludes its brief entry: 'A persevering man, his short and plain physical appearance did little to offset his enigmatic, introspective personality and, paying insufficient attention to publicity, he was denied the rewards his skills and achievements should have brought.'

How could I resist a bait like that?

On a market stall at a hot rod show I found a copy of a slim 1977 paperback called *The Real Story of Wizard Smith*, by Steve Simpson. It didn't dent for a moment my belief there was a book there for me to write; in fact, quite the opposite. Because with all respect to the author, a former editor of *Wheels* magazine – and as easy as it is for me to say now – his brave effort tells barely half the real story. What it did do was spur me on to get to the bottom of a mystery so obviously absent from its pages.

How could such a bold but credible venture, I asked myself, have degenerated into farce? What could possibly have gone wrong?

I soon found that, if the short answer is everything, the long answer is, I suppose, this book.

The taciturn Smith specialised in short answers. Back in the day, he was asked what his secret was. What made him a wizard?

'I just keep my foot down,' he replied.

I can almost see him now, having got to know him as I feel I have, squinting at his inquisitor, shrugging inscrutably, the one-time journalist in him well aware, and saying, *Sorry I can't give you a better quote, old boy.*

When asked, later in life, why he did it, Norman replied, simply, 'I just enjoyed it.'

Right up to his death in 1958, the former Wizard was reluctant to talk about the Enterprise disaster. Not that many asked him. Peter Davis, the grand patriarch of Australian motor writing, interviewed him for *Wheels* not long before he died, and Davis gave me the impression that Norman was saturnine about the question, which is completely in character. Davis also told me that due to a misunderstanding, Norman's scrapbooks and memorabilia were thrown out before he could go around and pick them up.

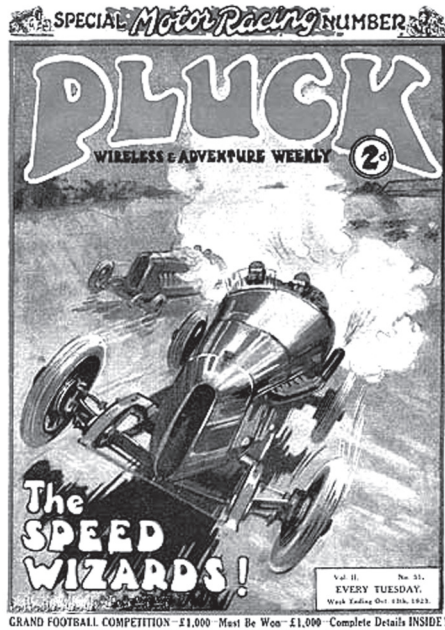
The story of the Wizard's ill-fated attempt on the world land-speed record is scattered sporadically through the history of Australian motoring and of international speed-record racing, but the way it's usually told is upon a litany of myths, misapprehensions and misinformation. In 1965, when Paul Clifton published his seminal history of the record, *The Fastest Men on Earth*, a short chapter called 'An Australian in New Zealand' entrenched many of the erroneous tropes, not least of which is the virtual persona non grata status of Don Harkness.

When Harkness died in 1972, his archive was left to Powerhouse Museum in Sydney. But not even Steve Simpson referred to this source. Neither did Simpson refer to the other single, major source I collected, Wizard Smith's published journalism, for Sydney's *Sunday Times* between 1927 and 1930, and Robert Packer's *Sun* in 1932.

Neither the Anzac nor the Enterprise, nor any trace of them (most notably their engines, which were rare to begin with), seem to have survived. If they had, they would now be nestling in museums alongside some of the other great machine-age totems of early modern Australia like Kingsford Smith's Southern Cross, or the Spirit of Progress, a Halvorsen speedboat, even Sydney Harbour Bridge. But both cars are long lost. The Harkness archive contains selected clippings, but lacks any drawings or blueprints. The two cars have disappeared so completely that neither is even listed in John Blanden's otherwise comprehensive 1979 reference *Historic Racing Cars in Australia*.

Naturally there aren't any eyewitnesses left to tell their versions of a tale now 80 years old. The rare strength of Steve Simpson's book is that he researched it on the ground in the Northland of New Zealand in the early 1970s when he was able to interview people still living with first-hand memories of not only the Enterprise's long anticlimax, but also the earlier, somewhat more successful Anzac campaign. This material amounts to about a dozen or so meaty paragraphs in *The Real Story of Wizard Smith*, and I have shamelessly recycled practically every single one of them.

My research became a cross-eyed odyssey of digging up every fragment of information published. After starting on Norman's



journalism – especially for the *Sun*, which in effect amounted to a diary of his 100 days on Ninety Mile – I moved on to so much more coverage in other Australian as well as international newspapers and magazines.

The Enterprise was much more than just another dream dashed by the Depression. The real story is one of two men with a common vision, a story of invention and dogged determination but also volatility and hubris, and it ends complete with a final descent into depression, paranoia, betrayal, controversy and rapaciousness.

The transcripts of the eventual five-week court hearing, which reportedly amounted to a 1300-page document, are long lost too, but because it was a *case d'jour*, the newspapers afforded it extensive coverage, and this material became my third major source, and a vital one in picking the difference between self-interest, urban myth, and fact.

I put it all back together like the proverbial jigsaw puzzle.

The deeper I kept digging, the higher the story reached into the highest levels of Sydney money, power and politics. I was delighted,

as any writer would be, to find a story woven through the same fabric that produced the fascist New Guard's interruption of the Sydney Harbour Bridge opening as well as the design of the bridge itself, or that caused the Poms to devise Bodyline as a way of counter-attacking the perceived cowardliness of Bradman. I was delighted the way so much of the story took place around the very neighbourhood where I live, in Sydney's inner west.

I was further consumed, or rather probably drawn to the story in the first place, because it rekindled an old flame in me. When Malcolm Campbell's son Donald brought his Bluebird to Australia in the early 1960s and took the record to over 400 mph, I was a schoolboy in Melbourne and I was enraptured by what I now know was the fading glory of the last days of classical (wheel-driven/pre-Jet Age) land-speed racing. I saw none of the storm-in-a-teacup controversy attending the event. All I saw was the romance. All I saw was the Bluebird (Malcolm Campbell called all his cars and boats Blue Bird, two words; Donald streamlined it to one). I got a plastic scale model of the car and it could be one of my Rosebuds: encapsulated in these futuristic lines, this manifest form of speed I could hold in my hands was a whole other world where everything was shiny, fast and new. So maybe this book began for me back then, as many as 50 years ago, when an allure was first born. Re-born, the irresistible image of these super-streamlined monsters hurtling out of the misty past grew into a broader fascination for the whole concept of speed and its relationship with 20th-century design, aesthetics and cultural and social history. This comes out in the book too.

Modernism itself is underpinned by the idea of movement, and if I've had any item on an agenda at all, it is to pay overdue credit to Smith and Harkness as Australian pioneers of machine-age design. The quality of their work is self-evident, I think, if you juxtapose in your mind's eye the Enterprise and Sydney Harbour Bridge: the way they harmonise, or 'talk to each other' as modern architects say, is simply stunning.

Otherwise, I could only follow where the cards fell. Malcolm Campbell had to become a character, for instance, because he loomed

so large as the Wizard's great rival in the race for the record. Campbell was the man that anyone who entered the land-speed race ultimately had to beat, and the book contains new material that hopefully makes a small contribution to the growing field of Campbellania.

Australia may have been a colonial backwater, but that was one of the lesser reasons the Enterprise was doomed to failure. It was an age when innovation was the work of wildcat engineers in backyard sheds, when luck and courage liked to dance together, and when Smith and Harkness started their collaboration, before the US stock market crashed towards the end of 1929, all things (still) seemed possible.

Occasionally I've recreated dialogue, or ruminated inside the characters' heads, but only upon the basis of detailed accounts whether newspaper reports or courtroom testimony.

Mostly, imperial measurements are retained. Present-day metric-minded drivers should get enough of the right impression by simply keeping in mind: 200 km/h = 125 mph; 320 km/h = 200 mph; 300 mph = 500 km/h. A handful of other incidental measures are either converted or self-explanatory. 'Horsepower' (hp) has much more meaning to most people than kW anyway. Ninety Mile Beach appears as 90 Mile Beach where, in quotes, it originally appeared that way.

The tables of speed records provided in the endnotes, with the exception of the most major world flying-mile record, are based on my original research and offered not just as an essential adjunct to the text, but also in an attempt to clarify a history that's hazy nowhere more so than on its official honour rolls.