

The Cars in My Life

I am not sure how many motor vehicles I have owned. I would guess double figures. I remember most of them, because in memory almost all¹ have a weight and emotional resonance which, though by no means equivalent to that of a person is nevertheless not entirely different in kind to that of a person.

I don't think this is either surprising or discreditable. The car remembered is proxy for the best and the worst of its owner's life at the time. The first car recalls becoming an adult, making a life with a new wife and a new baby, learning to drive and to maintain a vehicle, travelling up and down Britain between the south of England and the north of Scotland, commuting to the first job, family excursions – and so on. Other stories for other vehicles. There were Cars for family holidays, cars for bush roads and remote beaches, cars for the wilderness, cars for the suburbs.

Of course, these memories come with a shadow. The end of the marriage, life ruefully remembered rather than fearlessly anticipated, the sadness and pain of a child with a difficult life.

Somewhere out beyond cars there were also motorcycles which I will write about separately. Motorcycles for pushing into fear on long straights and well-cambered corners, motorcycles for interludes or illusions of freedom between work and domesticity, motorcycles for freezing in winter and stewing in summer..

Vehicles are, of course, also mortal and mostly with a shorter lifespan than their owners. Most of my vehicles are no doubt scrap – or were scrap, maybe some are now reborn?. I wonder what has happened to the metal in all the defunct vehicles in the world. How much of it wasted. We should see our new car as already scrapped when we are breathing in its new car smell, and not enjoy the car or smell any the less, in fact enjoy it more because we don't

¹ *The exceptions are vehicles I owned for a very short time. For example, I believe, but am not sure, that I have owned a VW station wagon, and I am slightly more confident that I have owned a Renault 12 sedan, but remember hardly anything about either of them. See below.*

deny their impermanence and thus contaminate our pleasure with fear, according [to the Buddhist teaching](#). I am unskilled both in acknowledging mortality and in appreciating what is mortal while it is here.

I was only a modestly competent amateur mechanic. I changed my own oil and filter, at least until the last couple of years, and for a time did basic tune-ups, replacing plugs and points and adjusting timing, until fuel injection and electronic engine management made those tasks unnecessary.

I don't have my own pictures of most of the cars, so have inserted images found on the web. Most of them are also hyperlinks to the results of a search for the vehicle model on Google Images, so that control-clicking will lead you to lots more pictures.

The First Cars I Remember

My parents' Morris Minor Station Wagon in Ceylon is the first, followed by my Grandmother's Hillman Imp in Scotland, and the Volkswagen Beetle, borrowed from her brother, in which Debbie and I toured California after working at a summer camp for blind children in the late Sixties. The first two pictures below (Morris and Imp) are taken from the web. The third was taken by Debbie a few weeks ago by the side of the road in Ainslie and is a bit more decrepit than the car I remember and not quite the right colour.



The Morris Minor and the Hillman Imp are both classic British mass market cars from a time when the British still made mass market cars. The last time I visited Sri Lanka, in 2006, there were still a few Morris Minors on the roads although I can't find any in the photographs I took at the time – most of the cars there are Japanese.

The picture below is either our Morris Minor or one belonging to my father's sister Dilly and her husband, taken maybe in the late 50s. The small

boy is my cousin [Terry Williamson](#). The man who is leaning forward and blowing his nose looks like my father.



[Renault 4](#)

From Wikipedia:

“The car was launched at a time when several decades of economic stagnation were giving way to [growing prosperity](#) and surging car ownership in France. The first million cars were produced by 1 February 1966, less than four and a half years after launch,^[3] a commercial success for Renault because of the timing of its introduction and the merits of its design. It was exceptionally spacious for its size, and although regarded as a small estate car when launched, it is now seen as the first [hatchback](#) family car.”

I don't remember the circumstances in which we bought the Renault. It was in England, before we came to Australia. The car was second hand, but not too old and still clean inside, it gave us few mechanical problems, used little petrol and was cheap to service. My own sense of it is very much in line with the declared intentions of its makers and its achieved reputation. It was a very practical car, roomy for its size, economical, its suspension anything but plush but good on rough roads. It had some of the rugged virtues of the Citroen 2CV, but more comfort. You can look at a few contemporary commercials on YouTube. [Here](#) is one which emphasises its appeal to families (for whom it now seems tiny) and [here](#) another which claims it was

very much at home in Africa. Both approaches are common in advertisements for SUVs in the 21st century.

The Renault 4 had an unusual gear lever, sticking out from under the bonnet, which took a bit of getting used to as you had to push it in and out as well as rotating it. However, this feature like the rest of the car was an example of simple and efficient design.

I remember driving the Renault from Southampton to Scotland and back, a route with far fewer motorways then than now, and taking it to Stonehenge and the New Forest and Cornwall. We regretted having to sell it when we left England for Australia in 1972.

My father later owned a couple of Renault 4s. His were older than ours. The floor on one of them was heavily rusted, probably by the mixture of salt and sand used to defrost Scottish roads in winter, so you could glimpse the ground rushing by between your legs as you sat in the passenger seat.



[Ford Cortina](#)

Our first car in Australia was a Ford Cortina. I assume it was an Australian model as described in the Wikipedia link. We bought it second hand in the early 70s, so I assume it was a Mark II model. I remember it as being light beige or cream in colour, something like the image below. It was the most powerful car I had ever owned (or, possibly, driven) at the time and the most smoothly suspended, so while I regretted the loss of the Renault on aesthetic grounds I was far from inconsolable.

The Cortina was totalled in a rear end collision on the southbound lane on Commonwealth Avenue Bridge in Canberra. When the car in front of me braked abruptly I was able to pull up in time but the car behind me struck the Cortina strongly enough in the rear to push it forward into the car in front and do it some damage. The view ahead of me when I stepped out of the car would have looked much the same as in [this Google Streetview image](#). The National Library on the left was built then and I don't think the bridge has been significantly altered.

I have since wondered whether I could have swerved to avoid the car in front. I wasn't a very experienced driver at the time. In any event, I wasn't held responsible for the damage to the Cortina and we received a full insurance payout for the car, although nothing for the whiplash injury which troubled me for a few months afterwards.



Several cars, some possibly imagined rather than owned.

We may or may not have owned two or more cars after the Cortina and before the Volkswagen Kombi Camper described below, certainly a very large Ford Station Wagon and (possibly) a Renault 12 sedan and (very unlikely) one of those dumpy looking VW Station Wagons that were contemporary with the Beetle. Going on the dates, the Ford could have been an XR, or more likely an XP Falcon Wagon – the image below is of an XP and I think our car may have had a side panel in a different colour as it does. The XP was an American sized and styled car. I reversed it into a tree on a picnic somewhere outside Canberra, doing significant damage. I think it may have been uneconomical to repair.



I don't remember much about the [Renault 12](#). I am not even sure if it existed. The main reason I suspect it might have is that for years, whenever I have seen a Renault 12 the thought has arisen that I once owned one of those. I am quite confident that I never actually owned the [VW](#) , but maybe I thought about buying one once and inspected it and lusted after it and have blended that with ownership, memory and imagination being as they are near neighbours.

[Mazda 1300](#)

The first new car we ever bought, and the last for a long time afterwards, was a Mazda 1300. I remember it took us a while to remove all of the plastic protective film from the cabin. As the Wikipedia link indicates, it was a model in the long-lived and very diverse Mazda Familia series that was built for nearly 40 years, between 1964 and 2003. As the image below indicates, it was a similar style of car to the Renault 4. Ours was the same shade of blue as the car in the picture, but I rather think had four doors. It was technically sophisticated compared to previous cars I had owned and I had some trouble working out what was what under the bonnet, although I think it still had a carburettor rather than fuel injection.

Many of the videos of Mazda 1300 wagons on YouTube show them [doing burnouts](#), an activity which suggests that the car still has an afterlife being modified by young petrolheads. I couldn't find any advertisements. We drove it to the Snowy Mountains and the south coast of NSW. I remember getting stuck in sand on a bush road in the Mimosa Rocks National Park, probably on the Cowdroys Road somewhere around [here](#).

We sold the car to fund the purchase of the Volkswagon Kombi Van which is described below. I believe that we were paid \$1600, by a purchaser who seemed indignant that we would not accept less. I thought at the time that we might have sold it too cheap and perhaps should not have sold it at all, as we needed two cars and the Mazda would have made a good second car.



[Kombi Camper](#)

I wonder if any photographs survive. Debbie has a suitcase of old photographs at her house, which I have already been through, but not in search of Kombi images, or indeed of any other cars. There are plenty to be found on Google Images, under “[Volkswagen Type 2](#)” or “[Volkswagen Kombi Camper](#)”, and on internet car sales sites. The nearest I have found in appearance to our family vehicle, as I remember it, is this:



The colour scheme is wrong, ours was a different shade of blue, but otherwise it was similar although without fancy speakers below the rear seat. I was flabbergasted to find out how much this vehicle is selling for - \$29,500 – and that this price is not out of the ordinary for reconditioned Kombi Campers which are often more than 30 years old. A baby boomer thing, I suppose. I did some mechanical work on ours, getting as far as a rudimentary tuneup, but found the engine hard to access.

We took it on camping holidays to Queensland with my brother Alan and his then girlfriend, and to Tasmania, where it rained incessantly and Zoe, I think it was, fell out of the top bunk in the middle of the night, apparently without hurting herself. Its strong emotional appeal for me had to do, I think, with the fact that it was at one and the same time a family car, and a hippy car, thus reconciling aspects of my character that might at times have been in conflict. It was also good off road, with high ground clearance and the full weight of the engine bearing down on the drive wheels at the back.

I was responsible for the death of the Kombi. I pulled out onto Copland Drive from Clancy Street in Evatt (I think that is where it was) without looking to my left and was hit just behind the driver's seat. [This](#) is the spot in Google Maps. Unfortunately for the other driver, he was drunk at the time, so I avoided full responsibility, even though I doubt he could have avoided the accident even if sober. One or more of the children was in the car at the time but we all escaped serious injury. The Kombi was judged a write off and our insurance paid out, but I think it may actually have been repaired because I later thought I saw it around town. Debbie remembers going to pick up our things from the car in the wrecker's yard.

[Debbie's Alfa](#)

I don't remember what model it was. The link above is to information about the Alfa Giulia, which it might have been. It was certainly nice to drive, but I didn't get to drive it very often as Debbie used it to go to and from work. She remembers that we sold it to buy a new engine for "your car" – ie my car – which I think was the Holden Shuttle described below.

[Holden Shuttle](#)

Also known as the Isuzu Fargo, as you will see from the link. This classic "people mover" was our replacement as a family car for the Kombi. I was a little surprised to discover that Debbie regarded it as "my" car, probably because I respected rather than loved it, finding it a little more powerful and economical than the Kombi but not so good off road and somewhat lacking

in soul. We put in an aftermarket rear-facing rear seat and a new rear window that could be opened and I built a false floor at the back that allowed it to be turned into a camper. Ella tells me, and Zoe confirms, that its numberplate was YOB 253, memorable because [the 253](#) was a famous V8 engine and hence likely to be loved by a “yobbo”². They also remember that they named it Blanche, after the character in the Golden Girls. I was never that familiar with it as I have never given my cars names.



It blew a head gasket somewhere in the Victorian Alps, requiring the sacrifice of Debbie’s Alfa, but lasted for quite a few years after that. I am not sure what happened to it in the end – I guess we sold it, or maybe Jake took it over.

[Leyland P76](#)

People – men in particular – laugh. The P76 was Australia’s equivalent of the Ford Edsel, but it was a good car cars (as was the Edsel, I have somewhere read). I can’t remember what led me to buy my first one, but it soon turned out to have a moribund gearbox. I bought the second for spares from someone who picked me up when my gearbox failed by the roadside. He must have thought he had won the lottery, finding a buyer for his dead car. Sven, the Swedish Volvo specialist who lived just up the road, fitted the replacement gearbox for a good price, but didn’t seem keen to do more work on the car and I had a strong suspicion that more work would be needed.

² See [here](#) for some definitions of the word “yobbo”.



My p76 was a V8, the only one I have ever owned, so it had plenty of power, but the engine tended to overheat. I remember a cloud of steam from a split hose while descending Macquarie Pass on the way to a weekend at Shoalhaven Heads, but also a fine drive up to Charlotte's Pass on which it handled a 1000 meter climb I had done many times before with more aplomb than any previous car I had owned, or any subsequent car until my current Vitara (see below).

They were large cars, so two of them took up a lot of room and I think I sold them for scrap or spare parts, after we returned home from a long overseas trip. You still see the occasional P76 on the road, always impeccably maintained so they must have a cult following, which they deserve.

[Renault 16](#)

My French cars all had character, as they are supposed to, and I remember them all with affection. The Renault 16 was pleasing to look upon, economical on petrol (particularly compared to most Australian cars), had a cleverly designed interior, and was lovely to drive. A lot of my cars were bought cheap and sometimes turned out to have mechanical problems. The Renault had a problem with, I think, one of its drive shafts, or perhaps its suspension system, which would have cost a largish proportion of its original

purchase price to fix, but it remained drivable despite this so I kept it for a while, perhaps until the resulting noises became intolerable or perhaps until I decided to buy something else.



The paint job on my car wasn't quite as bad as you see above but it was on its way in that direction. I also remember torn seats.

[Mitsubishi Pajero](#)

I was about to write that it is an urban myth that “Pajero” is slang for “wanker” in Spanish, but discovered that it is true. [Here](#) is a link to an interesting article. The Pajero was my first 4WD. As a bushwalker and pseudo-greenie, I had always felt some pressure to disapprove of 4WD vehicles and to regard their owners as members of a hostile tribe, but had secretly coveted one, despite doubting that I could ever be comfortable as a member of the tribe. Greatly to his credit, my friend Ihian was expelled from the Jeep Club of NSW for denouncing the unenlightened views of his fellow-members.

The Pajero was a first generation 4 cylinder model with a 2.6 litre [Astron](#) engine, the same engine that powered one of Jacob's cars, a Mitsubishi Sigma, and Quillan's first car which Linda bought him a month ago, a 1994 Mitsubishi Magna with all the trimmings (cruise control, air con, music system – not a bad first car). The Pajero cost around \$17,000 from a car dealer in Woden, the most I had ever paid for a car, had done around 90,000 kms, and had previously been owned by a mining company, despite which it

was in good condition and hadn't seen much rough use. I looked on line for a photograph but the marque remains in production so almost all the photos on Google Images are of more recent models. Then I looked at my digital photo library and was delighted to find the picture below (which, like the others, is linked to a page of Google Images).



I believe it was taken at Round Mountain in the Snowy Mountains, a little way down the dirt track which leaves the Tooma road just below the right angle bend it makes in the middle of [this map](#).

The Pajero was one of the first 4wd Vehicles designed to be competent and comfortable on the bitumen as well as on dirt roads or off roads. Mine hardly ever went off-road, but it did allow me to follow pretty much any road with confidence. I remember digging it out of mud occasionally, and getting bogged on a beach in Northern New South Wales and rescued by a grey nomad couple in a larger vehicle who were nice about it so my humiliation was within bounds. Eventually I sold it to Jake and he had it for a while before also selling it, to his later regret.

[Mazda 929](#)

I think of the Mazda as being Zoe and Ella's car, because we passed it on to them (I thought sold but Zoe says gifted) and they ran it for a while. Zoe thinks of it as hers but acknowledges that she may have shared it with Ella.

She remembers its unusual recessed chrome door handles, just visible in the photograph, and that she frequently ran out of petrol because she couldn't bear to put in more than \$5 worth at a time. I think it was the car that Debbie drove into a large pool of water in on a dirt road somewhere near [Termeil Lake](#). I pulled it out, probably with the Pajero. Water came in under the doors, but it cleaned up ok. I remember it as a reliable rather than an exciting car.



Ella comments:

“Ahh, the red Mazda, or "Rose" as we briefly tried to nick name her (the white van being "Blanch") in honor of the Golden Girls which was popular in the house at the time. The nick name didn't stick. I don't remember buying the car, I think we just inherited it when Mum upgraded to the Subaru. The word reliable doesn't sit well with me, probably because I was driving it when the head gasket blew for the last time. I was driving back from the river on a very hot summer's day. Mercifully I was ALMOST home, having just turned off William Hovell and half way up Coulter Drive. I think that it may have had a "choke". My first and I suspect only car that will have a choke.”

And Zoe:

“Els' recollections of the 929 (aka Rose) are excellent. (Can you believe The Golden Girls was one of our favourite shows?) It was certainly not sold to us, but gifted (you were more indulgent parents than you think). I remember the choke too - it got a workout in the Canberra winter. I feel the

accompanying picture is not quite right, so I will have a look in my old photos and see if I can find a better one”.

[Debbie's Subaru Liberty](#)

This model of Subaru is called the “Liberty” only in Australia – in the rest of the world it is the “Legacy”, a name apparently not used by Subaru in Australia in deference to the Veterans’ Organisation. We bought it for Debbie to use in commuting to work when the Mazda became unreliable. A two wheel drive version, second hand but with relatively low mileage and a long warranty, it felt like a solid and well-made car and I always enjoyed driving it when I got the chance. It may have been our first car with cruise control. Subarus are popular in Canberra, which fact could be used as the starting point for either flattering or unflattering reflections about Subarus, and about Canberra.

The photograph below is the right colour and body shape. I like its angular lines better than the later models in the linked Google Images page. Debbie kept the car for a few years and then passed it on to Ella and Kirk, later replacing it with another Subaru.



[Toyota Troop Carrier](#)

There is no separate Wikipedia entry for Troop Carriers, aka Troopies – technically it is a 70 series Landcruiser. The nickname certainly isn't exclusive to Australia (see below) but it probably has most currency over here, where the success of this and other varieties of Landcruiser after WWII came at the expense of the British-made Landrover (regarded as unreliable) and the American Jeep (never really caught on). You see a lot of Troopies in Central Australia, coated in red dust and driven by miners and graziers and aboriginal people and public servants and grey nomads and tourists on the adventures of their lives.

Troopies are associated with adventure in other countries too. The following is from an essay by an NGO representative in the Sudan:

*“Body bags were stored under the back seat of the Toyota Land Cruiser ‘Troop Carrier’ – a large and highly prized car known throughout Darfur for its speed, agility and long desert range. A car used by aid workers and coveted by killers. Take off the roof, attach a machine gun and you have a ‘technical’ – a makeshift instrument of war capable of striking deep into the continent”.*³

I bought mine before retirement, planning to strike deep into the continent, and did use it for one cross country return trip to Perth, with Linda on the way over via Adelaide and by myself on the way back via Alice Springs. It came with a serious bullbar and driving lights, dual fuel tanks, a built in hot shower, a large water tank mounted under the rear chassis and a couple of CB radios which I never learned to use. There was no machine gun, but the idea of cutting off the roof and attaching seems entirely plausible.

The photograph below shows Linda behind the wheel, somewhere between Canberra and Perth.

³ Quoted from “The Mission” by Tom Bamforth in *Granta*, 117, August 2011.



On the road, it felt underpowered, bouncy on corrugations and unwieldy around corners – maybe later models had more speed and agility or maybe expectations are lower in Darfur - but the large diesel engine was industrially reliable and the suspension setup and massive truck tyres more than equal to the worst terrain. I pointed it wherever I wanted to go and never had any trouble. Fuel economy was mediocre and as fuel prices rose and it became clear to me that only a small proportion of my driving would ever be on anything other than bitumen, I fell out of love with the Troopie...

[Peugeot 405](#)

...and soon entered into an illicit relationship with the 405 – owning two cars was a gross financial indulgence. I bought it for commuting between Tuross and Canberra, a task which for which it was well suited, being perhaps the nicest car to drive I have ever owned. With only a 2 litre 4 cylinder motor it gave way a lot in straight line speed to cars with V6 or V8 power but it cornered brilliantly and always felt easy and smooth and comfortable.

It also had a good stereo system with a plug for my iPod, so I was able to turn up the music as I pushed it through the corners across the farmland between Queanbeyan and Braidwood or through the forests [up or down Clyde Mountain](#).



Its previous owner had given it loving care over many years so it was in beautiful condition. Its service record was written on the wall of his impeccable garage (tools hanging on wall boards with their outline drawn in behind them). He had taken it to [Alpine Motors](#) in Woden which specialises in European cars, and I continued the care by taking it there as well, although it soon acquired a layer of dust which would have saddened him.

It had some trivial but annoying mechanical problem the details of which I forget, and which the proprietor of Alpine Motors persuaded me not to have fixed because doing so would be too expensive. Ah yes, I remember – a speedometer needle which wobbled in a certain range. Fixing this apparently required removing the entire dashboard and much of the rear of the engine compartment.

I eventually sold it, and the Troopie, at the around the same time, both to appreciative purchasers but both perhaps too cheap, to fund the purchase of my last and current vehicle....

...[The Grand Vitara](#)



Pictured above in its garage (the first of my vehicles ever to live in such luxury), and topped by a kayak as it often is, the Vitara is another vehicle with other names in other countries. I am not too keen on “Vitara”, which sounds to me like a health drink or a tasteless biscuit, and “Grand” is of course ridiculous, but “Escudo”, its primary name in other countries according to the Wikipedia article, isn’t a whole lot better, to my ears suggesting coinage of small value.

However, I love the car. It has a small and economical turbo diesel engine with a modest maximum speed but a lot of torque around practical driving speeds (say 80-120kph) so you rarely have to change out of 5th gear. Its suspension provides a good balance between the requirements of smooth (metalled) and bumpy (unmetalled) roads. It corners and rides well in all road conditions – this being the essential virtue of the SUV. As an SUV, it is more competent off-road than many of its competitors, particularly because it has low-range gearing, indispensable on steep slopes or rough terrain. Admittedly its ground clearance could be improved, being no better than just adequate off-road. But the vehicle is also fine on long motorway drives,

twisty-would-be-rally-driver-driver-friendly bitumen roads, and around town. Its seats are comfortable and it provides the raised driving position that I have liked since I first experienced it in the Kombi Camper. It has a good sound system which allows an iPod to be connected and effective heating and air-conditioning – although Linda would demur at the last claim, in my view because she has never mastered the controls of its “Climate Control System”.

Be careful what you say about my car. Does this sound like a love song?

The Vitara is undoubtedly an SUV, which of course means it is politically incorrect. It is a well-known fact that SUVs are responsible for global warming and the increasing incidence of obesity. But – hah! In your face, Bob Brown! - it is actually more economical than many of the vehicles driven by people whose lips curl or whose brows furrow at the mention of SUVs.

It was expensive, in straight dollar terms easily the most expensive car I have owned although maybe not so if you allow for inflation, and its service costs are above average. But it has a five year warranty and very good fuel economy at a time of rising fuel prices, and everything still works.

A few concluding thoughts

I used to save money, or think I was doing so, by buying cars cheaply and working on them, doing oil changes and other minor maintenance, but with increasing prosperity I stopped doing these things and started paying others to do them. More recently, in retirement, I have thought it would be good to start doing some of that again, but have been discouraged by the greater mechanical complexity of modern vehicles.

I have been reminded of my extensive experience of purchasing cheap cars when accompanying Linda on the purchase of Quillan’s car. There is always a risk. You can of course have the car examined by professionals, but that costs an increasing proportion of the cost of the car as the car gets cheaper so for cheap cars, seems hardly worth it. Being able to make sound judgements

in this area, and avoid being duped, is a component of socially constructed masculinity. I had some difficulties getting Quillan's car, which was purchased in the ACT, properly registered in NSW. It had to be inspected, and the mechanic who was inspecting it initially refused to approve it because the engine was producing a lot of smoke. I felt bad about this because I had recommended that Linda buy the car. She wondered whether the person selling her the car, a co-worker, had duped us by driving the car hard to burn off the smoke before we inspected it.

As it turned out, all this anxiety turned out to be unwarranted. The car passed its re-inspection without smoking too much after I had changed the grade of its engine oil and used some additives (remedies discovered through internet search). This behaviour was entirely consistent with what the vendor had told us about the car, that it had an old engine needing regular attention to its oil level.

Major repairs cost. I haven't had too many. I did once buy a new engine for a car, but it was Jacob's car and he was paying for half of it, as I remember. Other than that, work on brakes and suspension, one blown head gasket, a clutch or two. No need to worry about any of that. The glass is already broken.

I will probably drive the Vitara into the ground. Or maybe the diesel will run out first. Or I will die first.