



WIZARD of OZ

***SPEED,
MODERNISM
and the LAST RIDE
of WIZARD SMITH***

NORMAN 'WIZARD' SMITH

CLINTON WALKER

WIZARD
of OZ

Clinton Walker is a writer Sydney's *Sun-Herald* has called 'our best chronicler of Australian grass-roots culture'. An art school drop-out and recovering rock critic, he was born in Bendigo in 1957, and is the author of seven books, including: *Inner City Sound*, his 1981 debut on the Australian punk uprising, finally back in print in 2005; *Highway to Hell* (1994), his internationally acclaimed, best-selling biography of Bon Scott; *Football Life* (1998), a personal history of minor league Australian Rules; *Buried Country* (2000), the highly regarded secret history of Aboriginal hillbilly music; and *Golden Miles*, originally published in 2005 and updated, through Wakefield, in 2009.

'Arguably,' as John Birmingham put it, 'the country's best post-punk writer,' Walker is an historian who finds stories where others don't even bother to look, in our own backyard yesterday. For ABC-TV, he was the presenter of late night live music show *Studio 22* and co-writer of the hit 2001 Oz-rockumentary series *Long Way to the Top*. For SBS, he wrote the documentary film version of his book *Buried Country*. He produced soundtrack CDs for all three shows, and for the expanded 2005 American edition of *Inner City Sound*. "Feverish in his search for motifs and connections," as John Clare put it in the *Sun-Herald*, 'he packs more detail and reaches wider than his rivals.'

Walker lives with his family in Sydney and is currently working on a sequel to *Buried Country*, and a graphic novel about Lionel Rose.



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CLINTON WALKER



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**THERE CAN
BE NO EXACT
ANALYSIS OF
FEAR, OR ANY
COMPLETE
ASSESSMENT
OF COURAGE**

ALAN MOOREHEAD

Mediterranean Front

1 9 4 2

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.

SEVEN MILE BEACH

The sand underfoot was sappy. When the short man lifted his tennis shoe it left a gloppy little crater. The beach at Gerringong had been lashed by storms for a couple of days now – it was the last day of spring, 30 November 1929, a Saturday, late morning, low tide – and the sun only impetuously peeked out between angry clouds. The wind gusted and the surf crashed onto the shore.

‘It’s terrible,’ said the first man, looking at the other, who was taller, fair.

The roar of wind and water made hearing difficult, and Harkness cupped his ear. ‘Hmnn,’ he nodded.

Both men looked northwards up along the line, the narrow track of sand that was supposed to be much broader and smoothed by wind and water and baked firm by the sun, but which was thin and wet and lumpy, and scarred with crevices and littered with debris, and still under siege from wild seas and the swirly skies.

‘What do you think?’ Norman ‘Wizard’ Smith asked Harkness.

‘Well, we’ve got to do it,’ said Harkness. ‘It’s not the best, it’s pretty rough I know. But it’ll have to do.’

‘Yes, I suppose it will.’

Smith grimaced, squinted at something in the middle distance. He sighed. ‘Very well then, let’s go.’

Harkness smiled and waved to the team watching from the distance of a camp protected among the dunes. He gave them the thumbs up and they cheered into action, hastening to complete the car’s preparation.



Wizard Smith and Don Harkness were at Gerringong’s Seven Mile Beach, a couple of hours south of Sydney, to co-drive an assault on

the Australian all-out speed record. They had built for the purpose a car called the Anzac, a hulking great hybrid speed special that had a huge Rolls-Royce V12 Eagle aero-engine dropped into a huge Cadillac chassis and was encased in a huge, golden streamlined body. The car had big thin wire wheels, a raked and slotted radiator cowling and a modest little tailfin. She was the very shape of Australia's ideal tomorrow.

The 1920s, the boom before the bust of the Great Depression, are sometimes referred to as the Roaring Twenties, sometimes the Jazz Age – sometimes the Age of Speed. The soundtrack to the era was indeed the new American jazz, which seemed to syncopate so well with the fast tempo and disjointed textures of the modern city. But nothing caught the zeitgeist quite like land-speed racing. In the 1920s, everything was a race. They were racing luxury liners across the Atlantic and they were racing dirigible airships over the North Pole. In 1927, American Charles Lindbergh became the first man to fly solo non-stop across the Atlantic, and Briton Henry Segrave proved it was possible to drive over 200 mph. In 1928, Australia's own Charles Kingsford Smith, the much-adored Smithy, led the first flight across the Pacific. These were the new heroes of the age. High speed was high fashion. Men like Segrave, Parry Thomas, Malcolm Campbell, Kaye Don – what names they had! – took their lives into their hands every time they climbed aboard these monstrous, thundering, super-streamlined mounts and rode them rocket-like across marshy, undulating beaches in an attempt to – what? – get to the other side of the sky? Touch the face of God?

The bounds of the physical world were receding. Freud was a journey to the centre of the mind; sheer, pure speed, like Einstein, was a journey to the edge of time and space itself. This was just before the 1930s' birth of comic book heroes like Flash Gordon, Buck Rogers and Superman, the offspring of the second great age of science fiction. Cars like the Golden Arrow, Blue Bird and Anzac were examples of science fact, men like Wizard Smith the new knights in shining, streamlined armour.

At Seven Mile Beach, the Wizard and his partner Don Harkness weren't tackling any world records. Not just yet. Neither car nor beach

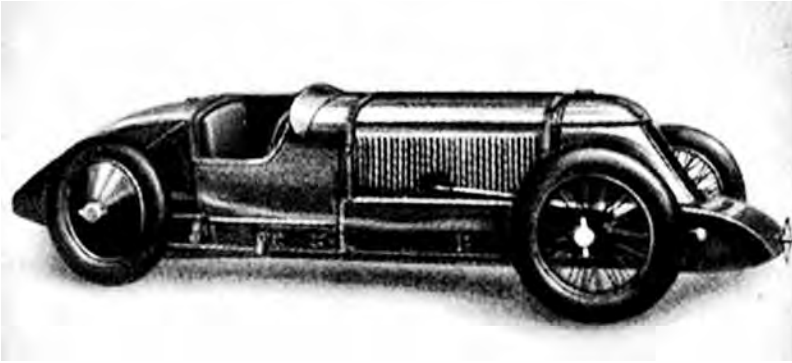
were up to that, and were never meant to be: the Anzac was just the first step in a grander plan, the sort of testbed designed to take some local or lesser records on the way to building a second car that would be the real world-beater. For Smith and Harkness, both approaching 40 after equally long and distinguished racing careers, this was to be their triumphant last hurrah.

Gerringong was the best natural beach track anyone had yet found in Australia. Before the Bonneville saltpan in Utah became the mecca of land-speed racing in the 1930s, drivers sought stretches of beach all over the world, looking for the longest, straightest, flattest, hardest stretch of them all. You need a lot of straight line to wind up to top speed. And, after covering the measured distance, you need a lot of straight line to slow down too. Do this in opposite directions within an hour to neutralise any wind advantage, and the result was the average speed of the two runs.

When Major-cum-Sir Henry de Hane Segrave drove the Golden Arrow to his 231 mph record at Daytona in 1929, it established the Florida beach as the centre of speed racing, even if its 23 straight miles were unfortunately bisected by a pier. The Golden Arrow was like a giant flying chisel powered by a 930-hp Napier Lion aero-engine, and perhaps all that prevented it from going a lot faster was the shortcomings of the Daytona track.

Smith and Harkness knew the 360 hp Anzac couldn't crack the 200 mph barrier on the best course in the world with a raging tailwind, but they were confident she was capable of beating the world's ten-mile record, which then stood at 133 mph, set by a French team driving a Voisin at the Monthelery circuit near Paris in 1927.

So they set their plan, in stages: after taking the Anzac to Gerringong, where they would firstly get the Australian flying-mile record – which, standing at 107 mph, belonged to none other than Harkness himself, and was easily within the Anzac's grasp – they would then move on to Ninety Mile Beach in far-north New Zealand to beat the French record. And then – the larger plan continued – the team would move on to build a nominal Anzac II, which they would take straight to New Zealand to tackle the outright world flying-mile record.



Voisin ten mile record car

Smith, who had reconnoitred Ninety Mile Beach on a trip across the Tasman, was strongly of the opinion it was a better course than Daytona – not that he'd ever actually seen Daytona. Meantime, Harkness at least was obviously familiar enough with Seven Mile Beach, because it was there, in 1925, that he became the first man in Australia to officially top the ton, when he got his 107 mph record.

Wizard Smith's record-breaking background was largely over long distances – he was the king of intercity racing – but at Gerringong, in the Anzac, he was in the driver's seat and Harkness, who designed and built the car, was his 'riding mechanic'. Under the headline 'Men Who Put Australia on the Speed Map', sporting weekly the *Referee* said, 'Smith looks no Wizard/Bowler hat, giggle and weak heart/Harkness genius.' *Referee* motoring editor Norman Ellison wrote of the two men, 'They have three points in common: apparently they don't know fear; they do know their job; and they are both ashen-faced when racing against the clock.'

Smith was, well, the Wizard, the Smith on the ground to rival Australia's great golden god of the skies, Charles Kingsford Smith. 'A chap in his early 40s,' wrote Ellison, 'of average height, thick build, with a corporation; a plump face and a rather pallid complexion. His voice periodically breaks into falsetto like a growing schoolboy, he has a funny little diffident laugh and wears a bowler hat. And to round off the mystery, he has a weak heart.'

Like the Wizard, Harkness too had a weak heart – for both men, a legacy of having suffered rheumatic fever – and he was also renowned as a fearless driver. But that was where the similarities ended. If Smith was admired for his cool composure, Harkness was a unit that ran hot. ‘The antithesis of his partner,’ as Norman Ellison put it, Harkness was a handsome, dashing Beau Brummel, tall with crisp features, fair hair and piercing blue eyes. ‘A lean, incisive chap radiating energy,’ said Ellison, ‘and of an over-sensitive temperament.’ In his wildest dreams, Harkness might have been an Australian Howard Hughes; he was even then, after all, working on Australia’s first aero-engine, the Harkness Hornet, and collecting women and films.

When the quietly determined Wizard decided, then, in early 1929, to mount a bid on the flying-mile record as a sort of career capper and he and his manager Jack Mostyn approached Harkness to help them, Harkness was more than eager to sign on.

So it was then on that stormy Saturday at Seven Mile Beach that the team of mechanics tending the Anzac in the shelter of the dunes watched Smith and Harkness poke around the shoreline in the distance, and cheered when Harkness finally gave them the thumbs up. It was a run!

‘The Gerringong beach is suitable for moderate speeds only,’ Smith ‘told’ the *Sunday Times*, the paper he himself worked for, ‘but he anticipates an Australasian record of between 120 and 150 mph, depending on the day and the condition of the beach. He believes that on the 90 Mile Beach he can maintain the new car’s maximum speed for ten miles with safety.’

The *Times* was full of puff:

These attempts by Smith will be more than mere speed performances. They will demonstrate that Australian engineering skill ranks with the world’s best; that with an engine adapted to the immediate needs by an Australian engineer, with an Australian designed body, on an Australasian beach, and with an Australian at the wheel, we can challenge the world.



The mechanics scurried to their posts to finish final preparations. The Anzac team numbered maybe a dozen: Smith, his wife Harriet, Harkness, Mostyn, cartage contractor Ernie Swadling, a couple of mechanics, plus representatives from tyre and oil companies. They were joined by officials from the Sydney Bicycle and Motor Club, who were setting up to time the runs. There was a marquee erected in the dunes, and a couple of thousand spectators wandering all over the place.

At best, at low tide in mild weather, Seven Mile Beach offered a fairly wide, firm, straight and level surface between Beecroft Head in the south and Black Head to the north. But when it storms, as it had been doing now for a few days, sand from the beach is washed out by the wild surf and re-deposited as underwater sandbars, which in turn quell the incoming surf, which means the sand on the shore isn't smoothed by the waves.

The officials set up a mile-long gate around the middle of the course where the surface was best. The gathering throng watched the mechanics warm up the engine, check the tyres and, crucially, change the spark plugs, all 24 of them, two per cylinder, from soft plugs to hard racing ones. Smith and Harkness climbed aboard, Smith in his trusty leather flying helmet, Harkness with his cap inverted, both behind goggles. They huddled behind the dashboard, Smith peering through the tiny half-moon windscreen on his side, Harkness keeping an eye on the instrument panel. The crowd lost sight of the receding dot as it taxied south. The men wore no seatbelts. Many drivers survived crashes precisely because they were thrown clear of tumbling cars. At the southern extremity of the beach, the Anzac turned around and began her approach to the starting line.

All the spectators could do was listen out for the distant buzz of the engine. They heard the sound building up, getting louder, its pitch increasing. They saw a screaming, blurry golden blade, which, before they could blink, whooshed past. And then – it seemed to waver! It dipped and took off, launching into the air! Afterwards, none of the

officials or spectators could agree on exactly what they'd seen. Some, the more fanciful perhaps, said they saw the car struck by a bolt of lightning; others thought it was a gust of wind that picked the car up, or a ramp of sand that slingshot it, causing it to jump. But whatever the reason, most agreed, the car took off, flew into the air, and as the engine screamed louder in that moment with no ground under its wheels, it seemed to teeter on some sort of razor's edge ... and then, somehow, in a moment's airless silence, it was carried back to Earth and wriggled and fishtailed and righted itself onto a steady bead and then, in another instant, started slowing down.

When Smith and Harkness returned to the camp and got out of the car and peeled off their headwear, they were indeed ashen-faced. How close had they come to meeting their maker? Smith was apologetic. 'No more racing today,' he said.



The next morning, Sunday, the first day of summer, conditions on the beach were no better, but Smith and Harkness knew they had to go out regardless.

It had been raining at dawn. By mid-morning, the rain did seem to be blowing away. Again, the officials marked out a course that made the best of the bad situation. Again, the team gave the car a last once-over.

Again, the crowd watched as the car built up speed towards the starting line. But this time as it flashed past it smoothly proceeded to and crossed the finish line. The howl of the engine tapered off as the car slowed and turned around to come back to base.

The officials confirmed a new Australian all-out record of 128 mph. After they'd almost killed themselves the day before, it seemed almost anticlimactic.

The *Sunday Times* crowed, '*Times*' Motor Editor Smashes Another Record'.

'This is without doubt the finest speed performance ever made in Australia,' said the *Times*, 'and speed men who witnessed the attempt

were unanimous that if the car had anything like a track to run on its performance would have been even more sensational.’

Harkness said the rev counter indicated they’d hit as high as 142 mph.

‘I’m convinced that Don has built me the fastest machine in Australia,’ Smith beamed to reporters. ‘I’ll guarantee the old bus has more speed than anything on land or above it, or in the water.

‘I’m looking forward to our next job,’ Smith went on, with January 15 set as the Anzac’s date with destiny in New Zealand, ‘and then finally the big job.’

Harkness told the *Sunday Times*: ‘I’m more than satisfied with the present car, for nothing in it has failed me. I can start the big job with confidence. At Gerringong I expected, perhaps, 120 mph with the beach in such a state. We got 142 mph. In New Zealand we might get 170 mph. I’ll guarantee 150 mph.’

There was excited talk even then of the big job aiming at 300 mph. ‘This is no idle dream,’ said the *Sunday Times*, ‘as both Smith and Harkness are known to get what they go after.’



After celebrating Christmas, Norman sent Harkness a telegram just prior to their departure for New Zealand: ‘Triumph with car health prosperity new year success Smith,’ it read.

Virtually as he was walking out the door, the Wizard declared to the staff of the *Sunday Times*, ‘Never fear, I will break the world’s record no matter what the conditions are, and, if the gods are good, I will smash it to bits.’

In fact, the Seven Mile Beach record just won would transpire to be virtually the last thing to go right for the two men for the next two or three years.

Part One
ANZAC SPIRIT



TODAY, SPEED IS THE
CRY OF OUR ERA, AND
GREATER SPEED ONE
OF THE GOALS OF
T O M O R R O W

NORMAN BEL GEDDES

1932

FAST FORWARD

Norman Leslie Smith and Donald James Harkness were both born in Sydney in 1890. Both grew up on farms in what is now Sydney's far-north-western fringe, and both emerged as archetypal products of their generation, coming of age in thrall to the spirit of the age, what Robert Hughes in *The Shock of the New* called the 'millenarian promise and magical freshness of early modernism'.

If their lives had flashed before their eyes on that stormy Saturday at Gerringong just before Christmas 1929, what would they have seen?

For Australia, the new millennium and a new national life began with Federation in January 1901. Some Australians heard just as clearly a more universal calling: 'At the turn of the twentieth century,' John Leinhard wrote in *How Inventions Begin*, 'the forces of social reform, suffrage and technology were running in overdrive. They reflected a central belief in the power of radical change.' The sheer rate of change over the few decades either side of 1900 touched Australia and the whole world. If, as the *Sydney Morning Herald* put it in 1907, the 'quest for speed is one of those terrible new diseases which modernity is so alert to invent', the disease became an epidemic – and if Smith and Harkness were bitten by the bug, they were but two among many.

Considering they grew up within only a few miles of each other in a small rural community, were of the same age, the same religion (Church of England – not that it ever seemed to mean much to either) and were infected by the same speed fever, it's more than likely that Smith and Harkness first met as youngsters. It's not recorded where or when they did first meet. Certainly, they competed directly in the mid-1920s, when they were both chasing the Australian 24-hour record at the infamous Maroubra Speedway. Either way, they were drawn together and driven on by shared dreams of speed.

Norman Smith was the last of nine children to Australian-born

parents Bill and Cecelia. He was born on 13 July 1890 on the family farm at tiny North Richmond, in the foothills of the Blue Mountains just over the Hawkesbury River from Richmond proper. Australia's oldest white settlement outside Sydney Cove, Richmond at the turn of the century was the centre of rich farmlands. Today, it is still lush and pretty, surrounded by golf courses and the sprawling Ham Common air force base.

Donald James Harkness was one of those unfortunates born on Christmas Day, five months after Norman, in Leichhardt in Sydney's inner-west. The middle of five children, he grew up at Rouse Hill, a few miles closer to Sydney along Windsor Road from Richmond. His father Sam Harkness was a former Tyneside shipbuilder who settled on a farm at Rouse Hill in 1885.

A schoolboy even in far-off Australia didn't have to read Jules Verne or H G Wells to know a revolution was underway. It was palpable marvels like photography and electric light and telegraphy and the bicycle and the internal combustion engine and talking machines and now horseless carriages. There was talk of powered flight, and moving pictures. The young Norm Smith, like his older brothers, had a good eye for a cricket ball. Later, under oath in court, he said he'd been driving since 1900 – when he was ten years old, and there wasn't more than a hundred cars in the entire colony! Harkness too, later in life, recalled he'd been building cars since he first nailed a set of wheels to a fruit box. In 1901, when both boys were ten, the *Windsor and Richmond Gazette* noted the first car to have passed through the area at Windsor. Inevitably, it 'scared nearly every horse in the district'. Only a couple of months after that, modernism clattered right up to Norman's doorstep when local squire Philip Charley arrived at his North Richmond mansion, Belmont Park, in a barking gas buggy, a De Dion Bouton he'd bought off Isaac Phizackerley, one of Sydney's first car dealers. At its conception, motoring was the preserve of wealthy eccentrics, and Phil Charley, the self-made man who discovered silver at Broken Hill, could afford the indulgence. The third car seen in the area, in 1902, belonged to Isaac Phizackerley himself; Phizackerley married a local lass, and regularly drove to Richmond.

The world gasped at the news in 1903, when the Wright Brothers achieved powered flight at Kitty Hawk. It gasped again the following year when French motor driver Louis Rigolly became the first man to break the 100-mph barrier. Rigolly's car was a Gobron-Brillie, a boat-nosed, 13-litre, four-cylinder job that put out about 100 hp, and got up to an astonishing 103.55 mph.

Don Harkness, after only the sixth grade, moved to Granville in Sydney's west to start a general engineering apprenticeship. In 1906, when he was 16, he was arrested in nearby Burwood on charges of 'uttering counterfeit coin', meaning passing fake silver currency. It was a common crime of the day, especially among the many, like Harkness, who worked in metallurgy. He pleaded guilty and received a 12-month suspended sentence. He doesn't seem to have committed a repeat offence.

In Richmond in 1906, after local medico Dr Guynott got a jalopy, a Brouhot, Phil Charley traded in his De Dion for a Talbot. Charley was well-known for his adventurous expeditions, and Norman may have assisted him on these. Certainly, in 1907, when Norman was 17, he was reported to have helped Guynott emergency-drive a local lady, Mrs Main, to hospital in Sydney.

By 1908, Norman had moved to Sydney too. Like Harkness, he wasn't yet out of his teens, but in starting as an apprentice mechanic at none other than Phizackerley's, he was getting in on the ground floor of one of the period's defining growth industries.



Sydney in 1908 was a bustling Edwardian colonial capital of more than half a million souls and a thousand cars. It seemed like a cosmopolitan centre in 1908 when the Great White Fleet visited, and on Boxing Day, when Hugh D 'Huge Deal' McIntosh promoted the world championship bout between American 'negro' fighter Jack Johnson and Tommy Burns at Sydney Stadium in Rushcutters Bay. There was talk even then, with automobile traffic exponentially increasing, of building a great bridge over the harbour.