

Review by Pedr Davis

BILL THOMPSON, Australian Motor racing Champion - By Kent Patrick

Written and published by Kent Patrick, a long-standing member of Bugatti Club Australia, this new book was twenty years in the making but it's easy to see why. It is undoubtedly one of the most thoroughly researched motor racing books that I've encountered.

The long gestation also means the author was able to include interviews with some of Bill Thompson's contemporaries, long since departed.

Kent Patrick interviewed no less than 200 people, read 36 specialist books and consulted one or more editions of 25 different newspapers and magazines. But far from being a compendium of facts and figures, it's a highly readable account of an almost forgotten era of Australian motoring racing.

Bill Thompson was Australia's most successful pre-World War Two racing driver, the winner of three Australian Grands Prix and countless other circuit races and hill climb events.

Bugattis played a big part in his career and the T37, T37A, T40 and T44 he drove are fully documented. He also raced a Brooklands Riley and an MG K3.

Emerging from the story is a fascinating array of other cars ranging from impossibly rapid Austin 7s to an enormous Mercedes. But most of all, the text brings to life the antics and skills of its hero, William Bethel Thompson.

It outlines the spectacular history of Australian motorsport from 1907 to World War Two, concentrating on the late 1920s and the depression years of the 1930s. That was a time when sponsorship – if available – usually comprised free fuel or a set of tyres. No one raced to make money. Many drivers were their own mechanics – they couldn't afford the services of a professional. Seat belts were not used and, although hard hats were available, a surprising number of serious competitors drove wearing a leather helmet.

Men – and a few women – indulged their love of motor sport at great financial and personal inconvenience. It was a hobby – albeit an expensive one – but no sacrifice was too much. It was also a time when racing drivers were almost

expected to be larrikins – and Bill Thompson certainly did not disappoint in that regard.

The large, landscape format book comprises 420 pages and 302 photographs; pleasingly, most photographs appear on the same page as the text most relevant to them. The magnificent layout was achieved by a young Adelaide specialist, Mark Thomas, and the immaculate printing done in Hong Kong.

Although Thompson competed on track circuits for only eight years, he was almost unanimously rated as Australia's fastest driver by his contemporaries. And the statistics bear them out. The fiercely competitive Thompson took part in 107 non-speedway events, winning 62 (58%), coming second in 21, third in two and fourth in one.

He made six appearances in the Australian Grand Prix and won three times, came second twice and failed to finish once. He set the fastest laps in four AGPs and – remarkably - only 41 seconds separated him from an incredible five out of six AGP victories.

In the course of his story we learn about the background of numerous familiar names such as Sam Aggett, Boyd Edkins, Bill Balgarnie, Hope Bartlett, Charlie East, Barney Dentry, 'Phil' Garlick, Carl Junker, Mrs J.A.S. Jones, Jack Manton, Geoff Meredith, Jack Murray, John Newton, John Sherwood, 'Wizard' Smith, Tom Sulman, A.V. Turner, Wal Warneford and Cec Weatherill. Bill Northam, the Olympic Gold medallist and yachting champion, was a close friend. Most interesting of all is that near genius Professor Arthur Burkitt; his numerous hobbies included motor sport and helping his young protégé.

Bill Thompson, the central character, emerges as a driver of great professionalism and exceptional physical fitness. He was charming, well groomed and well-spoken; and, when the occasion required, he dressed immaculately.

Endowed with more than a touch of bravado, he had an inexhaustible propensity for getting himself and his friends into trouble through foolhardy and sometimes illegal acts. A great practical joker, he had little regard for the effect a prank might have on the recipient. Over the years we see Thompson

mature from an undisciplined and reckless driver to a thoughtful and calculating professional - but that touch of larrikinism never left him.

There are graphic descriptions of hairy rides on public roads that must have terrified the unfortunate passengers. They occurred both when he was a teenager driving the family 20/70 Crossley or Armstrong-Siddeley and, in later years, when he was a Bugatti agent. Thompson was a car hoon before the term was invented.

As a racing driver, however, his professionalism shines through the text, including his early attempts to speed up work in the pits with more rapid wheel changes.

Thompson's story runs from his birth in 1906 to his death in a flying accident when on his way to Hawaii during World War Two; typically, he was on an unauthorised journey.

Although Thomson came from a humble background, his mother's skill in buying and selling real estate made it possible for the family to assist him financially at the beginning of his career. He was also fortunate in meeting the wealthy Professor Arthur Burkitt, who both encouraged and partly financed him during his initial foray into motor sport. Without their help Thompson might never have amounted to more than a car-mad salesman.

When in his teens, young Thompson went to the UK and, inevitably, visited Brooklands where he persuaded Dr Benjafield to take him around the circuit at racing speeds in his three-litre Bentley. Not content with his, he cadged an even faster ride from Parry Thomas. As a result, Thompson developed an acute condition which he himself described as 'speeditis' and he returned home determined to start a racing career.

In 1928, Dr Burkitt bought Thompson's first racing car, a Type 37 Bugatti worth more than Thompson's family home. The 21-year-old made his racing debut, winning his class in an RAC event at Robertson, NSW, clocking a speed of 86 mph over the flying half mile, followed by a class win in a hill climb. Inevitably he was attracted to Maroubra Speedway, the recently opened 'concrete saucer' near Sydney. On his debut there, he came second in a feature race, beaten only by the mighty Charlie East. Two weeks later young Thompson

turned the tables and beat East who, very sportingly, came up and congratulated the winner in front of his proud parents.

Thomson tackled the 1928 100-mile race at Phillip Island (later called the first Australian Grand Prix) with Dr Burkitt as his riding mechanic. Burkitt's goggles were shattered by a flying stone but he hung on grimly until Thompson was forced to quit when the Bugatti's engine blew up.

After hearing that a four-cylinder supercharged Type 37A had averaged 122 mph around Brooklands, Thompson and Burkitt ordered a similar car for the 1930 AGP and it became the mainstay of the coming successes. An 8-cylinder Type 35 GP car might have been preferable but would have cost twice as much. Thompson also went into business on his own account, taking on an agency to sell Bugatti and Bentley cars.

The Type 37A gave Thompson his first major victory, winning the 1930 AGP after a fierce and exciting duel with Arthur Terdich in a similar car. When Terdich dropped out with engine failure, Thompson was so far ahead of the pack that he was seen to calmly peel an orange as he raced on to victory. The financial rewards for winning an AGP were however scant. Bill received a trophy and the equivalent of \$105 prize money!

In late 1930, Dr Burkitt decided to sell the car to his protégé and, within a few years, the Type 37A had become Australia's most successful race car of the pre-war era. Amongst countless other achievements, it set a record 112 mph over the measured mile on a public road outside Richmond, NSW. Because of the limited distance available, Thompson was forced to finish the run under heavy braking. A knowledgeable witness, Harry Kerr, described it as one of the most dangerous car performances he had ever seen.

Over the years Thompson also acquired a four-cylinder Bugatti Type 40 Grand Sports, an eight-cylinder Type 44 (previously used by Professor Burkitt's wife) and a Type 43 formerly raced by Hope Bartlett. Indeed the book brings new light on the well-known and very public feud between Thompson and Bartlett.

There's a fascinating description of the 1932 AGP and the heroic effort by riding mechanic Wal Warneford who used his bare hands to stem the flow of hot engine oil leaking from the back of the dash panel. Warneford endured the

pain for two hours and was rushed off for urgent medical attention immediately the race finished. For this effort, Thompson received \$200 for coming first, \$60 for setting fastest time of the day and \$40 for winning the Herald Trophy. Warneford's reward is not stated!

Famous names come thick and fast. Early in his career Thompson was a frequent visitor to the home of his friend John Newton in Five Dock, Sydney. On one occasion he arrived with a promising young cricketer in the passenger seat- his name was Don Bradman. Another of Newton's frequent visitors was Frank Kleinig in his Special powered by a Miller straight eight.

Bill was never good at business and it seems unlikely that his garage-cum-showroom ever made money. Racing undoubtedly was his life and, in late 1932, he accepted an offer from Bill Cameron of Empire Motors Ltd to take up employment as manager of Cameron's newly created competition department.

Racing Rileys were in the news at the time after one averaged nearly 100 mph at Brooklands and a red 'Brooklands' Riley duly arrived at Cameron's Sydney workshop in late 1932. It is thought to have been owned by the factory which also sent out two mechanics to look after it. However, Bill soon became angry with what he regarded as their sloppy approach to the job and used all sorts of devices to keep the car's preparation under his control. This was just as well because even the sealed cans of fuel they brought with them proved to contain contaminants.

There's an eye-catching passage about the contingent of Sydney entrants who decided to travel in convoy to Phillip Island for the 1933 AGP. The road trip developed into a mini APG of its own which ended in disaster. Mrs J.A.S. Jones, with daughter Vida as passenger, crashed near the Victorian border and her 1750 Alfa-Romeo burst into flames. Fortunately neither occupant was seriously hurt.

Bill meanwhile arrived safely at the AGP in the Riley. At one stage during the race, riding mechanic Bill Balgarnie thought he heard screams coming from the driver. Looking up, he discovered that Thompson was laughing hysterically because the instruments dials were rolling in and out of the dash panel slots and bouncing around on the end of their cables. In addition, the braking

system was in tatters, everything was dripping with oil and it had started to rain! Despite the problems, Bill went on to win the AGP in record time.

Soon afterwards, in June 1933, Bill returned to Maroubra and attacked the one-hour track record in his Type 37A. He crammed 78 eventful miles into the hour and set a new Australian track record.

Starting from scratch in the 1934 AGP, Bill set off in his MG K3 to create a new Phillip Island lap record but managed a 360 degree spin. He set off again, made the fastest lap and drove into second place. He came second again in the 1935 AGP and clocked the fastest lap.

Bill Thompson retired from circuit racing in 1935 but – being strapped for cash - he had taken up speedway racing in 1934 though his subsequent career was undistinguished. Two years later he ceased racing and joined Shell Oil Company as a metropolitan representative.

When World War Two erupted in 1939, Thompson joined the RAAF and, according to rumour, became involved in espionage work at one stage. Surprisingly, he never achieved his great wish which was to become a fighter pilot. Whatever offers may have been made concerning flying light bombers, transport or liaison aircraft, Bill was adamant - it was fighters or nothing. However, RAAF policy on fighter training was strict, notwithstanding the pressing shortage of pilots - he was simply too old! Even his racing career did not help in those circumstances.

As with all publications, a critic can find faults. In this case, there are occasional sentences that are difficult to understand and the odd punctuation error creeps in. Many pictures are not as sharp as one would like, although this is because of the size and condition of the original photos from which they are derived. Even so, one wonders why the image is blown up to cover a full 235mm x 330mm page.

A little jarring is the use of kph when converting miles per hour, whereas the recommendation of the Australian Metric Conversion Committee is km/h.

There is no index – something that historians and contemporaries always look for - if only to see if their own name appears.

Carping aside, without doubt, Kent Patrick's new book, *Bill Thompson*, is an eminently readable, magnificently illustrated and thoroughly researched contribution to Australian motor racing history.

It is available for \$120 from some specialist bookshops or \$120 plus \$18 p&p directly from Kent Patrick: patrick@xentech.com.au.

Pedr Davis