

Introduction

LINCOLN CELEBRATED its eightieth anniversary in 2001, and February 4, 2002 marked the eightieth anniversary of the purchase of the Lincoln Motor Car Company by Ford. The seventieth and seventy-fifth anniversaries had been marked by commemorative books and special events, but the eightieth was allowed to pass unnoticed. It's not that there was nothing to celebrate; Lincoln has been selling very well of late. The problem is that during the preceding decade Ford Motor Company had come to own so many luxury brands—Aston Martin, Jaguar, Volvo and Land Rover—that it suddenly found itself tripping over its own toes and badly in need of a way to organize the mess.

Lincoln had always been Ford's luxury flagship. Now the company had five luxury brands, and Lincoln's mission—along with its anniversary—got lost in the shuffle. To remedy this situation, they might start by studying Lincoln's post-World War II history. That subject is the reason for this volume. And an honorable story it is, too.

Lincoln's heritage is, in fact, as rich as that of any car built anywhere in the world, and far more impressive than all but a few. The Lincoln Continental of 1940, for example, was one of the first cars to be universally recognized by classic car cognoscenti. Never a mere used car, it went directly from current

production status to being a much sought-after collectible, a record that few classics have ever matched. The list of Lincoln-built cars in the postwar era certified with classic or comparable “milestone” status by various sanctioning bodies is likewise lengthy. And, of course, generations of Americans have known it as the Car of Presidents; since the days of Franklin Roosevelt, the White House has exhibited a marked preference for Lincolns.

Clearly, Lincoln has won a large measure of well-deserved respect. Even so, it remains curiously underrated. For example, only one truly comprehensive Lincoln history has ever been published—and it is long out of print. By contrast, one could load a good-sized bookshelf to the point of structural failure with books on other luxury marques that have been built through the years—only a bare handful of which have survived the test of time, and most of them treasured mainly for their rarity, their overwrought excesses, or their glorious impracticality.

Why is this so? Part of it is the inverse value we tend to place on volume. The more plentiful an item is, the less we appreciate it and vice versa. Nowhere is this more true than with collector cars. Although Lincoln was rarely until recently a sales leader in the luxury field, it built far too many cars to compete for cachet with certain smaller foreign brands whose names are uttered in hushed tones by aficionados.

Lincoln also suffers as a result of our distorted cultural bias toward things American. When it comes to Mass Culture, we think—unreasonably—that no one else in the world can hold a candle to us. When it comes to quality (from luxury goods to the fine arts) it is just the reverse. We automatically grant special status to things foreign, while reflexively denigrating our own achievements or, perhaps worse, ignoring them altogether. It has long been a cliché in the arts, for example, that all-too-often an American artist (performer, painter, whatever) cannot gain acceptance in America until he or she has established a name abroad; only when Europeans give their stamp of approval will we readily give our native sons and daughters a fair hearing. Every educated American knows of Picasso, but how many could name a 20th Century American painter?

It is no different with high-quality automobiles. If it is built in the Black Forest by elves, it is accorded an instant respect an American car maker has to struggle for years to attain. In the area of our finer accomplishments, people around the world tend to have a better appreciation for us than we do ourselves. (After all, Picasso drove a Lincoln.) One wonders what sort of popular mythology would have grown up around Lincoln—and how much more Ford could charge—if it had an unpronounceable foreign name and came from over there.

Make no mistake about it, few cars built anywhere in the world during the past six decades have surpassed Lincoln in either the richness of its heritage or the excellence of its products. The cars have been unfailingly interesting, frequently magnificent and—in several instances—quite literally legends in their own time.

What is really striking about Lincoln's postwar development, though, is how haphazard it was. Unlike Cadillac, which had a successful formula it relentlessly pursued during good times and bad—except, significantly, during the 1980s when it faltered disastrously—Lincoln has not had a well-thought out, consistent mission or theme. Instead, the brand has been sent hither and yon in search of the magic formula that would transform it into America's premier luxury car.

Each of the postwar cars designed in the first two decades after the end of World War II, for example, were victims of this lack of focus. The 1949–51, 1952–55, 1956–57, 1958–60, and 1961–65 series cars were so lacking in continuity they could have been built by five different car companies. The 1949–51 series was tastefully designed by E. T. Gregorie, but the standard Lincoln models were originally intended as replacements for the prewar Ford. The 1952–55 series was dramatically recast by Ford's chief engineer, Earle MacPherson, in a smaller, more roadworthy package inspired by GM's Oldsmobile. It was a terrific road car, but no amount of fancy interior trim could make it fully competitive with contemporary Cadillacs in the minds of luxury car buyers. Lincoln-Mercury Division finally got the longer, lower, wider car it wanted with the 1956–57 series, but it was short-lived—again by edict from MacPherson who ordered the division to switch to unibody construction for 1958. The result was a styling and engineering failure that nearly killed the brand. Rescue came in the form of the “slab-sided” 1961–65 range—a car originally designed as a Thunderbird.

With the 1961 Continental and the Mark III in 1969, Lincoln at last seemed to stumble upon a winning formula—a tasteful sedan range balanced by a garish personal luxury coupe—and Lincoln sales rose steadily throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Unfortunately, the fuel crises of the 1970s turned these types of cars into dinosaurs and Ford's attempts to replace them met with one failure after another. Consider the history of the past quarter century. Lincoln has had thirteen major new product launches: Versailles (1977), Town Car and Mark VI (1980), Continental (1982), Mark VII (1984), Continental (1988), Town Car (1990), Mark VIII (1993), Continental (1995), Navigator (1998), Town Car (1998), and LS (2000), Blackwood (2001), and Aviator (2003). Of these, only four were major successes, two were middling, six were outright failures—and the jury is still out on one.

The reason for this checkered history has to do with the corporate structure of Ford Motor Company. Back in 1922, when Henry and Edsel Ford bought Lincoln, it was a self-contained automobile manufacturer with every function required to build cars, including engineering and manufacturing. By the end of World War II, Lincoln as a corporate entity had for all practical purposes ceased to exist. The creation of Lincoln-Mercury Division in 1947 made it official, for Lincoln-Mercury was a sales and marketing organization with virtually no direct control over design, engineering or manufacturing. That essentially remains the case today.

Cadillac, in contrast, remained a self-contained car company with a fair degree of autonomy within the General Motors system even after its acquisition in 1910, including design, engineering and manufacturing. The GM reorganization in 1984 altered this dramatically in the direction of the Ford Motor Company model, but Cadillac regained significant control over its engineering and manufacturing in 1987, and remains to this day the only automotive operating division at GM with any real autonomy at all. (Saturn, which also maintains some autonomy, is technically a wholly-owned GM subsidiary.)

As a result, it has been far easier for Cadillac to stay, as the politicians would put it, “on message” from decade to decade, while the Lincoln brand has flailed all over the map. Even as this is written—sixty years after the death of Lincoln’s patron, Edsel Ford—Ford officials are still musing publicly about trying to define Lincoln’s mission!

So how did Lincoln manage to come through the last few years in seemingly better shape than archrival Cadillac—and even in recent years achieve parity in sales? Simple. As bad as things were at Lincoln-Mercury in the 1980s, Cadillac did even worse. Even so, it wasn’t the various Lincoln car lines that propelled the brand to its startling sales victory over Cadillac in 1998, it was the Navigator sport-utility truck.

All is not well, though. Lincoln passenger car sales have softened in recent times, as has the large sport-utility vehicle market. Worse, Cadillac again has a clear-cut mission upon which it is focused. Some industry observers are doubtful that this mission—which is known as “Art and Science”—will work miracles, but at least it is something. To paraphrase an old cliché, a second-rate mission given first-rate execution will always beat a first-rate mission given second-rate execution. For the time being, Lincoln has no clearly defined mission at all other than to keep doing what it has been doing and hope for the best.

That may not be enough in the face of a rapidly changing market. As recently as 1990, Lincoln and Cadillac dominated American luxury sales. Then

the Baby-Boomers began to constitute an increasing percentage of luxury vehicle buyers, and they, in turn, will be followed in due course by the Gen Xers. Those groups are indifferent—if not hostile—to traditional American concepts of luxury. This has sparked a tremendous boom in foreign and Japanese luxury brands—BMW, Mercedes-Benz, Lexus, etc.—to say nothing of Ford's own brands, such as Volvo and Jaguar. So Lincoln had won its seventy-eight-year-old battle with Cadillac only to find the rules of the game had changed.

A couple of comments are in order on the way in which this book has been put together. Since the intended audience includes enthusiasts, there is significant attention paid to product coverage. And since it has been the product cycles that have driven the Lincoln story since the end of World War II, the chapters have been arranged to conform to those cycles with, as nearly as possible, each told as if it were a self-contained story. The model proliferation in recent decades would, on the surface, seem a complicating factor. With all those cars (and now trucks) being built on different platforms, one would think that covering the products would become more and more difficult and require more and more space. Yet, this factor has been more than offset by Ford Motor Company's approach to vehicle development since 1980.

When Detroit realized it had a major quality problem, Ford was the first automaker to achieve notable results. One way it accomplished this was to ruthlessly develop new products before initial launch to make sure they were as nearly perfect as possible in every way, and then leave them more-or-less unchanged throughout their life cycles. Thus, a 1992 Mark VII was, except for detail refinements needed along the way, remarkably close to the first model in the series back at the launch in 1984. So while there are more platforms involved today than there were in the 1950s and 1960s, there were far more changes made from year to year back then than there are today.

At any rate, the next few years promise to be interesting ones for Lincoln. If we cannot predict the future, we can at least try to understand the past. That is what this book is about.