



## PATRICK BEDARD

### *On the failure of Triumph.*

• Before we go any further, why don't you slip into your old shoes. If we're not wading in puddles of syrupy nostalgia by the time we finish this page, I will be very surprised.

I just found out that the Triumph factory in England is ending production of the TR7 and TR8. When the cars in the pipeline are sold, your neighborhood sports-car store is going to take down the Triumph sign and throw away the brochures, because this is it: adios, Triumph time. The gristle-assed TR6 was discontinued in 1976. The whimsical little Spitfire went away last year. Now the denizens of the wedge-shaped garage are being put to sleep. Soon there will be nothing Triumph left but bruised kidneys and the memory of a line of sports cars whose truculence could always be counted on.

The demise of Triumph, by itself, probably wouldn't mean much. But it comes while we're still misty-eyed over the recently departed MG. There is a pattern forming here. The Austin-Healey line was discontinued in the U.S. with the last Sprite in 1974. Jaguar stopped building open cars about the same time. Sunbeam has faded. Jensen is gone. I hate to be an alarmist or anything, but it looks to me as though the British sports car has slipped right through the endangered-species stage and is now deader than an old Lucas wet cell.

Hey, there must be some mistake. Sports cars are okay, you know. Oldsmobile prairie schooners may have outlived their usefulness, half-ton pickups are no longer the personal-transportation wave of the future, and the V-8 engine is not nearly so necessary as we once thought, but sports cars still make a certain amount of sense. They're small. They're easy on gas. They don't have a lot of cylinders getting their valves out of adjustment. And in a country whose idea of progress is the 55-mph speed limit, who can say they haven't kept up with the times?

Nonetheless, the sports car as it was originally defined—two seats, four speeds, and a somehow put-downable top—is essentially gone. Twenty years ago the open two-seater was the most glamorous car in the market. Now you can barely find one. Something very drastic is happening, and we should all climb to the top of the observation platform for a broader view.

If you believe, as I do, that people express themselves with the cars they drive, it's clear that Americans have begun saying very different things with their cars in the past several years. Whether they were fed up with the old vocabulary or carmakers just stopped offering the old choices, I can't say. But the sorts of cars that thrilled us yesterday are gone. You can't buy a truly fast car anymore. Those land yachts of magnificent dimension are out of production. The exotic Italian menu is pared down to a low-cal Ferrari plate and a few halfhearted side dishes. And of course, no traditional sports cars. We are left with variations on the transit-box theme, marvelously efficient but packing no more individuality than a suit from Sears.

Individuality was the thing about sports cars; you exceeded the adult minimum daily requirement just driving to work in the morning. They were quick. They were rakish. They were un-Detroit. Maybe this latter was the best part. Sports cars were a rebellion against conventional values; ten years ago it was Vietnam, twenty years ago it was sports cars. They were the catalyst for a whole social movement, an international fraternity with meetings, hand signals, paraphernalia, protocol, and pecking order. And—how could I forget?—magazines. This journal you are holding was formerly called *Sports Cars Illustrated*. It appeared on newsstands next to *Road & Track*, *Sports Car Graphic*, and a list of others that have now faded along with the cars that inspired them.

The flame burned fiercely at the time, though. When I graduated from college, I prevailed upon my father to cosign a note for the full amount of a used Sunbeam Alpine. Just paging through the owner's manual was an introduction to a brotherhood that referred to the dashboard as the fascia, to hub caps as nave plates, and, in the event of a "flat battery," reached into the trunk for the "starting handle." This car and the brotherhood were my companions as I entered the work force. I moved to Detroit and put the top down, and it stayed that way until well into autumn. A tonneau cover kept the rain out when the car was parked; a brisk minimum speed served the same purpose when in motion. A number of blond hairdos were ruined that summer, thwarting subsequent seduction attempts, but I never deviated from what I knew to be the gospel—namely, that a real sports-car guy braved the elements. That was a badge of membership.

Sometime in the intervening years, I, like the rest of the population, cooled off on sports cars. The idea of them still attracts, but I can't see owning one as primary transportation anymore. I think I tired of braving

the elements; not just the wind and the rain, but also the vibration and the noise and the general hardship of travel in those cramped roadsters. It's hard to stick with a hair shirt when you can have polyester at the same price. Yet every time I smell musty leather and mildewed carpet, I get a warm feeling for that old Sunbeam Alpine. Life with the top perpetually down was wonderfully idealistic.

The failure of Triumph reminds me of what has been lost. And I'm feeling a bit guilty at the moment because I fear that I—and we on the staff of this magazine—may have hastened the demise. The sports car is a fragile idea. If you look only at machinery, as we tend to do in road tests, they are conspicuously primitive, and we've said so. But there is a state of mind about them that transcends the clunky hardware. We've always known that, but could rarely handle it. Editor-publisher Davis and I fell into one of those terrible teeth-baring, nostrils-flaring arguments over the last TR6 test, which I wrote. I saw the car as a celebration of the sports-car guy's search for uniqueness. Sure, it has a damaging ride. Of course it's damp and drafty inside. That's what keeps everybody from driving one. A sports car was a jaunty way of showing the world that you were one of the few guys who could take it. Mr. Davis, if I understood his position correctly, held that accusing Triumph owners of enjoying such crudeness was the same as saying they sought pleasure in fat women. Neither of us would yield any ground, and it's a subject we walk delicately around to this day. The point is that if we so-called experts can't agree on the appeal of a sports car, it's not surprising we've had trouble conveying the idea to you.

The job is made harder, I submit, by the strong reactions sports cars produce. You never know when one of them will change your life. Back in the Detroit days, Howard Padgham put me into his TR3 so that I might properly experience the symptoms of incorrectly damped SU carburetors, a circumstance he had been laboring to repair for the better part of a week. It was one of those nights when the streets go black with rain. The Triumph was a crazy mixture of hair-trigger clutch and same-day throttle response—a real spastic—and I lurched up the avenue wrestling manfully with it as Buicks and Pontiacs nonchalantly splashed water in over the cut-down doors. I was an engineer then, carefully schooled in science and illiteracy by two institutions of higher learning, but the comedy of the scene was so sharply drawn it inspired even a slide-rule virtuoso. For the first time, I wanted to write.

Now, years later, I sit before my typewriter composing an obituary for a car that closed a circuit in my brain, awakened me to a profession infinitely more agreeable than engineering. Probably I should be thankful, but that's not the feeling that comes to the top of the pile. Instead, there is a puzzlement at human nature. Why do I—and presumably you—lament the passing of these cars that have been so unapologetically difficult?