

COLLECTIBLE BOOKS

By: Nathan Chadwick



Nathan Chadwick began his career in regional print journalism in the U.K., and after a few years working at a veterinary journal, he began his dream automotive career in 2011 at *Classic Cars* magazine and *Land Rover Owner*. His involvement with *Modern Classics* magazine, a new title dedicated to 1980s, '90s and '00s cars, turned his role from sub-editor to writer and assistant editor. After *Modern Classics* was closed in 2020, he moved into freelance journalism. He currently writes for *Magneto*, *Auto Italia* and several other publications, and provides public relations services as well. He lives in the U.K. with his wife and two greyhounds. He may be reached at NayfLimited@gmail.com

Pourtout-styled machines were well known for their glamor. Pourtout, meanwhile, was well known to the French tax office.



MARCEL POURTOUT: CARROSSIER BY JON PRESSNELL

There's an infamous line in Quentin Tarantino's seminal 1990s film *"Pulp Fiction"* about the naming of McDonalds products in France. Yes, this is an odd way to introduce a book dedicated to one of the most celebrated carrossiers of all time, but it gets to the heart of French exceptionalism: a Quarter Pounder could have been called anything else, due to the European dedication to the metric system, but according to *"Pulp Fiction's"* Vincent... in France it's called the "Royale with Cheese." There's an elegance with which that phrase rolls off the tongue – a simple description just wouldn't do.

There's a similar elegance in the way your eyes roll along the contours and curves that make up a French coachbuilding effort. The British and Americans have a sense of rigidity and grandeur, and the Germans and Swiss have a restrained elegance. The Italians can be flamboyant or challenging to the eye, but the French coachbuilders of the 1930s were the masters of automotive aesthetic maximalism.

MARCEL POURTOUT • CARROSSIER



Photographed at the June 1935 concours organized by Femina and L'Intransigeant, at which it won the Grand Prix d'honneur, this demure-value Panhard, commissioned by Émile Darrivat, has Eclipse coachwork. (Les Amis de Darrivat)

PURSUED BY THE TAXMAN

Meanwhile, in 1934 Émile Darrivat would take delivery of at least eight cars, including the two Eclipse-bodied Panhards mentioned above, one of which would serve as his personal car. Other vehicles bodied by Pourtout in 1934 were a Graham-Paige and a Fiat ordered by Chapat, and a Hotchkiss, a Delahaye and a Delage coupé among the 11 cars recorded as being invoiced to de Corvaia. The arrival on the scene of Georges Paulin and the decision by Peugeot to make Eclipse-bodied cars as catalogued models must surely have bolstered morale at the Bougival works, and can be regarded as a portent of better days to come. They would arrive none too soon, as the year 1934 would end with net profits roughly a third of what they had been the previous year.

There was also a further reminder of how precarious was the health of the business. In December Marcel Pourtout received notice that his assets would be seized at the beginning of January as a result of 12,067 francs in unpaid taxes. In a beseeching letter to the tax authorities he said that it was impossible for him to pay the outstanding sum, a claim that left the Inspector of Taxes unmoved. "To date you have made no down-payments on your taxes for 1932, 1933 or 1934, which prompts me to say to you that until now you have shown no proof of goodwill in settling matters," he replied on 28 December, whilst saying that if Marcel Pourtout paid for 1932 by 2 January and gave an undertaking to pay an instalment for 1933 and 1934, then he would take no further action. Pourtout said he could only find 2000 francs straightaway, and proposed



THESE TWO PAGES: With the last car being finished in August 1938, ten months before the final roadsters and dropheads, evidence suggests that the closed model failed to find the hoped-for customers. This particular example was owned for many years by well-known enthusiast, the late Dominique de la Chapelle. The wheels, in alloy, are a post-war accessory; the four-spoke steering wheel, which has angled spokes to channel air to the brakes. The cockpit of the coupe is tight-fitting – so much so that the window-ventilator folds back to keep out of the way. The leather-covered dashboard would originally have been in painted metal (see page 100).

While much of the archive is in black-and-white, the color images really ping.

This is more than a manufacturer – Pourtout was, and is, a proper family firm.



One of the most important of these coachbuilders was Carrosserie Pourtout, which grew from a tiny family concern to a world-leading provider of bodies in just a few years, spearheaded by company founder Marcel Pourtout. Over the years the firm, which is still going in Rueil-Malmaison in family hands, has seen tragedy and opportunity, rise and fall.

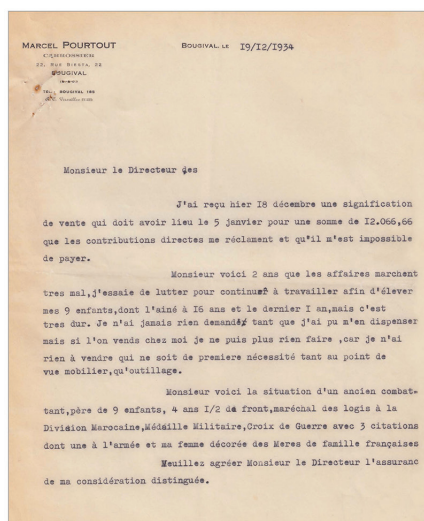
Jon Pressnell's superbly presented book reveals Marcel to be a dogged character with a persistent sense of duty to his employees and to the wider community – even if it put him on the wrong end of public opinion later on.

Founded in 1925, Carrosserie Pourtout sailed close to the wind financially during much of the prewar era; in fact, the circumstances of the company's founding came through the demise of the Aubertin works, where Marcel Pourtout worked. The non-payment of tax dogged the family firm, with threats outnumbering snatches four to one by 1931, but the company continued to grow.

The real turning point was teaming up with Parisian Peugeot dealer Émile Darl'mat, who wanted to build his name and reputation with a series of bespoke bodies. It was good, steady work for Pourtout, and it opened further doors to the likes of Ford, Lancia and Bugatti. Darl'mat would, however, also introduce Pourtout to a certain chap by the name of Georges Paulin.

Paulin lived a busy but short life – he was a dentist, a journalist and, eventually, a spy. He came to Pourtout having come up with an innovative retractable roof mechanism during his time making false teeth. Pourtout would eventually put this invention into production with a Peugeot, which the French carmaker then used itself. Paulin would end up becoming Pourtout's chief stylist – and the automotive designer of the moment, with manufacturers such as Bentley and Delage enquiring after his services.

This was a golden time for Pourtout, and there are excellent color and black-and-white photographs of the coachbuilder's efforts; my favorite has to be the Pagnol 601 Eclipse that was awarded the Grand Prix at the 1935 *Cannes Concours d'Elegance*, which has the majority of a double-page spread in the book dedicated to its voluptuous form.



payments of 1000 francs each month or 3000 francs per quarter.

In a letter, possibly written by his wife, it was said that any impression of prosperity on the part of Marcel Pourtout was misleading. He has been suffering so much from the economic crisis that he has had to borrow 130,000 francs over the course of the past two years, one can read. It is doubtful because these loans meant he could carry on in business that he has appeared to be a comfortably-off trader!



FAR LEFT: In this letter Marcel Pourtout pleads for clemency, citing his nine children, underlining his distinguished car service, and saying that after two enriched business years he does not have the means to pay the sum demanded. If the seizure of his property goes ahead, he would be destitute, he writes, as there was nothing either in his house or in the workshop but the bare necessities needed for maintaining his personal and his professional life.

The Pourtout archive brought many heretofore unseen papers and clippings to light.

The glory years didn't last. **World War II** closed down operations, and Paulin was shot for his work with the Parisian Resistance. Pourtout never really came back from this huge loss, which occurred just as coachbuilt cars in general started to fall from favor in the post-**WW II** years. The firm moved on to manufacturing special bodies for industrial and advertising clients, which, while lacking the obvious glitz of the 1930s, provided a steady stream of work. The original company came to an end in 1994; however, the brand name is still going today as an automotive bodyshop in Rueil run by Brieuc Pourtout.

Cont'd next page.

FAMILY TENSIONS

Organisational weaknesses there may well have been, as a result of the two-factory arrangement, but by the middle of the 1980s there was a further worm in the apple, in the form of growing tensions within the three-member management team. In 1972 Marcel Pourtout had passed to Claude and Gilette his shares in the property-holding company for Saint-ly, the SCl du Val de Loire. A year later there was a dispute over the succession of Marcel Pourtout, with Gilette and Jean-Pierre not in agreement with Claude and the rest of the family. The year 1973 also saw the Carrosserie Pourtout business become a limited company, and this furnished the opportunity for Gilette to be appointed manager, by common admission to keep the peace between Claude and Jean-Pierre.



It didn't seem to work. By 1985 Claude was seeking outside arbitration to hold the ring between him and Jean-Pierre – and saying that if a solution could be found then he would be happy to take early retirement. The root of the problem was the tension between two men of very different character. Claude was an easy-to-get-on-with well-built bon vivant, while Jean-Pierre, recognised as an excellent technician, was thin, sporting, and had something of a short fuse, remembers Jean-Claude Pourtout. "Sometimes things certainly got a bit heated," he says. "I think that they scrapped quite a bit," confirms Huguette Pourtout, recalling that Jean-Pierre was "very bright and had a sharp mind" while Claude was more the exuberant salesman.

So long as the business was doing well, differences of opinion and approach could be played down. The trigger, according to Claude's notes made for the arbitration hearing, was the sudden end of the Schlumberger contract. This, he wrote, precipitated the company's fall from grace. Until then, there had been no need to put oneself about – indeed he had even turned down work. Now there was a need to blame someone, and he felt he had been made a scapegoat for the falling-off of work, with Jean-Pierre letting it be known that in his opinion the fault was with the commercial side – Claude, in other words – for not

The book doesn't flinch from the realities of the original firm's decline.



TOP LEFT: The BerrogaZ Renault elevated from up-high – the tail lights are from the second-series Simca Vedette. The gas bottle opens up to reveal a covered platform and a pair of doors for access to the interior.

TOP RIGHT: The chippy-looking vehicle carries on 'M Pourtout' badge on its nose. Next detailing includes super shafts that pass directly through the windscreen.

BOTTOM: The BerrogaZ vehicle in the course of construction. It was based on a 2.5-litre Renault R2000 chassis.

TOP: Jean-Pierre Pourtout is remembered as a quick-tempered, an excellent technician, and as an enthusiast for Triumph sports cars and sailing; he died young.

RIGHT: The new factory built at Chanteloup-les-Vignes promised a new beginning, with all activities based in one brand-new facility. But with the ending of key contracts the company soon found itself in serious difficulties.

OPPOSITE: Meanwhile the former works in Rueil-Malmaison were demolished, giving way to glitzy car showrooms with flats above. Demolition was hastened when a fire broke out on the site.



The postwar decline in bespoke luxury coachwork led Pourtout into other bodywork.

Pressnell's book – produced with the involvement of Pourtout family members, who are still active in the running of the firm – is the result of extensive research that has taken him deep into the archives, summoning forth many heretofore unseen photographs and stories from this deeply family-focused firm. These tales are not simply about the vehicles the company produced; there are touching family pictures – some highly poignant, such as those depicting an ill-fated attempted escape to Portugal at the start of **WW II**.

Don't worry if your focus is more on the machinery; there is also a vast Appendix detailing commission numbers, plus a section on the surviving prewar cars. But to simply train your attention on the metal is to do the book a disservice, as it is full of morsels of memories and insights that almost have you there, with the family, crafting vehicular art.

This \$150, 488-page book is a must for anyone with an interest in coachbuilding, and is a clear labor of love from the author. Its 754 images are largely bright and clear, with the

color reproduction largely excellent. The paper is of excellent thickness, with a lovely shine, and the layout is clear and easy to read in a landscape 219mmx290mm format. You can order the book directly from the publisher at DaltonWatson.com or 847-274-5874.

Reading this book makes you wish for some of the French magic to return to bespoke carmaking. While the motive power underpinning electric vehicles might not stir the soul, the undoing of the need for a rigid ICE-focused drivetrain offers new design opportunities that a company whose history includes the gumption of Pourtout and the imagination of Paulin could seize upon. Sadly, that doesn't appear to be happening soon, with any number of copy-and-paste SUVs or vaporware hypercars being announced daily. The reality is a bit disappointing, a bit like the Royale with Cheese itself. And Tarantino got it wrong, after all: It's actually called the McRoyale in France. Not quite the same, is it? C'est la vie.

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