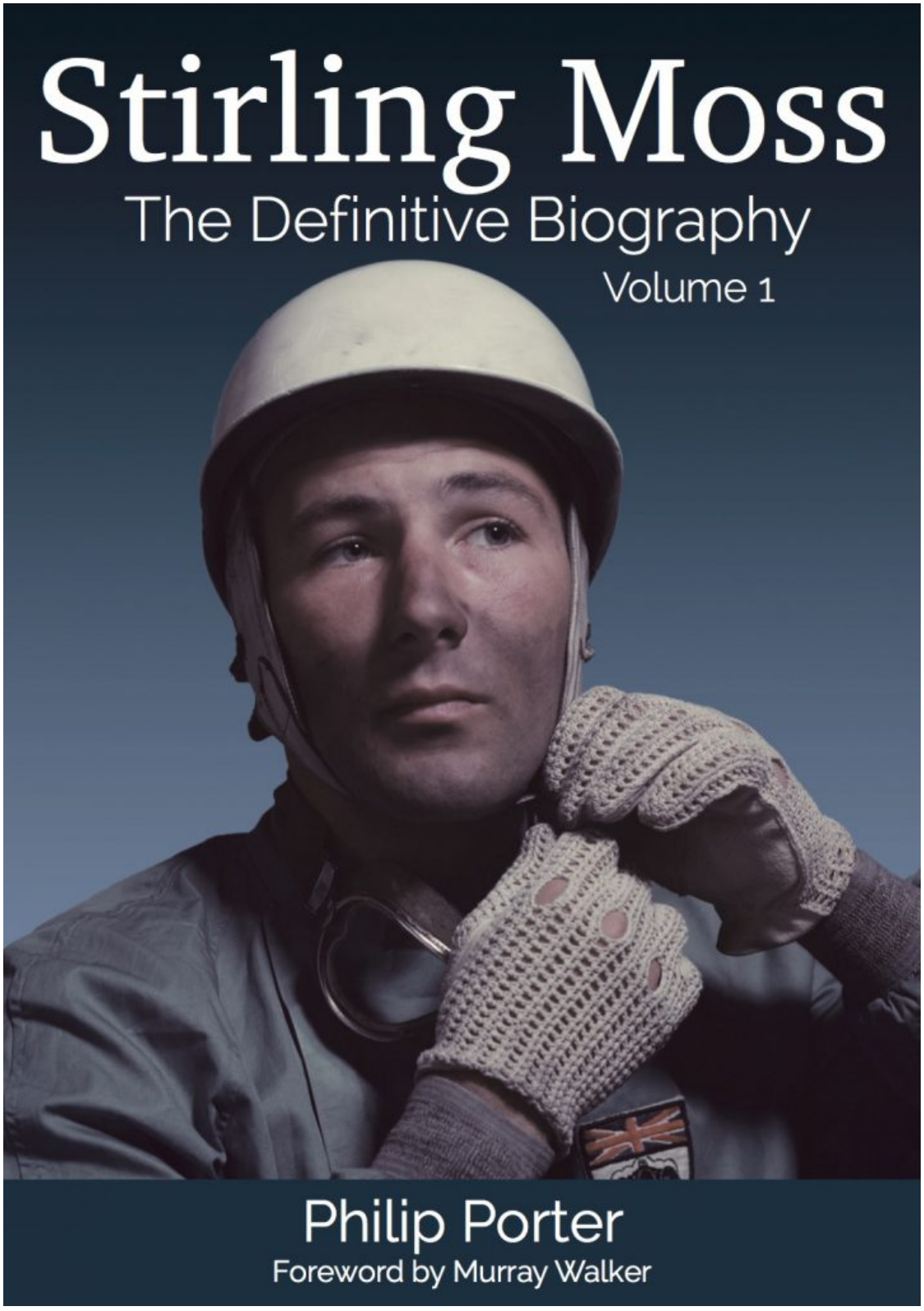
Book Review: “Stirling Moss: the Definitive Biography, Volume I 1929–1955”

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Kieron Fennelly reviews Volume One of a huge, in-depth two part biography of Stirling Moss, written by Philip Porter…



Author: Philip Porter (with forward by Murray Walker)

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Philip Porter has undertaken the daunting task of writing the ‘definitive’ biography of Stirling Moss and evidently this is going to be a substantial work as 600 pages of volume I covers only half the story. The challenge for the author is that Moss is surely the most written about racing driver in history from Robert Raymond’s 1953 work to Robert Edwards’s much admired 2001 Authorised Biography, not to mention impressive works by Doug Nye and Ken Purdy. A self confessed Moss fan, Philip Porter himself has also written about his hero. So the inevitable question is whether there is anything more to say. Porter proves there is.

Clearly he has researched the subject in exceptional depth; his style continuously cross references Moss’s own recollections with contemporary newspaper reports, material from interviews with people who knew Moss during the period and books such as Raymond’s or Alf Francis’s memoirs. What emerges is not just a finely detailed account, but also a fascinating narrative of British and continental racing in the immediate postwar years. And if for example Moss’s exploits with the Sunbeam Talbot in Alpine rallies are well known, I had never realised what an absolute master of driving on ice he was; Moss’s distinctly commercial approach to racing is not new, like his famous advocacy of Craven A cigarettes, but the author also shows how ahead of his time Moss was, missing few opportunities to get manufacturers to provide him with kit, his racing shoes for example made by Russell and Bromley. We knew too about Moss’s professional approach – his famously practiced Le Mans starts, but Porter demonstrates how thorough his preparation was elsewhere, from reconnaissance laps of the road circuits like Targa Florio, sometimes undertaken in the wet or the dark when other competitors might have been enjoying the pleasures of the local nightlife, to modifications to his cars designed to give them a minute but vital advantage

such as filling the gearbox with extremely thin oil.

That Moss should have been more successful in his early career is undisputed, but the author reveals just how mediocre were some of the mounts which let him down. Even Jaguar was guilty of being slapdash – the failure by mechanics to replenish the C type's sump cost Jaguar the 1953 Nine Hours at Goodwood; elsewhere time was lost because bonnet catches failed. The muddle-through attitude prevailed disastrously. Tellingly, when he visited Maserati in the search for a better car, the first thing Moss's manager, Ken Gregory noticed was the quality of the machining. The author is especially good when he evaluates his sources, contrasting the sometimes self-aggrandising Francis's accounts with Moss's more matter of fact journal entries and then perhaps referring to Autosport's view of events allowing the reader almost to decide which version he prefers.

This is a work of fine scholarship and to criticise it would risk carping; however to introduce Bernard Cahier as "a French racing photographer" does seem slightly to undervalue one of the great characters of fifties and sixties motor racing, but this is a minor point and in no way spoils a dense yet compellingly readable history. Volume 1 concludes with Moss's fantastic season in 1955 when he and Fangio in their Mercedes beat all comers: this really whets the appetite for the rest of the story, but frustratingly – though entirely understandably – we have to wait till 2018.