

McGurn, James. *On Your Bicycle: An Illustrated History of Cycling*. New York: Facts on File, 1987. Pp. 208. Notes, index, 127 illustrations. \$21.95.

James McGurn, a teacher and writer on modern languages, is also a cycling journalist. Currently a free-lance writer for the Cycling Press, he and his family enjoy pedalling around New York City on tandem tricycles. Although his writing reveals a love for cycling and an enthusiasm about its past, McGurn has attempted to do much more than could possibly be accomplished even in a book twice the size of this one. For example, although *On Your Bicycle* is advertised as covering virtually every aspect of cycling on all corners of the globe, it does far less. Over two-thirds of the volume is actually about British cycling, and the only countries discussed in more than a brief paragraph are the United States, France, Germany and China.

Beginning when the cycle itself was no more than a faint outline in one of Leonardo da Vinci's sketches, McGurn's first five chapters give a good-natured account of the prehistory of cycling, the "Bone Shaker Craze" of the 1860s when the two-wheeled velocipede finally established itself as a useful vehicle, the introduction of the high wheeler, and finally development of the modern safety bicycle. Primarily concerned with the significance of the cycle as an agent of social change, he devotes a great deal of attention not only to advances in cycling technologies, but their impact on transportation, commerce, social recreation and status.

Of particular interest is his discussion of the effects of changing technology on women cyclers. He notes that during the 1860s, "scantly dressed women rode acrobatically" in the Paris theaters and music halls (p. 34), while more refined ladies attended velocipede schools in the riding halls. Simultaneously, women cyclists competed against men both in road races and on tracks, where special races for women were also held. This era of equality ended with the introduction of the high wheeler, which was considered too dangerous and inappropriate for women. Thus, while men flocked to join the cycling clubs around which much of their social life and leisure time centered, women who wished to cycle were relegated, along with the aged, to riding tricycles. Sexual equality in cycling did not return until the introduction of the modern safety bike.

McGurn also provides an insightful description of the cycling clubs themselves, placing the activities and attitudes of elite British cycling organizations within the context of the Victorian Amateur ideal which pervaded sport during the middle and late nineteenth century. He also describes ways in which cycling clubs differed in different countries, and the changes which occurred when mass production enabled working class citizens to own bikes for the first time. Unlike their more elite counterparts, the workers' cycling clubs were politically active, and welcomed women as well as men as members.

Although the narrative sometimes bogs down, the first half of the book is enjoyable and informative, punctuated with delightful photographs and asides. McGurn includes such delightful tidbits as the advice of an 1880s cycling magazine which recommended breaking an egg in one's cycling shoes before putting them on to prevent sore feet, and putting a cabbage leaf on the crown of the headgear to guard against sunstroke (p. 60).

Unfortunately, the second half of the book, which covers developments since the first World War, is dull and difficult to read, lacking all of the qualities which made the earlier chapters enjoyable. There are sentences which seem totally unrelated to their paragraphs, and great gaps in the information. Lacking humor, insight, or even good writing, it leaves the impression that the author, who began with great enthusiasm, lost interest in his project about halfway through.

The much-touted section on "Cycling in the Third World" is so brief as to be virtually useless. It attempts to cover a fifty-year period in less than seven pages, jumping crazily from Kenya and Nigeria to Colombia and Mexico City;

Malaysia and Indonesia to Chile, Tanzania, and finally China. While pointing out that Chinese cycling is extremely dangerous, accounting for over half of all reported accidents, McGurn seems to support the Chinese polices and attitudes toward it, noting that they “have developed the possibilities of cycle transport to the fullest” (p. 192).

Another drawback to this work is the minimal attention paid competitive cycling, which the author seems to dislike. Throughout the book, he states or implies that competitive cyclers were by and large undesirable characters, their sport corrupt. Discussing the 1890s, for example, he characterized the popular six-day bicycle races as *degrading*, and commented that American track racing had “reached new depths of corruption and foul play” (p. 136). A particularly glaring omission in chapter 5 (“The Triumph of Safety Cycling”) is the absence of any mention of cycling in the 1896 Olympic Games, although its inclusion was certainly part of the amateur cycling craze which he extensively analyzed. In fact, although he does note the participation of cycling clubs in the Workers’ Olympiads in the 1920s and 1930s, McGurn never mentions cycling in the modern Olympics except in one brief paragraph about the 1984 games. The only international cycling event discussed in any detail is the Tour de France.

The book is exceptionally well illustrated with vintage photographs and drawings and also has an adequate bibliography. However, the notes, averaging approximately twenty per chapter, seem quite sparse for such a comprehensive work, and the index is so brief that it is virtually useless. In sum, while *On Your Bicycle* has some strong points, it promises much more than it delivers. It gives only passing mention to competitive cycling, twentieth-century cycling, and cycling in the third world, but does provide good insights and information about British cycling, particularly nineteenth-century cycling in Britain, France, and the United States.

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