

The Bicycle in British Literature

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In the 1890s, when the safety bicycle replaced the high wheeler and introduced bicycling to a wide audience that included women, it produced a popular literary genre in Britain as in France and the United States. Cycling journals abounded, providing an outlet for this writing. Part of the fascination of cycling was that it was more than a sport. The bicycle was, for one thing, a machine, and a product of advanced technology – a cleaner, more manageable technology than the earlier industrial revolution had introduced. Within a few years of its introduction other machines had a greater impact on the literary imagination. However, for a while the bicycle held a special attraction for the artist.

The perceptions writers had about bicycles depended on the way they were used, and in Britain cycling changed from one thing to another in the space of a generation. Starting as a sport for athletic young men, it became in the 1890s a fashionable pastime for the upper and middle classes and then a means of transportation for the masses. As cycling gained a working class audience, the boom for the sport ended and cycling clubs declined in prestige and membership. Cycling papers folded and the fashionable public shifted its attention to automobiles.

In Britain the battle to keep the sport of cycle racing pure (that is, socially exclusive) and maintain rigid divisions between gentleman amateurs and professionals was waged fiercely. The same concern with exclusivity was evident in other aspects of cycling. The success of H. G. Wells' work on bicycling lay in his ability to treat this concern with a comic touch which made it seem less ominous. His *The Wheels of Chance*, which appeared in 1896, was not the first novel by a major writer with cycling theme. But unlike Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's earlier *Beyond the City*, Wells was able to catch the public's fancy; no other English cycling novel approached its success.

As bicycles became fixtures of working class life, they lost their glamor for writers. They appear in works of fiction, but in ways which emphasize their absurdity. When cars at last became affordable for ordinary working people in the 1950s bicycle use declined sharply. The whole network of clubs, cyclists' cafe and publications which had supported cycling in the interwar years collapsed, and with it a host of fashions and conventions. By the time Britain produced a literary generation anxious to celebrate the institutions of working class life it was gone. So the bicycle figured in this new wave of writing as a symbol of the loner, the anti-hero, rather than as part of a flourishing cultural form.

The record literary sources provide for the historian of cycling are sketchy and incomplete, with the very gaps in the literature testifying to the social prejudices which help shape the development of cycling in Britain. Yet this fiction is a potentially important source. It can provide the imaginative insights and close scrutiny of popular attitudes which illuminates our understanding of the historical process.