

Cycling in Rural Ireland

Dr Paul Rouse

For 150 years Irish people have used bicycles to live, to work, to compete, to love, to fight, to have fun. During this time the bicycle has changed people's lives and this change has been dramatic.

The Arrival of the 'Freedom Machine'

The first pedal-driven bicycle – the boneshaker – arrived in Ireland in the 1860s. It was somewhat unwieldy, was hugely uncomfortable with its solid wheels, and was expensive. Its arrival was of relatively minor significance – through the 1860s, the 1870s and into the 1880s, cycling remained a relatively exclusive, male-dominated, middle-class activity.

All of this changed in the second half of the 1880s. The introduction of the chain-driven safety bicycle and of the pneumatic tyre saw cycling blossom as a phenomenally popular pastime that appealed to men and women of all ages and backgrounds.

Bicycles – as we know them today – began to be mass produced in factories and were sold relatively cheaply to millions of people across the world, particularly from the beginning of the 1890s.

The craze for cycling was such that cycling rapidly became a vibrant part of the social and cultural life of Ireland. And in doing so it imparted something very new to Victorian Ireland. Cycling clubs spread across the country and every – or almost every – reasonable sized town had at least one club.

But clubs only mattered to a point – the great craze for cycling was powered by unattached individuals who now bought bicycles and cycled them in town and country. In the process, it also became big business. Bicycle shops and mechanics thrived in this new, expanding industry, all of which was captured in a newspaper, *The Irish Cycling News*, founded and run by a man who soon became Ireland's champion cyclist, R.J. McCredy.

Cycling thrived because it worked on many levels. It was, in the first instance, a glorious means of recreation. One 1895 cyclist wrote: 'No outdoor pastime can be more independently pursued.' City people saw in the bicycle the chance to escape from urban life. The novelist H.G. Wells wrote of how he and his wife were using bicycles to 'restore our broken contact with the open air.' And country people, for their part, could use the bicycle to get into towns. It was, wrote one cyclist, a thing which allowed for 'unfettered liberty', 'a freedom machine.'

Cycling and Sport

Beyond recreation, the bicycle was also raced in competition. Back in the boneshaker days the first cycling club on the island had been founded in Dungarvan by Richard E. Brennan, a photographer, in 1869. That same year the club held a cycle race in the town for a challenge cup which Brennan won. Cycling races then became an integral part of the many sports days that proliferated in Irish towns and villages during the 1870s and 1880s.

These attempts to organise sports in rural areas often met with mockery from sneering, self-denoted urban sophisticates. When a Dublin newspaper sent a correspondent to cover a sports event in Kilmallock in the 1880s, he reported his high amusement at the attempt to stage a cycling race. The journalist wrote that, although the cycle race was only over two miles, he had time to go and eat his dinner in mid-competition and still be back for the finish because the competitors kept falling off.

During those years, the Tralee Sports Ground was considered one of the finest in the country. During the first months of 1885, the Tralee Sports Committee had laid down a cinder track for athletics and cycling events. Around this ground, a new stand and palisade was being erected, at the cost of some £1,200. This was funded by the County Kerry Amateur Athletic and Cricket Club, which was itself backed by wealthy local landlords. Kerry, it was written in one newspaper, now possessed 'the best ground in all of Ireland'.

It was a ground which certainly stood comparison with Lansdowne Road, which was then being condemned as a 'ramshackle, tumbledown, malodorous old rookery'. There had been cycle races held there, but by 1885 it was suggested that the most exciting race at Lansdowne Road was to see which part of the stadium would collapse first. The track at Tralee remained in place until 1929, when it was removed to facilitate the enlargement of the pitch.

As well as being a sport in itself, cycling became essential to facilitating all manner of other sporting activities. The writer Breandán Ó hEithir, dedicated his masterful book, *Over the Bar*, to an anonymous Meath GAA official. On a wild, wet night, that official had cycled thirteen miles from his rural home to a County Board meeting held in Navan. Drenched on arrival, the flow of water from his clothes to the table caused the meeting to be suspended so that the delegate could be taken to a neighbouring bakery, placed in front of an open oven and turned until he was dry. The meeting then resumed, but when its business was completed, the same delegate climbed back upon his bicycle and rode once more through the driving rain across the same thirteen miles of country road to his home.

Women and Cycling

The arrival of the modern bicycle in Ireland in the 1880s saw both genders take to the wheel. This process saw the bicycle both reflect – and help to change – societal perceptions of women. The meaning of cycling to the lives of women in the 1890s was brilliantly captured by Frances Willard, the American temperance campaigner, in her 1895 book, *How I Learned to Ride the Bicycle*. Willard was 53 and in poor health when she took up cycling. She was, she wrote, ‘sighing for new worlds to conquer.’ She had met a British Naval Officer who said to her ‘You women have no idea of the new realm of happiness which the bicycle has opened to us men.’ And Willard resolved to enter that realm. She bought a bike which she called Gladys and was transfixed by it – it was, she wrote, ‘the steed that never tires.’

Willard’s contemporary, Susan Anthony, who was a pioneer in fighting for women’s rights, said that the image of a woman on a bicycle was ‘the picture of free, untrammelled womanhood’, and that cycling did more to emancipate woman than anything else in the world.’

Others – often men – reacted against such notions of untrammelled motherhood. There were those who believed in the 1890s that cycling would, in the words of one writer, ‘intoxicate women to immoral acts.’ Indeed, another claimed that there was already proof of such intoxication, that cycling was responsible for the ‘ranks of reckless girls who became outcast women.’ Other fears revolved around the notion that cycling would destroy a woman’s femininity, by giving her muscular legs and arms, and by inducing her to wear masculine clothes. Initially, when cycling, women wore – and were expected to wear – long skirts, but the dangers of them getting caught in the wheel were obvious. The obvious solution was caustically put by Amalie Rother, a cycling devotee, in 1897: *“An experienced female cyclist can only be amused by the question, ‘skirt or trousers?’ A woman has exactly the same number of legs as a man ... and should clothe them just as sensibly, giving each leg its own covering rather than placing both into one. Has it ever occurred to anyone to put both arms into one sleeve?”*

But the reaction to women wearing trousers was remarkable. Verbal abuse was commonplace and the female editor of a newspaper called the *Rational Dress Gazette* was hit by a meat-hook while out cycling in trousers in Kilburn in London in 1903.

Through all of this, virtually all cycling magazines and women’s magazines advised their readers to stick to skirts. And many did. But the significance of cycling for women lies in the fact that some actually did change and because cycling became important for the symbolic participation of women in healthy exercise.

Golden Age

The golden age for cycling extended from the 1890s until the 1920s. During these years, the bicycle was essential to Irish life. And, as well as being essential, it also held status. There was no shame in being on a bike, nor was it a thing of eccentricity. The writer J.M. Synge, for example, described himself to be 'as happy as seven kings' after going cycling. In the imagery of these years, people as distinctive as Michael Collins and Eamon de Valera were happy to be associated with cycling. Cycling also really thrived as a sport and leading Irish cyclists such as Harry Donnelly were feted for their successes, with huge crowds turning up to see cycling competitions at Croke Park.

All the while, newspapers, magazines and novels carried stories of people enjoying gentle recreation on their bicycles. And, in general, the spread of the bicycle was part of a wider process of modernization in Irish society. It allowed young people to travel further afield for education and for work – particularly in rural areas. It also gave greater scope than ever before for those who were off in search of entertainment – trips to the cinema and to dance halls previously considered too far on foot now became viable through the bicycle.

And some people simply lived on their bikes. This was an obsession picked up on by Flann O'Brien, who – in his novel *The Third Policeman* – has the sergeant describing how a man in the parish, Michael Gilhaney, *'has spent no less than thirty-five years riding his bicycle over the rocky roadsteads and up and down the hills and into the deep ditches when the road goes astray in the strain of the winter. He is always going to a particular destination or other on his bicycle at every hour of the day or coming back from there at every other hour. If it wasn't that his bicycle was stolen every Monday he would be sure to be more than halfway now.'* *'Halfway to where?'* *'Halfway to being a bicycle himself.'*

Indian Summer

Later, the great Indian summer for the bicycle in Irish life came during the Second World War. In general, through the war years, the scarcity of petrol for cars and buses, and a rail service constrained by a lack of coal, saw thousands of people cycle long distances to, for example, football and hurling matches. As a reporter with the *Carlow Nationalist* wrote, 'with the shortage of fuel the bicycle was back to its own'. On big match Sundays (some 80,000 came to the 1944 All-Ireland football Final!), streams of bikes flowed across the country to Dublin, meeting on the North Circular Road like so many tributaries flowing into a broadening river. In the decades that followed people who made that journey spoke with a huge nostalgia of the experience – but the fact remains that they did not usually (or ever) seek to repeat it once petrol began again to flow freely.

This was, of course, because it was easier to travel by train and bus – and, later still, easier travel by car came to dominate. Indeed, the story of the 1950s and the 1960s in Ireland is the story of the inexorable rise of the motor car. It is not, of course, that everybody abandoned the bicycle – nor was it abandoned all at once. But the number of cars on the island grew from about 60,000 in 1935 to about 250,000 in 1960, to 1.1m in 1980 and on to more than 2.5m in 2016. During this time, bicycle racing remained entirely embedded in the sporting culture of post-war Ireland, even if it does not hold the popular fanaticism which it inspires across continental Europe.

Cycling and Partition

People can identify with bicycle racing as something that is familiar – everybody knows what it is to cycle up a hill. And the passions it provoked were revealed, for example, in the extraordinary split that occurred around partition. This was a split that saw the Republic of Ireland enjoy the luxury of having two governing bodies for the sport – the National Cycling Association which claimed jurisdiction over all 32 counties, and Cumann Rothaíocht Éireann, which recognized the border. There is no way to sugar-coat this: the National Cycling Association considered Cumann Rothaíocht Éireann to have sold out on northern nationalists and simply deemed them to a ‘gang of traitors’. There were many glorious instances of disputes to choose from, but perhaps the best was the 1955 World Amateur Cycle Road Race Championships held in Rome. Both associations travelled and claimed to be there to represent Ireland. On the road, just before the race started, they became involved in a fist-fight which ended in imprisonment and international press coverage.

An Rás Tailteann

It was in this context that the Rás Tailteann was established in 1953. Beginning as a two-day cycle race, it eventually grew as long as ten days, with cyclists traversing Ireland in stages. As Tom Daly writes in his brilliant history of that race: ‘Probably the most demanding sporting event in the country’, it touched the psyche of the sporting nation from its inception and became the subject of the dreams and aspirations of Irish cyclists. For the leading riders, success in the Rás was the ultimate prize. For the ordinary rider, the race itself was the prize.

This ‘magical grip’ the Rás had on those who came to see it was real. The passage of one of its stages through an area every few years was a significant local event, anticipated with great enthusiasm. The men who won the Rás were superstars of their day, but as Daly remembers: ‘We would try, usually unsuccessfully, to catch a glimpse of the local man, an individual who, in parochial communities, would always carry the distinction of having ridden the Rás.’

And the Rás – and cycle racing in Ireland in general – continued to prosper after the 1970s, even as the private motor car’s relentless expansion swallowed almost all if the space available on Irish roads. The bicycle became increasingly considered by

many to be the preserve of the child, the student, the poor, or the hopelessly eccentric. In part, this was a reflection of the economic reality of commuter life, suburban estates, feeder towns and so on. But it was also more than that. In the iconography of modern Ireland, the car was a symbol of wealth and prosperity – and the bike simply did not measure up.

Cycling Renaissance

This has changed a little in the last decade with the construction of greenways, cycle paths, activity based holidays, bike-to-work schemes and bike-for-hire stations. It is a reminder that the fever for cycling that gripped Victorian Ireland which was loosened in the twentieth century by the inexorable rise of the motor car, is a fever that has never properly been shaken. The cycling renaissance that has seen great swarms of men and women again cross the countryside on bicycles, this time in highly dubious uniforms of lycra, underlines the timelessness of this ‘freedom machine,’ a machine so vital to life in for generations of Irish people.

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