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Robert Cromie's Writings in the Cycling Press in the 1880s

By Brian Griffin

In a recent issue of *Lecale Review*, Colm Rooney presented a succinct biographical overview of Robert Cromie, a native of Clough, Co. Down, who achieved fame in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a pioneering author in the field of science fiction.¹ In Cromie's first work of science fiction, *A Plunge into Space* (1890), the novel's hero discovers how to control the 'ethereal force' which permeates all matter as well as all space, and uses his discovery to power a large globe-shaped spaceship in which he and his companions travel to Mars. Before Cromie became interested in fictional portrayals of interplanetary travel, his writer's imagination – for a while at least – was focused on a much more earthbound mode of transport than spaceships: the bicycle. A perusal of the British cycling press in the early 1880s shows that Cromie, before he ventured into the new world of science fiction, was also a pioneer in the world of cycling journalism. The first British cycling newspapers and magazines began to emerge in the late 1870s and early 1880s,² to cater for the growing number of cycling enthusiasts, and Cromie was amongst the first identifiable Irish writers to contribute to this new kind of sports publication. Cromie's occasional contributions to the cycling press have never been studied before, and an examination of these writings throws interesting light on the early stages of his career as a writer.³

Most of Cromie's articles were published in *The Wheel World*, a monthly cycling magazine that was edited by Henry Sturmev and C.W. Nairn. This was a typical magazine of its kind, containing numerous advertisements for the latest bicycles, tricycles and cycling accoutrements of various types, as well as the latest news of cycling clubs and race meetings,

practical hints on the maintenance of cycles, humorous sketches and poems, fictional stories with cycling themes, and accounts by readers of their cycling trips. Cromie's contributions to the magazine were of the latter two varieties, consisting of either descriptions of trips that he undertook a wheel or imaginative pieces that usually have cycling more or less at their centre. His first *Wheel World* article, 'A Run through Donegal', was published in the June 1882 edition of the magazine. In this piece, Cromie recounts a two-day car trip (horse-drawn) of some 85 miles that he and three friends made in southern Donegal in May 1877.⁴ Much of his account consists of descriptions of the region's scenery. These are generally positive, particularly when describing the grandeur of Slieve League and its neighbourhood, although he also comments on the dreary monotony of much of the bogland through which the travellers proceeded. Such was the monotonous nature of the bogland terrain between Slieve League and Ardara that the latter village, surrounded as it was with 'pretty hedge rows and green trees', was 'like an oasis in the desert'. In addition to describing the topography of South Donegal, Cromie was also fascinated by the people who lived in this area. He recorded that when travelling between Killybegs and Carrick:

'I was much struck by the number of cabins we saw, and the crowds of people we met. The fact that it was Sunday evening may have had something to do with the number of people, but if it may be taken as representing the usual population, I cannot conceive how they contrive to live in such a wilderness. The girls walked in groups of ten or twelve, and were invariably followed, at a distance of perhaps twenty yards, by an equal number of "the boys". The latter appeared quite happy in this rather uninteresting association; such, however, is the simplicity of these humble people that a more intimate acquaintanceship, at least in public, never strikes them as either necessary or desirable. They seem much pleased when a stranger addresses them in their native tongue, should it be but a few simple words'.

In March 1883, *The Wheel World* published 'Locomotion in the Wild West', in which Cromie narrates the adventures that allegedly befell him and his friend, 'Mc _____', on the final stage of their bicycle tour in an unspecified part of the West of Ireland. After one of their bicycles was badly damaged in a collision, the two friends decided to catch a train at the nearest railway station, some twenty miles away. This necessitated travelling by car, with their fellow passengers being a Royal Irish Constabulary officer and an unnamed 'young lad'. Their first car was abandoned a few miles into the journey after its shaft was broken beyond repair on the poorly maintained road, but their driver, Teague, borrowed a replacement turf cart from a neighbour. There then ensued a rather improbable dash to the distant railway station, with the straps and a shaft of the cart breaking at various points of the journey and receiving makeshift repairs from the resourceful Teague, who managed to deposit his charges at the station just in time to catch the train. The relieved police officer offers his relieved fellow passengers a drink – presumably alcoholic – only to find that it had broken on the accident-prone journey to the railway station.

'Round the Antrim Coast', in which Cromie describes a two-day bicycle journey that he undertook from Ballycastle to Larne, is a much more believable account than the one outlined in 'Locomotion in the Wild West', but it is also much less interesting. Published in the June 1883 edition of *The Wheel World*, it contains none of the flights of imagination of 'Locomotion in the Wild West', nor of the interesting topographical details or descriptions of local inhabitants that one reads in 'A Run through Donegal'. It is also very short – not much longer than one page of the magazine – almost as if Cromie's heart was not in it when he wrote the piece. 'A Ruinous Ride', which appeared in *The Wheel World* in July 1883, is both much longer

and more interesting than 'Round the Antrim Coast'. Cromie explains the meaning of the title of 'A Ruinous Ride' in the article's opening lines:

'Not ruinous from any irreparable disaster to either riders or machines ridden, but from the profuse number, and profound interest to the archæological student, of the ruins visited. Ruins where men have lived whose names have blazed in the grandest pages of history, and in the brightest records of literature; where shattered battlements, crumbling ivy-clad walls, and lofty windows still bear mute testimony to past magnificence. Castles, abbeys, churches and manors – every one with its story of illustrious men, and every ruined hall or every grass-grown courtyard of which has been the scene of famous doings in olden times. All these mournful relics of an epoch whose monuments were erected by no niggard hand, and whose annals were written in everlasting memorials, are lying on every hand through County Meath'.

This article is an account of a day's sightseeing bicycle trip of around 30 miles by Cromie and a friend, which started in Trim and took in visits to King John's Castle and the Yellow Steeple in the aforementioned town; the remains of Jonathan Swift's house and that of his mistress, Stella, at Laracor, a few miles from Trim; the ruins of Dangan Castle, the home and reputed birthplace of the Duke of Wellington; Bective Abbey; and finally the Hill of Tara, before the two cyclists returned to Trim.⁵ In addition to describing the various historical sites that he visited, Cromie also recorded his impressions of the villages and scenery along the route. He was struck favourably by the appearance of Rathmolyon:

'Like Summerhill, two miles distant, it forms a surprising contrast to villages of other parts of Ireland. Cleanliness, loneliness, and comfort, instead of dirt, frolic, and poverty – half a dozen pretty cottages, instead of half a hundred wretched ones – a few well-dressed children round the doors gravely indifferent to the passing cyclist, instead of a score of ragged yelling urchins to whom the wheelman is a thing of beauty and a joy forever'.

As it was a hot day when Cromie and his companion made their trip, the frequent long stretches of road that were shaded by trees and whitethorn hedges delighted Cromie at first, but he adds that 'while delighted with the ride, I would have liked more variety of scene – the average Meath landscape is bounded by the nearest hedge'. Cromie finished his account by explaining that he hoped it would prove of use to cyclists who wished to tour in Meath in the future.

A similar utilitarian impulse appears to have influenced Cromie's 'Through the Mourne Mountains', which *The Wheel World* published in November 1883. In contrast to Meath, with its miles of pretty scenery that offered little variety to the bicycling tourist, Down, Cromie's native county, proved to be by far the most attractive area that he toured, offering both variety of scenery and lots of interesting town and villages to visit, as Cromie explained at the start of his article:

'The southern coast of County Down, if wanting in the wild grandeur of the western seaboard of Ireland, possesses a variety of scene quite peculiar to itself, and eminently picturesque. Rarely are such pleasing contrasts of landscape met with in such close proximity, and if the portion of the coast referred to falls short in point of heroic outline, there is a wonderful softness, one might almost say grace, of contour in the Mourne Range which charms and delights the eye; a voluptuous tenderness in the wavy sky line of Slieve Donard which grows on one, and becomes from familiarity even more enjoyable. Then there are, in an easy day's ride, so many of these contrasts that one is saved from either dullness or monotony. Even the unrelieved monotony of beauty sometimes palls; but Rostrevor, with all the modern surroundings of high-class hotels and elaborate *tables d'hôte*, or Briansford, with its lovely Swiss vistas and wooded dells, absolutely debars the possibility of weariness'.

'Through the Mourne Mountains' is by far the best written of all of Cromie's contributions to *The Wheel World*, combining evocative descriptions of scenery with snippets of local history and folklore and warm descriptions of the towns and villages through which he cycled.

Cromie's love of his native area comes through in the article, as is apparent in his narrative of his route after he rode down the slopes of Slieve Donard:

'Returning to Newcastle after the ascent of the mountain, Briansford will be found a long enough ride for the evening. The road is pleasantly wooded all the way, and the village of Briansford is assuredly a pretty collection of quaint cottages all clad with a shrub covered by a profusion of red berries. The *piece de resistance* is the tableau from the gate into the demesne. The avenue dips abruptly into a deep glen, and over against the steep side of the mountain, covered with fir trees, rises a glorious background to the picture. From the mansion a grand view of mountain, wood, and sea is obtained, which includes almost every possible adjunct of scenic effect. At the bottom of the glen a brook of many bridges winds its way with all sorts of romantic windings, and caves, and overhanging rocks; deep pools, where the brown trout love to dwell, and charming vistas, where photographers love to assemble; fairy bridges, where one lingers till the soft twilight deepens into night, and miniature cascades which sparkle with frothy turbulence over moss-grown rocks. Then side by side with nature's handiwork are grouped artistic loads of choicest flowers – labyrinths of horticultural achievement; every possible assimilation of highest art with natural magnificence obtains. To confess oneself disappointed with Briansford – well, the fault is either in the place or in the critic'.

'An Awkward Ride', published in June 1883, may have been inspired by Cromie's native area. It is a curious effort, which supposedly details Cromie's first attempts to ride a bicycle, but it is difficult to be certain whether it is a work of fact or fiction. The location of the story is

impossible to identify, except that the action takes place in an unidentified village where the author learns to ride a bicycle, and also in 'a mountainous country which rose with hills of varying steepness for very nearly five miles' – this may be in the Mourne, but one can't be certain of this. The vagueness of detail regarding the story's location adds to its fictional quality, as does the episode in which Cromie rides down one of the mountains on his brakeless and out-of-control bicycle, barely escaping with his life at the end of his hair-raising descent.

Cromie produced an undoubted work of fiction in his final contribution to *The Wheel World*, a short story titled 'A Christmas Carol', which was published in December 1883. This is a sentimental tale in which the hero, Jack Williamson, a keen cyclist, departs from his native area for reasons that are unspecified and for a lengthy but unspecified length of time, leaving behind his disconsolate sweetheart, Emmy Pigott. The story ends on a 'wet, sloppy, fog-laden, mud-bedraggled Christmas Eve' when Williamson, expecting a Christmas card from Emmy, receives instead a black-bordered letter from Emmy's mother, telling him that Emmy had died. The heartbroken Williamson never gets over his grief at Emmy's death. In the story's final lines, Cromie contrasts Williamson with his 'philosophical friend' who often remonstrates with Jack on his 'excessive grief' and who frequently holds himself up 'as an example of the way a man should regulate his life without strong passions'. Jack agrees with his friend's self-estimation, but also opines that when his passionless friend dies, he will never have really lived. Cromie published another fictional story in December 1883, in the Christmas edition of *Cyclist* magazine, another British cycling publication which was edited by Henry Sturmey. 'In the Wind's Eye' describes the adventures of the narrator and his friend, nicknamed Belzie – a shortened form of Beelzebub, a name given to him by his friends because of Belzie's 'insatiable propensity for smoking'. Belzie, we are told, was 'a veritable fire god, so far as strong tobacco is

concerned, and is never seen on his wheel unprovided with a massive pipe, one bowlful of which would keep an ordinary mortal in weed for a day'. The first half of the tale focuses on how the two friends gamely battled on their high-wheeled bicycles against muddy roads and strong winds to attend a cricket match around ten miles away. The second half is an amusing account of how the narrator and Belzie and two of their friends spend hours in playing loo, a card game that proves to be so competitive and addictive that the players accumulate unfeasibly high debts, the amounts of which are recorded on IOUs in the form of torn strips of newspaper, until the players finally come to their senses and tear up the incriminating pieces of paper and depart from one another in the small hours of the morning.

In conclusion, one can say that Cromie's contributions to the cycling press in the early 1880s are an eclectic mix of travelogue and fiction, with some blurring of the boundaries between the two genres in one instance. These writings provide a fascinating insight into Cromie the budding writer, who could scarcely have imagined that he would be a famous author at the end of the decade in which he penned these pieces for *The Wheel World* and *Cyclist*.

¹ Colm Rooney, 'From Clough to Eternity: Robert Cromie and *A Plunge into Space*', *Lecale Review*, no. 12 (2014), pp 27-28.

² The first Irish cycling newspaper, *The Irish Cyclist*, was published on 20 May 1885.

³ An obituary of Cromie, published in *Irish News* on 8 April 1907, stated that Cromie 'from his school days showed a literary bent'. These contributions to the cycling press are the earliest known examples of his literary output.

⁴ In an addendum to his article, Cromie describes the condition of the region's roads for the benefit of cyclists, and states that he later cycled along the route that the article describes.

⁵ Cromie may have undertaken this sightseeing trip when he was working in the Trim branch of the Ulster Bank. He started working for the Ulster Bank after completing his studies at Belfast's Royal Adacemical Institution. Details from obituaries in *Belfast News-Letter*, 8 April 1907 and *Larne Times*, 13 April 1907.