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## “As Happy as Seven Kings”: Cycling in Nineteenth-Century Ireland’

In November 1897 the editor of the *Irish Wheelman*, J.C. Percy, surveying recent developments in the cycling trade in Ireland, declared that ‘Cycling has now found its level, which happily, is a very high one. It is no longer a fad or a fancy, but an established factor in modern every day life..... The army of riders is increasing with constant and steady growth, and will continue to enrol in its numbers members of every age, sex, and rank’.

The newspaper’s female columnist, ‘Portia’, commented that

‘The day will come when we shall wonder how we ever existed before the advent of the cycle. Doctors who are still shy about visiting their patients by such locomotive means will do so as an ordinary occurrence. Governesses will arrive at their pupils’ houses on their machines; men and women will pay their calls as a matter of course on their bicycles, while by this means even the frock-coated clergyman will visit his parishioners’.

The revolutionary changes that ‘Portia’ predicted were already occurring in much of Ireland even as she penned her column. Indeed, such was the pace at which cycling’s popularity was growing that in July 1898 the *Irish Tourist* published an imaginative piece, ‘Dublin Fifty Years Hence’, in which the author speculated on how the enthusiasm for cycling would affect the capital city if it persisted into the future. In the Dublin of c.1950, cycling ‘scorchers’ and anybody who deliberately sang ‘Daisy Bell’ would be ‘mercilessly shot down by the nearest passer-by’, while the Liffey between the Custom House and Capel Street would be pumped dry

and the riverbed transformed into a splendid cement cycling track. While cycling obviously never developed to these absurd levels, by the late 1890s it was nevertheless no longer viewed as an unusual 'fad' or 'fancy' but had become a commonplace activity throughout Ireland.

However, cycling was a fringe pursuit for most of the period since the first crude form of bicycle, the Draisienne or dandy-horse or hobby-horse, appeared in Ireland in the summer of 1819. For a few months in this year, Irish 'dandies', like their British and French counterparts, propelled these pedalless machines around fashionable parks, until the novelty of the contraption wore off. In the decades that followed, a few enterprising individuals made their own cycling machines, but without sparking off the kind of wider interest that marked the ephemeral craze for dandy-horses. These pioneering individuals included Robert Manley, a Dungarvan farming implement maker, who in 1843 constructed a form of tricycle with a 'neat gig-like appearance', which was 'propelled by two levers worked pleasantly by the hands and feet', allowing the rider to travel uphill as well as down. Another early tricycle-making innovator was William Bowden of Ballysallagh, County Down, who in 1848 constructed a hand-propelled, foot-steered machine which could be ridden by two riders. Most Irish cyclists before the late 1860s either rode wooden tricycles that they had constructed themselves, or they rode wooden quadricycles that were made in various factories throughout the United Kingdom, including that of a Dublin manufacturer named Andrews.

While cycling in various guises engaged the interest of small numbers of Irishmen in the fifty years since the end of the Napoleonic Wars, the introduction of the first pedal-driven bicycle — the velocipede, or 'boneshaker' — in the late 1860s led to a significant surge of interest in the pastime. The boneshaker, a machine consisting of two wheels and which was propelled by the rider pushing pedals on the front wheel, frequently made for an uncomfortable ride on Ireland's poorly constructed roads, as its nickname suggests; nevertheless, riders were able to travel further and at greater speed on it than they could on wooden tricycles and quadricycles, and the boneshaker quickly became the most popular form of cycle in Ireland. Its popularity was short-lived, however, as it was superseded in the early 1870s by the high-wheeled Ordinary bicycle (often nicknamed the 'Penny-farthing' by non-cyclists): like the boneshaker, the Ordinary was propelled by the rider pushing pedals on the front wheel, but one could travel much further and at greater speed on the Ordinary than one could on the boneshaker, and with less physical effort. Riders of Ordinaries were often pitched headfirst over the handlebars as a result of their machines' front wheels encountering ruts, large stones or potholes, but this only appears to have been an added attraction to the young men who rode 'Penny-farthings'. Throughout the 1870s and 1880s these cyclists regarded themselves as the elite of the Irish cycling world: to ride an Ordinary was not merely a test of skill, but of courage; indeed, men who rode Ordinaries with brakes were deemed by their fellow enthusiasts to be unmanly. At first, not even the development in the mid 1880s of the chain-driven safety bicycle, with two wheels of equal size, enticed many Irish devotees of the Ordinary away

from their favourite machine: because the first safety bicycles had solid rubber tyres, they were slower than the high-wheeled machine. While most young male cyclists rode Ordinaries, older men tended to ride tricycles (which were constructed of metal from the mid 1870s onwards), as did the small numbers of Irish women who took up cycling in the 1870s and 1880s. Many of their machines were 'Dublin' tricycles, patented by William Bindon Blood, a native of Cranagher, in 1876.

The chain-driven safety bicycle did not replace the Ordinary or the tricycle on Ireland's roads until John Boyd Dunlop, a Scottish veterinarian practising in Belfast, demonstrated its superior capabilities when it was fitted with pneumatic tyres. At first, Dunlop was motivated by the challenge of providing a more comfortable ride for his nine-year-old son, Johnnie, whose solid-tyred tricycle vibrated uncomfortably when he cycled over Belfast's poorly surfaced roads; Dunlop then proceeded to develop a pneumatic tyre that would fit a safety bicycle. William Hume of the Cruisers' Cycle Club, riding one of Dunlop's pneumatic-tyred bicycles, caused a sensation when he won all of his races against solid-tyred opposition at Belfast's Queen's College races in May 1889, and the virtues of the new tyre were further demonstrated when a six-man 'Irish Brigade' of racers swept all before them on English racing tracks in 1890. Although it soon transpired that Dunlop's patent for his pneumatic tyre was invalid, as, unknown to Dunlop, another Scot, William Thompson, had taken out a patent for a similar invention in 1845, nevertheless, in the public eye at least, Dunlop was credited as the pneumatic tyre's inventor.

The remarkable racing successes of Hume and the 'Irish Brigade' helped to spark off a popular clamour for pneumatic-tyred safety bicycles in both Ireland and Britain, and the company which was formed by Dunlop and a number of associates in November 1889 was well placed to meet it. After a brief period of production in Dublin, the company relocated to Coventry in 1892, following a court case taken against the company by Dublin Corporation which claimed that it represented a health hazard, due to the noxious smells arising from the rubber and naphtha used to manufacture Dunlop's tyres and tubes. The move to Coventry probably also made sound business sense, however, as the British Midlands was then the centre of the United Kingdom's bicycle manufacturing industry.

Dunlop's invention (or, more accurately, his rediscovery) of the pneumatic tyre revolutionized cycling at home and abroad. Not only did the pneumatic tyre render Ordinaries and tricycles obsolete, but it also made cycling a much more accessible activity to a much wider range of people. While Irish cycling still remained a largely middle-class and upper-class activity in the 1890s, just as it had been in the 1870s and 1880s (while safety bicycles were certainly cheaper than Ordinaries and tricycles, they were still way beyond the purchasing power of most lower-class consumers), a much broader spectrum of middle-class rider took to the wheel in the final decade of the nineteenth century. As its name suggests, the safety bicycle could be ridden without the hair-raising risks that riding an Ordinary often entailed, and the addition of the pneumatic tyre meant that the safety bicycle offered both a relatively smoother and faster ride than any of its predecessors. Middle-class, and, eventually, upper-class

Irish customers of all ages and of both sexes sparked off a remarkable cycling craze in the 1890s, such was their eagerness to ride pneumatic-tyred safeties. The *Irish Cyclist* presented a fascinating picture of cyclists in Dublin's Phoenix Park in May 1896, during the cycling craze:

'To laze away a few hours in the Phoenix Park one of these fine evenings is delightful; and watching the motley train of cyclists that go by is never tiresome. In the early evening the "classes" are out, highly respectable ladies pedalling around with a look meaning "society expects everyone to do their duty, and we are doing it". They are usually followed by well-filled men, getting on to second childhood. A little later, the junior "swells" come out. Refined young men in leggings and driving gloves, tall collars, and other comfort providers. They generally escort ladies — invariably young, but very variable every other way. The man of the "It's all settled, we're only waiting" couple, wants to let everybody see who is the predominant partner. He bowls along as fast as he can, and if has acquired the hands-off trick, he keeps his chest out and hands down straight like a sprinter, and looks around as proud as any animal in the Zoo. The poor little fiancée plugs along hotly behind, her skirt flopping, and her eyes smarting with the dust kicked up by her lover..... A few unescorted ladies come round at intervals, and look quite old enough to take care of themselves. Practising for new-womanhood, we suppose. Once or twice, peculiar figures flash past. Wild-faced men, thirty-anything, with cap off and legs akimbo. There being no asylum in the vicinity, we were forced to conclude that they were jilted lovers, or men out on a "bend". It is twilight, and the "k-r-r-r-r" of the scorchers' wheels begins to be

frequent. Whole files of humped up mixum-gatherums whizz by. Grimy fellows in kinkled trousers; ancient speed-men with pipes; smart club youths, complete with knickers, sweater and badge; oddments in straw hats, long coats, and brogues; machines from crocks to last season's gems; round they go silent as spectres, with a look of comatose unhappiness on their faces. Border the road with dark pines, and they would resemble a band of sad spirits hastening to a Walpurgis night spectre-revel.'

The newspaper exaggerated the unhappiness of 'scorchers', for comic effect: most Irish cyclists would have agreed with J.M. Synge's assessment of the therapeutic effects of cycling, when he stated that he felt 'as happy as seven kings' after one spin on his bicycle.

The pneumatic-tyred safety bicycle was particularly welcomed by middle-class girls and women, as it freed them, at least temporarily, from the stuffy confines of their homes and provided opportunities for exercise and enjoyment that appeared revolutionary and even emancipatory to themselves and to contemporaries. Writing in the 1970s of her childhood years in Rathmines in the 1890s, Sidney Gifford Czira recalled that 'Two girls from our neighbourhood, who cycled a distance of about eighteen miles, with a long rest in the middle, gained a reputation comparable to any astronaut today'. One aspect of the bicycle's revolutionary impact is that it enabled Irish women to challenge prevailing notions about women's physical frailty; the most spectacular instance of this occurred in 1893 when Beatrice Grimshaw, the *Irish Cyclist's* woman correspondent, set a world record for a twenty-four-hour cycle ride by a woman, by riding



some 212 miles on a 'Rover' bicycle, beating the previous record by some five miles. Most Irish women who cycled did not go to the extremes to which Grimshaw went, but were content to go on bicycle 'spins' that did not involve excessive speed or exertion; accounts of women comfortably cycling from thirty to fifty miles in a day were commonplace in the 1890s. It was considered scandalous for women to 'scorch' on their bicycles, and those few Irish women who wore 'bloomers' or 'rational clothes' when cycling were subjected to ridicule or even, on occasion, physical assault: even in the relatively liberated Irish cycling world of the 1890s, then, there were still social constraints on women's cycling. Nevertheless, the safety bicycle enriched Irish women's lives, as outlined by Elizabeth A.M. Priestley of Saintfield in June 1895:

'To glide along at one's sweet will; to feel the delight in rapid motion that is the result of our consciously exerted strength; to skim like a low-flying bird through the panorama of an ever-varying landscape; to know a new-born spirit of independence ..... to return from a country spin with a healthy appetite, a clearer brain, and an altogether happier sense of life — an altogether unaccountable freshness of spirit; this is to experience something of the joys of cycling, and in so doing to rejoice that such a good gift has fallen to modern woman as the safety bicycle'.

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Further reading:

Jim Cooke, *John Boyd Dunlop*, Garristown, 2000

Brian Griffin, *Cycling in Victorian Ireland*, Dublin, 2006