ARTICLES

LIBERATION ON TWO WHEELS: SOCIAL CHANGE AND THE BICYCLE IN H. G. WELLS'S *KIPPS* AND *THE HISTORY OF MR. POLLY*

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Abstract. This article offers an analysis of the cycling scenes contained in two of H. G. Wells's well-known social romances, drawing attention to the ways in which *Kipps: The Story of a Simple Soul* (1905) and *The History of Mr. Polly* (1910) use the bicycle to question and disrupt class hierarchies. Since these novels – unlike their predecessor *The Wheels of Chance* (1896) – focus on the bicycle less explicitly, critics have tended to overlook the potent symbolism of two-wheeled transportation they contain. However, as this reading shows, bicycles frequently bisect the pages of both novels, functioning alternately as a vector of a character's social ascension, a means to challenge the established social order or a way of imagining an alternative organisation of society. Written in the first decade of the twentieth century, when bicycles had ceased to be an aristocratic plaything and begun to offer a truly affordable, democratic form of transport, these novels bear testimony to the importance of mobility choices in shaping modern societies.

> Free people must travel the road to productive social relations at the speed of a bicycle.[1]

H. G. Wells's rich use of the symbol of the bicycle in his fiction is not limited to his well-known early cycling romance, *The Wheels of Chance: A Bicycling Idyll* (1896).[2] Until recently, criticism has tended to overlook his compelling

[1] Ivan Illich, *Energy and Equity* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 12.

[2] The bicycle's compelling role in this novel has been examined in the following articles, amongst others: Yoonjoung Choi, 'The Bi-Cycling Mr Hoopdriver: Counter-Sporting Victorian Reviving the Carnivalesque', *Critical Survey*, 24.1 (2012), 102-15; Simon J. James, 'Fin-de-Cycle: Romance and the Real in *The Wheels of Chance*', in *H. G. Wells: Interdisciplinary Essays*, ed. Steven McLean (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2008), 34-48; Simon J. James, *Maps of Utopia: H. G. Wells, Modernity, and the End of Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University

narrative and symbolic use of bicycles in a number of later novels, including *The War of the Worlds* (1898), *Kipps: The Story of a Simple Soul* (1905), *The War in the Air* (1908) and *The History of Mr. Polly* (1910).[3] A keen cyclist from the 1880s, Wells drew some of his earliest literary inspiration from bicycle rides. In 1895, the author recorded that 'I learnt to ride my bicycle upon sandy tracks with none but God to help me; he chastened me considerably in the process, and after a fall one day I wrote down a description of the state of my legs which became the opening chapter of *The Wheels of Chance*.'[4] The passion he developed for cycling was translated onto the page by means of various fictional cyclists, who rarely play a merely anecdotal role. Indeed, Wells frequently mobilises various means of transportation in his fiction as a metaphor for movement through the strata of British society, a strategy that he makes explicit towards the end of *Kipps*, when the narrator invites the reader to 'imagine fleeing through our complex and difficult social system as it were for life, first on foot and severally to the Folkestone Central Station, then in a first class carriage, [...] then in a four-wheeler, a long, rumbling, palpitating, slow flight through the multitudinous swarming London streets'.[5] In this instance, as we shall see, Kipps's flight marks the beginning of his downward spiral after being rocketed into the upper echelons of British society. The various means of transport evoked here give a sense of the importance for Wells of locomotion in individuals' relations with class structures, as well as in determining the character of societies to come.

Wells's use of the bicycle and other machines in his fiction conforms to Herbert Sussman's observation that 'primarily the machine appears in those Victorian writers most directly concerned with immediate social

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Press, 2012); Hiroshi So, '*The Wheels of Chance* and the Discourse of Improvement of Health', *The Wellsian: The Journal of the H. G. Wells Society*, 29 (2006), 37-47.

[3] Notable exceptions include works by Jeremy Withers: his recent monograph *The War of the Wheels: H. G. Wells and the Bicycle* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2017), along with the following articles: 'Bicycles, Tricycles, and Tripods: Late Victorian Cycling and Wells's *The War of the Worlds*', *The Wellsian: The Journal of the H. G. Wells Society*, 36 (2013), 39-50; 'Bicycles and Warfare: The Effects of Excessive Mobility in H. G. Wells's *The War in the Air*', in *Culture on Two Wheels: The Bicycle in Literature and Film*, ed. Jeremy Withers and Daniel P. Shea (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2016), 78-93.

[4] H. G. Wells, *Experiment in Autobiography* [1934], in 2 vols. (London: Jonathan Cape, 1969), II, 543.

[5] H. G. Wells, *Kipps: The Story of a Simple Soul* [1905] (London: Collins, 1961), 231. Henceforth referred to as *K*.

problems.'[6] Wells – briefly a member of the Fabian society, and a lifelong socialist – used his fiction to wage a direct attack on Victorian class structures. As became evident in his feud with his former friend Henry James, he refused the idea that art should be autonomous from society. Rather, as Simon J. James points out, he believed in 'the necessity for art to engage directly in creating the utopia that he saw as the only alternative to mankind's self-destruction'.[7] Indeed, Wells's social novels share with his science fiction their utopian stance. Throughout his writing, Wells explored possible other worlds in order to draw attention to the contradictions and the injustices of the one in which he was living. In his social novels, the bicycle allows characters to journey into another realm, not dissimilar to the world into which Wells's Time Traveller is projected by his conspicuously bicycle-like time machine.[8] In the above epigraph, Ivan Illich portrays cycling as a vector of more equal, 'productive social relations', since it remains accessible to all, while respecting the social 'speed limit' beyond which inequalities are exponentially exaggerated. For Wells, the bicycle also plays a revolutionary, equalising role, bringing those at opposite ends of the social spectrum to the same level by giving them the same modest geographical scope. The novels I examine mobilise the bicycle as a means to propel their characters into another social reality; and for each of Wells's heroes it becomes a means of subversively and creatively exploring the byways of the existing social hierarchy.

Here, I focus on the long-overlooked role of the bicycle in *Kipps* and *The History of Mr. Polly*. These two novels have in common a young draper hero, who aspires to gain more from life than selling fabric to his social superiors, much like the hero of *The Wheels of Chance* and Wells himself in his youth. While Hoopdriver channels his desire for a better life into a cycling holiday, Kipps and Mr Polly discover freedom when they unexpectedly inherit money. In the latter two novels, cycling does not provide the backbone of the narrative, yet bicycles frequently recur in the story in connection with the characters' ascendant or descendant social status. Moreover, the temporal span of these three novels, from the height of the bicycle boom to the beginning of the motor-car era, permits us to trace how the class significance of transport technology evolved across the period. While Kipps, like Hoopdriver, mimics the attitude of a gentleman cyclist, Mr

[6] Herbert L. Sussman, *Victorians and the Machine: The Literary Response to Technology* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968), 3.
[7] James, 'Fin-de-Cycle', 34.
[8] H. G. Wells, *The Time Machine* [1895] (London: Book Club, 1980), 22-24.

Polly takes to cycling as part of a rejection of the concept of social climbing. In Wells's novels, the bicycle emerges as an amorphous symbol that refuses to be associated with a single category. It takes us on a meandering, subversive ride through the intricate and often infuriating social reality in which Wells's characters dwell. Jeremy Withers broke new ground in this domain with his recent monograph *The War of the Wheels: H. G. Wells and the Bicycle* (2016), which includes a brief analysis of the bicycle's role in *Mr. Polly* and a lengthier one in *Kipps*. While I concur with Withers that 'Wellsian bicycles flicker between the literal and the figurative, the concrete and the metaphorical' – with the bicycle often playing a complex, ambivalent role, somewhere between liberating its users and enslaving them to technology – my reading of the bicycle's role in these two novels diverges significantly from that proposed by Withers.[9] Indeed, the association Withers establishes between the bicycle and capitalist commodification in *Kipps* could not be further from my interpretation of this novel, which I maintain portrays the bicycle as a social leveller.

Sociable cyclists, contingency and upward mobility in *Kipps*

Kipps provides us with a compelling case study of Wells's use of the bicycle in his social fiction. The bicycle does not play such an obvious role in this novel as in Wells's first cycling romance *The Wheels of Chance*, since the object is rarely associated with the protagonist; rather, it is his contact with other cyclists that most often plays a crucial narrative role. Withers focuses solely on the bicycle's association with Kipps's childhood friend Sid, whom he interprets as displaying 'attitudes toward the bicycle [that] are hopelessly enmeshed in a capitalist ethos and in the values of a commodity culture.'[10] I challenge this view of Sid and focus on several other characters' connection to cycling, notably the eccentric playwright Chitterlow. In this account of Artie Kipps's rags-to-riches return trip, the bicycle recurrently crops up in the narrative as a symbol of opportunity, chance and contingency, all of which may lead protagonists up or down the social ladder. The bicycle provides a means of re-reading this well-known novel, providing a perspective that allows us to come into fresh contact with the text. Above all, the bicycle affirms the importance of values such as spontaneity, empathy and sociability and incarnates both a refusal of and an alternative to stifling Victorian class codes.

[9] Withers, *The War of the Wheels*, 4.
[10] Ibid., 142.

The bicycle makes its first appearance in the novel in a description of the young Artie Kipps, who 'by inherent nature [...] had a sociable disposition. When he was in the High Street he made a point of saying "Hallo!" to passing cyclists' (*K* 9). In the humdrum world of New Romney, where Kipps is brought up by his aged aunt and uncle, the enterprising and enthusiastic young boy is drawn to the adventure and opportunity embodied in the rare sight of cyclists who pass through the village. His spontaneous friendliness is given an outlet by interacting with the riders of this quintessentially sociable vehicle, which Marc Augé has credited with 'the reinvention of amicable, light-hearted social relations, which are perhaps fleeting but nonetheless carry with them a certain *joie de vivre*'.[11] While Augé is writing in the context of car-infested twenty-first century cities, the bicycle functioned in a similar way in late-nineteenth-century streets by reinstating roads and villages as spaces of encounter in the wake of the railway age. In Illich's terms, the bicycle is a 'convivial' tool which invites creative human interaction in public spaces.[12] By reviving the possibility of roadside meetings from coaching days, the bicycle invited a new, ephemeral paradigm of interpersonal interaction, based on brief meetings between strangers from various social strata. Kipps's spontaneous interaction with these cyclists contrasts sharply with the description of his aunt and uncle some lines earlier, who 'never received visitors' and, fearing mixing with their social inferiors or superiors, '"kept themselves to themselves," according to the English ideal' (*K* 9). The young boy's irreverence towards the strictures of the English class system is thus incarnated from the opening pages of the novel in the image of the passing cyclists he enthusiastically greets.

Some ten pages later, the bicycle reappears when the adolescent Kipps is told a secret by his friend Sid. Sid confides he has a 'girl', and Kipps is taken aback on discovering her identity, since 'Maud Charteris was a young person of eighteen and the daughter of the vicar of St. Bavon's – besides which, she had a bicycle – so that as her name unfolded, the face of Kipps

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[11] Marc Augé, *Éloge de la bicyclette* (Paris: Payot & Rivages, 2008), 36: 'la réinvention de liens sociaux aimables, légers, éventuellement éphémères, mais toujours porteurs d'un certain bonheur de vivre.'

[12] Ivan Illich, *Tools for Conviviality* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 34-5. Here, Illich states that 'Convivial tools are those which give each person who uses them the greatest opportunity to enrich the environment with the fruits of his or her vision.' These include most hand tools (within which category Illich includes the bicycle) and the telephone.

lengthened with respect. "Get out," he gasped incredulously. "She ain't your girl, Sid Pornick"' (*K* 19). Kipps's incredulity is well founded, for Maud's age and class make her inaccessible to the haberdasher's son Sid, who in fact can only dream of being involved with this young cyclist. This second occurrence of the bicycle in the account of Kipps's formative years points to its potent symbolic link to the superior social class into which the young man is to ascend within the course of the novel. Although Sid does not become romantically involved with the vicar's daughter, he leaves home at fourteen to be apprenticed in a bicycle shop (*K* 38). At the same time, carefree young Kipps (who has meanwhile fallen in love with Sid's younger sister Ann) starts his apprenticeship as a draper in Folkestone.

The difference between the friends' career paths is patent, as Sid gradually rises through the ranks and is eventually able to open his own bicycle shop, while Kipps remains on the bottom rung of the ladder in the drapery emporium, becoming a mere cog in the capitalist machine. 'Dimly he perceived the thing that had happened to him', the typically condescending narrator relates, 'how the great stupid machine of retail trade had caught his life into its wheels, a vast, irresistible force which he had neither strength of will nor knowledge to escape' (*K* 37). In contrast to the senseless, exploitative wheels of retail, the bicycle is portrayed as a machine that allows Sid to achieve financial autonomy and to navigate an individual route through the unfriendly waters of commerce.

While Sid's star rises in his London bicycle shop, the machine plays a key role in the radical change that occurs in Kipps's fortune thanks to his chance encounter with Chitterlow, a character whom Michael Draper aptly describes as 'an amusingly disruptive figure whose vitality is associated with rule-breaking and intoxication'.[13] While Kipps is walking through Folkestone one evening, thinking about his desirable but unattainable woodcarving teacher Helen Walshingham 'in a state of profound melancholia [...] Fortune came upon him, in disguise and with a loud shout [...] followed immediately by a violent blow in the back' (*K* 59). A series of confused sensations ensues, until Kipps is helped up from the ground and finds himself 'confronting a figure holding a bicycle'. 'The bicyclist', as Chitterlow is metonymically called during the whole four-page scene, proceeds to excuse himself, alternately blaming the accident on his handlebars, the hill he was descending, or his own lack of skill. The cyclist's sympathy is perhaps spurred by the approach of a policeman (who could fine him for 'scorching' and for having no lamp), and he offers to bring Kipps to

[13] Michael Draper, *H. G. Wells* (London: Macmillan, 1987), 77.

his house so he can clean his wounds and repair his ripped trousers. 'Accidents *will* happen', he remarks as they walk to his home, 'Especially when you get *me* on a bicycle' (*K* 60). Chitterlow thanks Kipps for pretending there had been no accident in the policeman's presence, prophetically telling him: 'You acted like a gentleman over that slop' (*K* 60). As we shall see, this collision does in fact have the unlikely result of transforming humble Kipps into a gentleman.

Once he has served Kipps a glass of whisky, Chitterlow remarks: 'it's curious how one runs up against people bicycling! [...] half an hour ago we didn't know we existed. Leastways we didn't know each other existed. I might have passed you in the street, perhaps, and you might have passed me' (*K* 63). This central scene highlights the contingency of modern experience, and the paradoxical role played by transportation and communication technologies in both hindering and facilitating human encounters. In an increasingly anonymised, fast-paced urban environment, Georg Simmel observed, human contact is sidelined or limited to monetary exchange; we cultivate 'a necessary indifference to those around us'.[14] As Chitterlow's slip 'we didn't know we existed' suggests, the metropolis also dulls the human sensorium through over-stimulation, leading to a certain loss of our place within our surroundings.[15] Cycling participated in the acceleration of urban environments, yet the fact that the cyclist remains open to his surroundings and in control of his itinerary means that it is a propitious vehicle for encouraging human contact. For Kipps, the bicycle plays a very different role than it did for the newly mobile draper Hoopdriver, or for the enterprising mechanic Sid. It is an external force that acts upon him, a point of entry into another social reality unchosen by him. The bicycle acts as an intermediary, unexpectedly allowing a well-educated if struggling playwright's path to cross with that of a lowly draper's assistant.

The pair stay up drinking until morning; Kipps arrives late and hungover to work and consequently receives his dismissal. Yet two days later Chitterlow calls on the despondent Kipps with a cutting from a newspaper, which he fishes out from his pocket along with 'a bicycle pump' and various other paraphernalia (*K* 83). The barely literate Kipps struggles to understand the meaning of the advertisement, and Chitterlow is obliged to explain to him that 'It means [...] that you're going to strike it Rich' (*K* 83). With Chitterlow's help, and after some hesitation, Kipps responds to the letter and

[14] Georg Simmel, 'The Metropolis and Mental Life', in *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, trans. Kurt H. Wolff (London: Free Press, 1950), 415.
[15] Ibid., 410.

discovers his grandfather (who, as an illegitimate child, he never knew) has bequeathed him a house and an income of twelve hundred pounds a year. Here, the democratising potential of the bicycle is thrown into sharp relief. Upper middle-class Chitterlow has access to both modes of transport and forms of knowledge that are denied to poorly educated Kipps. The advertisement about Kipps's inheritance, placed in a newspaper read by the higher social classes, was unlikely to be read by him or by any of his circle – a fact that uncovers the closed nature of the social and economic establishment, where information is only circulated between the initiated. It is the draper's fortuitous collision with the cycling playwright that tears the fabric of this unjust logic, allowing Kipps access to the carefully guarded higher echelons of society.

During the initial shock of the discovery, Kipps glimpses Chitterlow crossing the street, remembering: 'Of course, it was Chitterlow who had told him first of the whole thing!' (*K* 91). He rushes after him to tell him the news, but he loses sight of him in the maze of streets. Nonetheless, he reflects that 'the sight of Chitterlow was a wholesome thing, it connected events together, joined him on again to the past at a new point, and that was what he so badly needed' (*K* 91). Although the cyclist is on foot in this scene, his initial identity as 'the bicyclist' is recalled by his rapid movement and his sudden disappearance round a corner. He has been instrumental in leading Kipps to his fortune, yet he remains elusive and aloof at this moment of realisation of the extent of the young man's fortune and subsequent change in status. Moreover, the temporal continuity for which Kipps craves is enshrined in the image of the cyclist, a traveller on a fluid, gradual journey, rather than one who is simply transported to destination in a train, car or aeroplane. The brutal, sudden nature of Kipps's change in status recalls mechanised means of transport or communication that negate the agency of the human in a complete abandonment to the machine.

As Kipps gradually comes to appreciate the implications of the wealth he has acquired, he connects the bicycle to an almost medieval idea of social hierarchy, wondering: 'Over a thousand a year made him an Esquire, didn't it? [...] In which case, wouldn't he have to be presented at court? Velvet breeches, like you wear cycling, and a sword!' (*K* 116). His flights of fancy about possible purchases include 'a motor-car' and 'a bicycle and a cyclist suit' (*K* 103), and he soon begins a course of private cycling lessons (*K* 134). As Kipps is rocketed into Folkestone high society, he is mentored in etiquette, elocution and reading by a certain Mr Cootes, but his social shortcomings are painfully clear to the new company he keeps. Cootes looks benevolently upon Kipps's interest in cycling, while insisting on the

importance of continuing his education in manners, literature and other subjects. When Mrs Walsingham observes: 'He's going in for his bicycle now', Cootes replies: 'That's all right for summer, [...] but he wants to go in for some serious intellectual interest' (*K* 167). As a new member of the upper class, Kipps is now expected to demonstrate intellectual and cultural capital. Rather than aiming to extend Kipps's range of experience genuinely, however, his tutor simply aims to make him appear cultivated, to enable him to play the convincing role of a member of the leisured upper classes. Recalling what Yoonjoung Choi characterises as the Bakhtinian carnivalesque use of the bicycle as an external marker of social status in *The Wheels of Chance*, Kipps's attempts to emulate the accent, habits and intellectual pursuits of the upper class only reveal the arbitrariness of such a system, inviting a critical outlook on contemporary social organisation.[16]

One morning soon after Kipps has become a rich man, Chitterlow calls on him, acting as 'a reminder of a world quite outside those spheres of ordered gentility' (*K* 118) in which he has been strenuously attempting to immerse himself. Although he had planned to spend the day reading 'a precious little volume called *Don't* that Coote had sent round for him – a book of invaluable hints, a summary of British deportment', and attempt a 'difficult exercise called an Afternoon Call' (*K* 123), Chitterlow takes him for 'a great walk, not a long one, but a great one', into 'a wilderness of thorn and bramble, wild rose and wayfaring tree', suggestive of 'Alpine adventure' (*K* 120). The playwright, meanwhile, waxes lyrical on his art, and urges his friend to buy a half-share in his next play. After their walk, they enjoy a 'simple but sufficient meal [...] distributed with careless spontaneity' by Mrs Chitterlow. Their Romantic ramble and simple repast could not contrast more sharply with the idle, sophisticated lifestyle that Kipps is vainly attempting to emulate. Although Kipps eventually finds himself slightly irritated by his friend's intrusion – and especially at his financial request, to which he nonetheless later agrees – it is clear where the narrator's sympathies lie, as he steps forward to beg the reader's indulgence, advising: 'You must not think too hardly of him' (*K* 123). It will take some time before Kipps, greatly relieved, is forced to climb back down the social ladder, but Chitterlow's frank, simple presence at this early stage in his social ascendancy acts as a counterfoil to the disingenuous nature of upper-class life. Although it was indeed the cyclist who initially pointed Kipps's way out of enslavement to the vast 'machine of retail trade' (*K* 37), the route he

[16] Choi, 112.

suggests is a very different one from that encouraged by the superficial world into which Kipps has just been projected.

In the fourth chapter, entitled 'The Bicycle Manufacturer', Kipps hires a motor-car to make his first trip back to his home town after coming into his inheritance, ostensibly to tell his aunt and uncle about his engagement to Helen Walshingham. In New Romney, he bumps into his childhood friend Sid, now a successful bicycle manufacturer who boasts that his 'Red Flag' bicycle is the 'best machine at a democratic price in London. No guineas and no discounts – honest trade. I build 'em – to order. I've built [...] seventeen. Counting orders in 'and...' (*K* 154). When Kipps reveals he has inherited money and a house, and become engaged to educated, upper middle-class Helen, Sid is both surprised and indignant. He points to the hypocrisy of a system that pays most to the most idle in society, affirming 'I'm a Socialist, you see' (*K* 155). Sid offers his frank opinion on 'the Present distribution of Wealth' (*K* 155), suggesting an alternative organisation of society; he imagines that if he came into such money, he would 'start an Owenite profit-sharing factory perhaps. Or a new Socialist paper' (*K* 156). He exhibits 'disgust' at the price Kipps paid to hire his motor-car, as he watches his friend drive off the narrator remarks: 'The young mechanic had just discovered that to have manufactured seventeen bicycles, including orders in hand, is not so big a thing as he had supposed, and such discoveries try one's manhood' (*K* 157).

Jeremy Withers sees Sid as 'an anti-capitalist capitalist (or an anti-socialist socialist)' who 'is [...] like any capitalist, taking advantage of consumers by selling his product at a markup in order to turn a profit.'[17] Sid the self-made bicycle manufacturer is of course participating in a profit-driven system, drawing revenue from the sale of an object in high demand. 'Money and credit are as much human contrivances as bicycles', Wells wrote in *Anticipations* (1901), 'and as liable to expansion and modification as any other sort of prevalent but imperfect machine.'[18] Overproduction and falling prices during the bicycle boom provoked a financial crisis in 1898, most keenly felt in the US, and bicycle manufacturers such as Alexander Pope developed mass production techniques on a proto-Fordian model.[19] In addition, the manufacture of bicycles relied on colonial rubber extracted at

[17] Withers, *The War of the Wheels*, 140.
[18] H. G. Wells, *Anticipations of the Reaction of Mechanical and Scientific Progress Upon Human Life and Thought* [1901] (Auckland, N.Z.: Floating Press, 2008), 315.
[19] David V. Herlihy, *Bicycle: The History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 290.

the cost of many lives in central Africa. On a global scale, then, bicycle production can hardly be seen as challenging the predominant economic paradigm, yet locally the mushrooming of bicycle manufacturers often revived flagging economies and suggested alternative forms of economic organisation. The prime example in the UK is Coventry, where bicycle manufacture took over from the production of watches and sewing machines as the new cottage industry; by the 1890s, 248 different cycle manufacturers employed approximately 40,000 workers in the city.[20] Glen Norcliffe characterises the bicycle industry in Coventry as creative and collaborative, consisting of an 'interconnected network of "actors" and innovative firms [...], a pool of skilled entrepreneurs and workers' in which 'ideas were shared, and the actors, although competitive, were also to a degree cooperative.'[21] Unlike Withers, I see Sid's small-scale production of bicycles in Hammersmith as a refusal of the generation of surplus value through large-scale mechanised production. Sid's seventeen hand-built bicycles stand in silent, humble opposition to Kipps's noisy motor-car and the accumulated wealth that lies behind it. The manual skills required for the construction of bicycles and on which Sid builds his modest living contrast sharply with the idle lifestyle Kipps now leads. The self-perpetuating wealth the hero has inherited recalls his hired motor-car, as both rely on complex, capitalist processes (extracting rent from the poor; extracting petrol from the ground). Sid and his bicycles propose a simpler model of mobility and economy, founded on a non-exploitative use of both human labour and energy.

The opening pages of Chapter 6 relate Kipps's first bicycle journey, and are rich in details that explore the bicycle's complex and somewhat paradoxical effect on an individual's interaction with his or her environment and society. While Chitterlow and Sid's bicycles have thus far acted as external forces on the protagonist, respectively helping him discover his fortune and suggesting an alternative economic model, Kipps's own experience of cycling forces him to consider the subjective impact of his sudden change in status. Kipps rides to New Romney in a second attempt at informing his family of his engagement (and his corresponding social ascendancy, including a change of name from Kipps to Cuyps), something he had neglected to do on his previous visit. The chapter begins: 'One day

[20] See Geoffrey Williamson, *Wheels within Wheels: The Story of the Starleys of Coventry.* (London: Bles, 1966); Glen Norcliffe, 'The Rise of the Coventry Bicycle Industry and the Geographical Construction of Technology', *Cycle History*, 15 (2004), 41-58.
[21] Norcliffe, 55.

Kipps set out upon his newly mastered bicycle to New Romney, to break the news of his engagement to his uncle and aunt – positively. He was now a finished cyclist, but as yet an unseasoned one; [...] ever and again he got off and refreshed himself by a spell of walking' (*K* 173). His slow-paced approach to his home town invites significant insights about 'the atmosphere of New Romney', which had 'some faint and impalpable quality that was missing in the great world of Folkestone' (*K* 173). The 'homeliness' and 'familiarity' Kipps senses are certainly linked to the fact that he grew up in these surroundings, yet the close observation permitted by his chosen forms of locomotion (cycling and walking alternately) allows for a specific, nostalgic engagement with place, as illustrated in the following passage:

> He had noted as he passed that old Mr. Clifferdown's gate had been mended with a fresh piece of string. In Folkestone he didn't take notice, and he didn't care if they built three hundred houses. [...] It was fine and grand to have twelve hundred a year; it was fine to go about on trams and omnibuses and think not a person on board was as rich as oneself [...] but yet there had been a zest in the old time out here, a rare zest in the holidays, in sunlight, on the sea beach, and in the High Street, that failed from these new things. (*K* 173)

Modes of locomotion come to the fore as Kipps begins to gain awareness that wealth will not bring him happiness, and that the latter is the more precious of the two. It is by slowing his movement to walking or cycling pace, and being observant of small details in his surroundings, that this crucial realisation – inaccessible to the unobservant, passive tram or omnibus passenger – comes to him.

On the road into New Romney, Kipps bumps into his childhood sweetheart Ann Pornick, who is now employed in domestic service. He neglects to mention his change in status to her, and they walk companionably together, talking 'with remarkable ease to one another' (*K* 174). Ann incarnates the nostalgia in which Kipps had been absorbed before meeting her, and he is deeply moved by the encounter, so much that he once again forgets to share the news of his engagement with his aunt and uncle. On his journey back to Folkestone, the bicycle's role is transformed; it becomes a vector of his social distance from the people and places he knew as a child, and engenders a fragmented, subjective interaction with place that prefigures modernist narrative technique, as illustrated in the following description:

> The south-west wind perhaps held him back; at any rate he found himself through Dymchurch without having noticed the place. There came an odd effect as he drew near Hythe. The hills on the left and the trees on the right

> seemed to draw together and close in upon him until his way was straight and narrow. He could not turn round on that treacherous half-tamed machine, but he knew that behind him, he knew so well, spread the wide vast flatness of the Marsh shining under the afternoon sky. In some way this was material to his thoughts. And as he rode through Hythe, he came upon the idea that there was a considerable amount of incompatibility between the existence of one who was practically a gentleman and of Ann. (*K* 176)

His skills of close observation have now evaporated: the machine and his incomplete mastery of it (he is not yet a proficient enough cyclist to look over his shoulder while riding) now give him tunnel vision, forcing him to look ahead. He is denied a view of the Marsh he knew in his childhood, and the straight and narrow road on which he is travelling inevitably brings to mind his newfound social superiority and the yawning gap between himself and the servant Ann. It is the bicycle's liminal position between corporeal and mechanical means of locomotion that allows it to play an equivocal role in this sequence. On his slow-paced, observant journey to New Romney, the bicycle encourages Kipps to reconnect with his past and question the value of his new life as a gentleman. Yet on the return trip, his bicycle provides a means by which he accelerates into his new lifestyle, away from the people and places of his childhood. It is important to note that a condition of this latter function is Kipps's inability to control his bicycle fully, leaving him at the mercy of the 'treacherous' machine. Unable to turn around to glance at the landscape that vividly recalls his past, Kipps feels the machine has taken over, negating his own agency as its rider. Although none of Kipps's further bicycle rides are related in any detail in the novel, it is fair to presume that as the cyclist becomes a more proficient rider and gains mastery over the machine, he may find a balance between the extreme observant/nostalgic and unobservant/progressive ways of seeing, both evoked in connection with the bicycle in this chapter.

Following this visit to New Romney, Kipps begins to feel increasingly ill at ease and out of place in his new social circle in Folkestone. He returns to see Ann, and is unable to face Helen Walshingham, but nonetheless writes to his aunt and uncle to inform them of his engagement to her. On receiving the reply that they are coming directly to Folkestone to meet his fiancée, Kipps takes flight to London, fearing the coming collision between his old world and the new one, which he imagines would be 'a hideous, impossible disaster' (*K* 188). London provides Kipps with a comforting temporary anonymity, but even there his ambiguous social identity is a source of constant anxiety; unsure that his table manners are up to the task, he avoids dining at the Royal Grand Hotel, yet he feels too well dressed to go into a

fish shop. While roaming hungrily through the streets, he meets Sid by chance, who invites him home for mutton. They travel third class on the Underground to Sid's shop in Hammersmith, 'a practical-looking establishment, stocked with the most remarkable collection of bicycles and pieces of bicycle that he [Kipps] had ever beheld' (*K* 194). The bicycle shop provides the setting for what Ivan Melada has seen as an important instance of socialist propaganda appearing in Wells's novels.[22]

Here, Kipps meets Sid's lodger Masterman, an impoverished socialist intellectual suffering from tuberculosis.[23] His conversation with Kipps acts as a moment of epiphany for the unenlightened protagonist, whom the narrator has consistently depicted as the eponymous 'simple soul'. Masterman asks Kipps how it feels to be rich, and goes on to argue that individual and collective happiness cannot be achieved by the accumulation of wealth. 'As for happiness', Masterman maintains, 'you want a world in order before money or property or any of those things have any real value, and this world, I tell you, is hopelessly out of joint' (*K* 198). Masterman's judgement is illustrated by Kipps's dilemma; although he has found wealth, he is far from being happy, as he feels himself to be in contradiction with the world around him. Masterman illustrates his conviction that people are essentially similar through a transport metaphor, arguing that 'your cads in a bank holiday train, and your cads on a two thousand pound motor, except for a difference in scale, there's not a pin to choose between them' (*K* 199). These modes of transport, while functioning as markers of false distinctions between people, also shape people's behaviour, and frequently in harmful ways. Masterman decries the senseless waste in the current application of technology, arguing that 'God gives them [the rich] a power like the motor-car, and all they can do with it is to go careering about the roads in goggled masks, killing children and making machinery hateful to the souls of men!' (*K* 201).[24] Occurring within the confines of Sid's bicycle shop, Masterman's speech is an invitation to more sober, compassionate ways of living that

[22] Ivan Melada, Review of *Socialist Propaganda in the Twentieth Century British Novel*, by David Smith, *Studies in the Novel*, 12.1 (1980), 95-96 (95).

[23] We may presume that Wells named this character after his contemporary, the liberal writer and government minister C. F. G. Masterman, who authored *The Condition of England* in 1909.

[24] This mirrors C. F. G. Masterman's view of motor-cars as an 'extravagance of wealth and waste' (C. F. G. Masterman, *The Condition of England* (London: Methuen, 1909), 23).

could not be further from the pretentious, unfulfilling, wasteful lifestyle of the English upper classes.

On returning to Folkestone, Kipps breaks off his engagement with Helen, marries his childhood sweetheart Ann and settles down to 'a quiet little life' with her, including trips to New Romney by bicycle (*K* 235). Finally, in a familiar Wellsian trope (partly based on the author's own biography), Kipps loses most of his fortune due to speculation by Helen's brother and by undertaking to build a grand house. In the closing pages of the novel, the couple have set up a bookshop and are raising their firstborn, receiving occasional cheques from Chitterlow, thanks to Kipps's share in his play, which turned out to be a great success. Thus, the eccentric cyclist who first announced Kipps's change in status makes an understated return as the novel ends. Rather than bringing a great fortune, he assures them a small income that allows them to live modestly and happily. Overall, as a motif in *Kipps*, the bicycle stands for convivial encounters between strangers, occasionally acting as a social accelerator which projects the protagonist into another reality, or functioning as an intermediary between two different social spheres. The bicycle plays the role of a counter-cultural subversive force, actively rejecting a profit-driven outlook in order to concentrate on alternative routes to human happiness. This aspect of the bicycle's symbolism comes to the fore in the figure of another Wellsian cyclist, Mr Polly.

Alternative routes to happiness in *The History of Mr. Polly*

Wells invents a further semi-autobiographical cycling draper in *The History of Mr. Polly*.[25] In *The Wheels of Chance*, the bicycle stands for temporary yet subversive social ascendancy; in *Kipps*, it is an equivocal symbol, suggesting an alternative path to personal betterment, and finally in *Mr. Polly*, it points to a clear rejection of a wealth-driven, capitalist organisation of society. This evolution in the symbolism of the bicycle across the three novels can at least partly be explained by their temporal span. While the bicycle was associated with the upper class in 1896, by the early twentieth century the aristocracy had become enamoured by the motor-car, and the bicycle's modernity had become tarnished. As such, by the time Wells wrote *Mr. Polly*, the bicycle was no longer a status symbol, but potentially a means for critiquing capitalist society. Mr Polly does just this, not by backing any definite social

[25] H. G. Wells, *The History of Mr. Polly* (London: Pan, 1963). Henceforth referred to as *HMP*.

or political programme, but by championing sociability, creativity, spontaneity and happiness.

Although he does not learn to ride a bicycle in his youth, the machine plays a background role in Alfred Polly's life from its beginning, since his retired father had run a 'music and bicycle shop' (*HMP* 45). While Polly's education, like that of Kipps, has left him with little more than a confused jumble of ideas, he is a sensitive and intelligent character who loves literature and 'dream[s] always of picturesque and mellow things' (*HMP* 49). Indeed, as Michael Draper puts it, Alfred Polly combines Kipps's 'comic rebelliousness' with Chitterlow's 'transforming imagination', thus resulting in 'Wells's most heroic, most memorable and least patronised character'.[26] However, Polly is still patronised to an extent, and John Carey groups him together with Wells's 'lower-middle-class types – Polly, Hoopdriver, Kipps', towards whom Wells has an equivocal stance: 'Wells's attitude to them [...] is divided. He feels for them, but does not quite treat them as men.'[27] In spite of the persistence of a somewhat condescending narrative tone, the portrait of Polly contains much more psychological detail than those of his predecessors. The bicycle plays an important role in his characterisation, contributing to both the imaginative and rebellious aspects of Polly's personality.

Polly seems to have a disposition that is singularly unsuited to the demeaning work of shop-keeping; yet just like Hoopdriver and Kipps, he is trained as a draper and works in an emporium. Disgusted at the violent dismissal of his friend Parsons (for his over-creative decorating of a shop window), he quits his stable job in the emporium; then follows a period of unemployment and various short-term jobs, which leave him feeling like a rabbit 'in a net' (*HMP* 53). All this is to change on the death of his father, when Polly inherits a modest three hundred and fifty pounds, thanks to an insurance policy and his father's savings. His small inheritance frees him from life as an employee, allowing him to begin to reflect on different ways of living. While the bicycle plays a more direct role in allowing Kipps to come into a much greater fortune, there are echoes of the earlier novel here, as Polly's father made part of his small capital from selling bicycles. This very object will permit the inheritor to question and reject the logic of the system in which he is living.

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[26] Draper, 82.

[27] John Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice among the Literary Intelligentsia, 1880-1939* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), 144.

Mr Polly leaves his job in London and goes to stay with his cousin Harold Johnson in Easewood, where he 'translated his restless craving for joy and leisure into Harold Johnsonese by saying that he meant to look about him for a bit before going into another situation' (*HMP* 77). Indeed, the advice from his family is to marry and invest his capital in the purchase of a draper's shop at the earliest possible opportunity. Polly, however, delays his decision: his first purchase with his new capital is 'a safety bicycle which he proposed to study and master in the sandy lane below the Johnsons' house', soon followed by 'a number of books' (*HMP* 77). The bicycle and literature here stand as emblems of Polly's resistance to the profit-centred attitude he is being encouraged to adopt. They allow him to reconnect with his adolescent 'Joy de Vive', which he sought out during long walks in the countryside with his friends from the drapery emporium. We are told that during Polly's youth 'the bicycle was still rare and costly, and the motor-car had yet to come and stir up rural serenities' (*HMP* 31). As it lost its status as a luxury item, however, the bicycle increasingly began to take on the counter-cultural symbolism that rambling had enshrined for certain writers in the Romantic era.[28] It was mobilised in various other contemporary narratives as an anti-capitalist symbol; J. W. Allen's cycle-touring narrative *Wheel Magic; or, Revolutions of an Impressionist* (1906) contains a chapter about a character who, rather than investing an inheritance he comes into, quits his job, buys a bicycle and begins a life as a cycling nomad. To him, it is the society around him that seems insane:

> It amuses me [...] to think of all the nonsensical advice that was dumped on me then. I was told how I could double my capital in two years! [...] I didn't mean to shut myself up in a poky business. What on earth should a sane man do such things for?[29]

Polly adopts a similar attitude, making the most of the freedom he is suddenly able to enjoy, rather than seeking to perpetuate the system that had imprisoned him as a toiling draper.

Mr Polly, instead taking up the advice of those around him to invest in a shop, begins to travel through the local vicinity on 'exploratious meanderings' (*HMP* 79),[30] experiences which allow him to reflect creatively

[28] A well-known example is John Thelwall's *Peripatetic* (1793).

[29] J. W. Allen, *Wheel Magic; Or, Revolutions of an Impressionist* (London: Lane, 1909), 62-3.

[30] Here, we are reminded that Mr Polly's speciality is inventing words.

on his surroundings and develop a healthier relationship with his emotions and his body after years of confinement on the shop floor:

> He did not ride at the even pace sensible people use who have marked out a journey from one place to another, and settled what time it will take them. He rode at variable speeds, and always as though he was looking for something that, missing, left life attractive still, but a little wanting in significance. And sometimes he was so unreasonably happy he had to whistle and sing, and sometimes he was incredibly, but not at all painfully, sad. His indigestion vanished with air and exercise [...]. (*HMP* 78)

Polly's erratic riding refuses the idea of departure, destination, and uniform speed encouraged by railway schedules and motorised means of transport; rather, he sets his own speed, performing an active engagement with his surroundings, constantly 'looking for something', and ever willing to enact an open exchange with the world. In so doing, he actively questions the dominant societal model based on acceleration and accumulation.

By means of his bicycle rides, Polly begins to lead a 'double life', telling his cousin he is 'looking for an opening' and in fact going to enjoy the company of his three young female cousins in a nearby town (*HMP* 85). One day his explorations take him to a picturesque wood where he surprises a young girl named Christabel attempting to climb over the stone wall which marks the boundary of her boarding school. Polly falls in love at first sight, feeling 'like one of those old knights [...] who rode about the country looking for dragons and beautiful maidens and chivalresque adventures' (*HMP* 88). The first thing Christabel notices about Polly is his bicycle – she tells him that she cycles, too – and the object (as well as his complicity with her part-flight from school) at once allows them to establish a certain intimacy. Like Jessie in *The Wheels of Chance*, upper-class Christabel is initially unable to ascertain Mr Polly's social class and uses the bicycle in an attempt to do so:

> 'I say,' she said, in the pause that followed, 'why are you riding about the country on a bicycle?'
> 'I'm doing it because I like it.'
> She sought to estimate his social status on her limited basis of experience. (*HMP* 90)

The leisure time Mr Polly disposes of hints at a superior class status, yet Christabel's questions 'probed ever nearer to the hateful secret of the shop and his normal servitude' (*HMP* 90). Nonetheless, they continue to meet at the same spot for the next ten days, Christabel sitting on the wall while Polly

admires her from below. Their respective positions and the boundary between them clearly symbolise the radical difference in their social status. Withers implicates Polly's bicycle in the humiliation experienced by Polly at the pair's final meeting, when Christabel's friends hide on the other side of the wall and listen in on their conversation. Withers claims that 'the machine is positioned in the narrative as a guilty accomplice to Polly's immersion in excessive fantasy and to his obtuseness regarding her [Christabel's] duplicitous nature.'[31] I do not view Christabel as a malicious character, however, since she does feel 'moved' by Polly's attentions, and experiences 'a perplexity, a curious swimming of the mind' in his company (*HMP* 92). This is what leads her to ask her friends to give their opinion on him, since they are 'great students of character all' (*HMP* 92). Christabel is furious with her friends when they are discovered, which does not suggest that her primary aim was to humiliate Polly. Rather, the patent difference in their social status makes any continuation of their liaison unthinkable. Polly's life as a cycling *flâneur*, when he enjoyed 'the happy dream in which he had been living, of long, warm days, of open roads, of limitless, unchecked hours, of infinite time to look about him' must come to an end when he takes stock of his dwindling inheritance (*HMP* 103). He finally conforms to society's expectations by marrying his cousin Miriam and investing in a shop. His bicycle, however, allows him to make one last imaginary and geographical flight 'towards the tropics and the equator and the south coast of England' (*HMP* 106), where he finally takes a shop in the little village of Fishbourne 'to escape the doom of Johnson's choice' in Easewood (*HMP* 123). Polly's bicycle rides in his youth allow him to imagine the possibility of other ways of life, even if the world around him forces him into certain patterns. Yet these flights of fancy on his bicycle will be recalled when he eventually gives rein to his imagination in middle age.

For the next fifteen years, Polly leads a miserable life as the owner of a business, nonetheless managing to find occasional release from daily drudgery in cycling and reading: 'on summer evenings he would ride his bicycle about the country, and if he discovered a sale where there were books, he would as often as not waste half the next day in going to acquire a job lot of them haphazard' (*HMP* 126). Yet his overall mood is despondent, and this is clearly linked to his lack of physical, outdoor activity: 'he got little exercise; indigestion grew with him until it ruled all his moods; he fattened and deteriorated physically' (*HMP* 129). The narrator intervenes here in an attempt to provide a structural justification for Polly's dissatisfaction, citing

[31] Withers, *The War of the Wheels*, 47.

a certain fictitious social theorist who has developed the concept of 'collective intelligence' in opposition to individualism (*HMP* 129). He 'quotes' this imaginary thinker for a number of pages, developing the following bodily metaphor of a sick society:

> A rapidly complicating society [...] which as a whole declines to contemplate its future or face the intricate problems of its organisation, is in exactly the position of a man who takes no thought of dietary or regimen, who abstains from baths and exercise and gives his appetites free play. It accumulates useless and aimless lives as a man accumulates fat and morbid products in his blood, it declines in its collective efficiency and vigour and secretes discomfort and misery. (*HMP* 130)

Here, Polly becomes 'a microcosm of society' and a 'rather crude political symbol', as Michael Draper observes,[32] functioning to throw the ailments of society into sharp relief. Wells insists on the parallel between social organisation and our relationship to our bodies. The reason the bicycle stands in opposition to the contemporary organisation of society is that it allows us to reconnect with our bodies, our surroundings and others, encouraging a vision of society that is more far-sighted and humane, in contrast to the individualist, profit-seeking society in which Polly finds himself trapped.

The final straw for Polly comes when he crashes his bicycle into his neighbour's ironmongery stall. Estranged from all his other neighbours, he had developed a friendship with Mr Rusper the ironmonger, but this event leads to insults and a physical fight. The cause of the accident is explained as such:

> His bicycle was now very old, and it is one of the concomitants of a bicycle's senility that its free wheel should one day obstinately cease to be free. It corresponds to that epoch in human decay when an old gentleman loses an incisor tooth. It happened just as Mr. Polly was approaching Mr. Rusper's shop, and the untoward chance of a motor-car trying to pass a waggon on the wrong side gave Mr. Polly no choice but to get on to the pavement and dismount. (*HMP* 140)

The bicycle's senility mirrors the lamentable physical and mental state of its owner. Due to the bicycle's jammed freewheel, Polly's attempt to dismount causes him to crash into his neighbour's goods, which sparks off an argument. Where, in his youth, Polly had used the bicycle as a tool for

[32] Draper, 87.

exploring more interactive, collective, non-materialist ways of being in the world, he has now become a taciturn, unwilling victim of the capitalist system. Just as the bicycle's freewheel refuses to function, Polly has become incapable of free, independent thought, imprisoned in a life he resents. Although this scene relies on the malfunctioning of the machine, the bicycle displays evidence of agency here, forcing a crisis that makes Polly face up to his reality and take action.

Following the bicycle incident, Polly sinks deeper into depression and decides to commit suicide. He makes a plan to burn down his house, in order to make the death look accidental, and slit his throat. When he sets his house alight, however, a sudden survival instinct takes over. Polly manages to escape from his burning house, but the fire spreads to the rest of the town. The unexpected result of Polly's attempted suicide is a rare pulling together of Fishbourne society in an attempt to extinguish the blaze and save lives. Previously the pariah of the town, Polly becomes a local hero by saving an old woman from a burning house, as a result of which 'everyone thought well of him and was anxious to show it' (*HMP* 162). As well as drawing the community together, the event brings the perverse nature of capitalism into sharp focus; those who have lost their shops and homes in the fire will in fact be better-off thanks to their insurance policies. 'It's cleared me out of a lot of old stock, [...] that's one good thing' (*HMP* 164), Mr Wintershed remarks, highlighting the thwarted logic of an economic system built on ever-renewed commodities and capital.

The fire changes Polly's life in a very different way; it leads him to the discovery that 'if the world does not please you, *you can change it*' (*HMP* 167).[33] Rather than cashing in on his insurance policy (which he leaves to his wife), he makes the resolution to 'walk and loiter by the way [...] and get an odd job here and there, and talk to strange people' (*HMP* 168). This phase of the middle-aged man's life mirrors his flight from society's expectations in his youth, when his bicycle offered him the means of temporarily delaying his integration into the world of commerce and matrimony. Just as the bicycle encouraged a more attentive relationship with both his body and the environment, walking allows him to lead 'a healthy human life, living constantly in the open air [...]. After a lapse of fifteen years he rediscovered this interesting world, about which so many people go incredibly blind and bored' (*HMP* 169). The contrast between Polly's simple, pastoral existence and the general tendency of society is underlined by the evocation of modern means of transport. He is woken from his sleep on a pile of brushwood 'by

[33] Italics in the original.

the distant rattle of a racing motor-car breaking all the speed regulations' (*HMP* 170). He is described from the perspective of a car driver in the following terms:

> A tramp sat by the roadside, thinking, and it seemed to the man in the passing motor-car he must needs be plotting for another pot of beer. But, as a matter of fact, what the tramp was saying to himself over and over again, was a variant upon a well-known Hebrew word. (*HMP* 171)

The senseless acceleration of the motor-car Polly hears, and the warped, erroneous viewpoint of the passing driver, stand in contrast to the human-powered, contemplative existence he has finally chosen. In his youth, the bicycle provided a means to engage in a peripatetic, alternative lifestyle. Polly's bicycle rides act as an apprenticeship in liberty, a foretaste of the life he will eventually adopt as a tramp, whereby he rejects possessions in order to engage actively with the world and the people he encounters.

Conclusion

We have seen that Wells's lower-middle class heroes use the bicycle to challenge or break out of the role society has reserved for them in order to engage more meaningfully with their bodies, their surroundings and others. *Mr. Polly* and *Kipps* both reflect how, at the turn of the twentieth century, the bicycle permitted a democratisation of mobility and accompanied a drive to invite a broader base of society to participate in the country's intellectual life, thus challenging the prevailing power dynamics in Edwardian Britain. The 'clerking culture' associated with Wells and his fictional creations was often grouped together with, among other things, bicycles and low-brow literature, cultural objects which challenged the monopoly of knowledge by a social elite. As John Carey points out, at the turn of the century 'a new culture of socialism, cycling, free thinking and the flouting of respectable norms was flourishing among the clerks, teachers, shop assistants, telegraphists and other white-collar youth. Cycling was important in extending the clerks' experience and interests.'[34] The extensive use of the bicycle in the fiction of working-class or lower middle-class authors, such as Wells, Jerome K. Jerome and Grant Allen, points to its role in helping to formulate what Carey calls an 'alternative culture' to which the newly literate masses could relate.[35] To this low-brow clerking culture Carey contrasts the

[34] Carey, 59.
[35] Ibid., 58.

high-brow literature of modernist authors, such as E. M. Foster, Virginia Woolf and T. S. Eliot, who condemned the fiction produced by and for the clerking classes. Yet these low-brow authors, actively addressing themselves to the classes from which they came, dared to rethink the connection between popular and high culture. The bicycle was one democratising force in both society and fiction that helped to challenge the boundaries drawn between literary and social classes, allowing for a more creative and inclusive exploration of both spaces and texts.