

BOOK REVIEWS

JEREMY WITHERS, *THE WAR OF THE WHEELS: H. G. WELLS AND THE BICYCLE* (SYRACUSE: SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2017) ISBN 978-0-8156-3503-1 (HB) \$60.00, 978-0-8156-3526-0 (PB) \$29.95 [RICHARD NATE]

This study draws our attention to a topic which has hitherto played only a marginal role in Wells scholarship. While for some readers at first a book on Wells's fascination with bicycles may not seem very important, Jeremy Withers makes a strong case for Wells's keen awareness of the social and cultural significance of the bicycle at the end of the nineteenth century. Although Wells's enthusiasm for bicycles is not a great secret, this study shows that his attitude to the new 'machine', as it was then called, was anything but one-dimensional. In Wells's works, the bicycle is portrayed as a means of transportation which, in many ways, signifies the complex facets of modernity. In bringing city dwellers closer to nature, bicycles represented a counterforce to the process of industrialisation, but at the same time they caused injuries among pedestrians and could even be used as effective new war machines. Equipped with an impressive knowledge of the history of cycling, Withers traces Wells's fascination with the bicycle from the mid-1890s, when the so-called 'bike craze' reached its peak, to the end of World War I, when it had largely been replaced by the motorcar.

The study is divided into six chapters, each of which focuses on a specific aspect of the bicycle as highlighted in Wells's works. While each chapter primarily concentrates on one work, there are numerous references to related texts by Wells which support the respective argument. The first chapter ('Nature') focuses on Wells's romance *The Wheels of Chance* (1896), which depicts a cycling adventure as the decisive moment in the protagonist's development. Although in this narrative Wells did not refrain from using established commonplaces, such as the 'bicycle as horse' or the 'cyclist as chivalric knight', he also considered the bicycle from a less obvious perspective in taking into account the negative potential of this fashionable gadget. What Wells thought about the ill effects to which a blind trust in modern technology could lead is demonstrated in the second chapter ('Arrogance'). In the battle scenes of *The War of the Worlds* (1898), Withers argues, Wells illustrates how new technologies can entice people to develop

a complacent attitude that finally proves fatal. While the invasion of the Martians is making progress, those citizens who erroneously confide in the speed of their bicycles have to pay a heavy price. At the same time, the Martians do not fare any better since it turns out that their death machines, ultimately, are not able to compensate for the delicacy of their degenerate bodies. Wells's novel can thus be understood as a 'stark warning against human pride' (59), triggered by the use of machines.

In contrast to what might be expected, the third chapter ('Warfare') comments on Wells's view of the advantages of military cycling. Aware of the role that bicycles played during the second Boer War, the author repeatedly criticised the old-fashioned attitude of military strategists who regarded this new device exclusively as an accessory for infantry soldiers. Although Wells's short story 'The Land Ironclads' (1903) is usually acknowledged for its vision of the tank as a weapon of future warfare, on closer inspection it becomes clear that bicycles also play a decisive role in it. Wells was eager to show the great extent, for instance, to which tanks would depend on the assistance of soldier-cyclists in order to succeed in a battle-scenario. For all his enthusiasm, however, Wells finally had to acknowledge the decline of the bicycle as a military tool. Even though in 1914 he acknowledged its importance, the bicycle plays only a marginal role in his *War and the Future: Italy, France and Britain at War* (1917).

In the fourth chapter ('Hypermobility'), which takes *The War in the Air* (1908) as a reference text, the bicycle appears not so much as an effective war machine but as a welcome alternative to vehicles which Wells regarded as a threat, rather than an opportunity. Withers argues that in presenting the bike as 'more benign, peaceful and humane' than trains, motorcycles, cars and aeroplanes, Wells anticipated the views of ecological movements of the 1970s and after. As shown in the fifth chapter on 'Commodification', however, despite its obvious advantages, the culture of cycling was by no means immune to the ill effects of commercialism. That Wells was worried about the bicycle becoming a mere 'object of cultural commodification' is demonstrated with respect to *Kipps* (1905) and *Tono-Bungay* (1909). Thus in *Kipps*, Sid Pornick who, despite his socialist affiliations, is primarily interested in making profit, betrays rather than illustrates the emancipatory and egalitarian values then associated with the bicycle.

The final chapter ('Automobility') illustrates how, in the end, Wells himself was not able to withstand the fascination of the motorcar. Despite his earlier reservations, he bought his first car in 1914 and named it 'Gladys', in this way anticipating his protagonist in *Mr. Britling Sees It Through* (1916). This shift in attitude becomes understandable, Withers argues, if one

takes into account the fact that by this time bicycles were ‘no longer synonymous with terms like speed, modernity, and technological sophistication’ (159 f.). Instead, they would now be increasingly regarded as toys for children. Since Withers, clearly, is a keen cyclist, it is no wonder that he characterises Wells’s final flirtation with motorcars as ‘disappointing from a modern, environmentally informed perspective’ (175). Still, he is also fair enough to state that in view of the historical circumstances, Wells’s shift in attitude was ‘not altogether surprising’.

The present study highlights an important, and hitherto neglected, aspect of Wells’s life and work. Readers are taken through two important decades of Wells’s writing career, beginning with *The Wheels of Chance* and ending with *Mr. Britling Sees It Through*. Apart from the works mentioned here, the book includes several references to lesser-known writings, which makes it valuable for all those whose interest reaches beyond Wells’s best-known works. Another advantage is that all the works discussed are constantly considered against a wider literary background, as is demonstrated in frequent references to Wells’s literary contemporaries, among them Grant Allen, Jerome K. Jerome, George Bernard Shaw, and Mark Twain.

What makes this work unique within the field of Wells studies is the fact that it draws our attention to the bicycle as a modern invention, and Wells was not alone in identifying its great importance. For a considerable span of time, Wells seems to have shared the belief of some of his contemporaries that the bicycle might even represent a kind of ‘utopian machine’, one that would be able to reduce, if not cure, some of the social and political evils of the day. In order to illustrate the historical significance of cycling, Withers provides the reader with considerable contextual information, ranging from popular cycling songs, such as ‘Daisy Bell’ and ‘A Bicycle Built for Two’, to facsimiles of a 1910 catalogue on cycling sandals.

As the author admits, his study intends not only to investigate Wells’s view of the bicycle, but also to encourage readers to consider alternative modes of transport. In the last chapter, readers are reminded of ‘the demands a car makes on one’s pocketbook, such as the costs of initial purchase, maintenance, repairs, parking, and insurance, not to mention things like the car’s contribution to the deteriorating health of our bodies, our communities, and our ecosystems’ (156). However, throughout his study Withers resists the temptation of making Wells a mouthpiece for his own agenda. On the contrary, he does not refrain from disclosing rather dubious methods of appropriating Wells for today’s bicycle advertisements. We learn that Wells

did indeed declare that ‘cycle tracks will abound in Utopia’ in his *A Modern Utopia* (1905), but he was not the author of the slogan: ‘When I see an adult on a bicycle, I no longer despair for the future of the human race.’

The study includes an appendix with detailed notes, a comprehensive bibliography, as well as a name and subject index. Its seventeen illustrations are carefully chosen, some showing photographs of Wells and his family on bicycles, others presenting relevant documents or advertisements. Withers’s fluent style will appeal to both an academic and general readership. Although there are occasionally errors (the publication of *Anticipations*, for instance, is erroneously given as 1902), the author generally demonstrates a deep knowledge and understanding of Wells’s works. There are some redundant statements, for example, the virtual reiteration of a sentence in two places in the same chapter (48, 50); and some readers may also ask themselves if the author’s reference to Deleuze’s and Guattari’s concept of ‘assemblage’ in the chapter on ‘Warfare’ was really necessary in order to understand his argument. These are minor points, however, which cannot diminish the overall quality of the work. In all, *The War of the Wheels* represents a fascinating study, not only for Wellsians and cycling enthusiasts, but also for all those who are interested in a hitherto largely neglected area of modern literary and cultural history.

THE WHEELS OF CHANCE BY H. G. WELLS, WITH A STUDENT GUIDE TO THE HISTORICAL AND SOCIAL CONTEXT OF THE NOVEL. ED. JEREMY WITHERS (BRIGHTON, PORTLAND, TORONTO: SUSSEX ACADEMIC PRESS, 2018). ISBN 978-1-84519-889-3 (PB) £14.95 (UK) / \$22.95 (US) [UNA BROGAN]

In this innovative scholarly edition of H. G. Wells’s 1896 novel, Jeremy Withers provides a valuable resource for understanding and engaging with *The Wheels of Chance* and its context. The editor’s inclusion of an introduction, a map of the protagonist Hoopdriver’s cycle journey, notes on the text and discussion and essay questions all contribute to produce a didactic tool that will be appreciated by both teachers and students of Wells.

Jeremy Withers, an assistant professor at Iowa State University, is an important authority on both Wells and cycling literature. To date he has published a number of articles on bicycles in Wells’s novels, as well as a 2017 monograph, *The War of the Wheels: H. G. Wells and the Bicycle*. He is the co-editor of the collection *Culture on Two Wheels: The Bicycle in Literature and Film* (University of Nebraska Press, 2016), to which he contributed a chapter on Wells.