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# Cycle Touring and the Middle-Class Consumption of Nature. Anti-urbanism in H. G. Wells' *The Wheels of Chance* and Cycling Press Reports of the Late Nineteenth Century

**Abstract.** The article aims to discuss the cultural significance of cycle touring for the Victorian urban middle class in the context of the growing significance of leisure and recreation to England's working population and the burgeoning mass tourist industry. Cycle tourism in the countryside is presented as a leisure activity reinstating an organic link between man and nature that was severed by the progress of industrial capitalism in Victorian cities. The remarkable popularity of bicycle tourism in the last decade of the nineteenth century was induced mainly by its perception as an essentially rural recreation, allowing cyclists to immerse themselves in the unspoilt nature of England's pastoral countryside. As such, the activity corresponded with Victorian attitudes to nature, their idealisation of the country, nostalgia for the wholesomeness of rural existence and denunciation of the city. The discussion of the phenomenon is illustrated with references to numerous press publications promoting cycle touring in the countryside and extolling its benefits, and Herbert George Wells' bicycling novel *The Wheels of Chance: A Bicycling Idyll* (1896).

**Keywords:** bicycle, touring, cyclist, nature, country, tourism, landscape, Herbert George Wells.

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## Introduction

The article discusses cycle touring in the countryside in the cultural context of anti-urban feelings in late Victorian Britain, cherishing rural beauty, and acknowledging its beneficial influence on urban residents. The onset of industrial capitalism brought about profound economic, technological and social transformations in Victorian Britain, and engendered the cultural climate of the period perceptibly characterised by polar attitudes to the consequences of industrial progress for human beings. On the one hand, it produced a fascination with scientific and technological advances, which transformed the nature of work and penetrated every sphere of human existence; on the other, it evoked concern about the detrimental effects of industrialisation on urban populations. The latter view was expressed by the growth of anti-urban attitudes and appreciation of rurality and unspoilt nature. Noticeable changes in people's mindset resulting from these conflicting tendencies revealed themselves in their attitudes to work and leisure, and the growing realisation of the importance of recreation for the well-being of human beings. These changes, combined with the arrival of the railway and working hours legal regulations, proved conducive to the development of mass domestic and overseas tourism. One of the inventions of the period which played a pivotal role in Britain's burgeoning tourist industry was the bicycle. As "one of the technological marvels of the Victorian era" (Rubenstein 1977: 48), the bicycle in a unique way fused both of the above-mentioned opposite attitudes, simultaneously satisfying the Victorians' thirst for technological progress and becoming an instrument of physical and psychological liberation from the relentless effects of industrialisation in the city. This means of personal transport offered possibilities for unrestrained movement and enabled its users to vent pent-up longing for the wholesome pastoral atmosphere of the country and natural scenery.

The present paper has been informed mainly by scholarly works on social history and leisure studies of the Victorian period, particularly those examining the role of cycling and tourism, as well as Victorian attitudes to the country and nature. References to numerous press cycling reports and Herbert George Wells' bicycling novel of 1896, *The Wheels of Chance: A Bicycling Idyll*, demonstrate the indubitable popularity of cycle tourism in Britain in the last decade of the century. They support the argument that this mode of tourism fitted into the anti-urban mood of the period and corresponded with the appreciation of the country as the antithesis of the city.

Pastoral values of the country admired by cycling tourists augmented rural sympathies and helped urban residents rediscover nature. H. G. Wells, himself an enthusiastic cyclist, often ventured on cycling trips in the home counties<sup>2</sup> (James 2008: 41). The

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2 I.e., the counties surrounding London: Buckinghamshire, Surrey and Berkshire. The term is also applied to the counties of Kent, Hertfordshire and Essex.

author's personal experience and familiarity with the region were translated into insightful and affectionate literary descriptions of pastoral landscapes through which the main protagonist's itinerary led, their impression on him, and the felt psychological and emotional effects of cycling in the country. The implicit nostalgia for unspoilt nature and idyllic rustic scenery perceptible in Wells' novel evinces the novelist's "deep love of rural England" (Hammond 2001: 87). Similar affection for rural England and the beauty of the English countryside can be inferred from the study of press reports of cycling trips in the countryside and articles promoting cycling. The authors of these pieces fervently recommend cycle touring in the country to city residents, regarding it as a hobby which, by subjecting cyclists to the beneficial effects of nature, could bring relief from the frustrations of existence in late-Victorian cities.

## **Perception of nature and anti-urbanism in Victorian England**

Historically, ruralism has been a salient factor in English culture, affecting the perception of human-nature relations, moulding the nation's lifestyles and pastimes, and leaving an imprint in the country's literary tradition. The pastoral ideal, having its roots in classical times, found its various manifestations in English literature, which since the sixteenth century frequently utilised the pastoral convention in poetry, drama and the novel. For centuries, the country ethos was also cultivated by the landed elite, whose income was intertwined with land ownership, who took pride in their country mansions and estates, and enthusiastically pursued rural recreations such as horse-riding and hunting. A cultural turn in the perception of what natural rustic beauty and pastoral ideal consisted in occurred in the eighteenth century, when the English aristocracy, under the influence of the popular Grand Tour and landscape painting, were persuaded to adopt a new standard of natural beauty. It resulted from a close relationship between art and nature, and was convincingly translated into a new, more informal and natural gardening style—the English landscape park. Starting in the 1720s, when William Kent introduced an Arcadian ideal of a more naturalistic composition in garden designs, until the early nineteenth century, when Humphry Repton applied ideas of the picturesque and the sublime in his Romantic landscapes, the skills and artistic genius of English landscape architects and gardeners helped transform numerous country estates into seemingly natural representations of perfect rural scenery. English landscape-park style reached its most excellent refinement around the mid-eighteenth century when the most renowned landscape gardener, Lancelot 'Capability' Brown, started creating minimalist natural 'gardenless' landscapes surrounding England's finest country houses and estates (von Trotha 2009: 7-9; Jarrett 1978: 10-15). Brown's designs established a lasting model of natural rural scenery that the Victorians and future generations regarded as the essence of English scenic beauty.

In his lecture on the cultural significance of land and landscape, Jonathan Bate argues that the perception of the countryside, the characteristics and values ascribed to it, are a cultural product—the result of certain circumstances, beliefs and ideas (2002: 47). The Victorians largely owed their appreciation and understanding of the natural world to the Romantics, whose perception of nature as a dwelling place of God, a purifying but mysterious force inspiring awe and solace, gave a new dimension to the pastoral ideal long embedded in the English cultural and literary heritage. The Romantic legacy underscored the vitality of retaining an organic human-nature link (Kaur, “God and Religion”; Kiersnowska 2020: 55) and aroused awareness of the positive influence of nature on man. Such beliefs were fundamental to nineteenth-century sensibility and social thought, prompting ameliorationist civic reforms and campaigns for establishing recreational grounds, public parks, and open spaces in industrial cities.

In Victorian times, idealisation of the country, where the beneficial effects of nature on humans were fully manifested in the simple, wholesome life of country folk, and where landscapes retained their pre-industrial unspoilt beauty was at the root of an antagonistic dichotomy between the city and the country. The ‘natural’ country perceived through the prism of a rural ideal possessing a divine element and offering moral and physical benefits to man was the antithesis of ‘man’s creation’—the town, with all the social and moral inadequacies resulting from industrial capitalism (Bate 2002: 48). Such ideas engendered a climate of anti-urbanism discernible in social and intellectual thought, which permeated the public discourse (Kiersnowska 2020: 55). Arguably, a significant contributory factor to the growth of rural sympathies was the rapid progress of urbanisation attendant on the advance of industrial capitalism.

The development of manufacturing production in towns combined with economic changes in the countryside induced a massive migration of the impoverished rural population into new urban industrial centres. In consequence, by mid-century, the urban population exceeded the rural one, and England became the first urbanised country in the world (Williams 1973: 2; Thompson 2016: 28-31; Kiersnowska 2020: 54). However, the progress of urbanisation came at a social and environmental cost. Recurring epidemics of cholera and other contagious diseases afflicting urban communities crammed in dirty, narrow and poorly ventilated streets, air pollution, environmental degradation and industrial ugliness resulting from haphazard urban development came in for criticism from the enlightened members of society. While social problems resulting from abject poverty and dire living conditions in industrial cities created widespread concern and apprehension for the future, the wholesomeness and simplicity of the rural lifestyle were increasingly appreciated. The observations of a well-known physician and social reformer, doctor James Philips Kay-Shuttleworth, based on his visits to Manchester slums and published in *The Moral and Physical Condition of the Working Classes Employed in the Cotton Manufacture in Manchester* (1832), made a direct

link between the poor physical and moral constitution of working-class city dwellers and the deploring living conditions in England's manufacturing cities. They were further corroborated by the publication of an official report, *The Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population of Great Britain* (1842), by Sir Edwin Chadwick, an influential secretary to Poor Law commissioners. Both publications reinforced the anti-urban argument and triggered a national debate on improving the quality of life of city residents by promoting urban green areas conducive to healthy outdoor recreation and propagating outdoor leisure activities in out-of-town locations. Although anti-urban attitudes reached their climax in the 1840s, when the deplorable conditions of life in industrial cities were most acutely manifested, the deprecatory stance on towns and town life persisted until the century's end (Machlow 1985: 97-98; MacMaster 1990: 118-119; Burchardt 2002: 47; Kiersnowska 2020: 55).

## **Cycling revolution and mass tourism**

Cycling began in England in the late 1860s when the velocipede, the ancestor of the bicycle, entered England from France. The first machines were produced in 1868 by Josiah Turner and James Starley in their Coventry Sewing Machine Company. Their business decision established Coventry as the cradle of British cycle manufacturing in the nineteenth century and inadvertently prepared the ground for a bicycle mania that swept across the country in the mid-1890s (Reid 2015: 247; Norcliffe 2016: 8). The first bicycle was a heavy contraption with wooden wheels, a solid metal frame, and metal tyres that promised the user a comfortless and bumpy ride; hence, it was rather appropriately nicknamed the 'boneshaker' (Mackintosh & Norcliffe 2007: 157). However, continuous technological advances combined with high market demand fuelled the rapid evolution of the bicycle as manufacturers regularly launched improved, lighter, safer and faster models. It is tenable to argue that the introduction of the 'safety' bicycle fitted with two equal-sized wheels, Dunlop's pneumatic tyres and pedal-and-chain drive in the 1880s was a milestone in cycling progress. It helped transform the machine from a costly fashionable sporting contrivance for risk-loving individuals into a more manoeuvrable and easy-to-use device universally adopted by casual riders, both men and women (Dauncey 2012: 12).

Until the 1890s, the bicycle tended to be perceived as a class-related status symbol because the prohibitive price of both new, and second-hand machines made cycling virtually inaccessible to the lower-middle and working classes. Like many other forms of leisure and recreation at the time, it was characterised by strong social and gender delineations (Norcliffe 2016: 4-5; Kiersnowska 2019: 88-91). Nevertheless, despite the high prices, the number of cyclists on the roads and bicycles sold in Britain proliferated. In 1889 alone, more than 300,000 new bicycles were sold (Reid 2015: 248). In the mid-1890s, when the safety bicycle became the dominant model, a growing market in

much cheaper, older second-hand models made cycling available to the less affluent (Flanders 2007: 454).

The cycling mania which erupted in England in the 1890s owes as much to the Victorian Britons' fascination with modern technological achievements as to the increased leisure time and the rise of mass participation in recreation observable in the last quarter of the century. Higher wages, larger disposable income, a shorter working week, holidays—including paid bank holidays from 1871—and an expanded railway network were conducive to the development of the mass tourist industry in the British Isles (Reid 2008: 753-756; McNee 2021: 62). The primary beneficiaries of these developments and social changes were skilled manufacturing workers and the lower middle class. Shop assistants, warehouse workers, domestic servants and bank and office clerks could join the ranks of the well-off tourists and travel, visiting different parts of the country (McNee 2021: 62). The expansion of popular tourism and outdoor recreation was also spurred by the growing awareness of the recuperative powers of rest and healthy outdoor exercise to improve the city population's physical condition. It gave rise to numerous initiatives such as establishing public parks in towns and cities, campaigns and legislative measures to preserve green areas, and public footpaths in the neighbourhood of metropolitan centres. Such policies were intended to provide urban residents access to healthy recreation such as rambling in the open (Flanders 2007: 437; Daunton 2008: 50). Railway companies taking multitudes of manufacturing workers and lower-middle-class employees from industrial cities for inexpensive day trips to the burgeoning seaside resorts also fitted into the atmosphere of promoting open-air recreation and accelerated the expansion of the tourist industry (Poole 1983: 81; Churchill 2016: 43). Package tours to famous sites in the British Isles and overseas, pioneered by Thomas Cook, became the kernel of the flourishing mass tourism. Amidst these changes, in the last decade of the century, the bicycle became a significant instrument of tourism, and cycle touring climbed to a prominent position among these modes of mass recreation and healthy outdoor leisure.

## **Pleasure and freedom of riding**

As cycling became more accessible and affordable in the final decade of the nineteenth century, it began to lose its class-related status and was increasingly popular with a new group of less affluent users—young men from the lower middle class—as a cheap and sociable form of recreation (McNee 2021: 67). In H. G. Wells' cycling novel *The Wheels of Chance: A Bicycling Idyll* (1896), the main character, Mr. Hoopdriver, represents this new and quickly growing group of lower-middle-class bicycle users—office clerks, teachers and shop assistants—who have sufficient funds and leisure to go cycle touring. Hoopdriver works as a draper's assistant in Putney, London, and decides to spend his holidays travelling along the South Coast. To this end, he purchases a second-hand bicycle—"a

machine with a past", "an antiquity", "perfectly sound, if a little old fashioned"—and starts practising the skill of riding (Wells 1913: 29-30). On the first day of his holidays, dressed in his fashionable cycling apparel of a brand-new brown woollen Norfolk jacket and thick chequered stockings, and equipped with a change of clothes and "a Road map of the South of England" (Wells 1913: 15), Hoopdriver sets out on his journey.

As cycle mania swept across the country, some novice cyclists joined numerous existing cycling clubs and, as members, participated in organised excursions; others, like Mr. Hoopdriver, undertook longer cycling holidays or just short out-of-town trips on their own. Longing for the respite and pastoral pleasures the country offered, weekend and day-trippers ventured from the cities by their thousands, riding the latest models or much cheaper second-hand machines. The popularity and ubiquity of cycle touring are evidenced in numerous press accounts from that period, such as the weekly cycling reports in the *Manchester Weekly Times*, whose correspondent offers the following observation from one of his bicycle excursions: "Away down the familiar road to Altrincham there were hundreds of cyclists travelling in both directions. Machines of all sorts of types, and riding of many styles, were in evidence" (May 17: 1895).

Like the railway, which transformed the Victorians' geographical experience, the bicycle was also a "geographically liberating" machine (Norcliffe 2001: 23), playing an instrumental role in altering the relationship between the hitherto distant country and the city (Choi 2015: 252). It was unsurpassed in enabling the late Victorians an inexpensive means of escaping from the city and taking refuge in the country. Urban topography, with its network of streets lined with high buildings, dark backyards and narrow alleys, was physically and psychologically confining. The townscape, juxtaposed with the wide-open countryside offering limitless possibilities of moving about, appeared to restrict man's physical mobility and the ability to experience a full range of emotions and achieve spiritual welfare. Thus, the bicycle as a unique means of personal transport harboured the potential of offering much-needed freedom and release from the oppression of urban life—its noxious atmosphere, frantic pace of life and industrial production, human and traffic congestion, demanding work schedules, and coercive class division. Cycling advocates emphasised the wholesome character of riding a bicycle, arguing that it was "a sedative and refreshment to jaded nerves and spirits" (*Cycling* June 12, 1897), and helped offset the adverse physical consequences of sedentary work. Therefore, the activity was particularly recommended to "men who are tied to a desk or confined to a warehouse all day" (*Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser* June 28, 1890), and to tired city residents who were looking for a way to relieve the daily stress of urban life: "This is change, this is rest, this is a holiday; and the tired man who hungers for a laze will never find a better means to this end than his cycle" (*Cycling* August 4, 1894).

Unlike railway passengers or package trip tourists, cycle travellers were unencumbered by timetables, itineraries or fixed routes (Withers and Shea 2016: 3-4; Chen 2017: 610). The joy, excitement and pleasure resulting from unrestrained movement across the country on one's two wheels were frequently emphasised in cycling journals and the press of the period to weigh in favour of cycle touring. For instance, readers of the tourist section in *Cycling* could find the following argument highlighting the superiority of individual cycle touring over other forms of tourism, such as a guided package trip: "one of the charms of a cycle tour is that one is not bound to do anything, or be anywhere, at any fixed time, but to scorch, loaf, or change one's route at one's own sweet will or at the command of a stiff head wind" (May 8, 1897). On that account, cyclists were not merely passive consumers of mass tourism but autonomous creators of their touristic experience. They enjoyed complete liberty to roam and explore the countryside and had full command of the choice of their destination and the pace of their movement.

The pleasure that cycling provided was one of the chief incentives for adopting it as a hobby (Horton et al. 2007: 6). The feeling may have stemmed from different aspects of riding a bicycle—satisfaction from mastering the machine, developing cycling prowess, appreciation of the fine scenery, or the sensation of speed and freedom. In the anti-urban discourse of the late Victorian period, these emotions were frequently quoted to promote the beneficial effects of experiencing and exploring rural settings in an unmediated way. The exponents of anti-urban opinions tended to identify cycle touring as the best way of discovering the beauty and merits of the country, providing the urban cyclist not only with much needed physical exercise but also with a positive emotional release and sensory input. Press accounts of bicycle trips and articles praising the joys of cycling highlighted pleasure and freedom as the singular sensations experienced by the cyclist when touring the country on a fine day:

How sweet a thing it is to turn out in a fair and bright, but breezy, day and turn one's front wheel to the wind already faintly laden with Maytime fragrances. As the long rhythmical sweep and roll of the machine bears the rider onward, he and his wheels cleave the opposing air, and it rushes past him with a swish that is pleasant to his ears.  
(*Manchester Weekly Times* May 17, 1895)

Similarly, an article in *Cycling* (August 4, 1894) highlights a range of sensations experienced by a cyclist during different stages of their ride: "the exhilaration experienced in rapidly passing through beautiful scenery", the "gaiety" of halting in towns one passes through, and the "quiet and repose" of resting in a country inn. Ultimately, all of these emotions filled one with a sense of excitement and pleasure inextricably connected with the freedom of moving across rural scenery. Thus, the bicycle not only facilitated



movement through the country but also enhanced the tourist's delight in perceiving the surrounding scenery.

The sense of pleasure gained from cycling in the country is also evinced in Wells' descriptions of Hoopdriver's movement across southern England in *The Wheels of Chance*. As soon as he leaves London, the young man is filled with relief and captivated by the charming rustic landscapes and rich vegetation, which are entirely new and refreshing to him: "the hedges and trees and the open country were all glorious to his town tired-eyes" (Wells 1913: 38). The superiority of cycling to provide excitement when enjoying rural scenery is attested to further in the novel, for example, when Hoopdriver converses with a fellow cyclist during a chance meeting at Ringwood. The latter, a clergyman on a tricycle, enthusiastically declares: "I can imagine that, with a properly oiled machine, there can be no easier nor pleasanter way of seeing the country" (Wells 1913: 281). All the emotions that cycling in the country and being surrounded by nature provide are in stark contrast to the humdrum of city life, its boredom and confinement. Unsurprisingly, then, riding to the South Coast becomes for Hoopdriver an exhilarating break from his regimented life in London and an exciting adventure engendering the feeling of "*joie de vivre!*" (Wells 1913: 28).

Hoopdriver's cycling trip is a literal and symbolic escape from the city. As soon as he leaves the city behind, he feels liberated from his repressive London existence and his poorly paid, dead-end job in the draper's shop. In London, he has little control over his life and highly supervised work, in which the prospect of ever rising in the professional hierarchy seems elusive. When his cycling trip commences, he feels that: "All the dreary, uninteresting routine drops from you suddenly, your chains drop about your feet. All at once you are Lord of yourself" (Wells 1913: 17). The further away Hoopdriver rides from the city, the more self-confident and independent he becomes, both as a cyclist and a man. He enthuses at the sudden realisation that he can go wherever he pleases and is in complete control of his actions and choices: "call none Sir or Madame, have a lapel free of pins, doff your black morning coat, and wear the colour of your heart, and be a Man" (Wells 1913: 17). Riding through the vast expanse of the open country enables Hoopdriver to be freed from his constricting social and mental framework, as if all the constraints that restrained him in London suddenly disappeared, allowing him to develop a new, more mature identity. A servile draper's boy "bowing you out with fountains of civilities" (Wells 1913: 4) is supplanted by a daring, adventurous cyclist, a countryside explorer, and a chivalric knight errant who goes to great lengths to rescue a fellow cyclist—the young impressionable Jessie Milton (the Young Lady in Grey)—from the predicament she found herself in, and boldly defend her honour. At a deeper level then, the cycling trip becomes for Hoopdriver a symbolic rite of passage into manhood, which might have been much delayed in the urban environment.

The bicycle journey to the South Coast in Wells' novel is also a kind of escapism from the class-ridden urban community, where Hoopdriver's inferior social status moulded by his economic circumstances is evident, into the world of cyclists, where seemingly one's social class is irrelevant. He is acutely aware of how insignificant and "how little he was noticeable" (Wells 1913: 2) in the London draper's shop. By the time Wells' novel was published, bicycling had democratised and almost lost the aura of social exclusivity, yet some of its early associations with a sport for the socially privileged lingered. It is probably this aura of social exclusivity that once surrounded cycling that appealed to Hoopdriver and made him believe that this hobby could be a means to discard his lower-middle-class status, even if momentarily, and become equal to gentlemen cyclists. Thus, dressed in his brand-new fashionable cycling costume and adopting a fake accent, which in his opinion disguises his humble social background, Hoopdriver joins the ranks of the men of leisure: "The draper Hoopdriver, the Hand, had vanished from existence. Instead was a gentleman, a man of pleasure" (Wells 1913: 26).

In the late Victorian period, the availability of reasonably-priced mass-produced daily and recreational clothes—for example, special bicycling outfits—to the lower social classes made class-related dressing codes less readable (James 2008: 40-41). Therefore, Hoopdriver's projection of an elevated social status deludes some people he encounters during the journey—the heath-keeper, Jessie Milton, and a 'scorcher' he meets in Esher. The young man smugly registers that the last one speaks to him "as his equal" (Wells 1913: 47). The fact that they all take Hoopdriver for a gentleman boosts his self-esteem and increases his confidence. The only ill-fitting element of Hoopdriver's gentleman-cyclist image is his old battered bicycle, the most expensive component and the one that may reveal its owner's true social standing. This is what happens during a chance meeting with Bechamel, the proud owner of an expensive, top-of-the-range 'safety' complete with pneumatic tyres. Bechamel rudely responds to Hoopdriver's greeting and projects an aloof and superior attitude throughout the encounter. He instantly sees through Hoopdriver's façade and reads his true identity as a "Greasy proletarian" (Wells 1913: 49). To him, Hoopdriver is an imposter, an encroacher into the realm of what some still regard as a gentlemanly recreation. As mentioned earlier, cycle touring had achieved a degree of egalitarianism by the end of the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, some old class prejudices were still in evidence, as exemplified by the incident mentioned above. However, the social character of this recreation, bringing into direct contact cycling aficionados from different rungs of society, prompted some modern scholars researching Victorian modes of leisure to view cycle touring as a sort of social bridge (Kern 2003: 216; So 2006: 39). Away from the pervasive professional and class divisions affecting all forms of social contact in an urban environment, cycle touring in the country arguably created ample opportunities for informal class interaction. Seemingly,

it wiped out class distinctions as all bicycle users were simply fellow cyclists united by a shared passion.

At the peak of bicycling popularity in the 1880s and 1890s, bicycles were so ubiquitous on British roads that a cyclists' recreational subculture developed. Demonstrating a mass-participatory character, the brotherhood of cyclists united cycling devotees over class and gender divisions. Many bicycle users congregated in bicycling clubs to tour the countryside or race. The first clubs appeared as early as 1870 (McCrone 2006: 181), and the rise in their number was so rapid that in the 1890s London alone had 300 active bicycling clubs (Huggins 2004: 38). By that time, many cycling clubs had also relaxed their restrictive admission rules and had discarded their gender and class exclusivity (McCrone 2006: 181; Norcliffe 2016: 12). Like many subcultures whose members are identified by a unique style, jargon and ritualistic behaviour, Victorian cyclists also manifested certain attributes of belonging to a specific cultural group. Their shared passion, experience, clothing style and manners were powerful bonding factors and identity markers, providing a sense of belonging. In conversations with fellow wheelmen or entries in visitors' books in pubs and hotels, cyclists would use a specialised argot characterised by phrases like: “‘road scorchers’, ‘fellow wheelmen’ and ‘mud-plugging’ through ‘beastly wet’ conditions” (McNee 2021: 67), which to them was perfectly natural and understandable. Maintaining certain rituals when passing a fellow cyclist was expected and conducive to sustaining an invisible bond uniting all cyclists. That is why when Hoopdriver passed Bechamel, throwing a greeting and a due remark on the quality of the road surface, he felt “a pleasing sense of having duly asserted the wide sympathy that binds all cyclists together, of having behaved himself as becomes one of the brotherhood of the wheel” (Wells 1913: 49). In the Victorian period, urban populations—often migrant and lacking cohesion—were believed to be deprived of community spirit; therefore, the bond that united cyclists was unique and appreciated. It was reminiscent of pre-industrial, rural, close-knit communities that used to be united by common goals, needs and experiences.

## **Picturesque tourism and appreciation of nature**

The expansion of mass tourism in Victorian Britain was conjoined with the landscape's cultural importance inherited by the Victorians from Romanticism and its perception as an essential constituent of national identity. Eighteenth-century philosophical treatises on the 'sublime' and the 'picturesque' moulded aesthetic appreciation and sentiment for domestic scenery. Edmund Burke's ideas of landscape's 'curiosity' and 'sublimity', articulated in his essay *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), were complemented by the third aspect—the 'picturesque'—popularised by William Gilpin, a pioneer of picturesque touring, in his essay *On Picturesque Beauty* (1792) and Uvedale Price in *Essays on the Picturesque* (1794). The beautiful, the sublime,

and the picturesque formed a famous triad against which scenery was aesthetically and emotionally assessed in the Romantic period and Victorian times (Williams 2008: 21-25). Price enhanced the picturesque mode of perceiving a landscape by identifying 'curiosity' as its vital element. Curiosity was both a chief reason for and the felt effect of surveying picturesque scenery: "the effect of the picturesque is curiosity; an effect, which, though less splendid and powerful, has a more general influence" (1810: 88). Voracity for experiencing at first-hand the spectacular effects of foreign and domestic natural beauty spots and historical sites was a key motive for the eighteenth-century picturesque tourist and the Victorian individual and package traveller to venture to foreign lands or explore domestic scenery.

Traditionally, the beauty of the scenery was associated with harmony, tranquillity and smoothness. However, picturesque tourists expected more from the landscape they viewed than just a brief satisfaction of their aesthetic needs. A picturesque site ought to have the potential to bring about a strong emotional reaction evoked in the observer by the roughness, irregularity and ruggedness of the perceived scenery. They sought landscapes that could stir up a kind of painterly experience. Implementing the technique of looking at the surrounding nature promulgated by Gilpin, the Romantic tourists and their Victorian successors would usually take a stance in a high vantage spot allowing a broad birds-eye vista over the surroundings and enabling them to conceptualise the scenery into a picture. This way of surveying the scene created the feeling of control and mastery over nature, while at the same time having the impression of being its integral element (Morgan 2001: 47, 59; Austin 2007: 633-634; Williams 2008: 26-28).

By the late nineteenth century, there had been a redefinition of what constituted the essence of the picturesque. The category was not solely applied to vacant, rough and rugged landscapes and awe-inspiring irregular monumental castles and ruins described in the gothic novels, but also started to be used for isolated pastoral, rustic areas, winding streets and irregular buildings in small towns and villages. Collective nostalgia and a yearning for the simplicity and peacefulness of rural existence accumulated from century-long intensive industrialisation were fed by the appreciation of such simple picturesque scenery (Austin 2007: 644-645). Raymond Williams argues that it was quite natural that "a feeling for unaltered nature, for wild land" (1973: 128) should develop as a consequential response to the forces of the agrarian and industrial revolutions. This new perception of the picturesque was reflected in the growing body of tourist guide books, newspaper editorials, tourist columns, and literary works where 'green language' was employed to describe rural scenery, the weather, lighting, the sounds of nature and botanical and animal life.

Such a writing mode characterised many press accounts of cycle tours whose authors appealed to the picturesque sensitivity of their bicycling readers. They promoted aesthetic consumption of nature when riding in the countryside by applying Gilpin's

technique of looking at the scenery from an elevated spot. Numerous examples of such a style can be found, among others, in a series of articles promoting cycle touring around Cheshire, Lancashire and Yorkshire. They started to appear in the *Manchester Weekly Times* in 1892, and in the summertime of 1895 became a regular weekly feature of the paper, introduced to satisfy the growing demand of its cycling readership for reliable, professional information on roads and routes suitable for cycling trips. Extensive reports, illustrated with sketches of historic buildings or picturesque spots, written by an experienced cyclist, included not only much needed practical particulars on the difficulty and length of recommended routes, surface quality, and pubs and inns providing service for cyclists, but also detailed descriptions and the historical background of places and landmarks passed on the way. The factual accuracy and historical details that one would typically find in tourist guide books were supposed to provide wheelmen and wheelwomen with some prior knowledge on the historic sites they would pass, stir up their interest, and encourage them to stop for a visit. Thus, an account of a cycling trip to Wharfedale in Yorkshire recommends cyclists to visit Adel Church near Leeds, "which is admitted [...] to be the most perfect miniature specimen of Norman ecclesiastical architecture in England" (July 26, 1895). In a report recommending to Manchester cyclists a long itinerary through several counties down to Somerset, there is a compelling description of the history and the present state of Malmesbury Abbey in Wiltshire, an edifice of "ancient grandeur" and a supposed resting place of King Athelstan (September 20, 1895). Similarly, cyclists who choose to travel in Cheshire from Adlington to Macclesfield are informed that a stretch of marshy wasteland they will pass on their way, known as Danes Moss, was the site of a fierce battle between the Saxons and "their ruthless foes, the Scandinavian hordes" (May 12, 1893).

Detailed references to places of historical significance in the described routes undoubtedly spoke to the antiquarian interest of a sizeable part of the educated Victorian public. However, their inclusion in the cycling reports was likely aimed predominantly at provoking the curiosity of the less cultured cyclists, providing intellectual stimulation, and maximising their experience of an out-of-town wheel journey. Thus, a cycling trip promised a unique blend of athletic exercise in natural scenery and a desirable touristic effect produced by visiting places of historical and cultural significance. Such a conjecture can also be made based on the fact that in *The Wheels of Chance*, Wells included an educative stopover on Hoopdriver's journey in the "charming old town" of Guildford (1913: 63). An entry in the guidebook informs the young draper's assistant that the town has a "delightful castle" worth a visit, and a Tudor Guildhall, "very pleasant to see" (Wells 1913: 63). His interest spiked, Hoopdriver ascends the castle tower and, from this elevated spot, like a proper picturesque tourist, looks down and over at the town and the surrounding scenery (1913: 65).

While the touristic attractiveness of cycle touring in the countryside had its relevance, it was the possibility of experiencing nature in its complete form that was crucial to the cyclists. The bicycle provided an incomparably better way of admiring the landscape and an unmediated perception of nature than any other means of transport used by tourists in the nineteenth century. The railway undoubtedly offered unmatched speed of covering long distances but, as Douglas Burgess argues, it detached the passengers from the surroundings they were passing through (2016: 10). Enclosed in the confined space of the carriage, the passengers could only passively gaze at the quickly changing scenery without the possibility of pausing and reflecting upon it or relating to it emotionally. The perception of nature on the part of cyclists was an act of volition, and they adjusted their cycling speed accordingly, slowing down or even stopping to contemplate a beautiful vista. Like Romantic picturesque tourists, the wheelmen and wheelwomen often chose an elevated vantage point that offered a broad birds-eye perspective.

Many press articles recommending particular cycle routes suggested where to stop to take in the vast expanse of the surrounding area and gain the maximum effect of the grandeur and beauty of the landscape. In a piece describing the Macclesfield to Buxton itinerary, *The Chronicle* strongly advises pausing after a strenuous uphill ride at the Cat and Fiddle pub, from where there is a magnificent view over the moorlands, the mountains beyond them and the town of Buxton in the valley (June 9, 1899). Similarly, those cyclists who decide to follow the *Manchester Weekly Times*' recommendation and visit Wharfedale ought to halt at an elevated vantage point, look down, and marvel at the magnificent sight of: "The silver stream of Wharfe [...] winding its way along the centre of the valley for miles" and the "fine configuration of the distant hills towards Ilkley" (July 26, 1895).

H. G. Wells, too, when describing the glories of southern England's landscape as seen through the eyes of Hoopdriver, appears to frequently utilise William Gilpin's technique of scanning the landscape as if from above. He allows the reader's eye to gradually travel from the shrubs and trees lining the road further and further away to distant hills, woods, and other scenery features, creating the impression of a broad panorama. The description of the landscape contemplated by Hoopdriver during the Cobham to Ripley leg of his journey provides an apt illustration of this method. Wells directs the protagonist's gaze first at the "fine mossy trees and bracken" on either side of the road, and then beyond them at a stretch of "an open country [...] covered with heather and set with pines, and a yellow road running across it" (Wells 1913: 51). Similarly, when riding from Haslemere towards Portsmouth, Hoopdriver observes with delight "the wide blue hill views and pleasant valleys [...] on either hand of the sand-scarred roadway" (Wells 1913: 91). This perspective of looking at the surroundings creates the impression of a vast expanse of open land stretching before Hoopdriver's eyes. Moreover, the character of

landscape descriptions in the novel creates the impression that its bicycling protagonist dynamically perceives the surrounding scenery. He first notices the nearby features, and then, gradually, his gaze travels further to discover the more distant landscape elements. Thus, the cyclist becomes an active and conscious consumer of the scenery and one with the surroundings.

Cycling in the countryside enabled urban residents to rediscover nature, develop a close relationship with it, and experience the animated and non-animated natural world with all their senses, without an intermediary. This widely held belief was confirmed by numerous press accounts of bicycle journeys, offering detailed descriptions of the botanical and animal variety observed by the cyclists, and nature's colours, smells, sounds and beauty. For example, the regular cycling correspondent for the *Manchester Weekly Times* adopts an almost poetic language to render the multi-sensory impression that the road from Adlington to Macclesfield and the surrounding scenery left on him:

The air is sweet with the odours of the spring blossoms; the birds are twittering in every bush and thicket; from the distant copse the soft dreamy note of the cuckoo tells us the harbinger of summer has arrived [...] and the poet lark rains down his melody from the cloudless blue above. The fragrant hedgerows, on which the hawthorn bloom is shadowing, separate the dusty road from the verdant meadows that stretch away on either hand, their banks are studded with star-like blossoms of the wild hyacinth. The flower-laden chestnuts are in the pride of their summer glory, and the bright green and yellow of the limes and newly foliaged oaks present a marked contrast to the sombre hue of the firs and conifers. (May 12, 1893)

In another press piece on country cycle touring, it is argued that the study of wayside plants and bird and animal life enhances not only the recreational aspect of riding but also develops one's knowledge and the faculty of observing nature and storing "quaint and curious information" about it (*Cycling* June 12, 1897). The reporter maintains that the discovery of the natural world may turn into an enjoyable hobby whose pursuit will give the urban cycling bourgeoisie purpose and a "*raison d'être* to [their] wheel excursions" to the country (*Cycling* June 12, 1897). This argument is corroborated by one of the characters in *The Wheels of Chance*, a middle-aged cyclist at Esher, who declares that he rides not only for exercise, but to observe the scenery and "botanise" (Wells 1913: 42).

Conjoining cycle touring with the consumption of leisure and nature is given proper relevance in Hoopdriver's journey in *The Wheels of Chance*. As the main hero progresses in his trip to the South Coast, Wells' descriptions of the rural scenery become more detailed, accentuating its serenity and picturesqueness. This creates the impression that the further away from London Hoopdriver cycles, the more details of the landscapes passed on the way he notices, and the more aware of nature and receptive to its

influence he becomes. The protagonist's riding pace becomes more leisurely, and he becomes more observant of the scenery. He often pauses and loiters, "generally 'mucking about'" (Wells 1913, 93), to appreciate the idyllic pastoral landscape: cornfields "glorious with poppies", "surly dun oxen", "little cottages, and picturesque beer-houses with the vivid brewers' boards of blue and scarlet, [...] a broad green and a church" (Wells 1913: 95). Immersion in the vastness and tranquillity of the rural landscapes exerts a powerful influence on Hoopdriver. He takes more and more pleasure in the leisurely relaxing pace of his journey, enabling him to admire lush vegetation and enjoy the greenery and peace of the country, which is in stark contrast to the constant haste, harassment and nagging he was subjected to in the city. He dismounts his bicycle to paddle in the clear water of a pebbly rivulet, gathers wildflowers, and like a self-discovered botanist admires their different shapes and colours, and wonders at their names "for he had never heard of any" (Wells 1913: 93).

Wells' descriptions of soft, bucolic southern landscapes evoke a nostalgia for the romanticised bliss of 'Old England' rusticity and fit into the climate of idealisation of the country as the antithesis of the city. Such ideas were given prominence in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as homely rurality, particularly associated with the south of England, was viewed as the essential element of English culture and national identity (Tebbutt 2006: 1125). Therefore, the ascendancy of cycle touring over other forms of contemplating the countryside cannot be overestimated. Press accounts and Wells' novel testify that it created unique opportunities for a fusion between the cyclist and the surrounding nature. Press reports from cycle journeys often contained descriptions of country scenery that had impressed their writers. They were detailed, offering a broad perspective of a particular beauty spot. More often than not, they had a literary or even poetic quality—clearly appealing to the readers' sensitivity and nostalgia for pre-industrial unspoilt rural landscapes, and entreating them to pause and experience nature. Attention to the details of natural life in landscape descriptions in these press articles and *The Wheels of Chance* also confirms the ubiquity and dominance of anti-urban discourse in late-Victorian Britain. By aptly suggesting the psychological and physical benefits of cycle touring in rural areas, Wells and the authors of the aforementioned press pieces indicate the country's superiority over the city. Thus, they are the exponents of anti-urban tendencies defining the social and cultural climate of the period.

## Conclusion

Cycling in its leisure forms provided not only much-needed athletic exercise to the sedentary urban middle class but was also an aesthetic activity continuing the picturesque tourism tradition. Though essentially a machine of speed, the bicycle also provided Victorian tourists with a valuable means of exploring the country freely and in a manner that enabled the cyclist and nature to come together in a kind of fusion that no



other means of transport allowed. Gentle and unhasty riding made one acutely aware of the surrounding scenery, providing continuous stimulation to all senses. Press accounts of cycling tours in the country undertaken by readers and reporters, and H. G. Wells' literary references to the effect rural surroundings exerted on the novel's main character corroborate the above view.

Picturesque expanses of rustic landscapes marked by various topographical features, historic landmarks, and verdant nature were unfamiliar to the city cyclist and filled the cycling tourist with wonder. While beautiful forms and colours of inanimate nature provided visual aesthetic pleasure, the sounds of birds and the tranquillity of the rustic scenery offered pleasing aural stimulus. This multi-sensory exposition to the surroundings engendered a unique experience and evoked an emotional reaction to it on the part of the perceiver. Cycle tourism then induced a composite response to nature, elevating the cyclist from a passive consumer of scenic beauty to a conscious actor involved in a deliberate act of participation in sensual human-nature harmony. Recreational cycling was not merely a way of sightseeing utilising technological advances of the period in the burgeoning individual and organised tourist industry. It was a means of rediscovering the country and restoring the link between man and nature that industrial capitalism and urbanisation had severed.

Cycle touring reinforced the polarity between pastoral values traditionally associated with the country, and the Victorian cultural construct of the city as the representation of modernity and coercive dehumanised industrialism. It evoked nostalgia for the gone-by bliss and serenity that had been wiped out by industrial capitalism in the city but could still be found and felt in the rural environment. Thus, the activity fitted into the anti-urban mood of the epoch as it offered a welcome release from the stifling routine of the urban work-life cycle, and provided one with all the health, physical and mental benefits that direct contact with rurality and immersion in the natural world provided.

The bicycle as a 'vehicle of liberation' enabled a physical and symbolic escape from the urban environment. It opened up the possibilities of almost unrestricted mobility, not subjected to physical or temporal constraints beyond the cyclist's control but ensuring complete command over the range and speed of one's movement. The sense of freedom experienced by recreational cyclists in the country was the natural consequence of leaving behind city topography's physical and psychological limitations and stifling urban social circumstances. Societal rigours and constricting conventions resulting from the conspicuous class structure in the city were particularly intensely felt by members of the working lower-middle class, whose professional position often involved servile, restraining conditions and induced a dependency-based relationship with their superiors. At the end of the nineteenth century, the democratisation of cycling created a sense of community uniting all bicycle aficionados, in which class divisions appeared to have lost relevance. This development in bicycle culture was

particularly appreciated by the urban middle class, many of whom experienced alienation and anonymity in large human aggregates in Victorian metropolises.

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