Cycling in Nowhere

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I've been wondering lately about the absence of cycles and cycling in *News from Nowhere*. At a moment when the personal and environmental value of cycling is being rediscovered as our car-obsessed culture begins to reach gridlock, it can seem odd that Morris's own clairvoyant vision of a more humane future should not feature the pleasures and benefits of cycling. *News from Nowhere* clearly shares our contemporary concern with less stressful, more environmentally benign modes of transport - hence the utopian transformation from the overcrowded and overheated underground train of the book's first chapter to the horse and cart on which Dick and Guest wend their leisurely way across London or the boats in which they later row vigorously up the Thames. But still, where, we might protest, is the bicycle in all this?

To feel cycles and cycling to be a significant absence in *News from Nowhere* is not, I think, an anachronistic projection, an improper backdating of the concerns of the post-modern 1990s to the Victorian 1880s. For the first notable wave of cycling enthusiasm in this country predates Morris's *Nowhere* by a good many years. As Andrew Ritchie informs us in his fine study, *King of the Road*:

Cycling began in the late 1860s. Then, they talked about 'velocipedes' and 'velocipeding', and only during the last two years of the decade did the words 'bicycle' and 'bicycling' come into circulation. 'Bicycle' was used to distinguish a two-wheeled velocipede from all the other different kinds... What had before 1865 been an enthusiast's fad indulged by a small number of technically minded people became almost overnight a massive craze, a huge social phenomenon in France, the U.S. and England.

When the Franco-Prussian war paralysed the French bicycle industry in 1870-71, England had this new manufacturing field to itself, with Coventry and Wolverhampton becoming major centres of production. The 1870s and 1880s were the great years of the cycling clubs, with their uniforms and bugles; a national organisation, the Bicycling Club, was formed in 1878, and by 1886 the Cyclists Touring Club had over 22,000 members. 'The Saturday and Sunday club runs', Ritchie remarks, 'were the beginning of the modern "weekend", when city people looked out towards the countryside and its pleasures as a way of recovering some of the health and strength they felt they had lost in the city' (p. 89). All sorts of gruelling cycling competitions and stunts were held during these decades, including an Oxford-Cambridge cycle race (the 84 miles between the two universities) which one wonders if Morris knew of. And all sorts of legal, medical and social controversies dogged cycling in these early days. In *Bicycling: A History* Frederick Alderson writes of 'the perils which attended on the bicycle pioneer of the 70s before legal rights were defined': 'Patrols of mounted police made raids on bicyclists frequenting the wood-paved roads of Hammersmith and Kensington'.

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Did Morris witness such skirmishes, one wonders, after he moved to Hammersmith in 1878?3

There was, then, a rich and fast-growing culture of cycling surrounding Morris as he composed *News from Nowhere* in 1890. It is true that by then he himself, as a portly and gout-stricken fifty-six year old, was not likely to be seen perched high above the ground on an Ordinary or penny farthing for a brisk club run down to Brighton and back, though he had once cycled out to Southwark with William De Morgan to inspect a possible site for their ‘fictionary’ in 1881.4 Still more germane to Morris’s utopia, however, is the fact that there was beginning in these years to be a distinctive politics of cycling. The earliest instance of this I can trace occurs in *Commonweal* itself on 30 July 1887. The correspondence column of that issue contains a bold appeal ‘TO SOCIALIST CYCLISTS’:

While the summer is still with us, I should like to call the attention of those of our comrades who may come under the above designation – and they must be many – to a ‘plan of campaign’, whereby they may take their cycling pleasure and advance the Socialist cause at the same time. The plan is this: Let them in their future ‘runs’ into the rural districts carry with them a stock of pamphlets and leaflets for judicious distribution on the road and at the villages and other likely places they pass en route . . . Those who try this plan for the first time will be as surprised as delighted to note the gratitude with which Socialist literature is accepted, and the eagerness with which it is perused . . . a splendid opportunity of doing a little practical good in their day and generation is now open – where, perhaps, it was denied them before – to all who have a ‘wheeler’ and a will.5

Whether any socialist cyclists responded immediately to this appeal I do not know. Two weeks later, however, another correspondent wrote in approving the scheme and confessing that ‘as a walker I thought of doing something in this sort of work myself’.6 Committed individuals, whatever their means of locomotion, clearly did distribute socialist literature on their tours, and one might have hoped that this discussion would have planted a cycling-related seed in the mind of the editor of *Commonweal* to bear fruit in his utopia just three years later.

Certainly bicycles were around in Morris’s utopian Kelmscott landscapes in the years preceding the composition of *News from Nowhere*. In August 1888 Morris wrote to his daughter Jenny: ‘We had a beautiful day on Sunday we all went up the water along with Mr Radford who suddenly turned up on Saturday evening on a bicycle, asking for lodging, having come over from Didcot through Wantage’ (II, p. 805).

Seven years after the *Commonweal* appeal, on 7 March 1894, the notion of a socialist cycling movement was vigorously taken up again:

. . . seven men met together in Birmingham, in what was formerly a Wesleyan chapel, and discussed how best to combine the pleasures of cycling with the propaganda of Socialism. And thus was born the first of all the Clarion Cycling Clubs . . . From January, 1895, and onwards for the next few years, the growth of Clarion C.C.’s was remarkable. It was the boom period for cycling. Everybody
cycled . . . By the end of the first year over eighty C.C.C.’s had been formed, and the next season started with over one hundred and twenty clubs. Within three years the membership had gone up from seven to over seven thousand. And the original Object of the Club: To propagate Socialism and Good Fellowship, was actively and vigorously pursued.7

If Morris’s ideas, as mediated by Robert Blatchford, were a major inspiration to the Clarion movement, it seems odd that we can’t detect any anticipations of this left-wing cycling culture – only four years away in the future, after all – in News from Nowhere!

We can measure this absence quite precisely by comparison with another aspect of the Clarion movement where Morris’s utopia actually is clairvoyant in ways we would expect. In Early Green Politics Peter C. Gould writes of ‘appreciation of Nature in the field as a legitimate and necessary part of socialist activity’ in the 1890s: ‘The Clarion Field Club (C.F.C.) claimed 58 members in March 1895 . . . By March 1896 there were 700 members in more than 38 clubs’.8 And News from Nowhere had clearly predicted this whole social development in advance, all the way from Guest’s early reference to being caught on his ‘archaeological natural-history side’ in the discussion of Epping Forest to the description of the Nowherians on the upper reaches of the Thames: ‘they were eager to discuss all the little details of life: the weather, the hay-crop, the last new house, the plenty or lack of such and such birds . . . the women knew as much about all these things as the men: could name a flower, and knew its qualities; could tell you the habitat of such and such birds and fish, and the like’.9

We can see then why bicycles, historically and politically speaking, might have featured in News from Nowhere, and yet still for all that they do not. I want now to ask in what ways they might be appropriate to the book’s specific utopian vision, and what it might be (insofar as we can speculate on such matters) that prevents the book from taking them on board? The utopian society of Nowhere aims to break down the rigid dualism of city and country, and it was clear enough, in the 1880s and 1890s, that bicycles could do precisely this. They allowed the urban dweller to get refreshingly out into the countryside in the evenings, at weekends or on more extended summer holidays, and once there, these early cyclists livened up the traditional life of secluded villages, both socially and economically. To this extent, then, cycling seems to earn its place in Morris’s vision of the good life. On the other hand, from its own revolutionary perspective, News from Nowhere might tend to see cycling in the 1870s and 1880s as a false solution to the city/country dichotomy, a ‘technical fix’ which offers some individual alleviation while yet leaving the intolerable general situation firmly in place. Cycling might then be the equivalent, in the field of transport, of what Morris fiercely dismissed as reformist ‘palliatives’ in the realm of politics; and if Nowhere would thus incline to see cycling as ideological, as creating a ‘false consciousness’ that you’ve solved the town/country split when you haven’t really, then this may create the blockage which prevents its entry into the text in the first place.

There is a certain progression within the utopian transport systems of Nowhere itself. The pleasant amble with Dick across London at Greylock’s slow pace is appropriate to a Guest who has only just arrived from the bad old society –
physically debilitating and prematurely ageing as that was – into the good new one. But as Guest recovers vitality in the new world self-propulsion comes to seem more desirable than passive reliance on horse power. To get oneself geographically about under one's own muscle power may even be more 'manly' in the book's value-system, one of the means whereby ‘we live amidst beauty without any fear of becoming effeminate', as Old Hammond puts it (X, p. 61). Here, too, one half expects cycling to enter the book. For cycling, then as now, was all about fresh air, sunshine, beneficial exercise, the pleasures and dignity of self-propulsion. Could we imagine Guest, Dick and Clara cycling from Hammersmith Guest House to Kelmscott Manor – with a tricycle for the elderly Guest and a two-seater 'sociable' for the young lovers, perhaps? Dick Hammond's indefatigable athleticism certainly seems to make him more than a match for the racing cyclists of the 1870s; and if Ellen is indeed some sort of 1880s New Woman, it is certainly more likely that she would be scandalising her neighbours by cycling on her own, like the Young Lady in Grey in H. G. Wells's The Wheels of Chance (1895), than by rowing on her own.

And yet, of course, our happy band of socialists row up the Thames, not cycle beside it. Why should this be? Is Morris so formatively conditioned by his Oxford experiences of rivers and boating that rowing is thereafter the only mode of muscle-powered transport he can envisage? Could he only imagine using arms to propel oneself, not legs? (Perhaps Birdalone's prodigious feats of swimming in The Water of the Wondrous Isles are as far as he can go in the 'legs' direction – though News from Nowhere does fleetingly admire 'men with good "building legs" ', XXVI, p. 151). If so, perhaps Morris might have shown interest, had he ever come across them, in some of the very early velocipedes that were hand-propelled – 'manumotive' rather than 'pedomotive', in the jargon of the times. One or two of these, indeed, were even designed for a team of riders, who thereby virtually 'rowed' along the highways, offering Nowhere the best of both worlds, Oxford and Coventry as it were. There is a constant, though implicit, contrast in the later chapters of Nowhere between boats and the (abandoned) Victorian railway system. You can vary your speed in a boat, explore tributaries you hadn't planned for, stop for a picnic or camp out when you like – all of which you can't do in a train. And yet even boats, I can't help thinking, confined as they are to the 'wet way from the east' (XXX, p. 172), are decidedly constrained compared to bikes.

Yet bicycles in the end do not enter Morris's great work. In a rare failure of imagination, News from Nowhere does not glimpse the possibility of the Clarion Cycling Clubs, of that happy culture of cycling and socialism that exists just beyond its own historical moment – and this despite its deep interest in stress-free and environmentally friendly modes of transport. But if Nowhere simply misses the Clarion cycling phenomenon, some later socialist commentators have fiercely belittled the latter, seeing it as a potential trivialisation rather than cultural enrichment of the movement. Thus Henry Pelling writes censoriously in Origins of the Labour Party:

The progress of sport and entertainment at the expense of religion and serious political discussion is a phenomenon of the twentieth century, and we can see
one aspect of its beginnings in the simultaneous success of the Clarion Cycling Clubs and the failure of the Labour Churches.\(^{11}\)

This is a dour concept of politics indeed! It is founded on a sharp opposition of work versus play, seriousness versus frivolity, which *News from Nowhere*, to its eternal credit, is concerned radically to undo. We need to invoke against Pelling the meanings of cycling in our own culture today, where it once more stands for an ethic and a politics – though of a broadly environmental rather than specifically socialist nature. To cycle today, to be involved in local or national campaigns around cycling, is to express a wish for safer roads, for re-humanised cities, for less polluted air, for reintegrated communities; one’s own muscle power is put, day in day out, to the service of those values. These are, of course, the values of *News from Nowhere* itself; and therefore I find myself saddened that the humble bicycle, which contributed so much to them in the 1880s and 1890s as it does again today, does not feature in Morris’s utopian vision. For the Green-Left cyclist of today is likely to share the prophetic vision of Jose Antonio Viera-Gallo, Assistant Secretary of Justice in the government of President Allende of Chile – ‘Socialism can only come riding on a bicycle’ (cited in Ritchie, p. 165).

**NOTES**

3 Morris’s very first opportunity to come across cycles and cycling would, one presumes, have been the Great Exhibition of 1851, where three early velocipedes were on show.
4 See Norman Kelvin (ed.), *The Collected Letters of William Morris*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1987), II, p. 43. I am grateful to Peter Faulkner and Nicholas Salmon for this reference. Subsequent references to Kelvin are included in my text.
5 *Commonweal*, 30 July 1887, p. 245. The letter is signed ‘Aegzycae’.
6 ibid., 13 August 1887, p. 261.
10 This is a ‘progression’ in which Morris’s wife apparently did not share, since, as Fiona MacCarthy informs us, Janey Morris ‘felt nostalgia for Venice and the
gondola, the most perfect form of locomotion she had ever found', William Morris: A Life for Our Time, (London: Faber & Faber 1994), p. 390. However, May Morris, in Egypt in 1897, paints a more spirited picture of her mother's tastes in transport: 'it would amuse you to see Mother on horse-back, and how well she gets on. A camel has been suggested for her . . .', cited in Jan Marsh, Jane and May Morris: A Biographical Story 1839–1938, (London: Pandora Press 1986), p. 234.