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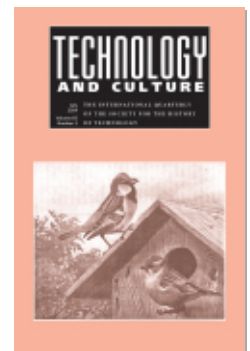
The Alternative Modernity of the Bicycle in British and French Literature, 1880–1920 by Una Brogan (review)

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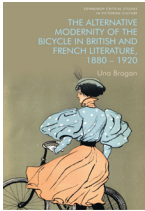
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Christoph Laucht is associate professor of modern history at Swansea University in Wales. He is the author of *Elemental Germans: Klaus Fuchs, Rudolf Peierls and the Making of British Nuclear Culture, 1939–59* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012). At present, Laucht is completing a book tentatively titled *Uncertainty and the Nuclear Threat in Britain, 1979–85*.

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The Alternative Modernity of the Bicycle in British and French Literature, 1880–1920

By Una Brogan. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022. Pp. 276.



Over the past three decades, the growing popularity of the bicycle in the Western world has stimulated a flow of historical studies about its technological development and social-cultural significance. Una Brogan's book is about literary representations of cycling in novels and short stories by some twenty British and French authors in the decades around 1900, when the bicycle changed from an elitist gadget into a means of mass transportation. With the exception of several articles and a volume on the bicycle's role in film and literature (Raab, "Wheels of Fire," 2012; Gates, "Vélibre," 2011; Withers and Shea, eds., *Culture on Two Wheels*, 2016), Brogan's study largely covers uncharted terrain.

The basic concern of her analysis pertains to the double position of the bicycle in the development of modern transportation and the nature of its technology. In multiple ways the bicycle paved the way for advanced mobility, as it became linked to motorized traffic, notably the car. Both means of transportation were associated with the dynamics of (technological) progress, industrial mass production, efficiency, speed, individual freedom and flexibility, and an expansive and adventurous experience of space and time. In several ways, however, cycling—as marked by its convergence of (human) engine and passenger—differed from motorized traffic; hence Brogan's designation of "alternative modernity." First, and most notably, cycling came with physical effort and intense sensory awareness of the natural and social environment. Second, recreational cycling in particular satisfied the romantic nostalgia of urbanites for the "unspoilt" countryside and the preindustrial past. Third, the bicycle was seen as an emancipatory and democratic vehicle, not only because of its swift availability to women and the lower classes but also because it enabled a break with social conventions and spontaneous encounters, sometimes even sexually connoted, beyond one's circle. Fourth, the bicycle's technology was transparent, which promoted a self-reliant, do-it-yourself attitude. Finally, the bicycle was presented as a mechanism that could bridge the contrast between, on the one hand, the natural and human dimension, both physically and mentally, and on the other, the artificial and

potentially overwhelming character of technology. In Marxist terminology, the bicycle was not an alienating and de-skilling machine, but rather a tool in support of the body, which still allowed human control and choice.

Another important aspect addressed by Brogan is the connection between the bicycle experience and new narrative and stylistic literary forms, such as those practiced, for instance, by H. G. Wells, E. M. Forster, Aldous Huxley, Arthur Conan Doyle, Maurice Leblanc, and Marcel Proust. The flexibility, spontaneity, adventurousness, egalitarianism, and intense personal experience expressed in their descriptions of cycling were mirrored in the narrative structure and temporal dimension of their stories. Also, the growing literary representation of cycling went hand in hand with the production and consumption of other popular writings, such as travel accounts and guides, cycling periodicals, practical instructions, feuilletons, poems, and songs. Writing and reading, according to Brogan, thus helped to foster a group feeling among bicyclists, if not an “imagined community.”

The book, which is based on the author’s dissertation, provides interesting insights, but its theoretical force tends to be limited. Brogan refers frequently and casually to divergent thinkers such as Bruno Latour, Henri Lefebvre, Michel de Certeau, Georg Simmel, Walter Benjamin, Charles Baudelaire, Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, Ivan Illich, Henry Bergson, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Martin Heidegger. Yet this name-dropping stands out all the more in the absence of a comprehensive theoretical frame. Symptomatic of this is Brogan’s ultrashort conclusion, in which she expresses her commitment to the humane and sustainable bicycle but does not reflect on her analysis in the preceding chapters. Nor does she discuss the relationship between literary fiction and social-historical realities, as if she assumes that literary texts offer more or less direct information about past cycling experiences. Her discussion of novels and short stories is interlaced with information from other primary texts as well as secondary historical studies, philosophical reflections, social studies of technology, and views from urban and sports sociology, without explicitly accounting for this rather indiscriminate mingling of genres, disciplines, and sources of information. Paying more attention to British than to French literature, this study has a British bias, while the author’s one-sided focus on recreational cycling by the middle classes undermines her claim that her analysis covers utilitarian cycling as well.

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