The War of the Wheels: H.G. Wells and the Bicycle

Jeremy Withers
Iowa State University, withers@iastate.edu

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H. G. Wells was obsessed with transportation. Throughout his vast corpus—over a hundred published books, thousands of articles and essays, dozens of short stories—readers encounter references to a staggering array of transport technologies. Tanks rumble across the pages of the short story “The Land Ironclads.” Londoners desperately attempt to flee the walking Martian tripods by means of boats, carriages, and trains in *The War of the Worlds*. Elevated moving sidewalks slide citizens around the city in *The Sleeper Awakes*, a work that—like the novel *Tono-Bungay* and the story “The Argonauts of the Air”—also showcases an intense interest on the part of Wells in the development of aeronautics. Airplanes and airships rain down destruction from above in *The War in the Air*, while trams, cars, and motorcycles scurry frantically below. Ships and cylinders are hurled through space in *The First Men in the Moon* and *The War of the Worlds*. The Time Traveller saddles his time machine for a ride hundreds of thousands of years into the future, and then eventually all the way to the dying days of a posthuman planet Earth. Automobiles flicker across the pages of *Kipps* as emblems of conspicuous wealth, while in his epic “time out of joint” speech in that novel the dying socialist Masterman rails against the cars of the rich that dash around “killing children and making machinery hateful to the soul of man.”

In *Anticipations of the Reaction of Mechanical and Scientific Progress upon Human Life and Thought*, a futurological nonfiction work that provides Wells’s prophecies on the coming century, the text, as Simon J. James points out, strikingly “begins by considering neither birth, politics, nor art, but transport.” Such front-loading of the topic
of transportation surely speaks to the significance the topic held for Wells. Commenting on another text that serves as a useful overview of many key Wellsian themes and ideas—the “film-book” *Things to Come* (1934)—James goes on to observe that

the plot is propelled by Wells’s characteristic preoccupation with technologies of transport, from the children’s toys at the opening, to the tanks of the war, to the horse-drawn Rolls-Royce of its dystopian aftermath, to *Wings Over the World’s* solo airplanes and bombers, to the earth-tunnelling machines of the imagined utopian future, and the moon rocket of its triumphant conclusion. In the film’s middle section, who controls the air controls the world: power and technologies of transport are explicitly equated.³

Wells’s *A Modern Utopia* devotes an entire chapter to reflections on transportation in a utopian society; the title of this chapter, significantly, is “Concerning Freedoms.” In a later speculative work, *The Shape of Things to Come*, Wells imagines “a cardinal date in the emergence” of the utopian World State as being a conference “organized by the Transport Union, which had begun as a loose association of the surviving aeroplane and shipping operators for mutual aid and protection.”⁴ In his *Experiment in Autobiography*, written late in his life, Wells periodically sets the scene for a particular memory by referencing what the state of transportation was at that time. For example, when discussing his mother, Sarah, Wells states that she was born “three years before the opening of the first steam railway,” in an era that was “still an age of horse and foot transit, sailing ships and undiscovered lands.”⁵ In the final chapter of his *Experiment in Autobiography*, Wells describes inventing during World War I a “telpherage,” a type of aerial tramway designed to transport supplies across the battlefields in a way that put soldiers’ lives at far less risk of injury or death. Additionally, *War and the Future*, a collection of Wells’s journalistic coverage of the Great War, brims with his musings on the importance of zeppelins, balloons, airplanes, trucks, tanks, and roads for that epoch-defining war. In short, these examples demonstrate that Wells—with all of his diverse interests that ranged over a long writing career, and despite
his rejection of earlier genres he wrote in like the scientific romances in favor of more sociological and educational genres later in life—was strikingly consistent across much of his oeuvre in placing an importance on transport.

But a transportation technology that particularly mesmerized Wells, and which is the focus of this book, is the bicycle (a category that, for the purposes of this book, includes the tricycle). With the debatable exception of flying technologies, cycling was the mode of transport that most captivated Wells. Nearly every history of the bicycle and nearly every book-length study of H. G. Wells mentions how much the bicycle fascinated Wells. For example, in the most recent comprehensive and scholarly biography of Wells, Michael Sherborne’s *H. G. Wells: Another Kind of Life* (2010), the index includes eighteen entries listed under “cycling” (only one of which, however, is more than one page long). The most recent monograph devoted solely to Wells, James’s *Maps of Utopia* (2012) includes a robust discussion of Wells’s most cycling-centric work, his 1896 novel *The Wheels of Chance*. Similarly, book-length histories of cycling such as Andrew Ritchie’s *King of the Road* (1975), Pryor Dodge’s *The Bicycle* (1996), Jim Fitzpatrick’s *The Bicycle in Wartime* (2011), and Duncan R. Jamieson’s *The Self-Propelled Voyager* (2015) contain scattered references to the appearance of bicycles in Wellsian texts. Even a new history of cycling focused almost entirely on the bicycle in the 1890s American context, Evan Friss’s *The Cycling City* (2015), is sure to make quick mention of how, notably, British writers like “Arthur Conan Doyle and H. G. Wells introduced bicycles into their fiction.”

However, even though H. G. Wells is clearly a noted and important figure in the history of the bicycle (especially in terms of specifically artistic responses to the bicycle), the existing discussions of Wells and the bicycle are scattered and cursory. This book is therefore the first in-depth analysis of bikes in Wells’s long and prolific writing career. As this study will show, bicycles (and bicycle-related machines like tricycles) show up in an impressive array of Wellsian texts: his scientific romances, social comedies, short stories, futurological speculations, utopias, autobiography, letters, and so forth. They show up (directly
or indirectly) in well-known and revered masterpieces like The War of the Worlds, The Time Machine, and Kipps, as well as in more obscure and less frequently read works like The Wheels of Chance, Mr. Britling Sees It Through, and the unfinished novel The Wealth of Mr. Waddy. I will argue that across his many references to the bicycle, Wells found the machine to be a useful literary device for creating elaborate characters and for exploring complex themes, while he also often saw the bike as a springboard for meditations on technology and transportation in general. Put another way, this book will be interested throughout in exploring the ways in which Wellsian bicycles flicker between the literal and the figurative, the concrete and the metaphorical.

The full title of this study is The War of the Wheels: H. G. Wells and the Bicycle. The first and main part of the title is, of course, a pun on one of Wells's most well-known and enduring works, his proto-science fiction classic The War of the Worlds. It also serves as a reference to Wells's most cycling-centric novel, The Wheels of Chance. However, beyond its connections to puns, allusions, and alliteration, my title gestures toward the main arguments and themes of this book.

First, the title embodies the overall ambivalence and vacillation that characterize Wells's many writings on the bicycle (as well as on technology in general, it might be noted). As we will see in detail, although by and large Wells celebrated the bicycle as a singular and astonishing piece of technology, he was anything but a monotonous promoter of this machine.

Second, the title references what I will argue is Wells's ongoing debate with many of his contemporaries regarding the significance and usefulness of the bicycle. Most of his peers had abandoned their enthusiasm for the bicycle by the close of the nineteenth century, about the time the worldwide "bicycle boom" collapsed around 1897–98. Wells, however, persisted in his conviction in the value of the bike into the era of World War I (1914–18), a good twenty years or so more than other people.

Finally, The War of the Wheels is a title that previews the particular foci within the book, such as the chapter examining Wellsian thoughts on the wartime applications of bicycles, as well as the final
chapter examining the conflict between automobiles and bicycles. In sum, the title’s reference to war alludes to the abundant discord and uncertainty characterizing the relationship between Wells’s writings and those of his contemporaries on the topic of bicycle.

**Ambivalence Toward the Bicycle**

As several chapters in this book will address at length, Wells’s devotion to the bicycle was far from monolithic and unquestioning. It is this complexity of his thinking about the bicycle that connects Wells with such literary contemporaries and fellow cyclists as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. An 1896 issue of *Scientific American* shows Conan Doyle confessing to his own frequent practice of cycling and declaring a belief that “[w]hen the spirits are low, when the day appears dark, when work becomes monotonous, when hope hardly seems worth having” all one needs to do is “just mount a bicycle and go out for a spin down the road.”\(^8\) However, as with some of Wells’s texts, a closer examination of some of Conan Doyle’s stories reveals ambivalent images of the bicycle. For example, in his Sherlock Holmes tale “The Solitary Cyclist” (1903), Conan Doyle depicts the bicycle both as a tool for female freedom as well as an ominous tool for male surveillance of that freedom. “[E]ver since that girl has been in my employment,” Mr. Carruthers tells Holmes, referring to Violet Smith, with whom he is in love, “I never once [when she was on her bicycle] let her go past this house . . . without following her on my bicycle, just to see that she came to no harm.”\(^9\) As well intentioned as such surveillance sounds, it still represents a way in which the very machine that helps to liberate women like Violet at the same time facilitates an extension of her employer’s male gaze outside his house. In a similarly ambivalent way, another bicycle-centric Holmes tale—“The Adventure of the Priory School” (1904)—finds Conan Doyle celebrating how a “good cyclist does not need a high road” and can instead just ride across the inhospitable terrain of “a great rolling moor” and a “desolate plain,” while also negatively associating the bicycle with treachery by having one of the story’s villains, James Wilder, secretly cycle over to the school to lure a young boy, Arthur, to the site of his abduction.\(^10\)
Wells, like Conan Doyle, was a fervent cyclist whose writings also convey conflicting attitudes at times regarding bicycles. To turn now to one quick Wellsian example of this negative treatment of cycling technology, in his novel published posthumously as *The Wealth of Mr. Waddy* (an unfinished work that constitutes an early version of his midcareer masterpiece *Kipps*), Wells depicts in the second chapter the titular character being paralyzed at the age of forty-five by a tricycle accident. While going downhill, the machine suffers a mechanical failure in the form of the brakes going out. After colliding with an omnibus and killing its horse, Mr. Waddy comes “to his senses again three weeks after . . . bandaged from head to foot and a log from his waist downwards.” He is now, in short, “crippled for life.” This negative depiction of the bicycle portrays it as a machine rife with potential for technological breakdown and personal injury. Put simply, Conan Doyle and Wells might at first glance appear to be steadfast champions of cycling, but a closer reading of some texts reveals their depictions of bicycles and cyclists to be more equivocal and complicated.

In more recent years, some cycling scholars have similarly highlighted the contradictory and complicated nature of the bicycle. For instance, Rosen has pointed out that the bicycle industry is complicit in resource depletion and in unpalatable capitalistic practices like “built-in obsolescence and opaque product design,” and Hoffmann and Lugo have shown the promotion of cycling by cities to be too often motivated by unsavory gentrification and urban renewal that displaces the poor and people of color. Wells then, like these cycling scholars, does not shy away from representing some of the more dubious—even at times outright negative—aspects and effects of the bicycle. In this book, we will occasionally see Wells touch on these insidious and problematic aspects of the bicycle—aspects such as its contributions to a fetishization of technology and to a belief in human superiority, as well as its contributions to unhealthy escapist and apolitical fantasies.

**Beyond the Bicycle Boom**

One significant point I want to highlight in this study is that Wells affirmed the importance and the utility of the bicycle much longer
than many of his contemporaries. As many historians have discussed at length, the late nineteenth-century "bicycle boom"—those years when everybody seemed to be riding bicycles (in addition to writing, talking, and even singing about them)—peaked around 1895–96. Cycling historian Nicholas Oddy describes this boom as "when the activity [of cycling] was at the height of fashion, the market was characterised by the monied classes buying top-grade machines and the industry was bloated by huge speculation by capitalists eager to profit from the potential it offered." The bike boom then collapsed around 1897–98. This "crash" was most pronounced in the United States, but the bicycle also suffered a decline in overall investment and in high- and middle-end sales, as well as a loss of social and cultural cachet, across Canada and Europe in the late nineteenth century. As Woodforde writes of the British cycling scene in particular: "The slump at the end of the 1890s put a number of bicycle firms out of business or drove them to make other things—those who could afford the plant turned to the motor-car field. Since around 1900, the number of cycle firms, large and small, has steadily diminished, with [British bicycle manufacturer] Raleigh alone expanding and remaining in good order." Yet, I argue that Wells maintained a largely positive interest in the bicycle for nearly another twenty years beyond the bicycle’s golden age. Even though chapter 6, "Automobility," demonstrates that Wells began to downplay the significance of bicycles in some of his fiction published during World War I, we will see in chapter 3, "Warfare," that at least in some of his journalism during the Great War he still encouraged a serious consideration of the value of the bicycle for the war effort. Again, The War of the Wheels maintains that Wells’s interest in and his promotion of the bike all the way into the years of the First World War is significant and sets Wells apart from many of his peers.

Wells the Cyclist

The modern bicycle and the career of H. G. Wells are intertwined from their beginnings. Although Wells had published journalistic essays, book and theater reviews, and some pieces of fiction prior to 1895, it
is the publication of *The Time Machine* in that year that launched him onto the world literary stage. From that point on, he earned his living solely from his pen, and many readers and intellectuals revered him as a leading light among the late Victorian intelligentsia. Similarly, the bicycle rose to new heights in 1895, a year that (as mentioned above) is often perceived as inaugurating the “bicycle boom” that swept across a large portion of the globe around 1895–96. Although the version of the bicycle that is often hailed as the forerunner of today’s modern bicycle—the safety bicycle—was invented and manufactured in the late 1880s, it was only in the mid-1890s that the market became so “bloated” (as Oddy puts it) with an abundant supply of these bicycles (both new and secondhand) that more and more lower- and middle-class people were able to purchase one of the newfangled machines. The significance of so many affordable bicycles around was that it meant “the beginning of greater social freedom, above all for the middle classes to whom the bicycle was particularly precious. Personal mobility, independent of railway timetables and stations, had previously been restricted to the minority who could afford a horse and carriage.” And it is against this background of proliferating bicycle ownership and of a mania for all things bike-related that H. G. Wells—a writer whose career would largely be defined by technology-focused, proto-science fiction works like *The Time Machine* and *The War of the Worlds*—burst onto the scene. Small wonder, then, that the revolutionary machine of the bicycle would show up repeatedly throughout many of his works.

We know from his writings that Wells was an avid cyclist himself, at least in the first half of his life (figure 1). In his *Experiment in Autobiography*, for example, he writes of cycling with his wife Jane while living in Woking at the time he was planning and writing *The War of the Worlds*, *The Invisible Man*, and *The Wheels of Chance*. Eventually, he and Jane “got a tandem bike of a peculiar shape made for us by the Humber people and we began to wander about the south of England” (figures 2 and 3). Additionally, the *Experiment in Autobiography* includes a memorable description of Wells attempting to teach the novelist George Gissing how to cycle in order to help improve the
latter's ailing health. Wells tells us, however, that Gissing “was far too nervous and excitable to ride.” The riding lessons ended when one day Wells launched Gissing into a paroxysm of laughter by telling him to “[g]et on to your ironmongery,” a bit of humorous wordplay that resulted in Gissing falling off his bike after a few yards of riding. Further remembrances of the bicycle in the Experiment in Autobiography include descriptions of Wells cycling to visit his first wife, Isabel, during their separation; of a cycling trip during the arduous writing of Love and Mr. Lewisham, a trip whose exertions helped rekindle his recurring kidney ailment; of trips via bicycle to socialize with nearby
Fabians like Hubert Bland; and a poignant description of a ride “out of the cold skirts of a wintry night into a drizzling dawn along a wet road” to try to find a doctor for a dying Stephen Crane (the expatriate writer best known today for his American Civil War novel, *The Red Badge of Courage*). 24

When we turn to the surviving correspondence of Wells, abundant references to the bicycle appear throughout these letters as well. In the earliest letter that mentions cycling, from around 1888 or 1889 (significantly, well before the “bike boom” begins), Wells writes to his friend Elizabeth Healey, “I have been cycling for a week, Guildford, New Bognor, Arundel, Pulborough, Reigate, and I must admit that the weather was really very good & no tampering with the brakes & so forth on the hills.” 25 In these letters, Wells boasts of routinely doing twenty- to thirty-mile rides in less-than-ideal conditions such as “white fog all the way, ruts like iron, flints now on the roads.” 26 In
one particular letter, written around the time he was composing his “cycling romance” novel *The Wheels of Chance* (published in 1896), Wells evinces clear pride in how much that novel would draw upon his own familiarity with cycling, writing that the “details of bicycle riding, carefully done from experience . . . should, I think, appeal to a certain section of the public.” Additional letters discuss the military value of cycling as well as bicycle rides with his second wife, Jane, and there is a humorous cartoon drawn by Wells in one letter detailing “[d]irections for descending from bicycle on left side.”

Around 1898–99, Wells momentarily gave up cycling due to health issues related to a smashed kidney (the result of a football injury) and a frequently hemorrhaging lung. In some of the letters from these years, he mentions being “easily fatigued & quite unable to travel or walk far” and that he “mustn’t ride a bicycle or take any exercise.” He even writes in one letter of giving away his bicycle to Henry Hick, the doctor treating him, “in a sort of ‘appreciation’ over & above
[the doctor's] fees," a token of appreciation perhaps signaling Wells's thinking that his cycling days are behind him for good.30

However, by 1900 we hear in the surviving correspondence of Wells taking up the saddle again. He writes to Elizabeth Healey in May of that year that he has "been prowling about the North of France on a bicycle," and he tells his brother Fred in 1902 that, upon the latter's return home from South Africa and if Wells has his work done in time, he will "cycle to Southampton & meet you when you land."31

Wells also mentions that around the time he was finishing Kipps (published in 1905) and planning Tono-Bungay (published in 1909) he "got a bicycle again and was beginning the exploration of Kent," and in two letters from 1911 he writes of "having been away on a cycling

4. Wells's 1911 provisional membership card for the Cyclists' Touring Club. From The Rare Book & Manuscript Library of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Used with permission.
tour” and of “bicycl[ing] part of the way home” from France with his two sons—Gip and Frank—after spending four months there. Just prior to this cycling trip abroad, Wells and his two sons purchased memberships in the Cyclists’ Touring Club that granted them benefits in terms of lodging discounts and road maps (figure 4). Wells writes that he would have done the entire ride home from France had it not been “for rain and punctures.” One of the latest pieces of evidence for Wells’s own cycling is a photograph taken in the summer of 1912 depicting Wells inspecting several bicycles before a cycling holiday in Holland (figure 5). However, as will be discussed at greater length in this book’s final chapter, by the mid-1910s references to Wells’s own bicycling become essentially nonexistent.

These examples demonstrate that, for Wells, the bicycle was literally and physically never far away from him for at least the first half of his life, a period of astounding creativity that is often hailed (by early acolytes like Joseph Conrad and Henry James, as well as by many later readers and critics) as his most impressive and successful. Wells utilized the bicycle during this time to plan and think through novels he was writing, to nourish relationships with fellow writers and socialists,

5. Wells examining bicycles before a bicycle holiday in Holland (summer 1912). From The Rare Book & Manuscript Library of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Used with permission.
to explore the British countryside, and to help maintain his health. In
the rest of this book we will see that, in addition to often being liter­
ally and physically close to Wells, the bicycle was also often nearby and
readily incorporated into Wells’s fiction and nonfiction. The bicycle
was repeatedly a convenient “literary machine” upon which he could
draw when he needed to develop a character, explore a theme or topic,
or ruminate on the future.

Why Bicycles Now?
The subject of Wells and cycling is a timely one for our contempo­
rary era because transportation is a topic very much on many people’s
minds right now. That is, many scholars, activists, politicians, and
everyday citizens are questioning and rethinking some of our society’s
most sacred and well-entrenched beliefs about how we move and how
we get around as a society, and about transportation’s relationship
to such issues as climate change and pollution, vibrant communities,
social equality, and personal health.

Most pressing of these issues is the role that transport plays as a
major contributor to greenhouse gases and other harmful pollutants.
As one article states: “Transportation is an important contributor to
global emissions of many different gases and aerosols that can have
an impact on climate and stratospheric ozone, either directly or indi­
rectly.” The transport sector is a major contributor of particular harm­
ful emissions such as nitrogen, carbon dioxide, volatile organic carbon,
and black carbon. Road vehicles in particular have been estimated
to dispense 75 to 80 percent of all carbon dioxide emissions from the
transport sector, which includes road, rail, sea, and air transport. And
although some people have found cause for celebration in how certain
sectors of society have successfully curtailed their greenhouse gas out­
put, transportation is not one of these sectors. As one 2010 article
somberly declares, whereas now transport in the United States and the
European Union is guilty of around 20–25 percent of total carbon
dioxide emissions, by 2050 “as much as 30–50% [of total carbon diox­
ide emissions] . . . are projected to come from the transport sector.”
Given this connection between transportation and the increasingly clear threats posed by global climate change, several recent US government reports and memoranda have highlighted the need for large-scale political, technological, and societal overhauls of our transportation sector. In *Building a Sustainable Energy Future*, a report published in 2009 by the National Science Foundation, the authors point out that because the “U.S. transportation sector ranks high in both energy consumption and carbon dioxide emissions” there clearly needs to be a national move toward more research and development of “transportation infrastructure improvements that can reduce energy use,” such as “improved public transit, congestion pricing, dedicated high-occupancy vehicle lanes, and urban planning that encourages walking and biking.”\(^{40}\) Additionally, a 2015 US government memorandum titled “Multi-Agency Science and Technology Priorities for the FY [Fiscal Year] 2017 Budget” asserts that one multiagency research and development priority needs to be “building a clean and efficient 21st century transportation sector” and that we must as a nation “advance multiple transportation modes.”\(^{41}\) Both of these reports—the first with its explicit mentioning of biking and the second with its reference to “multiple transportation modes”—remind us that the bicycle needs to and ought to play a role in any kind of multipronged approach to improving transportation’s gluttonous energy consumption and colossal carbon footprint.

In addition to contributing heavily to anthropogenic climate change, road transport also adds significantly to air pollution, which numerous studies have connected to respiratory and cardiovascular diseases, as well as certain cancers.\(^{42}\) Although many scholars agree that any solution to transportation’s effects on air quality and on climate change must involve a multipronged approach—and many agree that convincing more people to adopt sustainable, alternative modes of transport is only one way to address our immense environmental problems—putting more people on bicycles can still be an important step toward making significant reductions to global greenhouse gases and other pollutants possible.\(^{43}\)
Of course, Wells lived and wrote at a time when people had the thinnest of knowledge regarding anthropogenic climate change.\textsuperscript{44} However, his largely positive and at times outright utopian celebration of the bicycle makes many Wellsian texts important reading in these increasingly dark days of predicted environmental catastrophe. This is because Wells (like many current activists) teaches us that there is much to admire about the "lowly" bicycle, and that for myriad reasons this simple machine should play a significant role in the future of any society aspiring to attain utopian levels of peace, stability, and happiness. Although "utopian celebration of the bicycle" and "utopian levels" might sound extravagant and excessive, it is important to remember that at least in the 1890s, when Wells was launching his literary career, the belief that the bicycle could cure a throng of social and political problems, as well as a range of physical and psychological ailments, led people to embrace the bike as resembling a utopian machine. For example, in his 2015 study of the American bicycle craze, \textit{The Cycling City}, Friss repeatedly describes the bike as often being exalted in utopian terms, asserting at one point that "late nineteenth-century Americans looked upon the bicycle as an almost utopian instrument. The possibilities of the bicycle and the cycling city appeared limitless."\textsuperscript{45} The British bicycle craze might have differed in some of its particulars from the American one but not in its general zeal for the bicycle and its at times utopian glorification of this machine.

Many people are also looking to the bicycle to help offset the deterioration of local communities and of inner cities that has often been the result of rampant post–World War II urban flight and suburban sprawl. The bicycle, like farmers’ markets and non-chain restaurants and stores, has been increasingly embraced in recent years by people eager to adopt a smaller-scale, more localized lifestyle. Although in its earliest years, the bicycle was celebrated for the distances it was able to introduce into people’s constrained lives (such as the lives of women and the lower classes), more recently environmentalists and proponents of "locavore" culture have praised the bicycle for its capacities to shrink distances. As Dave Horton describes it: "the irony is that
the bicycle historically led to an expansion in the geographical range of people’s everyday lives . . . [but now] the bicycle tends to symbolise and achieve the opposite effect, ‘squeezing’ different aspects of daily life into a more compact geographical area.” Like many people today, Wells was quite interested in transportation’s relationship (and the bicycle’s relationship in particular) to issues of community, space, and distance, as we will see in chapters that examine works like Anticipations and The War in the Air.

Third, proponents of cycling hail the bicycle’s potential contributions to social equality.47 Because private car ownership is often prohibitively expensive, and because even public transportation can be notoriously unreliable in some cities and in some poorer neighborhoods, the bicycle—affordable and durable as it is—has, since its inception, been lauded as “the poor person’s horse” and eventually “the poor person’s car.” The bicycle, in other words, grants a level of mobility and freedom of movement to people who might otherwise be confined to areas that lack sufficient access to employment, health care, shopping, recreation, and so forth. Just as Wells anticipates some of our contemporary reflections on the bike’s connections to space and to sustainable, livable communities, his writing about bicycles (most prominently in a work like The Wheels of Chance) also prefigures and parallels modern day reflections on the bicycle’s relationship to “social leveling” and to increased mobility for people who formerly lacked it.

Finally, in addition to contributing to sustainability, social justice, and healthy communities, the bicycle has also been adopted as a crucial element in creating and maintaining healthy bodies.48 This association of bicycles with issues of health is not new, though: since the earliest days of the bicycle a fierce debate raged as to how advantageous or deleterious the bicycle was to a rider’s health.49 The majority of voices at that time, however (correctly, of course), proclaimed cycling’s benefits for human health as outweighing any possible negative effects. Cycling has again been lauded as an ideal activity that can help combat public health epidemics, such as our various “diseases of affluence” (e.g., type 2 diabetes and heart disease) and “the obesity epidemic,” both of which are in part caused by—and significantly
The significant advantage that cycling is seen as having over other forms of exercise is that it can combine a healthy activity with the needs of everyday mobility. That is, since a large proportion of the trips people make on a daily basis are short distances of only a few miles, and a few miles is seen as an ideal cycling distance that is neither too ludicrously short nor too strenuously far, the bicycle provides the unique opportunity to exercise while doing the necessary commute to work or while running one’s daily errands. In short, it avoids the folly of having to drive to the gym in order to stay in shape.

No less an embodiment of knowledge and rationality than Sherlock Holmes also proclaimed cycling’s health benefits around the end of the Victorian era. In “The Solitary Cyclist,” Sir Arthur Conan Doyle depicts Holmes—as the famous detective is attempting to guess the reason why a beautiful, young cyclist has come to Baker Street to consult him—telling the woman right away, “[a]t least it cannot be your health . . . so ardent a bicyclist must be full of energy.” Wells, similarly, was clearly aware of the health benefits of the bicycle. His fiction, as well as his autobiography and letters, attest to his familiarity with the integral role cycling can play in treating a wide range of physical ailments. For example, in the novel The History of Mr. Polly, the title character’s health becomes noticeably improved during his stint of embracing the bicycle, for we are told that Polly’s “indigestion vanished with air and exercise,” an indigestion that returns later in his life after he settles down into marriage and a career, and after his cycling begins to taper off. And as discussed above, Wells attempts to ameliorate George Gissing’s health problems by introducing Gissing to cycling. Additionally, works like The Wheels of Chance attest to Wells’s familiarity with what today we refer to as the psychological benefits of exercise and with how cycling in particular can be a wonderful tonic for one’s mood and an effective eliminator of stress and depression. Therefore, Wells’s various texts that portray the bicycle as a potent weapon against disease, stress, and an unhealthy lifestyle in general can find a newfound relevance given our current public health crises.
In sum, bicycles are more relevant than ever given many of our current environmental, political, social, and health problems. The fact that Wells’s writings are often so emphatically interested in exploring the bicycle’s significance and extolling its benefits means that this book’s examination of Wells’s complex and sustained musings on the bicycle is timely and relevant. Even though there is not a perfect correlation between current interest in bicycles and Wells’s own interest in them (since, for example, large-scale concerns about climate change have arisen only recently), we can still find Wells engaging with a throng of issues in his own time that complement our contemporary concerns about transportation.

Overview of Chapters

Each of the chapters in this book is organized around a particular topic or theme that relates to cycling, and discussion is focused around one, or at times around several, Wellsian texts. The chapters proceed in roughly the order in which Wells wrote and published these texts. This chronological order provides some sense of how Wells’s thinking on bicycles progressed and evolved.

The first chapter, “Nature,” takes as its focus the most cycling-centric of Wells’s texts: his comedic romance novel The Wheels of Chance. Many existing discussions of this work examine the novel’s interest in cycling’s connections to late Victorian discourses on social class, gender, and health. This chapter’s analysis will focus on the novel’s attentiveness to the bicycle’s relationship to the natural world. Although some reactionary technophiles of the Victorian era, such as William Morris and Edward Carpenter, were critical of machinery and saw it as harmful to human culture and our connections to the natural world, The Wheels of Chance, as well as other celebratory texts of the bicycle at this time (such as writings by some socialist reformers), perceived technologies of transport such as the bicycle as capable of putting people more in touch with nature. This chapter, however, argues that The Wheels of Chance actually manifests Wells’s ambivalence about the possibility of a closer and more benevolent human connection with the natural world: although at times he conveys a keen optimism that
machines like bikes can lead to a greater knowledge of and sensitivity toward nature, he also references ways in which bicycles can threaten, harry, and harm the nonhuman denizens of the rural countryside.

The second chapter, "Arrogance," continues the investigation of Wells’s conflicted and at times negative perception of the bicycle. Even though scholars overwhelmingly perceive some of Wells’s earliest cycling-focused works, such as *The Wheels of Chance*, as sounding clear notes of praise for the bicycle’s technological progress and for what it has done to help liberate women and the British middle class, his depiction of the bicycle in *The War of the Worlds* darkens into a much more dismissive and far from celebratory one. Put simply, this chapter argues that Wells’s occasional references to the bicycle function as integral elements of the novel’s overall project of undercutting humanity’s smugness regarding its own accomplishments, especially its technological ones. The chapter also briefly examines late Victorian thinking on the relationship between technology and evolution, and investigates Wells’s own reflections on the effects of machinery on evolutionary degeneracy in *The War of the Worlds*.

"Warfare," the book’s third chapter, looks at Wells’s recurring interest in bicycles as an integral part of an effective military fighting force. Taking as its centerpiece Wells’s short story "The Land Ironclads" (a story famous for its pre-World War I prophesying of the tank), while also examining some speculative nonfiction and various letters and editorials that Wells wrote, this chapter places Wells’s writings about the military capabilities of bicycles within their historical era of the Second Boer War, and also discusses how his interest in these capabilities endures until the opening stages of World War I.

Chapter 4, "Hypermobility," examines how *The War in the Air*, a novel typically read as prophesying a horrific future state of warfare defined by airplanes and airships raining down destruction from the skies, can also be usefully read as a meditation on issues of transportation in general. In *The War in the Air* we perceive an author who is anxious about the ways in which new modes of transport like automobiles, motorcycles, and airplanes are making distant places more accessible while also bringing far-off people increasingly in contact
with one another in ways that foster and facilitate outbreaks of war. However, as this chapter will demonstrate, throughout the novel the bicycle is returned to again and again as an image of an ideal piece of technology that outlasts all of the others, and as a mode of transport that allows its users just enough mastery over space and distance without leading to the conflagration of worldwide warfare that Wells envisions the flying technologies of the future igniting.

The fifth chapter, “Commodification,” examines the issue of the rampant commercialization of bicycles and of cycling culture in general. First, the chapter provides an initial overview of current interest in the appropriation of cycling by the forces of the marketplace, and how many punks, anarchists, DIYers, and other bicycle enthusiasts are resisting those forces, which they perceive as corrupting the egalitarian, socially progressive values embodied by the bike. Next comes a discussion of the socialist and utopian potential that Wells projected onto bicycles in various works like *A Modern Utopia* and *The Wheels of Chance*, followed by the core of this chapter: an analysis of Wells’s critiques and satirizing of the commodification of cycling in his novels *Kipps* and *The War in the Air*. In addition, the chapter looks briefly at how Jerome K. Jerome, a contemporary of Wells and one of his friends, also registered keen concern about the rampant commercialization of the cycling in his comedic travel novel *Three Men on the Bummel*.

Chapter 6, “Automobility,” reflects on why Wells becomes largely silent on the topic of bicycles after World War I and considers what role Wells’s own eventual car ownership played in his changing attitudes toward bikes. Examining two Wellsian midcareer masterpieces—*Tono-Bungay* and *Mr. Britling Sees It Through*—this chapter will compare Wells’s shifting depictions of both bicycles and automobiles in these novels, published only seven years apart. I argue that Wells conveys a much more accepting and inclusive attitude toward the car in *Mr. Britling* than in *Tono-Bungay*, while at the same time he continues in the latter work to manifest a dismissive attitude toward the bike (the seeds of which we find in the negative treatment of bicycles in earlier works like *The War of the Worlds* and *The History of Mr. Polly*).
My conclusion briefly reflects on the almost iconic status that H. G. Wells has achieved among some members of current cycling cultures. It then goes on to remind readers that Wellsian texts can serve as a valuable locus for thinking through many of our current issues related to transportation, mobility, and sustainability.