

## All colours of the rainbow, including black and gold: making and selling bicycles in Ireland in the 1880s and 1890s

In the last two decades of the nineteenth century, cycling in Ireland progressed from being a relatively exclusive pursuit, confined mainly to young, middle-class men, to a popular sport and pastime which appealed alike to young, middle-aged and elderly members of the middle class, including large numbers of women. At the beginning of the 1880s, most Irish cyclists were young men who rode the high-wheeled 'Ordinary' or 'Penny-farthing' machine. The introduction of the more cumbersome, but easily mountable, tricycle meant that in the early to mid-1880s cycling became accessible to older or more timid men than those who braved the Ordinary machine, and many women also took to the roads on the tricycle. The pastime also received a boost later in the decade, with the invention of the chain-driven 'safety' bicycle in the mid-1880s. The safety bicycle did not render the Ordinary obsolete until after the development of the pneumatic tyre, by John Boyd Dunlop, in 1888. Once it became apparent in a number of cycling races in Ireland and England in 1889 and 1890 that the chain-driven and pneumatic-tyred safety bicycle was both quicker and easier to ride than the Ordinary bicycle, the latter's days were numbered. From 1890 onwards, bicycle dealers in both countries were inundated with requests for pneumatic-tyred safety bicycles, and in the course of the 1890s cycling was transformed into a popular, albeit still mainly middle-class activity, that appealed to both sexes.<sup>1</sup>

A number of contemporary observers commented on the swift changes that revolutionised the Irish cycling world from the middle of the 1880s onwards. As late as June 1887, it was still possible for Dr William Henry Stacpoole-Westropp of Lisdoonvarna, a member of the Irish Cyclists' Association's council, to celebrate Irish cycling's elitist nature with the claim that 'cyclists, as members of society, constitute a sharply defined class – more so, perhaps, than do the votaries of any other pastime. To be a cyclist denotes that you do not belong to the common herd.'<sup>2</sup> Cycling's exclusive nature in this period was reinforced by the high cost of tricycles and bicycles, which meant that participation in the pastime was beyond the means of most people below the middle ranks of Irish society.<sup>3</sup> Although a small number of cycling clubs admitted female members in the late 1880s and early 1890s, most remained largely male outfits, which often gave a claustrophobic atmosphere to organised cycling activity in this period and

<sup>1</sup> For these developments, see Brian Griffin, *Cycling in Victorian Ireland* (Dublin, 2006), *passim*.

<sup>2</sup> *Irish Cyclist*, 8 June 1887.

<sup>3</sup> Griffin, *Cycling in Victorian Ireland*, pp 53–88.

heightened the pastime's exclusive nature.<sup>4</sup> Within a few years, however, mainly because of the technological changes outlined above, cycling became accessible to larger numbers of riders, which led to a marked change in the ethos of the Irish cycling world; as the *Irish Cyclist* commented in 1893, '[t]he old freemasonry of the wheel is out of place in these levelling days'.<sup>5</sup> According to the *Belfast News-Letter* in 1894, in future 'It is probable the trams will have only the aged and infirm of both sexes to carry, as the younger members will be found rushing about on the improved tyres as lightly and noiselessly as butterflies in a flower garden'.<sup>6</sup> Two years later, the same newspaper claimed that 'at the present day nearly everyone has taken to wheels as a mode of locomotion. Bicycle manufacturers cannot turn out machines in sufficient numbers to meet the demand.' It added that 'Perhaps one of the most significant facts of the fin de siècle is the run on cycles by the fair sex. For every single or married lady who ventured on wheels, shall we say of fortune, in the past year, hundreds are to be encountered at the present time.'<sup>7</sup> Such was the large number of Irish cyclists during the latter part of the 1890s that the *Irish Wheelman* stated in August 1897 that 'if cycling advances with the same rapid progress of the past ten years', it would be necessary for pedestrians to organise themselves into clubs for their own protection.<sup>8</sup> The newspaper's editor, J. C. Percy, claimed in November 1897 that the 'cycling craze' had had such an effect on Ireland that cycling 'was no longer a fad or a fancy, but an established factor in modern every day life.... The army of riders is increasing with constant and steady growth, and will continue to enrol in its numbers members of every age, sex, and rank.'<sup>9</sup> Tim Healy, M.P., claimed in July 1898 that there were a quarter of a million bicycles in Ireland:<sup>10</sup> while it is impossible to verify the controversial politician's statistic, there is no reason to challenge his general point about the remarkable growth of cycling in Ireland in the last decade of the nineteenth century.

Irish dealers had to modify their approach to conducting their business in order to meet the challenges posed by the cycling revolution, and there were also significant changes in the number and type of cycling businesses, particularly in the 1890s. In the early 1880s, as in the 1860s and 1870s, cycles were supplied to the Irish market by a relatively small number of traders, for most of whom selling tricycles and bicycles and cycling accoutrements represented just one aspect of much broader retail interests. General hardware dealers featured prominently in the Irish cycling trade in this period, such as M. Hogan's 'house-furnishing, ironmongery, cutlery, saddlery, electro-plate, lamp brush, and general ironmongery warehouse' at 94 Clanbrassil Street, in Dundalk. As well as acting as agent for Rudge's tricycles and bicycles, Hogan sold such products as paints and fishing tackle, paraffin and petroleum oils, and insurance for the Royal Insurance Company, and was agent for Bradford's washing, wringing and

<sup>4</sup> For a recent discussion of Irish cycling clubs see Brian Griffin, 'Irish cycling clubs, 1869–1901' in Jennifer Kelly and R. V. Comerford (eds), *Associational culture in Ireland and abroad* (Dublin and Portland, OR, 2010), pp 105–26.

<sup>5</sup> *Irish Cyclist*, 27 Sept. 1893.

<sup>6</sup> *Belfast News-Letter*, 6 Feb. 1894.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 28 July 1896.

<sup>8</sup> *Irish Wheelman*, 24 Aug. 1897.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 9 Nov. 1897.

<sup>10</sup> *Hansard* 4, lxi, p. 178 (7 July 1898).

mangling machines and Milner's fireproof safes.<sup>11</sup> The *Belfast and province of Ulster directory for 1884* listed some eight Belfast businesses that sold tricycles or bicycles, but only one of these — Rudge's, of 49 Royal Avenue — was a purely cycling concern. The others combined selling cycles with retailing a wide variety of ironmongery goods.<sup>12</sup> According to the *Irish Cyclist*, there were only three businesses in Dublin in 1885 whose main concern was selling cycles: these were the shops of Booth Brothers, Walter Carson and Sons and Fletcher Brothers, the latter of whom had also opened a shop in Belfast.<sup>13</sup> Dubliners could also buy machines from such outlets as Pim Brothers' 'general wholesale and retail warehouse' on South Great George's Street, whose 'cycle, sewing machine and lamp depot' sold machines from such British bicycle companies as Robinson and Price, Trigwell and Watson, Kitson, William Andrews, Marriott and Cooper and the Centaur Cycle Company;<sup>14</sup> J. Edmundson's of Capel Street, who traded mainly as 'general house furnishers, ironmongers, gasfitters, gas engineers, plumbers, sanitary engineers, electricians', but who were also agents for the Claviger, Humber, and Cooper and Kitchen cycle companies;<sup>15</sup> and Ross and Murray's engineering, plumbing and iron and brass foundry business on Middle Abbey Street.<sup>16</sup>

The 1890s saw a marked increase in the number and variety of businesses selling cycles in Ireland's main cities and in other districts. Indeed, the Irish market had become so important to British manufacturers that one company, the Centaur Cycle Company, produced a special Irish catalogue in 1890. Amongst other machines advertised in the catalogue were a number of safety bicycles, 'special Irish machines' that were allegedly specially designed to survive the greater wear and tear to which tricycles and bicycles were supposedly exposed on Irish roads.<sup>17</sup> Several other British companies, including Dan Albone's, also manufactured special versions of their machines for use on Ireland's roads.<sup>18</sup> The *Irish Cyclist* of 7 March 1894 listed some forty-two cycle agents throughout Ireland, with eleven in Belfast, nine in Dublin, six in Cork, four in Limerick, two in Derry and Portadown and one in each of Ballymena, Carrick-on-Suir, Dundalk, Killarney, Mountmellick, Nenagh, Sligo and Wexford. The true total of Irish cycle traders was undoubtedly higher than this, as the *Irish Cyclist's* list does not cover such important centres of cycling as Armagh, Waterford,

<sup>11</sup> George Henry Bassett, *Louth county guide and directory, including the town and county guide of the town of Drogheda* (Dublin, 1886), p. 340.

<sup>12</sup> Details from *The Belfast and province of Ulster directory for 1884* (Belfast, 1884), pp x, xix, 101, 149, 230, 260, 612.

<sup>13</sup> *Irish Cyclist*, 11 Nov. 1885.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 26 Jan. 1886.

<sup>15</sup> *Freeman's Journal*, 1 July 1886; *Irish Cyclist*, 29 Feb. 1888.

<sup>16</sup> *The industries of Dublin: historical, statistical, biographical* (London, c.1887), p. 116; *Irish Times*, 30 Aug. 1888.

<sup>17</sup> *Irish Cyclist*, 15 Jan. 1890. The Centaur Company advertised the 'Irish Sharpshooter' and 'Irish Ranger' models in this catalogue.

<sup>18</sup> Albone's company manufactured the 'Irish Ivel' safety bicycle. For a discussion of Albone's contribution to the cycling industry in nineteenth-century Britain, see Kathy Hindle and Lee Irvine, *A thorough good fellow: the story of Dan Albone, inventor and cyclist, including a short history of cycling* (Bedford, 1990); Mike Benson, 'Dan Albone and the Ivel bicycle' in *The Boneshaker* (1991), pp 22–41.

Drogheda, Kilkenny or Athlone, for example. By 1900, according to *Thom's directory*, there were some sixteen 'cycle agents and manufacturers' in Dublin alone,<sup>19</sup> and the 1901 census recorded some 739 people, nine of whom were women, under the occupational category of 'Bicycle, tricycle-maker, dealer' for Ireland as a whole. Some 205 of these were in Dublin (up from thirty-two in the 1891 census)<sup>20</sup> and 103 in Belfast.<sup>21</sup> It is likely that *Thom's directory* and the census listed only those manufacturers or dealers for whom tricycles or bicycles were their sole or main source of income. However, in addition to makers of or specialists in selling cycles, there was also a host of other traders for whom the tricycle or bicycle represented an important – but not sole – source of their income, as they attempted to cash in on the increased demand for cycles in the 1890s. As the *Freeman's Journal* pointed out in January 1894, 'the cycle business is a rapidly developing one, and many shopkeepers in the country are either adding, or thinking of adding, a cycle department to their business'.<sup>22</sup> The traders who dabbled in the cycle trade, in addition to selling other goods, were an eclectic bunch: they included William Trimble of Mullingar, a 'seedman, implement, emigration, and cycle agent' who not only sold bicycles and offered them for hire, but also provided an enamelling and silver nickelling service to his customers;<sup>23</sup> C. Richardson of St Stephen's Green, Dublin, who ran a combined cycling agency and gun business;<sup>24</sup> Herbert V. Binns, a retired racer who offered a cycle, sewing machine and small machinery repairing service at his depot on Great Britain Street, in Dublin;<sup>25</sup> John Heath, who ran a jewellery and bicycle shop on Thomas Street, Armagh;<sup>26</sup> and six or seven of Cork's 'monster houses' or department stores, who angered the regular cycle agents in that city by opening up cycle departments in 1897.<sup>27</sup>

The reason why specialist and non-specialist dealers alike got involved in the cycle trade is obvious: bicycles were expensive commodities and, if the dealers were fortunate enough to prosper in what was becoming an increasingly competitive market, there were significant profits to be made. While there was considerable variation in the prices that dealers charged for their machines, and country agents often undersold their city competitors by charging city residents 12.5 per cent less than city traders did for the same brand of machine,<sup>28</sup> new bicycles remained well beyond the purchasing power of most Irish people who were not members of the middle or upper classes. Even at the end of the decade, when the British and Irish markets suffered a slump from 1897 onwards that was

<sup>19</sup> *Thom's official directory of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland: for the year 1900* (Dublin, 1900), p. 1941.

<sup>20</sup> The figure for 1891 comes from *Thom's official directory of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland: for the year 1901* (Dublin, 1901), p. 1281.

<sup>21</sup> *Census of Ireland, 1901*, Cd 1190 H.C. 1902, cxxix.1.

<sup>22</sup> *Freeman's Journal*, 13 Jan. 1894.

<sup>23</sup> *Westmeath Nationalist*, 27 May 1897.

<sup>24</sup> *Irish Times*, 21 Jan. 1897.

<sup>25</sup> *Irish Cyclist*, 12 Feb. 1896.

<sup>26</sup> *Irish News*, 8 Sept. 1897.

<sup>27</sup> *Irish Cyclist*, 21 Mar. 1897. Dublin department stores also sold bicycles in this decade: see Stephanie Rains, *Commodity culture and social class in Dublin 1850–1916* (Dublin and Portland, OR, 2010), p. 131.

<sup>28</sup> This claim was made in the *Irish Wheelman*, 9 Nov. 1897.

brought on partly by over-production and partly by American manufacturers offering cheaper machines, the bicycle remained a largely middle-class or upper-class consumer item.<sup>29</sup> As Denis Donovan of the City of Cork Licensed Vintners' Trade Protection Association pointed out in May 1898, 'it was well known that not one working man in Cork out of a thousand could afford to have a bicycle'.<sup>30</sup> This is understandable, when one considers that even during the slump at the end of the decade 'Humber' bicycles were being sold for £12 10s. by Humber's sixty-five Irish agents in 1898,<sup>31</sup> while M. A. Dixon's Dublin shop was selling his 'Hibernian' bicycles for prices ranging from £8 to £14 in 1899;<sup>32</sup> such prices were well beyond the reach of most Irish people of modest means. With the exception of policemen and teachers, whose steady, well-paid employment meant that they could afford to purchase new bicycles, usually by instalment payments,<sup>33</sup> most of those Irish cyclists who were not members of the middle or upper classes were able to engage in the new pastime only because they were able to buy obsolete machines such as Ordinaries, tricycles, and solid-tyred or cushion-tyred bicycles which were sold off at knock-down prices by Irish cycle dealers in the 1890s.<sup>34</sup>

While some dealers did a good trade by selling second-hand cycles – Joe Keogh of Dublin, who sold some 300 1894 model bicycles in over two days in April 1895 is a particularly good example<sup>35</sup> – most cycle businesses pinned their hopes on selling new machines to a middle-class or, indeed, upper-class clientele. The surviving evidence of sales is extremely patchy, but there is enough to show that some dealers were very successful cycle salesmen. For example, Thomas Edens Osborne of Belfast sold between £2,000 and £3,000 worth of cycles and cycling accessories in his Lombard Street depot during the 1888 season,<sup>36</sup> while over £1,500 worth of machines were sold in Sligo during the 1894 season.<sup>37</sup> The *Westmeath Nationalist* stated in 1896 that there was a 'rage' for cycling in the Midlands, and claimed that this was proven by the fact that one King's County agent had sold more than 500 bicycles during the previous two years; this was possibly the firm of Price Brothers, of Portarlinton, which allegedly sold the impressive total of between 4,000 and 5,000 machines in the 1896 season, according to the *Irish Cyclist*.<sup>38</sup>

The sizeable profits to be made from supplying cycles to eager Irish customers attracted some characters of doubtful honesty in both Britain and Ireland, who made or sold so-called 'gas pipe crocks'<sup>39</sup> – cycles of shoddy quality which were passed off as better quality machines, often with fake badges or logos to entice unwary

<sup>29</sup> H. D. Gribbon, 'Economic and social history, 1850–1921' in W. E. Vaughan (ed.), *A new history of Ireland*, vi: *Ireland under the union, ii 1870–1921* (Oxford, 1996), pp 311–12.

<sup>30</sup> *Belfast News-Letter*, 25 May 1898.

<sup>31</sup> The names and addresses of the sixty-five agents are detailed in an advertisement in *Irish Cyclist*, 29 June 1898.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 2 Aug. 1899.

<sup>33</sup> See Griffin, *Cycling*, pp 75–83, 85–86.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 91–2.

<sup>35</sup> *Irish Cyclist*, 24 Apr. 1895.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 28 Nov. 1888.

<sup>37</sup> *Sligo Champion*, 29 Sept. 1894.

<sup>38</sup> *Westmeath Nationalist*, 30 July 1896; *Irish Cyclist*, 12 Aug. 1896.

<sup>39</sup> *Weekly Irish Times*, 18 Sept. 1897.

buyers to part with their cash.<sup>40</sup> The public was often warned to beware of answering advertisements for suspiciously cheap bicycles in the daily and cycling press, on the grounds that it took an expert eye to judge truly whether a machine was a good one or not and there was a high risk of one's ending up with a 'cheap and nasty' cycle from an unknown source by answering some advertisements.<sup>41</sup> In February 1897, in an article titled 'Beware of bogus firms!', the *Irish Homestead* detailed how one English 'gas pipe' firm sent a letter and catalogue to a novice Dublin cycle dealer and asked him to become their agent in the Irish capital:

The catalogue... was a thing of beauty. Printed upon 'art' paper, embellished with high-class drawings of the firm's 'famous' bicycles, and ornamented on the back with a bird's-eye view of a splendid factory in full working order – smoke pouring from the tall chimneys, and rows of drays carting away cycles for all parts of the world. The firm's address was in one of the best situations in Coventry; the commission they offered their agents was so princely, and their bicycle guarantee so satisfactory, that the agent (he was new to the business, remember) thought of accepting. But as he was going over to England he decided on first paying the firm a visit. Arrived at Coventry he found at the address mentioned a waste piece of land 'to be let for building'. In the middle was an old railway carriage minus the wheels, and inside the splendid 'factory' was a fat, greasy gentleman seated before a mass of correspondence entering orders for bicycles in a delapidated (sic) note-book! The catalogue was the only genuine part of the firm. They made no machines themselves, but bought up cheap *gaspipe* bicycles wherever they could, and, having impressed their 'famous' trade mark upon them, dispatched them to their confiding customers. As to the guarantee it was, of course, not worth the paper it was written upon.<sup>42</sup>

According to one newspaper in May 1896, 'gaspipe-and-solder' bicycles were finding ready purchasers among novice Irish riders, especially women, who gullibly paid £6 or £7 for machines 'worth probably six or seven pence'.<sup>43</sup> In the circumstances, it is probably not very surprising that a certain amount of suspicion existed between intending customers and cycle agents. This suspicion was not entirely unfounded, even towards reputable dealers who did not sell 'gaspipe' machines. Beatrice Grimshaw, Ireland's leading female cycling correspondent, recommended 'when conversing with a cycle agent on the subject of machines generally, to cultivate a large and generous incredulity, if he knows you to be a novice. The extraordinary fictions that I have heard poured into the ears of innocent beginners by wily Dublin agents!'<sup>44</sup> It is revealing that the figure of the crafty cycle dealer was the subject of a poem, 'The wily cycle man', published in *Ulster Cycling News* in 1893:

How doth the wily cycle man  
His latest wheel display;  
And gather money while he can  
Towards a rainy day?

<sup>40</sup> For the example of the Great Northern Cycle Company of Draperstown, a bootleg operation run by two National schoolteachers who passed off their counterfeit bicycles as Rudge-Whitworth machines, see Patrick Loughrey, 'Commerce, cycling or the classroom?', *Ulster Local Studies*, viii, no. 3 (winter, 1983), pp 25–9.

<sup>41</sup> *Sport*, 10 Mar. 1894; *Irish Cyclist*, 12 Feb. 1896; *Weekly Irish Times*, 8 May, 22 May 1897; *Irish Tourist*, July 1898.

<sup>42</sup> *Irish Homestead*, 27 Feb. 1897. Italics in original.

<sup>43</sup> Undated *Irish Field* article in *Ulster Football and Cycling News*, 8 May 1896.

<sup>44</sup> *Social Review*, 6 Feb. 1897.



The cycle man looks to the summer  
 for his brightest biz;  
 His conscience, made of para gum,  
 Light and resilient is.

How skilfully he tells his tale,  
 How neat he weaves his facts;  
 And labours hard to make a sale –  
 For cheek he never lacks.

All honour to the cycle man,  
 With morals tough as glue;  
 Though ‘Satan finds some mischief still  
 For idle hands to do’,  
 The cycle man is not his meat,  
 This, between me and you.<sup>45</sup>

Percy French wrote a poem in a similar vein, ‘The last voyage of Maeldun’, which recounts the pursuit of a cycle agent by the eight sons of a man who was killed while riding a secondhand bicycle which he purchased from the fugitive, the machine in question breaking in two and causing a fatal crash. The agent fled on a ‘Royal Enfield’ bicycle which a customer had left to have repaired.<sup>46</sup> Some cycle sellers also suspected their customers of dishonesty, to judge by ‘The woes of a cycle agent’, an article which presents a litany of feeble excuses given by customers to avoid paying agreed prices for bicycles or their concocting falsehoods to explain how their machines got damaged and why the vendor was liable for their repair: allegedly, the ‘worst liars’ in this regard were ‘D.L.s and J.P.s, soldiers, barristers, and even clergymen’.<sup>47</sup>

Cycle dealers adopted a number of strategies in an attempt to attract customers to their shops. One of these was an effort to make shopping for cycles a more pleasurable experience for potential customers, something which was not necessarily foremost in dealers’ minds before the end of the 1880s, when competition was much less intense than in the 1890s. This is apparent from a British observer’s comments on Dublin’s cycling shops in 1885, when he stated that:

One noticeable feature about the Irish depots, which is a strong contrast to those on this side of the water, is the generally untidy state of machines. By this we mean that they are not, as in most English depots, kept polished and burnished as if on exhibition, but are evidently cleaned only when sold, and consequently those that have been in stock some time have not nearly so attractive an appearance as they might have, and we would suggest that, although this happy-go-lucky method of business is characteristic of most trades in Ireland, the expenditure of a little labour in the way of cleaning and burnishing would be well repaid by the greater attractiveness of the goods on view, and the agent who takes the lead in that respect next season will, we can confidently assert, find the benefit of it in increased sales, as first appearance goes a long way with the purchaser of a cycle.<sup>48</sup>

This rather thoughtless approach to displaying wares was soon abandoned, as the growing number of dealers competed for the lucrative custom of the

<sup>45</sup> Poem by ‘Bearings’ in *Ulster Cycling News*, 8 Feb. 1893.

<sup>46</sup> *Irish Cyclist*, 20 Jan. 1897.

<sup>47</sup> *Irish Wheelman*, 7 Dec. 1897.

<sup>48</sup> *Irish Cyclist*, 11 Nov. 1885.

increasing number of cyclists and would-be cyclists. Indeed, in December 1889, in a leading article on ‘How to develop trade’, the *Irish Cyclist* stressed that a cycling agent’s shop ‘should be the most striking shop in the town’, and that having one’s shop window ‘neatly “dressed” with well-polished samples’ was the first step that an agent should take if he wished to prosper.<sup>49</sup> The studied approach to décor and appearance which was taken by the Donegall Street shop of the Belfast branch of the Pneumatic Tyre and Booth’s Cycle Agency in March 1892 was praised by the *Belfast News-Letter*:

Since the magnificent depot was opened, a week or so ago, there has constantly been a crowd admiring Mr Osborne’s photographic exhibition of cycling celebrities. (This collection, we understand, is by far the largest in the cycle trade.) The appearance of this delightful display of cycles through fifty feet of plate-glass frontage is certainly very imposing, and at once arrests the attention of the pedestrian. The windows are tastefully dressed with the celebrated cycles (‘Humbers’, ‘Referees’, ‘New Rapids’, ‘Swifts’, ‘Irwells’, ‘Stars’, ‘Excelsiors’, ‘R. & P.’, and ‘Centaur’) for which the company are sole agents, and the names of these famous wheels stand out boldly in large enamelled characters attached to the windows. The interior is spacious and imposing, long phalanxes of safety bicycles are placed on elevated platforms, above which upper rows of machines stand in ingeniously constructed racks.<sup>50</sup>

The *Ulster Cycling News* commented early in the following year that cycle shops in Belfast ‘have a more general appearance of “well to do” than formerly’, and that businessmen strove to make their depots more attractive as a result of the ‘keen competition’ that existed in Belfast’s cycle trade. The newspaper drew particular attention to ‘the exceedingly tasteful manner in which nearly all the windows are arranged’, with ‘the light, graceful machines standing amongst ferns and plants of all kinds, presenting an agreeable sight’ and ‘making the cycle shops a credit to Belfast streets by the splendid manner in which their goods are displayed to the passers by’.<sup>51</sup> Irish dealers also made special efforts to attract female custom by such devices as installing large mirrors where women could admire themselves whilst perched on various machines, and by adorning their premises with potted plants and plush decorations.<sup>52</sup>

Many cycle businesses also showed some ingenuity in devising gimmicks to attract the public’s attention to their wares. For example, in April 1888 Dubliners were treated to the ‘novel spectacle’ of a ‘huge van’ travelling through the city, on top of which was a boy cycling on a home trainer or stationary bicycle, drawing attention to Rudge’s Dublin premises.<sup>53</sup> In March 1891 in Dublin, one Bachelor’s Walk outfit came up with the original idea of perching a stuffed monkey each night on one of the various bicycles on view in its shop window, with the terrified look on the monkey’s face undoubtedly proving a draw to passers by.<sup>54</sup> In May of the same year Ben Wayte, chief mechanic of another Bachelor’s Walk cycle shop, Bowden’s, constructed a water cycle, described as a ‘combination of catamaran and millwheel’, which travelled on the Liffey from

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 11 Dec. 1889.

<sup>50</sup> *Belfast News-Letter*, 28 Mar. 1892.

<sup>51</sup> *Ulster Cycling News*, 18 Jan. 1893.

<sup>52</sup> *Irish Times*, 19 Mar. 1897; *Social Review*, 3 Apr., 19 June 1897; *Irish Society*, 10 Apr. 1897; *Weekly Irish Times*, 26 June 1897.

<sup>53</sup> *Irish Cyclist*, 4 Apr. 1888.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 23 Mar. 1891.



Ringsend to the Halfpenny Bridge towing advertising placards for Bowden's, with hundreds of people watching the machine's progress. The water cycle was ridden by 'Professor' J. E. Weston, the famous trick cyclist.<sup>55</sup> On 1 August 1891 Wayte's machine featured as 'Cycle torpedo boat no. 29 of Bachelor's Walk' in an illustrated advertisement in *Sport*, which claimed that the 'torpedo boat' would do battle with several other torpedo vessels, as a prelude to capturing Kingstown. In May 1894, Thomas Edens Osborne of Belfast was praised for the imaginative advertising use he made of his shop windows:

T. Edens Osborne knows how to attract a crowd around his windows, and certainly his latest effort in this direction is unique, and could not be done by any other agent in the kingdom. One window is filled with 1894 patterns, Humbers, Premiers, Trents, &c; the other window is crowded with the most curious collection of ancient bicycles and hobby-horses ever brought together, and would make the present up-to-date young man shudder at the very thought of attempting to ride one.<sup>56</sup>

On one day in August 1894 the Grappler Tyre Company of Dublin attracted a large crowd to the window of its Clare Street premises by posting hourly bulletins of the progress of a twelve-hour race that was being held at Ballsbridge; the success of this gimmick was described by one sports journalist as 'but one of the many proofs of the go-aheadness of this firm'.<sup>57</sup> Each night in January 1895, 'a really clever advertising notion' of staging a shadow pantomime in a shop window was thought up by one Dublin cycle dealer: the chief scene in this pantomime conveyed the message that 'Æolus cycles are the best, cheapest, lightest, and fastest'.<sup>58</sup> The evidence certainly suggests that many Irish cycle dealers showed considerably more imagination and skill in the use of their shop windows for advertising purposes than the stereotypically stupid dealer from 'near Dublin' in an 1896 *Punch* cartoon, who promised to repair and paint bicycles in all colours of the rainbow, 'including black and gold'<sup>59</sup> (Figure 1).

Other clever advertising gimmicks included an employee of the John Griffiths Cycle Corporation daily riding a 16-foot-high 'Eiffel' bicycle, reputedly the tallest in the world, through the streets of Clonmel in March 1897 to advertise the opening of the company's new premises on Gladstone Street, which proved to be a very effective promotional device.<sup>60</sup> The Dublin cycle dealer, W. F. McCourt, who sold so many bicycles to members of the Royal Irish Constabulary (R.I.C.) in the 1890s that he was made an honorary member of the R.I.C. Depot Cycling Club, caused a sensation by organising a visit by Joe Grimes to the R.I.C.'s Phoenix Park depot in May 1897. Grimes, a 'giant' who was six feet tall and weighed some 36 stone and 5.5 lbs, became something of a celebrity when he visited Ireland for a month as a representative of the London Cleveland Cycle Company: McCourt was one of the Irish agents for 'Cleveland' bicycles. Grimes toured the R.I.C. depot accompanied by McCourt and Constable Thomas

<sup>55</sup> *Sport*, 2 May 1891.

<sup>56</sup> *Ulster Football and Cycling News*, 4 May 1894.

<sup>57</sup> *Sport*, 18 Aug. 1894.

<sup>58</sup> *Irish Cyclist*, 9 Jan. 1895.

<sup>59</sup> *Punch*, 12 Sept. 1896. All illustrations are courtesy of the National Library of Ireland.

<sup>60</sup> *Munster Life*, 27 Mar. 1897. An original 'Eiffel' bicycle may be seen on display in the National Cycle Collection at Llandrindod Wells in Wales. For a fine example of a John Griffiths Corporation advertisement in the art nouveau style, see Jack Rennert, *100 years of bicycle posters* (London, 1973), p. 27.

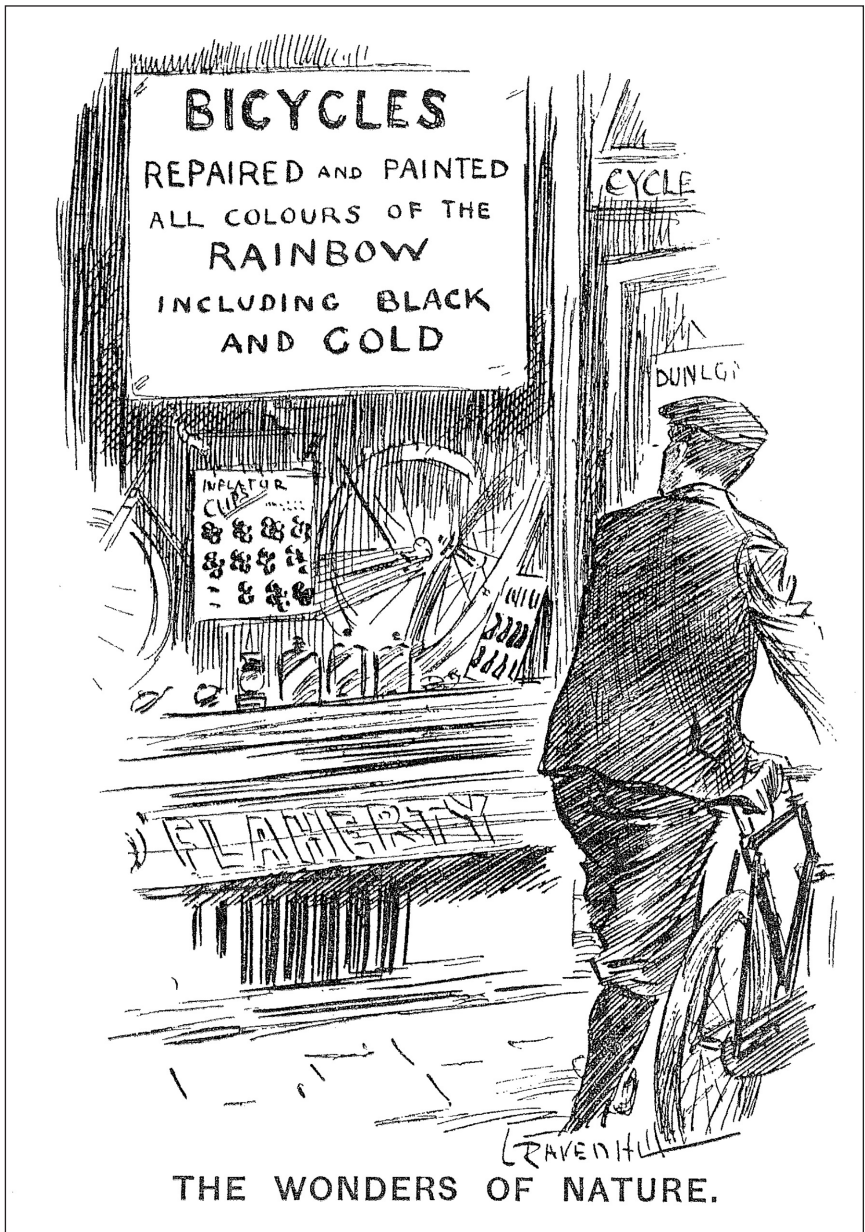


Figure 1

Torsney, 'The Flying Policeman', who had achieved fame by winning numerous bicycle races in Ireland. The *Weekly Irish Times* described the impact which Grimes made on the constabulary:

He strolled round the square, visited the mess, gave an exhibition of his athletic prowess in the form of kicking a hat placed at his own height, drank in lemonade to the health of

the men of the Depot, and on the whole showed himself to be a really good-natured, amiable, big, fat man ... All the men at the Depot turned out to see this phenomenally big man, and the younger members particularly gazed in an awe-stricken manner at his immense proportions, which, it must be said, turned, by comparison, into pigmies the most finely developed men at the Depot, some of whom, who plume themselves on their physical prowess, looked extremely helpless, and seemed to feel their position keenly.<sup>61</sup>

The newspaper commented that 'if gathering a crowd means the selling of bicycles, then this company would require to have a large stock in hand to meet the demand'.<sup>62</sup> Another Dublin dealer, J. Maguire of the Yorkshire County Cycle Company in Leinster Street, put together a clever window display with a topical theme on St Patrick's day, 1900, which made telling use of shamrocks, bicycles, tyres and the colours of Irish regiments serving in the Boer War to draw an admiring throng of holiday-makers to his shop window.<sup>63</sup>

Placing advertisements in newspapers, especially cycling newspapers, was another important method used by cycle dealers to bring their wares to the attention of potential customers. These advertisements contained a variety of messages and themes. A recurring advertisement feature, in Ireland and elsewhere, was that of linking success in cycle races with particular makes of machine, clearly suggesting that if one were to purchase similar cycles one could ride as swiftly as the winner of the race or races mentioned in the advertisements.<sup>64</sup> It is no coincidence that successful racers or ex-racers were prominent in the Irish cycle trade in the 1890s: according to the *Kerry News*, cycling's popularity in Kerry was attributable to the establishment of a number of cycling clubs in the county's towns, and also to 'the introduction of agencies of good and tried repute, and to their efficient working by popular agents – who are almost invariably ardent cyclists and racing men themselves'.<sup>65</sup> A representative sample of racers or ex-racers in the Irish cycling trade in this decade includes J. A. Anderson of Sligo;<sup>66</sup> Alexander Kennelly of Ennis;<sup>67</sup> R. G. Rogers of Mullingar;<sup>68</sup> James Gormley of South William Street, Belfast;<sup>69</sup> J. S. Hanley, who sold 'Raleigh' bicycles in his Patrick Street, Cork, shop;<sup>70</sup> Harry Reynolds, Ireland's first world champion cyclist, who, after a spell as a professional racer, opened a cycle shop at Crampton Quay, Dublin;<sup>71</sup> John Hilliard of Killarney and Tralee;<sup>72</sup> and the du Cros brothers, who, with their

<sup>61</sup> *Weekly Irish Times*, 8 May 1897.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> *Irish Wheelman*, 27 Mar. 1900.

<sup>64</sup> For a discussion of this aspect of the cycle trade in North America, Britain and continental Europe, especially France and Germany, see Andrew Ritchie and Rüdiger Rabenstein, 'Mostly middle-class cycling heroes: the *fin de siècle* commercial obsession with speed, distance and records' in J. A. Mangan (ed.), *Reformers, sport, modernizers: middle-class revolutionaries* (London and Portland, OR, 2002), pp 91–133.

<sup>65</sup> *Kerry News*, 11 Jan. 1898.

<sup>66</sup> *Irish Cyclist*, 17 Apr. 1895.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 24 Apr. 1895.

<sup>68</sup> *Westmeath Nationalist*, 9 Jan. 1896.

<sup>69</sup> *Irish Wheelman*, 8 June 1897.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 22 June 1897.

<sup>71</sup> Michael Killeen, 'Harry Reynolds world cycling champion' in *Dublin Historical Record*, xli (Dec. 1987–Sept. 1988), p. 78.

<sup>72</sup> *Irish Wheelman*, 15 Jan. 1901.

father, were principals in the Pneumatic Tyre and Booth's Cycle Company and, when it was floated as the Dunlop Pneumatic Tyre Company, Arthur du Cros was the latter company's joint managing director.<sup>73</sup>

There were other links between the Irish racing world and the Irish cycle trade. For example, races were often won by 'makers' amateurs' – supposedly amateur riders who received secret payments from cycle manufacturers to ride their machines, in a ploy to boost sales; according to the *Irish Weekly Independent*, rural customers were often taken in by advertisements extolling the machines ridden by these supposedly amateur riders.<sup>74</sup> It was also common for Irish racers to write letters to cycle agents or cycle manufacturers, in which they praised particular cycles<sup>75</sup> or various cycling accessories, such as particular makes of tyre,<sup>76</sup> horse-skin racing shoes,<sup>77</sup> knitted handlebar covers,<sup>78</sup> puncture repair kits,<sup>79</sup> a 'magical tonic elixir' marketed as 'Athlene',<sup>80</sup> or particular embrocations.<sup>81</sup> It is difficult to avoid the suspicion that these racers received payment for their endorsements of these products.



Figure 2

<sup>73</sup> Arthur du Cros, *Wheels of fortune: a salute to pioneers* (London, 1938).

<sup>74</sup> *Irish Weekly Independent*, 6 July 1895.

<sup>75</sup> *Irish Cyclist*, 29 Feb. 1888; *Cycling*, 18 Apr. 1891, 30 July 1892, 28 Jan. 1893; *Sport*, 12 Nov. 1892, 23 Dec. 1893; *Belfast News-Letter*, 13 Feb. 1893.

<sup>76</sup> *Cycling*, 25 Mar. 1893.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 24 Jan. 1891.

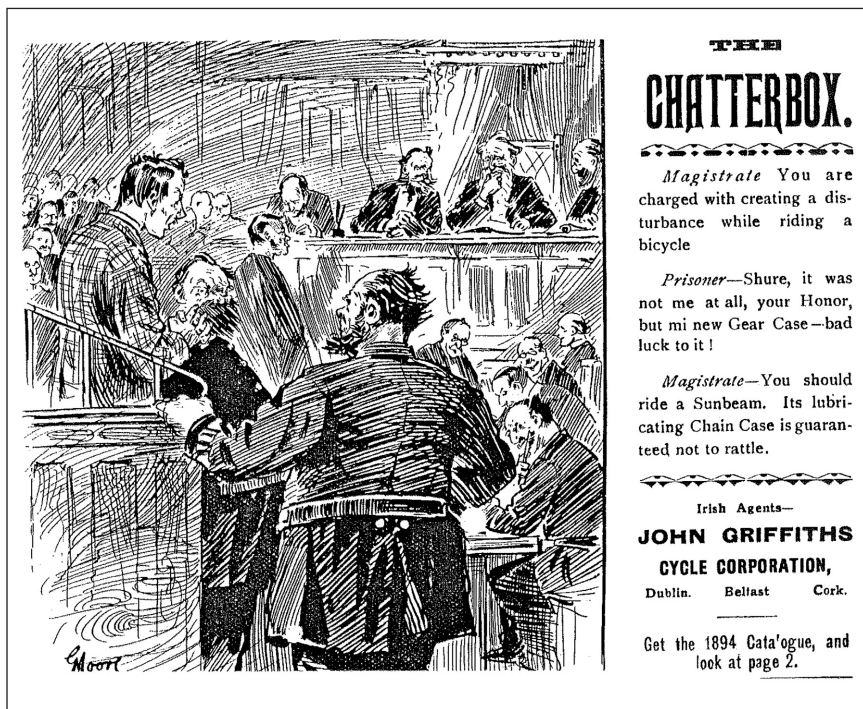
<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 13 June 1891.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 29 Oct. 1892.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 2 May 1891, 4 June 1892.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 31 Jan. 1891; *Irish Cyclist*, 4 Jan. 1893; *Sport*, 13 May 1893.





## THE CHATTERBOX.

*Magistrate*—You are charged with creating a disturbance while riding a bicycle

*Prisoner*—Shure, it was not me at all, your Honor, but mi new Gear Case—bad luck to it!

*Magistrate*—You should ride a Sunbeam. Its lubricating Chain Case is guaranteed not to rattle.

Irish Agents—

**JOHN GRIFFITHS**

**CYCLE CORPORATION,**

Dublin.    Belfast    Cork.

Get the 1894 Catalogue, and look at page 2.

Figure 3

Cycle advertisements with topical or amusing content were also aimed at Irish readers. Some of these were probably of questionable effectiveness, such as that for Brookes's cycles in May 1893, which featured Prime Minister Gladstone cycling with a copy of his Home Rule bill under his arm, over the message 'Opposition easily passed on a Brookes'<sup>82</sup> (Figure 2): the defeat of the bill in the House of Lords was probably not the result that the Brookes had hoped for when they commissioned this particular advertisement. The John Griffiths Cycle Corporation's February 1894 advertisement, in which a magistrate recommends that a man accused of creating a nuisance while riding a bicycle with a noisy gear case should instead ride a 'Sunbeam', which the Griffiths company sold, was certainly a more astute example of the advertiser's craft (Figure 3).<sup>83</sup> An advertisement for Nolan's Cycle Depot and Tinware Factory, in Tralee, in which the rider of one of Nolan's bicycles jeers at the hapless owner of a bicycle bought from a different dealer and which has been badly damaged on the road, is another example of the effective use of humour to promote bicycle sales (Figure 4).<sup>84</sup> An April 1897 advertisement for Scott's 'standard tyres' was almost certainly unintentionally humorous, given the botched outline of Ireland that it contains, as well as its hazy awareness of the locations of Ireland's main towns and cities<sup>85</sup>

<sup>82</sup> *Irish Cyclist*, 3 May 1893.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 21 Feb. 1894.

<sup>84</sup> *Kerry News*, 19 Oct. 1897.

<sup>85</sup> *Irish Wheelman*, 13 Apr. 1897.

# NOLAN'S CYCLE DEPOT, AND TINWARE FACTORY.



“There You Are!” You See

“You were advised to get one of  
NOLAN'S MACHINES, and you didn't.  
Serve you right now.”

Are you aware NOLAN'S is the place to  
get Stovepiping, or Revolving Lobster Back  
Chimney Cowls made to order. The latter  
are the best preventitives against “Puff-  
downs” or faulty draughting Chimneys.

Figure 4



(Figure 5): this particular advertisement is unlikely to have favourably impressed potential Irish customers who saw it.

Many Irish dealers also made their own bicycles as a means of advertising their businesses. One Dublin outfit, Robertson's of Lemon Street, built the 'Gaelic' bicycle, which was 'specially designed for Irish wear'; the firm was mainly interested in building up its repair trade, and used the 'Gaelic' mainly as a promotional device, and left 'very little margin for profit' when selling this

# SCOTT'S STANDARD TYRES GO STRONG IN IRELAND

AS IN ALL PLACES.

THIS IS OUR FIRST JOURNEY'S FIXINGS.

Sligo—J A Perry, W A and A F Woods, F Nelson  
 Sligo—W W Wolfe,  
 Tipperary—M Peare.

Tralee—R M'Cowan & Sons, J E<sup>d</sup>wards  
 Tullamore—Henshall & Son, A S  
 Poole & Son.

Waterford—Meredith & Co, Mr Douglas  
 Wexford—Mr Ellis, M'Guire Cycle  
 Agency.

TOWN. FIRM.  
 Armagh—J S Sleight, Whitlett Bros.  
 Athy—Messrs A Duncan & Son, Mr  
 Dunlop.  
 Athlone—Hall, Sisters.  
 Balbriggan—R Dennis.  
 Ballymena—T B Jack, Henry Cooke,  
 Ferguson & Co, H S Cunningham  
 & Co.  
 Belfast—Brady, Gormley & Co;  
 Northern Wheeleries, J M'Kane &  
 Co, Jos H Gass, D Gray, Murphy  
 & Co, Riddell, H & Co, B Johnson,  
 Wilson & Boyd, Crawford & Co,  
 Rudge-Whitworths, Wilson & Co.  
 Ballymoney—J C Foster.  
 Ballinasloe—M. Carr.  
 Cavan—J Gannon & Co.  
 Clones—Benjamin Hall.  
 Carrickfergus—Mr. Forsyth.  
 Coleraine—D. M'Cullum, J & W  
 Dunlop.  
 Castlereagh—M'Loughlin.  
 Cork—J R Brown & Co, J T Mulligan,  
 J S Harley & Co, R B Baker, E  
 O'Caughan, Munster Cycle Co, J  
 P Daly, London Cycle Co, G H  
 Harvey.  
 Cloonmel—P & T Murphy, D Sheedy,  
 Carlow—A E Coleman, The Carlow  
 Cycle Corporation, Ltd.  
 Dublin—Wm Bown, Ltd, J J Keating,  
 Henry Braine, B Conway, Coventry  
 Plating Co, M H Dixon, Harcourt  
 Cycle Co, Hepworth & Co, Maxwell,  
 Harding & Co, W A M'Crum,  
 M'guire & Nicholson, T M'Kenzie &  
 Son, C Mannin & Co, Martin &  
 Tindler, New Howe Machine Co,  
 R Nightingall, Naylor & Co, Peter  
 & Kerr, C Richardson & Co, Rudge-  
 Whitworth, Ltd, Ross & Son, G A  
 Strong.  
 Dundalk—Thomas Williamson.  
 Dungannon—W J Trimble & Sons,  
 George Irwin.  
 Donegal—J Anderson.  
 Enniskillen—J R Acheson, J Lemon  
 & Son.  
 Ennis—Roy & Co.  
 Enniscorthy—Mr Green, F Deacon, T  
 Denby.  
 Fermoy—T O'Mahoney.  
 Galway—Barbour Bros.  
 Killybegs—C Meagher & Son, Hilliard  
 & Sons, D F O'Sullivan.  
 Kilkenny—J Kelly & Sons, T Power &  
 Son.  
 Lurgan—Samuel Charles.  
 Larne—Mr Pinkerton.  
 Londonderry—T & J Smiley.  
 Longford—P J Joyce, W & C Pearce,  
 Limerick—Cole, Nelson & Co, Talbot,  
 J D Cusack.  
 Listowel—Cronin & Co.  
 Mullingar—R G Rogers.  
 Maryboro—J J Aird, Mr Hipwell.  
 Newry—Ingram & Co, J Wallace.  
 Nenagh—Hodgins & Co, T Carroll, R  
 F Hyran.  
 Omagh—J M'Farland, J M'Geonen.  
 Portlinton—Price Bros.  
 Roscrea—H M & W Smith.

**They are all Buyers.**

**WOTT'S STANDARD PNEUMATIC TYRE CO., Ltd., 89 Chiswell Street, London, E.C.**

Figure 5

particular machine.<sup>86</sup> Many of these Irish-built machines were given brand names which were probably designed to appeal to a local or regional clientele: hence William Talbot built ‘Treaty’ bicycles at his Treaty Cycle Works at Bedford Row in Limerick,<sup>87</sup> the same city where Cole, Nelson and Company made ‘Limerick Challenge’ and ‘Shannon’ machines;<sup>88</sup> W. F. Pearce, an ex-racer engaged in the cycle trade in Tipperary, made the ‘Clanwilliam’ bicycle on his premises,<sup>89</sup> while Power and Son of Cahir made the ‘Galtee’ machine,<sup>90</sup> R. McCowen’s cycle depot in Tralee made the ‘Kerry Diamond’<sup>91</sup> and Cork’s Royal Irish Cycle Company produced the ‘Shandon’ bicycle.<sup>92</sup> Dublin had a number of dealers who also made bicycles for a local or regional market, as suggested by the brand names that were devised for the machines that they constructed: for example, L. Humphreys of Dame Street made the ‘Castle’ bicycle;<sup>93</sup> W. R. McTaggart, who had a cycle shop at Grafton Street, made the ‘Grafton’;<sup>94</sup> W. F. McCourt, of Duke Street, made ‘Duchess’ machines;<sup>95</sup> Morton and Law made ‘Blessington’ bicycles at their Blessington Street premises;<sup>96</sup> while T. Cavanagh of Wellington Quay manufactured ‘Wellington’ cycles.<sup>97</sup> One sees a similar pattern in Belfast, where John Alexander made ‘Royal Ulster’ cycles,<sup>98</sup> Henry Riddell made ‘Lady Dufferin’ and ‘Clandeboye’ machines at his Donegall Street premises,<sup>99</sup> W. J. Anderson of Mountpottinger made the ‘Mountpottinger’ bicycle at his Albertbridge Road establishment,<sup>100</sup> and Thomas Hill’s Willowfield Cycle Depot constructed the ‘Willowfield’ machine.<sup>101</sup> Some dealers who made their own machines showed rather a lack of imagination by simply naming their bicycles after themselves: these included Thomas Mallon of Ann Street, Belfast, maker of the ‘Mallon’,<sup>102</sup> as well as a number of Dublin dealers. These included William Conway, whose Drury Street factory constructed ‘Conway’ cycles;<sup>103</sup> W. R. McTaggart, who, in addition to producing ‘Grafton’ bicycles, also made the ‘McTaggart Royal’;<sup>104</sup> and Alexander Mecredy, nicknamed ‘The Energetic’, whose Clare Street business built ‘Energetic’ bicycles which were especially aimed at R.I.C. customers.<sup>105</sup> Thomas McKenzie and Sons of Great Brunswick Street did not make their own machines, but had a bicycle specially made for

<sup>86</sup> *Irish Cyclist*, 14 Mar. 1888.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 15 Apr. 1893; *Irish Wheelman*, 6 Mar. 1900.

<sup>88</sup> *Irish Cyclist*, 7 Mar. 1896; *Irish Wheelman*, 6 July 1897.

<sup>89</sup> *Irish Wheelman*, 9 Mar. 1897.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 15 June 1897.

<sup>91</sup> *Munster Life*, 22 May 1897.

<sup>92</sup> *Irish Cyclist*, 8 June 1898.

<sup>93</sup> *Irish Tourist*, July 1898.

<sup>94</sup> *Irish Cyclist*, 5 Feb. 1896.

<sup>95</sup> *Social Review*, 23 Jan. 1897.

<sup>96</sup> *Irish Tourist*, July 1898.

<sup>97</sup> *Irish Wheelman*, 22 May 1900.

<sup>98</sup> *Irish Cyclist*, 14 June 1893.

<sup>99</sup> *Irish Athletic and Cycling Record*, 18 Jan. 1898.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 8 Mar. 1900.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 11 Feb. 1897; *Belfast News-Letter*, 26 Jan. 1898.

<sup>103</sup> *Irish Wheelman*, 12 Jan. 1897.

<sup>104</sup> *Weekly Irish Times*, 29 May 1897; *Irish Cyclist*, 2 Aug. 1899.

<sup>105</sup> *Irish Cyclist*, 23 Sept. 1891.

them by the Cycle Components Company of Componentsville, Birmingham, which they named the 'Royal McKenzie'.<sup>106</sup>

Some dealers who constructed their own bicycles gave names to their machines which were designed to appeal to potential customers' patriotic sentiments. For example, C. Freeburg's shop in Dawson Street, Dublin, made not only the 'Leinster' but also constructed the 'Hibernian' safety bicycle;<sup>107</sup> the latter make was later produced by M. A. Dixon of Molesworth Street.<sup>108</sup> Another Dublin cycle dealer, C. Mannin of Brunswick Street, who first ventured into making his own bicycles by constructing the 'Brunswick' machine towards the end of 1892, followed this up by starting to manufacture the 'Shamrock' bicycle a year later.<sup>109</sup> Other machines with names that were probably chosen to evoke a patriotic response included the 'Emerald', made by Robertson's of Belfast,<sup>110</sup> the 'Celt', made by the gunmakers Trulock, Harris and Richardson of St Stephen's Green, Dublin,<sup>111</sup> and the 'Celtic', made by O'Leary's of Waterford.<sup>112</sup>

At first sight, the existence of so many Irish bicycle makers would appear to be evidence of a thriving native manufacturing industry, but in reality most of these businesses merely assembled machines from components that were manufactured in England. The most important producer of bicycle components in this period was the Birmingham Small Arms (B.S.A.) Company, which manufactured its own cycles from 1880 to 1888 and then began to concentrate solely on the mass production of bicycle components in 1893,<sup>113</sup> thereby enabling numerous small concerns throughout the United Kingdom to make their own machines without incurring prohibitive engineering costs.<sup>114</sup> Irish-made bicycles that were constructed with B.S.A. parts included the 'McTaggart Royal', 'Galtee', 'Lady Dufferin', 'Clandeboye', and 'Willowfield' machines.<sup>115</sup> It is possible to identify many other bicycles of alleged Irish manufacture that were actually merely assembled in Ireland using English-made components: for example, the Dublin-based Irish Cycle Company's 'Shamrock' bicycles, which were produced for a short period in 1890, were made out of parts that were manufactured in Redditch;<sup>116</sup> Mannin's 'Shamrock' bicycles were made using 'Humber' or 'Whitworth' parts;<sup>117</sup> those machines that were made by the John Griffiths Cycle Corporation were built using Coventry Machinists' Company components;<sup>118</sup> W. F. McCourt's machines were constructed with 'Humber' and

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 18 May 1898.

<sup>107</sup> *Sport*, 28 July 1894.

<sup>108</sup> *Irish Cyclist*, 2 Aug. 1899.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 22 Feb., 13 Dec. 1893; *Irish Wheelman*, 5 Sept. 1899.

<sup>110</sup> *Ulster Cycling News*, 26 Apr. 1893.

<sup>111</sup> *Irish Tourist*, July 1898.

<sup>112</sup> Advertisement on unnumbered page in C. P. Redmond, *Beauty spots in the south-east of Ireland and how to see them by car and cycle* (London and Dublin, 1901).

<sup>113</sup> H. W. Bartleet, *Bartleet's bicycle book* (London, 1928), pp 72–5.

<sup>114</sup> W. F. Grew, *The cycle industry: its origin, history and late development* (London, 1921), p. 29.

<sup>115</sup> *Irish Wheelman*, 15 June 1897; *Weekly Irish Times*, 29 May 1897; *Irish Athletic and Cycling Record*, 28 Jan. 1898, 8 Mar. 1900.

<sup>116</sup> *Commercial Ireland*, 27 Dec. 1890.

<sup>117</sup> *Sport*, 21 Apr. 1894.

<sup>118</sup> *Freeman's Journal*, 28 Jan. 1895.

‘Enfield’ parts;<sup>119</sup> while W. J. Anderson’s ‘Mountpottinger’ bicycles were made with parts imported from W. A. Lloyd’s Cycle Fittings Company of Birmingham.<sup>120</sup>

Almost all Irish makers of bicycles in this period produced machines in relatively small numbers, mainly due to the fact that imported machines from Britain, particularly England, were both cheaper and considered of better quality than native-assembled bicycles, regardless of their names that were designed to evoke feelings of local, regional or national pride. Some of the larger Irish cycle businesses, perhaps influenced by the common perception that English-made machines were of superior quality, stressed that the bicycles that were made on their premises were made by skilled English workers. For example, C. Mannin, the maker of ‘Brunswick’ and ‘Shamrock’ bicycles, employed ‘one of the principal frame-makers in the Humber establishment’ to make his machines,<sup>121</sup> while an advertisement for the ‘Shamrock’ stressed that it was ‘Guaranteed made with material of [the] very best description, and by mechanics selected from Beeston and Coventry’.<sup>122</sup> Even a relatively small cycle concern, such as Thomas Fee’s Longford Cycle Depot, felt it necessary to stress in an advertisement that it had ‘secured the services of a first-class cycle mechanic from England’ to run its newly-opened cycle repairing plant in March 1898.<sup>123</sup> When one takes into consideration the relative cheapness of English bicycles, and the generally higher esteem in which they were held by Irish customers, it is not surprising that Irish dealers who made their own machines struggled to sell high numbers of bicycles that were made in Ireland: M. T. Woods of Newbridge, whose ‘well-equipped factory and repair shop’ produced the ‘Woods’ bicycle, ‘which enjoys a big reputation, and commands a ready sale in Newbridge and the very important district surrounding it’, was very much an exception to this general rule concerning small businesses’ sales of bicycles that they had constructed themselves.<sup>124</sup> Only two factories established a long-lasting, nationwide reputation for selling Irish-made bicycles: these were John O’Neill’s factory in South King Street, Dublin, which produced the ‘Lucania’ bicycle,<sup>125</sup> and Pierce’s agricultural implement factory in Wexford, which began making bicycles in June 1897, the first of which was a custom-built machine for a local justice of the peace, M. A. Ennis of Ardrudh.<sup>126</sup> The Pierce company linked buying one of its machines with patriotism. ‘Irishmen rely upon yourselves. Support your country’s best interests’ by purchasing a ‘Pierce’ bicycle, proclaimed one of its advertisements in 1901,<sup>127</sup> but such appeals mostly fell on deaf ears. Both ‘Lucania’ and ‘Pierce’ bicycles were relatively dearer than English-made or American-made machines, and most Irish customers preferred to buy imported bicycles in the 1890s and, indeed, in the early twentieth century. ‘Rudge’ (later ‘Rudge-Whitworth’) bicycles were particularly popular with Irish customers:

<sup>119</sup> *Irish Times*, 18 Jan. 1897.

<sup>120</sup> *Irish Athletic and Cycling Record*, 8 Mar. 1900; *Irish Wheelman*, 26 Feb. 1901.

<sup>121</sup> *Sport*, 18 Nov. 1893.

<sup>122</sup> *Irish Cyclist*, 23 Jan. 1895.

<sup>123</sup> *Midland Reporter*, 24 Mar. 1898.

<sup>124</sup> *Irish Wheelman*, 11 May 1897.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 19 Jan. 1897.

<sup>126</sup> *Enniscorthy Guardian*, 26 June 1897.

<sup>127</sup> Advertisement on unnumbered page of Redmond, *Beauty spots*.

Davy Alexander, the Rudge factory's Irish manager in 1894, claimed that he was 'doing a brisk trade all over the Emerald Isle, and can scarcely get over machines fast enough to cope with the pressing demand';<sup>128</sup> Rudge-Whitworth's Dublin depot manager boasted in December 1896 that 'There are more Rudge-Whitworth cycles running in Ireland than of any other make'.<sup>129</sup> While it is impossible to verify this claim, there is no doubt that English-made bicycles dominated the Irish market in the 1890s, an impression which was confirmed by a *Weekly Irish Times* correspondent's visit to Lucan on one Sunday in May 1897. Of the forty men's bicycles that he saw there, there were a couple of 'Elsricks' and one 'New Rapid' and one 'Raleigh' in evidence; however, 'Rudge-Whitworths' were the most numerous of any particular make of machine there, although 'Royal Enfields' and 'Shamrocks' were also 'well represented'.<sup>130</sup> The *Leader* lamented in 1901 that only around 10 per cent of the approximately 30,000 bicycles purchased annually in Ireland were Irish-made machines;<sup>131</sup> while makes such as 'Lucania' and 'Pierce' became *de rigueur* for many Irish Irelanders, especially in the early twentieth century,<sup>132</sup> they were heavily outnumbered on Ireland's roads by imported bicycles.

Whether they sold machines of Irish or foreign provenance, Irish dealers sometimes collaborated in efforts to promote the general cycle trade. For example, the agents of Dublin, Belfast and Cork collectively sponsored a special Agents' Cup to be competed for annually by cyclists in their respective cities.<sup>133</sup> A more important instance of collective endeavour by Irish cycle agents was the holding of a number of large exhibitions of cycles and cycling accoutrements in Belfast and Dublin in the 1890s, which were modelled on the biggest annual cycle manufacturers' and agents' exhibitions in Britain, the Stanley and National shows.<sup>134</sup> The earliest of these was held at Belfast's Ulster Hall in March 1893,<sup>135</sup> which was followed by one in Dublin's Rotunda in January 1894<sup>136</sup> and January 1895,<sup>137</sup> respectively; the Royal Dublin Society hosted the next two Dublin exhibitions at Ballsbridge, in January 1897<sup>138</sup> and January 1898,<sup>139</sup>

<sup>128</sup> *Sport*, 7 Apr. 1894.

<sup>129</sup> *Irish Times*, 1 Jan. 1897.

<sup>130</sup> *Weekly Irish Times*, 19 Apr. 1892.

<sup>131</sup> *Leader*, 9 Mar. 1901.

<sup>132</sup> William Bulfin, *Rambles in Eirinn* (2 vols, London, 1979 edn), i, 13; Fearghal McGarry, *Eoin O'Duffy: a self-made hero* (Oxford, 2005), p. 9. See also the bilingual advertisement for 'Pierce' and 'Lucania' bicycles sold by the Dunshaughlin Gaelic League activist, Peter Murray, in Jim Gilligan, 'Murray's of Dunshaughlin, 1896–1910' in Denis A. Cronin, Jim Gilligan and Karina Holton (eds), *Irish fairs and markets: studies in local history* (Dublin and Portland, OR, 2001), p. 240.

<sup>133</sup> *Freeman's Journal*, 19 Apr. 1897; *Sport*, 28 Apr. 1894; *Belfast News-Letter*, 19 June 1899.

<sup>134</sup> The Stanley show was named after the club that originated it, the Stanley Bicycle Club; David Herlihy, *Bicycle: the history* (New Haven and London, 2004), p. 188.

<sup>135</sup> *Ulster Cycling News*, 1 Mar., 8 Mar. 1893; *Belfast News-Letter*, 6 Mar. 1893; *Irish Cyclist*, 8 Mar. 1893.

<sup>136</sup> *Freeman's Journal*, 13, 22, 23, 24, 25, 30 Jan. 1894.

<sup>137</sup> *Freeman's Journal*, 23, 28, 30 Jan. 1895; *Irish Weekly Independent*, 2 Feb. 1895.

<sup>138</sup> *Irish Times*, 18, 21, 22, 25 Jan. 1897; *Irish Cyclist*, 20, 27 Jan. 1897; *Irish Figaro*, 23 Jan. 1897; *Social Review*, 30 Jan. 1897.

<sup>139</sup> *Freeman's Journal*, 15, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21 Jan. 1898.



respectively, while another Belfast show was held in the Ulster Hall in January 1898.<sup>140</sup> These were considered impressive affairs by contemporaries. According to the *Belfast News-Letter*, the ten stands displaying the products of nearly sixty manufacturers at the 1893 Ulster Hall show was the largest cycle exhibition ever held outside of London,<sup>141</sup> but this show was rather dwarfed by those subsequently held in Belfast and Dublin: for example, the week-long exhibition held in the Rotunda in January 1897 had more than 100 stands and displayed more than 900 bicycles,<sup>142</sup> and was attended by an estimated 25,000 visitors.<sup>143</sup> In addition to displays of tricycles, bicycles and cycle accessories, especially tyres of various types and brands, the exhibition organisers laid on various novelties and entertainments to sustain visitors' interest. These included performances each evening by W. J. Hurst, a celebrated trick cyclist, as well as a display of Thomas Edison's phonograph, at the 1893 Belfast show<sup>144</sup> and a 'grand assault-at-arms' by the army gymnastics staff, commanded by Sergeant-Major Wright, at the 1894 Dublin exhibition,<sup>145</sup> while the 1897 Dublin show included such attractions as a *café chantant*, musical entertainments by military bands, merry-go-rounds, shooting galleries, palmistry, billiard contests, and a cinematograph.<sup>146</sup>

Cycle promoters did not only attempt to sell tricycles, bicycles and associated equipment to the Irish public, but they also tried to promote the growth of their industry by encouraging investors to buy shares in various cycle businesses. According to Mary Daly, the 'cycle boom reached fever proportions' in Dublin in 1893, and some twenty-five cycle companies launched on the Dublin stock exchange in the closing years of the nineteenth century.<sup>147</sup> Perhaps the best-known of these was the company that was set up to exploit what was erroneously believed to be John Boyd Dunlop's invention in 1888 of the pneumatic tyre (unknown to Dunlop and his backers, a pneumatic tyre had already been patented by another Scotsman, Robert William Thomson, in 1845).<sup>148</sup> The Pneumatic Tyre and Booth's Cycle Agency (the Booth mentioned in the company name was Richard W. Booth, one of the two brothers who owned Booth Brothers' cycle shop, which was considered by one English observer in 1888 to be the 'the largest and best-stocked depot I have ever seen away from a factory')<sup>149</sup> was

<sup>140</sup> *Belfast News-Letter*, 26 Jan. 1898; *Irish Athletic and Cycling Record*, 28 Jan. 1898.

<sup>141</sup> *Belfast News-Letter*, 6 Mar. 1893.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 18 Jan. 1897.

<sup>143</sup> *Irish Athletic and Cycling Record*, 28 Jan. 1897.

<sup>144</sup> *Belfast News-Letter*, 6 Mar. 1893.

<sup>145</sup> *Freeman's Journal*, 22 Jan. 1894.

<sup>146</sup> *Irish Times*, 7, 18 Jan. 1897. This was a relatively early instance of the showing of moving pictures in Ireland. These were first introduced to Dublin in April 1896, but it was not until November and December of the same year that the new medium 'came of age', when several Belfast and Dublin music halls hosted cinematograph screenings: Kevin Rockett and Emer Rockett, *Magic lantern, panorama and moving picture shows in Ireland, 1786–1909* (Dublin, 2011), pp 219–24.

<sup>147</sup> Mary E. Daly, *Dublin, the deposed capital: a social and economic history 1860–1914* (Cork, 1984), p. 48. She adds that 'innumerable companies' were established in this period, only a few of which were ultimately successful.

<sup>148</sup> Eric Tompkins, *The history of the pneumatic tyre* (Lavenham, 1981), p. 1.

<sup>149</sup> A. J. Wilson, *Two trips to the emerald isle* (London, 1888), p. 11.



incorporated in November 1889.<sup>150</sup> It failed to achieve the hoped-for initial public subscription of £15,010 from Irish investors, largely because the public were, at first, unconvinced of the merits of the new tyre.<sup>151</sup> A succession of racing victories by riders of pneumatic-tyred safety bicycles had a dramatic effect in overcoming public scepticism,<sup>152</sup> and the fledgling company also quickly overcame the shock discovery in 1890 that Dunlop's patent was invalid. Harvey du Cros, who was the only executive director of the new company, ensured the business's survival by purchasing the rights to several other pneumatic tyre and valve patents which had been taken out by various British inventors in the early 1890s.<sup>153</sup> The company thrived,<sup>154</sup> but few Irish workers benefited directly for long, as it ceased manufacturing tyres in Dublin in 1891 and established a new factory in Coventry instead: this was partly a reaction to Dublin Corporation's prosecution of the company for allegedly running a 'noxious trade' which polluted the atmosphere around its Westland Row factory,<sup>155</sup> but it also made sounder business sense to shift to Coventry, which was then 'the centre of the bicycle industry'.<sup>156</sup> In October 1893 the Pneumatic Tyre and Booth's Cycle Agency was restructured, when a shareholders' meeting agreed that the cycle agency of the business should be sold off to John Griffiths, who thereafter formed the John Griffiths Cycle Corporation, leaving the Pneumatic Tyre Company, as the remnant of the parent company, to concentrate solely on the manufacture of pneumatic tyres.<sup>157</sup> In the previous twelve months, the company had made a profit of more than £268,000, and the value of shareholders' shares had risen by 200 per cent.<sup>158</sup> In May 1896 the company underwent a significant expansion as the result of acquiring the rights to several more tyre and other cycle-related patents in Britain, and was floated as the Dunlop Pneumatic Tyre Company with a capital of £5,000,000, sparking off 'a scene of indescribable activity' at the Bank of Ireland in Dublin, which was 'literally besieged with people anxious to buy shares' in the new company. By the close of one day alone, 11 May, applications were submitted for an estimated £480,000 worth of Dunlop shares.<sup>159</sup> Such was the enthusiasm for buying shares in cycle businesses that,

<sup>150</sup> *Irish Cyclist*, 20 Nov. 1889.

<sup>151</sup> du Cros, *Wheels of fortune*, p. 81.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 56–7.

<sup>153</sup> This complicated story is outlined in a very clear manner in John Moore, *Motor makers in Ireland* (Belfast, 1982), pp 141–4.

<sup>154</sup> From its incorporation in 1889 until April 1896, the shareholders of the company paid in some £260,000 and received dividends totalling £658,123: A. E. Harrison, 'Joint-stock company flotation in the cycle, motor-vehicle and related industries, 1882–1914' in *Business History* xxxiii (1981), p. 186.

<sup>155</sup> Details of the court case in *Freeman's Journal*, 3, 16, 21 July 1891.

<sup>156</sup> du Cros, *Wheels of fortune*, pp 100–1; H. D. Higman, 'Founding of the Dunlop Tyre Company' in Rob van der Plas (ed.), *Cycle history: proceedings of the 5th international cycle history conference* (San Francisco, 1995), pp 91–4, at p. 93.

<sup>157</sup> *Freeman's Journal*, 19 Oct. 1893; *Irish Cyclist*, 25 Oct. 1893.

<sup>158</sup> *Irish Cyclist*, 22 Nov. 1893.

<sup>159</sup> *Drogheda Argus*, 16 May 1896. Although 'Dunlop' appears in the company's name, John Boyd Dunlop had resigned as a director of the Pneumatic Tyre Company in March 1895: Jim Cooke, 'John Boyd Dunlop 1840–1921, inventor' in *Dublin Historical Record*, xlix (Spring, 1996), p. 26.

according to one bewildered contemporary, cyclists rode with one eye on the scenery and the other on the shares market, and by July 1898 there were an estimated 16,000 Irish shareholders in the Dunlop company.<sup>160</sup>

Although the Dunlop pneumatic tyre company, in its various guises, went from strength to strength in the 1890s, this did not hold true for all Irish cycle dealers. Towards the end of the decade, some were beginning to seek a way out of their straitened circumstances by embracing the new technology of the motor cycle and motor car. Amongst the earliest Irish enthusiasts for the motor cycle and motor car was the editor of the *Irish Cyclist*, R. J. Mecredy.<sup>161</sup> In a leading article in the *Irish Cyclist* in November 1899, ‘A new trade for cycle agents’, he urged those in the cycle trade to add motorised vehicles to their stock, arguing that ‘at the present juncture, when profits on bicycles are cut so low as to approach parlous near to the vanishing point, the new industry of motor selling and motor repairing promises to be the salvation of the real “live” dealer in cycles – the man who has adequate premises and a fair modicum of mechanical skill’.<sup>162</sup> Mecredy advised cycle agents to purchase a motor vehicle for their own use, in order to learn how to manage and repair it, and thus be in a good position to meet what he saw as the inevitable spread of the motor ‘boom’ to Ireland. A main attraction of engaging in the motor trade, he pointed out, was that ‘since the prime cost of a motor cycle or motor car is far greater than that of a bicycle, such vehicles will be purchased only by the more substantial people, who can and will pay fair prices for the little jobs which will bring continual supplies of grist to the repairer’s mill’.<sup>163</sup> In the following month, an *Irish Cyclist* survey of some twenty-six cycle dealers in various parts of the country as to whether they intended to engage in the motor trade as part of their business revealed a mixed picture, but one that suggested a strong trend in favour of selling the new vehicles. Three traders were already selling motors or repairing them and selling petrol,<sup>164</sup> while another thirteen dealers had already decided on selling motors in the coming season.<sup>165</sup> Three traders stated that they were likely to take up the new trade,<sup>166</sup> while four others expressed a cautious interest in doing so.<sup>167</sup> Only one

<sup>160</sup> *Irish Figaro*, 23 Jan. 1897; *Irish Cyclist*, 8 July 1898.

<sup>161</sup> See Bob Montgomery’s short biography, *R. J. Mecredy: the father of Irish motoring* (Garristown, 2001).

<sup>162</sup> *Irish Cyclist*, 15 Nov. 1899.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, 20 Dec. 1899. These were the County Cavan Stores in Cavan, J. Power of Kilkenny and J. Rea of Dundalk.

<sup>165</sup> These were Duthie and Large of Athy, M. M. Rutherford of Ballybay, John Alexander of Belfast, T. A. Wallace of Banbridge, Brady’s of Belfast, J. N. Carr of Ballinasloe, W. Slattery of Bandon, D. H. McDowell of Armagh, Foster’s of Newry, the North of Ireland Cycle Works in Belfast, J. P. Brehemy of Westport, R. H. Poole of Tullamore and H. Thompson of Wexford.

<sup>166</sup> These were Walsh Brothers of Banbridge, G. A. Lee of Parsonstown and W. Hopkins of Wicklow.

<sup>167</sup> Smith Brothers of Ballybay said that they would engage in the motor trade ‘when there is a prospect of its taking in that part of the country’, H. Hegan of Portadown stated that he would ‘take up the sale when business opens and motors become a little more reliable’, J. Lemon of Enniskillen intended selling motors ‘when the price is more within the reach of the public’, while T. McNeilly of Ballinahinch said he would sell motors ‘if the opportunity offers’.

of the cycle dealers surveyed gave a negative reaction to the idea of adding motors to his stock, as he was 'doubtful if his locality will be suitable for the motor trade'.<sup>168</sup> Although this was far from being a scientific survey, it nevertheless suggests strongly that, as the period drew to a close, Irish dealers continued to show the traits of flexibility, innovation and imagination that had characterised the cycle trade for much of the previous two decades.

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<sup>168</sup> This was R. Perdue of Killucan. Two dealers did not give a clear answer to the survey.