



“One needs to be very brave to stand all that”: Cycling, rational dress and the struggle for citizenship in late nineteenth century Britain

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ABSTRACT

The article discusses changing ideas around citizenship through an analysis of first person accounts of women cyclists in Rational Dress in late nineteenth century Britain. A close reading of personal correspondence provides a sense of how it felt to cycle while dressed in new mobility costumes, such as bloomers, in urban and suburban English landscapes. Such attired and independently mobile women affirmed or unsettled onlooker's understandings of how middle and upper class women should look and act in public. Some viewers subjected them to verbal and often physical assault. Others, in awe of their socio-technical sophistication were more supportive. Taking a 'blower point of view' provides a unique socio-material way of gaining a deeper understanding of what enabled and also inhibited women's claims to citizenship and freedom of movement, especially at a time when women were not citizens in a legal sense. I argue that through these richly described accounts we gain insightful glimpses into how individual sensory, embodied and political experiences collectively illuminate the becoming of 'citizen' as it relates to mobility, gender and landscape.

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1. Freedom of movement

Minnie says “Oxford is the most begottd place in the world kingdom and the meeting is likely to raise a great protest in the papers which will deter followers”. It certainly cannot be worse to ride in Oxford than in London, especially London suburbs. It's awful – one wants nerves of iron. I don't wonder now in the least so many women having given up the R.D [Rational Dress] Costume and returned to skirts. The shouts and yells of the children deafen one, the women shriek with laughter or groan and hiss and all sorts of remarks are shouted at one, occasionally some not fit for publication. One needs to be very brave to stand all that. It makes one feel mad and ones ideas of humanity at large sink to a very low standard. When one gets out into the country there is little trouble beyond an occasional shout, but it takes some time to get away from these miles of suburban dwellings.

This excerpt comes from a letter written on August 23, 1897, by Kitty to Uriah. A few weeks later, on September 13, Kitty writes to Maude in fading hand-penned cursive script about a cycle tour around Chippenham in her cycling costume.

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It was market day on Friday at Chippenham and we created quite an excitement, though I think as many looked on with approval as those who laughed and whooted. Anyway it was a good-natured crowd and nothing to hurt was yelled.

Kitty, Minnie, Uriah and Maude were enthusiastic cyclists and keen supporters of rational dress. The English Rational Dress Movement broadly sought to promote the wearing of *rational* dress for both men and women over what was considered to be *irrational* fashion in the late nineteenth century. Rational dress for women comprised a range of styles but was ostensibly recognised as a bifurcated garment such as bloomers (short full trousers or knickerbockers), looser corsets (or no corset at all) and shorter (or no) skirts (Fig. 1). Members advocated fewer layers and lighter fabric to enable people, and especially women, to embrace a more active lifestyle, including cycling. In these letters we learn that Kitty and her companions cycled around English cities, rural areas and the suburban sprawl in-between in rational dress. In some places they found that “nerves of iron” were required to navigate a path through a hostile public. In others they received a more welcome and supportive response with many who “looked on with approval”.

Given these two letters are written just three weeks apart, the contrasting reactions appear to be less a case of temporally changing social attitudes towards independently mobile women and more to do with different kinds of cycling practice, garments and



Fig. 1. An illustrated view of rational and irrational dress in *The Rational Dress Gazette* (1899).

the politics of place. Outside, in public places, dressed differently and moving independently, the women's actions were sometimes in and sometimes out-of-place. In fact, the women sometimes experienced a spectrum of conflicting responses in a single day's journey.

Why did their appearance engender such affective responses? For some onlookers, these attired and physically engaged women were seen to have relinquished their feminine roles and responsibilities in exchange for masculine behaviours. Reactions oscillated from verbal (and sometimes physical) abuse to receiving poor service at cafes and inns. Elsewhere historical accounts suggest when women embrace masculine clothing as an appropriate style to fit their mobility they engender violent reactions. An illustrative example is Cresswell's (1999) study of female tramps in mid-century America who took to the streets and railways for itinerant work. They were treated as less-than-citizen having relinquished their rights to conventional womanhood and all it stood for, evidenced as having embraced male dress and male forms of mobility. As Cresswell argues, these women had effectively 'committed a kind of gender treachery' (1999:186).

In the case of Kitty and her companions, the twin forces of mobility and mobile clothing proved similarly hard to reconcile. The mere fact that they were radically dressed mobile women was anathema. Yet others viewed them as model citizens, with approval and possibly also with envy given they had disposable income to embrace the newest exciting technology and had 'time for leisure and the resources to spend on special outfits' (Gordon, 2009:352). Some have argued that a commitment to fashion and technology by the middle and upper classes imbued cycling with respectability in certain contexts (Mackintosh and Norcliffe, 2006; Gordon, 2009). Mackintosh and Norcliffe (2006) go so far as to argue for the existence of the cycling female flâneuse who, like her more familiar bourgeois male counterpart, took to the streets with her privilege, fashionable body and technological cache and experienced little peripatetic restriction. 'These women...rode their bicycles free of care' (2006:18). Embracing all the new modern Victorian technologies could position female cyclists at this time in the respectable upper echelons of English society.

How can we reconcile these dichotomies? In this article I suggest that we do not. I propose that we resist tidying them up and instead closely examine what emerges in the inconsistencies and

tensions. Cycling in rational dress in the late nineteenth century elicited contradictory experiences and responses. As Kitty's letters attest, the movement for women into new forms of public space and social roles was anything but smooth and linear. These women were recognised and ignored, seen as decent and indecent, their presence engendered welcome and less than welcome reactions. These varying responses say much about ideas of gender, society and even the nation-state.

As the editors of this collection note there is a dearth of scholarship on the role of mobility cultures and identities in the construction of citizenship. While much has been written about citizenship in relation to the role of the nation-state, diasporas and large-scale human mobility across borders, there has been less attention focused on the daily practices of sensory and embodied mobility that together form ideas around identity (with the exception of Sheller and Urry, 2006; Chouinard, 2009; Crang, 2010; Favell, 2010). This article explores the idea of citizenship as dynamic and constantly performed, as a subjective practice or process rather than a given. In particular, I attend to the role of specifically clothed bodies in relation to citizenship, as something that varied according to intersections of social identities and how one was mobile.

It is also important to remember that the rational dress movement occurs against a backdrop in which women did not have the right to vote.¹ They were subject to the nation-state without representation. They were citizens without emancipation. How then might we think of these women's claims to citizenship? In this article I consider their relation to the nation-state through other means than the right to vote. Letters by Kitty and her friends invite us to investigate how different kind of citizenship were performed and practiced in everyday encounters in, with and through different costumes and places. These women's claims for citizenship were a shifting accomplishment. It was not universal nor consistently given but rather socio-spatially constructed and uneven, constantly negotiated and on the whole something that was struggled over.

Favell (2010) provides a contemporary example of the value of looking closely at alternative notions of citizenship. He argues that although European citizens on the whole are largely unenthusiastic

¹ Women in Britain over the age of 30 gained the right to vote in 1918. In 1928 women achieved the same rights to vote as men (at 21).

about conventional practices of citizenship (such as voting), they participate politically via ‘their active engagement as residents, consumers, parents and gentrifiers in the cities they have chosen to live’ (2010: 212). For this article, Favell’s work illustrates how citizenship is produced and experienced across multiple scales and through mundane everyday means beyond and around that of traditional large-scale top-down models. Science and Technology Studies (STS) is a body of scholarship that attends to often overlooked and undervalued everyday objects and mundane practices, with many writers arguing that seemingly unremarkable artefacts and systems make explicit the familiar and taken-for-granted ways in which people make sense of and operate in everyday life (Bijker and Law, 1992; Latour, 1992; Star, 1999). An example is Dando’s study about women’s cycling in 1890s America, in which she argues that bicycles and an accompanying growth in cartographic knowledge expanded women’s sense of the world and their place within it (2007:176).

Taking an STS approach invites a closer look at the critical role played by socio-materialities in the structuring of everyday life and gender relations. In this article I examine cycle wear, and bloomers in particular, as a way of gaining a deeper understanding of what enabled *and* also inhibited women’s freedom of movement. I argue that bloomers (and larger attending ideologies of rational dress) helped women carve out and legitimise a mobile presence in outdoor space and in doing so negotiate citizenship in different ways, place and times. Bloomers did not just appear, nor were they simply worn. Rather, they were produced by and productive of complex political, cultural, gendered and place-based entanglements. Bloomers are just one part in a heterogeneous network comprised of human as well as non-human actors. I also suggest that critical examinations of citizenship/s should include discussions of the body and its dress. After all, the citizen can hardly be an un-embodied, un-gendered being. What is the citizen if not embodied?

So, how might one develop a better understanding of the agentive nature of bloomers? In this article I examine them through textual archival materials. The letters that form the central analysis of this article come from ‘The Buckman Papers’, a collection of personal correspondence, *Rational Dress Gazettes* published from June 1889 to January 1900, and press clippings from 1894 to 1899. This assembly of primary materials is according to Rubinstein (1977:43) the ‘single most important source for the study of the rational dress movement’. Kitty J. Buckman², also known as Kate, was born in 1864, and was 33 years old when she penned these letters. She was the younger sister of Sidney Savory Buckman, or S.S. Buckman, the Secretary and Treasurer of the English Rational Dress Society and a prominent British geologist. Further to being integral to the movement, he was a confidant of Lady Florence Harberton, President of the Society, infamous woman’s rights advocate and enthusiastic cyclist. Amongst personal missives to and from Kitty, Minnie, Uriah, Jane and Maude are eighteen letters from Harberton to Buckman. Reading the latter together with newspaper cuttings, many of which were written by or about these two protagonists, entangles the reader in the behind-the-scenes intimacies of the public movement. In this article I turn my attention more closely to letters written by Kitty and her cycling companions. While Harberton’s and Buckman’s correspondence provides a tantalizing glimpse into the strategy and politics of the movement interwoven with personal triumphs and despair, with Kitty et al.’s writings we gain insight into the individual experiences of everyday cycling in rational dress, bringing to light how embodied and sensory practices, situated

bodies and mobilities are configured and negotiated together with place and contested boundaries of citizenship.

This article draws on a close reading of primary source texts. I start the analysis by locating the letter writers and their experiences in a brief history of the dress reform movement and cycling. I highlight the significance of first hand accounts from this period in book, article and letter formats. Turning to *The Buckman Papers* I then explore what we can learn from the daily accounts of cycling by rationally dressed women, or what could be termed their ‘bloomer point of view’. I argue that through these richly described accounts we gain insightful glimpses into how individual sensory, embodied and political experiences collectively illuminate the becoming of ‘citizen’ as it relates to mobility, gender and landscape.

2. Dress reform and gendered mobile bodies

Dress reform emerged in Britain the late nineteenth century as a response to a plethora of interconnected socio-technological, political and material actors. It was partly due to changes in working conditions, primarily for the middle classes who were increasingly leaving the home for employment due to economic necessity, and which required increased physical mobility. It reflected burgeoning interests in the benefits of exercise for women, a shift closely aligned to a growing awareness of the importance of health and diet. Suffrage organisations were also firmly advocating women’s freedom of movement – out of the home and restrictive clothing and into education, business and political spheres (Hanlon, 2011, 2013). Entangled with these different movements, rational dress enabled women to explore new freedoms that were not only physical but also ideological. As Cresswell has argued: ‘Mobile women, in particular, have been seen to be indicative of wider social and cultural themes of power, exclusion, resistance and emancipation’ (1999:175).

Although established before the advent of mass cycling, the dress reform movement gained popular and controversial attention with women’s enthusiastic adoption of the ‘safety bicycle’ – a two same-sized wheel bicycle design (Fig. 2). Supporters advocated change for men’s and women’s wear, but it was the latter, especially in relation to cycling that garnered more attention due to the noticeable transformation enacted in the public sphere. Contemporary fashions of the period featured up to seven pounds of layered petticoats, floor-length skirts, tightly laced corsets, tailored blouses and jackets, veils, hats, gloves and petite shoes. Cycling rendered visible, more than other sports, the irrationality of this conventional style of dress while undertaking physical exercise. Dangers emerged in the form of terrible bicycle crashes caused by their clothing, resulting in embarrassment, disfigurement and even death. Newspapers regularly documented in gruesome detail the crashes of women cyclists seemingly caused by the wearing of conventional dress.

Sir – I see in your columns a doubt expressed as to cycle accidents due to dress. We have had a terrible one in these parts which can clearly be traced to the skirt. I allude to the death of Miss Carr, near Colwith Force. The evidence of her friend who rode just behind her says that “Miss Carr began the descent with her feet in the rests, but finding the hill become much steeper, she strove to regain her pedals and failed”. I think she failed because she could not see the pedals, as the flapping skirt hid them from her view, and she had to fumble for them. Could she have taken but a momentary glance at their position, she would have had a good chance to save her life. The poor girl lingered a week – *Daily Press*, Sept 20, 1896 (*The Buckman Papers*).

The following account of an accident was given us by an eye-witness – “I was in Landsdown (Cheltenham) one evening

² Information about Minnie, Uriah, Kitty, Jane and Maude is limited. Kitty was four years younger than Sydney and lived in Gloucestershire. Maude was Sydney’s wife. They had four children. In 1897, Jane was living in Notting Hill. Kitty sometimes writes to Uriah from Bognor, and at other times from Notting Hill. Kitty also wrote a letter to Maude from Andover.

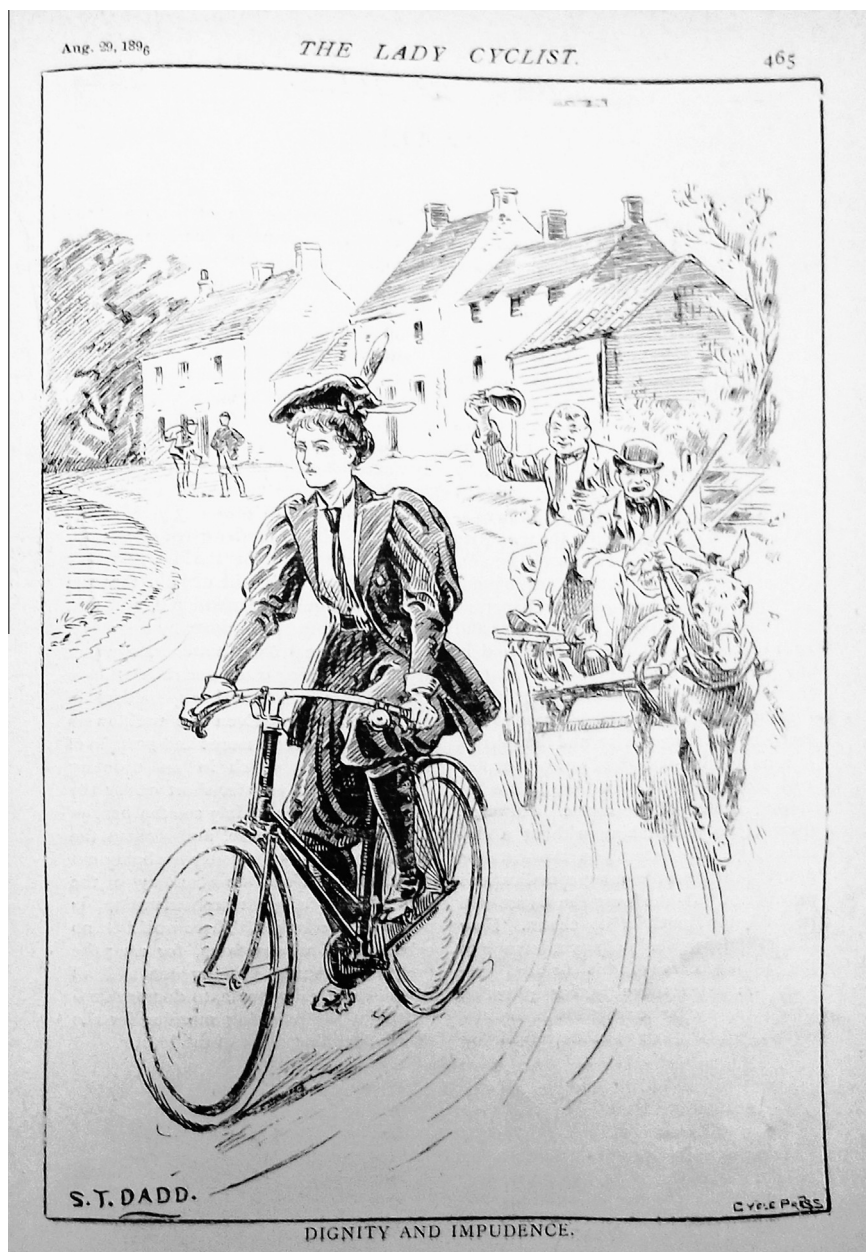


Fig. 2. A 'dignified' woman in bloomers riding a safety bicycle in the face of 'impudence', *The Lady Cyclist*, 1896.

last week, and two young ladies were riding side by side, It was very windy, and the skirt of one blew into the wheel of the other, where it got caught. They both turned somersaults. When they were picked up, their skirts were very nearly taken off them – well, I found it necessary to look the other way” – *Daily Mail*, April 11, 1897 (*The Buckman Papers*).

Men also had bicycle crashes but the cause was more often attributed to inadequate road surfacing, mechanical issues or the irresponsible actions of fellow road users, even if the male rider was a novice.³ The dangers of cycling for men were more often

³ See for example 'The deceased was comparatively a novice at the art, but even had he been an expert, the type of machine he rode would sooner or later have disastrously failed him' (*CTC April 1884a*) and also 'He appeared as to go pretty well, but unwisely or unknowingly he ventured his machine down the Tyson Road, where the gradient is 1 in 4 or 5. ... But for his robust constitution, it is confidently believed the accident would have terminated fatally' (*CTC May 1884b*).

articulated as risky and daring, producing a fusion of masculinity, modernity and technology⁴. Together this discourse reinforced the accepted notion of innate feminine 'weakness' and women's technological incompetency. It also illustrates the agentive quality of the clothing and why rational dress was required, to be taken seriously and to reduce risks. How could women display competency and skill (and thereby equality) if their clothes kept making them fall off?

While the wearing of bloomers reduced the chance of crashes and enabled more comfortable cycling for its wearers, the symbolism of the garments yielded another assembly of dangers and struggles. As illustrated in Kitty's experiences above, she and her friends suffered social rebukes and criticism in the form of verbal and sometimes

⁴ Cycle racing reinforced masculine forms of public citizenship, technological adoption and embodiment. A discourse of heroism embedded in accounts of racing events linked masculinity and cycling – 'speed', 'agility', 'performance', 'champion', 'professional' and 'skill'.

even physical assault. Some writers suggest this is because ‘the sight of a woman on a bicycle, particularly in bifurcated costume, soon became associated with the New Woman in the minds of many onlookers’ (Simpson, 2001:55). The ‘New Woman’ was distinguished as someone who desired an active life beyond the home, played sports, embraced less restrictive fashion and sought entry into new spaces previously deemed off limits (such as education, business, clubs, societies and politics). This peripatetic identity represented a feminist desire for more engaged public life and cycling became viewed not only as a means of physically getting somewhere but of enacting new forms of socio-political and gendered mobility. As such female cyclists and their dress provide an informative lens into changing ideas of embodied citizenship. But, as Irene Marshall describes, being a rationally dressed cyclist in the early 1890s was not a comfortable identity.

But it took some courage five years ago to ride in rationals. The idea was almost entirely new and the British Public was dead against it. Hooting and screeching were then the usual accompaniments to every ride. Caps, stones, road refuse – anything was then flung at the hapless woman who dared to reveal the secret that she had two legs. And the insults were not confined to the lower classes. Well-dressed people, people who would be classed as ladies and gentlemen, frequently stopped and made rude remarks. In fact, cycling in rationals in 1894 was a very painful experience (The Rational Dress Gazette, 1899:40).

Although lessening over the decade, the volume of abuse directed at rationally dressed women cyclists continued to an extent that it drew the attention of the Cycle Touring Club (CTC), the UK’s national cycling lobby group:

A new and important point is the decision to take legal action against drivers who wilfully endanger the lives of “rational” cyclists and against any persons using insulting or obscene language at rational dress wearers. This is in a field in which it is thought much may be done to show the loafer and the street-urchin that they have not more right to use foul language to a lady in knickerbockers than to a lady in a skirt’ (CTC, 1898:10).

The threat of a woman in rational dress arose from a plethora of transgressions. Cycling afforded middle and upper class women access to new aspects of the public sphere, away from the supervised, domestically situated and largely immobile position that many had conventionally occupied.

Night riding seems to have a fascination for many lady riders nowadays, and many of those who some time ago did not dare venture out after dusk had one fallen are the most enthusiastic (The Lady Cyclist, 1896b:164).

For some onlookers, these women were seen to ‘blatantly to ape the lifestyles and perceived privileges of manhood’ (Simpson, 2001:55). Not only were they entering into previously defined masculine spaces but they were also seen to be wearing men’s clothing.

There is yet another way to look at the problem as to whether a woman should wear “rational” dress or not, and that is from the religious point of view. We are told plainly in Dentonomy, chap xxii, verse 5, that it is wrong to do so, for it is as follows: – “The woman shall not wear that which pertaineth unto a man, neither shall a man put on a woman’s garment.” If a woman cannot ride a bicycle without breaking God’s command, she ought not to ride at all – Daily Mail, Sept 1897 (The Buckman Papers).

Much like Cresswell’s account of female tramps, women cyclists in bloomers produced confusing itinerant identities that appeared to some to be neither female nor male.

To the proprietor of the White Horse Hotel, Dorking, earns the thanks of all lady cyclists for the plucky stand he has taken. We now know where we can take our sisters and other people’s sisters without fear of being sickened by the sight of these “middle-sex” women, who are neither true ladies nor true gentlemen. Three cheers for him. P. Maurice – Daily Mail, May 12, 1898 (The Buckman Papers).

What made many nervous were the possible consequences of new opportunities for interactions with the wrong sort of people. ‘The worst fear was that cycling might even transport a girl to prostitution’ (Hall, 1971, cited in Hargreaves, 1994:93). There are many ways to make sense of the fears emerging here; unsupervised bodies, visible limbs, possibility of inter-class interactions and the rarely voiced burgeoning ideas about women’s bodies and sexuality.

At this time, other cohorts of women were experiencing freedom of movement beyond sport. Cresswell (1999) discusses upper class Victorian women travellers who enjoyed more masculine-oriented freedoms such as going on world tours. Their social standing and money enabled them to journey to foreign places, leaving behind some of the encumbrances of their lives and generate new feminine models of exploration through their travel writing. These social and geographic freedoms however were not always and entirely reflected in their clothing. Cresswell writes: ‘In some senses, these privileges were experienced as constraints rather than freedoms, as women were forced to take ‘home’ with them as they moved’ (1999:179). ‘Home’ in this case often comprised the accoutrements of mandatory Victorian dress, often in highly inappropriate conditions, amongst other cumbersome socio-material restraints. Conventional women’s dress was a symbol of home and domesticity, which was effectively travelling with these women even as they moved outside the home and challenged normative gendered constraints. In this sense, women on bicycles in rational dress may have been perceived as particularly threatening as they were effectively leaving the symbols of normative Victorian femininity at home. Moreover, as discussed above cyclists’ activities rarely escaped society’s gaze.

Mackintosh and Norcliffe (2006) present another lens on mobile women in late nineteenth century Britain. They take the view that historians have overlooked the existence of the ‘flâneurie’, a female cycling version of the masculine bourgeois flâneur, a symbol of Victorian urban modernity who occupied a privileged mobile positionality. They identify the flâneurie according to criteria drawn broadly from imaginings of the flâneur: strolling carefree through the city, dressed fashionably, observing the social conditions around them and unhindered by social restriction (Benjamin, 2002). Mackintosh and Norcliffe argue that the gradual acceptability of cycling for women had a great deal to do with the moral respectability of high profile society women advocates:

We acknowledge that, initially, a section of high society frowned on these women but that dissatisfaction quickly abated under a landslide of cycling respectability, so that many of those who at first were morally affronted subsequently acquiesced to the women and cycling phenomenon (2006:18).

Several characteristics of Mackintosh and Norcliffe’s ‘flâneurie’ match Kitty and her companion’s actions, including how they sensually engaged with the landscape, ‘made reports about their findings’ and ‘walked both to observe and to be observed’ (2006:23). Yet, as Kitty’s letters in the late 1890s suggest, the ‘landslide of cycling respectability’ was not quick or universal. Although attitudes were changing towards the end of the late 1890s, the wearing of rational dress remained unevenly accepted. There were groups of people in particular places struggling with the idea of independently mobile women wearing bifurcated garments such

as bloomers. Kitty's letters inform us about how it felt to occupy multiple positionalities on a daily basis through everyday encounters; of being abused, scorned, ignored, welcomed, appreciated and otherwise constantly observed by society. What emerges in these materials is vivid description of the struggle for citizenship and a sense of the physical, material and emotional labour required on a daily basis.

3. First person accounts

First person accounts by women cyclists of late nineteenth century Britain are rare. Commentary *about* women's cycling, especially in regard to what they chose to wear far eclipse those of first hand accounts *by* women cyclists⁵. A prime example is the famous incident of Lady Harberton being denied entry to the coffee room in the Hautboy Inn, Surrey on April 5, 1899 for wearing rational dress, and which drew extensive media attention, public opinion and a court case⁶. While we know a considerable amount about that event, less dramatic stories of more everyday experiences of cycling in rational dress are rarely explored. There are exceptions of course, in the form of fascinating accounts of women's cycling by women cyclists that bring into focus varied personal interests and concerns of authors, such as Willard's (1895) 'A Wheel Within a Wheel: How I learned to ride a bicycle' and also Ward's (1896) 'Bicycling For Ladies: The common sense of bicycling'⁷. Popular periodicals of the time featured many smaller pieces such as Pennell's (1897) cycling travelogue in 'Harper's Monthly Magazine'. 'The Lady Cyclist' and The Rational Dress Gazette also offered condensed narratives of touring in the UK and abroad. Further to tales of adventures was a plethora of instruction and advice about dress styles and fabric, underclothing, shoes, veils, hats, hairpins, gloves, skin care, hair care, how to sit appropriately on the saddle and how fast one should cycle, where and for how long. Books and publications like these opened up a new world for many women, inducting them into a new technological imaginary and wide-ranging consumer culture.

A similar style and tone can be found in Emily Sophia Coddington's diary, a first hand diary account of a young woman's enthusiastic adoption of cycling in June 1893 to July 1896⁸. This diary predominantly takes the form of a detailed spreadsheet, with headings: 'Places', 'Date', 'Miles', 'Weather' and 'Comments' with the 'Total number of miles' tallied up at the end of every year. In some ways it can be read as an early example of the 'quantified self', a popular contemporary use of self-tracked data for personal knowledge.

Dynley, Feb 7th, 1895. 12miles.

Snow banks each side. Very rough. N. wind.

Went by myself, G.H.S [husband] away travelling, had a lovely spin, beautiful day, sunshine, but very cold, road like a cattle track, had to get off every time I met a cow, but very enjoyable.

What The Buckmann Papers omit in this kind of explicit structure, they made up for in detail. These rich first person accounts of women's everyday activities offer a glimpse into British citizenship in a time of rapid social and cultural transformation. Whilst these letters do not make explicit reference to the notion of citizenship,

⁵ See *The Lady Cyclist* (1896) 'Why a lady cyclist should dress well', 1(2), March and *The Daily Mail* (1898) 'Middle-sex Ladies', May 12 in *The Buckman Papers*.

⁶ See Supplement to the Rational Dress Gazette: Organ of the Rational Dress League, April 1899, No. 7, for a roundup of the broadsheet news coverage of the court case.

⁷ Willard's book documents a spirited older woman's adoption of a bicycle called 'Gladys' and the freedoms that cycling and cyclewear had brought to her life. Ward's book is a compendium of information from how to ride, what to wear and how to progress with techniques for training and building up strength.

⁸ See Oddy (2010) for a discussion of this diary. For other first hand accounts see Hanlon (2008) and Rubinstein (1991).

they do explore ideas about class, social relationships, bodies, money and the politics of place. Every letter describes recent or planned rides in and around Dorking, Hammersmith, Rickmansworth, Cirencester, Chippenham and Shrewton and many other places in the late 1890s. They weave together colourful stories of companions, weather, mechanical details, length and landscape of journeys, state of the roads, cost and quality of meals and accommodation, increasing skills and fitness and of course candid accounts of public responses to their cycling costumes. Following is more from the above letter from Kitty to Uriah:

Yesterday we did better, as we started off early and with our own friends the Sallmanns rode to Rickmansworth, and from there to Miltons Village, Chalfone St Giles where we had a hot meat dinner, potatoes, drinks and pudding for 1/6 per head. On the way too we had some bread, cheese and butter, 1 ½ pints cider and 1 pint of stout, for four of us and it cost 1/6 the lot, 4 ½ each. What do you think of that for cheapness? Coming back soon after we started Mr Sallmann had a nasty fall over a big stone and sprained his right arm and leg, beside cutting his hand a bit he seemed quite [flat], but he rode home only he said his leg and arm seemed to get stiffer and stiffer. Then Will's back cushion tyre went to pieces and was half off and we had to wind it up all round with string. We had miles of suburban road to come along and the hooting was pretty bad until it got dark and we lit up, then I couldn't be seen so much. We did 45 miles all together, the Sallmann's rather more as they had further to go home. Mr Sallmann seemed pretty well done up. I felt very stiff the last part of the journey, but I feel all right today and that's not bad riding as we had a strong wind against us going there all the way.

Reading about active women and their preoccupations with the food they consumed, value for money and technical performance echo many contemporary interests and practices. Another unique characteristic of this primary source material is the writers' shared interest in rational dress and cycling. On several occasions Coddington talks about cycle wear but these comments are limited. She wore a new costume on 8th April 1894 with "rational underneath, especially when the wind blew". Then on 6th September she almost had a crash while cycling in full skirts and exclaims "why don't we wear rationals?" In contrast, it is central to Kitty et al.'s letters. Moreover they did not just discuss and debate dress reform and cycling. Kitty and her companions were actively and enthusiastically engaged in the practice of wearing it and documenting their experiences; its impact on others, how it felt on and off the bike, on different roads and in varied weather conditions and in occasional crashes. The wearers supported each other and the dress reform movement in rides, via the distribution of leaflets, attendance at meetings and letters. They can be seen as embodying the duties of Rational Dress Society members outlined by Harberton in the editorial in first edition of the Rational Dress Gazette:

In the first place, while no absolute rules have been laid down to bind members, we naturally expect that those who earnestly desire freedom in dress will do all in their power to help; not only by donning the costume for special meetings and rides, but by wearing it on every possible occasion. It would be a good rule for every member to ask herself, before going anywhere "Now can I wear rational dress there?" (1898:2)

The broader aim of the movement was to slowly break down prejudice against dress reform by gaining exposure for the costume as widely as possible.

It is difficult to over-estimate how much may be done in home life and private social ways. By having the courage of her

convictions, the Leaguer will find that she can generally arrange to wear the dress some part of the day in her lodgings or boarding house, flat or home and so the prejudice of parents and brothers, friends and fellow-boarders may be overcome, or at least the way made easier for others (1898).

Harberton knew it would not be an easy task, and might never become easier for the wearer even over time, so she encouraged her to think about the impact of her actions not only on changing the opinions of viewers but for the larger benefit of future wearers. Every member was charged with forging a future through a series of small, personal, daily actions in the home, street or further afield. Harberton's comments also suggest her awareness that the experience of wearing rational dress would be configured differently according to place, context, bodies and each woman's family's prejudices. Clearly, while all were valued, no one woman's experience would be the same.

Critically, what these materials remind us is that we can never really know what it was like to cycle in bloomers in the late 1890s. These are only partial and fragmented representations. In letter-form, these materials make it easier to confront the fact that there is no stable truth – only pieces of it. The challenge of historical data therefore is not to write these stories as stable and fixed or straightforward and neat, but rather to resist the notion of tidying up, not just notionally but also narratively.

4. View from the bloomers

The Buckman Papers provide a glimpse into a gendered and specifically clothed mobile positionality at a particular time in history. This 'view from the bloomers' is a view mediated via clothing, as well as an assemblage of other factors that together comprise the ability and inability to move and the practice and struggle for citizenship. It builds on the idea of the 'view from the bicycle saddle' in Mobilities Studies, which draws attention to the normative view framed by the car window in comparison to the other forms of mobility. Different modal perspectives raise questions about everyday, ordinary, or otherwise overlooked frameworks of power, gender and citizenship (Spinney, 2006; Horton et al., 2007; Aldred, 2010; Jungnickel, 2013). Broadly speaking, this work holds that the positionality of the viewer is critical in shaping what can be seen, felt and known. To stay true to the episodic flow of the original letters, I highlight and discuss key excerpts in each missive instead of thematically extracting and re-ordering them. This method also serves to emphasise the contrasting encounters the women experienced in different places and often within short periods of time. That is to say that there emerges no one female cyclist narrative or a single female experience of cycling. Instead, we bear witness to the ups and downs and the delight and distress of cycling in bloomers in Britain in the late 1890s.

Well on the 10th to 12th I had a caravan party at Wotton, 6 miles from Dorking. We were a party of 8, the 4 men slept in rooms at a village, the 4 women in the van. We all pic-niced together in a big tent. Five of us cycled to town meetings at Hammersmith Bridge at 11.45. Kate Woodward one of the party and I rode in knickers all the way. I decided to go into Richmond Park, K W went behind a tree and off with her skirt in a jiffy, the other lady riding with us was quite a beginner and had not got a rational costume but means to get one, her husband is much in favour of it – Kitty to Uriah, 18 July 1897.

In this first letter we see a range of geo-material strategies being enacted when members of Kitty's party changed from skirts into rational dress. While Kitty often rode in her costume to the start of rides, others were less able to do so. In this instance she describes how her friend, Kate Woodward, wore rational dress

with concealed knickers, or bloomers, through town. She then removed the skirt "behind a tree" before setting off on a longer day ride. Women who had to travel alone to group rides, would sometimes chose to wear a skirt when in public contexts without other cyclists. The overskirt operated as a tactic to deter potentially negative public response. It also delivered wearers a flexibility to change whenever they felt comfortable.

These site-specific strategies were reflected in popular media of the time. Asked what costume she wore to cycle in an interview for a regular column 'Lady Cyclists at Home' in *The Lady Cyclist*, Mrs Selwyn. F. Edge had two answers: 'A skirt for town riding, but rationals for actual riding... I certainly think a skirt looks best when riding slowly, but for real riding I like the rational' (1896c: 27). Other women, such as the beginner that Kitty mentions, opted to purchase the bike first, possibly to test social reactions, before considering a range of other consumables such as a cycling costume. The letter also signals how the attitudes of kin, such as husbands, needed to be negotiated along with the landscape, weather and attitudes of fellow road users. Kitty's note about the beginner's husband's positive attitude was clearly good news, and revealing of barriers that existed for other less fortunate women.

In the same letter, Kitty describes a crash when the conventionally dressed beginner runs into her back wheel.

During the ride she ran into my back wheel not having her machine enough in control. We both came off and my dress guard was broken, but not riding in a skirt that didn't matter. We were not hurt beyond a bruise or two, but her front wheel broke a spoke and got out of [whack] so we had to find a shop where it was put right for 6" and we all went our own way rejoicing.

It is not clear if the accident was caused by the woman's skirt or novice skills or a combination of both, but Kitty notes that she would have considered the damage to her bike far worse had she been wearing a skirt rather than her bloomers. As such a broken skirt guard did not prevent her from continuing the journey and the group only had to divert to true the damaged wheel. However, the revised route introduced a range of new unsupportive actors.

There were cries of "Bloomers!" "Take em off" (so idiotic that) but nothing to hurt and it is only from children and the 'Arry and 'Arriet class... The country Harborough folk are much more polite and better mannered. We did 33 miles that day. I had to come slowly the last part and Will of course waited for me for I felt a bit done. It was very hot and I was out of condition but we arrived at Wotton about 7pm.

"Arry" and "Arriet" [Harry and Harriet] were common terms for lower class citizens with middle class aspirations. Renown for loudly voiced conservative opinions, they were regular features in satirical publications like *Punch* and mocked for their 'ignorant vulgarity' (Harris, 1994). In evoking these stereotypes in her letter (18 July 1897), Kitty dismisses their cries and moreover associates them with the immature opinions of children. Their comments did not "hurt" which signals a familiarity with this kind of experience and also the cruelty of other, far worse responses. She notes for comparison, how "folk" in other villages, such as Harborough, were much more accepting of hers and her companions attire. What is clear is that the wearing of rational dress did not often go unremarked.

Later in this same letter Kitty describes more geo-material strategies. In this case, Minnie travelled by train independently to the start of a ride and she either forgot or chose not to wear a cycling costume and then regretted her decision.

Minnie came from Harborough part of the way by train the rest cycling, she got in late for she as quite done up by the heat. K.W and self wore no skirts on Sunday, some friends of hers came to tea and she wanted them to get used to the costume. It was jolly wandering around the woods without a skirt and Minnie wished she had her costume. But she wore a skirt because of going by train and did not bring a coat.

This part of Kitty's letter also tells us about the encouragement and support provided by the group to help others "get used to the costume" both on and off the bike. It is interesting to note the location they chose to familiarise themselves with the new garment – the woods. This was presumably a public yet relatively private place, away from the gaze of others. There was clear delight in the risqué activity of walking around the wood without a skirt, which suggests that it was not a mundane and ordinary event.

The question of why the women took to the woods for a brief respite is answered in the same letter. Social condemnation took many forms. On the same ride, Kitty is the target of derogatory comments from two passing girls.

Two girls on bikes passed me one day and one shouted "You ought to be ashamed of yourself". I was ashamed of her and her lack of manners.

Kitty keeps note of how other cyclists are dressed and how they cycle. The inappropriate nature of the two girls' cycle dress serves to reinforce her opinions about the irrationality of contemporary fashion.

Two more girls passed riding against the wind. One had white petticoats on and white drawers, the other a red flannel petticoat. We got a fine display of legs for their skirts were blowing up over their knees... All the girls seem to ride very slowly about here. I seem able to pass any of them. I have not seen any in Rational Costume, but Will said he saw two small girls riding with their father in Bognor and they wore full bloomers knickers.

In highlighting the indecency of conventional dress Kitty positions her choice of clothing as decent and respectable. Overall, the letter presents a spectrum of emotional responses from ambivalence to animosity, as well as pleasure. It reveals a cyclist who is paying attention to the world around her and her place within it.

Like Kitty, Jane also wrote deeply revealing and richly detailed letters. Her 4th August 1897 missive to Uriah provides insight into hers and her cohorts' technical competencies. This letter is one of the few typed documents in The Buckman Papers. Jane either owned or had personal access to a typewriter, which is in itself a striking example of early technological adoption. It was only ten years earlier that the Remington Typewriter Company established its first British dealership (Mitchell, 1988:826). In the letter Jane writes about accepting Uriah's request to use the machine to produce circulars for rational dress meetings. She also talks about how she used it for professional purposes, and how in some case it interrupted her cycling plans.

I had some nice rides with Minnie, but we did not get to Stonehenge, for the day we were going I had to return home to do some type-writing for a new man.

Other examples of Jane's technical interest and competency emerge throughout the letter. Jane talks often about the weights of different bikes, gear ratios and distances travelled along with her developing fitness and skills, such as her posture on the bike and learning to align her ankles for the most effective pedal stroke. She is also, she tells Uriah, a much faster cyclist than her husband.

We came home early yesterday and rode to Rickmansworth were [sic] we took the train that Will might get up to Town earlier. We simply scorched into Rickmansworth, the last three miles to try to catch the train, I made Miss Hudson fly and it was as much as Will could do to keep up with me, in fact the other day he had to call out to me to slow down as he couldn't [sic] go the pace, but of course he has a very heavy old machine...

A writer in *The Lady's Own Magazine* (1898:51) may have warned readers that '[t]here is no "lady scorcher", for ladies never scorch', yet Jane provides a first hand account that in reality, many did. Her letter presents a striking narrative of women's technical abilities and strengths in comparison to common media representations of women as weak and incompetent as discussed earlier. One of the reasons women could perform this physically and technically accomplished identity is related to their rational clothing, that did not get caught in the bike or cause them to fall off.

Jane does not talk much about her own cycle wear in the letter but it is clear that she was becoming a firm supporter and advocate of the costume.

Minnie wouldn't let me ride in a skirt around Andover and as she did not herself, it seemed foolish for one and not the other to do it, but I hate skirts more and more and ride in one as little as possible

Allowing skirted riders on rational dress rides was a divisive topic in many women's cycling clubs. Some believed like Minnie that it was essential that rationally dressed women claim outside space *en masse* in a visually coherent manner. One of the benefits of collective practice was that it helped to defuse negative public response. Harberton was firm in her conviction that wearing the costume was more effective than talking about it. In a letter to Buckman, she writes: 'Miss James told me more members were joining the League. But that is nothing. They join because they would like to wear the dress when they can do it so without remark. And they think they help by joining' (26 October 1898). However, some members of the Lady's Cyclists Association felt otherwise when they vigorously debated in their 1896 annual meeting the existence of separate "rational" and "skirted" rides and who was allowed to participate in each (Daily Telegraph, November 28, 1896, in *The Buckman Papers*). Even here it is clear that boundary maintenance activities and the policing of female cyclists mobility was not just the provenance of non-cyclists but by cyclists themselves.

Jane also points out potential new recruits to Uriah. As per Kitty's point earlier, husbands could pose initial critical barriers for women interested in exploring new mobile social worlds.

Mrs Sallman I think, is going to take to rationals & will I hope come to the Meeting, her husband approves of them.

Much like Kitty, Jane has a nuanced analysis of the critiques she engenders. She too uses the familiar vernacular of "Arry" and "Arriets" to describe responses from lower class observers.

We only did about 30 miles yesterday, and next Sunday we are going to Pinner to lunch with friends that will be only 25 there and back. I find the knickers get shouted at only from the 'Arry and 'Arriet class, and all the country people are very polite and we have no remarks at Inns or cottages where we stop to enquire the way.

Jane appears to take little notice of their comments and focuses instead on the welcome from others along the way. Again, like her friends, the way she writes about this verbal abuse suggests she accepts it as part of the larger social, political and material landscape in which her cycling practice was embedded.

Less than a month later, Kitty continues her reflective analysis of her position as a female cyclist. Her letter to Uriah on 23 August 1897 finds her pondering the rational dress movement.

Of course I know its very true what you say about the meeting at Oxford, but if there are people who have to think of the ordinary necessities of life even before the advantages of Rational Dress it is best for them to say so, and anyway I can't help it can I?

Kitty and her companions were confident that they were part of something much larger than petty trivialities of everyday life (and clearly lived privileged lives that enable them to do so). As members of the Rational Dress Society they subscribed to Harberton's belief that they must persist in the wearing of the garment if change was going to happen. Given the dogged nature of the criticisms, both verbal and physical, to which Kitty and her companions were exposed, their persistence is remarkable. (The excerpt that starts the article is part of this letter). Society validates and celebrates suffrage activists of this period for their courage and resolve. Perhaps it is time we relooked at and imagined the mundane and everyday trials of early women cyclists as pioneers as well. Their actions were not without cost. They stood for something in their own minds, and enacted these socio-politics through their bodies, clothing and everyday mobilities. They saw themselves as driving social change on a daily basis.

The nature of the new world these women hoped for extended beyond clothing. In Kitty's letter to Maude, 13 September 1897, she reflects on the changing nature of the social landscape. She describes a ride when a male cyclist joined her party on the road. Cycling expanded women's cartographic knowledge, technical skills and physical fitness, and it also opened up social circles for many.

Coming from Cirencester we were joined by a male cyclist going to Telbury who began to talk and told us it must be far more comfortable riding without skirts while he was riding with us.

130 years later it is hard to ascribe a motive to the male rider. Did Kitty find this patronising, annoying supportive or just funny? She offers no obvious retort in her letter but we can imagine she had one. Later, while cycling through Devises, Kitty describes yet another type of response to the costume.

Devises seems an uninteresting town and the waiting maid who served us with tea at 'The Bear' held her head in the air, sniffed and would not speak more than was necessary. From there we were advised by another cyclist, who spoke to us, and rode with a little way, to go on to Shrewton, a village about 3 miles from Stonehenge, which we did and had a lovely run across the Plains. We stayed the night at the 'Katherine Wheel' Shrewton, kept by pleasant people who much approved of Rationals and we were very comfortable there and cost us 9/.⁹

In contrast to the vitriolic abuse that Kitty recounted in the letter cited at the beginning of this article, receiving poor service at an inn seems minor. However being shunned in this way by someone of a lower class would have been significant experience, and it appears to ruin her experience not only of lunch but the entire town of Devises. Her account of Shrewton later in the ride, with its warm support for rational dress, was markedly different. Again, what is evident is how the experiences of wearers of rational dress can be mapped as geographic indicators of social change.

⁹ Kitty describes in detail not only the affective encounters with people she met on her travels but also documents the locations, businesses, costs and consumables along the way.

5. Making sense of the female cycling citizen

The object of the league is to make reform easier by avoiding the publicity of an out-door reform. The founder thinks that hitherto a grave error has been committed in trying to force a reform upon a public which is not educated up to it. . . . When this Indoors League gains all the recruits it hopes to secure. . . . [t]hen shall the lady cyclist who merely wears her "rationals" when wheeling feel what a spurious, half-hearted reformer she really is – *Daily Mail* 1898: Feb 11 (*The Buckman Papers*).

In 1898, Miss E. Whittaker declared herself a member of the *Indoors Reformed Dress League*. Interviewed in the *Daily Mail*, she made clear that she did not cycle and chose instead to showcase her bloomers at home and claim this space first before venturing out onto the street. Miss E. Whittaker argued that "the cause" was being harmed by out-door dress reformers. She strongly felt the home was the first challenge for women dress reformers before seeking to claim outside space.

What letters like this and *The Buckman Papers* tell us is that there was no single experience or place for women in rational dress. A close reading of the day-to-day practices of late nineteenth century British women makes visible their complicated positionalities. The nature of these women's claims to participation in the nation-state and indeed citizenship were shaped according to place, context, clothing and personal resilience. Returning to Kitty's letter in the introduction, one needed to be very brave not just to bear the abuse but also to deal with and make sense of affective inconsistencies from place to place. Rationally dressed female cyclists did not know what experience the next street or town would bring.

The aim of a dress reformer was to intervene in whatever places she had at her disposal and felt comfortable with the level of discomfort that it caused. For Miss E. Whittaker, this was the home space. For Harberton it involved taking on the social and legal establishment. For Kitty and companions it involved engaging in the practice of everyday cycling in urban and suburban contexts. Their embodied experiences, their daily lives, and their very claims to citizenship appear to be geographically situated, particularly unpleasant in Oxford and London's suburban sprawl, but much less so in rural areas. Usefully for us, these less positive experiences did not stop them from cycling, richly documenting their sensory and embodied experiences and articulating their struggles for citizenship. The specificities of Kitty's and others' joy, discomfort, irritation, and contentment summon a past with all its complexities and intimacies into our present. Although all clearly loved cycling, doing it in rational dress did not make for seamless social or technical encounters.

It is important to remember the affinity between dress reformers and the suffrage movement. These groups of women sought changes writ large to the British nation. Although their aims, methods and desired outcomes frequently did not align, their challenges to a nation-state in which they were not fully emancipated are striking. Riding a bike, dressing in rational dress and moving around un-chaperoned in public catalysed mixed reactions from Victorian society as to where a respectable woman could be located on the social spectrum. Kitty and her companions were situated between established categories, not dissimilar to Cresswell's tramps whom 'produced a crisis in anxious onlookers as they tried to make sense of these bodies-out-of-place' (1999:176). Cyclists like Kitty refused to be placed or tidied. Instead, their rationally dressed bodies played a small but nevertheless critical role in helping to legitimize new mobile forms of gendered citizenship in different places. The advent of bloomers and rational dress offered women a way to safely cycle yet also exposed them to intense social and public scrutiny. Sometimes this was positive, sometimes

less so. Seldom was it ignored. Fundamentally, what the 'view from the bloomers' brings to light are different strategies, practices and complex inter-relations and entanglements involved in mobile women's claim to citizenship in late nineteenth century Britain.

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