

The Human Motor: Hubert Opperman and Endurance Cycling in Interwar

Australia

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During the late 1920s and 1930s, Hubert ‘Oppy’ Opperman (1904–1996) rose to prominence as the greatest endurance cyclist of the period. After success in Europe, Opperman spent a decade setting a slew of transcontinental and intercity cycling records. This article explores how Opperman attained his celebrity status and why his feats of endurance resonated powerfully with the Australian public. More than a mere distraction in the economic turmoil of the Depression, Opperman’s significance can be explained within the context of broader concerns about modernity, national capacity, efficiency and race patriotism. This article also argues that for a nation insecure about its physical and moral condition, Opperman fostered new understandings of athleticism, masculinity and the capacity of white Australians to thrive in a vast and sparsely populated continent.

On the morning of 5 November 1937, the Mayor of Fremantle, Frank Gibson, gently lowered the rear wheel of Hubert Opperman’s bicycle into the Indian Ocean, signalling the start of the famed endurance cyclist’s attempt on the transcontinental cycling record, a distance of some 2,700 miles that he hoped to cover in less than eighteen days.¹ Thousands had turned out to see the champion cyclist and he rode leisurely, so that they each might catch a glimpse of his new machine.² Fascination with the record attempt had been building for weeks. The Melbourne *Argus* printed a picture of Opperman’s ‘million revolution legs’ on the front page and estimated that with an average pedal pressure of twenty-five pounds, he would need to exert over

22,234 tons to cover the distance.³ For the next two weeks, newspaper and radio broadcasts reported on every aspect of the ride, including his gear selection, diet, clothing, sleeping regimes and daily mileages. Reporters, using the kind of mythic language usually reserved for explorers and adventurers, described the cyclist's 'heartbreaking struggle with winds, the inevitable red sand, hope-raising mirages, baking sun and other decidedly unpleasant characteristics of the Nullarbor Plains at their worst'.⁴ Surviving the 'dreaded Madura Gorge' showed great tenacity, as did riding through the long stretches of 'unsettled country' without communications, suffering sunburn and blinding 'clouds of swirling dust'.⁵ He took wrong turns, overcame crashes, a knee injury, boils, cysts, and encounters with wildlife. In remote sections Opperman had to carry his bicycle over sand dunes while the midday sun blistered his exposed skin and in the evenings he suffering from the numbing cold. Exhausted support crews struggled to keep up, with one member driving a car and caravan over an embankment into a fence.⁶ And, in the midst of all these challenges, he still paused in the middle of the baking Nanwarra Sands to observe two minutes silence for the fallen on Armistice Day.

As Opperman passed across the country, those following the journey learnt of remote towns and railway sidings, which, for urban Australians, were unimaginably remote—mere names on the map of a wild continent: Zanthus, Rawlinna, Cocklebidy, Ecula, Wirrulla, Yardea and Corunna. As he drew closer to the cities, thousands of spectators lined the roads, his precise arrival times having been advertised in local newspapers and on radio. The papers called for calm and asked that enthusiastic supporters not slap him on the back as he arrived given his severe sunburn. In Adelaide, spectators converged in a 'wild rush' causing the police to lose control, forcing Opperman to 'battle through with his bicycle held high in the air'. He

made a speech about his struggles with fatigue and exhaustion: ‘It has just been one succession of battles . . . and there have been times when I have felt like cracking up, but I have managed to keep on going’.⁷

Reports about Opperman’s wife, Mavys, and her anxious search for information about her husband’s progress lent personal drama to the crossing. Travelling from Fremantle aboard the RMS *Strathmore*, Mavys rushed from the ship as soon as it berthed in Port Adelaide.⁸ She explained to reporters that although she had looked after her cycling husband for over nine years, she had ‘never been so worried as now over any of Oppy’s rides’. If the cars and caravans happened to get stuck in the desert:

he will have to ride on alone over terrible country worried by flies and heat in the day or risking injury in the dark at night . . . How could any wife be any different, knowing that so many things might happen to him along the road?⁹

As Opperman sped into Sydney, around 60,000 people gathered to witness the final twenty miles of the epic record. Police sirens heralded the arrival of the convoy, now followed by hundreds of motorcars and cyclists. Opperman arrived at the official finishing point thirteen days, ten hours and eleven minutes after leaving Fremantle, taking over five days off Billy Reid’s 1936 record.¹⁰ Thousands packed the Sydney Cenotaph in Martin Place to see their hero. One reporter observed that while the memorial had been witness to many ‘stirring scenes . . . never had such a terrific crowd nor one so madly enthusiastic’ gathered to pay tribute ‘to the indomitable pluck, unremitting toil and brilliant endurance of Australia’s super cyclist’.¹¹

Post-Federation cycling

The vastness of the Australian continent has posed an irresistible challenge to generations of explorers, adventurers and athletes. When the first bicycles arrived in

the colonies, cyclists looked to traverse great distances, first between the cities, then through the heart of the interior, much of which remained unexplored by Europeans. They looked to test themselves against the harshness of a grand landscape, the punishing climate, difficult terrain and potentially hostile aborigines. Historians have naturally gravitated to these early decades, focussing on the introduction of the velocipede in the 1860s, the arrival of the high wheeler or penny-farthing in the 1870s and the frenetic enthusiasm for the safety bicycle from the 1880s. Particular attention has been devoted to the debates about the impact of the bicycle on femininity and the prevailing gender order.¹² Yet, the role of the bicycle in Australian life beyond these formative decades has received surprisingly little attention.¹³

In one sense, the lack of detailed post-Federation cycling histories is a result of the near universal acceptance of the bicycle as a practical and economical form of transport for city and rural dwellers alike. By the turn of the century, a number of key technical refinements had turned these once dangerous curiosities into relatively comfortable, safe and reliable machines. In social terms, a generation of women had used their bicycles to no demonstrable ill effect. The Australian medical community, although still concerned about the nation's health and fertility, no longer saw the bicycle as a threat to physical well-being. Most significantly, mass production techniques saw the price of bicycles plummet. In the face of this seemingly unremarkable acceptance of the bicycle, historians have either ignored cycling or mentioned it briefly as an important mode of transport, filling the gap between the horse and the achievement of mass car ownership.¹⁴ The omission implies a certain technological determinism where it is deemed unnecessary to analyse or examine the 'old' technology in the face of the self-evident advantages of the new motorised technology.¹⁵ Cultural and social historians have also played a role here. When they

have studied sport, they have preferred to examine cricket and football as key sites for the expression of national identity. In doing so, they have unwittingly focused attention away from other sporting pursuits.

The great enthusiasm for the bicycle as a utilitarian and sporting machine did not disappear as the motor car arrived in the early twentieth century. The high cost of vehicles in the 1920s and the economic stagnation of the 1930s restricted the number of motor cars on Australian roads, which allowed the bicycle to retain its place as a key mode of personal transportation. Bikes remained capable of inspiring wild enthusiasm both as a symbol of human potential and as a device that might revive a listless postwar generation.¹⁶ Indeed, the First World War re-energised popular opinion in favour of the bicycle and its role in developing the ‘national physique’. Social reformers, religious leaders, suffragists and eugenicists all embraced the bicycle as a conduit to a more vital, healthy and disciplined lifestyle; a vital dimension of modern life that also served as an antidote to the ills that modernity might bring. In a literal sense, the bike had quickened the pace of modern life and human physiology. Exercise, toned muscles, rising heart rates and expanding chests, all created a palpable sense that the bike was indeed the technological marvel that humanity had been waiting for. In contrast to earlier anxieties that the bicycle threatened the fabric of society and the gender order, many saw bicycling as an activity that could preserve, if not extend, social and physical well-being. The bicycle, claimed the *Adelaide Mail*, ‘puts new vigour into the human frame . . . and from the very urgent need of health in these strenuous times [is] all the more important to humanity’.¹⁷

Learning to ride in the immediate postwar years, the teenage Opperman was caught up in the renewed interest and enthusiasm for competitive and recreational

sport. He also belonged to a generation of men who were too young to have served in the war, and now looked to prove their manhood in contests against distance, time, the elements and, of course, each other. Furthermore, the significance of these heroic and manly tests on the bicycle were amplified by the obvious absence of men who had been killed in the war and the presence of disfigured former soldiers as they resumed life in Australia.¹⁸ For a nation insecure about its physical and moral condition, sporting champions were empowered with an important symbolic role as exemplars of the kind of virtues that would ensure the health and future of the national community.¹⁹ This article draws upon the considerable scholarly research on the cult of athleticism that swept the Western world during the early twentieth century.²⁰ While it accepts that the pursuit of physical fitness and a neoclassical bodily aesthetic gained momentum after the First World War, it argues that a very particular kind of physical conditioning—one that valued stamina and endurance—achieved special prominence in the Australian context.²¹ As such, endurance bicycle riding, as undertaken by Opperman, offers a rich and hitherto unexplored source for testing assumptions about the cultural significance of sporting bodies during the interwar period and their role in shaping popular understandings of athleticism and its place in Australian life.²²

Making ‘Oppy’

In 1920, a commercial traveller selling bicycles in country Victoria quit his position in order to run his newly purchased cycle business in Melbourne’s east. Ambitious, charismatic and charming, the young Bruce Small knew the value of celebrity to his emerging business, Malvern Star Cycles, and began offering prizes in local cycle races. Small first met Opperman in 1921, after he placed third in a local race. Small

was so impressed with Opperman's performance and attitude that he offered him a role in the business. As Opperman recalled, the equation was elementary: 'I sought success on the wheel—he sought spectacular returns for Malvern Star'.²³ At 18, Opperman swore his loyalty to Small, quit his job with the Postmaster-General's Department and began working as a salesman in Small's shop. In time, Opperman would trust Small to know the limits and capabilities of his body more than he did. In other ways Small became something of a paternal figure; perhaps a substitute for Opperman's own father who was often absent during his childhood, and especially so after his parents separated and Opperman moved in with his grandmother. Small was as flamboyant and extroverted as Opperman was modest and reflective. He nurtured Opperman's physical training with the assurance of an experienced coach. Their relationship would define the rest of each other's lives. By the end of the decade, Small's advertising slogan 'You'd be better on a Malvern Star' became etched in the memories of a generation and would forever be associated with Opperman.

Opperman thrived in his position and, in addition to setting numerous motor-paced and unpaced records on velodromes, won the national road championships in 1924, 1926, 1927 and 1929. In 1928 he completed the gruelling three-week Tour de France and overcame the sabotage of his bicycles to win the coveted twenty-four hour Golden Bowl (Bold'or) in Paris. Before Opperman returned to Australia, 500,000 readers of the sports paper *L'Auto* voted him sportsman of the year, the first non-European to receive the accolade. He returned to Australia an international celebrity and expressed his joy at measuring up to the high standards imposed by Europe's cycling elite. Sports writers in Australia saw his success as further evidence that sportsmen from a far-flung corner of the globe could rival the older, larger and more powerful cultures of Europe.²⁴ As famous as cricketer Don Bradman and the

racehorse Phar Lap, he became a household name, more commonly known as ‘Oppy’.²⁵ Opperman continued to race and set records on the velodrome, but now turned his attention to the well-established tradition of attempting records for cycling across the continent and between Australia’s major cities.

Endurance cycling, sometimes called ‘overlanding’, emerged during the 1890s when riders such as Francis Birtles, Arthur Richardson, Sarah Maddock, Ted Ryko and others, gained national attention for their audacious journeys across the continent.²⁶ By the late 1920s, Australia was in the grip of something of a record-breaking craze, stimulated by fierce competition among local bicycle makers as well as a broader appetite for endurance sports. Most bicycle manufacturers sponsored cyclists to compete in races as well as attempt endurance records. Under Small’s leadership, Malvern Star developed a successful cohort of sponsored riders. The company was especially notable for its support of female endurance riders, such as Joyce Barry, ‘Billie’ Samuels and Pat Hawkins. Small played a major role in creating events that catered to the particular talents of his sponsored cyclists and he devoted considerable time to perfecting his publicity techniques with Opperman, by far his most gifted athlete.

Small faced the task of simultaneously sustaining Opperman’s rising celebrity and bringing a willing public into close proximity with their champion. Those close to endurance cycling bore witness to the intense mental and physical drama that was played out against opponents and their own bodies. But from a distance, the seemingly unskilled and repetitive nature of the sport could appear dull. With people enjoying more leisure time, what would long-distance road cycling or a record attempt have to offer the spectator that other popular sports did not? Of Australia’s most popular sports, cricketers displayed finesse, creativity and shot making, while

football and rugby players demonstrated their prowess with skilful ball play and spectacular physical confrontations. Cyclists, by contrast, appeared to be mere workers labouring over an impersonal machine in an endlessly repetitive act, akin to an assembly line. Furthermore, without the action taking place in an enclosed space where they could experience competition in its entirety, spectators could not see how a record attempt or a long road race unfolded. Early cycling adventurers, such as Birtles and Richardson, had no support vehicles, therefore any reports and interpretation of their adventures had to wait until either the ride was complete or they reached an urban centre where they might find an interested reporter. More often than not, interested readers waited days to read a report or an article written by the rider themselves, or wait years for the publication of a book, if one was ever forthcoming. Small recognised that removing those delays was critical to maintaining and increasing public interest in Opperman's rides.

[Insert Figure 1 here]

Small's experience of the 1928 and 1931 Tours de France transformed the way he understood the craft of sports promotion. His skilful use of both print and radio would change forever the way Australian audiences experienced and understood endurance cycling. Critically, he witnessed the way radio coverage of the Tour, which began in the late 1920s, radically changed the public experience of the event. Daily briefings on the difficulty of the route, the physical condition of the riders, weather reports and interviews with the cyclists before and after races, created an immediacy and intimacy that the print media could not replicate.²⁷ In both a literal and abstract sense, radio enhanced the collective experience of the Tour, especially as people gathered together to listen, and engendered a truly national connection to the race.²⁸

Small applied the theatrical techniques he had observed in France to Opperman's solo endurance rides. One of Opperman's early endurance rides set the pattern for almost a decade of record setting. The Kalgoorlie to Perth journey of 378 miles (608 kilometres) was a familiar route for many in Western Australia, linking the profitable mining region to the city. By segmenting the journey, Small structured Opperman's performances into a theatrical event that would capture the imagination of Australian audiences and, not least, sports journalists. The division of each record attempt into readily identifiable and reportable stages allowed tension and suspense to be woven into an epic narrative by writers covering the race and, most dramatically of all, the cyclist himself who spoke on radio, as well as to the assembled crowds, before, during, and after the ride. Listeners keenly waited for the hourly updates and a broadcast from Opperman when he reached a studio in Southern Cross. Hourly progress reports also allowed listeners to remain connected to the ride and for spectators to know when to get to the roadside to catch a glimpse of the cyclist, which they did in their thousands. With the ride timed to finish in the centre of Perth on the weekend, Small ensured the maximum number of people to witness the new record. As Opperman arrived the crowds were so large that he had to be carried up a ladder to a verandah above Small's local office. Here he addressed the crowd. Later in the evening he spoke over the national radio network from his hotel bed. 'A few hours rest had worked wonders, and he was again the cheerful, unassuming athlete whose performances have brought him world fame'.²⁹

In the months leading up to Opperman's two-week trans-continental record attempt in 1937, the major newspapers reported his training rides, physical condition and any minor mishaps that might have affected his speed. For his part, Opperman gave talks in theatres about his overseas races complete with slides and moving

pictures.³⁰ Just as he had done with the much shorter Kalgoorlie-Perth record attempt, Small constructed the route as a theatrical stage through which a colossal struggle against the land could be acted out and relayed to the nation. He arranged for a special correspondent from the *Sydney Morning Herald* to accompany the support crew for the entire distance. This allowed the journalist's own travelogue and personal experience of the land to infuse reports of the attempt. Like a serialised novel the combination of regular print and national radio reports gave the event an immediacy and momentum not typically associated with cycling events. For the reporters that followed, their own encounters and experience of the land became fused with the record attempt itself. While Australian cycle journalism lacked much of the lyricism of the European press, it conveyed a very particular understanding of the challenges faced by Opperman and a deeper uncertainty about the land in which the events took place. Australia might have lacked the high alpine passes that animated French cycle writing, instead they had miles of the 'villainous, sand and rocky wastes of the Nullarbor', 'blistering uninhabited deserts', 'icy hilltops' in south-eastern Australia, and the 'sun-dazzled' highways, as well as the prospect of meeting hostile aborigines.³¹ The combination of Small's theatrical constructions, a sustained advertising campaign and a willing media, burnished Opperman's reputation to heroic proportions.

An Australian superman

For most of the interwar years, journalists, radio broadcasters and advertisers referred to Opperman as a 'human motor', a 'flying machine' or a 'superman'.³² One of the more inspired representations of Opperman appeared in *Smith's Weekly* after his trans-continental record in 1937. A caricature titled 'Superman Opperman' showed

the cyclist astride an upside down model of Australia, to which bicycle wheels had been added. His legs are pedalling furiously, suggesting a fusion between man, machine and the continent. A short verse accompanying the cartoon also suggests the range of metaphorical images routinely associated with the cyclist:

He covers Australia by means of a bicycle,
With legs like a piston and nerves like an icicle:
Out of the sunset and over the scenery,
A knight upon wheels and a god in machinery!³³

This language and imagery had its roots in the physiological sciences of the late nineteenth century and culture of experimentation that grew around studies of human movement and athletic potential. Breakthroughs in thermodynamic physics during the nineteenth century generated new understandings of energy, fatigue, the productive capacity of a working body, and the universe itself. According to the historian Rabinbach: ‘The universal laws of energy applied equally to the movement of the planets, the forces of nature, the mechanical work of machines, and the work of the body’.³⁴ The language of work also shifted to describe the labouring body as a productive organism capable of transforming universal natural energy into measurable outputs. This new materialism rested on the idea that science could bring the forces of nature under human control, but also bring human nature under the control of science.³⁵ The social reformers, scientists, engineers and hygienists who popularised such ideas, claimed that measuring and harvesting every source of power would release a vast reservoir of latent energy and produce a civilisation resistant to decay and disorder. Evocative metaphors of human beings as motors or dynamos reflected the newly understood link between human physiology, science, industrial technology

and progress.³⁶ As the influential American behaviourist John Watson explained, a human being was appropriately understood as ‘an assembled organic machine ready to run’.³⁷

[Insert Figure 2 here]

From the late nineteenth century the study and measurement of human capacity and movement became central to streamlining labour processes and boosting national productivity. Jules-Etienne Marey’s ‘chronophotographs’ (a sequence of images that broke movement into component parts) and Frederick Taylor’s emphasis on ‘scientific management’ and the elimination of unnecessary movement, were each motivated by a desire to liberate the body’s maximum capacity for work and ensure the greatest economic output.³⁸ The idea that with the application of modern science and management, a worker’s body might become capable of infinite productivity also had profound implications for modern athletics. Across the world, with notions of industrial efficiency and economy taking on a much broader significance as the key to social regeneration, the successful, efficient, scientifically trained and disciplined athletes soon transcended sporting endeavour to become exemplars of industrial civilisation itself.³⁹

In Australia, Opperman served as the perfect sporting illustration of the plasticity, resilience and machine-like efficiency of the human organism. He often spoke of his riding as work or labour. Through training, he aimed to achieve an ‘automatic’ pedalling action where his body fused with the bicycle.⁴⁰ While training for the Fremantle to Sydney ride, he insisted on using a fixed geared bicycle. On such a machine the pedals are always moving when the bicycle is in motion, forcing the rider’s legs to revolve. Unable to coast down hills or along flat roads, his body, thus fused with the forward moving machine, was forced to work harder and build greater

strength. Opperman remained fascinated by this process of ‘moulding’ his mind and body into a ‘smooth working combination’, transforming his limbs, which were ‘as wooden and dead as any fallen trees’, into machine-like pistons, so that the ‘muscular reply to the sensory demand [would be] as swift and ready as the actions of an unthinking robot’.⁴¹ Opperman’s ability to ride in a mechanically precise fashion also gave him the appearance of possessing limitless energy. The experienced cycling officials who witnessed the Kalgoorlie-Perth record, who were accustomed to witnessing the distressing sight of riders breaking under the strain of long-distance events, expressed dismay at ‘the champion’s wonderful exhibition of almost unnatural endurance’.⁴² The writer continued:

in heavy climbing through the Darling Ranges from Northam to Greenmount his pedalling and leg action were still as perfect as they were when he left Kalgoorlie 24 hours before . . . Never was there the slightest sign of any jerking on the chain running between the chain cog and the chain wheel, such as one would see in the case of a tired cyclist of ordinary ability when his legs commence to give under the strain of hours of hard riding.⁴³

Scholars such as Robert Dixon have suggested that the intertwined relationship between humans and mechanical technologies were an important source of imagery in interwar Australian literature. Modernism, he has argued, ‘produced an image of the colonial body defined by its capacity to incorporate mechanical prostheses’, such as aircraft, cars, weapons and cameras.⁴⁴ The depiction of Opperman’s body conjoined with a device that amplified his own energies clearly extended this trope. Statistics about the distances covered with each pedal rotation, what gears he preferred, and the amount of pressure he applied through the pedals, all reinforced the image of a mechanically augmented human traversing the landscape, impervious to pain and capable of miraculous recovery.⁴⁵ While such images were in keeping with the interwar traditions identified by Dixon, these representations also

recalled the surrealist and futurist fantasies explored by turn of the century writers, such as Alfred Jarry, who described the bicycle in his 1902 novel, *Supermale*, as an ‘external skeleton which allowed mankind to outstrip the process of biological evolution’.⁴⁶

‘This game little Australian’⁴⁷

Australian bodies have long been associated with health, vitality and a robust physicality.⁴⁸ As David Walker and others have argued, Australians developed a particular fascination for the creation and display of bodies that were muscular, resilient and competitive. Fictional literature, in particular, celebrated big men, ‘chesty’ heroes who had the ‘vital energies and visionary capacity that nation building demanded’.⁴⁹ During the interwar period, ideas about efficiency and industrial productivity permeated broader discourses of gender and national progress. Australian representations of manhood increasingly emphasised traits such as productivity, stoicism, rationality and repression.⁵⁰ In a similar vein, Australia art and photography of the 1930s featured athletic and semi-industrialised bodies (often, but not exclusively, male).⁵¹ In concert with the fresh interest in endurance athleticism, however, a new type of athletic body was gaining currency.

Riding a bicycle great distances or over challenging terrain rewarded the smaller framed athlete who did not have to expend energy moving an oversized physique. Similarly, endurance riding required ergonomic efficiency rather than brute strength, and mental tenacity and control rather than competitive aggression. Often the subject of anthropometric examinations, which had been performed on cyclists since the late nineteenth century as scientists endeavoured to learn the physiological effects of extreme exertion, Opperman confounded popular understandings of human strength, power and capacity. At just five feet seven inches (170 cms) tall and

weighing around 140 lbs (64 kgs), Australian sports writers inevitably remarked on Opperman's slight stature and expressed surprise at his ability to generate and sustain such great power. 'Seeing him under the trainer's hands', wrote one reporter, 'it was hard to realise that such a little man had such a big record'.⁵² European writers, on the other hand, had grown accustomed to their diminutive racing heroes, and rarely mentioned it. One specialist reported that he possessed an 'abnormally' slow pulse rate, low blood pressure, and despite being a 'small man', could expand his chest from 33½ inches to 36¾ inches, which was 'more than unusually large'. Like the racehorse, Phar Lap, physicians discovered that his heart was larger than normal, not due to disease, but from training and efforts sustained over many years. Opperman's flexibility and suppleness (described as 'soft' muscles) were also clear indicators of great endurance and strength. His highly trained body when combined with his technique of sleeping for only ten minutes every three to four hours during long record attempts, also allowed him to amplify the restorative effects of sleep.⁵³ Over the decade, he emerged from these investigations as the epitome of modern athleticism; disciplined, superbly trained and abstemious. Importantly, his biomechanical efficiency meant that he did not rely on oversized muscles or any crude display of brawn to achieve extraordinary physical goals. The ultimate validation came from the famous British sports physician, medical official of the International Athletic Board, Dr Adolphe Abrahams, who recorded that Opperman did not 'owe his greatness to any one factor, but to the happy circumstance that everything is right at the right time. His compactness of build is suitable for economy of energy. He is a physical marvel'.⁵⁴

Just as Opperman's small stature challenged popular conceptions of masculine strength, his quietly spoken demeanor as well as his talents as a writer and public

speaker helped reshape notions of Australian manhood. Largely self-educated, Opperman's habit of writing and speaking about the emotional as well as physical difficulties he endured set him apart from most Australian sportsmen. For the Brisbane to Sydney record attempt in 1936 he provided two articles for the *Courier Mail*; one before the ride and another dictated to a journalist while receiving a massage after the event. Reflecting on Shakespeare's famous line from *Hamlet*, Opperman confessed that his imagination rather than his conscience had made him a coward. Doubts crowded his mind, he wrote, resulting in a 'disturbing process of mentally shrinking' despite being physically sound. The 'doubts begin to white out one's confidence to complete the journey' as he was 'tormented by hopes and fears'.⁵⁵ On the journey itself, he wept as he cycled passed small groups of country folk, who had gathered along the roadside in the darkness. Their 'loyalty and interest', he wrote, 'brought tears to my eyes. It was absolutely astounding. Admittedly you are temperamental when you are in the middle of an attempt of a record. You are highly strung, and things affect you more deeply'.⁵⁶ His public appearance wearing a beret (a deeply felt nod of respect to the French supporters who received him so warmly on his first trip to Europe in 1928) also hinted at a degree of sophistication and a European sensibility that was unusual in Australian sportsmen at the time.

While Opperman's stoicism and resilience reflected many elements of conventional Victorian masculinity of the period, his image certainly did not exclude women. Opperman's wife, Mavys, appeared as an unwavering, if emotional, nurturer of a champion who set out on dangerous journeys to earn money for their family. The media invariably reported her as 'anxious' to the point of losing sleep but also steadfast, 'keeping Opperman properly dieted' during training and record attempts.⁵⁷ Coverage emphasised the anxiety, pride, relief and joy that she experienced during the

rides. Photographs showed the happy reunion between Mavys and her husband at the end of his gruelling record attempts. During the 1920s and 1930s, the combination of falling birth rates, the widowing of thousands of women (who might never remarry), and the shortage of male labour, all created a powerful sense of national crisis.⁵⁸ The portrayal of a young, united, hard-working, married couple such as the Oppermans may have been comforting to a society confronting the stark demographic, social and economic reality of postwar Australia. Further, in a community still recovering from the outbursts of household violence, drunkenness and other dislocations caused by war, Opperman's teetotalism—often illustrated with photographs of the cyclist drinking milk after his efforts—took on an especially potent symbolism.⁵⁹ The Oppermans' public life reaffirmed the enduring stability of traditional gender roles and the important role women would play in enabling male success. Readers could hope that with such a fine example of a successful and supportive marriage that the nation would eventually recover from its current social and financial malaise.

During the 1920s and 1930s, Australian health reformers, exponents of physical culture, national fitness and eugenicists, all saw vigorous exercise as vital to the creation of a healthy, efficient and sane democracy.⁶⁰ That Opperman's machine-like efficiency had not eroded his capacity to maintain a strong marriage proved reassuring to those who were concerned about the social and physical degradations that might accompany an increasingly mechanised and technocratic world. His stamina, efficiency and discipline, coupled with a masculine demeanour that eschewed the unsophisticated brawn and swagger of earlier sports heroes, also served as an example of how Australians could address the negative consequences of modernity that threatened to overwhelm the nation.⁶¹ Indeed, his consistent success also magnified the role the bicycle might play in a national physical revival. The

praise lauded upon Opperman and cycling in general echoed the breathless enthusiasm expressed for the bicycle some four decades earlier. As one writer exclaimed, this ‘wonderful sport . . . strengthens the lungs and the whole structure of the body . . . The recent feat of Hubert Opperman . . . shows how cycling can develop a man’.⁶² Furthermore, his ‘keen intellect’, thoughtful speeches and writings helped allay old fears that Australia’s vibrant physical culture might sustain little more than a muscular overconfidence or, at worst, a brutish anti-intellectualism.⁶³

[Insert Figure 3 here]

Space, time and the bicycle

Every form of propulsion has changed understandings of distance and time because of the particular way each technology moved the human body through space.⁶⁴ While motorised transportation in the form of the railway, the motor car and the aeroplane may have destroyed the ‘tyranny of distance’, the bicycle played its own role in reconceptualising Australian understanding of space, distance and time. Bicycles brought the human form into a distinctive kind of relationship to the land, quite unlike that experience in a mechanised vehicle. While Opperman’s journeys were intended to prove his athletic strength, rather than understand the landscape he passed through, the representation of his cycling feats nevertheless contributed to a distinctive appreciation of the continent. This is not to suggest that the extraordinary attention devoted to these events produced a more objective or richer understanding of the land. Rather, it is to say that the country was reframed with a different set of cultural imperatives, grounded in a desire to measure the nation, both literally and figuratively, more precisely against the human form.

Paradoxically, Opperman’s human powered efforts both reinforced the scale, vastness and hostility of the continent, yet also rendered it less abstract in human

terms. Previously unbounded or unmeasured space was understood in recordable, measurable, quantifiable and comparable ways. The interest in his athletic capacity together with an emphasis on time and distance, shifted the presentations of such journeys from a kind of exploration to a scientifically quantifiably (and improvable) test of human performance. The distances between towns and cities—indeed, the entire continent—had been measured bodily: in distance, time, and even tons of force required to pedal one’s way across it.⁶⁵ The time it took a person to cover set distances across the country became a benchmark in understanding and describing the scale of human settlement.

Paul Carter reminds us that part of the colonial project is to survey, measure, record and therefore ‘know’ the land. This creation of demarcated spaces, he wrote, ‘rendered the distant immediately conceivable, it made the invisible visible’; measurement and maps ‘seemed to bring remote things near and balance the mind’.⁶⁶ The imposition of these controls, as well as the building of roads and railways, was an attempt to ‘iron out spatial differences’ and to make a place that could be possessed and inhabited.⁶⁷ While the land traversed by Opperman and other pioneer cyclists, was, in one sense, already colonised, the record attempts repeatedly retake the ‘unsettled’ land back into the control of the settler. In this sense, the bicycle, just as the horse was before it, was an instrument used to occupy and apprehend the continent, to make sense of its immensity.⁶⁸ Yet while the actions of athletes like Opperman can be seen as part of an attempt to ‘nullify strangeness’ and a means of ‘translating the country into a place for reliable travelling’, they also suggest a form of occupation distinct from the establishment of colonial control.⁶⁹ As Lorenzo Veracini and others have pointed out, the late nineteenth and early decades of the twentieth century in Australia are more precisely understood as a period of ‘settler colonialism’,

where the demarcated or colonised landscape is subsequently reinterpreted and layered with different meanings; meanings intended to assert not just sovereignty but a deeper form of possession and identification.⁷⁰ Epic bicycles journeys enabled the kind of material and symbolic reorganisation of space whereby settlers could ‘claim the land as their own and re-make themselves into the “new natives”, legitimately at home on the territory’.⁷¹

Notions of possession and belonging during the interwar period were unsettled by the worsening economic conditions of the 1930s. Unprotected and exposed to the vicissitudes of global capitalism, white Australians increasingly saw themselves as battling great odds. Representations of Opperman’s gruelling physical battles with the landscape and the elements resonated within a complex nationalist discourse grounded in notions of alienation, adversity and conquest.⁷² Andrew Lattas for instance has argued that Australian nationalist narratives have typically emphasised the importance of sacrifice and suffering in an effort to legitimise the possession of the land:

The land becomes a testing ground; it represents a challenge to prove the worth, character and mettle of those who wish to claim her. This is the space of the pioneer, explorer and artist. Each of them is involved in giving birth to our sense of nationhood. Each represents a figure for colonizing the land, for gaining over it some kind of spiritual possession . . . Their suffering takes on the epic proportions of a pilgrimage that redeems and heals the nation.⁷³

It is also, I would suggest, the space of the endurance athlete and for the sake of the arguments contained in this article, the long-distance cyclist. Opperman’s suffering saw him literally leave parts of himself over the country; from sweat, tears and even blood in the event of a fall. Though he was clearly an unusually gifted athlete and achieved his epic goals *in extremis*, this merely magnified the sense that superior

physiological and mental capacities were required to occupy the land and that ordinary people should work towards developing these traits. Opperman helped validate white possession of the continent and granted hope to those who doubted their potential to thrive here.

The tendency to represent Opperman as an archetype of the national character became more explicit in the build up to the Second World War. As armed conflict appeared likely, journalists and other commentators drew Opperman's sporting feats into accounts of national capacity and race patriotism. In September 1938, Opperman attempted the Hobart-Launceston-Hobart cycling record. On schedule to completing the 247.8 miles (around 400kms) in less than twelve hours, a large crowd had gathered at the Hobart Town Hall to greet the cyclist on his return. A police motorcycle escort forced cars from Opperman's path as he shot towards Hobart. The crowds along the route were sufficient to block traffic from the side streets and mounted police in the centre of town struggled to contain the cheering spectators each craning for a view of the flying cyclist. On arrival at the Town Hall two policemen hoisted Oppy to their shoulders and carried him inside to be received by the Lord Mayor. The *Mercury* newspaper enthused that the public reception stood as a 'stimulating indication of public calmness and detachment when on the verge of a world-shaking crisis . . . proof of the orderly mind that accompanies British blood'. It was further evidence that:

the most awesome situation can be faced by the British peoples without panic . . . It is the fighting spirit displayed in such feats of endurance . . . that finds its equivalent in even sterner contests. So long as Australia has men to perform such feats and others to cheer them on, the nation will worthily acquit itself in whatever it is called upon to achieve.⁷⁴

In this climate, it is unsurprising that Opperman's leadership potential outside of sport became apparent. A career in politics was first mooted publicly in 1940, as

the cyclist neared retirement.⁷⁵ The Second World War delayed any ambitions Opperman may have possessed, but towards the end of the decade, he attracted the attention of a resurgent Liberal Party. In 1949, he won the Federal seat of Corio in Victoria, defeating John Dedman, Labor's Minister for Post-war Reconstruction. He held Corio for the next seventeen years and in 1967 became Australia's first High Commissioner to Malta. Few public figures of the twentieth century better illustrated the Australian embrace of the Rooseveltian faith in the 'strenuous life', a concept that gained much traction in Australian social and political discourse during the interwar years.

Conclusion

By the end of the 1930s, Opperman had become a towering figure in Australian sport. His story was an athletic drama that energised and shaped the way Australians thought about themselves, their own bodies and the very continent they inhabited. While many cyclists had achieved feats of endurance before him, none had so successfully woven such a compelling narrative of their own performance into the national consciousness. This article has reframed Opperman's life outside more orthodox histories of sporting achievement, which have tended to create singular narratives centered on national progress, and instead locates it within a broader range of historical themes. Indeed, Australia's enthusiastic embrace of Opperman suggests ways to extend the boundaries of Australian sports history itself, in part because the language used to describe endurance athleticism routinely traversed ideas about race, gender, efficiency, physiology and science.

To understand Opperman's rise to national prominence in this wider context is to gain a more finely textured understanding of Australian society between the wars.

While his fame was culturally and materially anchored in the late nineteenth century excitement for the bicycle, his prodigious stamina and tenacity resonated powerfully with very contemporary interwar concerns. Opperman quelled anxieties about racial deterioration, modernity and masculinity, while providing a visceral demonstration of the capacity of white men to flourish in isolated and harsh environments.⁷⁶ His human-powered journeys remade the Australian landscape and its impossible distances into a place where urban white settlers could feel vital, legitimate—perhaps even at home.

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¹*Examiner*, 11 November 1937, 7–8.

²*Argus*, 6 November 1937, 1, 16.

³*Argus*, 6 November 1937, 1; *Argus*, 29 September 1937, 30; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 September 1937, 21.

⁴*Mirror*, 20 November 1937, 5.

⁵*Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 November 1937, 21; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 November 1937, 15.

⁶*Argus*, 19 November 1937, 22.

⁷*Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 November 1937, 15; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 November 1937, 15; *Argus*, 15 November 1937, 20.

⁸*Mirror*, 6 November 1937, 4.

⁹ *Mail* (Adelaide), 6 November 1937, 2.

¹⁰ *Western Mail*, 22 October 1936, 50; *Barrier Miner*, 8 July 1941, 4.

¹¹*Sunday Times* (Perth), 21 November 1937, 7.

¹²Penny Russell, 'Recycling Femininity: Old Ladies and New Women', *Australian Cultural Studies*, no. 13 (1994): 31–51; Kylie Winkworth, 'Women and the Bicycle: Fast, Loose and Liberated', *Australian Journal of Art* 8, (1989/90): 97–121; Fiona Kinsey, 'Stamina, speed and adventure: Australian women and competitive cycling in the 1890s', *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 28, no. 10 (July 2011): 1375–87.

¹³ Among the historians who have examined post-Federation cycling, Jim Fitzpatrick's *Bicycle and the Bush* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1980), still stands as the most comprehensive text. More general treatments include Geoffrey Blainey, *Jumping over the wheel* (Melbourne: Rathdowne, 1993), and Keith Dunstan, *Sports* (Melbourne: Cassell Australia, 1973), and Rob Hess, 'A Mania For Bicycles: The Impact of Cycling on Australian Rules Football', *Sporting Traditions* 14, no. 2 (May 1998): 3–24. Some club histories have also considered interwar cycling. For example, see Rod Charles, 'Cycle Racing in Geelong, 1869–1956', in *Scorchers, Ramblers and Rovers: Australian Cycling Histories*, ed. Clare Simpson (Melbourne: Australian Society for Sports History), 103–116.

¹⁴ Robert Lee, *Transport: An Australian History* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2010); Geoffrey Blainey, *The Tyranny of Distance* (Sydney: Pan Macmillan Australia, 2001); Frank Crowley, ed., *A New History of Australia* (Melbourne: Heinemann Educational Australia, 1990), 186, 301, 311.

¹⁵ John Knott, "'The Conquering Car": Technology, Symbolism and the Motorisation of Australia before World War Two', *Australian Historical Studies* 31 no.114 (April 2000): 1–26.

¹⁶ *Advocate* (Tasmania), 30 August 1927, 3.

¹⁷ *Mail* (Adelaide), 8 May 1915, 5.

¹⁸ Joy Damousi, *The Labour of Loss: Mourning, Memory and Wartime Bereavement in Australia*, (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 85.

¹⁹Kay Saunders, “Specimens of Superb Manhood”: The Lifesaver as National Icon’, *Journal of Australian Studies* 22, no. 56 (March 1998): 96–105.

²⁰Ana Carden-Coyne, *Reconstructing the Body: Classicism, Modernism and the First World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 163–89. Tony Ballantyne and Antoinette Burton, eds, *Bodies in Contact: Rethinking Colonial Encounters in World History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 6–7, 419–20.

²¹Anne Rees, “‘Australians Who Come Over Here Are Apt to Consider Themselves Quite Large People’: The Body and Australian Identity in Interwar London’, *Australian Historical Studies* 44, no. 3 (September 2013): 408, 414.

²²Hubert Opperman, *Pedals, Politics and People* (Sydney: Haldane Publishing, 1977); Sandra Fitzpatrick, *Hubert Opperman: A Cycling Sensation Called Oppy* (Melbourne: Reed Library, 1996).

²³Opperman, 47.

²⁴*Sporting Globe*, 5 December 1928.

²⁵While cricketer Don Bradman and the champion racehorse Phar Lap have become synonymous with Depression-era sport and society in Australia, knowledge of the equally famous and revered Opperman has somewhat faded from popular memory. One factor that might explain this is that cycling declined in popularity during the 1940s—both as a pastime and spectator sport—and struggled to re-establish itself in the car dominated culture that flourished after the Second World War. The iconic status achieved by Bradman and Phar Lap, on the other hand, has been sustained by the unbroken popularity of cricket and horseracing, sports that developed much deeper roots in Australian society since the nineteenth century. Opperman’s reputation as a sportsman may have also declined due to his high profile and sometimes-controversial seventeen-year political career in the postwar Menzies Government.

²⁶Georgine Clarsen, ‘Pedaling Power: Bicycles, Subjectivities and Landscapes in a Settler Colonial Society’, *Mobilities* (July 2014 online): 1–20.

²⁷Christopher Thompson, *The Tour de France: A Cultural History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 42–4.

²⁸Thompson, 99.

²⁹*Sunday Times* (Perth), 10 September 1933, 1.

³⁰*Sunday Times* (Perth), 22 August 1937, 10.

³¹*Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 November 1937, 15.

³²*Argus*, 20 November 1927, 12; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 November 1937, 1.

³³*Smith's Weekly*, 27 November 1937, 13.

³⁴Anson Rabinbach, *The Human Motor: Energy, Fatigue, and the Origins of Modernity* (New York: Basic Books, 1990), 290.

³⁵Thompson, 182; Rabinbach, 23, 72.

³⁶Rabinbach, 19–26; Lewis Mumford, *Technics and Civilisation* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1934).

³⁷John Watson, *Behaviourism* (New York: Norton Library, 1930), 269, 99, 158–9, 220, 302.

³⁸Rabinbach, 2, 271–88; G. Davison, *The Unforgiving Minute* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1993), 124–30.

³⁹Rene Fülöp-Miller, *The Mind and Face of Bolshevism: An Examination of Cultural Life in Soviet Russia* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 24–5.

⁴⁰*Western Mail*, 7 November 1935, 29; *Daily News* (Perth), 8 September 1933, 4.

⁴¹*Burra Record*, 23 November 1937, 3.

⁴²*West Australian*, 12 September 1933, 5.

⁴³*West Australian*, 12 September 1933, 5; *Advertiser*, 10 March 1928, 18.

⁴⁴R. Dixon, *Prosthetic Gods: Travel, Representation and Colonial Governance* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 2001), 19, 58–63.

⁴⁵*Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 November 1937, 21; *Mirror* (Perth), 7 September 1935, 16.

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- ⁴⁶ Alfred Jarry, *The Supermale* (New York: New Directions, 1977); John M. Hoberman, *Mortal Engines: The Science of Performance and the Dehumanization of Sport* (New York: The Free Press, 1992), 129–130.
- ⁴⁷ A.L. Vowles, 'Fremantle to Sydney by bicycle in 13½ days', *Shell House Journal* (April 1938): 12. See also, *Geraldton Guardian and Express*, 31 March 1938, 4.
- ⁴⁸ Rees, 405–22; Michael Roe, *Nine Australian Progressives: Vitalism in Bourgeois Social Thought, 1890–1960* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1984), 101, 131.
- ⁴⁹ David Walker, 'Energy and Fatigue', *Australian Cultural History* 13 (1994): 174; Jonathan Todd, 'Conceptualisations of the Body in Australia 1880–1925' (Hons thesis, University of New South Wales, 1991).
- ⁵⁰ Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 2–4.
- ⁵¹ Isobel Crombie, *Body Culture: Max Dupain, Photography and Australian Culture, 1919–1939* (Melbourne: Pelus Press, 2004); Stephen Garton, 'Sound Minds and Healthy Bodies: Re-considering Eugenics in Australia 1911–1950', *Australian Historical Studies* 26, no.103 (October 1994): 172–81.
- ⁵² *Daily News* (Perth), 8 September 1933, 4.
- ⁵³ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 November 1937, 11.
- ⁵⁴ *Northern Miner*, 11 November 1937, 3. Opperman, 186.
- ⁵⁵ *Courier Mail*, 13 October 1936, 13.
- ⁵⁶ *Courier Mail*, 19 October 1936, 15; *Sunday Times* (Perth), 10 September 1933, 1.
- ⁵⁷ *Daily News* (Perth) 9 September 1933, 1.
- ⁵⁸ Damousi, 66–7.
- ⁵⁹ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 November 1937, 14.

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- ⁶⁰Michael Roe, 'The Establishment of the Australian Department of Health', *Historical Studies* 17, (October 1976): 184; George Z. Dupain, *Diet and Physical Fitness* (Sydney: Briton Publications, 1934).
- ⁶¹Walker, 'Energy and Fatigue', 164–77; See also, *Health and Physical Culture*, April 1, 1937.
- ⁶²*Camperdown Chronicle*, 2 July 1932, 8. See also, *Referee* (Sydney), 29 July 1931, 22.
- ⁶³*Referee* (Sydney) 29 July 1931, 22; Saunders, 96–105.
- ⁶⁴Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space, 1880–1918* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983).
- ⁶⁵*Argus*, 6 November 1937, 1.
- ⁶⁶Paul Carter, *The Road to Botany Bay* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 218–9, 229.
- ⁶⁷*Ibid.*, 221.
- ⁶⁸E.J. Brady, *Australia Unlimited* (Melbourne: G. Robertson, 1918), 64.
- ⁶⁹Carter, *Road to Botany Bay*, 221–2. Paul Carter, *The Lie of the Land* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), 295.
- ⁷⁰Lorenzo Veracini, *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview* (London: Palgrave, 2011).
- ⁷¹Clarsen, 2–3.
- ⁷²Ann Curthoys, 'Expulsion, Exodus and Exile in Australian Historical Mythology', *Journal of Australian Studies* 23, no. 61 (1999): 1–19.
- ⁷³Andrew Lattas, 'Aborigines and Contemporary Australian Nationalism: Primordality and the Cultural Politics of Otherness', in *Race Matters: Indigenous Australians and 'Our' Society*, ed. Gillian Cowlishaw and Barry Morris (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1997), 234–5.
- ⁷⁴*Mercury*, 29 September 1938, 8.
- ⁷⁵*Daily Advertiser*, 23 May 1940, 3.

⁷⁶ David Walker, *Anxious Nation: Australia and the Rise of Asia 1850–1939* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1999), 1–12.