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Round Ireland in Low Gear

Eric Newby

Published by Picador,
in association with Collins

Extract

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INTRODUCTION



The roads are very variable, some being grand, others very bad. Intercourse with the peasantry will be found interesting and amusing. Nothing can exceed their civility and courtesy; and for those who are not too particular it will be found an excellent plan to lunch in their cottages, excellent tea, home-made bread, butter and eggs being procurable for 1s. [5p] a head.

The Cyclists' Touring Club Irish Road Book, c. 1899.

In the autumn of 1985, more or less on the spur of the moment, we decided to go back to Ireland and travel through as much of it as we could in the space of three months or so, starting in the South. The North could wait. If things improved there, so much the better. If they got worse we would simply not go there. We were not going to travel in the guise of sociologists, journalists or contemporary historians. I was unlikely to write a book called *Whither Ireland?* or *Ireland Now*. We were not going there, we hoped, to be shot at. We remembered it as it had been some twenty years previously, when it had been idiosyncratic and fun. (Romantic Ireland was long since dead and gone, as Yeats wrote, 'with O'Leary in the grave' – that is, if it had ever existed.) We

were going there, in short, to enjoy ourselves, an unfashionable aspiration in the 1980s.

It was now mid-November. All Soul's Day was already past. The dead season, as far as weather went, was in full sway all over the northern hemisphere and would last until Easter, and probably longer. We had no illusions about the dead season. Anywhere in the British Isles and in most parts of the Mediterranean it conjured up vistas of matchstick figures bent double by the wind, silhouetted against a colourless sea without a vessel in sight to break the monotony; sun lounges in hotels and guest houses filled with rolled-up carpet, those still open soldiering on with a skeleton staff, their proprietors in the Canaries, those left in charge in their absence never quite sober.

But it will be better in Ireland, we said, putting our faith in the Gulf Stream, and in the Irish themselves with their humour, and trying to forget, while adding up their other virtues, their cooking, though even that was said to have improved.

The reason we chose to begin our journey in this dead season was simply that at home in Dorset in the not-so-dead seasons we are engaged in extensive gardening operations without any sort of outside help. We have a large kitchen garden in which we grow all our own vegetables; large expanses of grass to be cut, a lot of it in a steep-sided orchard which, no sooner than one turns one's back on it, becomes infested with moles whose excavations knock hell out of a mower; not to speak of a long, tapering field and quite an extensive beech wood to try and keep under control.

Having decided to explore as much of Ireland as we could between December and March and the rest of it when we could afford the time, we then had to decide what means of transportation to employ. My first impulse, one not shared by my wife Wanda, was to walk it; but what makes Ireland such a meal from the walker's point of view is its coastline, which is 3500 miles long, more than a thousand miles longer than that of England and Wales and exactly a thousand miles longer than that of Scotland, and a lot of it on the Atlantic coasts very indented. Peninsulas such as the Iveragh, the Beara, the Dingle and Mizen Head Peninsulas are between thirty and forty miles long. To skirt the perimeter of these four adjacent peninsulas would involve a journey of at least

255 miles – the Ring of Kerry on the Iveragh Peninsula alone is over a hundred miles – and at the end of it one would only be about sixty miles further on one's way. Similar vast detours would also have to be made, if one was serious about it, all the way up the West coast.

According to the excellent *Ireland Guide*, published by the Irish Tourist Board (otherwise Bord Failte, the Welcome Board), it is possible to visit the country 'in its entirety in a couple of weeks' by car or motorcycle; they then go on to say, however, rather like a band of roguish leprechauns, that 'you cannot see everything, of course'. But we both rejected the idea of using a car on the grounds that whoever is driving sees hardly anything except the road ahead – if not they shouldn't be driving – and the one who isn't is either permanently map-reading or looking things up in guide books to entertain the driver, and getting ticked off if he fails to do so, which leads to what my wife calls 'rowls'. In this way no one sees anything. Motorcycles we regarded, and still do, as just plain dangerous.

Buses sounded a little more promising but a closer look at the *Amchlar Bus do na Cuigi agus Expressway*, otherwise the *Provincial and Expressway Timetable* (not surprisingly there is no equivalent for 'Bus' and 'Expressway' in the Irish language) showed that some of the services were pretty skeletal in the winter months. The *Amchlar Traenach*, or *Train Timetable* (trains, presumably because of their more ancient lineage, having somehow contrived to get themselves incorporated into the language) offered even less hope. However carefree the image the Irish Railways tried to project, it was obvious that the system had suffered the attentions of some Irish equivalent, if such can be imagined, of Beeching, the destroyer of the British railway system. To understand what had been lost as a result it was only necessary to look at the railway map in the 1912, and last, edition of that splendid work, *Murray's Handbook to Ireland*.

We also ruled out horses, as we are both terrified of them. Anyway, we would have had the problem of feeding them. I could foresee us buying them dozens of packets of All Bran in supermarkets and getting soundly kicked for our pains. Remembering what happened to Mr Toad we were less than enthusiastic about hiring a caravan. What we really needed was a balloon, but

that would have meant employing a balloonist, and most likely ending up beyond the Urals.

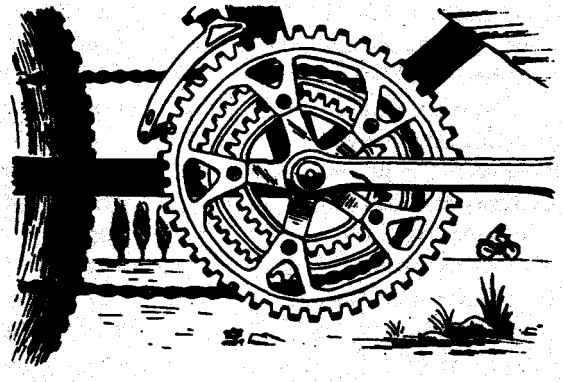
The only other practical method of making the journey, although I was not sanguine about persuading Wanda to agree, was by bicycle.

PART 1

DECEMBER

Chapter 1

STATE-OF-THE-ART



STATE-OF-THE-ART *adj.* (*prenominal*) (of hi-fi equipment, recordings, etc.) the most recent and therefore considered the best; up-to-the-minute: *a state-of-the-art amplifier.*

Collins English Dictionary

A bike is a very personal thing and the only person who can really judge it is the rider.

The Bicycle Buyer's Bible, 1985/6

When I was seven or eight I used to have an awful recurrent nightmare about Germans invading England on bicycles.

It was inspired by a story in a germ-laden, pre-First World War magazine which I rescued from a dustbin behind the block of flats we lived in by Hammersmith Bridge in south-west London. In this tale, the Germans were landed on the shores of the Wash under cover of fog – a difficult feat, but Germans were up to it. Instead of horsed cavalry, however, which would have had a pretty glutinous time of it out in the marshes, battalions of them squelched ashore with folding bicycles strapped on their backs.

Once on *terra firma* these *pickelhaubed* hordes split up into flying columns and, led by expert local navigators, traitors to a man, of whom there were inexhaustible supplies even before 1914, swept through the fog-bound low country at a terrific rate. In the course of the following night they seized all the principal cities of the Midlands, including Birmingham ('Only ninety kilometres as the crow flies, Herr Hauptmann,' said some unspeakable turncoat, clicking his heels.) Cambridge fell without a shot being fired, which was not surprising considering its subsequent record – or was it the long vacation? Other columns were directed towards the metropolis. At this point the narrative ended. It was a serial and by the time I went back to have another dig in the dustbin to find the sequel it had been emptied.

They must have been foiled in the end because we later won the Great War, but for years I had this terrifying vision of Germans with spiked helmets pedalling swiftly and silently over Hammersmith Bridge in the night, finding my bedroom and spitting me on their bayonets like a *knackwurst*.

It was therefore to some extent paradoxical that the swiftness and silence of the bicycles about which I had dreamt with such horror, as irrational as the horror of whiteness described in *Moby Dick*, but equally real, were the very qualities which subsequently attracted me to this form of transport, and turned me into a keen cyclist and owner of many bicycles of varying degrees of splendour.

My first really good bicycle was a second-hand Selbach which I bought from a boy at school for £3 – it would have cost about £12 new. I was heartbroken when it was stolen from the school bicycle shed. Selbachs were the Bugattis of the cycle world. The frames were made from tapered tubes which, although almost paper thin, were immensely strong, and they were fitted with Timken roller bearings instead of conventional ball-bearings. The lightest machine Selbach built is in the Science Museum in London. He flourished between the wars, and was far ahead of his time. He was killed when the front wheel of his bicycle got stuck in a tramline in South London; he didn't even rate an obituary in *The Times*. Ever since the 1890s, when for a time it was fashionable, though never as a competitive sport, cycling had been and still is hopelessly *déclassé*. Even today the only socially acceptable bike for a member of the British upper crust is one that looks as if it has been retrieved from a municipal rubbish dump, and probably has.

The finest bicycle I ever had was a Holdsworth which my father allowed me to order when I was sixteen. He had arranged with a Swiss business acquaintance of his called Mr Guggenheim that I should work in his silk firm in Zurich in order to learn the business and the German language, and no doubt he thought that cycling up and down the Alps would keep my thoughts in wholesome channels. It was a model called Stelvio, and was specially designed for cycling in the Alps.

It was hand-built in a small shed at the back of Holdsworth's shop in Putney by a thin, energetic, chain-smoking genius with wispy hair and a terrible cough. He had lined the walls of the shed with a really wonderful collection of pin-ups all of which displayed enormous tits; presumably to stimulate him to even greater activity. They certainly stimulated me. It was the finest bicycle procurable at that time and it cost a colossal £20. The day I

took delivery of it I remember him bouncing it up and down on its over-size hand-made tyres as if it was a ping-pong ball.

'Luvly job,' he said, with a cigarette stuck to his lower lip. 'A real iron. Go out and give them Alps a bashing. Funny to think I'll never see 'em.'

I never saw the Alps either, let alone gave them a bashing. The arrangement with Mr Guggenheim was shelved when my father found out that the kind of *Schweitzerdeutsch* they spoke in Zurich was so extraordinarily funny that if real German speakers heard it they fell about. I never dared tell the creator of the 'iron' that the furthest I got was the Black Mountains on the Welsh border.

In the war I rode huge bicycles with 28" wheels that weighed 60 lbs or more, of the sort still popular in parts of India and Africa. At the Royal Military College, Sandhurst, which I attended in 1940, a special drill had been invented for riding these monsters:

'Number One Platoon!' (or whatever it was) ''Arf Sections Left! *Prepare to Meount*! . . . *Meount*!' And we would wobble off into the asylum country round Broadmoor.

Wanda's affair with the bicycle was very different from mine. For her there was, and still is, a Platonic, archetypal bicycle, the first one she ever had. It was the sort of bicycle on which droves of girls used to cycle past the prison camp in which I was incarcerated in the Po Valley, near Parma, during the war. Similar droves were to be seen riding through the equally flat countryside around pre-war Ferrara in Visconti's film *The Garden of the Finzi-Contini*.

It was a single-speed lightweight roadster with an open frame, raised handlebars fitted with a wicker basket and a back pedalling brake on the rear wheel, the upper part of which was covered with thin cords to prevent the wearer's skirt becoming entangled in it, which made the whole thing look like some archaic stringed instrument on wheels.

It was a present to her from her godmother on her sixteenth birthday. Originally she had given her a wristwatch but Wanda displayed such obvious disappointment on receiving it that her godmother eventually wrung from her the confession that what she really longed for was a bicycle. Unfortunately Wanda's

godmother had no idea how much a bicycle cost, and the money she gave Wanda in lieu of the wristwatch was totally insufficient to buy even a good secondhand one, which was why Wanda's bicycle came to be made up of salvaged parts, re-assembled by the village bicycle repairer. In spite of this it was a good bicycle, with a frame made by the still excellent firm of Bianchi.

Because of all this Wanda had the fierce affection for her bicycle that most people reserve for the living. So when the Germans occupied Italy in September 1943, and her father was arrested by the Gestapo as an anti-Fascist, her bicycle was impounded as an additional punishment, to which she took strong exception. Eventually she succeeded in tracking it down to a German military headquarters at Salsomaggiore, a spa miles away from where she lived in the foothills of the Apennines, to which literally thousands of confiscated bicycles had been taken.

'You have stolen my bicycle,' she said without preamble to the first German officer she encountered there, who happened to be a colonel taking a turn in the open air.

'What, me?' he said in genuine astonishment, saluting. 'Why should I take your bicycle? I have no need of a bicycle.'

'Well, if you didn't take it your soldiers did. My father was in the Austrian Imperial Army. *He* never stole ladies' bicycles.'

'Where is your bicycle?' he asked.

'In there,' she said, indicating through open doors in a hangar what appeared to be the biggest second-hand bicycle shop in the world.

'*Signorina*,' he said gallantly, anxious to be rid of this Slovenian fury he had somehow unwittingly fielded, 'if we have taken your bicycle I can only apologize on behalf of the Wehrmacht. We are not here to make war on young ladies. We will restore you a bicycle. Please take *any* bicycle. I will personally authorize it. Take a *good* bicycle.'

'I don't want *any* bicycle,' she said. 'I want *my* bicycle.'

Eventually the colonel was constrained to send for a couple of soldiers and order them to force their way through the masses of bicycles, many of them superb machines, any of which she could have had for the asking, until they reached the enclave in which Wanda's humble machine was finally located. For with Teutonic

efficiency they were grouped according to whichever town or village they had been impounded in.

Knowing all this, and that a facsimile of her old bicycle was the only thing that would really make her content, I felt myself in the same sort of spot as the German colonel at Salsamaggiore in 1943. In one of my wilder, more fanciful moments I imagined trying to sell her the idea that dropped handlebars are nothing more than raised handlebars installed upside down. And in my mind's eye I could see her wrestling with them, like an Amazon with the antlers of a stag at bay, trying to return them to what she regarded as their proper position.

The heart of rural Dorset is not the easiest place to find out about the latest developments in the world of bicycles, but by good fortune our local newsagent in Wareham had a copy of a magazine called *The Bicycle Buyer's Bible, 1985/6* on its shelves. By this time the question of what sort of bikes we were going to take with us if we were going to get moving before Christmas was becoming extremely urgent. *The Bible* gave detailed specifications of about three hundred machines with prices ranging from £105 to £1147, and £1418 for a tandem.

The machines that interested me most were the mountain bicycles, otherwise ATBs, All Terrain Bicycles. Everything about a mountain bike is big, except for the frame, which is usually smaller than that of normal lightweight touring bicycles. They are built of over-size tubing and have big pedals, ideal for someone like me with huge feet; wheels with big knobbly tyres which can be inflated with four times as much air as an ordinary high-pressure tyre; very wide flat handlebars, like motorcycle handlebars, fitted with thumb-operated gear change levers; and motorcycle-type brake levers connected to cantilever brakes of the sort originally designed for tandems, which have enormous stopping power.

Most of them are fitted with 15- or 18-speed derailleur gears made up by fitting a five- or six-sprocket freewheel block on the rear hub and three chainwheels of different sizes on the main axle in the bottom bracket where the cranks are situated; a sophistica-

tion so conspicuously unnecessary that it would have had Thorsten Veblen ecstatically adding another chapter to his great work, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, had he lived to see it. This equipment produces gears ranging from 20" or even lower (which can be a godsend when climbing mountains) to 90" or even higher for racing downhill, or with a following wind on the flat.* Not all these gears are practicable or even usable, however, for technical reasons.

These mountain bikes looked very ugly, very old-fashioned and very American, which was not surprising as they were the lineal descendants of the fat-tyred newspaper delivery bikes first produced by a man called Ignaz Schwinn in the United States in 1933. To me they looked even older. They made me think of Mack Sennet and Fatty Arbuckle and Jackie Coogan. If I got round to buying one I knew that I would have to wear a big flat peaked cap like Coogan's. Eighteen gears apart – perhaps she would settle for fifteen – and providing we could find one with an open rather than a man's diamond frame model, this seemed exactly the sort of bike, in the absence of her beloved Bianchi, that Wanda needed to carry her the length and breadth of Ireland and even up and down a holy mountain or two.

'"To buy a mountain bike now",' I read, '"is to win yourself a place in the first of the few rather than the last of the many."'

It was a wet Sunday evening in Dorset. We were in bed surrounded by the avalanche of catalogues and lists I had brought down on us by clipping out the coupons in *The Bicycle Buyer's Bible*. One dealer, in what seemed to me an excess of optimism, had also sent order forms which read:

> PLEASE SEND . . . MOUNTAIN BICYCLES(S), MODEL(S) . . . FRAME SIZE(S) . . . COLOUR(S) . . . PLEASE GIVE ALTERNATE COLOUR(S). I ENCLOSE A CHEQUE/BANKER'S ORDER, VALUE. . . .

*The gear ratio (as a single figure) in inches is calculated by dividing the number of teeth on the chainwheel by the number of teeth on the rear sprocket and multiplying the result by the wheel diameter, in the case of most mountain bikes, 26".

'I don't want to be one of the first of the few,' Wanda said.

'Shall I go on?' I said. 'There's worse to follow.'

'Okay, go on.'

'"From prototype to production model they have been around for less than a decade. In that short time they have been blasted across the Sahara, up Kilimanjaro, down the Rockies and along the Great Wall of China."'

'Isn't it true that the Great Wall of China's got so many holes in it that you can't even walk along it, let alone cycle along it?'

'Yes, I know,' I said, 'but there is a picture here of two men sitting on their bikes on the top of Kilimanjaro. And anyway, just listen to this: "With each off-the-wall off- the-road adventure, with each unlikely test-to-destruction, the off-road-state-of-knowledge has rolled the off-road-state-of-the-art further forward."'

'Read it again,' she said. 'More slowly. It sounds like bloddy nonsense to me.'

'There's no need to be foul-mouthed,' I said.

'It was you who taught me,' she replied.

I read it again. It still sounded like bloody nonsense and it came as no surprise when I later discovered that some of the early practitioners of this off-the-road-state-of-the-art mountain bike business hailed from Marin, that deceptively normal-looking county out beyond the Golden Gate Bridge on the way up to the big redwoods, which gives shelter to more well-heeled loonies to the square mile within its confines, all of them into everything from free association in Zen to biodegradable chain cleaning fluid, than any other comparable suburban area in the entire United States.

'Read on,' Wanda said.

'"You don't have to be some gung-ho lunatic to get your kicks",' I read on. '"Take a mountain bike along the next time the family or a group of friends head off for a picnic in the woods. There'll be plenty of places to put the bike through its paces and it sure beats playing Frisbee after lunch [interval while I explained the nature of this, I thought outmoded, pastime to Wanda]. Or take the bike on a trip to the seaside – rock-hopping along the beach is a blast."'

'That's enough,' she said in the Balkan version of her voice. 'I can just see you on your mountain bike, a gong-ho (what is gong-ho?), Frisbee-playing, rock-hopping lunatic.'

'I say,' I said, some time later when the lights were out, 'I hope all this isn't going to make you lose your enthusiasm.'

'Enthusiasm for what?'

'For these bikes, and Ireland and everything,' I said, lamely.

'Not for these bikes, I haven't,' she said. 'I've never had any. Nor for Ireland in winter. If I come it will only be to make sure you don't get into trobble.'

'What sort of trouble?'

'In Ireland all sorts of trobble,' she said, darkly.

We went to London to make the rounds of shops selling mountain bicycles, and if possible purchase some. Under the arches off the Strand, in the substructure which was all that remained of the Adelphi, the Adam brothers' great riverside composition, we saw and rode our first mountain bikes. Wanda tried something called a Muddy Fox Seeker Mixte, which had an open frame constructed from Japanese fully lugged chrome molybdenum tubing with Mangaloy manganese alloy forks; I tried a Muddy Fox Pathfinder which had a lugless frame of the same material, put together by the TIG (Tungsten Inert Gas) welding process. Wanda quite liked her Mixte which reminded her a bit of the old Bianchi open-framed bike on which she had ridden out to bring me and my friends food and clothing in the autumn of 1943.

What the staff of most of the bicycle shops we visited had in common, we discovered, was almost complete indifference as to whether we bought one of their bikes or not. This was surprising, considering how much money was involved and the fact that the industry was going through one of its periodic slumps. In mountain bikes there was nothing worth buying under £200. From £200 to £300 the choice was very limited and it was only in the £300 to £500 range that one started to find high quality bikes. From £500 to around £1000 or more, one was in a world of prototypes and purely competitive machines in which everything,

as the *Buyer's Bible* put it in a way that I was beginning to find insidiously corrupting, was 'silly money'. One thing we had learned was that whatever make we bought, our bikes should come from a firm that actually built, or at least assembled them, on the premises. But time was now running out and if we did not leave for Ireland within ten days we would have to wait until after Christmas. One of the firms we had not yet visited was called Overbury's, in Bristol, who designed and built their own racing, touring and mountain bikes. And Bristol had the added attraction that our daughter, son-in-law and grandchildren lived there.

Overbury's premises, in Ashley Road, can scarcely be described as being at 'the better end' of Bristol; in fact Bristol has no better end. The more enviable parts are perched high above the city at the top of impossibly steep hills or on huge cliffs above the Avon Gorge, from both of which eyries the inhabitants look down with Olympian detachment on those less fortunate mortals below. Overbury's, which is run by Andy Powell and his mother, Enid, is about the size of an average newsagent's and is crammed with bikes that are either beautiful or sophisticated, or both, and all the complex bits and pieces that go to make them up. What space remains is taken up by machines in various states of malfunction or collapse awaiting attention. In fact on the Monday morning we visited, it was rather like being in a National Health doctor's waiting room during surgery hours. One of the more spectacular accidents had befallen an *ATB* - riding log-hopper who had failed to clear a huge pile of them in a Forestry Commission conifer wood. The resulting smash had destroyed the special welded guard bar, fitted under the bottom bracket to protect the triple chain rings from just such a mishap, doing a wealth of damage.

'You're looking at more than a hundred nicker,' the owner said with gloomy pride, when I showed an interest in it. 'That's the end of guards for me.'

We were lent a couple of test bikes on deposit and we set off with them in the back of our van for an attractive open expanse called Ashton Court Park, to try them out. Wanda's was the most expensive and the most unconventional in appearance. It

was called the Wild Cat and was going to take a bit of living up to.

Mine was a Crossfell, at that time the most expensive of Overbury's diamond frame mountain bikes.

By the end of this outing Wanda was very depressed. It was not surprising: the last bicycle she had ridden had been a borrowed ladies' Marston Golden Sunbeam which she had used while house-hunting in South London in the 1970s, perhaps the finest conventional bicycle ever made. This was the bicycle on male versions of which deceptively fragile-looking curates used to zoom past me, as I frantically pedalled my Selbach back in the 1930s. She liked the semi-open frame of the Wild Cat, but found it difficult to live up to the image conjured up by its name. She couldn't cope with the complexity of the twin-change shift mechanisms on the handlebars which controlled the eighteen gears: the right-hand one which shifted the chain from any one of the six sprockets to another on the Shimano Extra Duty Freewheel Block; the left-hand one which shifted the chain on the costly oval Shimano Biopace triple ring chainset. 'Biopace delivers power when you need it most,' the blurb said. 'Computer analysis shows round rings force unnatural leg dynamics that interfere with smooth cadence and can lead to knee strain.'

In comparison with a traditional lightweight bicycle fitted with narrow, high-pressure tyres I found the knobbly mountain tyres sluggish uphill, but very good downhill at speed on a track full of pot-holes. The saddles, amalgams of leather and plastic, we both agreed were hell. By the time our trial run through the wilds of the Ashton Court Park was over I had resigned myself to giving up the idea of mountain biking, or any other sort of biking, in Ireland; but when we got back to the shop and redeemed our deposits Wanda, to my surprise, told me to go ahead and order. 'If I have it I will *have* to use it,' she said.

There was no problem in producing my Crossfell in time, as there was a frame in stock of the right size that only needed stove enamelling. Wanda's Wild Cat, as its name suggested, was more difficult. It would have to be built from scratch in seven days. But first her inside leg had to be measured for the frame – a feat

difficult to accomplish in a crowded bike shop when the subject is wearing a skirt – and all work ceased while I performed it.

In a state of shock at the realization of the enormity of what I was doing I allowed Andy Powell to persuade me that I should also have eighteen gears. I forget the reason he gave. Perhaps he had run out of five-sprocket freewheel blocks, the last shipment from Osaka having gone down with all hands in the South China Sea to become a source of wonder to marine archaeologists around 3000 AD, who would eventually identify them as amulets against the evil eye.

In the course of the next hour or so I spent vast amounts of money – we paid for everything ourselves – on what bicycle builders laughingly refer to as 'optional extras': pumps, front and rear reflectors, guards to protect the derailleur mechanisms, frame pads to make it easier to lift my diamond-framed Crossfell over gates and fences, over-sized mud guards for the over-sized tyres, two sets of front and rear panniers, front and rear pannier frames to hook them on, 'stuff sacs', rudely named bags to keep our waterproof clothing in, front and rear lights, drinking bottles, Sam Browne belts and trouser clips made of reflective material that might improve our chance of not being knocked down and squashed flat at night. Foolishly, having donned them and then looked at one another, we decided against crash helmets – 'head protection for the thinking cyclist', as one catalogue put it.

We also needed a whole lot of tools and spares: a three-way spanner, a ten-in-one dumbell spanner, two brake spanners, a pair of cone spanners, a Shimano crank bolt spanner and freewheel remover, a 4" adjustable wrench, three Allen keys, a spoke key, a cable cutter, a pair of pointed pliers, a tyre pressure gauge, an adaptor so that a garage air-line or a car foot pump could be used with Presta bicycle valves, a set of tyre levers, spare spokes, two spare inner tubes, spare gear change and brake cables, spare brake blocks (at a colossal £3.90 a pair), and valve caps.

My next purchase was something called a Citadel Lock which had a half-inch metal shackle said to be proof against a pair of 42" bolt cutters and big enough to lock both bikes to a parking meter or a set of railings at the same time. However it was so heavy that

we left it at home and took with us instead a couple of pre-coiled 5ft steel cable locks which would last about ten seconds against bolt cutters.

By this time I began to feel myself in a state of euphoria, like a character in a Fitzgerald novel going shopping – Gatsby stocking up on shirts, or Nicole Diver buying an army of toy soldiers in Paris in 1925: 'It was fun spending money in the sunlight of the foreign city, with healthy bodies . . . that sent streams of colour up to their faces; with arms and hands, legs and ankles that stretched out confidently, reaching or stepping with the confidence of women lovely to men.' Although it was a bit different in Bristol in deep December for a senior citizen with all the confidence of a man unlovely to women – well, most women.

Then we shopped for clothes. The most difficult to find on the spur of the moment, because they were very expensive, were the long zip jackets with baggy trousers to match made from Gore-Tex, a wind and waterproof material which allows perspiration to evaporate. Shoes were another problem. Cycling shoes designed for riding lightweight bikes on the road would be hopeless anywhere off it in waterlogged old Ireland. In the end we both took climbing boots and short, wool-lined wellingtons which were warm and could be accommodated on the big mountain bike pedals but soon lost their linings. And we bought long wool and nylon stockings with elasticated tops that came up over the knee and waterproof over-mitts with warm inner linings.

We also spent a gruesome hour in company with other senior citizens stocking up for the winter, buying thermal underwear, which everyone said we must have: long johns to sleep in and underwear to ride in. Some of it looked terrible, especially a particular brand of men's underpants which came down to the knees and gave the wearer, in this case myself, an air of geriatric instability. It also, when it warmed up, gave off an awful pong. 'I wonder,' Wanda said, emerging from the fitting room in which she had given the thumbs-down to the underpants, and surveying the milling throng, 'if they are all going to Ireland, too, on bicycles. If they are we shall look pretty silly.'

As I had promised myself, I took with me a huge cap that had belonged to my father – almost a dead ringer of that worn by the

now dead and gone Jackie Coogan, which Wanda from now on referred to as my 'Jackie Hooghly'.

The bikes were delivered to us by van from Bristol the following Tuesday at what was literally the eleventh hour. Together with the optional and non-optional extras, all done up in protective wadding, they made an impressive pair of packages, and the bikes themselves, which had been wrapped like Egyptian mummies in the equivalent of cerements, were so scintillating when finally exposed to the light of day that it seemed a pity to foul them up by riding them. If there really was such a concept as state-of-the-art, this was it.

'We can put it all down to expenses,' I said to Wanda.

'I wouldn't count on it,' she said. 'I can just see the expression on the Inspector of Taxes' face. He'll laugh all the way to your funeral.'

'Well, why did you let me buy all this stuff if that's what you think?' I asked.

'I was going to stop you,' she said, 'but when I saw how much you were enjoying yourself, somehow I couldn't. You looked like a small boy in a sweet shop.'

We set off to negotiate some of the network of lanes in the Isle of Purbeck, the majority of which involve ascents of unnatural steepness. The first part included a fairly hard climb along the flanks of Smedmore Hill. This time I rode behind Wanda in order to be able to tell her when to operate the front and rear gear shift mechanisms. This worked all right until she suddenly pulled the left hand lever back and at the same time pushed the right hand one forward, while still riding on the flat, which transferred her instantly to the lowest gear available to her, 23.6", leaving her with her legs whirring round until she fell off.

In spite of this setback, she did succeed in climbing the hill, from the top of which we roared down hill towards the hamlet of Steeple, which consists of a manor, a vicarage, a very old church which houses a giant eighteenth-century version of a pianola and a plaque displaying the stars and stripes of the Lawrences, a family who were collateral ancestors of George Washington.

From here a hill climbs to the summit of West Creech Hill, a rise of about 295 feet in 1000 yards, which may not seem much, and certainly doesn't look much, but is in fact excruciating. If any of the Alpine passes I rode over on my way to Italy in 1971 had been as difficult as parts of this hill, I would never have ridden a bike over the Alps at all.

'You go on,' said Wanda, when the time came to tackle it. 'Don't watch me.'

From the top, completely breathless, I watched the little figure gallantly toiling up, very slowly, very wobbly at times, but she made it.

'I did it,' she said. 'Not bad for a grandmother, am I?'

I felt so proud of her I wanted to cry; but privately I prayed that there wouldn't be many similar hills in Ireland.

When we got back to the house Wanda allowed me a fleeting glimpse of what her hand-finished, calf leather, high-density, memory-retentive foam Desmoplan base saddle had done to her in the course of about six miles and I knew that unless a better alternative could be found she would be a non-starter in the Irish Cycling Stakes, 1985. So I got on the telephone to Enid in Bristol and the following morning a large carton full of saddles arrived by special delivery.

I had solved the saddle problem on my mountain bike by ordering a Brooks B66 leather saddle which had big springs at the back. Most mountain bike saddles seem to have been designed by men who don't realize that on a mountain bike the rider sits more or less upright, as on a roadster, so that the whole weight of the body, divided on a bicycle with dropped handlebars between the saddle and the bars, falls on the saddle. It is even worse for women. Women have wider hips and, as the *Buyer's Bible* delicately put it, having presumably taken female advice, 'the pubic arch between the legs is shallower, making the genital area very vulnerable to pressure'.

The saddles we now received were mostly similar in construction to the one that had originally come with Wanda's bike. Some had been injected with silicon fluid, to make them more bouncy beneath the layer of 'high-density memory-retentive foam' already referred to. With all these lying around in the hall, it

resembled a saddle fetishist's den. Eventually, Wanda chose a Brooks B72 leather touring saddle, 'specially designed for women cyclists and those wanting a broader support'.

I now spent the time, when not engaged in packing my pannier bags (we were leaving the next day), in bashing her saddle with a lump of wood, and rubbing it with Brooks Proofhide and something called Neatsfoot Oil in order to take some of the sting out of it for Wanda's inaugural Irish ride, which I was planning with my customary inefficiency.