

EOIN O'BRIEN, in the first of two articles, looks back to the halcyon days of the bicycle and proposes a plan to accommodate it happily in the Dublin of today.

'The most efficient movers in the solar system'

THE BICYCLE, once a cherished mode of conveyance, for the Dubliner is making a slow but steady comeback. But it is still a far cry from the days of Brian O'Nolan when the Plain People were themselves half bicycle by virtue of the passage of "mollicules" from backside to saddle "*pari passu* and vice versa". From the 30s through to the 60s these metamorphosing velocipedes masquerading as Dubliners controlled the passage of the motorist through Flann's city.

The memory of these halcyon days has been known to bring Samuel Beckett (whose bicycle boasted a horn rather than a bell) to the point of ecstasy — "I will go further and declare that if I were obliged to record in a roll of honour, those activities which in the course of my interminable existence have given me only a mild pain in the balls, the blowing of a rubber horn — toot! — would figure among the first . . . What a rest to speak of bicycles and horns."

All that deters the Dubliner from returning to this traditional means of propulsion is the motorist, who makes the cyclist's life a nightmare on wheels. The cyclist is three times more at risk than the motorist, and is most vulnerable in the fast-moving motor traffic on the main arterial roads into the city; once in the city centre where traffic movement is slower the cyclist is comparatively safe.

Unfortunately our main roads will not accommodate cycle lanes as in some continental cities, and we are left with the problem of finding alternative routes for the cyclist.

Recently I set out to see if it would be possible to cycle from

suburban areas to the inner city along routes not open to motorists, and I returned with the answers to the following conundrums — "tell me how to get from Templeogue to Ringsend without passing or being passed by a motor car?" or "how can one get from the Custom House to Blanchardstown in 30 minutes without passing or being passed by a motor car?" Before providing the solutions a few thoughts on urban cycling.

Cost and energy

The motor car is one of the most inefficient and expensive means of moving in any city, whereas cycling is both cheap and efficient.

The illusion of efficient movement is one to which the city motorist is continuously subject, and yet it has been shown clearly that the bicycle is quicker than the car. Ivan Illich suggests that there is little point in moving an urban populace at speeds in excess of 20 m.p.h.

The typical American male devotes more than 1,600 hours a year to his car. He sits in it while it goes and while it stands idling. He parks it and searches for it. He earns the money to put down on it and to meet the monthly instalments. He works to pay for petrol, tolls, insurance, taxes, and tickets. He spends four of his 16 waking hours on the road or gathering his resources for it. And this figure does not take into account the time consumed by other activities dictated by transport: time spent watching automobile commercials or attending consumer education meetings to improve the quality of the next buy. The model American puts in 1,600 hours to get 7,500 miles: less than five miles per hour."

Dr Ronald Williams, who has studied the science of cycling, regards cyclists as "the most

efficient movers, as far as it known, in the solar system." A man (or woman) with two pedals and wheels beneath him (or her) uses less energy to cover a given distance than even the sublime salmon or dolphin, not to mention birds, the great cats, the motor car or any form of jet or rocket engine.

For sheer engineering ingenuity man's synovial joints are an example of complexity and elegance that no technological system can even attempt to emulate. Then, compare the cyclist's ability to utilise oxygen in his working muscles at 36 degrees Centigrade in complete silence with a rise in local temperature of only a few degrees at most, to the cumbersome combustion system of the motor car with its elaborate cooling mechanism and there is difficulty in keeping God out of one's thoughts.

The cyclist moves at an energy expenditure equivalent to over 1,400 miles to the gallon. How effectively we could contribute to energy conservation if the bicycle rather than the motor car was *la mode*.

There is no firm proof that regular exercise will prevent heart disease or increase longevity, but the Americans who have taken life, or rather life-style, very seriously in the past decade have reduced the death rate from heart attack significantly. How much of this is due to the jogging phenomenon, and the diet, weight and smoking modifications about which the Americans have become so obsessional, is not known, but it is difficult not to associate one with the other.

Leaving aside the effect of exercise on mortality there is a sense of well-being associated with exercise and physical fitness, and for this, if no other reason, cycling as a pleasurable means of exercise as well as of propulsion has no equal. What better way to obtain the daily quota of exercise than on the way to and from work.

Let us return again to Dr Williams: "To move at 12 m.p.h., a speed which would keep him about level with the winner of an Olympic marathon, a cyclist on a lightweight touring machine has to exert only 0.1 h.p., and at this power output an unathletic individual is probably using about one-quarter of his maximum breathing capacity. Yet the training effect of cycling only four miles each way to work at this modest speed has been estimated — on the basis of comparative caloric requirements — to equal that from 10 minutes' wrestling, over half-an-hour's squash, 50 minutes' tennis (singles), an hour's skating, a brisk 2½ mile walk, or 24 holes of golf."

There are, of course, dangers in cycling, especially in cities, and children and the elderly are particularly prone to accidents. Much of the danger is due to the sheer carelessness and bloody-mindedness of drivers, who must come to see the cyclist for what he is — a frail and vulnerable body balanced precariously on two rotating wheels.

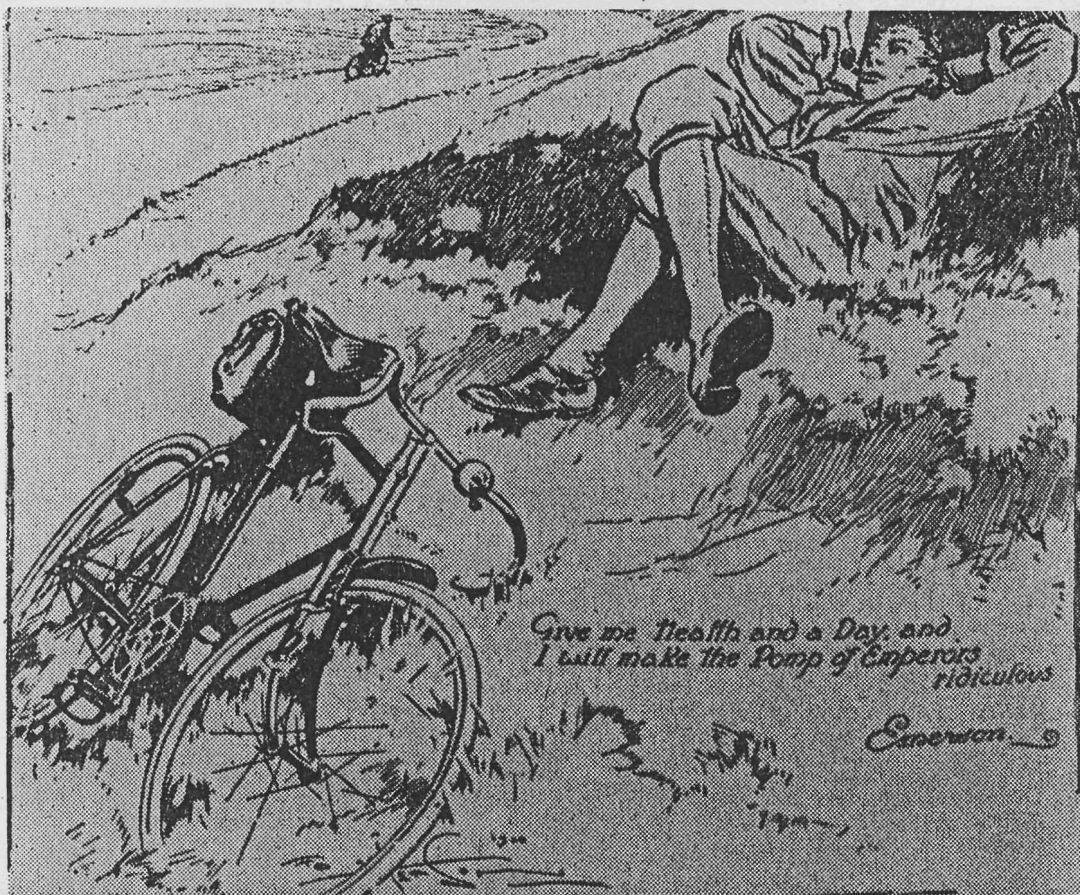
There is then the possible hazard of the damage the urban cyclist does himself by breathing in exhaust fumes of motor engines. Dr Williams has, once again, put the record straight by showing that the carbon monoxide and lead levels (a measure of inhaled exhaust fumes) in the urban cyclist are no higher than in the average citizen.

Environment

Neither the motorist nor the cyclist should reign supreme at the other's expense; both must come to understand each other so that both may establish a peaceful means of co-existence. No-one would advocate the abolition of the motor car, but there does come a time when some control must be applied. The Dublin environment has suffered more than enough in the interests of motoring. Ghastly new roads have

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*Give me Health and a Day, and
I will make the Pomp of Emperors
ridiculous*

Emerson

been built at the expense of aesthetic and amenity considerations, and worse ones are planned which if implemented would devastate large parts of the city.

Old roads have been widened without consideration for the pedestrian. The beautiful gardens that once graced the fronts of many Dublin houses are now bleak patches of tarmac. Parking meters obstruct the pavements and the city authorities seem powerless to prevent the motorist from parking on the narrow preserve of the pedestrian — the pavement.

The motorist pollutes the atmosphere in which we must all exist regardless of whether or not we drive, and the health hazard of this consequence of technological advancement is not, as yet, determined. Not only does the motorist poison the atmosphere with carbon monoxide and lead,

he also creates noise, often to an alarming degree.

The cyclist by contrast has modest requirements in terms of road space; his parking needs are easily solved; he causes no pollution to the atmosphere, and he does not kill his fellow-citizens.

If we could provide the suburban commuter with a means of access to and from the city by bicycle, we might in time see the motorist taking his car to a certain point and continuing to the city by bicycle, or alternatively the suburban rail service might provide a means of using both bicycle and public transport to get around. The recent decision by CIE to ban bicycles from suburban trains is a most short-sighted action that should be reversed.

Cycle plan

Dublin remains a small and compact city by comparison with

other European capitals. From the hub of the city — the Liffey mouth — a number of cycle routes could radiate to the periphery. On the southside the Dodder stretches to Templeogue and further, the Grand Canal to Walkinstown, and by using the railway and seafront there is a route to Killiney and Bray. The old Harcourt Street line provides a route from Bray through densely populated regions of south Dublin to link with the route along the Grand Canal.

On the northside there is the Royal Canal radiating from the Liffey to Blanchardstown and further to Lucan, and the seafront along the North Bull stretching to Howth. The Phoenix Park provides another complex of cycle routes that could be linked along the Liffey to the city centre and onwards to the quays where a ferry could link the north and southside cycle systems.

More tomorrow