

Pedalare, Pedalare. A History of Italian Cycling

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Author: John Foot

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There are many ways to write about the history of Italian cycling. John Foot explains that his book ‘tells the story moving between biographies of individual cyclists, tales of races and an analysis of Italian society’ and that ‘space will be dedicated to the role of bicycle in everyday Italian life’ (p. 4). His aim is to offer a ‘mirror’ of the Italian nation, because ‘developments in this popular sport have always been linked to cultural, economic and social change in Italy as a whole’ (p. 6). Nevertheless Foot affirms (and insists) that his book does not claim ‘to provide a comprehensive history of Italian cycling’ (1) and adds that the book’s target are both ‘experts and non-specialists’ (p. 7). However, though the book may be very useful to English readers – both sports experts and those interested in Italian society and in professional cycling – this is not an academic text. Foot does not appear interested in taking academic distance from his subject; conversely he *enters* into it. In fact, Foot presents the book like a ‘journey’ that starts in a particular coffee bar in Milan, where ‘there is a whole world waiting to be discovered, the *past*, the history of Italian cycling itself’ (p. 1). In many pages the author seems to take part in the rivalries and feelings of the Italian people and, in some passages of the last part of the book, the narrative is openly mixed with his experiences.

The book is organised in five parts and 21 chapters. Most chapters present the biographies of the leading Italian cyclists. Some chapters describe the social and political context and the last part of the book reports the decline (the ‘slow death’) of professional cycling caused by doping.

In chapter one of the first part (‘The heroic age’), the reader is introduced to the Italian society of the early 20th century. The history of Italian cycling begins at the end of the 19th century with the invention of the bicycle and the subsequent development of cycling technology beyond that of the old fashioned cycles with high and dangerous wheels. Few pages are dedicated to this period and Foot starts his history with the first *Giro d’Italia*, in 1909. Foot entwines cycling history with other aspects of the role of bicycle in the Italian society. He explains the divide between the industrialized North and the rural and underdeveloped South, as well as the attitudes toward cycling of the different political and social groups (the socialists, the Catholics, the nationalists).

After describing the beginning of the *Giro d’Italia*, Foot describes the *ciclisti rossi* (red cyclists) – the association created by the socialists, and the events surrounding Enrico Toti, the First World War volunteer who cycled with his only one leg and became a national hero by dying on the front. Foot also underlines the

significant role of the bicycle in the everyday life of the Italian working class. Professional cyclists had their first contact with the bicycle through their job: they cycled to their farms, workshops and factories or to deliver groceries. Cycling generated the first popular heroes, such as Luigi Ganna, the bricklayer who won the first *Giro*, and Giovanni Gerbi. Prominent was Ottavio Bottecchia. With him starts the chain of personalities around which Foot has woven almost the whole book. Bottecchia, born in an extremely poor rural family, worked as cobbler, builder and woodsman. During the war, he was part of the cycling Bersaglieri division and earned a silver medal. In 1919 Bottecchia emigrated to France, where he began to race (p. 34). The Bottecchia's myth began with the 1923 *Tour*, when he was the first Italian to wear the 'yellow' jersey, and finished second. The following year he won the *Tour*. His myth was sealed with his early death in 1927. An anti-fascist and socialist sympathiser (p. 34), when he was found dying on a roadside near his bicycle many believed it to be a fascist punishment. Yet other theories continue to circulate and Bottecchia's death remains a mystery.

The second part of the book ('Cycling as a mass sport'), describes the age of Costante Girardengo, Alfredo Binda and Learco Guerra. They were the most important Italian cyclists of the 1920s and the 1930s. Girardengo worked as a delivery boy and then in a factory near Genoa. Every working day he commuted 38 kilometres by bicycle. Foot observes that it was Girardengo who created the *gregari* (p. 45), a team of cyclists dedicated to help him during the race and a crucial category in the social history of professional cycling. Bottecchia's has become a household name and is remembered in songs as well as in novels (p. 47). Other aspects of Girardengo's life were his friendship with the bandit Sante Pollastri, who he knew since his childhood, and his less-studied relationship with the Fascist regime. Some passages tell of Alfonsina Strada, the only woman who ever rode the *Giro d'Italia* (1924) and who remained in people's memory for decades.

Another legend of Italian cycling was Alfredo Binda. During the main part of his career, Binda dominated cycling races to the point that he was even paid for not to compete in the 1930 *Giro*. According to some of Foot's sources, Binda was the greatest Italian cyclist of all time. He was also 'the first cyclist to attract a female fan base', with his elegance and style, and the first whose fame reached the whole country. Foot underlines Binda's right-wing tendencies and his transformation from a member of the working class into a (*nouveau riche*) gentleman (p. 59). In 1932, when Binda won his third world championship, for the first time the radio broadcast a commentary of the race all over Italy (p. 67). One year earlier, the superiority of Binda had been challenged by Learco Guerra. During the world championship race in Copenhagen, riders were not allowed to drink during the race. While Binda became desperate for water and had to stop and knock on someone's door to ask for a drink, Learco Guerra was able to keep going at speed for hours (p. 66). In this period, Italian athletes dominated international cycling, and the Fascist regime used this superiority for its propaganda, exalting the Italian male virtues.

The third and longest part of the book is about 'the golden age' of Italian cycling, the age of Gino Bartali and Fausto Coppi, from the end of 1930s to the 1950s. It coincides with the hardest time of recent Italian history, namely that of the Second World War and the partisan resistance against nazi-fascism; but it also corresponds to the years of the reconstruction and the start of the Italian 'economic miracle'. According to Foot, in these years three conditions occurred together. The period is exceptional firstly because of the simultaneous emergence of two of the greatest cyclists in Italian history; secondly, because the bicycle itself had become the most important private vehicle; and thirdly, because cycling had become the most popular sport. Foot points out also the tight links between cycling and Italian politics and society, for example with the story of the relation between Bartali's feat in the *Tour de France* and the attempt on the life of Palmiro Togliatti – chief of the Italian Communist Party (chapter 8); or the relationship between the love affair of Fausto Coppi and a married woman (the 'white lady') and the traditional Italian society that condemned the adulterous women to prison. Foot also remembers the post-war stage in Trieste and the role of cycling in the Italian identity. One chapter is about Biagio Cavanna, a former cyclist and the trainer of Girardengo and Coppi as well as of many *gregari*. Cavanna transformed his town, Novi Ligure, into the capital of Italian cycling of that time.

The legendary rivalry between Bartali and Coppi mirrored the cultural division of Italian society: catholic

and traditionalist on one side, secular and progressive on the other. How much the two cyclists actually represented the two cultures is debatable. Bartali was a committed catholic during and after the Fascist period. Probably, Coppi's political culture was not as definite as Bartali's one, and this made easy to attach to him the progressive and left-wing label. Nevertheless, there was a 'third man', Fiorenzo Magni, who was shadowed by the superiority of Bartali and Coppi, but also by his 'uncomfortable past' – he had been accused of participating in a massacre of partisans – and by his awkward position after 1945 (p. 174). Magni represented the Fascist Italy, 'the third' Italy, which was not easy to deal with.

The 'golden age' of Italian cycling ended during the second half of the 1950s and Foot analyzes the various aspects of this process. The car replaced the bicycle: 'not everyone had a car, but everybody wanted one'. Afterwards the 'bond' with bicycles and cycling was broken. The Italian 'economic miracle' marginalized bicycles and cycling at a number of levels: the use of free time now centred around television; many public spaces had become dangerous for cycling; football was growing in popularity; and the diffusion of *Vespa* and *Lambretta* motor scooters. In short, Italy as represented in the film *Bicycle Thieves* had been replaced by that of *Roman Holiday* and *Il Sorpasso* (p. 200–6).

Interestingly the fourth part of Foot's book, 'After the golden age', does not have its own name. Foot mentions many racers who had to confront the memory and the heavy legacy of the golden age, and highlights the transformations that changed professional cycling as well as the entire society. The most important was the emergence of television. Television radically changed the relationship between fans and their heroes, and there were less heroes and myths. The big character of the 1960s and 1970s was a Belgian, Eddy Merckx ('the cannibal'), who rode in Italian teams. The Italian Felice Gimondi was never a serious contender. Other cyclists were labelled as 'meteors' because they were unable to shine for a long time. Technical improvement made cycling faster, yet more predictable and boring (p. 236) while a society wealthier than ever in its history increasingly ignored this sport of poor people. Foot also remarks that Italian history and the *Giro* were not anymore inextricably united. The chronicles of the *Giro* ceased to speak about Italy. They just reported about cycling and cyclists. At the same time, the *Giro* became 'a place of memory' and nostalgia. New rivalries, as between Francesco Moser and Giuseppe Saronni, were compared to that between Coppi and Bartali (p. 241).

The fifth part of the book is dedicated to the 'age of doping', which represents the 'slow death' of Italian cycling. According to Foot, the history of Italian cycling ends at some point between 1980 and 1999, that is between the Francesco Moser speed record in Mexico City and the exclusion of Marco Pantani from the *Giro*. From that episode 'this is no longer a book about cycling ... Rather we enter a shadow world of blood transfusions, hormones, testosterone, cocaine, arrest, protest, masking agents, police swoops ...' (p. 262). The protagonist of this age was Marco Pantani, perhaps the most loved cyclist of the last years. His feats, crisis and dramatic death in 2004 delineate the last myth of Italian cycling. Foot does mention other great and famous cyclists, such as Mario Cipollini and the North American Lance Armstrong (who cycled in Italian teams), who seem not to have been touched by doping suspicion.

In his conclusion Foot puts the bicycle and cycling in the context of Italian history and points out the links between cycling and everyday life. The widespread use of the bicycle among working-class people was instrumental in the huge popularity of sportive cycling (p. 312). Cycling also had followers among well-known journalists, writers and intellectuals. Foot underlines the role they had in communicating cycling events through press, radio and TV. With television, cycling became part of the 'society of spectacle' (p. 308). Through the media, Italy itself was told to the Italian people; and the *Giro* reflected and recreated Italy (p. 311). Cyclists played their part 'in the creation and recreation of historical, national and regional narratives' (p. 305). In this process, memory and nostalgia have a remarkable role, particularly after the cultural and social revolution known as 'economic miracle', during the 1960s, when the bicycle was marginalized. Signs of this revolution are the velodromes which, like ancient cathedrals of a civic/sportive religion, have nowadays been abandoned or transformed.

Foot ends with some reflections about the role of bicycle in today's polluted and jammed Italian cities.

Bicycle history and the history of sportive cycling are not linked as they were until the 1950s. While ‘the bike had made a comeback’ and its use has become a ‘political issue’, professional cycling lives in a ‘rarefied world of sponsors and technological advances’, stuck in its glorious past, and struggling ‘to recover from a doping epidemic, which has turned many fans away’.

The book also features useful maps (elaborated by John Gilkes) and appendices as well as beautiful and interesting photographs.

Pedalare, Pedalare is an interesting and very well-written introductory book on Italian cycling, and through it, on Italian society. The author has used a large and rich bibliography. Moreover, Foot has drawn on several contemporary newspapers and presents, in the pages about Fiorenzo Magni, some unedited archival documents.

In his narrative, Foot has chosen to focus mainly on the biographies of the most important cyclists whose stories, however, only partially illustrate Italian cycling. For instance, from this narrow point of view, a quick mention of the *gregari* (pp.145–7) may seem enough. Yet it is inadequate for these athletes, who were very important in cycling history. There is a further important point to understand the social history of Italian cycling, at least of the first half of the last century. Foot argues that Coppi, if born far from Novi Ligure ‘perhaps would have never become “Fausto Coppi”, and would have remained a delivery boy or have become a bricklayer’ (p. 106). Probably Foot wishes to underline the importance of that town. Yet this entails underestimating the widespread world of both local cycling clubs and bicycle’s workshops, where mechanics became the managers and trainers of many young cyclists from both urban and rural contexts. Coppi could have become famous even if he had been born outside Novi Ligure.

With regard to the beginning of the history of Italian cycling, two further points need to be raised. First, it is crucial to note that in 1909, year of the first *Giro*, Italians had been following bicycle racing for about 20 years. In the 1880s the first national cyclist federation (Unione Velocipedistica Italiana) was constituted, and during the next decade with the revolution of the ‘safety bicycle’ both riders and the public in northern Italian cities were ready to create the first sportive popular heroes, like Romolo Buni, the ‘black devil’. A related second point concerns velodromes and track racing (chapter ten). Foot starts his narration with the cycling ‘golden age’, without mentioning the initial beginning of the velodromes at the turn of the 20th century, when in many cities these facilities were being built. Therefore, overall, the few pages on the 20 years before the first *Giro* (pp. 11–14) still leave the impression that Italian cycling history began in 1909.

The emphasis on the mythical character of the history of cycling deserves a mention. ‘Myth’ is a recurrent word in Foot’s narrative. He tells readers about the lives of cyclists, but he also analyzes the circumstances in which cycling myths were created. Nevertheless, the concept of myth itself should have been analyzed in greater depth. I agree with Foot’s statement that myths ‘are key to the ways in which national identities are constructed and transmitted through the time’ (p. 141), and that myth is a meaningful aspect of the modern civic/sportive religion. However, the interesting point is that by ‘entering’ into the history of cycling, Foot does not maintain enough distance from the cycling myth and in fact helps to feed it. This in particular applies to Coppi’s myth. Although Foot tries to explain the Bartali-Coppi rivalry and the Bartali’s and Coppi’s myths in an analytical way (chapter seven and 11), his sympathies for Coppi are evident in many passages of the book:

‘[Coppi’s] war was similar to that of many others – and at the same time exceptional. His experiences were those of millions – but he was also unique. This made Coppi and his story glamorous, out of reach, star-studded – but also approachable, understandable, within the grasp of ordinary people’ (p.109).

‘Coppi’s victories were spectacular, dramatic, unrepeatable. They lived on in the memory and bore endless retelling. They were the stuff of which dreams were made’ (pp.110–11).

‘At that moment, Coppi and Italy became one. They were fused together. A myth of endurance, of a superman in peasant’s clothing, had come into being ...’ (p. 111).

These passages, I think, support the Coppi myth but also show Foot’s empathy with Italian history, his ability to grasp and share the feelings of that time. This passion leads Foot even to change the chronological order of the book, by placing Coppi’s chapter before that about Bartali, who was older and had started his cycling career earlier than Coppi.

I think *Pedalare Pedalare* represents a valuable resource for English readers and a very good overview also for Italian readers – Italian readers may take advantage of the very rich bibliography of the book, for example the texts by Daniele Marchesini and Stefano Pivato. Foot’s main merit is having confronted a recent period of Italian cycling history. This is not a ‘golden’ period of Italian cycling or of Italian society as a whole. For this reason, Foot argues, cyclists’ fans search refuge in the memory of the great cyclists of the ‘golden era’: Binda, Coppi, Bartali. For Italian readers the last part of the book may be particularly interesting. This is also due to Foot’s skill in entering into the subject and guiding the reader inside the history of Italian cycling.

My final point concerns the editing, noting that there are some important quotations for which proper reference is lacking (for instance at pp. 255, 270, 271, 273).

Notes

1. In spite of that, the editor boasts on the rear-cover that the book is ‘the first comprehensive history of Italian cycling’. [Back to \(1\)](#)

Other reviews:

Guardian

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2011/may/20/pedalare-italian-cycling-foot-review> [2]

Independent

<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/pedalare-pedalare-a-history-of-italian-cycling-by-john-foot-2280729.html> [3]

Spectator

<http://www.spectator.co.uk/books/6937183/wheels-of-fortune-.html> [4]

Podium Cafe

<http://www.podiumcafe.com/2011/5/24/2187256/PedalarePedalare> [5]

Socialist Review

<http://www.socialistreview.org.uk/article.php> [6]

Camden New Journal

<http://www.camdennewjournal.com/reviews/books/2011/may/books-pedalare-pedalare-history-italian-cycling-john-foot> [7]

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[4] <http://www.spectator.co.uk/books/6937183/wheels-of-fortune-.html>

[5] <http://www.podiumcafe.com/2011/5/24/2187256/PedalarePedalare>

[6] <http://www.socialistreview.org.uk/article.php?articlenumber=11774>

[7] <http://www.camdennewjournal.com/reviews/books/2011/may/books-pedalarare-pedalarare-history-italian-cyling-john-foot>