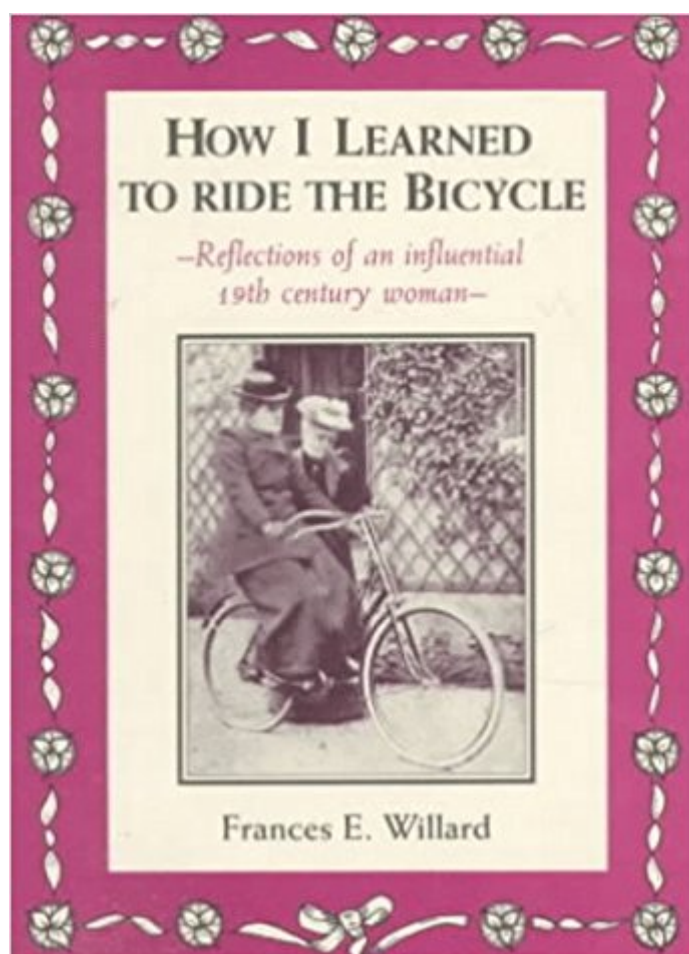


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# How I Learned To Ride The Bicycle: Reflections Of An Influential 19th Century Woman



## Synopsis

In 1893 Frances Willard was at the height of her power and influence as leader of the women's social reform movement. It was also a time when bicycles were wildly popular. And so, when her doctor recommended she exercise out-of-doors, Willard was determined to learn to ride. It was not easy for a woman in her fifty-third year, hampered by long skirts, but she was eager for the challenge. She hoped her example would help other women seek "a wider world." She saw cycling as a way for women to gain independence, develop confidence, and be seen by men as equals in skill. A best-seller when originally published a century ago, Willard's fascinating account of her adventure continues to enchant and inspire readers today. An introduction by Edith Mayo, curator of political history at the Smithsonian Institution, describes the life and work of Frances Willard and her role as an early leader of the women's movement. The book concludes with an illustrated essay on the history of women and cycling.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Willard "muses with sagacity and charm, on the sport's philosophical implications." (Publishers Weekly, February 1, 1991) "This delightful, uplifting and unique bit of history is bound to attract both browsers and researchers." (Booklist, February 15, 1991) "It's a wonderful study in social change and expanding freedom for women. (Feminist Bookstore News, February 1991) "Her account of the bicycle as a liberating force freeing women from home and long skirts is sweetly inspiring." (San Jose Mercury News, March 10, 1991) "daring little classic" (Washington Post Book World, April 21, 1991) "charming and disarming memoir" (Los Angeles Times, March 3, 1991) "Willard took up

cycling in an effort to forestall her deteriorating health in 1893, a period that coincided with the bicycle's emergence as a catalyst for sweeping social change. 'How I Learned to Ride the Bicycle' gives an appreciation of the enormity of that undertaking in the 1890s, and Willard relates her cycling tribulations with an easy wit reminiscent of Mark Twain. Willard became a passionate cyclist and in this book she encourages other women to participate in the sport." (Bicycle Guide, June 1991) "The book is a charming and insightful parable that relates women's mastery of 'machinery' to the mastery of their own lives. . .Willard was clever enough to see a parallel in her struggle to ride a bicycle with the larger struggle of her WCTU sisters to control their lives. Corsets and long skirts curtailed the potential for freedom a bicycle could bring; women's mental bondage of dependence and subservience in Victorian society were equally prohibitive. . .Willard's subtlety in linking her bicycling experience to the broader issue of women's rights was her gift to her contemporaries, as well as to the generations of women that followed. As she wrote, 'I would not waste my life in friction when it could be turned into momentum.'" (Sacramento Bee, March 13, 1991) "This charming essay is more than a how-to manual, for its not-so-hidden agenda encourages women to live their lives to the fullest, to engage in activities as controversial as ride a bicycle. The book contains a series of photographs in which the heretofore sedentary Willard mounts the machine and aided by friends who help her keep her balance, begins her lesson. The last photo shows her zipping down a byway, as free as the air." -- Minneapolis Star Tribune, April 7, 1991

Frances E. Willard (1839-1898) was widely known in the United States and abroad for her social reform efforts. Her causes included temperance, women's suffrage and education, eight hour workday, prison reform and public kindergarten. She served as president of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union from 1879 until her death in 1898, building it into the largest women's organization of its time. She also founded the World WCTU, the first international organization of women. She was a popular and prolific writer, outstanding educator, astute politician and strong advocate for the emancipation of women.

i never knew that women's christian temperance union was fighting for women who were frequently abused by their alcoholic husbands. fascinating part of history both the events and frances willard herself.

I read this book out of curiosity, having worked for a public school named Frances Willard Elementary (and I ride a bicycle, also). Containing Ms. Willard's own words, the language is what

some might call "quaint", with the tone and phrase turns reflecting a woman from the late 1800's. However, a message of strength and independent thought comes clearly through, reminding us once again that a woman in any time, when given an opportunity, can move and inspire into the future. Her story about learning to ride a bicycle is prefaced by a present-day writer's brief, yet very interesting review of Willard's life and accomplishments. This review, which surprised me because I had no idea Ms. Willard was such an advocate for women, education, and expanding a woman's world in whatever way she could, made it easy to ignore Willard's "quaint" writing style. She obviously tries to persuade and encourage the reader, and gets a little heavy-handed and verbose. The purpose and passion of her cause comes through, however, making it a valuable and obvious choice for a Women's Studies course, or just someone who is curious, like me.

This is a great 19th century point of view of a champion of temperance and suffrage. The book has three parts: an overview of Willard's life, Willard's writing, a commentary on the role of the bicycle in social history.

An engaging account of Victorian life and women is presented through the eyes of Frances E. Willard, woman extraordinaire. Willard, widely known in the United States and abroad for her social reform efforts, discovered the bicycle at the age of fifty-three. Although she was not in good health, she was still determined to dare and take chances and, most importantly, urged other women to do so. Willard believed that the experience of mastering a bicycle would give a woman the experience of mastering her own personal destiny. Thus, we are treated to an amusing account of how Willard mastered "Gladys", her bicycle. Some charming pictures of Willard and her bicycle are included. However, the most interesting and entertaining aspect of the book is found near the end in a section by Lisa Larrabee entitled, "Women and Cycling: The Early Years". Some new and unusual facts accompanied by sketches and pictures make the article not only enchanting but an important contribution to the history of cycling. Did you know that all sorts of maladies were thought to occur if a woman cycled? A woman could develop "bicycle eye" caused by prolonged raising of the eyes while the head was lowered in a riding position. Or even worse, a woman could ruin the "feminine organs of matrimonial necessity"! Also fascinating were some of the many accessories especially for women. One was called "Cherry's Screen". It was a device that blocked the view of a lady's ankles and feet, and also prevented her skirt from blowing about. It rather looked like batwings. Larrabee combines humor and historical fact to allow a glimpse of Victorian life for the female and to explain how the bicycle led to the eventual emancipation of women. Anyone who enjoys cycling

would find this book a great conversation piece and a welcome addition to his or her library.

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