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RESEARCH

'Make Do and Mend': Crafting a Scottish Underdog in *The Flying Scotsman* (2006)

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The Flying Scotsman (2006) charts the exploits of Graeme Obree, who won the World Cycling Championship in 1993 on his homemade 'Old Faithful' bicycle. It was the first biopic to focus exclusively on Scottish sporting achievement and this article asks how does that Scottishness interact with the tropes of the sports biopic and how can *The Flying Scotsman* be located in the discourses surrounding the sport of cycling? It contends that *The Flying Scotsman* remodels the sports film's underdog theme to present Obree as a Scottish underdog hero, untouched by contemporary doping scandals within cycling and who, following Michael de Certeau's explanation of 'tactics' in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), adopts an improvisational 'tactical' approach which enables him to overcome cycling's dominant forces embodied in English cyclist Chris Boardman and the World Cycling Federation's bureaucracy. Within the film, Obree (played by Jonny Lee Miller) appropriates different junk materials to craft Old Faithful and describes this approach to cycling as 'make do and mend'. These 'tactical' appropriations are coupled with the film's 'textual' appropriations: *The Flying Scotsman* draws on generic characteristics familiar from the biopic and sports film which are then blended with visual and narrative references to Bill Forsyth's films and the depictions of Scottish life presented in British cinema. The film, a bricolage of different traditions, is thus a textual expression of the 'make do and mend' philosophy.

Keywords: Graeme Obree; biopic; underdog; *The Flying Scotsman*; cycling

Adapted from his autobiography, *The Flying Scotsman* (2006) reconstructs the exploits of Scottish cyclist Graeme Obree who broke the cycling world hour record riding his home-made 'Old Faithful' bicycle. At the time of its release, the film joined a small body of 'British' biopics which reimagined the sporting successes of athletes and sportsmen; but whereas these typically concerned English successes,

The Flying Scotsman merits attention as the first biopic to prioritise *Scottish* sporting achievement. Although Obree's status as cycling's 'underdog' echoes a well-worn narrative template employed in sports films, *The Flying Scotsman* is also at pains to stress Obree's identity as a Scotsman. This article asks how does that Scottishness interact with the tropes of the sporting biopic and how can *The Flying Scotsman* be located in the discourses surrounding the sport of cycling? The article first considers *The Flying Scotsman's* place in the history of Scottish sports biopics and examines the filmmakers' motivation for moulding Obree as a Scottish underdog hero. The subsequent film analysis centres on the representation of Obree's 'make do and mend' approach and shows (following Michael de Certeau's notion of 'strategies' and 'tactics') how Obree exhibits a 'tactical' approach which grants the underdog opportunities to outmanoeuvre both powerful cycling rivals and the cycling authorities. This 'make do and mend' ethos is also articulated at a formal level: by highlighting instances where the visual style and narrative devices characteristic of the biopic, the sports film and Scottish filmmaking traditions coalesce, this article suggests the film's hybrid approach mirrors Obree's crafting of Old Faithful, itself a mixture of washing machine and bicycle components.

The 'Scottish' sports biopic

Though recent studies attest to the British biopic's distinctiveness (see Minier and Pennacchia 2014; Robinson 2016), analyses of 'Scottish' biopics typically form part of a wider concern with British biopics or Scottish films. For instance, the J.M. Barrie biopic *Finding Neverland* (2004) is discussed as part of a focus on films about children's authors (Müller 2014: 179–193) whereas biopics such as *Braveheart* (1995) and *Rob Roy* (1995) are analysed as part of a broader focus on Scottish cinema (see Petrie 2000: 209–213; Murray 2015: 31–38). This reflects the meagre number of 'British' biopics which focus on Scottish figures rather than English ones. In terms of Scottish sporting achievements specifically, *Chariots of Fire* (1981) dramatised Eric Liddell's preparation for the 1924 Olympic Games and has been the subject of analysis (see, for instance, Neale 1982: 47–53; Hill 1999: 20–28; Chapman 2005: 270–298; Cashmore 2008: 43–57). However, that film also focused on Harold

Abrahams and the other English members of the team. *Tommy's Honour* (2016), a film about golfers Old Tom Morris and Young Tom Morris, is a more recent attempt to remember Scottish sporting achievement. In contrast, there have been several films about sportsmen from other parts of the UK released since the 1980s, including jockey Bob Champion (*Champions*, 1984), race car driver Barry Sheene (*Space Riders*, 1984), football manager Brian Clough (*The Damned United*, 2009), ski jumper Eddie Edwards (*Eddie the Eagle*, 2016), Welsh boxer Howard Winstone (*Risen*, 2010) and Northern Irish footballer George Best (*Best*, 2000). *The Flying Scotsman* is significant for being the first biopic to focus *solely* on Scottish sporting achievement.

Obree's nationality was important to the director Douglas Mackinnon: 'I just knew what everyone else knew about Graeme Obree ... I was starting from scratch and it instantly leapt out as a piece of Scottish cinema' (quoted in Anon. 2006a). Biopics are frequently discussed by those making them as projects which contribute to national culture by promoting a shared national history because, as George F. Custen remarks, biopics construct a broad 'public history' and are frequently 'the only source of information many people will have on a given historical subject' (1992: 7). In light of the 'English' sports biopic's prominence, Mackinnon highlights the need to foreground an unknown history while stressing the film's potential to contribute to a distinctly 'Scottish' cinema. This was also reflected in the £450,000 contributed by Scottish Screen to the film's reported £4million budget (Obree 2003: 288; Miller 2006: 7). Established in 1997, Scottish Screen was formed with the remit to cultivate and prioritise a distinct Scottish national cinema (Murray 2007: 79). Following devolution in 1998, a biopic about Scottish sporting success on the world stage, and specifically Obree's victory over the Englishman Chris Boardman, could potentially tap into themes of national distinctiveness and separateness from England.

A Scottish underdog

The Flying Scotsman's potential as a 'piece of Scottish cinema' was enhanced by the perceived continuities between Obree's story, the traditions of Scottish filmmaking and earlier filmic representations of Scotland: '[i]t had the elements of films that have often worked in Scotland in the past – it is set in a small town, it has a guy

who is a local hero, and so on' (Mackinnon, quoted in Anon. 2006a). The emphasis on small town life recalls the traditions of representation embodied in Tartanry and Kailyard, traditions critiqued by Colin McArthur as 'wholly inadequate for dealing with the historical and contemporary reality of Scotland' (1982: 66) in their framing of Scotland as a romantic landscape of Highlanders, mountains and glens, or a world of small parochial communities and their local ministers. Originating in the work of Scottish novelist J. M. Barrie, the Kailyard tradition reduces Scottish life to one of small town life in which humour is derived from the townspeople's 'couthiness', narrow-mindedness and parochialism (Malcomson 1985: 16). Small town life was at the centre of Bill Forsyth's *Local Hero* (1983) in which Burt Lancaster's Texas oil executive sends his representative to the fictional village of Furness to convince the locals to sell the land for a refinery. *Local Hero* itself drew on the Kailyard tradition while challenging it – by, for instance, featuring a Nigerian minister (see Malcomson 1985: 18) – and *The Flying Scotsman* displays traces of Kailyard in its supporting cast of a Protestant minister and lush images of the Ayrshire landscape. However, there are also moments within the film where comedic references are made to these traditions and part of the film's appeal lies in its acknowledgment of these legacies of representation.

There were also similarities between Obree's story and the sports film's classic narrative template, namely, the underdog overcoming obstacles to achieve sporting greatness. Such narratives typically show how 'the sporting figure has challenged the system, or overcome great adversity to become the legends they are' (Cheshire 2015: 73). For example in *Chariots of Fire* Liddell, a devout Christian, refuses to race on a Sunday despite the protests of the Prince of Wales (see Richards 1997: 210). The Scotsman as 'outsider' is present in Obree's account of his problematic relationship with the Union Cycliste Internationale (UCI), which enforced a rule change before he competed in the 1994 world pursuit championship. Obree identified himself as the victim of a corrupt bureaucracy: 'it was downright sneaky to change rules in the dark of night and conspire to keep them secret until the last moment from the only intended victim' (2003: 202).

Obree's autobiography also contained candid discussions of his struggles with bi-polar disorder and his suicide attempts (see Obree 2003: 165, 173, 276, 278, 282). The film's treatment of these issues was debated by the filmmakers and Obree's family. His wife, Anne, described the conflicting agendas: '[t]he illness was something the financial backers wanted in the film. We tried to argue against it for the children's sake ... Douglas Mackinnon handled the depression scenes very tastefully' (quoted in Brown 2007: 5). The film omits many of these instances, indicating the family's privacy was considered in the production. Instead the film focuses on Obree's relationship with the UCI. For screenwriter Simon Rose the image of the Scotsman-as-underdog rallying against the cycling establishment formed the basis of Obree's appeal:

I had been itching to write a screenplay, but a subject eluded me. Then I heard about Graeme Obree. This down-at-heel Scot built a revolutionary bicycle from scrap metal and washing machine parts and became world champion, only to be banned by the cycling authorities. Instead of giving up, the amazingly determined Obree redesigned his bike and had another go. (2006)

This resonates with the Hollywood sports film which typically 'coalesces around underdog-to-champion, hard-work-leads-to-victory narratives' which also 'help to forge a masculine ideal closely intertwined with an "Athletic American Dream"' (Miller 2010: 1222–1223). Rooted in the notion of equality of opportunity, this ideal is embedded in narratives which suggest 'if individuals can gain control over their own bodies they can gain control over their own economic and social destiny' (Miller 2010: 1223). *The Flying Scotsman* does show Obree, the determined outsider, battling personal problems and a group of sadistic childhood bullies, as well as those obstacles created by the cycling authorities (Crosson 2013: 133). Variants of the underdog narrative are present in films about Scottish sport more generally. *A Shot at Glory* (2000), for example, depicts football minnows Kilnockie battling through the early rounds of the Scottish cup before facing off against Glasgow Rangers in the

film's finale. Instances of generic hybridity are not limited to the sports biopic and other films about Scottish figures draw on generic traditions typically associated with Hollywood film production. In the Scottish-American co-production *Rob Roy*, for instance, the thematic concern with cattle rustling and landowner rivalries resonates with the 'revenge western' (Petrie 2000: 211). However, the underdog narrative presented in *The Flying Scotsman* is markedly different from those Hollywood sports films and their American dream ideals because the underdog has nationally-specific significance within the Scottish context, related to the country's position in the United Kingdom.

Within Scottish culture the notion of Scotland-as-underdog can be traced to the country's asymmetrical relationship with England, in terms of population size and perceptions of government spending and priorities (see Miller 2005: 2–5). This disparity is reaffirmed by Tartanry and Kailyard, the discourses which have structured representations of Scotland, 'united in that they reinforce Scotland's cultural and political inferiority, notably to England' (Malcomson 1985: 17). In studies of football culture, anti-English sentiment has been linked to an 'underdog mentality' amongst Scots fans (Whigham 2014: 170). Thus England forms the 'significant other' which helps define Scottish identity and is 'ever present in Scottish consciousness' (Miller 2005: 4).

This inferiority interacts with notions of a 'Scottish Cringe', feelings of low self-worth amongst the Scottish populace which First Minister Jack McConnell hoped devolution could reverse: 'Scotland needs a change of attitude, an end to the cringe, the defeatism, the culture of enjoying the failure of others and the embarrassment at ambition and success' (quoted in Fraser 2004: 9). Sport has been seen as one route to changing this mind-set, for example an article in the *Herald* cited sport's 'vital role' in addressing Scotland's 'psychological malaise' following Andy Murray's first tennis title in February 2006: '[h]ow precious these moments are for the national psyche, especially in a small country where they come along infrequently' (Reid 2006: 14). The biopic's forging of a public history of sporting success offers the possibility to enshrine such morale-boosting moments in popular memory. It helps that Obree

is the Scottish underdog *par excellence*: a sportsman who overcame doubters to become a world champion, beating the Englishman Chris Boardman in the process.

Obree's opposition to drugs also made him a key figure in British sports, as Rose remarked: 'Britain has so few sporting heroes that this eccentric, whose training fuel was marmalade sandwiches, should be lionised' (2006). Cycling has always been the sport most closely associated with doping (Brewer 2002: 277; López 2015: 89), highlighted by the 1998 'Festina affair' in which the Festina team's masseuse was caught with Erythropoietin and the team was expelled from the Tour de France. The scandal reaffirmed 'what many in the sport had known for decades and yet few had publicly admitted: PED [performance-enhancing drug] use in cycling remained a deeply institutional practice, facilitated by a sport culture that encouraged both performance and secrecy' (Sefiha 2017: 624) and subsequent cases involved the Cofidis team and time-trial champion David Millar (see Christiansen 2005: 498).

This perception informed the filmic representation of Obree's struggles with the UCI (identified in the film as the World Cycling Federation) as the 'clean' Scottish underdog challenging a *corrupted* sports establishment. The film analysis below isolates those sequences in which Obree's underdog credentials are foregrounded, including the numerous moments in which he is represented as turning situations to his advantage; it goes on to consider how *The Flying Scotsman* positions Obree in conflict with both the forces of cycling's bureaucracy and also the English rider Boardman whose 'professional' approach is portrayed as the antithesis of the Scottish underdog.

'Forget all the rules'

The Flying Scotsman is framed around Obree's attempt on the hour record in 1993 and his individual pursuit victory in 1995, concentrating on the building of Old Faithful and his relationship with the World Cycling Federation (WCF). The opening quickly establishes Obree's bi-polar disorder: Obree (Jonny Lee Miller) is shown carrying his bicycle through woodland searching for a place to hang himself. The motif of encirclement is established through the surrounding trees and the lack

of natural light. The next scene depicts Obree as a schoolboy (played here by Sean Brown) singing in a school choir. He notices three boys watching him as he sings, and the scene cuts to the same boys pursuing him through a housing estate. Just as the opening shows a dark organic landscape the estate's concrete pathways are set against an overcast sky and appear drained of colour. As Obree is knocked to the floor a bird's-eye shot illustrates the boys surrounding him. The theme of liberation is introduced once Obree receives a bicycle and a tracking-shot, backed with an electric guitar score, depicts him cycling through the estate and away from the bullies. Both score and chase evoke the opening of *Trainspotting* (1996), in which Ewan McGregor's Renton is pursued by police through inner-city Edinburgh, and this connection is sustained in the subsequent images of Obree as an adult cycling in Glasgow backed with the same music. Again emphasising the bicycle's capacity for liberation, these images are saturated with the colour from road signs, traffic lights and shop signs. Where previously the woodland and the urban development appeared restrictive, these later sequences show Obree's travelling at speed through the built environment and densely-packed streets.

This opening establishes continuities between *The Flying Scotsman* and other examples of Scottish cinema, and further scenes draw on characteristics of the biopic and sports film. Given the biopic's 'contestable boundaries' (Anderson and Lupo 2002: 91–92) and the sports film's 'considerable plasticity' (Babington 2014: 12) it is unsurprising that generic characteristics such as the 'close friend', who offers the biopic subject guidance in moments of disillusionment, and the sports film's big game finale, are present in *The Flying Scotsman*. Such characteristics inform both the representation of Obree's rivalry with Boardman and the former's uneasy relationship with the cycling authorities, but *The Flying Scotsman* also constructs Obree as 'underdog' through sequences which emphasise his creative, 'tactical' approach to dealing with problems.

Early scenes display this tactical approach as Obree cycles with friend Malky (Billy Boyd) in rural Ayrshire. These scenes, and those representing Obree's participation in local cycling competitions, suggest liberation through their

arrangement of space and colour. Where previous scenes frame Obree in relation to imposing structures (the woodland, the housing estate, and Glasgow city centre) these later images represent him against green rural backdrops, lakes and clear blue skies as he cycles along quiet roads. While cycling with Malky along one such road, Obree stops to reposition his handlebars upside down. Realising this permits a more aerodynamic position, Obree informs local minister Douglas Baxter (Brian Cox) that he will '[f]orget all the rules, start from scratch' when building Old Faithful, and *The Flying Scotsman* stresses how this ethos guides Obree's everyday life.

An earlier scene depicts Obree working as a Glasgow cycle courier. Entering an office building and approaching the reception desk, he announces proudly that the journey from depot to office took only six minutes, but the receptionist notes that he has delivered the wrong parcel. The sequence conveys a 'tactical' appropriation of work time. In *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984) de Certeau uses 'strategies' and 'tactics' to explain how moments of resistance can arise within modern society. Strategies form the rules and power structures established by institutions which govern the actions of individuals, whose resistance is manifested through the tactics they employ in response:

I call a *strategy* the calculation (or manipulation) of power relationships that becomes possible as soon as a subject with will and power (a business, an army, a city, a scientific institution) can be isolated. It postulates a *place* that can be delimited as its *own* and serve as the base from which relations with an *exteriority* composed of targets or threats (customers or competitors, enemies, the country surrounding the city, objectives and objects of research, etc.) can be managed. (1984: 35–6 original emphasis).

Strategies thus refer to the systems generated by institutions to manage individuals' actions. The notion of 'tactics' was devised to explain how individuals can negotiate these systems, operating within institutions' strategies but running counter to their ideals:

A tactic insinuates itself into the other's place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety ... because it does not have a place, a tactic depends on time – it is always on the watch for opportunities that must be seized 'on the wing' (1984: xix).

The tactic's potential as 'an art of the weak' (de Certeau 1984: 37) lends meaning to Obree's underdog status and propensity for opportunism, and when he describes to Baxter his 'make do and mend' approach this recalls the Second World War slogan encouraging everyday instances of domestic creativity in the face of wartime hardship (Atkinson 2006: 4). It is *la perruque* specifically – 'the worker's own work disguised as work for his [sic] employer' (de Certeau 1984: 25) – which is evoked in Obree's delight at the delivery speed. That Obree uses 'courier time' to train is affirmed in his forgetting the journey's official objective. Such appropriations are later repeated when Baxter delivers a sermon while watching Obree's 1993 World Championship attempt on a television hidden within the lectern.

Further tactical behaviour is evident in Obree's creative use of space during an impromptu race. Before the hour record attempt, Obree is shown selling stock from his failing shop and challenging the buyer to a race back to his scrap yard; should Obree win, the price will be higher. The buyer, who arrived in a van, accepts the challenge but the subsequent race conveys how Obree's capacity for improvisation permits him to compete on equal terms. Both competitors set off from the shop as equals before the van pulls away in front. As it slows at a red light Obree accelerates through the junction, weaving between cars. Instead of bearing right and continuing along the road he accelerates down a narrow path over the words 'keep clear' painted on the tarmac and between bollards erected to prohibit larger vehicles. The scene cuts between the competitors on their respective routes and the race concludes with the van knocking Obree off his bicycle just as he turns into the yard.

The race displays Obree improvising a route to the destination through a combination of pathways selected on the fly: de Certeau described viewing New York from the 110th floor of the World Trade Centre as being 'lifted out of the city's grasp' (1984: 92) and how this perspective cannot account for how people move through

the city's passageways below. Travel is managed by rules imposed by governing bodies which structure movement through the city's spaces but pedestrians can respond 'tactically' by detouring and selecting quieter routes: 'if it is true that a spatial order organizes an ensemble of possibilities ... then the walker actualizes some of these possibilities' (1984: 98). Obree transforms the road network into a temporary race-track, a transgressive act in which his knowledge of access points and pathways permits the underdog to compete as equal. When Malky complains about their subsequent trialling of Old Faithful on local roads Obree points to the lack of dedicated cycling tracks nearby, reaffirming the underdog's pragmatism and his willingness to utilise spaces readily available.

Obree the 'bricoleur'

The Flying Scotsman constructs Obree's tactical approach to work as allowing him to gain advantages and the film suggests Obree's Old Faithful was born out of the same mentality. The sequences which trace Old Faithful's evolution from abstract idea to functional bicycle resonate with *bricolage*: the way consumers make creative use of the mass-produced goods available to them through re-appropriation. Such 'making' forms a 'hidden' form of production which 'does not manifest itself through its own products, but rather through its *ways of using* the products imposed by a dominant economic order' (de Certeau 1984: xii–xiii original emphasis). Obree uses washing machine bearings, BMX tubing and scrap metal as components of Old Faithful, of which some are taken from objects he owns whereas others are stolen from a junk yard, but each is re-appropriated.

A scene set within Obree's flat above the shop dramatises his realisation that washing machine bearings can benefit his design. The opening image displays him sitting at the kitchen table with the rattling sound of the washing machine off-screen. The machine is then shown in its entirety surrounded by typical domestic objects, a washing basket and an ironing board. The camera slowly moves into a close-up of Obree staring at the washing machine. The next shot reveals Obree's focus is not the machine in its entirety: the camera zooms towards the circular door vibrating with each revolution. This exchange of shots continues until the door of

the washing machine fills the frame. The sequence ends with Anne (Laura Fraser) finding her husband sitting cross-legged surrounded by the appliance's drum and hollowed-out casing.

The sequence dramatises the 'eureka' moment familiar from other biopics – '[t]he moment of insight typically marks a revelation after which everything is perceived differently' (Radcliff 2008: 66) – but it also reflects Obree's creative use of consumer objects:

The weak must continually turn to their own ends forces alien to them. This is achieved in propitious moments when they are able to combine heterogeneous elements ... the intellectual synthesis of these given elements takes the form, however, not of a discourse, but of the decision itself, the act and manner in which the opportunity is 'seized.' (de Certeau 1984: xix)

In Obree's case, such 'opportunities' include his epiphany watching the washing machine, his first, chance, encounter with Baxter and a risky robbery at night. The latter episode involves Malky and Obree himself, reflecting the emphasis placed in the film on teamwork. *The Flying Scotsman* could be read as a straight-forward underdog narrative in which Obree's *individual* determination permits him to achieve his goals; but Mackinnon wanted to represent Obree's achievements as characterised by teamwork, making one of the film's core themes that 'though you are a world record holder you cannot get anywhere without people helping you' (quoted in Anon. 2006a) – and thereby illustrating that making biopics 'involves a process of selection and (re)arrangement, based on interpretation, on the makers' take on the subject' (Minier and Pennacchia 2014: 11).

This theme of teamwork accounts for the inclusion of the fictional Malky and Baxter. The film foregrounds both at the expense of Anne, who works as a hospital nurse to support the Obree family, and Katie (Morven Christie), who helps Malky locate sponsorship for Obree's record attempt and serves as a romantic interest for Malky. This marginalisation might reflect the real Anne's desire to ensure the family's privacy was respected. The inclusion of reaction shots detailing her horrified face

when she finds Obree dismantling their washing machine indicate the effect of her maverick husband's obsession on family life. However, it is Baxter who provides key moments of guidance to Obree and Malky who trains with him.

Both Malky and Baxter are shown supporting Obree at different moments and while these scenes illustrate the theme of teamwork they also highlight *The Flying Scotsman's* poaching of different generic and stylistic resources, most notably the biopic, but also framing and stylistic strategies familiar from Bill Forsyth's films. The scene where Obree and Malky steal bicycle parts from the junkyard resembles Forsyth's film *That Sinking Feeling* (1979) in which unemployed boys become illicit entrepreneurs after stealing some kitchen sinks from a Glasgow warehouse. That film takes place under a dark Glasgow sky with torrential rain and as Obree and Malky jog towards the junkyard they are similarly exposed to a heavy downpour. In both films the robberies occur at night, the characters portrayed as shadowy figures in the heavy darkness as they hustle their illicit gains from one location to the next. As Obree and Malky carry their loot back to Obree's shop Baxter tails them and subsequently offers Obree the use of his workshop to build Old Faithful. Baxter also counsels Obree on his mental health, thus articulating the teamwork valued by Mackinnon while also fulfilling the classical-era biopic trope of the older figure who provides guidance to the disillusioned subject (Custen 1992: 69).

One crucial scene where Baxter broaches Obree's mental health is filmed at the former's workshop, which connects to a stone jetty and a large expanse of water. The sequence comes before the film's climax – Obree's individual pursuit victory – and illustrates the older figure imparting wisdom but it also evokes Forsyth's *Local Hero* in its setting and visual style. The pair are framed against a backdrop of water with a large expanse of green trees on the far shore. This framing strategy, coupled with the sound of the water lapping against the jetty, resembles the arrangement in *Local Hero's* conclusion in which oil executive Felix Happer announces his intention to build a marine biology research institute (rather than the proposed oil refinery) at Furness Bay. As Happer explains this to company workers Mac and Danny, the three walk along Camusdarach beach, where the tide laps on the shore and the Small Isles

are visible in the background. In *Local Hero* there is 'a reliance on the romantic and elemental appeal of the beauty and remoteness of the landscape' (Petrie 2000: 155) and this appeal is also evident in *The Flying Scotsman*, illustrating how the latter fuses tropes and style from different generic contexts and filmmaking traditions.

The emphasis on group support extends beyond Malky and Baxter to include Armstrong (Moray Hunter), the boss of an employment firm whom Malky visits to seek sponsorship for Obree's hour record attempt. Seated behind his office desk, Armstrong listens to Malky's pitch, apparently unimpressed. He rises from the chair and undresses while maintaining eye-contact with Malky. Clad in only his underwear, taking a Lycra cycling outfit from an office drawer, Armstrong, an amateur cyclist and patriot, begins to discuss passionately the prospect of a Scot's beating the record (Crosson 2013: 133). His sponsorship of Obree is rooted in personal passion rather than commercial considerations. In *The Flying Scotsman* the Scottish nation rallies around its underdog, and in the film's final moments the lycra-clad Armstrong watches Obree's 1995 World Championship victory in a pub surrounded by cheering Scots. The biopic conveys the importance of a bricolage approach while also emphasising that crafting Old Faithful is a collaborative effort: a different representation from the typical underdog narrative and its emphasis on the efforts of the individual.

Derailing 'the gravy train'

The Flying Scotsman portrays Obree's underdog journey as guided by an integrity which is lacking in official cycling bodies. The WCF, led by Ernst Hagemann (played by Steven Berkoff and modelled on former UCI president Hein Verbruggen), form a group of Machiavellian schemers driven by cycling's commercial potential. The WCF's decadence, fuelled, Anne suggests, by cycling's 'gravy train', is affirmed at the 1994 World Championships when Obree walks past a gazebo under which WCF members are shown drinking wine and lunching together. Obree's Old Faithful challenges cycling's norms and illustrates his resistance to the WCF's greed. This opposition is highlighted when Obree is forced to comply with various regulations invented 'ad-hoc' to disqualify him: his tuck position is considered dangerous so he attaches bicycle stabilisers; when the WCF invent a rule regarding saddle position to hinder

Obree's ability to use the tuck position, he saws off part of Old Faithful's saddle to ensure the space between saddle and handlebars complies; when Hagemann then insists '[i]t must be possible to purchase all parts in the commercial market' Obree uses the saddle from a child's bicycle.

On one level, this dynamic conforms to the classical biopic's generic structure, whereby the subject challenges the values of a community who are resistant to change (Custen 1992: 188), but Obree's creative attempts to circumvent the WCF's 'red tape' also recall the depiction of wily Scots against hostile bureaucrats in Ealing's *Whisky Galore* (1946). That film, set on an island in the Outer Hebrides, details the efforts of custom officers to retrieve a cargo of whisky which the islanders have acquired following a shipwreck. The film's target is the officialdom against which the villagers seek to retain their find (Richards 1997: 191). There are echoes of this in *The Flying Scotsman*: though Obree's victory over Boardman in the 1993 World Championship is a key moment, it is presented half way through the film and the remaining narrative details Obree's disqualification from the 1994 World Championships, and his subsequent shift from the 'tuck' to the 'superman' position to win the World Championship in 1995. Indeed, the film's climactic scene shows Obree's receiving a handshake from Hagemann and accepting the victor's medal. Gary Whannel proposes that sports films such as *Cool Runnings* (1994) and *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002) follow a narrative trajectory in which 'winning respect is at least as important as winning' (Whannel 2008: 86), and in foregrounding the handshake (*before* the medal) *The Flying Scotsman* suggests something similar: the 'washing machine on wheels' has finally secured Hagemann's reluctant approval. Obree has triumphed over the WCF's obstacles; the underdog has overcome officialdom.

Furthermore, the Scottish underdog has asserted the sporting ideals of cycling. When Obree and Hagemann meet before Obree's first attempt on the hour record Hagemann is immediately established as embodying alternative ideals; the two men shake hands and Hagemann wipes his clean with a cloth. When Obree demands a second attempt at the hour record after failing the first, Hagemann refers to him as a 'Mad Englishman' prompting Obree to respond, 'You wanna know what mad is, try calling me English again'. This recalls the characterisation of

Waggett (Basil Radford), the English captain of the Home Guard, in *Whiskey Galore*. Waggett's failure to grasp the language and traditions of the Torday islanders, and their capacity for ingenuity, is partly what leads to his downfall (see Petrie 2000: 43). Hagemann is similarly guilty of underestimating Obree and the latter's rebuke suggests that his determination to succeed is partially motivated by Hagemann's comment (see Crosson 2013: 133).

The WCF committee's scheming nature is dramatised as they debate Obree within their headquarters following his victory at the 1993 World Pursuit Championships. An establishing shot displays an imposing building with darkened windows surrounded by large trees, a visualization of the perceived 'secrecy' of cycling authorities following the Festina affair (Sefiha 2017: 624). Inside, committee members sit on either side of a large rectangular table with Hagemann at the head in the centre of the frame. The boardroom's wooden walls, its windowless and dark interior broken only by the harsh artificial lights, resemble the wood-panelled lair of villain Auric Goldfinger from the James Bond film *Goldfinger* (Guy Hamilton 1964), and Berkoff's previous roles as a villain in *Octopussy* (1983), *Beverly Hills Cop* (1984) and *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985) underscore this. One member questions how manufacturers can persuade people to purchase bicycles when a 'washing machine on wheels' holds the hour record, while another describes testing Obree's marmalade sandwiches for PEDs in the hope that a positive result will provide the grounds to ban him. Thus the committee is less concerned with protecting cycling's integrity and more focused on ensuring any innovations do not impede their commercial ambitions.

This meeting also locates Obree within a theme familiar from the 'Great Man' biopics of the studio period. In his discussion of films about Graham Alexander Bell and Thomas Edison, Dennis Bingham remarks that the lives of inventors and entrepreneurs were shaped through 'myths of noncommodification' (2010: 52) in which the innovator's ideas are shown as a benefit to wider society rather than a commodity benefiting the few. This myth is expressed in Obree's resistance to the commodification championed by the WCF: Obree and Old Faithful cannot be 'packaged' to consumers in the same way as Boardman and his Lotus 108 bicycle. It is in the sequence which reconstructs the pair's race at the 1993 World Cycling

Championships that *The Flying Scotsman* most forcefully stresses Obree's underdog status by emphasising the financial disparity between cyclists.

David versus Goliath

The Flying Scotsman's racing sequences utilise strategies of representation familiar from numerous sports films. For instance, to represent Obree's hour record in 1993, the camera is located in the middle of the velodrome and Steadicam footage follows Miller-as-Obree around the track. This resembles the iconic scene in *Rocky* (1976) in which the camera tracks boxer Rocky Balboa up the steps of the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Just as 'the Steadicam is central to producing the speed, fluidity, and mobility of *Rocky's* training sequences' (Webb 2015: 120), the hurried camera movement grants urgency to Obree's effort. This is coupled with other techniques – the use of motion blur and tight close-ups framing his face as he travels around the track – to connote speed and exertion. Furthermore, sports films are typically structured around a rivalry between two different challengers: for example Rocky and Jake La Motta in *Rocky* and *Raging Bull* (1980) are 'to a considerable degree defined by their opponents' (Crosson 2013: 61). In *The Flying Scotsman* Boardman's funding from Lotus and his 'professional' training team reaffirm Obree's status as Scottish underdog while stressing the significance of Obree's eventual victory at the 1993 World Cycling Championships in Oslo. Before the race, Boardman (Adrian Smith) is shown in the foreground offering to shake Obree's hand while in the background Boardman's team unpack the tyres and place the Lotus frame on a bracket. Staged in this way, *The Flying Scotsman* presents Boardman as divorced from the preparation and merely a 'component' to be added once others are secured. Over panning shots of the velodrome the commentator then states Boardman is the favourite *because* of his £500,000, carbon-fibre 'superbike', underscoring that he is merely part of a larger 'package'.

The subsequent race switches between long-shots of Obree cycling in the velodrome, accompanied by the noise of the cheering crowd, to tight close-ups of his face leaning over the handlebars and breathing heavily. These are intercut with a further scene in which Baxter follows Obree's progress on the hidden television

while delivering a sermon in Ayrshire. The intercutting creates a comedic contrast of atmosphere between the tense velodrome and the somber church, where a handful of worshippers listen to Baxter read out community news, but it also maintains the parochial quality of the film's earlier scenes in which Baxter, Malky and Obree prepare Old Faithful in Ayrshire. As Baxter watches Obree cross the finishing line he looks up and apologises to the congregation for being overcome, explaining he gets excited about the annual bring-and-buy sale. The sequence serves as a playful nod to the Kailyard tradition's emphasis on small-town Scottish life while emphasising Scotland's position at the centre of a modern international sporting event.

Sports films typically feature a climactic finale, an 'emotional highpoint' which is 'dependent on the ability of the narrative as a whole to underline the challenges that the protagonist must overcome to get there' (Crosson 2013: 62). This can be, as in *Eddie the Eagle*, condensed by showing a close-up image of the athlete's face before they compete and combining that image with a voice-over of the different doubters such as a disproving father or pessimistic coach. *The Flying Scotsman's* version of the underdog narrative is different; the intercutting conveys the parallel experiences of Obree's friends as they delight in his victory and powerfully conveys that Boardman's (and England's) larger resources are little match for the efforts of the community who rally around the Scottish underdog.

'A Scottish story about a real Scottish champion'

The Flying Scotsman was plagued by production problems which delayed its release, and it eventually premiered at the Edinburgh Film Festival in 2006 (see Dawtrey 2006). Jack McConnell stressed its significance as a national project which could contribute to shifting the national outlook – 'it is particularly pleasing that it is a Scottish story about a real Scottish champion' – and promote a shared history of Scottish sporting achievement with contemporary resonance: 'part of the reason we have some of the world's best cyclists now, like Chris Hoy, is down to the inspiration provided by Graeme Obree' (quoted in Anon. 2006b). Indeed, the film was released two years after Hoy was awarded his first Olympic gold medal in 2004 and in his foreword to Obree's autobiography he described the latter as an 'inspiration' (Obree

2003: ix). McConnell's post-premiere comments suggest *The Flying Scotsman's* construction of a 'public history' of Scottish cycling excellence, a lineage beginning with Obree and leading to Hoy, contributed to a sense of national distinctiveness in the post-devolution era.

Evidence suggests the film grossed just £156,000 at the box office in its first three weeks of release (Gilbride 2008: 5). Reviewers criticised the film's formulaic structure, describing it as 'a conventional underdog sports movie that should have been much more gripping' (Holden 2007) and 'a one-man-against-the-world job: think of a dumbed-down *Chariots of Fire*' (Smith 2007). Connections between *The Flying Scotsman*, *Chariots of Fire* and Forsyth's films were made to suggest the film was unbalanced and that the light-hearted scenes were difficult to reconcile with the a focus on Obree's bipolar condition:

The director, Douglas Mackinnon, seems set on playing it essentially as a feelgood heartwarmer. If Bill "Gregory's Girl" Forsyth had made *Chariots of Fire*, it might have looked like this. But Obree's dark and despairing moments don't fit very easily into this template. (Bradshaw 2006)

This suggests the film's bricolage approach was difficult to reconcile with a focus on character psychology, an issue raised in reviews which criticised it for underplaying Obree's condition – '[a] great sports movie should have audiences shedding blood, sweat and tears along with the hero – Obree is watched from a distance' (Smith 2007) – and the depiction 'is so perfunctory that it might have been better not to address the subject at all' (Holden 2007). As discussed, Anne Obree was concerned the representation would upset their family and Obree himself was reluctant – 'Douglas [Mackinnon] had to twist my arm to leave the depression stuff in' – while acknowledging that 'the film needed it to be entertaining ... you have to add an emotional side' (quoted in Brown 2007: 5).

Internet Movie Database user reviews offered contrasting perspectives, praising the film's conventional style – a 'good old fashioned sports flick' (TheEmulator23 2007) – and the focus on Obree's 'clean' approach: 'very seldom is Graeme Obree

acknowledged as the superb (drug-free) athlete that he was' (j_m_scott 2007). Others saw a lineage in the representation of Scottish outsiders who drew criticism before achieving success: 'this film reminded me of the last Scottish athlete to be given the nickname "The Flying Scotsman", the great Eric Liddle [sic]. Both were criticised for their unorthodox styles, even though it gained them great success and honour' (Graham Muir 2007).

The Flying Scotsman's reception highlights how the subject's willingness to vouch for the depiction remains a potent authenticating strategy for those making biopics and that filmmakers will compromise to satisfy the subject and their family (see Custen 1992: 41). Although the film's importance as a national project was identified, reviewers and *IMDb* viewers were frequently at odds over the representation. Though *IMDb* viewers perceived Obree's significance as a 'drug-free' athlete and identified that *The Flying Scotsman* continued a tradition of the Scotsman-as-underdog, reviewers labelled the film as 'conventional' and 'dumbed-down' rather than picking up on the distinctive ways *The Flying Scotsman* remodels the sports film's narrative arc to foreground Obree as a Scottish underdog. Indeed, reviewers highlighted how the film's feel-good tone evoked Forsyth's films and posited that this was one of its limitations, indicating the mixture of biopic, sports film and Scottish filmmaking traditions contributed to an unbalanced depiction.

Conclusion

The Flying Scotsman representation of Graeme Obree as a Scottish underdog is evidenced in the various sequences which display him in acts of everyday creativity in ordinary spaces which through their radical novelty challenge the values of the WCF cycling body. In a period in which public perception of the UCI and cycling was shaped by the Festina affair the film portrays WCF officials as unwilling to combat doping, placing commercial considerations above sporting integrity. *The Flying Scotsman* celebrates Obree's 'make do and mend' ethos and suggests his integrity lies in how he resists commodification, a hero who bypasses the corrupted values of the cycling Establishment.

Though *The Flying Scotsman* depicts Obree's sourcing and using bike parts which have been adapted and re-appropriated, the film is itself a *textual*

appropriation of the underdog narrative structure. This underdog narrative is re-modeled in *The Flying Scotsman* to fashion Obree as a distinctly *Scottish* underdog: guided by a wily, 'tactical' approach which allows him, and his friends, to overcome both English cyclists and the forces of officialdom. *The Flying Scotsman* signals Scottish filmmaking traditions by evoking Bill Forsyth and also the Kailyard tradition, while blending this with themes and character types familiar from the classical biopic and the sports film. *The Flying Scotsman* is, much like its subject, engaged in acts of bricolage, adapting a conventional American narrative template and fusing this with values and tropes recognisable from earlier periods of Scottish cinema and representations of Scotland.

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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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