Cycling mania has supposedly gripped Sydney with middle-aged men and women in Lycra gasping through the city but it's nothing compared with the society changing impact of the two wheel "scorchers" 120 years ago, writes Heath Gilmore.

It's Sydney, 1895, and a sallow and weary chap wearing a straw hat alights from the Melbourne Express, and briefly saunters along a Redfern Railway station platform, before an almighty din erupts. A mob of hundreds rushes forward, surging about the "long and unshapely" form of Arthur Augustus Zimmerman, the world champion of cycling, a global superstar heralding the transformation of their Victorian-era lives.

The arrival of Zimmy in Sydney that November day sparked a two week celebration of cycling in the NSW colony after he had earlier competed in other colonial outposts. It was a sporting extravaganza mixed with elements of messianic rally for the converted and all the hallmarks of so called modern phenomena, celebrity worship.

For in the mid 1890s, a worldwide cycling boom was still to reach its zenith. And, Zimmerman had become the unlikely figurehead for the cycling movement. And he was here in Australia.

From Penny Farthings jolting along bumpy dirt roads to middle-aged men in Lycra gasping through the city, to follow the fortunes of the bicycle in Australia over the past 120 years is to get an insight into how Australian society itself has developed.

It all began in 1875, when the first ordinary bicycles were imported into Australia, according to author Jim Fitzpatrick in his excellent The Bicycle and the Bush.

A bit like the first smartphones, they were clunky, limited and owned only by the very wealthy.

Soon however, innovations such as the chain, the cog, and the diamond shape frame – made bicycles something for everyone.

An estimated 200,000 Australian bought bicycles during the 1890s as prices fell to below 20 pounds. If the whole world was gripped by the cycling craze, then nowhere was more entranced than Sydney.

To bike was now the ambition of everybody who is anybody. Newspapers, journals, and magazines
The bicycle was a private mode of transport in a public space, and the focus of much moral, political and economic import. Opponents of the bicycle claimed that it undermined morality.

For example, blokes could go further afield, and more often, to court the ladies. Trains and buggies being beyond the reach of most working folk. Fitzpatrick cites a British study of inter parish marriage patterns in Dorset which remained unchanged until the advent of the bicycle.

At the same time bicycles for women were a tool of emancipation giving them a unknown level of freedom. Their desire to hit the road brought about an immediate change to Victorian fashion, which had to be adopted to the requirements of biking.

The backlash was immediate and predictable.

From the pulpit, one church minister railed against the fad of "cyclomania" to the Herald in August 17, 1895.

"Neither sex, no age, no condition of life is exempt from the contagion cycling," he said. "The sedatest of men is not safe from the fascination, and no-one knows whom he may tomorrow behold "scorching" in the public thoroughfares."

Others, lamented the noise and dangers.

In the Herald again:

"Sir,  
In the columns of your paper this morning I noticed that seven cyclists were severely fined 1 Os 6d with 5s 6d costs for not having lights whilst propelling bicycles through the streets.

'...The heedlessness of many of these individuals riding these noiseless, startling machines is shameful, many of whom seem to be oblivious respecting the limbs and bodies of pedestrians generally.  

'...As an instance, Sir, of the gross carelessness attached to the movements of some of these myrmidons of the wheel, my daughter a young lady of 17 years, was knocked over down and severely bruised and shaken all over her body."

Regards,  
A concerned father -- May, 1896 ....

Conversely, cyclists were quick to take umbrage over the anti-cycling fraternity. Quaintly titled wheel men organisations lobbied for change, arguing for the need for better roads and bike lanes.
It does sound very familiar.

Then ... the car arrived: two wheels were good but four wheels were better. But bicycles don't die: they just change gear, moving from the adult world to become a fixture of every Aussie childhood.

New fashions sped along: in the 1970s ten-speeds with deraillieur gears were all the rage, along with choppers and dragsters; in the 80s it was BMX, and mountain bikes, and, more recently, hybrids.

As bikes became increasingly specialised - and as Australians came to better appreciate the importance of health (their own and the planet's) - the number of casual, recreational and commuter cyclists boomed. In 2011/12 some 1,166,712 bikes were imported into Australia.

In today's Australia the bicycle is once again an elite past-time, and a status symbol: but it also remains an enduring necessity of childhood, and an indispensable A-to-B device for tens of thousands huffing and puffing their way to and from work.

But in November 1895, when Zimmerman gave two demonstration races on the grass tracks at the Sydney Cricket Ground, the bicycle was new, exciting and lucrative.

Before his arrival in Australia, Zimmerman told a US reporter that "he will be handed $US5000 in gold upon his arrival in Sydney. All his expenses, including his wife's, were to be paid by Australian managers. In every race he will be guaranteed one-half the amount of the first prize if he loses, or, of course, the full amount if he wins. At all the race meets where is advertised to appear, he will receive one-quarter of the gate receipts.

Crowds scaling somewhere between 25,000 and 30,000 people turned up at the SCG over both weekends of racing to watch their hero. The total attendance was nearly 10 per cent of Sydney's population at the time.

It was a goldmine.

The Herald devoted a considerable portion of space to its report of the first race which Zimmerman easily won.

At the end of the article, the anonymous reporter was moved to conclude:

"In the past it was possible to divide society into two orders -- the equestrian and the pedestrian; this is now no longer possible," he wrote

"After a demonstration like that of Saturday we are irresistibly reminded of a third division. The cycling order must be included."