

The Flying Scotsman: Cycling around Bipolar Disorder with Old Faithful

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Abstract

The nickname "*The Flying Scotsman*," originally attributed to the iconic railway service between London and Edinburgh, gained new significance when attributed to Graeme Obree, a Scottish cyclist, who is renowned for breaking the world hour record twice, in 1993 and 1994 with his customized cycle "Old Faithful." Obree's life story, as recorded in his autobiography and the 2006 biopic, both titled as *The Flying Scotsman*, is a testimony to a successful person's extraordinary level of dedication and resilience. However, his journey was marked by severe struggles with mental health issues. He chronically suffers from manic depressive disorder or as we call it the "bipolar disorder," and this is a condition about which he openly discusses in his writings. In fact, the reporters who have chronicled his success story have noted this too. While his autobiography provides a candid recalling of challenges regarding the disease with clear references to his multiple suicide attempts, film reviewers feel that the film offers only a superficial treatment of his mental health issues, even after beginning with an obscure scene containing one of those infamous suicidal attempts and that arguably dilutes a major part of the biographical narrative. This paper investigates the extent to which the biopic captures Obree's lived experiences of bipolar disorder and its influence on his personal and professional life. Taking into account some of the visual metaphors used in the film and by analyzing some key moments of his life from the excerpts from Obree's autobiography, the study will then seek help from relevant medical and critical articles to uncover how bipolar disorder shaped his sporting and personal decisions. The paper additionally aims to highlight the complexities of portraying mental health in biographical cinema.

Introduction

The title *The Flying Scotsman* evokes an image that is at once historical, national, and mythic. Originally, it was the name of the iconic express train that connected London and Edinburgh, a symbol of speed and progress in the early twentieth century. In the late twentieth century, the title gained a new association when it was attached to Graeme Obree, a Scottish cyclist whose career and life combined remarkable athletic success with deep personal struggle. The metaphor of the train fits Obree well: relentless, fast, and groundbreaking, yet also burdened by the dangers of derailment. His achievements were spectacular. In July, 1993 and then again in April, 1994, he broke the world hour record with a homemade bicycle, aptly named “Old Faithful.” He repeated the feat in 1994, challenging the dominance of elite sporting systems with ingenuity and determination. His engineering skills were as legendary as his physical endurance, for “Old Faithful” was assembled from spare parts, including washing-machine bearings, reflecting a creativity born out of constraint. The heroic aura surrounding these achievements, however, is inseparable from the psychological battles that defined his life. Obree has lived with bipolar disorder, a condition historically labelled as manic-depressive illness, which involves oscillation between manic highs and depressive lows. In his autobiography *The Flying Scotsman* (2003), Obree describes this condition with candour, detailing suicide attempts, crippling despair, and episodes of compulsive innovation. His voice is unflinchingly direct, making it impossible to separate the athlete from the illness. The narrative challenges the assumption that sporting triumph can be narrated as pure resilience; rather, Obree shows that fragility and strength coexist in unstable equilibrium.

The 2006 biopic *The Flying Scotsman* dramatises these same events but reshapes them for cinematic accessibility. The film acknowledges depression, most memorably in the opening scene depicting a suicide attempt in the woods. Yet its focus soon shifts to a story of ingenuity and victory, highlighting the invention of Old Faithful, the disputes with cycling authorities, and the record-breaking rides. Illness,

while present, becomes episodic and symbolic rather than cyclical and pervasive. Visual metaphors attempt to convey inner turmoil, the rope, the dark forest, the solitary rides, but the film ultimately privileges triumph over despair.

This divergence between autobiography and biopic reflects a wider cultural issue: how mental illness is represented in sport and film. Medical discourse describes bipolar disorder as recurrent and chronic, demanding a nuanced understanding. Cultural discourse, however, often frames illness through simplified tropes – either as a heroic obstacle to overcome or as a tragic flaw. Sport complicates this further, for athletic figures are celebrated as national symbols of discipline, endurance, and pride. Illness threatens the stability of such narratives, forcing uncomfortable reckonings with vulnerability. Obree's story thus offers a critical tension between lived experience and mediated portrayal. His autobiography insists that illness is constitutive of his identity, while the film offers a streamlined narrative of victory shadowed by occasional darkness. The study of these two forms invites reflection on how narrative structures shape our understanding of mental health, how visual metaphors translate inner life, and how cultural identity reframes personal suffering. By comparing the textual honesty of Obree's autobiography with the cinematic strategies of the film, one can uncover not only the politics of portraying mental illness but also how Scottish cultural pride is both reinforced and complicated by such representations. The analysis will further benefit from psychoanalytic insights drawn from Freud and Lacan, which emphasise the unconscious structures of desire, repression, and identity, thereby adding a literary dimension to the study of sport and suffering.

Textual honesty in the autobiography

Obree's autobiography is striking for its refusal to separate cycling from illness. The narrative rhythm mimics the fluctuations of bipolar disorder. Periods of innovation and success – designing Old Faithful, training with obsessive precision, planning record attempts – are narrated as manic bursts of energy. These passages convey compulsion as much as creativity, showing how the illness propelled as well as

endangered him. By contrast, his depressive episodes are described with stark simplicity: days when leaving the bed seemed impossible, moments when life itself felt unbearable, and suicide attempts that punctuate the narrative as moments of existential crisis.

Such candour positions mental illness as a constitutive part of his sporting identity rather than a side story. Unlike conventional sports biographies, which celebrate resilience by downplaying fragility, Obree presents fragility as the condition of resilience. The reader comes to see that the very same energy that enabled him to outwit authorities and defy established cycling norms was inseparable from the volatility that imperilled his life. This paradox, illness as both curse and creative force, gives the autobiography its raw power.

Cinematic interpretation

The film *The Flying Scotsman* translates these events into a visual narrative, but the demands of cinema reshape the experience. The opening suicide attempt gestures toward despair but is soon overshadowed by the more palatable story of invention and victory. The cyclical nature of illness is replaced with episodic moments of silence, shadow, and isolation. Depressive states are compressed into suggestive imagery—darkened rooms, isolated forests—while manic energy is translated into sequences of intense training and exhilarating rides.

Film scholars have noted that cinema often struggles with mental illness because it seeks narrative resolution, whereas illness is marked by recurrence and unpredictability. In Obree's biopic, illness functions as dramatic tension that must eventually be resolved, giving way to a climax of triumph. This narrative structure diminishes the chronic, inescapable dimension of bipolar disorder. The film becomes more about the genius of Old Faithful than the lived cost of sustaining such genius.

Comparative reading: autobiography vs. film

A comparative reading highlights this difference starkly. Where the autobiography lingers in despair, the film

condenses it into metaphors. Where the autobiography insists on illness as identity, the film presents illness as a challenge overcome on the way to victory. In both, the bicycle is central: in the autobiography, it is both salvation and obsession, while in the film, it becomes a visual metaphor for release and endurance. Both forms are truthful, but they tell different kinds of truth—one about the raw interiority of living with bipolar disorder, the other about the cultural legibility of illness in cinematic form.

Psychoanalytic perspectives and cultural framing

Freud's theory of the death drive provides a useful lens for reading Obree's repeated suicide attempts and his compulsive return to the bike. The drive toward self-destruction coexists with the will to mastery, echoing the tension between despair and invention. Lacan's concept of desire as mediated through the gaze of the Other is also relevant: Obree's compulsion to prove himself against governing authorities, audiences, and critics reflects a subjectivity structured by recognition and rejection. Cycling becomes not just a sport but a symbolic communication, a way of negotiating identity.

When aligned with Scottishness, these psychoanalytic insights take on cultural resonance. Obree embodies the Scottish archetype of the underdog—defying institutions, creating innovation from scraps, and asserting individuality against systemic power. Yet his mental illness complicates this image, refusing the neatness of heroism. In Lacanian terms, the symbolic order of national pride cannot fully contain the real of mental illness, which ruptures narrative coherence.

Scottishness and cultural pride

Scottish identity often valorises resilience, ingenuity, and defiance of authority. Obree's career embodies all of these traits. Old Faithful itself stands as a national emblem: an object of ingenuity fashioned from limited means, challenging elite sporting technologies. His victories against global competitors resonate with narratives of Scottish pride, showing the lone innovator defeating powerful systems.

Yet illness interrupts this narrative. The figure of Obree cannot be assimilated into a simple national hero myth because his story insists on vulnerability. Scottish cultural pride, therefore, is reframed not as triumph over adversity but as the ability to hold triumph and despair together. Obree becomes emblematic not just of victory but of complexity – the capacity to acknowledge that resilience is inseparable from fragility.

Conclusion

Graeme Obree's story is one of convergence and contradiction. His autobiography presents a candid interplay of triumph and despair, showing how mental illness was inseparable from his creativity and resilience. His biopic reshapes the same life into a cinematic narrative of invention and victory, compressing chronic suffering into symbolic images. This contrast underscores the difficulty of representing mental illness in narrative form.

The broader implication is that cinematic biography often flattens illness into a narrative device, while autobiography preserves its raw complexity. Sport complicates the issue further, for athletes are expected to embody resilience, yet Obree demonstrates that fragility is part of resilience. His story suggests that to celebrate resilience without acknowledging vulnerability is to miss the truth of human endurance.

This tension speaks to cultural ethics. How do we represent mental illness without aestheticizing it, diluting it, or using it as dramatic ornament? Obree's story reveals the stakes of this question, as both autobiography and film circulate within discourses of sport, cinema, and national identity. For Scottish culture, Obree stands as a figure of ingenuity and defiance, yet his illness prevents him from being absorbed into a straightforward heroic myth.

What emerges is a figure who teaches us that resilience is not the absence of despair but the ongoing negotiation with it. His story reminds us that creativity often arises from fragility, and that the ethics of representation matter deeply when narrating mental health. In reflecting on Obree's life, one confronts the larger question of how societies can acknowledge

vulnerability while still honoring achievement. The lesson is as much cultural as personal: resilience is not perfection but the capacity to endure and create within imperfection.

References :

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