Journeys and accounts of them are shaped by the mode of transport adopted. How we travel affects how quickly we arrive at a destination and by what route, but it also influences how we relate to the environment and to one another. Even the ways in which we structure our stories of movement may be affected by our means of motion. This is especially true in what Wyndham Lewis called ‘the Petrol Age’, which introduced greater speed and mechanization. Narratives produced in response to its innovations often draw attention to literary contrivances that might otherwise have gone unremarked upon. My focus in this chapter is on the first few decades of the motorcycle, a form of transport more mechanical than the bicycle but more open to the elements than the train or motor car. My essay will survey some of the early developments in motorcycle history, up to the late 1920s, and will examine a range of travel accounts by male and female motorcyclists who rode for a variety of reasons.

In Britain, the motorcycle was seen as a way of getting closer to nature. So, too, was the automobile, but the motorcycle offered more flexibility and a more intensely personal experience. Writing in 1928 of the ‘ease with which even a novice can manage the modern motor-cycle’ and of its ‘simplicity and reliability’ making it an ‘ideal means of transport’, sisters Betty and Nancy Debenham note that ‘[t]here are usually delightful spots within 25 miles radius of any big town’. They refer to the motorcycle as the ‘magic carpet of the town-dweller’. The author of The Rudge Book of the Road exclaimed in the late 1920s that readers should be thankful to ‘live in an age when the petrol engine has brought back the old romance of travel by road . . . and [can] slake our thirst for adventure in a civilisation which is doing its best to turn us into a machine!’ With unconscious irony, readers were encouraged to use the motorbike to
‘take a holiday sometimes from modernity’. By the end of that decade there were an estimated 700,000 motorcyclists in Britain. In the United States, the ‘[p]opularity of the motorcycle [had] soared between 1910 and 1915...In 1912 and 1913, more than sixty new brands were introduced’, though the industry there declined after the introduction of the Model T Ford, and eventually Indian and Harley-Davidson were the only major manufacturers that remained.

The popularity of the motorbike was due in large part to the service it saw in the First World War, in which it was used extensively by dispatch riders. An early, full-length narrative of this experience was the book publication of Captain W. H. L. Watson’s *Adventures of a Despatch Rider* (1915). Made up principally of letters to his friend, fellow former Oxford student Robert Whyte, and to his mother (the ‘Perfect Mother’ of the dedication), the volume records Watson’s incremental immersion in the war after joining up as a graduate from Oxford. In the introductory letter to Whyte, 2nd lieutenant in the 1st Black Watch of the British Expeditionary Force, Watson explains that the volume ‘has no more accuracy or literary merit than letters usually possess’, an apology often found in travel books, by men and by women, and increasingly used since the mid-eighteenth century. Watson’s volume is derived from letters that his mother showed to his former tutor at Harrow, Townsend Warner (father of writer Sylvia Townsend Warner, 1893–1978), who then passed them on until they appeared in *Blackwood’s Magazine*. Watson asserts that: ‘My only object is to try and show as truthfully as I can the part played in this monstrous war by a despatch rider during the months from August 1914 to February 1915’ (18). Acknowledging that ‘all letters are censored’, he asserts that ‘[t]his book contains nothing but the truth, but not the whole truth’ (19). He had to be ‘exceedingly careful’ when describing ‘things that were actually happening round me’, but also, in the time between some events and his letters about them, ‘something was sure to crop up...that unconsciously but definitely altered the memory of experiences’ (19–20). He remarks, referring to a mutual friend: ‘The Germans have killed Alec. Perhaps among the multitudinous Germans killed there are one or two German Alecs. Yet I am still meeting people who think that war is a fine bracing thing for the nation, a sort of national week-end at Brighton’ (20). Another mutual friend, Gibson, has also perished, and a postscript reveals that ‘[t]he day after I had written this letter the news came to me that Robert Whyte had been killed’. Watson sighs: ‘The letter must stand – I have not the heart to write another’ (21).