Cycles of Manhood: Pedaling Respectability in Ontario’s Forest City

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A.T. Lane, riding through the streets of Montreal on 1 July 1874, on his plain-bearing, socket-steering, high wheeler, heralded the ominous arrival of the penny-farthing, or the ordinary bicycle, to Canadian social life. For some, the arrival of the bicycle and its high riders shook the foundations of public decorum, rousing the citizenry against this newest form of public nuisance perpetrated by reckless individuals and rowdies. Initially an object of wonder to passersby, the increasing popularity and prevalence of the bicycle on town streets polarized public opinions about issues of safety and on the more controversial questions about the ritual parading of men’s and later women’s bodies on the roads and pathways of late nineteenth-century urban Canada. Freedom of movement, sweat, vigor, and early-evening physical pleasures aside, the bicycle became a scourge to some respectable pedestrians and carriage drivers. Critics framed the debates over the issue in the context of appropriate and honorable manliness and womanhood, underscored by the physiological dispositions supposedly stimulated by cycling, or structured such controversies more comfortably as technical attention toward public safety and traffic decorum. Implicit throughout the debates waged in the newspapers were the often-invoked notions that responsible men with honor showed concern for others, particularly women and children, and behaved as proper gentlemen in public. Responsible women were to be cognizant of social hierarchies and ladylike, with bodies disciplined by fashion and behavioral codes of Victorian morality. Agitated city dwellers, thus, lobbied for bylaws to control the cyclists under the social guise of predominantly middle-class standards of the “respectable,” an unequivocal position of argument that equated cyclists with the long-standing public nuisances of the tavern brawler, the brazen harlot, and the reckless carriage driver.

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The weight of such arguments was not lost on the “respectable” young male cyclists in question, avid traders in social capital, who responded in kind by carefully positioning their emergent masculine attributes under the guise of physically active, but good, citizenship—the responsible but daring public man. These ideological invocations gained public legitimacy through the establishment of cycling clubs with members who advocated safe and organized rides, gentlemanly races, and cycling paths for members, both men and women. The legitimizing strategies undertaken by early Canadian cycling-club members, specifically those of the Forest City Cycling Club of London, Ontario, secured some measure of respectability for these active young men and were indicative of their roles in the broader social agendas forwarded by various middle-class men over appropriate public masculinities and bodily dispositions.

Middle-Class Men, Masculinity, and the Bicycle

The second half of the nineteenth century represented an era when gender roles and identities for men and women were subjected to a variety of challenges, many of which arose within the sphere of physical recreation. Cycling was a visible form of physical activity that stimulated considerable public debate about acceptable public displays of men’s and women’s bodies. Literature examining the processes that influenced the physical and social emancipation of middle-class Victorian women has consistently pointed to recreational cycling during the 1890s as representing an arena in which women were able to gain greater control over their bodies. This focus on cycling and its influence on women’s lives has been drawn on to confirm the existence of rigid gender identities at that time, as well as the presence of reform-minded individuals who sought to challenge the existing gender order. Despite this focus on issues of cycling and femininity, however, little serious attention has been paid to the role of cycling, particularly during the 1880s and early 1890s in Canada, in constructing and reproducing masculine identities for middle-class men. While offering some comments about the social consequences of women’s participation, this study examines some of the substantive and theoretical issues extant in men’s cycling, late-nineteenth-century masculinities, and the current debates about gender relations in history.

Who were the men who initially participated in cycling? The men who made up the ranks of early cyclists in both Europe and North America were drawn almost exclusively from the wealthier middle classes. These mostly young men engaged in recreational and competitive cycling on a variety of machines ranging from the solid iron velocipede, or the “boneshaker,” popular in the 1860s to the high wheeler, “ordinary,” or penny-farthing bicycle popular in the 1870s and early 1880s. Cycling and other physically active pursuits in the growing ranks of organized sport in Canada offered alternatives to the more popular forms of entertainment.