"We Are No Longer Freaks":
The Cyclists’ Rights Movement in Montreal

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On the evening of January 26, 1898, Montreal lawyer, businessman, and provincial legislator Albert William Atwater stepped onto the stage of the Monument Nationale and, following a standing ovation, proclaimed loudly to the enthusiastic audience of 300 in front of him: “Gentlemen . . . the day has now arrived when we are no longer freaks.” What drew this veteran middle-class Montrealer through darkened streets and snow banks to make this proclamation, and what led his audience to receive him so enthusiastically, was a technological revolution that began in the mid-1860s, that had recently gripped a segment of middle-class society in much of the western world, and that—unknown to Atwater or anyone in his audience—was about to disappear. I am referring here to the bicycle, and in particular to a movement that took shape around this machine in Montreal at the turn of the nineteenth century, just as the bicycle reached its peak of popularity, and just before that popularity fell so dramatically throughout North America. Part of what supporters and the media referred to as the cyclists’ rights movement, this meeting addressed the concerns of a large and relatively diverse segment of middle-class Montreal—young and old; men and women; francophones and anglophones; amateurs and world-class athletes; Catholics, Protestants, and Jews—who had taken to the bicycle in growing numbers, and who were demanding infrastructure and institutional support for their new pursuit.

The cyclists’ rights movement was an effort by Montreal cyclists to harness the recent wave of popular support for the bicycle and turn it into something tangible, namely, into a reworking of the legal and environmental contexts of cycling in and around their city. What follows is an exploration of this briefly lived movement in the context of the bicycle’s evolving place in the city, from its first appearance in the mid-1860s to its sudden crash into obscurity three decades later. In broad terms, Montreal’s experience is not much different from many other North American cities. Given that Montreal has recently emerged to become one of the most bicycle-friendly cities on the continent, however, it is a location worth drawing attention to. As this article shows, Montrealers first began grappling with these issues not in the 1970s through the work of groups like the imaginative, tenacious, and highly successful Le Monde à Bicyclette but fully one hundred years earlier. Briefly, this paper’s central argument runs as follows: during the thirty years that

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marked the bicycle’s “first wave” in North America, cycling introduced new ways of experiencing and perceiving urban and rural environments. As a result, cyclists became increasingly aware of the limits that the built environment and legal restrictions imposed on their activities. As they did so, they sought, in growing numbers and eventually through political channels, to reshape conditions in their favor. In Montreal, these efforts took various forms during the 1870s and 1880s, and culminated during the late 1890s in a movement that positioned its objectives via a rights-based discourse aimed directly at the city’s political sphere. Underpinning this argument are three broader objectives. First, I aim to situate Montreal in general terms relative to the history of cycling in North America and Europe during the nineteenth century. Second, I discuss the kinds of changes Montrealers experienced, anticipated, and in some cases demanded in regard to cycling conditions. Third, this project draws from the city’s cyclists’ rights movement an invitation to explore cycling as a social movement and ultimately as a political phenomenon. Tying all of this together is the recognition that when it comes to building an environment favorable to the bicycle, the politics of cycling is rooted firmly at the local level, in particular in municipal as opposed to provincial or federal politics.

The origins of the bicycle have been discussed often: what exactly counts as a “bicycle,” who was the first to invent it, and when and where did this take place. On this note, Montreal offers some refreshing insight, for the city’s initial encounter with this machine underscores how quickly it was taken up in cities around the world. General agreement has the rudimentary bicycle—two wheels joined by a frame, a steering device, a brake, and pedals, based on principles and technology established but not fully realized in the “draisine” of the 1810s—put together in 1867 by Paris blacksmith Pierre Michaux. Once available to the public, it did not take long for this new technology to spread. Together, the novelty of the bicycle, the thrills it offered, the sociability it inspired, and the possibilities it suggested in regard to the transformation of human mobility ensured that it would be a point of spectacle and performance, and would in turn become emblematic of modernity, liberalism, and freedom. 

This happened first in and around Paris in the spring of 1868. By the end of the year it had reached New York, and from there it spread quickly to Montreal and cities throughout North America, where it enjoyed a brief frenzy of attention. In Montreal this became apparent through a wide range of cycling-related institutions, materials, and events. As in other cities, cycling in Montreal began indoors. By the spring of 1869, Montrealers could choose from at least five rinks and riding schools. The largest was the Drill Hall Velocipede Rink and Riding School on Craig Street, which boasted a track of more than an eighth of a mile, and offered seven 70- × 40-foot rooms in which novices could learn. Close in size was the Crystal Palace Velocipede Rink and Riding School on Ste. Catherine Street; both charged a 25-cent admission fee. Those with only a dime to spare could ride at Gilman’s Hall at the Mount Royal Hotel on St. Lawrence Street, at Nordheimer’s Hall Velocipede Rink and Riding School above Dion Bros. Billiard Hall, or at the Velocipede Rink and Riding School above McVittie’s Billiard Hall.

Through the rinks and riding schools, would-be cyclists could easily locate bicycle suppliers and local manufacturers. The proprietors of Nordheimer’s had on hand samples of machines built in the city, and for $30.00 took orders for local velocipedes “made of wrought iron . . . and equal for durability to any manufactured in the States.” One could also buy locally manufactured bicycles “superior to any