

Urban History Review Revue d'histoire urbaine

URBAN HISTORY REVIEW
REVUE D'HISTOIRE URBAINE

Glen Norcliffe. *The Ride to Modernity: The Bicycle in Canada, 1869–1900*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001. Pp. 288. Illustrations. \$19.95 paper

Sharon Babaian

Volume 30, Number 2, March 2002

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1015914ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1015914ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine

ISSN

0703-0428 (print)

1918-5138 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Babaian, S. (2002). Review of [Glen Norcliffe. *The Ride to Modernity: The Bicycle in Canada, 1869–1900*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001. Pp. 288. Illustrations. \$19.95 paper]. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 30(2), 55–56. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1015914ar>

crafts, sewing, cooking, drawing, dancing, gymnastics, drama, singing, and poetry. It offered a place where young African Americans could socialize, learn together, and most importantly, according to Williams, feel a sense of race pride and community. Even more important was the construction of the Michigan Avenue YMCA. The YMCA Board of Directors was committed to improving the physical, intellectual, and social well-being of African-American youths. The YMCA performed several crucial functions for the black community of Buffalo. Vocational courses were targeted to careers open to African Americans. There were courses in music appreciation, furnace operation, and household management. The Y acted as an employment agency placing many young blacks into jobs. The Y also promoted good morals by stressing Bible study and by encouraging "Father and Son" and "Mother and Son" banquets to emphasize the importance of family ties. Williams argues that voluntary associations were incredibly important building blocks in keeping the African-American community together.

Both of these books are meticulously researched. Both historians use a diverse range of primary resources including census data, manuscript sources, newspapers, government documents, etc. Additional praise is due Lillian Williams for her outstanding collection of photos from the era which brings such life to her words. I highly recommend these books to the person with a casual interest in urban history and/or in African-American cultural studies as well as to the trained professional. However, I find one thing disturbing. As thought-provoking and important as these books are, we are missing something. No matter how much we hate to admit it, by ignoring race relations the books seem incomplete. Black communities do not develop in a vacuum. To treat them as if they did, seems shamefully naive and dangerously misleading. We just do not seem to get the whole story. By failing to address the white community that surrounds the African-American urban dwellers, the books leave many questions unanswered. What role did the relatively peaceful residents of Brooklyn play in one of the bloodiest race riots in American history which erupted in 1917? If the central premise of the book is that incorporation into the industrial metro-east region forced Brooklyn into a position of permanent economic subservience, how can you not discuss the relationship between core and periphery in greater detail? If Buffalo industrialists chose to hire recent immigrants rather than African Americans in their factories, how can you not at least comment on their reaction? Did they protest? Burn buildings? Attack foreigners on the streets? Did they live in the same neighborhoods? Questions for others to investigate, or maybe merely the rumblings of a comparative race relations historian.

Murray R. Wickett
Department of History
Brock University

Glen Norcliffe. The Ride to Modernity: The Bicycle in Canada, 1869–1900. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001. Pp. 288. Illustrations. \$19.95 paper.

The Ride the Modernity is an interesting and ambitious book. In it, Glen Norcliffe tells the story of the bicycle in Canada over three eventful decades. His primary goal is to place the bicycle, a long neglected technology, in the larger context of the times and to use it to explore and highlight certain aspects of social, cultural and economic change. He focusses particular attention on the bicycle boom of the 1890s, when thousands of Canadians discovered and embraced cycling as the thoroughly modern thing to do. By looking at this period, he argues, it becomes clear that this technology made a significant contribution to social and economic change in Canada.

The narrative is rich in detail and colour, reflecting Professor Norcliffe's extensive knowledge of cycling and cycle history and his love of the pastime. It is abundantly illustrated with over 90 images carefully chosen and captioned to enhance and elaborate on the text. The book itself is organized thematically into eight chapters each of which is divided into several smaller sections by subject. In these chapters, the author tells us a great deal about the technology of the bicycle and its development in Canada. His research on Canadian bicycle patents and manufacturing fills significant gaps in our knowledge and understanding of an important turn-of-the-century industry. His discussion of the social context and impact of cycles – cycle clubs, cycle touring, the good roads movement, women and cycling – helps to illuminate and explain some of the complexities and contradictions of Canadian society at the turn of the century. Based on this lively and informative narrative, it is quite clear that the bicycle was an important technology.

Other aspects of Norcliffe's book, unfortunately, are far less satisfying. His thematic and theoretical framework is problematic. Rather than giving form and substance to his narrative, I found his 'theory' of social and cultural change awkward and confusing. His primary theme is "modernity," which he describes by referring repeatedly to a series of generalizations: modernity seeks change, modernity opposes established ideas and standards, modernity is multi-faceted and differs from one community to the next, modernity in the late 19th century is inextricably linked to industrial change, and modernity builds but it also destroys. None of these statements is untrue, but they are so broad and amorphous that they can be applied with equal accuracy to Protestantism, capitalism or socialism.

Similarly, Norcliffe's use of the theoretical concept of "carrier waves" to explain technological change poses certain problems. He defines carrier waves as clusters of "related innovations," arising from one important invention but which, through their commercial success, exert "a much larger" influence on society. (21) But the application of this concept does not, in my view, clarify or add depth and subtlety to our understanding of the process of innovation. In many instances, it seems only to obscure the obvious. For example, Norcliffe states that the "historical clustering of patents" at the height of the cycling craze in

1897 “reflects the social embeddedness of invention and innovation.” (67) What this means, I think, is that inventors registered the largest number of patents when the bicycle market was booming, to take advantage of the opportunity for profit.

In his determination to demonstrate the singular importance of the bicycle, Norcliffe also makes some rather extravagant claims. He argues that early bicycle trekkers “stretched space by travelling to new frontiers on their bicycles,” creating “a new geography in which travel to the ends of the earth was increasingly the norm.” (222) Yet his own evidence shows that such treks were not at all the norm and that the handful who did undertake such world travels depended on other modes of transportation to get to the furthest reaches of the planet. He also asserts that farming communities “were less given to mechanical invention than the towns of central Canada engaged in making various kinds of machinery.” I think that the historical record of agricultural innovation shows the exact opposite: Canadian farmers were constantly inventing, adapting, and building machines to help them do their work. Some of their innovations were far more significant and enduring than the largely cosmetic refinements offered up by most Canadian bicycle inventors. Finally, he suggests that the bicycle was responsible for turning the countryside into “a recreational space” for city dwellers. (230) This might come as a surprise to historians of sport, recreation, and boat-building in this country who have documented our long tradition of recreational use of the countryside.

I also had problems with Professor Norcliffe’s writing style. He writes almost exclusively in the passive voice which tends to obscure the human actors who are generally at the centre of historical events. When he does use the active voice, it is the ideas, movements, and projects that are acting. Thus, we have innovations occurring, arriving in clusters, developing, and driving industrial modernity. Modernity is a movement and a project that is contested and marches, advances, and otherwise moves forward, all apparently without the help of human beings. When people do appear in the story it is either as part of a specific narrative – the Karl Kreelman tour – or as subjects being acted upon by the forces of modernity. This not only makes the book difficult to read, it also leaves readers with the erroneous impression that technological and cultural change are not the products of human action.

Norcliffe’s “two-wheeled” approach to his subject did not work. The theoretical analysis is not well integrated into the narrative but seems to sit on top of it. As a result, he presents us with detailed theoretical discussions followed, often abruptly, by long passages devoted entirely to descriptive narrative that only tenuously relate to the arguments he is making. The detailed excerpts from Karl Kron’s travels (157–68) tell us a great deal about the state of roads but not how the bicycling community contributed to their improvement or whether Kron saw himself in the vanguard of cultural and technological progress.

For all of its problems, I think that this book is worth a careful read. Norcliffe’s research is first rate and he has documented hitherto unknown events, artifacts, and individuals central to the

history of cycling in Canada. Though his theoretical analysis was not very successful, he nevertheless demonstrates the value of exploring the history of technology and the necessity of placing technological developments in a broad social and cultural context. Given the appalling lack of academic interest in the field of technological history in this country, this alone makes the book an admirable effort.

Sharon Babaian
Canada Science and Technology Museum
Ottawa

Orm Overland. Immigrant Minds, American Identities: Making the United States Home, 1870–1930. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000. Pp., x, 243. Index. US\$34.95.

This book reflects the American immigration historian’s ongoing fascination with the process of integration and even assimilation into American society. Recent works by George Sanchez, Jon Gjerde, Donna Gabaccia, Mario Maffi, and others have described processes of ethnicisation. They agree widely that ethnicity is invented, not some kind of transplanted cultural “essence.” What then can another book on the topic add to this discussion, especially one that emphasizes Western European immigrants that became integrated into American society with seeming effortlessness?

Much indeed, for Overland has made an intelligent and insightful contribution. Unlike other works on ethnicisation, he looks at the process by which immigrant group organizations sought the favour of the wider American society by asserting and even heralding their ethnicities. In these proclamations of ethnicity they did not contest America, but sought to place themselves at its very centre. Each group advocated a particular “foundation story,” claiming a seminal place within American culture. The obvious claims Italians had on Columbus the “discoverer” of America, the Irish on the idea of liberty, or the Norwegians on the status of “frontiersman”, were made alongside more obscure assertions of Washington’s “Italian sentiment” (60), of Columbus’s Jewishness, of German socialism’s affinity with American citizenship, of Dutch “true religion”, of Norwegian “discovery” of fourteenth-century Minnesota. It did not matter that such assertions often were spurious; they constituted a particular strategy of integration.

The book has many strengths. The first is this central thesis. But the many ironies and surprises that support the central thesis make the book a fascinating account. The fluid nature of invented identities undermines any notion of national “essentialism”, but the very phenomenon of “myth making”, argues Overland was an “essential feature of American ethnicity,” the creative identity of white non-English immigrants wishing “inclusion” (21). The drive for inclusion was that of the European immigrant, but “excluded” groups also found paths of integration: African Americans by asserting national partnership with the English, the Chicanos by professing true Spanish descent from