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CYCLING DRESS.

TO THE EDITOR.

SIR,—According to some of our London correspondents people at Home are chuckling over the defeat of the rational dress for cycling purposes. I doubt the truth of this defeat. If true, it is an unmitigated calamity for women, and another instance of men taking advantage of women. As one writer bluntly puts it, the "men would not tolerate this dress for their wives, sisters or sweethearts." Where, now, are the boasted equal rights for women which some men so much prate of? A man cycling in knickerbockers and a woman in skirts remind me of a man and a woman carrying a tapered log. The man will not tolerate the woman to carry the small end. Oh dear no! He takes that himself, and compels her to carry the large end, and bounces her into believing that both are carrying equal weights. In cycling there is a certain amount of work to be done, the same for women as men. Women are endowed with two legs, as is a man, and to demand that in season or out of season, at all times, these shapely limbs shall be hidden and cumbered seems to me to be a reflection upon the wisdom of her Designer, implying that He could not design women with a form good enough to be seen by our hypercritical eyes. Rational dress riders should organise and form clubs of their own, and take heart of grace from the total abstainers and the Salvation Army. How would these people have got on had they been deterred by ridicule and abuse?—I am, &c.,

*RATIONAL.

Dunedin, July 2.



[ARTEFACTS]

The wheels of history

How the quest for a nicely fitting knicker suit changed the world.

IN MAY OF 1894, THE NEW ZEALAND RATIONAL DRESS ASSOCIATION (NZRDA) LAUNCHED IN CHRISTCHURCH.

The aim was to “bring about that change in women’s dress which her wider life and increased activity seem to demand”. Basically, it was about the right to wear pants. The timing makes sense. Eight months earlier, New Zealand had become the first self-governing country in the world to grant women access to a “wider life” in the form of the vote. But just as important was the invention of one simple machine: the modern bicycle.

Bicycles and rebellion go hand in hand. An unverified quote (supposedly from the CEO of a large bank) currently circulating social media reads: “A cyclist is a disaster for the country’s economy.” And a boon for equality, Mr CEO. Bicycles set free those who may otherwise be hemmed in, by age, by income, by traffic (as anyone who’s done the inner-city can attest), and, in the late 1800s, by gender. Yep, before it allowed horny pre-driving-age teenagers to escape home, the bicycle was a conduit for women’s liberation. As was written in *Munsey’s*

Magazine in 1896 (and quoted by Sue Macy in her book *Wheels of Change*), “To men, the bicycle in the beginning was merely a new toy, another machine added to the long list of devices they knew in their work and play. To women, it was a steed upon which they rode into a new world.”

During the Victorian era, women in places like New Zealand were mostly relegated to the domestic sphere, an orbit with the kitchen, kids and cleaning at its centre. When bicycles entered the scene, they offered a way out (for the middle class, at least). They were a taste of the lives men were living, ones with hobbies and travel and the giddy, swooping joy of speed. Feathers were thoroughly ruffled by this steed-riding. A lady could now roam unchaperoned. Worse, cycling would expose her ankles! Worse still, a woman astride a bicycle with her legs spread and the world before her did not align with notions of the way a lady should be. Her morality was at stake. Especially when said ladies realised that riding in a heavy skirt was a stupid idea.

We’ll come back to that. First, a brief history of the bicycle, up to the late 19th century. Long before the advent of full suspension,

or ebikes, or hard tails or commuters or fat or folding or single speed rides, German baron Karl von Drais invented the pedal-less foot-propelled draisine, or dandy horse. The year was 1817. This initial precarious contraption was improved in the form of the velocipede (or ‘boneshaker’, for its juddering wood and iron wheels), which had pedals and cranks directly to the axle of the front wheel. Arriving in the 1860s, these were the first bicycles to circulate widely in Aotearoa. Next came the penny farthing (massive front wheel, tiny in the back, solid rubber wheel-wrapping), which allowed for higher speeds and improved comfort. Penny farthings were terrifying, though, because it didn’t take much to unbalance them, and the rider had a long way to fall.

It was the next evolution that really allowed women to get amongst the two-wheeled action. The safety bicycle was the first version of the bike we know and love today; invented in 1885, they had a basic gearing system, which meant the front and back wheels could be the same size. They were, obviously, safer, and, crucially, could be pedalled by someone in a big skirt. Women began to take to them. Public outrage ensued.



AN UNIDENTIFIED CYCLIST POSES WITH A WOMAN'S BICYCLE IN FRONT OF FALSE BACKDROP, PROBABLY IN THE CHRISTCHURCH REGION. MACLAY, ADAM HENRY PEARSON, 1873-1955; NEGATIVES. REF: 1/2-185696-G. ALEXANDER TURNBULL LIBRARY, WELLINGTON, NEW ZEALAND.

“before it allowed horny pre-driving-age teenagers to escape home, the bicycle was a conduit for women’s liberation”


Women of the day were meant to be demure, wallflowers, and were not to draw attention to themselves. Riding a bike was attention-grabbing at its most scandalous, and Miss Coad of Christchurch was the perfect, high-speed example of this behaviour. The *Otago Witness* of 30 July 1896 reported that, despite having been warned by the arresting constable, Miss Coad “dashed through pedestrians in a manner that was not at all safe ... if ladies claimed equal rights, they must accept equal liabilities. She would be fined 10s, with costs 7s, the usual penalty.”

Miss Coad had company in Christchurch. It was here, the home of Kate Sheppard, that the suffrage movement was gathering momentous speed, and it was doing so astride a bicycle. Cycling was becoming aligned with other women’s issues, like voting rights. In 1892, Australasia’s first all-female cycling club, the Atalanta Ladies Cycling Club, was formed by eight female cyclists in Christchurch. They included Sheppard herself, as well as Alice Burn, another suffragette and the first woman in New Zealand to pedal 100 miles in a single day. She became better known, however, for her activism in the name of dress reform - that is, the fight to wear trousers in public, especially while on a bike.

By riding bicycles, women were challenging perceptions around what they could (and should) do. They were demonstrating a more daring future. But this future would need an outfit change, stat. Neither corsets and exercise, nor skirts and bike machinery, were a happy match. Plus, the many-layered Victorian skirts of the day could weigh up to 11 kilograms. Bugger that. Enter the “rational dress” or “dress reform” movement. The question shifted, from whether women should ride bikes, to how they should ride them, and in what.


Rational clothing solutions included shortened or split skirts (which looked un-split when a woman was standing), and convertible skirts which could be gathered at the hem. Knickerbockers, the billowing earliest version of pants, came onto the scene for ladies, either to the ankle or, scandalously, shorter, exposing the lower leg.

Polite society was unimpressed. One male letter writer to the *Marlborough Express* called the whole thing “bunkum”, noting that, as far as knickerbockers went, “to the average masculine ... eye they are most weirdly hideous.” Debate ensued among women too; skirt splitting debate, to be precise. According to one commentator in



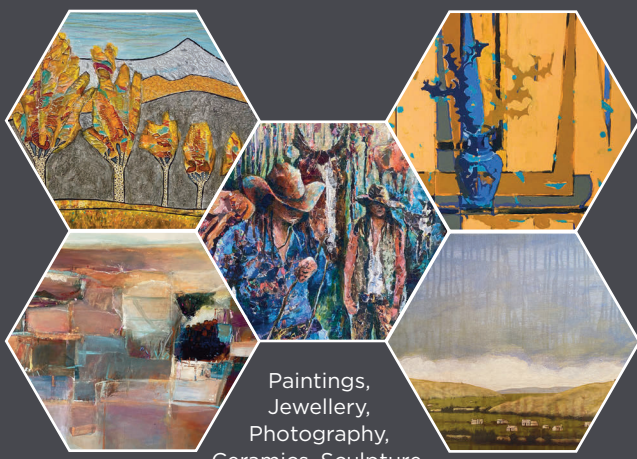
Springtime

What was old is new, renewed, dew, budding, ancient and green.


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MAKING THE SKIRTS WORK ALONG A ROAD IN CHRISTCHURCH. WEBB, STEFFANO, 1880-1967: COLLECTION OF NEGATIVES.
REF: 1/1-004283-G. ALEXANDER TURNBULL LIBRARY, WELLINGTON, NEW ZEALAND.

a July 1890 issue of *New Zealand Graphic and Ladies' Journal*, the question was “bifurcating feminine opinion as distinctly as the skirt itself is divided”. There were strong opinions all round.

The outlandish knickerbocker was very nearly the demise of the suffrage movement. A few of the members of the Atalanta Cycling Club caused a scandal by going on an excursion in knickerbockers soon after establishing the club. They were subject to verbal abuse and stone throwing, and were banned from pubs and hotels. The “knickerbocker scandal”, as it was known, began to earn the cycling club a radical label, and with the decision on the women’s right to vote just around the corner, the group reigned it in.

But by the end of 1893, the vote was won, and the knickerbockers came back out. The dress reform movement roared back to life. It was decided that a dedicated organisation

was needed for change to take hold, and the New Zealand Rational Dress Association (NZRDA) was founded the next year with Alice Burn elected president, and Kate Wilkinson vice president.

It was a mirroring of what was going on in the UK, where the Society for Rational Dress had launched in 1881. In Aotearoa, the women and men involved in the movement were not afraid to put their reputations at stake for a woman’s right to wear pants in public. Wilkinson herself wore breeches and a veil for her wedding to her husband James in 1894. Earlier, the couple had written in a (very long) pamphlet on the inequalities of dress that, “unhampered by skirt or corset, women would have greater freedom of movement, improved beauty and a healthy undistorted form”.

The revolution was proposed in stages: first, get rid of corsets (imagine trying to ride uphill with your ribs bandaged tight). Then,

divide the undergarment and shorten the outer skirt. Next, adopt Turkish trousers or a divided outer skirt, to be worn with a long tunic and knickers. Eventually, the Wilkinsons suggested, everyone should accept a “nicely fitting knicker suit for work and exercise”. Not everyone was outraged by the idea. The Cash Amateur Club, Christchurch’s largest cycling club, voted to support women’s rational dress. And dress reform wasn’t just for women – men began doing away with coat tails and baggy pants, which tended to get caught in moving bike parts.

Lots of ladies, however, while sympathetic to the movement, did continue to wear skirts when they cycled, which got caught in chains and spokes, causing accidents. There were designs to try and get around the problem: dress guards and skirt clips, draw-stringed safety skirts which were supposed to defy chain-catching. Other modifications were aimed at perceived risk of bike saddles



BEFORE THE "KNICKERBOCKER SCANDAL". MEMBERS OF THE ATALANTA CLUB [CA. 1892], INCLUDING ALICE BURN, PICTURED ON THE RIGHT.
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“the vote was won, and the knickerbockers came back out”

turning women into sex-obsessed horndogs, with “hygienic” saddles designed to prevent accidental stimulation.

Depending on your point of view, it turns out some of the worrying may have been justified. Women had their two-wheeled ticket to freedom, and the ramifications were explosive. They could go farther afield, which meant their choice of male acquaintances broadened. Hallelujah! According to geneticist Steve Jones, the intermingling of genes which eventuated from young people, men and women alike, having bikes, was unprecedented. In his book, *The Language of the Genes*, Jones writes that there is “little doubt that the most important event in recent human evolution was the invention of the bicycle”.

So bikes (and women riding them) were an evolutionary leap. Today, however, according to advocacy group Flocks On Bikes, there’s still work to be done around

the “to-skirt-or-not-to-skirt” question. The Flocks movement, which started in Wellington, is angled at getting more women on bikes on the daily - in skirts. Or whatever we want, really. The Frockers’ kaupapa is that cycling has no uniform. Lycra is not mandatory. You can ride to the pub, you can ride to work, you can ride in a dress or skinny jeans, or while holding a coffee (that last one might take some practice). Much like the rational dresser, “flocks” (Flocker communities) all over Australasia are running a host of events, like Love to Ride date rides, bike maintenance workshops and Frocktober celebrations, all to encourage the normalisation of everyday cycling in everyday clothes, including skirts. Like a rolling wheel, it’s come full circle.

Bicycles are, as the writer Laura Williamson points out in her book *The Bike and Beyond*, “time machines”. They’re a link to the past but also, at a time when conversations

around climate change, health and fuel prices are peaking, they are taking us into the future.

The words of Mrs. Ormiston Chant, written for the *Golden Bay Argus* in 1899, ring true today: “When cycling for women has become a matter of commonplace, the dreaded ‘wild woman’ in rational dress will be found to be quite tame, and far more reasonable than the ‘supposed woman’.” Skirts, knickerbockers and Lycra will come and they will go, but may the bicycle continue to be a ticket to freedom for everyone, and anyone, with the craving and the will.

GEORGIA MERTON