



Montreal

by Louis Godbout

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Montreal is located on an island in the St. Lawrence River in the Canadian province of Quebec. With a population of 1.8 million in the city proper and an additional 1.7 million in the metropolitan area, it is the second largest city in Canada. It is also--after Paris--the second largest French-speaking city in the world.

Bilingualism is extremely common, as there are large minorities of citizens who speak English and other languages. The city counts four major universities, two French and two English, as well as a large number of technical schools and junior colleges.

Early History

First visited by French explorers in 1535, the site was noticed as a promising location for a trading post. It had a good natural harbor and was the furthest point inland that could be reached by boat, as white water rapids lay upstream.

Montreal was founded in 1642 (as Ville-Marie) by a society of devout French Catholics intent on converting and "civilizing" the native peoples.

The first recorded case of sodomy occurred soon after, in 1648. As only one Frenchman--a drummer of the regiment sent to protect the settlers--was arrested, it is likely that his partner was a native whose conversion had gone awry and who had escaped. Sent to Quebec City for trial, the drummer was given a choice between execution and taking on the job of executioner. He chose the latter option.

In 1663, the entire island was granted as a fief to another religious group, the Messieurs de Saint-Sulpice of Paris. As *seigneur* or lord of Montreal, their representative, François Dollier de Casson, was the first to draw up a plan for the city. Although surrounding lands were fertile, the fur trade was the main activity and the population was disproportionately male.

It is therefore not surprising that the second and most detailed case of sodomy in New France should again concern the military. One lieutenant, Nicolas Daucy, called St-Michel, and two soldiers were accused of this crime in 1691.

The local bailiff started an inquest, but Daucy refused to cooperate in spite of threats, noting that his case was beyond the purview of the Montreal judiciary and demanding to be tried in Quebec City. Surprisingly, he was aware of his legal status as a sodomite. The Quebec authorities started the procedures from scratch and condemned him to banishment and a fine, while his partners were sentenced to continue serving in the army for a few years.

These sentences might seem lenient in view of the prescribed punishment of death by fire, but such executions never occurred in the colony and only rarely in France. Exceptional measures were nevertheless



Top: A view of the Montreal skyline.
Above: Jean Drapeau, the rabidly homophobic mayor of Montreal from 1954-1957 and 1960-1986. The image of the Montreal Skyline appears under the GNU Free Documentation License. The image of Mayor Drapeau courtesy The National Archives of Canada.

prescribed: to avoid scandal, the testimony was ordered to be sewn inside a bag and sealed.

Nineteenth-Century Montreal

No other cases of sodomy have been discovered until 1839, long after the fall of the city to the British in 1760. Two apprentices were caught having sex in the bed they shared.

Montreal was by then a busy port ruled by rich Scottish and English merchants. It received goods destined for the fast developing colony of Upper Canada (now Ontario) and exported lumber and grain to Europe. It was also developing as a manufacturing center. As such, the city grew to a size where young men could escape their families and gain some independence, both financial and sexual, as wage laborers.

These conditions no doubt contributed to the emergence of a male homosexual subculture, the first trace of which appears in 1869, when the police identified a store that served as a meeting place for homosexuals.

This discovery and the arrest of the owner spurred a crackdown and in the following days a man known for making indecent propositions to soldiers was arrested and fined. Other meeting places of homosexual men were occasionally mentioned in newspaper reports.

Outdoor cruising at the Champs-de-Mars, a promenade behind City Hall, was popular for decades in the second half of the nineteenth century, even though entrapment was frequent and gay bashings sometimes occurred under the complicit surveillance of the police.

By 1891 another city park, Saint-Helen's Island, provided an alternative to amateurs of outdoor fun. Gross indecency charges were first laid against a male couple having a tryst there in 1891, but this park was to have its heyday in the postwar years when many homosexuals frequented the Montreal Swim Club.

The Earlier Twentieth Century

In 1916, a male bordello that had existed for at least three years was closed and several people charged.

But for those who were wary of public cruising and reluctant to visit the city's Red Light district, a few private networks of gays and lesbians appeared, such as the literary and artistic circle created by Elsa Gidlow and her gay friend Roswell George Mills. In the French community, a similar literary association appeared in the 1930s around Marcel Valois and other admirers of Proust and Gide. Curiously, however, the first locally written novel to broach the subject, *Orange sur mon corps* by André Béland, was not published until 1944.

In 1945, the rape and murder of a nine-year-old boy in what was to be for a long time the city's favorite gay cruising spot, an area of Mount Royal Park dubbed "the jungle," led to witch hunts and a reinforcement of the public perception of homosexuality as evil.

Worse yet, Jean Drapeau, the lawyer assigned to defend the murderer (who was hanged), was to become the longest serving mayor of Montreal, after launching his political career as a crusader for morality. Rabidly homophobic, he had most of the bushes and many trees on the mountain cut down to prevent cruising, causing serious erosion problems. Later, he would repeatedly order the police to "clean up" the city, that is, crack down on homosexual meeting places, especially before the world fair of 1967 and the Olympics of 1976.

In 1954, the first sociological study of *The Homosexual in Urban Society*, as was titled Maurice Leznoff's Master's thesis, offered a fascinating look at the "overt" and "covert" lives of gay Montrealers. It underlined the extent and importance of private networks, but also of bars such as the Tropical Club and restaurants

such as the Diana Grill in creating a sense of community. Although gay men and lesbians had to rely on word of mouth or on the sensationalistic reports of the "yellow press" to find these establishments, some, such as the Monarch Café, had incredibly long lives, lasting from 1928 to the late 1980s.

There is no trace of an organized movement in Montreal until the late 1960s even though many individuals had contacts with the homophile organizations of Toronto, the United States, and France, as evidenced by copies of *ONE* and *Arcadie* which have been given by locals to the Quebec Gay Archives.

But if political organizations did not exist, commercial ones did, especially in the field of physique photography. Through the publications of the Weider brothers, who had made a fortune in the weight-training business, and through the work of photographer Alan B. Stone and his Mark One Studio, pictures of Montreal muscle boys were disseminated worldwide.

Gay Liberation

Decriminalization of sodomy in 1969, combined with calls for gay liberation in the countercultural publication *Mainmise*, led to the creation of the Front de libération homosexuelle in 1971, the first of many gay liberation organizations.

Many of these organizations were based at universities, the most important one being Gay McGill (later Gay Montreal), which organized monthly dances that attracted thousands. As elsewhere, lesbians in these groups reacted to the misogyny and sexism of gay men by creating their own organizations, but an additional problem unique to Montreal was the split between French and English communities.

In the early 1970s, the English groups were generally more active and politically in tune with the American movements, a situation that has tentatively been explained by the fact that many French homosexuals devoted their energies to the cause of national independence rather than to that of gay liberation. But when events of importance occurred, both communities mobilized, as they did for what is known as Montreal's "Stonewall": the 1977 raid on the Truax bar.

The Truax Bar Raid

Police harassment of gay men and lesbians had been frequent from the 1950s onwards, with raids on bars and baths being its most sensational manifestation. By 1976 this situation had led to the formation of the Comité homosexuel anti-répression, later to become the Association pour les droits des gai(e)s du Québec (ADGQ). When Truax was raided, the response was rapid. The following night a major downtown intersection was blocked by protestors and a riot ensued.

Surprisingly, the media took the side of the homosexuals. The heavy-handedness of the police and the application of morals laws from Victorian times, such as the law on Bawdy Houses used to incriminate the patrons, were deemed unacceptable. Contrary to previous raids, most of the accused pleaded not guilty and were eventually acquitted.

Political Success

The timing could not have been better, for legislators were then studying an amendment to Quebec's Charter of Rights that would ban discrimination based on sexual orientation. Pressured by the ADGQ and gauging the public to be supportive, the government of the province acted rapidly and in December 1977, Montreal was one of the first cities in the world to include such a clause in its charter.

Truax did not mark the end of raids, but it did galvanize the community. The ADGQ was greatly strengthened. It went on to publish the first long-running gay magazine in Montreal, *Le Berdache*. It launched the first successful discrimination lawsuit against the Catholic school board, which had refused to

lease them space. It also continued to organize legal support for the Truxx arrestees.

By the mid 1980s, however, the expansion of gay public space and a greater public tolerance for homosexuality had a demobilizing effect and the ADGQ disbanded.

The AIDS Crisis

Mayor Drapeau's party was ousted in 1986 and was replaced by an administration that included the first openly gay city counselor, Raymond Blain. He was instrumental in providing space for a gay and lesbian community center, but the new focus of activism was already by then the fight against AIDS, complications from which he himself died in 1992.

The Montreal AIDS Resource Centre (an outcrop of Gay Montreal) founded in 1984, was the first of a plethora of organizations that offered information, care, and support to those affected. Several individual doctors and researchers were also instrumental in bringing the health care system (which is public and universal) to deal adequately with the epidemic. Because of AIDS, media coverage of homosexuality became commonplace.

Tolerance of Homosexuality

The most significant source of progress for gay and lesbian liberation in the 1980s and 1990s was probably television. Contrary to the rest of Canada, where American television prevails, Quebec in general and Montreal in particular is especially fond of homegrown soap operas and mini-series broadcast at prime time. Very early in the 1980s, these sported sympathetic gay and lesbian characters and broached such important themes as coming out.

Openness to homosexuality was presented as modern and progressive to the French population eager to distance itself from the *grande noirceur*, or great darkness, the period prior to the 1960s when they were poorer, less educated, and living under the rule of the once powerful Catholic Church, which controlled education and other social services such as health care.

Today

Most Montrealers take pride in their openness to sexuality and look in horror at organized anti-homosexual crusaders in English Canada and in the United States. Province wide, Quebec politicians from all parties are generally friendly to gay causes, as shown by the unanimous approval of a Civil Union law (equivalent to marriage and allowing for adoption and parental rights) in 2002.

Locally, city officials encourage the development of a thriving gay village replete with bars, stripper joints, and saunas. The city helps to promote the *Divers/Cité* pride festival and even "circuit party" events, such as the *Black and Blue*. Official support was instrumental in bringing the Gay Games to Montreal in 2006.

Three free monthly periodicals--*Fugues*, *RG* and *Être*--cater to gay men and lesbians, in addition to the four alternative weeklies that give adequate coverage of queer cultural events, such as *Image & Nation*, the oldest and largest gay and lesbian film festival in Canada.

A plethora of groups and organizations--from sports leagues to biker clubs to libraries and archives--make for a vibrant glbtq community. Most of these organizations are members of a political umbrella group called *La Table de concertation des lesbiennes et des gais du Québec*, which was the major force behind the successful lobbying for spousal rights.

Sadly, such victories have been politically demobilizing, as was shown in May 2003 by the lack of reaction to a raid on a stripper bar by the morality squad of the Montreal police, the first such action against a gay

venue in nine years. Although the gay press has been unanimous in condemning the police and of their use of the traditional anti-homosexual arsenal of antiquated "Bawdy house" and "Gross Indecency" laws, very little grassroots support for the accused has emerged, whereas some conservative gays have gone so far as to approve of the police action.

Most Montrealers, comforted by the relative freedom of the past decade, see the raid as an aberration rather than as a threat to sexual liberation.

In spite of this apparent aloofness in the face of police repression, a number of Montreal's gay and lesbian organizations are fighting homophobia as never before. One of the largest and better financed, Gai-Écoute, is confronting lingering hostile attitudes wherever they may be, even in the world of sports, on which it has recently focused with an advertising campaign showing two hockey players kissing.

Another group, the GRIS, is sending hundreds of gay and lesbian volunteers to high schools to answer questions about homosexuality and to study the attitudes of students towards gay men and lesbians.

Finally, perhaps because Montreal has become a haven for many gay and lesbian refugees and immigrants who have contributed enormously to its community, a local chapter of Amnesty International has specialized in taking on cases of discrimination and persecution on the basis of sexual orientation in the third world.

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Québec's official site for gay tourism: www.bonjourquebec.com/anglais/idees_vac/gai.html

Montreal Gay Village Tourist Information at the Gay Chamber of Commerce: www.ccgq.ca/

About the Author

Louis Godbout is a collector and amateur historian. He is a longtime member of the Archives gaies du Québec and has participated in the preparation of several exhibits in Montreal. He has also produced three

multi-media lectures that reflect his varied interests: *Beaux enfans de Sodome*, on eighteenth-century sodomitical imagery; *Ébauches et débauches*, on gay French literature from 1859 to 1939; and *Le rideau rose*, on French gay and lesbian theater before 1969.