

Motoring And National Victories

The Gordon Bennett Cup at the Beginning of the Twentieth Century

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ABSTRACT

Every year between 1900 and 1905, the greatest European nations clashed in international motoring competitions for preeminence on the road. The industrial rivalries in this economic sector, stoked by international motoring competitions, saw France, the United Kingdom, Germany and Italy emerge as the primary leaders of the motoring revolution. These cups had at their source the media attention initiated by the American James Gordon Bennett, the owner and founder of the *International Herald Tribune* newspaper, which covered the events. The outlines were thus redrawn for European technical modernity, as it applied to the rapidly growing phenomenon of individual motorized mobility, whose promotion was ensured by the mass-circulating press.



Gordon Bennett Cup.

The “Gordon Bennett Cup,” crafted by the jeweler Aucoc, is the allegorical trophy of progress. Today it decorates the wood-paneled Gordon Bennett salon, on the mezzanine level of the Automobile Club de France building, located on the Place de la Concorde in Paris. In the early twentieth century, its conquest brought the European nations together, while setting them against each other, in an annual motor race with considerable repercussions. The portrait of James Gordon Bennett, Jr. (1841-1918)—the son of the American press magnate who founded the *New York Herald*—goes hand in hand with the prestigious memory of this major event—the beginnings of motor racing—as also of motoring. Before settling in Paris in 1877, on the other side of the Atlantic he became the youngest commodore of the New York Yacht Club, and won the first transoceanic race in 1866. Once established at the head of his father’s newspaper, his first editorial project was mounting Stanley’s famous expedition to Africa in 1869 to find Dr. Livingstone.

The Gordon Bennett Cup is the source behind the structure of contemporary international motor sport, as the FIA (Fédération internationale de l'automobile) emanated from its founding bodies, especially the AIACR (Association internationale des automobiles clubs reconnus), established in 1904. Similarly, the choice of the principle of closed road circuits was behind the Automobile Club de France's first Grand Prix held on the Sarthe circuit in 1906, the ancestor of current Formula 1 Grand Prix.

As was the case for the America's Cup in yachting, the country that won the trophy was tasked with organizing the following year's race. The regulations of the annual Gordon Bennett Cup—established by the sport commission of the pioneering Automobile Club de France, founded in 1895 on the heels of the Paris-Bordeaux-Paris race—stipulated that only three cars per country could participate, and had to be enrolled by each country's officially recognized bodies. Every automobile had to sport the national colour, which thereafter was traditionally maintained as blue for France, white for Germany, green for the British Isles, black for Italy, and red for the United States (this colour later became Italy's).

The fact that these automobile exhibitions, which had been produced only for a few decades, took on the quality of a demonstration for the general public is clearly shown by the role of the mass-circulating printed press in promoting such events. Additionally, nationalist considerations fueled these cups. In 1901, the Paris-Berlin race had been won by Henri Fournier in a Mors, in a climate of chauvinistic one-upmanship fed by French desire for revenge against Germany for its victory in 1870.

The Gordon Bennett Cup was thus an occasion for France, the United Kingdom, Germany and Italy to be seen as the primary leaders of the motoring revolution. The United States, Switzerland and Belgium would soon take part in the jousting on the roadways. In accordance with the industry's degree of advancement at the time, the hierarchy first identified a French supremacy, corresponding to its position as the world's leading carmaker, which it held until 1907-1908. France was victorious four times, twice with Panhard & Levassor brand cars, and twice with Richard-Brasier brand cars, including the most recent, thus illustrating its domination in the burgeoning world of motoring. After the victory of a Napier driven by Selwyn Edge in 1903, the circuit was set up in the United Kingdom, more specifically in Ireland, around the town of Athy southwest of Dublin. In 1904, victory belonged to a German car, a Mercedes driven by Camille Jenatton, the famous Belgian driver who in 1899 had been the first to pass 100 km/h with an electric car, the *La Jamais contente* [The Never Satisfied]. The next race was therefore held in Germany, northwest of Frankfurt am Main in Taunus, where the French driver Léon Théry won with an average speed surpassing 100 km/h. The race returned back to France in 1905 for a final installment on a circuit in Auvergne, which for the occasion was mapped on a scale of 1/100,000 for the first time, by the Michelin brothers. Théry was victorious again, which is why the trophy is conserved in Paris.

Through their lists of winners, these cups demonstrate the Europeanization of motoring competitions as well as, according to witnesses, confirmation of the "civilizing mission" of industrial powers, and the "universal benefits" of motoring. The profound coherence of motoring as a social revolution, one soon to be commonplace, was felt during these sporting shows. Pierre Souvestre, the first historian of motoring, incidentally chose this landmark as the title for the fifth section of his pioneering and monumental *Histoire de l'automobile* (Paris: Dunod, 1907): "The Gordon Bennett Century" (p. 800). That an American provided this impetus is ultimately a fine historical irony. We can note the same phenomenon with regard to conquest of the air, for in 1906, the "Coupe Aéronautique Gordon Bennett," which continues to this day, was established based on the same principle, with an inaugural competition departing from Paris and the Tuileries gardens.

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