French Cycling
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Before France was torn apart by the First World War it experienced the golden age of the *Belle Epoque*. Following the political and social upheavals of the Dreyfus Affair in the 1890s, which had for a time seemed almost to threaten the safety of the Republican regime, destabilized by attacks from the extreme right and doubting the validity of its own political, moral and social principles, France entered a period of relative calm and prosperity. As well as the success of the movement of ‘Republican defence’ in favour of the Republic that strengthened the regime around the turn of the century, a pause in the long-standing *guerre franco-française* between left and right over clericalism and anticlericalism seemed to have been reached with the separation of Church and state in 1905. However, it was also a period of change socially, economically, culturally and politically, and in geo-political terms, the years before 1914 were marked by growing concerns over France’s place in the world and over its relationship with the old enemy, Germany.

As well as a *Belle Epoque* in art and culture – the period saw a flowering of creativity in music, painting, literature and the decorative arts – the early twentieth century was marked by rapid economic development in terms of accelerating industrialization and the social changes concomitant with the growth of industry such as the rise of a significant working class and a growing urbanization of society. The historian Francis Démier describes France as having experienced a ‘belle époque de l’économie’ as well as the better-known era of prosperity and creativity that the term generally references (Démier, 2000). And Démier also reminds us that France during this period was the crucible of a new culture brought by technology, industry and the modernization of society towards ‘une culture de masse’.

The confidence of France during the early years of the *Belle Epoque* was symbolized most strongly by its hosting of the *Exposition Universelle* in 1900. As one of the first truly global ‘mega-events’, the *Exposition Universelle* showcased France’s genius to the world. It was hosted by the *ville lumière*, Paris, and housed in the novel and avant-garde surround-
ings of the Grand and Petit palais just off the Champs-Elysées. Following
the similar Exhibition of 1889, which had startled the world with the
Eiffel Tower as well as with examples of France’s growing industrial and
 technological accomplishment (including the advances made in bicycle
 manufacture, of course), the Exhibition of 1900 presented a bilan of the
 previous century’s developments, while looking forward to a glorious
 future. Included in the programme of the exhibition were Concours inter-
nationaux d’exercices physiques et de sports, reflecting the serious status
 of sport and health in the minds of the French elite.

In this chapter, we shall consider how the Belle Epoque of industry
 and technology was reflected in the cycle manufacturing sector, as devel-
 opments in the production of bicycles fed into the success of the French
 economy, and as evolving trends in transport towards motorized cycles
 allowed the technologies of two-wheeled vehicles to continue their contri-
 bution to the modernization of French industrial processes. More
 specifically, we shall discuss the performance of the famous Manufacture
 française des armes et cycles based in the heavily cycle-oriented indus-
 trial hinterland of Saint-Etienne, and then look at another emblematic
 French company born out of the boom in cycling in the late nineteenth
 century, Michelin. Following this brief exposition of how cycling had
 become substantially significant within industry, we shall discuss the
 founding of the Tour de France and the running of the race in the years
 preceding the First World War. As has been hinted at in the preceding
 chapter, the Tour de France was born out of a commercial and journal-
 istic conflict between two competing sports newspapers around the turn
 of the century, one of which – L’Auto-Vélo of Henri Desgrange – repre-
 sented the interests of the industrialists of the cycle sector. The creation
 of the Tour de France in 1903 and the ways in which it developed during
 its formative years 1904–14 shed light on the imbrications between cycle
 sport, the sports media, technology and industry. Thirdly, we shall
 discuss the ways in which other forms of cycling, radically different from
 the professional racing of the Tour, also reflected the contribution of the
 bicycle to the modernization of French society. Rather than racing, utility
 cycling was seen by the army as an innovation that could improve effi-
 ciency and help prepare France for eventual conflict with Germany. And
 touring cycling, although somewhat in the shade of sport-spectacle,
 nevertheless continued its development, both within the evolving federal
 structures of the UVF and the Touring Club de France, but also, as we
 shall discuss in the final section of the chapter in consideration of the tire-
 less promotion of cycle touring undertaken by Paul de Vivie, as a
 philosophy both of cycling and of life.
The cycle industry: a mature productive system

Although the early hey-day of vélocipédie among fashionable Parisian society had seen the workshops of the Compagnie parisienne des vélocipèdes producing up to 200 machines a month in 1869–70, in the mid-1880s proper French cycle manufacturers were still rare and the numbers of cycles produced were low, as the sport retained its restricted social recruitment. Individual frame- and cycle-makers had always existed in isolation in the provinces in towns and areas where cycling had taken an early hold, such as Angers and Bordeaux, but around 1885 the notable (small-scale) manufacturers were firms such as Meyer (Paris), Lagrange (Autun), Tinfranet (Tours) and the Gauthier brothers in Saint-Etienne. After the showcasing of cycling at the 1889 Exposition Universelle, companies such as Clément, Peugeot-frères, Michelin and Rochet began to develop strategies to reduce the British domination of the cycle industry. By 1895, however, the new forms of motorized transport, the motorcycle and the automobile, were beginning to make their appearance and some manufacturers transferred their attentions to these much more expensive products. By 1905 the aeroplane had taken on the role of symbol of modernity for leisure, sport, transport and war, and once again the focus of industry shifted to reflect new fads among the rich and new imperatives of technology. A minor slump in 1907 encouraged manufacturers of bicycles, motorcycles and automobiles to consider the long-term viability of their work in the transport sector, producing a rationalization of the plethora of firms that had grown up during the different phases of growth for the various products, and by the end of the decade the main lines of the sector were established. The war economy of 1914–18 disrupted production and altered priorities, but also forced the introduction of new approaches and management.

The economic and industrial background

Eugen Weber was one of the first to comment on the way in which cycling and all its connected activities – technical, industrial, commercial, media, advertising – seem to have encouraged not only the sports-mania of the late nineteenth century, but also the economic prosperity that created the true Belle Époque. The conceptualization of ties between sport and business were even suggested by Henri Desgrange, as Weber points out, as the physical regeneration of French society was linked to the recovery of the economy. Weber also considers the parallels between the organization of professional cycle sport into a star-system with an underlying drive for performance, records, speeds and distances, and the positivism,
productivism and Taylorism that underlay French economic development (Weber, 1987).

The traditional view of French industry in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is that it was backward and archaic, suffering from a retard technologique and a lack of business dynamism, hindered by demographic stagnation and the dominance of agriculture and rural society. Although reassessments of this view (e.g. Magraw, 1999) are now more frequent, and tend to suggest that not everything was quite so bad, pointing in particular to the new industries that arose from cycling, it is certainly the case that the bicycle business, then that of motorcycles and cars, and finally that of aviation appeared as dynamic, modern, innovative industries in the humdrum French economy of the 1890s and 1900s. Despite France’s wealth in the Belle Epoque, and its technological strengths, Michel Winock, for example, underlines that it should still be considered as a ‘pre-industrial’ society because of the meagre opportunities for profit afforded by stagnant demography, and points out that the economic development of the late 1890s and 1900s was heavily dependent on exports (2002: 54). Contemporary analysts of the French cycle industry still bemoaned the blow dealt to French companies by the Franco-Prussian war:

Pendant que nous luttions contre les Allemands, les Anglais, calmes dans leur île, se saisissaient du vélocipède parisien et le perfectionnaient avec le soin jaloux qui les caractérise […] si bien qu’en 1872, quand nous pûmes enfin respirer, on vit revenir de Londres l’instrument en France, avec des modifications peu importantes toutefois, mais très utiles. (Giffard, 1891: 13)

In something of a minor revisionist vein, the economic historian François Caron has suggested that the French economy, at least from the mid-1900s to 1914, enjoyed a boom that was facilitated by the attainment of a critical level of urbanization and industrialization and by a culture of ‘industrial creativity’ exemplified and driven by the bicycle, car and aviation industries (Caron, 1992). For Caron, the phenomenal success of these industries in the 1890s and 1900s demonstrated no French conservatism or archaism, but rather an ‘innovative society’ receptive to change and capable of rewarding risk. The bicycle, car and aeroplane were thus typical examples of a French industrial creativity whose signal strength was the capacity to invent new products and, crucially, in dialogue with new consumers, to progressively improve their quality. Caron thus sees the social, commercial and industrial/technological success of cycling as an example of receptive pioneer consumers working with innovative entrepreneurs, skilled managers and workers and a sporting–media–advertising–industrial complex to maintain a virtuous circle of creative
supply. Much – but not all – of Caron’s analysis fits with the history of the Manufacture française des armes et cycles and Michelin presented below: new-entry entrepreneurs with high technical expertise; severe competition and high failure rates; sound management necessary for success; strength in numbers through risks shared with other businesses; full use of workers’ specialist expertise; importance of a reputation for quality products; and the primacy of sport, press and advertising in promoting business. Whatever the weaknesses of the French economy in the 1890s and 1900s, the cycle industry at least was a success story.

La Manufacture française des armes et cycles
One of the earliest large-scale cycle manufacturers in France was the Manufacture française des armes et cycles (MFAC) based in Saint-Etienne, a town and region that, as André Vant (1993) has described, was a key centre of the French cycle industry. The links between the production of light weaponry and bicycle components are well known: not only can the machine-tools required be shared between the two ranges of products, but, in times of peace at least, the seasonal demands for guns and bicycles are complementary (in France in the 1880s guns sold best between June and October, whereas the season for bicycles was February to August). MFAC was originally founded in 1885 and was initially only concerned with the sale and repair of imported British bicycles, but in 1888 its famous Hirondelle subsidiary was created, charged with producing French-made cycles for the growing market. It was apparently a visit to Saint-Etienne by the famous Humber sales representative H.O. Duncan in 1885 that stimulated the birth of the industry in the region. Duncan demonstrated the great superiority of the new Humber ‘safety’ by riding up and down the hills around the town with considerably more ease than his French hosts, still accustomed to penny-farthings. During the 1890s, bicycle ownership rose rapidly as machines became more affordable and as the mania for vélocipédie continued. The government tax of 12 francs instituted as an annual licence fee from June 1893 reflected the bicycle’s new status as a consumer item and confirmed the development of a proper industrial market in which French firms could try to reverse the domination of British manufacturers that they had suffered since the 1870s. Although French workshops had arguably been in advance of those in Britain during the 1860s, with forerunners such as the Michaux family (father and brothers) producing early machines, many early racing successes had been won on British bicycles, and the Franco-Prussian war damaged both the development of cycling and that of a French cycle industry. By the late 1870s and 1880s, when cycling in
France was regaining popularity, it was imported British machines and components that dominated.

From the late 1890s to the mid-1920s, Saint-Etienne and its network of cycle manufacturers and component makers was known as ‘le Coventry français’, such was the concentration of industrial and technological expertise around MFAC and other companies. The famous cycling journalist Maurice Martin first made the comparison between Saint-Etienne and Coventry (Martin, 1898), but subsequent commentators have suggested Birmingham as a more accurate analogy, given the relatively small number of large firms and the myriad workshops providing subcontracted components and services.\(^1\) The cycle industry of Saint-Etienne was very wary of foreign competition and particularly distrustful of imported components that it felt could best be supplied by the stéphanois workshops. In the late 1890s tensions arose between cycle manufacturers based in Paris and those in Saint-Etienne, leading to schism at the 1897 Salon du Cycle: Parisian manufacturers saw no problem with using imported British components for bicycles assembled in state-of-the-art factories such as that of Clément at Levallois; but provincial companies from Saint-Etienne were more in favour of protectionism and the defence of France’s home-grown components industry.\(^2\)

Compared with other major companies in the cycle industry such as Clément or Michelin, MFAC was by no means backwards in its management. Indeed, the success of MFAC during the 1890s and the early decades of the next century was due in large part to innovative and modern policies in manufacturing, marketing and after-sales service. The success of the large range of Hirondelle bikes between the 1890s and 1920s reflected construction work inspired by the ideas of the rationalizer of industrial processes Henri Fayol (Fayol, 1916) and other modern thinkers on factory management, and although MFAC protected turnover by diversifying into fishing tackle, sewing machines, typewriters and a host of other products, it was unique in French cycling in being component maker, manufacturer, wholesale and retail seller of its bicycles.\(^3\) From 1897 everything could be ordered from the legendary MFAC mail-order catalogue (1,200 pages from 1907) or from the hundreds of agents spread across the country offering repairs and maintenance as well as sales.\(^4\) Under the energetic guidance of Etienne Mimard, MFAC acquired a model factory in 1902, which was expanded in 1910 to increase production of a large number of different models of bicycle. In 1908 the model ranges were rationalized in an effort to simplify marketing, production and servicing: individual model characteristics were kept, but wherever possible shared components and tools simpli-
fied manufacturing and after-sales. Although the bicycles were designed principally by the factory’s rationalistic design team, the model ranges also took into account feedback from the riding public and MFAC’s network of dealers and agents.

Michelin: cycle technology as the trigger of industrial success

By the firm’s 50th anniversary in 1939, Michelin (by then Michelin-Citroën) had become a strong symbol of success in French industry. Founded in Clermont-Ferrand in May 1889 when the Michelin brothers took over the running of an existing rubber company, its early expansion was driven by the vogue for cycling and then driving (Gueslin, 1993). Its idiosyncratic organization exemplified the paternalistic management style of the ‘captains of industry’ who arose during the Belle Epoque and the early boom years of the twentieth century. Michelin’s early success in the 1890s and early 1900s was based on the demand for tyres and inner tubes for bicycles and subsequently, when the market for car tyres became significant around 1906, on the rise of the automobile industry. Whereas the story of MFAC revealed the link between the manufacture of small arms and cycles, as all the studies of Michelin stress (e.g., Bletterie, 1981; Moulin-Bourret, 1997) the story of that company is of the link between the rubber industry and the new forms of personal transport – the bicycle, the motorcycle and the car. Much more so than MFAC, however, the development of Michelin in the Belle Epoque and early 1900s is linked with cycle (and motor) sport and the sporting media, as the company’s advertising campaigns – for example the Michelin-man Bibendum – were as innovative as its products. During the 1880s the rubber industry was in stasis, suffering from the general slump in the economy; the Michelin brothers took charge of the company in a context of mediocrity and underemployment, and surfing on the vogue for vélocipédie and their own genius for innovation, management and self-promotion created a boom industry. Not only did Michelin’s success contribute substantially to transforming the provincial industrial town of Clermont-Ferrand, it arguably provided a model for French capitalism in the twentieth century.

Some doubt is now cast (Moulin-Bourret, 1997: 18) on the ‘founding myth’ of Michelin’s involvement in the cycle tyre industry that portrays brother Edouard’s epiphanic moment while helping his workers laboriously mend the punctures of a chance passing cyclist in spring 1891 (Lottman, 2003: 11), but the story is part of the folklore of cycling and French industry. Apparently, Edouard realized, firstly, that convenient pneumatic tyres were the future of transport and, secondly, that existing
tyres were highly impractical. His conclusion was that Michelin should supply the world’s cyclists with rubber tyres and tubes, and by June–August 1891, patents had been registered and the factory was preparing to produce what the public would surely want, in volume. The company had already established its clever use of publicity and marketing by presenting ‘The Silent’ brake-block at the Paris *Exposition Universelle* in 1889. ‘The Silent’ was technologically innovative, named in English to benefit from French velo-anglomania, and sold very well, so the Michelins were keen to repeat the good impression made on the cycling public. The ploy they found was to use *Le Petit Journal*’s race from Paris to Brest and back in September 1891 as an advertising stunt for their new tyre. Coming late to the organizing of the race, they found riders already committed to other frame-makers and component suppliers, and failed to convince Jiel-Laval (the first Frenchman home in Bordeaux–Paris in May) to change allegiance. But Charles Terront, unhappy with his tyres, agreed to use those of Michelin, and duly won. All that then remained was to actually produce the tyres (4,000 were ordered by October), and by the end of 1892 an estimated 10,000 French cyclists were riding on Michelins.

The subsequent expansion of Michelin during the 1890s – turnover increased twelve-fold between 1891 and 1899 to six million francs – was based on research, innovation and quality products, dynamic advertising, marketing and customer service, and clever organization of processes and the growth of the company (Gueslin, 1993: 98). The Michelin brothers were not afraid of the politics of business either, and notably conducted a lengthy legal battle with the British Dunlop company over the rights to the clincher tyre and tube. British patents to rubber tyres fell into the public domain in 1904, but before then Michelin had already beaten Dunlop’s claim to sole rights. The ‘nationalism’ of Michelin’s battle with Dunlop was typical of the period, and surfaced again in the 1900s: in 1900 the Minister for Posts, Commerce and Industry foolishly attracted the wrath of Michelin by equipping post-bikes with German Continental tyres, provoking a quarrel in which claims and counter-claims concerning the real place of manufacture (Paris or Hanover?) were swapped (Moulin-Bourret, 1997: 94–95); and in 1909 Michelin attributed the crash of the French army airship *Le République* to inferior-quality Continental rubberized fabric.

As Moulin-Bourret (1997: 88) points out, the official company history of the early years of Michelin provides nothing for the period 1889–1914 except a list of cycle and automobile races. From 1891 Michelin was an important element of cycling’s journalistic–industrial
complex, either sponsoring races and riders or simply organizing ‘Michelin races’ in which all competitors used Michelin tyres. From 1900 Michelin was a supporter of L’Auto, in which a regular chronicle entitled ‘Les Lundi de Michelin’ publicized what the Clermont-Ferrand factory was doing for cycle and motor sport. The Michelin brothers’ first foray into motor sport was Paris–Bordeaux–Paris in June 1895, and they sold their first car tyres in February 1896, but despite promotions such as buying six months’ production of De Dion-Bollée cars in 1897 and selling them on equipped with Michelin tyres, car tyre sales were unimportant until about 1906. By contrast, between 1899 and 1906 bike tyre sales increased nearly eight-fold. Starting from almost zero, Michelin car tyre production rose rapidly and achieved market domination in France, with 90 per cent of Renault cars being shod with Michelins in 1907. The mini-slump of 1907 ended Michelin’s period of growth during the early 1900s based on the continuing popularity of cycling and the growing vogue for cars; the workforce had risen from 62 in 1889 to 3,400 in 1906, agencies had been opened throughout Europe and subsidiaries set up even in the UK and US, but in the years before the First World War, the company retired from motor racing (1912), consolidated its activities in France (no new exploits abroad) and moved to diversify production (tyres for lorries and aeroplanes). The economic mobilization of 1914–18 distracted the company from its traditional activities, but the fabrication of some 1900 Bréguet-Michel planes allowed the testing of ‘Taylorized’ production methods.

The history of Michelin demonstrates how closely intertwined were the technological, industrial and indeed sporting development of cycling, motorcycling and the automobile. It was very often the same companies that produced bicycles during the early years (after having previously been small arms manufacturers), moving seamlessly on to develop motorcycles, tricycles and other motorized vehicles, before eventually producing France’s first cars. The pneumatic tyre was a prime example of the continuity of entrepreneurship that obtained during this period, and of the links between the original innovation of the bicycle and the ongoing development of the instruments of technological modernity and personal mobility.

The Tour de France: the most important race in cycle history

In 2003 the Tour de France celebrated its centenary. In 2013 it will have been run 100 times, its continuity as a sporting event that defines the
nature of competition, tests technology and builds national identity only having been interrupted by the world wars.

The creation of the Tour: a ‘killer-event’
The Tour de France was the coup de grâce for Le Vélo in the circulation war that had been raging between Giffard’s ‘petit Vert’ and Desgrange’s ‘petit Jaune’ since the launch of L’Auto-Vélo in October 1900. L’Auto-Vélo (simply L’Auto from January 1903) had harassed Giffard mercilessly by taking races, financial backers, readers and advertisers, and by 1903 Giffard and other key staff had left the newspaper. Paradoxically, what seemed to be the terminal decline of Le Vélo also represented a new threat to L’Auto, as Paul Rousseau and Frantz Reichel, on leaving Le Vélo, were soon to set up Le Monde sportif, and other papers were also set to appear as ambitious journalists hoped to take over the cycling readership of Le Vélo. Hence de Dion and Desgrange of L’Auto (‘le journal des industriels’) needed something that would both attract any existing or new ‘floating’ readers and also legitimize L’Auto’s right to be considered a true sportspaper of la vélocipédie. In addition, the rising popularity of automobile sport was beginning to undermine the selling power of cycle racing for the sporting press, and something was needed to rejuvenate cycle competition and renew the public’s thirst for reporting on incredible feats of human, rather than mechanical, endurance.

The story goes (Seidler, 1964: 27–28) that it was the young Georges Lefèvre (a former employee of Giffard, and later known to the wider sporting world as Géo) who was particularly responsible during 1902 for finding an idea for an event convincing enough to satisfy Desgrange. On 20 November 1902 Lefèvre suggested an event that would take racers around France in the longest cycling competition yet staged. Even Desgrange, who was no novice in conceiving and running spectacular sporting events, seemed initially sceptical, although seeing the possibilities of the idea. By mid-January 1903, however, after some serious thinking, Desgrange was sufficiently sold on the idea to announce the race in L’Auto, and all that then remained was to invent and organize it in practical, rather than theoretical, terms.

The Tours of 1903 and 1904: the first and almost the last
The Tour de France was a media event of the first importance. Some specialists of the period and its sporting life suggest (Gaboriau, 2003a) that the Tour was in fact overshadowed in 1903 by the Paris–Madrid motor race, run in May, whose bloody list of accidents during only its
first stage caused it to be cancelled (Durlier, 1966). But the Tour and Paris–Madrid were linked in a variety of ways, most importantly by the fact that bicycles and cars had shared in a modernist sporting adventure involving science, industry, sporting heroes and the media in the search for speed and technical progress. In simple organizational terms, the Tour borrowed the idea of racing in stages from motor sport, which had been developing the idea for a number of years, and devised its six long stages in echo of what had been tried by cars and motorcycles.

Although by 1903 the idea of a bicycle race – even of gigantic proportions – was less startling to the masses than a motorized race of the nature of Paris–Madrid, the formula invented by Desgrange and Lefèvre was sufficiently innovative to differentiate the Tour from previous racing. Firstly, it was a stage race and, secondly, it was to be run without the riders having recourse to pacemakers. The 2,428 km of the 1903 race doubtless required that it be divided into segments in an attempt to spare the riders’ health, but Bordeaux–Paris (nearly 600 km) and Paris–Brest–Paris (1,200 km) had always been undertaken without breaks, so why the change of approach? The answer lies both in the race’s nature as an invention of the sporting press and in evolving ideas about the nature of sport, sporting champions and sporting performance. A race divided into stages facilitated reporting, and allowed a style of journalism that maximized anecdote and reaction and fostered a sense of the evolving drama of the competition. L’Auto made the most it possibly could of commentary before, during and after the long stages, and the fact that stages were separated by periods of rest allowed further opportunities to sell copy on the strength of material not directly related to racing. Furthermore, by the judicious arrangement of start times and distances, stages could be organized in order both to facilitate printing deadlines and to maximize crowds at the finish lines.

By banning the use of pacing, the Tour marked a shift away from the older interpretation of what cycle sport was about. Initially, road cycle races in particular had been seen as demonstrations of the practicality (speed and reliability as a means of transport) of the bicycle, and arguably more than the identity of the victor and his rivals, it had been the time and speed of the winning ride that had counted the most. Although the media reporting of rides did create sporting heroes such as Terront, and although track racing was also instrumental in inventing rivalries between individuals, much of the emphasis was on distance and speed, and all kinds of pacing – human and motorized – was allowed. And so if a rider won, it could be said that his performance was as much dependent on his pacing as upon his own abilities. In his Tour de France,
Henri Desgrange allowed competitors to fully demonstrate their own strengths and weaknesses within a sporting context that mirrored his own ‘theory’ of racing, as set out, particularly, in his volume *La Tête et les jambes*: ‘le sport cycliste exige de la part de celui qui veut s’y adonner deux genres de qualité, d’ordre bien différent, qui se complètent l’un et l’autre: la tête et les jambes’ (Desgrange, 1894). By pitting riders one against the other without pacing paid for by competitors or by the firms whose bicycles they rode, the Tour became a true test of ‘la tête et les jambes’, participating in a trend towards the democratization and popularization of sporting values. Unfortunately for the Tour in 1903 and particularly in 1904, the ‘sporting values’ of some of the competitors and many of the spectators fell somewhat short of what might have been hoped for in a contest of equals striving for honest victory. Perhaps because of the professional rather than ‘Corinthian’ traditions of French cycle racing, riders were often less than scrupulously fair in their riding, and the passions of the watching crowds were so inflamed by attachment to local heroes that racing conditions were on many occasions less than fair or safe for some competitors, as Jacques Seray has chronicled (Seray, 1994).

Staged from 1–19 July, the inaugural Tour of 1903 was a great popular success, winning the interest of the roadside watchers in rural regions and of the inhabitants of the major cities – Lyon, Marseille, Toulouse, Bordeaux, Nantes and Paris – through which it ran. Sales of *L’Auto* rose sharply, as new readers followed the progress of Maurice Garin and his rivals, and by the time the victorious Garin reached Paris, circulation had more than doubled to some 65,000 copies. Garin’s winning time was 94 hours 33 minutes, giving an average speed of 26.45 kph. Of the 76 riders who had registered, only 20 actually finished the race, with the *lanterne rouge* Millocheau a staggering 49 hours 42 minutes down on Garin, whose winnings were 6,125 francs and a work of art donated by *La Vie au grand air*. In 1904 the race kept almost the same route and organization (2–24 July, 2,500 km, six stages, six days of rest at Lyon after stage 1 but single rest days between other stages); however, measures were introduced to restrict the opportunities for cheating. Eighty-eight riders left Paris, and Garin was again victorious, but in circumstances of suspicion about the regularity of racing and about the violent incidents that had marked the race. Indeed, the problems of 1904 led Desgrange for a time to declare the Tour dead and never to be repeated (Seray, 1994). The Tour’s rulings on what was and was not allowed were numerous and complicated, amounting essentially to requiring competitors to ride alone and unassisted, except for feeding at
agreed checkpoints; however, the increased popularity of the race had made manufacturers much more keen to ensure that racers on their brand of bicycles were successful, and this led to various infringements, ranging from unauthorized technical assistance to the strewing of nails in front of rivals. Some riders succumbed to the temptation of taking trains, or sheltering behind cars or other cyclists, and accusations of irregularities were so strong in 1904 that the sport’s governing body – the Union Vélocipédique de France – was asked by the Tour’s own principal marshals to rule on the race results. After four months of enquiries, the first four riders were disqualified, making Henri Cornet the winner of this second Tour. Other sanctions were severe: Pothier, Chevalier and Chaput received life-bans and Garin was suspended from competition for two years. Desgrange was infuriated by the severe reactions of the UVF, which added to the punishments and exclusions he had himself imposed during the race. Not for the last time the Tour, as the major cycling competition, was feeling constrained by the intervention of a ruling body. The second Tour also brought tension between Desgrange and a manufacturer, the La Française company, whose team was made up of the Garin brothers and Pothier; the Tour was accused by some of being in the pocket of La Française. In addition to the cheating, however, the 1904 Tour had been marred by violent incidents in which spectators had attempted to brutalize riders who threatened the chances of their favourites, and on a number of occasions riders had been injured, forced to withdraw or hindered. Race officials had been obliged to use firearms to enforce their passage, particularly during the infamous attack on riders at the Col de la République near Saint-Etienne, where hooligans attempted to assist their regional favourite, Faure.

Building a legend: the Tour before the First World War

The development of the Tour in the years between 1905 and 1914 has been described as a ‘patriotic rebirth’ (Gaboriau, 2003a: 67). These ten years also served to create the original model for the world’s greatest cycle race, as Desgrange and his team introduced ever greater physical challenges and attempted to define the interactions between the media, manufacturers and champions. The Tour in the Belle Epoque also set much of the style of future reporting, as well as pushing innovation in sports journalism.

Although the first Tour had been a success, the difficulties of the second year meant that the race was in need of a second chance, and one of the trends in its development was that of a ‘patriotic’ renewal. Many of the changes in the organization of the race tended towards ever-closer
association between the route in particular and the notion of ‘France’. In terms of the nationality of competitors also, the initial involvement of Italians and Belgians led to something of a focus on the race as a contest in which France defended its territory against foreigners, ‘losing’ to Belgium in 1912, 1913 and 1914. The race increased in scale and gained even greater public support as a summer spectacle to be shared by the whole country. As the prospect of war loomed larger and patriotism swelled, the vocabulary of cycling – as of sport in general – became increasingly militaristic, culminating in a jingoistic and sanguinary diatribe by Desgrange in the columns of L’Auto on the eve of conflict in 1914 which it is worth quoting extensively:

Mes p’tits gars! Mes p’tits chéris! Mes p’tits gars français! Ecoutez-moi! Depuis 14 ans que L’Auto paraît tous les jours il ne vous a jamais donné de mauvais conseils hein? Alors écoutez-moi! Les Prussiens sont des salauds! J’emploie ce terme non pour parler « poissard » mais parce qu’il dit exactement ce que je veux dire... Il faut que vous les ayez, ces salauds-là, il faut que vous les ayez! D’abord parce que si vous ne les aurez pas, ils vous auront. Et quand ils vous auront, vous ne serez plus que des machines à obéir: vous serez obligés de faire le salut militaire à tous les uniformes... Stupide et fourbe en 1806, fourbe et lâche en 1870, pourquoi voulez-vous qu’il soit devenu intelligent en 1914? C’est un grand match que vous avez à disputer: faites usage de tout votre répertoire français. La tactique – n’est-ce pas – n’est pas pour vous effrayer. Une feinte, et l’on rentre. Vous savez tout cela mes p’tits gars, mieux que moi qui vous l’enseigne depuis bientôt trois lustres. Mais méfiez-vous! Quand votre crosse sera sur leurs poitrines, ils vous demanderont pardon. Ne vous laissez pas faire. Enfoncez sans pitié. Il faut en finir avec ces imbéciles malfaisants qui depuis quarante-quatre ans, nous empêchent de vivre, d’aimer, de respirer et d’être heureux... Ils comprendront que l’Alsace et la Lorraine sont des terres françaises. (Desgrange, 1914)

This editorial and its mixing of sporting and military metaphors – looking on the war as a ‘grand match’ that would allow plucky little Frenchmen to take revenge for 1870 through clever ruthlessness – was of a piece with much other media and political rhetoric of the period, but it pursued and built on a growing definition by the Tour itself of elements of French identity. The developing patriotism of the Tour is illustrated by the way in which it began to ‘beat the bounds’ of France as the length of the race increased: more and more important towns and cities were included in the itinerary as stage-halts (Grenoble and Rennes were added in 1905; Lille, Nancy and Brest in 1906; Metz and Belfort in 1908). The route was redefining France either in sporting terms by simply allowing far-flung regions to embrace the modernity of the Tour, or, more politically in 1906, by visiting the disputed territory of Alsace-Lorraine, under German control since France’s defeat in the Franco-Prussian war of 1870. Since
France’s political boundaries were mainly traced through physical geography, visits to the mountains in search of physical trials also served to emphasize France’s unity as described by the Tour (Vigarello, 1997; Campos, 2003).

One of Desgrange’s concerns during this period was to maintain the Tour’s reputation for excessive physical demands. Since the demands of the first two Tours had led to cheating, measures to increase the immensity of the sporting tasks set for the riders were accompanied by more and more draconian rules. Whereas long night stages were abandoned because they could not be properly monitored (1905), the number of stages was gradually increased, as was the overall distance (1905: 11 stages and 2,938 km; 1906: 13 stages and 4,443 km). As early as 1905 a mountain stage was introduced – *le Ballon d’Alsace* – in order to challenge riders even more, and in 1910 the race organizers forced the riders to climb the Pyrenean passes of Peyresourde, Aspin, Tourmalet and Aubisque in a single stage of 326 km from Luchon to Bayonne. In 1911 Alpine stages were included of such severity that riders accused the Tour of trying to murder them. The increasing length of the race and the mountains allowed Desgrange to maintain the ‘spectacular’ nature of the Tour, and constant modifications to the way in which the overall classification of race positions was calculated aimed to perfect a system in which suspense among *L’Auto*’s reading public was maintained for as long as possible during July. Although at this stage in the development of the Tour ‘rider power’ was as yet weak, Desgrange was at pains to assert the Tour’s independence from cycle manufacturers, and efforts were made to prevent manufacturers and their teams from fixing the results of star riders, or simply withdrawing from the race if their placings were not satisfactory. As the race grew in prestige and importance, and as prize monies increased, the Tour defended itself against riders’ gamesmanship and manufacturers’ pressures, as well as trying to retain its independence from French cycling’s governing bodies.10

The reporting of the Tour became a burgeoning seasonal activity for journalists, and the style of copy, borrowing from previous eulogies of physical endeavour and accomplishment in cycling sport, set the tone for much following journalism. Typically, Desgrange had tried to keep the reporting of the Tour as exclusive to *L’Auto* as possible by such ruses as being secretive about the exact details of the route until the last minute, but the national interest in the race soon meant that generalist newspapers, as well as the sporting press, began to closely follow the competition. Predictably, it was the scale of the challenges and the heroism of the riders that attracted the interest of reporters, and
the ascents of the mountains were recounted by Desgrange and his colleagues, as by others, in a eulogistic literary vein.

*La Vélocipédie utilitaire: clubs, the army and touring*

From about the middle of the 1890s until the beginning of war in 1914, the world of cycling in general was subject to a number of pressures that helped to transform the nature of France’s experience of *vélocipédie*. Cycling clubs saw much of their socially elite membership tempted by the new attractions of motorized speed, as motorcycles and cars replaced bicycles as the fetish-objects of modernity. And as the higher social categories tended to desert cycling clubs, the falling prices of bicycles made cycling affordable for greater and greater numbers of people of humbler origins. The bicycle as *la petite Reine*, symbol both of modernity, of social distinction and of ladies’ leisure or gentlemen’s sport, became increasingly a work- or play-thing of the working classes. Club cycling saw a redefinition of its social composition in the years before 1914.

*Club cycling: democratization*

Cycling clubs in the early 1900s were suffering from a stagnation in new foundations that had begun around 1895 and, moreover, were increasingly having to defend themselves against competition for membership from new (‘English’) athletic sports such as running, tennis, rugby and football. In addition, as the bicycle itself became progressively more affordable and less an object of social distinction, some better-off members and clubs were tempted to convert their loyalties to the car, or even to the aeroplane. During the 1900s overall numbers of cycling clubs remained relatively stable, but old and new clubs tended to share cycling with other sports, in what became known as ‘omnisports’ clubs. This reflected the fact that cycling was no longer the driving force of sport in general, as it had been in the 1880s and 1890s, and also the fact that ownership of a bicycle no longer meant that someone would be a member of a *véloce-club*: cycling was no longer the elitist, modernist fad it had been originally, and riding a bike was now as much a normal everyday activity as a practice of social or athletic distinction.

Membership of cycling clubs reflected the democratization of ownership of bikes, much to the chagrin of some. Writing just before the Popular Front victory in 1936, a certain Dr Ruffier lamented the declining social level of cyclists, complaining that in 1900 one was a world away from the days of the Prince de Sagan and elegant ladies cycling in the Bois
de Boulogne, and that la petite Reine had been democratized and taken over by the workers, and was therefore scorned by people of quality (Ruffier, 1936). Prices of bikes, new and old, were falling and wages were rising. In 1906 a statutory day of rest for the working classes was introduced, and this, along with the examples set by Garin and his colleagues in the Tour de France, stimulated popular interest in cycling and in membership of clubs. Frequently, cycling clubs were composed of homogeneous social groupings, as old-established clubs defended their select origins (for example the Véloce-club havrais and the Véloce-club béarnais), new clubs were created along corporatist lines (various clubs of postal workers, barbers or other trades), firms and industries formed sports clubs for their employees (for example the Association sportive Michelin, 1911) or as clubs were set up claiming working-class identities (for example the Rally-cycle rennais, 1904).

La Vélocipédie militaire: the bicycle and military efficiency

The use of cycling for military purposes was much discussed from the earliest days of la vélocipédie. Much was made of the success of a cyclist during the Franco-Prussian war of 1870 in bringing messages to an otherwise isolated military contingent. During the 1880s and 1890s debate raged over the usefulness of the bicycle in warfare, and how best France could prepare itself to benefit from its strength in vélocipédie. Frequently, the encouragement of la vélocipédie militaire was mentioned in the founding statutes of cycling clubs, and the larger clubs, such as the Véloce-club bordelais, organized conferences and liaised with the military authorities. Much of this apparent enthusiasm was, however, more lip-service than real passion for cycling on the battlefield. Firstly, the general social context in the last decades of the century and during the Belle Epoque was one of nationalism and revanchisme against Germany, and hence much public discourse on any matter was coloured by reference to war and France’s preparedness for conflict. As far as sport was concerned, the sociétés de gymnastique that had often pre-dated cycling associations and clubs were more or less expressly devoted to the physical preparation of French youth for military service. Secondly, the approval required from the authorities for the creation of a cycling club encouraged the inclusion in the statutes of objectives that were likely to produce assent, and a claimed desire to contribute to France’s military effectiveness was something that was guaranteed to elicit a favourable decision. So in practice, clubs were often less committed to vélocipédie militaire than they were in theory (Poyer, 2005). During the early years of the new century, however, the UVF renewed its long-standing support
for military cycling and created a number of initiatives intended to prepare youngsters for military service, as Alex Poyer has described (Poyer, 2003a: 262–64). As early as 1889 the UVF had instituted a *Brevet* (certificate) *routier* of 100 km, holders of which could claim to have demonstrated a useful ability in covering alone, on a bicycle, a significant distance. In 1900 two more tests of proficiency were added: the *petit Brevet routier* (50 km) and a *Brevet routier* for the longer distance of 150 km. In recognition of the varied terrain over which a military cyclist might have to travel, 1908 saw the inclusion of a *Brevet de cross-country cyclo-pédestre*. These tests were usually conducted by clubs affiliated to the UVF, with supervision from officials, and 1908 saw over 1,000 undertaken. The ability to cover distance was not the only skill that the UVF wished to inculcate in cyclists: between 1905 and 1914 a number of *Brevets* covering more specifically military skills were introduced. The most militarily accomplished cyclists could aspire (from 1905) to the *Brevet d’estafette cycliste* (‘dispatch rider’ or cycling, shooting, map-reading and topography, cycle-repair skills and general physical fitness) or (1914) the *Brevet d’éclaireur cycliste* (‘scout rider’ or cycling ability on varied terrains, shooting, map-reading and topography). Lesser paragons of cycling’s military dimensions could obtain (from 1912) the *Brevet de cycliste combattant* (‘active service’), which required the ability simply to cycle and use a rifle. The Defence Ministry was keen to support the federation’s efforts, providing funding that rose from a mere 500 francs in 1906 to 5,550 francs in 1911, and as the political situation in Europe worsened, from 1909 to 1914, the annual UVF congresses were increasingly devoted to *vélocipédie militaire* (Poyer, 2003a: 262–64).

**Sport and touring**

Apart from the Tour de France, cycle sport continued to be organized by clubs and federations and other stakeholders, but changing circumstances changed the nature of racing. Whereas the 1890s had arguably been the hey-day of track racing, the 1900s saw the supremacy of road racing, best exemplified perhaps by the Tour, but also by a range of other races organized and sponsored by the sporting press or by cycle manufacturers, or indeed, in a more classic mode, by enthusiastic and still vigorous *véloce-clubs*. Although the UVF became increasingly influential in regulating the competitions organized by clubs, newspapers or industry, the growing commercialism of cycle sport and its concomitant professionalization weakened any remaining attachments to amateurism. The UVF and professional racing coexisted in an uneasy but essentially profitable symbiosis, as the cycle industry and press contributed to the
funds of the UVF and the sport’s governing body ruled indulgently on the activities of its benefactors.

In the 1890s Bordeaux–Paris (1891), Paris–Brest–Paris (1891) and Paris–Roubaix (1896) had been invented by what we can term cycling’s ‘media–industrial complex’, but whereas these classics were aimed at elite professional riders (or amateur riders, in open competition), many races created in the 1900s by newspapers and manufacturers targeted the mass of competitive cyclists. Thus, in 1906, the Grand Prix Peugeot (later the Trophée de France) introduced club racers to the world of commercial competitive cycling. Although these races and others organized by manufacturers such as Alcyon, Clément or Gladiator relied on the assistance of véloce-clubs for marshalling and other tasks, they were instrumental in accelerating the breakdown of amateur values in cycling clubs, where riders had hitherto perhaps still been accustomed to competing for objets d’art rather than money. By 1908, when the UVF authorized amateurs to accept loans of bikes and travel allowances from manufacturers, the old ideals of 1890s amateurism seemed long-forgotten, and in 1911 the UVF went a step further by replacing its old division between amateurs and professionals with a tripartite system of amateurs, indépendants (allowed to accept prizes in cash and payments from manufacturers) and professionals.

In contrast to cycle sport, touring during this period seems to have been somewhat in the doldrums. Whereas racing was an object of interest to the media, industry and federations, touring had no such commercial or competitive attraction and, perhaps because of the rise of the automobile and the new possibilities for discovery that it offered to the moneyed classes, saw its function as an instrument of leisure seriously challenged among the bourgeoisie. Institutionally, the UVF was not really interested in touring, and reduced the funding allocated to tourism during the 1900s. The TCF had, of course, become a body dedicated to general touring with all kinds of transport, not just cycling, and although membership rose – after a slump at the turn of the century – from about 1904, reaching 136,000 in 1914, cycling seemed to be neglected as car ownership rose. The individual nature of membership of the TCF (rather than club affiliation) meant that it could only with difficulty lead any kind of campaign involving the actual practice of cycling, but it was active in pressing manufacturers to develop a perfected touring bicycle. In the absence of a touring federation purely dedicated to long-distance touring – the original definition of touring – non-racing activities in clubs became reduced to group rides over short distances often of only 50 km with frequent pauses for refreshment. Within this kind of tourism de prox-
imité some more dynamic clubs tended to organize excursions involving the use of trains (amusingly known as *le grand frère*) or even cars to give access to farther-flung areas.

Despite these institutional weaknesses, and the temptations of café stops on too short rides, cycle touring in the *Belle Epoque* saw a number of initiatives that helped prepare it for more successful years after the First World War. For example, in Saint-Etienne, the famous cycle-tourist Paul de Vivie, editor of the newspaper *Le Cycliste* since 1887, was instrumental in encouraging extremely long-distance touring in the region and beyond: the classic annual ride of de Vivie and his companions of the *Ecole stéphanoise* was a 40-hour Easter trip from Saint-Etienne to the Mediterranean (500 km). De Vivie’s oft-repeated general aim was to ever improve the usability of the bicycle in order to obtain the maximum length of stages of riding, and the maximum speed with the least fatigue and expense. During the 1900s the *Ecole stéphanoise* regularly undertook rides of between 200 and 300 km, but it was in Paris that Henri Desgrange took up the idea of rides over set distances (initially 200 km) within defined time-limits (initially 16 hours), monitored and certificated and giving rise to different *Brevets*. These ‘audax’ rides were launched in April 1904, and by September their popularity had already given rise to an *Audax club parisien* (ACP), authorized by *L’Auto* to organize reliability rides of *hypertourisme* (after 1909) over 300 and 400 km as well as the original 200 km. In order to help train riders to achieve the longer distances, the ACP also organized shorter rides of 60–150 km, bridging the gap between the short slow rides of club tourists and the spirit of the audax in an attempt to stimulate cycling in general.

**Paul de Vivie: an alternative view of cycling**

Writing in 1903 Paul de Vivie expressed the view that: ‘La bicyclette n’est pas seulement un outil de locomotion; elle devient encore un moyen d’émancipation, une arme de délivrance. Elle libère l’esprit et le corps des inquiétudes morales, des infirmités physiques que l’existence moderne, toute d’ostentation, de convention, d’hypocrisie – où paraître est tout, être n’étant rien – suscite, développe, entretient au grand détriment de la santé’ (Henry, 2005: 98). De Vivie (1853–1930), better known by his nickname ‘Vélocio’, was a major figure of French cycling during the 1880s and 1890s, and continued to strongly influence thinking on how the activity should develop during the early decades of the twentieth century. In particular, his way of seeing cycling was something of a coun-
terweight to the overly mediatized exploits proposed by Pierre Giffard, or the equally highly mediatized and even more commercial sports events promoted by Henri Desgrange. Vélocio’s varied and interrelated interests spanned cycle technology and the design and sale of bicycles from his Saint-Etienne workshop, the sporting press to which he contributed with his monthly review *Le Cycliste*, the encouragement of cycle touring, and a strong commitment to a healthy lifestyle centred around exercise and vegetarianism.

*Le Cycliste: Vélocio’s newspaper*

Vélocio first launched his monthly review in 1887, published initially under the title of *Le Cycliste forézien*. The newspaper was originally conceived as little more than an advertising leaflet for his shop/workshop *L’Agence générale vélocipédique*, but it rapidly became a means for Vélocio to disseminate his many and varied views. What characterized *Le Cycliste* from the outset, differentiating it from the vast majority of other newspapers of the cycling press, was the fact that there was very little reference to sport. Whereas similar reviews – such as *Le Vélocipède Sport* published in Bordeaux from 1885 – capitalized on the vogue for cycling competition, whether professional or amateur, on the road or on the track, *Le Cycliste* focused on practical aspects of cycle riding, excursions, touring and general *cyclisme de loisir*. In reflection of its editor’s personality and convictions, *Le Cycliste* was always independent in ownership, finance, tone and content, and during the 1890s was thus a critical friend (and sometimes enemy) of more commercially minded ventures such as *Le Vélo*; after the demise of *Le Vélo*, and the stranglehold of *L’Auto* on most journalism concerning cycling that developed after 1903, *Le Cycliste* was increasingly a dissident voice.

In contrast to its larger, more commercial rivals, *Le Cycliste* was essentially amateur in its production values and – although Vélocio’s own editorial line was always clear – open to allowing debate within its columns. It was printed on low-quality paper, had no or very few illustrations and contained little advertising; it was frequently late in being published and was often lost in the unreliable postal system. Nevertheless, each monthly issue reached twenty or thirty pages of practical discussion, disseminated in 1914 to 1,200 subscribers. The (small-scale) success of *Le Cycliste* was badly disrupted by the First World War, as publication was interrupted between 1914 and 1916, resuming briefly in 1916 before another break until 1919. In the difficult social and economic context of the early 1920s the relaunch of the paper was difficult, and Vélocio was forced to increase its price and
reduce its frequency to two-monthly, seeing subscriptions only slowly rise from about 750 to near pre-war figures of 1,000 in the mid-1920s. It would be false to say that *Le Cycliste* ignored racing completely – there were occasional reports on individual races and an annual commentary on the Tour de France – but the content was very predominantly practical, aiming to foster links between cyclists and provide them with advice on a wide range of issues that arose in the practice of everyday cycling.

Much of the debate in the columns of the paper was on technology or technical aspects of bicycle design, but apart from the more polemical items on developments such as the derailleur gear so hated by Desgrange, numerous exchanges between Vélocio and cycle manufacturers such as Hirondelle in *Le Cycliste* fostered improvements in cycle construction. The rest of the copy was made up of a varied diet of material reporting on touring rides, matching riders who were seeking riding companions with other cyclists, basic tourist guides to an increasing number of areas, various self-promotional competitions offering readers the chance to win pistols, knuckle-dusters, alarm clocks, telescopes, clothing and bicycles to help them in their cycling, and a range of contributions from readers.

When copy on cycling-related issues was short, Vélocio sometimes resorted to publishing poetry, but another crucial function of *Le Cycliste* was to organize the communal rides, meetings and reunions centring around the person of Vélocio that contributed to the emergence of what became known as the *Ecole stéphanoise* of cycling. Most of Vélocio’s famous long-distance touring rides were seasonal or annual events, when he undertook phenomenally long rides in the company of small groups of companions (one could almost say ‘acolytes’), which contributed through the epic and occasional nature of the exploits to the myth and publicity of the *Ecole stéphanoise*, but *Le Cycliste* also administered more regular local events that fostered cycling conviviality, technical testing and debate, and ‘lifestyle’. An example of such an event were the *matinées du Cycliste* run twice-weekly in August and September in the mid-1900s, when twenty or so riders would accompany Vélocio in an early morning hill-climb (13 km and 600 m) and take a café breakfast on top of the Col des Grands-Bois above La Digonnière near Saint-Etienne.

**Cycle touring, vegetarianism and mode de vie**

One of Vélocio’s most strongly held principles was that cycling was a social and moral phenomenon whose promotion – in the right directions – could contribute to the improvement of society. Launched in the late 1880s, this idea was characterized as the *voie sociale* whereby, for instance, the use of the bicycle as a cheap means of transport could allow
industrial workers in polluted Saint-Etienne to move their families to cheaper and healthier housing in rural areas away from the factories. In its most extreme formulation, this principle was expressed in Vélocio’s claim in 1901 that ‘Cycling and vegetarianism can together completely change the economic conditions of existence’ (Le Cycliste, 1901a).

In the Ecole stéphanoise that coalesced around Vélocio during the early decades of the new century, all of his concerns seemed to merge in a somewhat confused whole. In his later years, Vélocio became more and more ‘philosophical’ in his approach to cycling, essentially seeing the physical activity as a way of achieving a healthy body in a healthy mind as much as a means of efficient and economical transport. Whereas in the earlier years the long-distance rides had been intended mainly to demonstrate ‘les possibilités de la bicyclette’ and to test the machines and equipment proposed by manufacturers in ‘le laboratoire de la route’, it seems that increasingly cycling became an example of the possibilities of the human body and mind. The best way to ride was described by Vélocio in his oft-adumbrated ‘sept commandements’:

i) Haltes rares et courtes, afin de ne pas laisser tomber la pression.

ii) Repas légers et fréquents: manger avant d’avoir faim, boire avant d’avoir soif.

iii) Ne jamais aller jusqu’à la fatigue anormale qui se traduit par le manque d’appétit et de sommeil.

iv) Se couvrir avant d’avoir froid, se découvrir avant d’avoir chaud et ne pas craindre d’exposer l’épiderme au soleil, à l’air, à l’eau.

v) Rayer de l’alimentation, au moins en cours de route, le vin, la viande et le tabac.

vi) Ne jamais forcer, rester en dedans de ses moyens, surtout pendant les premières heures où l’on est tenté de se dépenser trop parce qu’on se sent plein de forces.

vii) Ne jamais pédaler par amour-propre.

This philosophy of cycle touring based on self-knowledge and a simple, almost ascetic approach to the physical dimensions of life – eating, drinking, clothing, sleeping – linked vegetarianism and Vélocio’s championing of the derailleur gear system in the Ecole stéphanoise, whose principles were set out in Le Cycliste and in La Revue du Touring Club de France in 1901 (Le Cycliste, 1901b). Essentially, the Ecole stéphanoise was about long-distance touring using the technology of multiple gears and the diet of vegetarianism, in order to travel far at small cost, thus demonstrating how citizens of modest means could discover the beauties of the countryside. In 1905 Le Cycliste defined the Ecole stéphanoise as
‘une école d’énergie physique et morale’ concerned with ‘l’hygiène et le culte de la santé physique et morale’, concluding that ‘A l’École stéphanoise, nous avons tous soif de mouvement et de grand air’ (Le Cycliste, 1905: 148). Vélocio’s vegetarianism seems to have been rooted in moral and dietary convictions as well as being recommended for financial reasons: one of the aims of his style of touring was to travel as far as possible for the smallest cost. Such a requirement presumed an efficient machine (the multi-geared bicycle) and an efficient rider (eating frugally and cheaply and pedalling economically), lightly clothed (allowing perspiration and healthy exposure to the elements) and prepared to sleep in the open. Compared with the rigid discipline and regimentedly simple efficiency of the L’Auto’s audax rides (described derisively by Vélocio as ‘le cyclotourisme à la Desgrange’), the ideological foundations of cycling as interpreted by the Ecole stéphanoise were rich and liberal.

Technology, touring and the Tour de France

Vélocio was not in general well-disposed towards Pierre Giffard and Henri Desgrange and their different styles of promotion of cycling. Although there may have been greater shared ground with Giffard’s notion of the bicycle as ‘bienfait social’ than with Desgrange’s focus on competitive professional cycle sport, Vélocio nevertheless styled his fellow apostle of vélocipédie as ‘Giffardus pontifex’ and deplored his ‘suffisance vaniteuse’ (Henry, 2005: 48). With Desgrange, Vélocio’s conflict was focused around the centrality of touring to his own vision of cycling, and the obstacles that he saw Desgrange placing in the way of the development of touring and cycling technology.

Desgrange had tried to impose L’Auto’s authority on long-distance cycle touring in the audaxes he had helped organize in 1904 and subsequent years, but these rides, effected under strict conditions at fixed speeds and over specified distances, were a much more institutionalized version of Vélocio’s free-style long-range tours or convivial morning rides, meetings and reunions. Moreover, Desgrange appeared obsessed by the fixed-gear technology, which he stipulated – with varying degrees of integrity – for almost all the races and audaxes organized under the auspices of L’Auto. Influenced by Vélocio, the Touring Club de France staged a competition in 1902 to find the best multiple-gearing system for practical long-range riding over varied terrain, as the old-fashioned traditional fixed gear (or even the single-speed freewheel system) imposed unnecessary demands on riders. But for a variety of reasons that are not entirely clear, Desgrange was violently opposed to what was known as ‘polymultiplication’, describing it as cheating and fit only for old men...
and women. When the inaugural Tour de France was run in 1903 on fixed-gear machines, many in the camp of the *cyclotouristes* suspected Desgrange of trying to rejuvenate the market for older styles of bikes in order to placate his industrial backers, and Vélocio, as a lucid observer of what really happened as riders tackled different conditions, pointed out that leading riders often changed bikes in order to benefit from different sizes of fixed gear, thus making nonsense of the very idea of a single- rather than a ‘poly’-geared machine (*Le Cycliste*, 1903). Between 1904 and 1912 there was a war of words between the two schools of thought, with Desgrange holding hard to the view that athletic prowess – and therefore commercial sporting spectacle – was best demonstrated by fixed gears. Vélocio, on the other hand, pointed out that the flatness of early Tours reflected the deficiencies of the technology authorized by their organizers, and suggested, moreover, that Desgrange was not only retarding the evolution of the bicycle but also, through augmenting the physical demands of the race, putting riders ever more at risk of exhaustion and at the mercy of unscrupulous organizers, managers and dopers (Henry, 2005: 246). In 1913 two riders started the Tour on derailleur-equipped machines, but were disqualified on stage 4.

In 1903 Vélocio summarized his views on life and society in the following statement: ‘Envers et contre toutes les apparences, je persiste à croire que l’homme est originellement bon et plus disposé à rendre service à son semblable qu’à le dépouiller’ (Henry, 2005: 114). When contrasted with the ideological and political values of Desgrange and, indeed, of France in general at the turn of the century – when social and political thought was dominated by neo-Darwinist theories of competition, survival of the fittest and neo-liberal economic theories extolling the free market – such an optimistic perspective on human nature is perhaps surprising. But Vélocio’s outlook on life and view of the world was based on traditions of humanism inherited from Antiquity and repeatedly incorporated into French culture before and after the Enlightenment. What might have been seen as Vélocio’s naivety by hard-nosed entrepreneurs such as Desgrange and the rest of the sports–media–industry complex during the early years of the twentieth century can also be interpreted as a Rousseau-esque romanticism typical of a traditional divide in French culture and society between those who feel that humanity is perfectible and those who conclude that nature and society are red in tooth and claw. Above and beyond the technical and technological disagreements between Vélocio and Desgrange, their philosophical and ideological divergences anticipated the kinds of antagonism that would colour debates between Left and Right about the nature of sport and leisure in the 1920s and...
1930s. The approach to life described by Vélocio in 1898 – ‘Je suis un primitif m’efforçant d’élaguer de l’existence toutes les complications de l’extérieur, recherchant les plaisirs qui naissent de nous-mêmes’ (Henry, 2005: 124) – was an aspiration that would perhaps only find full resonance in the France of the 1970s, when the desires of the generation of May ’68 fed into culture and politics. In the intervening years, however, the memory of Vélocio was kept alive by devotees and cyclotourists in France and worldwide, and, annually since 1922, by the commemorative ride known as la montée du Col des Grands Bois near Saint-Etienne. Attended by thousands of participants in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s, la Vélocio now attracts many fewer riders, but still enough to demonstrate the continuing attractiveness of Vélocio’s ideas. We shall discuss in a later chapter how the vogue for mass-participation cyclosportive rides is a contemporary development of concepts such as la Vélocio originated by de Vivie.

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The inauguration in 1903 of the Tour de France was possibly the single most important event in the history of competitive cycling worldwide. Desgrange’s invention of this particular model for national tours in particular and for cycle sport in general set the mould for professional cycling throughout the twentieth century, and the company that runs the Tour de France has ever since been the prime mover in world professional cycling. Based on patterns of industrial relations, class antagonisms and sport–media relations that originated in the French Belle Époque of the late nineteenth century, L’Auto (until 1944) and then L’Équipe dominated pro-cycling, even as late as the 2000s struggling with that other centenarian French-born organization the UCI for control of racing, riders and teams. During this same founding period of modern cycling, the bases were also laid in France of other, gentler and more recreational, kinds of cycling, in the form of the philosophy of cycle touring and leisure riding developed and demonstrated by Vélocio and the Ecole stéphanoise. As we shall see in later chapters, the encouragement of cycle tourism – in different forms, admittedly – has become in the 2000s something of a priority for the French state in its desire to foster sustainable and environmentally friendly leisure activities as well as to stimulate tourism and encourage healthy lifestyles. Similarly, the trials and tribulations, as well as the successes, of the French cycle industry in the twentieth century have echoed the issues evoked here in the founding years of the sector: technological modernity and the need to renew techniques and production,
and the links between innovation in the cycle industry and the wider economy. Overall, with the development of the Tour de France, the growth of a mature cycling-related industry and the ongoing rise of a media devoted to sport and competing interpretations of sport in general and cycling in particular, it can be said that France in the first two decades of the twentieth century was demonstrating a recognizably modern system of commercialized sports–media–industrial relationships.

Notes

1 Martin was one of the owners of Le Véloce-Sport in the late 1880s and early 1890s, but later wrote for Giffard’s Le Vélo. One of his specialities was the survey, or enquête, dealing with, say, the state of French velodromes or cycling clubs, and in 1897 he was commissioned by Le Vélo to report on France’s cycle industry (Martin, 1898).

2 The Salon du Cycle or cycling Trade Fair had long been campaigned for by the sporting press in the 1890s, which saw the British London Stanley Show as one of the ways in which the UK maintained its commercial superiority. The French salon was, however, often riven by disagreements.

3 Fayol was a kind of French precursor of Taylor. His most famous maxim was ‘diriger c’est prévoir, organiser, commander, coordonner, contrôler’, and the thrust of his ideas was that an appropriate organizational structure and an administratively competent leader are necessary for the successful functioning of a business.

4 The catalogue, which usually had to be bought, was occasionally used as a secret weapon for advertising, as on the occasion when a huge number of free catalogues were sent out to agents and shops, resulting in an abrupt rise in business. Because of the elegance of its design, the catalogue itself has recently become something of a style icon, and a version of it was republished in 2003.

5 Le Monde sportif lasted for less than a year, but Les Sports, introduced in December 1904, survived until June 1910.

6 Géo Lefèvre was a significant but minor figure in French sports journalism and entrepreneurialism. Lefèvre’s autobiography (1964) provides a roll-call of his encounters with sportspeople.

7 The long wait in Nantes before the final stage to Paris in 1903 was caused by Desgrange’s desire to have the riders arrive in the Parc des Princes on a Sunday.

8 Paris–Rouen in 1869 had been intended as a practical demonstration of the uses of vélocipédie, and the famous ‘matches’ on the track between crack riders were as much about records of time and distance as about rivalries between champions. Bordeaux–Paris in 1891 was won by a very strong rider, G.P. Mills, who also benefited from the strongest pacing (by Charles Terront), and subsequent pacing in Bordeaux–Paris was human-, tandem-, motorcycle- and car-based.

9 The foreign winners were Odile Defraye and Philippe Thys.

10 The Tour’s ongoing attempts to retain as much independence as possible were manifested in the late 1990s and 2000s by its struggle with the UCI and the UCI Pro Tour. This initiative is an attempt by the world cycling body to more closely control professional racing, and is intended to reduce the influence of the traditional major tours (Giro d’Italia, Vuelta a Espana etc.) and their organizers over world cycling competition.