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**Christopher S. Thompson**, *The Tour de France: A Cultural History*. Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2006. x + 385 pp. Map, photographs, notes, bibliography, and index. \$29.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-520-24760-4.

Review by Michael B. Miller, University of Miami.

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The Tour de France has now been run for more than a hundred years, but only in 2006 has it at last received the full-scale scholarly attention it has long deserved.<sup>[1]</sup> As Christopher Thompson rightly observes in his splendid study of this cultural phenomenon, the history of the Tour has always, in a way, been about the history of France. Its origins trace back to quarrels unleashed by the Dreyfus Affair. Again sides were taken (and reversed) under the Popular Front. Vichy's material and moral history were equally those of the Tour. In 1940 the race was canceled for lack of gasoline and easy maneuvering across the demarcation line. Later, when Vichy wished to harness the Tour to its legitimizing and moralizing agenda, the organizers kept their distance, writing yet another chapter in the endless ways of defining resistance under occupation. When in 1952 the Tour suddenly added Vichy to its itinerary, it did so not as an act of national reconciliation or of coming to terms with its crimes, but as what must certainly be one of the most peculiar means by which the French insisted upon a collective amnesia about their recent past.

Everywhere the Tour traveled, local hosts used the spotlight to express their version of their national identity. Images of the race, the reference points presenters and viewers summoned alike, were soaked in historical memory. Riders were "*poilus*" or resistance fighters. Let down by the French team were likened to Dunkirk; organizers standing in cars in safari jackets recalled General Leclerc. Thompson, in one of the most insightful themes he threads throughout the work, points to how the race, unlike practically all other sports, is not about skill, but endurance. Tour organizers and promoters consciously cultivated an imagery of sacrifice and suffering, of the grueling demands of its circuit, of attrition and survival, of holding out to the end, as if this were a metaphor for France's fate since 1870, renewed and affirmed in two world wars. De Gaulle's France was the France of the Madonna in the frescoes. Tour founder Henri Desgrange's France was more a parody of Barrès: dirt, blood, and what must have seemed an eternity.

As Thompson argues, to create heroes out of commercial riders, it was necessary to stress the superhuman in their staying power, an image that would have resonated with a nation that suffered through a century of defeat and torment, yet no less ultimate and magnificent triumph. Thompson evokes several times the memory of Raymond Poulidor, doomed to finishing always second, yet beloved by French cycling fans, who called him "Pou-Pou", for this very fate. Perhaps there is something universally appealing about such spirited but "tragic" sports figures; Jimmy White's spectacular collapses in snooker finals were no less the source of legend. Yet one is provoked to wonder whether coming in second, with due honors, and stand-out effects, was not also how the French by the twentieth century were coming to see their global destiny.

Thompson catches well the commercialism that informed the Tour from when it was only a glimmer in its patron's eyes. Everything about this race was designed to make money. The race would build circulation for a newspaper covering sports and owned by bicycle manufacturers. It would help sell cycles and tires.<sup>[2]</sup> Eventually it would be used to sell anything under the sun. Localities wanted the Tour like they wanted the railroad in the previous century: to put them on the map, to rake in francs

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(here from retinues and fans), and to connect them to the bigger economies, in this case by selling their virtues to national and worldwide audiences.

Vichy welcomed the Tour not for the opportunity to emerge from purgatory (or lower), but to sell itself as a tourist attraction. Desgrange, who micro-managed the Tour until he died in 1940, tinkered constantly with its rules and organization to sustain its commercial viability. Bicycle and tire manufacturers sponsored teams and manipulated these shamelessly to feature and advance their star riders and benefit materially from name recognition. Thompson is very good at describing the cat-and-mouse game engaged in by Desgrange and sponsors, each trying to recast the Tour to fit its version of preferred marketability. When Desgrange decided that the teams were ruining the race, he recast it with national teams, a problem-solving but cash-poor strategy that engendered still more brilliant levels of materialism. As a substitute for the former sponsors' monies, the Tour implemented its publicity caravan, a raucous carnival-like accompaniment to the racers, which drew even more spectators and attention and turned into a virtual cash cow for any kind of mass marketer, like *La Vache Qui Rit* (all the way to the bank). Thompson shows as well how French radio and television grew up with the race, so that even as the modernity of bicycle technology faded with the course of time, the race was still a mover and shaker of modern change in contemporary France.

Eventually everything connected to the event was up for sale. This included of course the men who raced, and who could profit handsomely, even if commodification was their bargain with this devil. In perhaps the one shortcoming to this otherwise excellent book, Thompson curiously leaves these riders, their public and their private lives, too much in the shadows. Several chapters, smacking a bit too much of the dissertation, examine the working-class identities of riders, the efforts to discipline them and make them respectable, and the controversy provoked by Albert Londres's muckraking series on the physical toll taken by the race. A third and final chapter provides a superb dissection of the history of doping in this most demanding of sports, thus contextualizing for readers what has become the Tour's central point of contention in recent decades and threatening to displace its central grounding from fame to notoriety.

But what of fame? Like so many other aspects of modern life captured in this study, the history of the Tour is also the history of the ascent of celebrity culture. At times Thompson throws us tantalizing bones of what this meant, intimating that behind all the disciplining was the unhappy recognition that what the masses actually preferred in their heroes was their lack of respectability, their cheating (within limits), their bawdiness and brawling, their sexual prowess, and their thumbing more than their noses at their spectators. Celebrity was thus about a very new kind of social mobility, somewhere beyond Samuel Smiles's and Karl Marx's versions of success. It brought with it enormous opportunities for wealth and influence. But it was also commercially fabricated in ways that turned heroes into commodities and, worse, clichés. In fact it was about heroes who were likely to be mediocrities at everything else they did. And it was about how and why one got to be a celebrity, and what one satisfied in the lives of others. Most of all it was about the priorities modern consumer culture was setting for itself. Thompson leads us partially into this not-so-brave new world, but at the fork in the road I would have preferred to take the other turning.

More than modernity or even historical association, the central theme of this work is that contradiction or tension, for historical reasons, ensnared nearly everything the Tour set out to do or turned out to be. In masterful ways, Thompson explores the dualities in all dimensions of the Tour, and thus fulfills the promise of writing the history of sport as the history of national culture. He shows how the Tour wanted to replicate its textbook namesake, yet lost control of local narratives. He writes about the unmanageable conflicts unloosened by the Tour's love affair with modernity, while all the while evoking memories of an earlier, simpler, pre-industrial France. He points out that the organizers' desire to

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discipline their racers was at fundamental odds with bigger and bigger prize money, which conferred independence as well as riches upon the winners.

In the ultimate twist he remarks upon the globalization of this quintessentially French event, the ineluctable logic of selling Frenchness in modern times. At his best, however, Thompson dwells, chapter after chapter, upon the tensions embedded within the fundamental reality of the Tour: it is nothing if it is not about bone wearying, superhuman endurance. Thus, there was no place for women except on the sidelines, because if women could compete in grueling races, what was so special about the men who won? Even as women have forced their way into contemporary sports, there is still little interest in France in them as cyclists, even though the greatest female bicycle competitor in the world is a Frenchwoman. But Thompson, as he begins to peel back these contradictions is only getting going. The race was to be emblematic of modernity, the celebration of the hero in an age of technology, but once technology made it easier to pedal uphill, or advances in equipment, clothing, and scientific observation of positioning made it possible for average riders to best previous accomplishments, then what was left except a bunch of professionals on a cycling trip around the hexagon? Such inner tensions plague every sport, but none is more vulnerable than the Tour to human or machine improvements.

The Tour has grown with the decades, but it may also, like the commercial products it sells, contain within it programmed obsolescence. Worse still was that the Tour's core identity set it on a collision course with late twentieth-century ethics, once doping became a public matter. As Thompson informs us, racers had always taken all kinds of stimulants and drugs, because even if these might occasionally kill them on the route (the death toll was actually surprisingly low), they might equally kill themselves if they actually managed to finish clean. As a commercial event dressed up as something more, there was early on a confrontation between *raison d'être* and sponsors who sought to protect their up-and-coming riders, or riders who were out of the competition, from immolation upon Desgrange's altar of human sacrifice. Desgrange, by forming national teams and upping the ante of commercialism, found a way around this. But doping scandals may not be resolved so easily, and Thompson rightly asks whether contemporary culture offers a suitable exit strategy. On the one hand, the public clamor has become, for historical reasons, unforgiving of the athlete who cheats. But on the other hand, the Tour and the legend it sells demand the superhuman performance that forces doping, so that the race may in the end be trapped by its own, myth-making success. By setting twenty-first century dilemmas within a century-long historical narrative, Thompson has made the Tour's societal and cultural connections more comprehensible than ever before. One is tempted to write that this is first-rate sports history. Plain and simple first-rate French history will, however, do.

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## NOTES

[1] For a review of literature on the Tour, see Hugh Dauncey and Geoff Hare, "The Tour de France: a Pre-Modern Contest in a Post-Modern Context," in Hugh Dauncey and Geoff Hare, *The Tour de France 1903-2003: A Century of Sporting Structures, Meanings and Values* (London: Frank Cass, 2003), pp. 18-23.

[2] *L'Auto*, which created and sponsored the Tour.

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