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*H-France Review* Vol. 13 (July 2013), No. 124

Hugh Dauncey, *French Cycling: A Social and Cultural History*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2012. vi + 290 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$99.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-1-84631-835-1.

Reviewed by Christopher S. Thompson, Ball State University.

In this first scholarly book-length study of one of France's most important sports, Hugh Dauncey promises the reader an "interdisciplinary analysis of how cycling has been significant in French society and culture since the late nineteenth century" (p. 1). As he rightly points out, cycling is far more than just a sport, it is a "ludo-sporting-utility practice" (p. 4), which makes it "arguably a more complex activity than other sporting or recreational practices that are, in essence, just games or sports" (p. 4).

This is a crucial point: unlike, say, soccer balls, bicycles have had and still have their utilitarian applications, both military (through World War I, particularly) and civilian (transportation and commuting). Moreover, in addition to its athletic dimension (road, track, and, more recently, mountain bike [VTT] competitions), cycling has always included a significant leisure component, such as riding in city parks or out in the countryside. Finally, perhaps more than any other physical activity, cycling has been intimately linked with the development and economic prospects of important commercial and industrial interests: going back to its beginnings in the late nineteenth century, the fortunes of cycle manufacturers, of course, but also of manufacturers of tires, clothing, components, and accessories have been inextricably tied to the popularity of cycling itself.

As Dauncey demonstrates, that popularity has, especially since World War II, ebbed and flowed, declining in the immediate postwar period in large measure as a result of the development of inexpensive motorized vehicles (notably the Vélo Solex), before experiencing a resurgence in recent decades following the invention of new forms of cycling and the implementation in large French cities of public bicycle provision schemes (such as the ubiquitous Vélib's in Paris), motivated by ecological concerns and the desire to improve the quality of life in large, congested urban environments.

Confronted by the dauntingly multifaceted nature of French cycling, Dauncey adopts a case-study method, "the analysis of a carefully chosen selection of topics representative of the principal social, cultural, economic, sporting, and political dimensions of the activity" (p. 6). These case studies, in turn, are focused on five essential themes: "leisure, recreation and sociability; utility; industry, commerce, and technology; sport, competition, and media; and 'identity'" (p. 7). As the above ambitious agenda suggests, the book's greatest strength is the scope and comprehensiveness of its coverage. Dauncey's choices are generally well-conceived, although there is, perhaps inevitably, the occasional somewhat perplexing inclusion or omission.

*French Cycling* is organized chronologically into eight chapters, in addition to an introduction and a conclusion, with the periodization largely determined by technological and other trends in French cycling, although occasionally, notably in the case of the interwar period, the chronology coincides with broader historical developments and a more conventional periodization.

A key focus of Dauncey's study, especially early on, is on what he refers to as French cycling's "sports-media-industrial complex" (p. 45). For those familiar with the history of French cycling, this will come as no surprise, but Dauncey is justified in emphasizing this crucial nexus in the development of cycling in France. From the sport's earliest period, media entities (notably the sporting press, and later radio and television), cycle and related manufacturers, and the sport's governing organizations collaborated to promote cycling, implementing a variety of strategies, most notably the organization of races, to fuel the nascent interest in the bicycle, whose modern variant was invented in the late 1860s. They also, however, at times found themselves at cross purposes, as when the organizer of the Tour de France sought to defuse the influence of major cycle manufacturers, who sponsored the top teams and star riders in the race during the 1920s as a means of promoting their wares, by turning in the 1930s to national and regional teams whom the race organizers supplied with bicycles. The contributions and experiences of a fourth group of actors, cycling clubs, are also explored, as Dauncey examines the various motivations—economic and social—that converged to create and sustain this new sporting and leisure activity.

The Tour de France and other forms of cycling competition receive their due, but Dauncey intelligently avoids the trap of an overemphasis on races and the Tour in particular. As his study convincingly demonstrates, a social and cultural history of French cycling is about much more than the sport's most famous races. That said, as he addresses the issue of identities, he takes the time to offer brief vignettes of certain postwar racers (Vietto, Robic, and Bobet in the 1940s and 1950s; Poulidor, Anquetil, and somewhat curiously, Thévenet from the late 1950s to the late 1970s), who, he argues, were seen by the French public to personify certain traits or values. His most original section on competitive cycling is his treatment of France's track successes beginning in the 1960s—notably the exceptional career of the sprinter (and later national coach) Daniel Morelon—which were part of the new emphasis in the Fifth Republic on sporting achievement ("*la France qui gagne*") in the wake of France's poor showing at the 1960 Olympic Games, which de Gaulle had deplored as inconsistent with his vision of "*la grande nation*."

Dauncey is especially good on the institutional, economic, and commercial history of French cycling. He effectively addresses the institutional battles that occurred at various junctures of cycling's history, as stakeholders and federations with diverging visions of cycling's future in France (and internationally) competed for control over one or more of its facets (competition, cyclo-tourism, et cetera). Dauncey's examination of the rise, and at times decline, of manufacturers is compelling. He covers, of course, the successful pioneers of cycling's early phase, such as the Compagnie Parisienne, a now familiar part of the history of French cycling. Particularly interesting is his treatment of innovative postwar French firms (Look, Time, and certain "niche" frame manufacturers), who managed to adjust to international competition and prosper. Globalization, predictably, has not spared the French cycle industry, and only those businesses willing to adapt have survived. Dauncey also covers the significant impact of the sporting goods megastore Décathlon ("*à fond la forme*") over the last few decades on the French cycle industry and bicycle sales. These more recent developments have received less attention from historians of cycling, and Dauncey is to be commended for broadening our understanding of the commercial dimension of French cycling, and for bringing it up to the present day.

Dauncey's treatment of postwar developments in French cycling is especially valuable as he addresses subjects that have received less attention from scholars to date. There are fascinating sections on new forms of cycling after World War II, including *vélo cross* and mountain biking, the latter in particular a manifestation of the growing appeal, especially among middle-class French, of so-called "Californian" sports, which emphasize innovative technologies and the individual's engagement with nature, and provide a strategy of social distinction for cyclists not interested in the more conventional (often lower-class) Sunday road ride. Dauncey's chapter on the bicycle and environmentalism is compelling, as he traces the recent vogue for public bicycle provision programs from the pioneering example of La Rochelle to initiatives in Paris, Strasbourg, and Lyon. In so doing, he rightly emphasizes the growing role of the state (which has in recent years appointed a *Monsieur Vélo* to lead efforts at planning cycling-

friendly programs and policies), as well as the increasing involvement of municipal and regional governments in developing and implementing a range of initiatives that promote and facilitate the activity.

The work does have some shortcomings. Dauncey, a senior lecturer in French at Newcastle University, chooses to open each chapter with a very brief (one to two pages) historical summary of the period under consideration, based on a few secondary sources. Thereafter, in the chapters themselves, there are numerous references to “sociopolitical” or “socioeconomic” changes, but these remain too often vague and undeveloped. As a result, Dauncey misses opportunities, especially in his chapters on pre-World War II France, to make more deeply contextualized connections between the world of French cycling and the broader society of which it is a part. For example, although he mentions pre-World War I Republicanism, he fails to relate the proliferation of cycling (and other) clubs in France at that time to the Third Republic’s ideology of Solidarism and its corollary, associationism.

Dauncey’s treatment of gender, a central issue with regard to French cycling identities (and an important aspect of the cultural history of physical activity in general), is incomplete and sporadic, perhaps a victim of his case-studies approach. In a section devoted to female cycling prior to World War I (pp. 35-42), he references briefly but leaves out any analysis of the key debate about bloomers for female cyclists. In general, debates in the late nineteenth century over the “social, cultural, medical, sexual, and political advisability” of female cycling (p. 205) are insufficiently developed. The period’s medical debates about cycling are also addressed rather superficially, with little or no mention made of the huge prewar controversy over fatigue, nor of the debate between the advocates of moderate exercise and the proponents of more demanding physical training.

The popularity of cycling’s early “heroes” is not explored critically: why did so many French, particularly before World War II, see in endurance cyclists individuals to celebrate and emulate? Dauncey frequently mentions the divide between amateurism and professionalism in his early chapters, but the various arguments of both sides in this essential debate are never fully developed; as a result, the impact of notions of social class and “respectable” conduct (including while cycling) are neglected. In these instances and others, a deeper appreciation of the broader context beyond the world of French cycling would have served Dauncey’s reader well.

There are also some errors. Dauncey states that the Second Empire starts in 1848 (p. 15), the result no doubt of a typo or oversight. More troubling is Dauncey’s assertion that the average speed of the winner of the men’s Tour de France of 1984 was “admittedly EPO-assisted” (p. 214). Such a claim, which is false—EPO entered the peloton at the turn of the 1990s—suggests a superficial understanding of the important issue of doping (many racers at the time were doping, but not on EPO). Certain of Dauncey’s judgments are questionable. A lengthy section devoted to the controversial female cycling champion Jeannie Longo exaggerates both her popularity and her impact. Now in her mid-fifties and apparently still determined to compete at the highest level, Longo has been irredeemably tainted by doping cases and allegations (indeed, her continuing competitiveness at such an advanced age is virtually inexplicable absent sustained and extremely effective doping); moreover, women’s cycling remains marginal in France today. Meanwhile, Dauncey’s claim, in an otherwise persuasive and nuanced section on Lance Armstrong, that “the relationship between Armstrong and the Tour has defined the culture of sport in France in the contemporary period” (p. 233) seems overblown. If any individual(s) or achievement(s) defined the “culture of sport” (a phrase that requires clarification) in France during the last two decades, surely it was the 1998 World Cup triumph by the much celebrated *black-blanc-beur* teams of Zidane and company.

Historians are also likely to take issue with some of Dauncey’s characterizations and interpretations. Chapter three begins: “France in the 1890s was politically relatively stable, even though the Third Republic...was still challenged by threats from the extreme right, and was shaken to the core by the

national drama of the Dreyfus Affair (1894-99)" (p. 44). These seem mutually exclusive propositions. How could France be both relatively stable and shaken to the core by the Dreyfus Affair? Dauncey himself seems confused about the impact of the Dreyfus Affair on the nation, noting at the start of the very next chapter: "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" (p. 75).

In addition to the apparent ambivalence about the impact of the Dreyfus Affair, Dauncey's reference to an entity, "France," which doubted "its" political, moral, and social principles, is problematic. The French, as he notes, were deeply divided (and not just by the Dreyfus Affair) at that time. Members of the extreme right did not necessarily "doubt" their principles; they simply saw them as in conflict with those of some of their compatriots. So too did individuals occupying other places on the political spectrum. At times, then, Dauncey's desire to summarize rapidly a complex historical context leads to over-simplification that obscures or eludes crucial distinctions. He alludes, for example, to the "ideological and political values...of France in general" (p. 99). Moreover, Dauncey occasionally endows with agency entities that are not historical actors, as when he notes "a growing definition by the Tour [de France] itself of elements of French identity" (p. 88). The Tour of course defines nothing; various groups in French society have used the race to promote, among other things, their vision for France, their values, and their interpretation of French history.

The above reservations notwithstanding, Hugh Dauncey is to be commended for taking on such an ambitious project and for the impressive range of subjects that he integrates into his engaging and informative history of French cycling in all its forms.

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