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THE GREEN FIELDS OF FRANCE: IRELAND'S SPORTING HEROES AND THE *TOUR DE FRANCE*

Ruadhán Cooke

Introduction

In post-industrial, 21st century western society, and for males within a particular age band to a greater extent than females, the word 'hero' is often synonymous with sporting achievement. If an opinion poll were conducted on the subject of the Irish sporting hero, the following might be some of the questions that would be asked: Who are Ireland's sporting heroes? What is Ireland's greatest sporting moment? Why has Munster's defeat of the touring All-Blacks in 1978 gone down in Irish sporting history? What place in the pantheon of Irish sporting greatness will Eamon Coughlan occupy as the man who came fourth in successive Olympic Games? Was Roy Keane's decision to leave the training base at Saipan before the 2002 World Cup the ultimate act of selfishness by a spoiled and overpaid footballer or a heroic stance against mediocrity? How do we judge swimmer Michelle Smith-De Bruin's triple gold medal winning performance at the Atlanta Olympic Games in the light of her subsequent conviction for doping offences? Is middle-distance runner Sonia O'Sullivan Ireland's greatest ever sportsperson?

Gaelic games provide many of Ireland's home-grown heroes. In the wider context, we look to Britain for the consecration of our star soccer players while success at international championships and 'Major' sporting events is generally the measure against which Irish sportsmen and women are judged for elevation to the status of hero. The unique setting that is the *Tour de France* would definitely feature on such a list. This annual event is neither a European nor a world championship, but

its winners, and even those who ‘merely’ take part, accede to a level of respect and recognition rarely witnessed in other sports. While the link to the theme of the Irish sporting hero is not immediately obvious - only seven Irishmen have competed in this great event - the *Tour de France* has played a unique role in defining the careers of two of Ireland’s most famous sports personalities, cyclists Seán Kelly and Stephen Roche. Both meet the requirements for consideration as sporting heroes according to the criteria which will be discussed below. During their careers they also inspired a rare level of popular acceptance from the Irish sporting public in transcending the parochial loyalties inherent in Gaelic games and the partisan followings of other sports to be considered as truly national heroes.

The title of this article is a reference to the song ‘The Green Fields of France’, a ballad which recounts the sacrifice made by nineteen year-old Private William McBride and tens of thousands of other young Irishmen who lost their lives on the battlefields of Belgium and Northern France during the Great War ‘in defence of small nations’. The lyrics consider these young men as ‘heroes’ but the hero status of Irishmen and women who died in the service of the British army has until recently been a taboo subject, their stories having been airbrushed from history in Ireland after the foundation of the state, the inference being that service to the sovereign of Ireland’s former colonial oppressor was an act of cowardice and betrayal.

The role of sport in the construction, perception and assertion of national identity should not be understated. Events which pitch Ireland against England for example, have always occupied a special place on the sporting calendar, and have produced some memorable moments and popular heroes. Who will forget Ray Houghton’s goal at the 1988 UEFA European championship finals or Gerry McLoughlin’s try in Twickenham in 1983? The saying in Irish, ‘*An rud is annamh is iontach*’, translates roughly as ‘the thing which is rarest is most beautiful’.

Outperforming the ‘auld enemy’, Ireland’s nearest neighbour and keenest rival, is a cause of great satisfaction and national celebration. Cycling is very much a minority sport in Ireland, but the success of Irish cyclists on the world stage and in the *Tour de France*, from the emergence of Shay Elliott in the mid-1950s to Stephen Roche’s swansong in the early 1990s, provided the country with very visible ambassadors who regularly eclipsed their British counterparts. Unlike the tragic case of the British rider, Tom Simpson, the *Tour de France* did not claim the life of any Irish cyclist but it is undoubtedly one of the greatest tests of skill, bravery and endurance in international sport.

This paper will analyse briefly the terms ‘hero’ / ‘heroic’ in a sporting context and examine some of the essential differences between stardom and heroism. Sporting greatness or popularity for example is not necessarily heroic. We will go on to explain why we have chosen to look at the sport of cycling and more particularly the *Tour de France* in the context of the Irish sporting hero. By analysing an event like the *Tour de France* we will highlight the importance of the occasion or stage in the creation of heroic moments out of which our heroes are born, and also demonstrate the extent to which the attribution of heroism in sport depends to a large degree on profile and media exposure. The *Tour de France* provides a particularly apt focus to a discussion on links between the heroic or epic setting, heroic moments in sport and the creation of sporting heroes, and Ireland’s *Tour de France* cyclists make a very interesting contribution to a case study of the Irish Hero. Only seven Irishmen have competed in the event and two of them became superstars. This article will profile Ireland’s ‘giants of the road’ and in so doing will highlight some of the different types of hero, their qualities, and the ingredients of the heroic act. The article will conclude by looking at problems with the notion of heroism and the temporary nature of hero status and raise some of the ambiguities and contradictions surrounding the concept of heroism in

modern professional sport with particular reference to the media, commercialism and doping.

The sporting 'hero', cycling and the *Tour de France*

The term 'hero' or 'heroic' is inherently subjective. Sarah Alyn Stacey¹ in her introduction to a collection of essays celebrating the sporting links between Ireland and France talks of the 'inescapable subjectivity' and the 'volatility' of sporting heroism and the fact that all definitions involve 'relative' terms. She quotes the nineteenth century historian Thomas Carlyle's definition of the hero as 'leaders of men / great ones' and points out that the Oxford English Dictionary defines a hero as '[someone] of superhuman qualities, favoured by the Gods, [an] illustrious warrior, [a] man admired for achievements and noble qualities'.

There is no exact formula for the making of a star or a hero but there are some essential ingredients. According to Hugh Dauncey² there must be real or concrete sporting achievement and admiration of such success. The hero should behave correctly in adversity. A certain degree of 'attractiveness' of personality or appeal is also required. Success on its own is generally insufficient to achieve popularity. Dauncey stresses that it is not unusual to be an unpopular champion, especially in an event such as the *Tour de France*. It could be argued therefore that unpopular champions, in spite of their achievements can never be heroes.

Writers on the topic have pointed out that it is the public which decides ultimately what is heroic and what is not at any given time. This extremely volatile status 'may be awarded or denied to an individual and its permanence cannot be

¹ Sarah Alyn Stacey, 'Heroism in Sport: Ireland and France', in Sarah Alyn Stacey, ed., *Essays on heroism in Sport in Ireland and France* (Lewiston, 2003), p.4.

² Hugh Dauncey, 'French Cycling Heroes of the Tour: Winners and Losers', in Hugh Dauncey & Geoff Hare, eds., *The Tour de France 1903-2003: A Century of Sporting Structures, Meanings and Values* (London, 2003), p.177.

assured'.³ Today's hero in sport can very easily become tomorrow's villain. Roy Keane is an interesting example of the hero turned villain turned hero again.

A degree of consensus as to what constitutes a hero is also required and this is generally engineered by the media. Given that the *Tour de France* was initially conceived in no small part as a publicity stunt by the editor of the breakaway sports newspaper *L'Auto* to sell more papers than its rival and forerunner *Le Vélo*, Dauncey points out that mediatisation has been and continues to be the 'key to the creation of the Tour's heroes'.⁴ Media coverage generates popularity and has the ability to create icons, turning mere competitors first into stars and then into heroes. The hero might therefore be described as the champion whose behaviour and personality attract admiration and who achieves a certain critical level of popular appeal.

Eugen Weber evokes the 'human yearning for something to admire'⁵ which according to Richard Holt is what makes us 'weave our myths (and dreams) around those who excel at things we cannot do but would like to do'.⁶ Sporting excellence is something which is beyond most of us and therefore we live it vicariously. An historical inferiority complex probably goes a long way to explaining why Irish people have always yearned for something to be proud of, to be seen as winners. We long to excel at something and not be seen as mere plucky competitors, the moral victory specialists, having given it 'a lash'. Under-investment in sporting infrastructure and competing priorities since the foundation of the Irish State in 1922 meant that truly national sporting icons competing on the world stage have been very thin on the ground indeed. This may explain to some extent the fascination evident in Ireland with English and Scottish Premiership football teams, over and above an

³ Alyn Stacey, 'Heroism in Sport: Ireland and France', p.5.

⁴ Dauncey & Hare, 'The Tour de France: A Pre-Modern Contest in a Post-Modern Context', in *The Tour de France 1903-2003*, p.26.

⁵ Eugen Weber, 'Foreword', in *The Tour de France 1903-2003*, p.xiii.

⁶ Richard Holt, 'Preface', in *Essays on heroism in Sport in Ireland and France*, p.xi.

interest in the Irish players attached to such clubs. Irish athletes competing on the wider international stage do so against all the odds and consequently attract the special attention of a nation hungry for sporting success.

It has been pointed out that cycling in general and the *Tour de France* in particular have always had a special relationship with the concept of heroism because of the sport's extreme difficulty and because of the Tour's capacity to 'create heroes and recount epic struggles'.⁷ David Walsh puts it as follows: 'The history of sport is speckled with the remarkable. Remarkable feats achieved by remarkable human beings. Because of its extraordinary demands on mind and body, the sport of cycling has offered a special stage for the heroic.'⁸ The greatest cycling event of them all is indisputably the *Tour de France*. It is an event which has produced many different types of heroes - Raymond Poulidor, the nearly man of the 1960s, Jacques Anquetil the cold perfectionist, the legendary Eddy Merckx who was considered to be cruelly ambitious and ruthlessly dedicated to victory, and most recently Lance Armstrong, the superhuman whose crushing dominance in winning a record-breaking six Tours in a row leaves people more sceptical than in worshipping admiration. Indeed, the French public's enduring affection for the nearly man Poulidor and the fallen hero Richard Virenque shows just how problematic the concept of heroism in sport can be, where the most accomplished champion isn't necessarily the hero. The all-conquering champion attracts suspicion and sometimes threatens to kill interest in a sport as the case of Lance Armstrong in the *Tour de France* and Michael Schumacher in Formula One motor racing might suggest. To further illustrate the point, the Irish sports writer Con Houlihan's favourite story is from the 1948 Tour. At the time a limited number of recreational cyclists were still allowed to participate in the event:

⁷ Dauncey & Hare, 'The Tour de France: A Pre-Modern Contest in a Post-Modern Context', p.26.

⁸ David Walsh, *Seán Kelly: A man for all seasons* (Huddersfield, 1991), p.7.

The hero of that race (1948 Tour) was (believe it or not) the man who finished last. He was about 70 and no more than a social cyclist but to ride the tour was his life's ambition. He couldn't afford it until he had retired [...] then he lined up with the men he so admired. [...] by the end of the first week he was something of a national hero. And as the Tour went on his name became more and more of a café-hold word.⁹

The '*lanterne rouge*' or 'red light', denotes the back-marker in the *Tour de France*. Riders who abandon the race suffer the ignominy of being 'swept up' by the '*voiture-balai*' or 'broom-wagon'. Many sporting directors make a point of waiting on the finish-line of each stage until all their riders make it home. There is therefore a very special significance in the context of the *Tour de France* attached to completing the event, even in last place.

There are no sporting heroes without action. There is no action without a stage / setting / context. But the stage / setting / context is all important: Croke Park on All-Ireland Finals Day, Lansdowne Road on a Six-Nations Saturday, the Giant's Stadium New York during the 1994 World Cup Finals. A 147 break in record time in the local snooker club is not the same as replicating the feat in the final of the World Snooker Championship at the aptly named Crucible theatre. Only the sporting acts which take place on the biggest of stages and against all the odds go down in history as acts of real greatness or heroism. Performing under the greatest of pressure, when it matters most and when everyone is watching are considered to be the true indicators of sporting greatness. How many times have some of the most gifted sportsmen and women failed to rise to the big occasion? How often has the big occasion caused our

⁹ Con Houlihan, 'Napoleon's poplars nod their dusty approval: Stephen Roche wins the 1987 Tour de France', in *More than a Game: Selected Sporting Essays* (Dublin, 2003), pp.105-6.

sporting icons, male and female, to choke? How many acts of sporting greatness have gone completely unnoticed because of the profile of the sport? A good example is rower Sam Lynch, a medical student and genuine amateur, who is virtually unknown in Ireland despite a fourth-place finish at the 1996 Olympic Games and being world champion at lightweight single sculls in 2001 and 2002.

In 2003 the *Tour de France* celebrated the 100th anniversary of the first staging of the race. It is the third largest sporting spectacle in the world after the Olympic Games and the FIFA World Cup, deserving of the title of the most gruelling sporting event on earth where merely finishing or ‘surviving’ is considered an act of considerable sporting and human achievement in itself, conferring the title of ‘giant of the road’ on those who make it. The longest Tour in 1926 covered 5,754 km while the 2004 edition involved twenty days of racing over 3,390 km. Roland Barthes in the famous cultural treatise *Mythologies* describes the event as a ‘modern epic’ a ‘unique fable’ and a ‘Homeric struggle’ involving the participation of ‘legends’ and ‘supermen’.¹⁰ The race finishes at the end of the Champs Élysées, the Elysian Fields of Roman mythology, under the Arc de Triomphe. Five million people lined the roads of France in 2003 with twenty million people following the race on television in France alone. It thus constitutes a stage or theatre of sport worthy of a heroic production and with a profile to match. Phil Dine considers the Tour as ‘the outstanding example of European sporting heroism’¹¹ while Holt and Mangan describe it as ‘an annual event which is indisputably heroic and in a sense which has come to define the very idea of the hero in Europe’.¹² Ireland’s *Tour de France*

¹⁰ Roland Barthes, ‘Le Tour de France comme épopée’, in *Mythologies* (Paris, 1970), pp.103-13.

¹¹ Phil Dine, ‘The Kid from Lens, The Sultan and the Divine Miss L: Some Varieties of French Sporting Heroism’, in *Essays on heroism in Sport in Ireland and France*, p.72.

¹² Richard Holt and J.A. Mangan, ‘Introduction’, in Richard Holt, J.A. Mangan, P. Lanfranchi, eds., *European Heroes: Myth, Identity, Sport* (London, 1996), p.9.

cyclists all plied their trade in professional teams based in Europe, thereby providing a rare and uniquely European focus to Irish sporting activity.

In the early days before radio and television, the style of reporting in newspapers by ‘incorrigible hyperbolists’¹³ contributed to the Tour’s iconic status, and when talking about the *Tour de France*, superlatives invariably abounded. However as live media coverage today bears out, the scale and difficulty of the event were hardly overstated and the pain, fatigue and immense bravery of the riders as the race unfolds before our very eyes are not exaggerated media inventions. The Tour represents a ‘gigantic crusade’,¹⁴ a ‘gladiatorial contest’¹⁵ pitting man against himself, his fellow competitors and the forces of nature. The names and places of the Tour have become sporting icons in themselves. The Mont Ventoux, the Alpe d’Huez, and the Col du Tourmalet are known to sports enthusiasts all over the world and have acquired a mythical personality in much the same way as Becher’s Brook and Amen Corner for example in the context of the Aintree Grand National and the Augusta Masters respectively.

The Tour is an event which places extreme physical demands on the competitors. When first conceived, the challenge was almost beyond belief and many felt it to be beyond the capacity of human beings. The organisers constantly sought to protect the difficulty of the race and looked for ways of making the race even more difficult to ensure that the winner and those who just managed to finish would be seen as heroes or supermen: ‘Not men but giants’ as the slogan for the Guinness All Ireland Hurling Championship proudly proclaims, although with less justification perhaps. In the opinion of Henri Desgranges, the race’s organiser, the ideal Tour would be a tour where only one rider managed to complete the event. In the reporting of the event,

¹³ Christophe Campos, ‘Beating the Bounds: The Tour de France and National Identity’, in *The Tour de France 1903-2003*, p.160.

¹⁴ Dauncey & Hare, ‘The Tour de France: A Pre-Modern Contest in a Post-Modern Context’, p.4.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.28.

nature is personified - the mountains and conditions seen as monsters to be conquered and the bravery of the participants became legendary. A famous competitor in the 1920s, Henri Pélissier, describing the event as a Calvary, was at pains to point out that Christ, unlike the competitors in the *Tour de France*, had a 'mere' 14 Stations of the Cross to endure. The Tour is therefore the ultimate endurance sport demanding courage out of the ordinary. According to Patrick Mignon¹⁶, the Scottish rider Robert Millar claimed that a good Tour takes a year off your life, a bad Tour three.

Ireland's 'giants of the road'

Shay Elliott was Ireland's first competitor in the Tour de France in 1956. He rode the race six times in all, completing three. A silver medallist in the World Road Race Championship of 1962, he won the third stage of the 1963 Tour and wore the race leader's yellow jersey for four days. Elliott was best known within the sport as a '*super-domestique*', whose job it was to act as 'first lieutenant' to his illustrious team leaders who included the legendary Jacques Anquetil and the revered Raymond Poulidor. Paul Kimmage points out that loyalty was his 'calling card'.¹⁷ He died tragically as a relative unknown in his native Dublin in 1971 having returned from France, burdened by a legacy of bad luck, unfulfilled dreams and a sense of having been betrayed by those for whom he had sacrificed himself in sporting terms. Elliott's greatness or heroism was to have been a trailblazer in a sport for which Ireland had no international reputation, to have put the country on the map and to have flown the flag at a time when sporting icons were few and far between on a truly international stage. The monument to the British rider Tom Simpson at the place where he died on the

¹⁶ Patrick Mignon, 'The Tour de France and the Doping Issue', in *The Tour de France 1903-2003*, p.228.

¹⁷ Paul Kimmage, 'In the name of the Father: The Life and Death of an Irish Cycling Hero', in *Essays on heroism in Sport in Ireland and France*, p.24.

1967 Tour describes him as an ambassador. Elliott was also a tragic ambassador for Irish sport.

Fittingly, Seán Kelly won the Shay Elliott memorial classic as an emerging talent and went on to become one of Ireland's most admired and respected sports personalities of all time in a career spanning three decades. He left school at the age of twelve to help his father out on the family farm and later began an apprenticeship as a block-layer. A man of few words, Kelly possessed the 'heroic' qualities of almost unnatural physical and mental toughness and a consistent durability which saw him ranked as the world's number one cyclist for five consecutive years from the inception of the points scoring system in 1983. He is considered by some ranking systems as the fourth most successful cyclist of all time. He contested cycling's greatest race fourteen times, completed twelve and finished fourth overall in 1985. Four times a winner of the green jersey for the most consistent finisher, he amassed five stage wins and was second on twenty-two occasions. He wore yellow once on the ninth stage of the 1983 Tour while at the same time wearing the green jersey. That same day, Stephen Roche was wearing the white jersey for best young rider. David Walsh commented that Ireland had 'hi-jacked'¹⁸ the *Tour de France*. For several years in the 1980s he was called 'King Kelly' or '*Le cannibale*', dominating his rivals in all events except the *Tour de France*. In making comparisons with the original '*cannibale*', the legendary Eddy Merckx, the sporting press was paying Kelly the ultimate compliment. Kelly looked on the Tour as the 100% race and his failure to conquer the event was, in part, a matter of choice, but it was also a reflection of his particular strengths. Expecting Kelly to win the *Tour de France* would have been like asking a flat-race specialist to win the Cheltenham Gold Cup or the Grand National. His biographer David Walsh remarks that Kelly's deeds in the world's greatest bike race

¹⁸ David Walsh, *Kelly*, (London, 1987), p.227.

will soon fade into the outer reaches of the memory but that the Tour was good for Kelly and that he, Kelly, was, in his own way, good for the Tour. His contribution will be remembered not in terms of one heroic exploit but for the daily efforts over many years. The Italian sprinter, Alessandro Pettachi, won the sprint finishes on stages one, three, five and six of the 2003 Tour but 'retired' from the race before the difficult mountain stages. Unlike this modern breed of sprint specialist who competes in the Tour exclusively to 'poach' wins in the early flat stages only to 'retire' before the real competition begins, Kelly paid the event the respect he felt it deserved in always competing to finish. Lance Armstrong's approach to the Tour involves dedicating both his and his team's entire season to peaking for just one event, a sacrifice Kelly could never bring himself to make.

At the end of a very successful season in 1982 during which he won the green jersey in the *Tour de France* and a bronze medal at the World Championships, the main square in his hometown of Carrick-on-Suir was re-named 'Seán Kelly Square'. Generally considered to be a nation of begrudgers, it is most unusual for an Irishman's achievements to be acknowledged while he is very much alive and well. In an article in *The Irish Times* on the day the second stage of the 1998 *Tour de France* passed through Carrick-on-Suir on the way to the stage-finish in Cork and the boat back to France, Kathy Sheridan observed of Kelly:

He is the quintessential local hero with a place in the town's heart and soul that is difficult to over-estimate; as likely to be seen emerging from Michael Hearn's hardware shop with smudges of plaster on his nose as sipping wine at international events with sporting and political legends.¹⁹

¹⁹ Kathy Sheridan, 'Grand Tour', in *The Irish Times*, 12 May 1998.

The article quoted the above-mentioned Hearn who summed up what Kelly meant to the people of the region:

In the mid-1980s when unemployment was running at twenty to twenty-five percent, Carrick became an icon of the poverty-stricken town... But every headline about emigration or a factory closure here was countered by another about the man from Carrick-on-Suir conquering something, somewhere in the world. When times were lean, it was Seán Kelly that kept heads up and brave smiles on the banks of the Suir.²⁰

Richard Holt's definition of the sporting 'hero' as the common man or woman who does uncommon things applies perfectly to Kelly. Kelly also provides a very neat fit for Roland Barthes' description of the 'promethean hero'²¹ epitomised by Louison Bobet, who triumphs through sheer toughness, physical conditioning and character.

The role of honour will show that Stephen Roche was the overall winner of the *Tour de France* in 1987, completing an extraordinary treble of *Giro d'Italia*, *Tour de France* and World Road Race Championship in the same year, a feat only equalled by the great Eddy Merckx. Roche rode the Tour on ten occasions, completed eight, finished third overall in 1985 and was three times a stage-winner. Less imposing physically than Kelly, Roche possessed qualities of finesse and style, but will be long remembered for his exceptional courage when finishing the stage to La Plagne by collapsing over the line in exhaustion, thereby putting himself within touching distance of the race-leader Pedro Delgado. This defining moment of the 1987 Tour laid the basis for his subsequent win. The journalist and sports writer Geoffrey Wheatcroft described Roche's win as 'one of the greatest days Irish sport has ever

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Barthes, 'Le Tour de France comme épopée', p.112.

known'²² and his triple-crown performance from 1987 is probably the greatest sporting achievement by an Irish man or woman. Roche matches the description of Charly Gaul, Barthes' second type of 'hero'²³ - the chosen one, blessed with exceptional talent by the gods. However, he did not have Kelly's durability or toughness. Over the length of his career, he had nothing like the same success and never earned the same level of awesome respect commanded by Kelly. The then *Taoiseach*, Prime Minister Charles Haughey, anxious to cash in on the political capital to be gained from one of the greatest sporting achievements ever by an Irishman, gate-crashed Roche's podium presentation on the Champs Élysées. He spoke about the victory as if Ireland would never see a poor day again, stressing that the whole country had got a badly needed lift. Wheatcroft points out that this son of a Dublin milkman was 'one of the most likeable of Tour winners, a decent skin'.²⁴ Like their French counterparts, a common feature of Ireland's cycling 'heroes' is their 'relatively modest social origins'.²⁵ Proof of the esteem in which the sport held Ireland's cycling superstars came with the 1998 Tour starting in Stephen Roche's home-town of Dublin, passing through Seán Kelly's native Carrick-on-Suir and heading back to France via Cork.

Until 2004, Ireland's three other *Tour de France* competitors were Martin Earley, Laurence Roche and Paul Kimmage. Earley was the epitome of the good journeyman professional, the loyal servant, a quality rarely seen in other team sports to the same degree as in cycling. Earley rode the Tour on eight occasions, completing five. One of his greatest days in the sport came when winning stage eight of the 1989 Tour. Laurence Roche rode the 1991 Tour finishing 153rd, an achievement largely

²² Geoffrey Wheatcroft, 'Damning evidence despite protestation', in *The Sunday Independent*, 28 Mar. 2004.

²³ Barthes, 'Le Tour de France comme épopée', p.112.

²⁴ Geoffrey Wheatcroft, 'Damning evidence despite protestation', in *The Sunday Independent*, 28 Mar. 2004.

²⁵ Dauncey, 'French Cycling Heroes of the Tour', p.181.

forgotten due to the glittering career of his illustrious older brother Stephen. Paul Kimmage was a very successful amateur who rode for Ireland in the 1984 Olympic Games and was the first Irishman to have worn the yellow jersey in the British Milk Race. Stephen Roche was his boyhood idol and they had been good friends as young amateurs. When he turned professional however, his four years in the ‘*peloton*’ were about survival. He discovered how gruellingly hard the sport was and also that he was never going to be a star. He also discovered that many cyclists were taking performance enhancing drugs just to get by - ‘not drugs that would necessarily ensure victory but drugs that would allow you to finish the race and start another day’²⁶ - something he could never bring himself to do and which ultimately led him to quit the sport during stage twelve of the 1989 Tour feeling betrayed by the system, his boyhood dreams shattered. Kimmage rode three Tours, finishing just once in 1986. He wrote an award-winning and prophetic account of drugs in professional cycling, *A Rough Ride*, after retiring in 1989 and suffered the inevitable opprobrium of his sporting peers for having turned ‘whistle-blower’ or having ‘spat in the soup’. Despite telling the truth and despite the fact that everything that has happened in the sport in the last fifteen years has proved Kimmage utterly right, he is the anti-hero of Irish cycling. He never claimed that Roche or Kelly had taken drugs but by indicting the sport as a whole he was seen as having sullied the reputations of Ireland’s two superstars. He describes being a guest on Ireland’s longest running talk-show, *The Late Late Show* and the iconic Gay Byrne putting it to him: ‘The implications from what you’ve written are that everyone is doing it. What about the lads - What about Stephen and Seán?’ According to Kimmage, Byrne’s look said: ‘How dare you cast a shadow on our fairytale. How dare you poison our dreams.’²⁷ Kimmage felt it was expected that he would reassure the good people of Ireland that only losers like

²⁶ Paul Kimmage, *Rough Ride* (London, 2001).

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.xvii.

himself got tangled up in the drugs web and that the sport's heroes were clean. Roche passed off the allegations by saying that it was only the second string pros struggling for a living who got involved in doping. Ironically, in March of 2004, allegations surfaced claiming that Stephen Roche was administered drugs by his Carrera team in the 1990s, thus casting a cloud of doubt over his heroic performances of 1987 at a remove of seventeen years. Geoffrey Wheatcroft remarks that it 'would please just about everyone in cycling if it could be proved Roche was not given EPO at Carrera'²⁸ but even his greatest admirers would admit that his hero status is somewhat tarnished as a result and that a "seed of doubt"²⁹ has been sown concerning the credibility of his past achievements.

Ireland's seventh and most recent competitor in the *Tour de France*, twenty-four year old Mark Scanlon, Junior World Road Race Champion in 1998, was only six years old when Stephen Roche completed his amazing treble. In finishing eighty-ninth in his debut Tour in 2004 he is the only Irishman to ride in the famous race since the glory days of Irish cycling. A new star may be in the making against all the odds.

The twilight of the hero?

The case of Paul Kimmage allows us to conclude by highlighting briefly some of the ambiguities and contradictions of sport in general and of cycling in particular. The shocking revelations about drugs in sport that continue to unfold beg the questions: How can cheats be heroes? Where is the honour, what is there to admire or aspire to in such behaviour? And yet, because of the extreme demands of top-level sport, wanting to survive is human and tragically heroic in a convoluted way, as the case of Tom Simpson bears out. Having collapsed from the combined effects of forty degree

²⁸ Wheatcroft, 'Damning evidence despite protestation.'

²⁹ Paul Brennan, 'Tour de Farce as Roche linked to doping scandal', in *The Kingdom*, (<http://www.the-kingdom.ie>) 1Apr. 2004.

Celsius temperatures, exhaustion and a cocktail of alcohol and amphetamines on the ascent to the finish of stage thirteen of the 1967 Tour at the summit of Mont Ventoux, Simpson's dying plea was a haunting: 'Put me back on the bike.' Commentators point out that 'the temptation to use anything which makes the race more bearable has always been strong'.³⁰ Patrick Mignon explains that one of the reasons Richard Virenque remains a 'hero' in France is because doping in cycling is seen by many as 'a means of overcoming the pain that a professional need[s] to endure to win'.³¹

Dauncey and Hare suggest that recent events in cycling have brought about the 'demise of the unambiguous athletic performance' and that we are witnessing not only the 'twilight of the hero of the *Tour de France*'³² but the twilight of the sporting hero in general. We are increasingly forced to ask ourselves whether there are any real heroes left in sport. Are our sportsmen and women merely 'stars who play sport', celebrity figures 'whose images are media and social products'³³ in much the same way as actors and models, and similarly subject to the passing whims of fashion?

Do modern sporting 'heroes' inspire us, the general public, and do our young people get involved and stay involved in sport seeking to emulate their achievements? Are our young people more taken with the trappings of stardom - celebrity, wealth and image - than the beauty of the game or the gesture? Con Houlihan commented that Kelly's and Roche's achievements would almost certainly send a few more Irish cyclists into the professional ranks. This prediction never materialised, in part because, as Houlihan himself put it, 'so few have the capacity to endure the loneliness of the long-distance bike-rider'³⁴. The other side of the story is that we live in an increasingly wealthy, sedentary and consumer-oriented society where *PlayStation* and

³⁰ Wheatcroft, 'Damning evidence despite protestation.'

³¹ Mignon, 'The Tour de France and the Doping Issue', p.240.

³² Dauncey & Hare, 'The Tour de France: A Pre-Modern Contest in a Post-Modern Context', p.15.

³³ Dauncey, 'French Cycling Heroes of the Tour', p.180.

³⁴ Houlihan, 'Napoleon's poplars nod their dusty approval', p.103.

round-the-clock television coverage of big sporting events rule. Children are under greater pressure than ever to 'succeed' in school and subsequently in their chosen profession while volunteers such as referees and coaches are increasingly reluctant to give up their time freely in light of the excessively litigious reflex which is all too prevalent in 21st century Irish society. Elite level sport in Ireland has never been as well run and as well funded, but the numbers of people of all ages participating in recreational sport are at a record low.

How can professional sportspeople be considered heroes when they are paid huge amounts of money to do what they do? Today even amateur sportspeople receive financial support through grants and sponsorship, amounts of money that in some cases are the equivalent of a decent industrial wage. The most amateur of all organisations, the Gaelic Athletic Association, is currently faced with the dilemma of balancing competing demands. On one side of the equation there are championship structures in hurling & football for both men and women, at all grades and at local and inter-county level, where interest in the games is at an all time high and where large amounts of money are made from gate receipts, merchandising, branding and television rights. On the other side of the equation are the interests and needs of the competitors themselves, who train and compete like professionals, who are being subjected to increasing levels of attention by the media in their sporting and personal lives but who do not share in the money generated by the games in which they star. They are still real amateurs doing what they do for the love of the game but who regardless of what happens on the fields of play, have to go to work every Monday morning.

Conclusion

To be a sporting hero requires that the imagination of the public be captured over a relatively short period of time, the length of a sporting career - in most cases less than twenty years. Our heroes are the stars and champions of our own preferred sport, those we remember, whom we saw or read about in our own lifetime, and especially as children and young adults. Teams of the Century and suchlike are usually controversial affairs and provoke debate as to the relative merits and comparability of competitors in different eras. One need only look at the lack of unanimity surrounding the issuing of several series of stamps by *An Post*, the Irish postal service, commemorating Ireland's Soccer Heroes, Ireland's Great Steeplechasers and the Teams of the Millennium in Gaelic games, to appreciate that the conferring of hero status is defined very much by time and place. Few born after the exploits of Elliott, Kelly and Roche will consider them as heroes. Cycling was widely covered on television and in the media in general during the 1980s and early 1990s. Biographies and picture books of our famous cyclists were best-sellers. Today, coverage of cycling is limited to reports of the latest scandal involving foreign stars. Books are out of print and only shabby copies remain on library shelves - hardly the stuff of heroes. More than ever before, hero status rarely endures once the glare of media attention has moved on. Could it be that modern sport is all about great moments and media spectacles and not about heroes anymore?