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**« L'ANGLAIS TEL QU'ON LE COURT »: ANTOINE BLONDIN'S "CLICHÉD
VIEW OF ENGLISHNESS" IN *TOURS DE FRANCE: CHRONIQUES
INTEGRALES DE L'ÉQUIPE 1954-1982*.**

Ruadhán Cooke

The Tour de France is one of the best examples of a sporting event as a media creation, having been conceived and first run in 1903 as a publicity stunt by the fledgling breakaway sports newspaper *L'Auto* in an audacious bid to outdo its rival and forerunner, *Le Vélo*. Strong links between one of the world's most iconic sporting events and *L'Auto*'s post-war successor *L'Équipe* remain to this day, both belonging to the Éditions Philippe Amaury media group.

As the number and variety of sporting activities in France increased from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, the newspapers of the day responded to a growing curiosity by featuring accounts of events and placing a greater focus on sport for an increasingly interested readership. The reporting did not always confine itself to facts and analysis, often tending to be consciously literary in tone and style. In the days before radio and television, “incorrigible hyperbolists” (Campos, 2003: 160) contributed to the Tour de France's iconic status, and when talking about the Tour, superlatives invariably abounded. The editorials by Henri Desgrange in *L'Auto* and Jacques Goddet in *L'Équipe* frequently read like excerpts from the myths and legends of heroic literature in light of the dramatic language in which the events and participants were described. Guest contributions from famous reporters and writers were also in vogue giving rise to a genre that could almost be described as “media literature”.¹

The 1950s was a time before international mass media coverage and regular affordable travel between countries. The Britain the French knew was one forged from a certain familiarity with her historical past, imagined from the great works of literature and defined by the concrete reality of her geography. This article will consider writer Antoine Blondin's Tour de France "chronicles" in the French sports daily *L'Équipe*, the first of which dates from 1954. These colourful and varied *chroniques* present a kaleidoscopic mosaic of France through her *grands hommes*, *belles lettres*, history, landscape, and *terroir*. Inspired by the presence of British riders on the Tour de France from 1955 onwards, Blondin frequently depicts Britain as represented by her great men and women, famous characters from her literary heritage and the physical attributes of space and place, as well as reflecting playfully on the richness of the English language. Such depictions are by their nature subjective on Blondin's part but also relatively spontaneous given the unpredictability of the events on any given stage and also the immediacy of the evening deadline to be met at the end of each day's action. As such, they constitute an inherently ephemeral but nevertheless particularly revealing French impression of the English. In cataloguing, contextualising and explaining a selection of such representations under the headings identified, this article invites readers to enter Blondin's creative universe and comes to a number of conclusions regarding the writer's lasting significance.

Neighbourly rivalry

International sporting rivalries provide a readily visible if generally superficial way of comparing nations, typically based on preconceptions regarding temperament, character, and physique. The study of stereotypes in the sports media has attracted

attention across a range of academic disciplines. For an interesting article which references other discussions, see de Leeuw, Knoppers and van Sterkenburg (2010).

Hugh Dauncey, in his recent study of French cycling, specifically highlights the “atavistic regionalist stereotypes common in much French sports journalism” and especially in respect of the Tour in the late 1950s and 1960s when France was “negotiating her developing identity in a period of social and cultural change” (166). Britain and France as near neighbours have a long history of competing with each other on a variety of fronts and this particular love-hate relationship has given rise to one of the most significant rivalries in world history. In his review of Robert and Isabelle Tombs’s *That Sweet Enemy: The French and the British from the Sun King to the Present*, which he describes as “the War and Peace of Franco-British relations”, Andy Martin contends that “each has defined and constructed itself by reference to this antagonism.”² Interestingly, on the day Tom Simpson became the first Briton to wear the yellow jersey, Blondin affectionately described the English as “our old and dear adversary” (281).³

In an essay entitled “Froggy! Froggy! Froggy!” the award winning English writer Julian Barnes expresses the relationship in the following terms:

France is what we first mean by Abroad; it is our primary exotic. Small wonder, then, that we think about the French much more than they think about us... The British are obsessed by the French, whereas the French are only intrigued by the British (320).

A steady flow of general-market books by Britons on France and things French in recent years would appear to bear this assessment out. Peter Mayle’s *A Year in Provence* (1989), Julian Barnes’s *Cross Channel* (1996) and Stephen Clarke’s *A Year in the Merde* (2004) among other titles were best-sellers. A number of English writers

have been specifically drawn to the Tour de France as an event that transcends the boundaries of sport: notably Geoffrey Nicholson's *The Great Bike Race* (1977), Tim Moore's *French Revolutions* (2001), Geoffrey Wheatcroft's *Le Tour* (2004), and William Fotheringham's *Roule Britannia* (2005).

Against this backdrop, and with a reversal of the gaze, Antoine Blondin's look towards the British Isles and their inhabitants through the prism of mainly English (and occasionally Irish) participants in the post war Tours de France as articulated in his *L'Équipe* column represents a playfully thought-provoking contribution to the study of this relationship.

Antoine Blondin and *L'Équipe*

Antoine Blondin was a right-wing French novelist of the post-war period. His style, outlook, and rejection of the literary and intellectual orthodoxy of the time as represented by the likes of Sartre and Camus allied him to a group of similar writers such as Michel Déon, Roger Nimier, and Jacques Laurent who became known as the *Hussards*.⁴ His trademark was beautifully crafted prose and a certain frivolity. Identified as an exciting young novelist with a bright future, he was asked along with a number of other personalities to contribute four "chronicles" during the 1954 Tour de France, casting his writer's eye over this uniquely French sporting celebration. Such was the reaction to his eclectic and quirkily high brow contributions that he was invited back the following year to be the featured "Novelist on the Tour".⁵ With a status that went way beyond that of the guest contributor, Blondin was the "Writer on the Tour", as his column was affectionately called, for 28 years from 1954 to 1982.

Over the duration of this special collaboration, he contributed a total of 524 chronicles which celebrate the French nation's love affair with this annual sporting

procession and which captured the imagination of the public with the style and variety of his playful yet insightful take on the event. The full set of Blondin's chronicles was published under the title of *Tours de France: Chroniques intégrales de L'Équipe 1954-1982* in 2001. Each chronicle has at the beginning the name of the place from whence it was written and at the end carries the date of its publication in the newspaper. Ultimately, Blondin was much better known and more widely read for his daily Tour de France chronicle in *L'Équipe*, which constitutes a pioneering genre of literary sports journalism and cumulatively resulted in a unique corpus, than for his novels. Geoffrey Wheatcroft describes Blondin as a “dazzlingly gifted writer, a passionate devotee of the Tour, and the greatest of all its chroniclers from the inside” (179). However, in spite of its cultural richness, because of the near impossibility of appropriate translation, this corpus remains virtually inaccessible to an English-speaking public. Playfulness with language, including Blondin's characteristic pun titles or *titres calembours* – a journalistic device he is sometimes credited with inventing – literary pastiches, and an extraordinarily broad *culture générale* were amongst his trademarks.⁶

The 1950s and significant firsts

The years following the turmoil and upheaval of the war witnessed a period of great change, politically, economically, and socially in France and Britain. Both countries experienced a loss of influence on the international stage and doubtless also a severe blow to national pride as a consequence of their respective retreats from Empire. By 1954, when Blondin began his thirty-year engagement with the Tour de France, Britain and France were adjusting to their relegated position in the new bi-polar world order dominated by the two Cold War super-powers. This practical and symbolic

watershed was marked by the two countries' embroilment in the Suez crisis of 1956-57. Against this backdrop, the Tour de France offered a distinctively French example of cultural continuities.⁷

The Tours of the 1950s and 1960s featured stand-alone national teams as well as "Internations" squads as they were known, made up of riders from a number of countries not strong enough in cycling terms to field a single nationality selection, and French regional formations, predominately but not exclusively comprised of French riders. Thirteen ten-man teams started the 1955 Tour, made up of seven full national selections, five French regional formations and a composite team named "Luxembourg Mixed" featuring riders from Luxembourg, Austria, Germany and Australia. The presence of a team from Great Britain in 1955, the first time Britons had competed either individually or as a squad since the Empire Aces of 1937, gave Blondin an opportunity to investigate popular national and cultural stereotypes and stock French perceptions of the British. Prior to 1955, only five Britons had ever taken part in the Tour which none of them managed to finish.⁸ The incongruity of an all-British cycling team competing in the Tour was likened by Blondin to a turban-wearing delegation from Pakistan showing up at the World Championships on postman's bicycles (28).

Britain's Brian Robinson featured prominently on the second stage of the 1955 Tour prompting Blondin, in a chronicle entitled « *L'anglais tel qu'on le court* » (27-29) and which translates loosely as "Cycling English style", to introduce the British team by way of a catalogue of deliberately exaggerated stereotypes. The tone of mock disdain gives way to genuine admiration for a pioneering bunch of cyclists whose exploits, Blondin felt, would earn their acceptance into the great melting pot of the Tour, which received only the briefest of mentions in the British press.

Three of Blondin's chronicles are considered by William Fotheringham who explains the stereotypes presented.⁹ In each case, the pretext for a consideration of Englishness on Blondin's part is a noteworthy incident involving an English rider. Commenting on « *L'anglais tel qu'on le court* », Fotheringham remarks that Blondin, by assigning a role in English society to each of the team members to which they would be much better suited, "dug out every English stereotype he could find" (24). Tom Simpson was the first Englishman and Anglophone to wear the Yellow Jersey, albeit for just one day on Stage 13 of the 1962 Tour. This historic first was marked by Blondin with one of his most famous puns « *Roule, Britannia!* » (280-82), a formula borrowed by Fotheringham for the title of his history of Britons on the Tour.¹⁰ On the evening Simpson lost his life on the slopes of the Mont Ventoux during stage 13 of the 1967 Tour, Blondin's chronicle entitled « *On court toujours seul* » / "You'll always ride alone" (465-66) pays a warm tribute to a real ambassador for British cycling.¹¹ While acknowledging the superficiality of the symbol, he nonetheless suggests that, in the same way an explorer might plant a national flag as a symbol of an historic first, Simpson had hung "an Eton tie" onto the handlebars of his bike, despite the fact that, as Fotheringham points out, he was from a much humbler background than this "clichéd view of Englishness" (77).

Two further chronicles not mentioned by Fotheringham have an almost exclusively anglophile flavour. In much the same style as in « *Roule, Britannia!* » and for very similar reasons, « *Ça fait Dublin par où ça passe* » / "It's Dublin wherever you look" (305-06) celebrates Dubliner Shay Elliott's win on stage 3 of the 1963 Tour, which in the process also earned him the yellow jersey, significant firsts for an Irish rider.¹² Not unusually for a Frenchman, Blondin treats the terms "British" and "Anglo-Saxon" rather loosely in applying them to an Irishman. « *Des Sirs inassouvis* » / "Can't get enough" (694-96) is inspired by the rare but welcome sight

of a delegation of British journalists at a stage finish of the 1974 Tour, their presence being proof of an acknowledgement of the growing relevance of the race to an English-speaking public, which 20 years of almost uninterrupted if patchy British participation had painstakingly fostered. For the first time that year, the Tour had crossed the Channel, stage 2 taking place on a newly built stretch of road outside Plymouth.

Living up to stereotypes

In contending that the onomastics of the Tour de France contribute to the epic status of the event, Barthes, in his 1957 essay, mentions the “exemplary phonemes” suggestive of the “race” of a number of riders including Brankart the Frank, Van Dongen the Batavian, Robic the Celt, Ruiz the Iberian and Darrigade the Gascon, whose names seem to derive from an ancient “ethnic age” and provide the “algebraic signs” of characteristics such as valour, loyalty, treachery and stoicism (103). From the *dramatis personae* of the Tour de France peloton, Blondin identifies characters which would have conformed to a certain idea of Englishness held by a French public of the post-war period based on imagined appearance and behaviour. We encounter well-dressed gentlemen who frequent their clubs (158), lords, ladies, counts and “sirs” (695), and a public schoolboy from Eton (465) representative of Britain’s comparatively stratified class system. Flying the flag for a proud military tradition are colonels, majors, and admirals (868). Specifically pinpointed are members of the county hunt in tweed jackets, a bowler-hat-wearing stock-broker who works in the City, a country clergyman (28), pearl-bedecked ladies of a certain age who spend their afternoons playing bridge (559 / 752), and respectable mistresses (489). Impish red-haired cockneys, spotty pale-faced teenagers, and Dickensian clerks (68) also feature

in the line-up. In making such deliberately superficial matches, Blondin provides a quick-fit identity that he suspects will be easily recognised.

In singling out a sample of emotions and reactions as displayed by the riders, Blondin similarly drew attention to French stereotypes. An Englishman is invariably composed and unflappable when faced with excitement or commotion (281 / 471). He is famously polite and nearly always courteous (640). He can be charming when the occasion calls for it and even warm at times (235). He is dignified, appropriately formal, and respectful of tradition and convention (476). An Englishman is never overly familiar. Personal feelings are rarely discussed and good-humoured impassibility is common. He has a reputation for being discreet (695). The English have a very strong sense of “fair-play” (193) and place great store on being decent (281) in their dealings with others.¹³ Britain is a nation that prides itself on getting on with things and making the best of it (872). “Dreamy” Ireland for her part has a reputation for romantic poets and dark-eyed heroines yet still manages to “export” hardy racing cyclists, dripping with sweat and covered in mud (306 / 867).

In splendid isolation

The “variable geography” of the Tour’s “sporting space” provided opportunities for Blondin to draw attention to Britain’s geography and history in his presentation of the country’s cyclists.¹⁴ Of particular relevance are Britain’s status as an island nation and the influence of the weather. On a number of occasions, when the route of the Tour followed the coastline of the English channel, Blondin was prompted to make references to historical invasions by sea in both directions, most recently the evacuation from Dunkirk, seen through British eyes as an heroic rescue but as a humiliating defeat, and even a betrayal, by the French, and the significantly less

contentious D-Day Allied landings in Normandy. The second stage of the 1960 Tour took the peloton from Brussels to Dunkirk and Blondin admired the “race to the sea” led by a breakaway group of six (197-99). Such was the speed and determination of the “escape” that one might have felt transported back in time to June 1940 and the fall of France. Indeed, his lingering worry was that the only Englishman of the six, Tom Simpson, carried away by the speed and urged by “tradition” and the “nostalgic” lure of home might “take English leave” or « *filer à l’anglaise* » by taking the first boat to Dover. A reference is made to the “precariousness” of the expeditionary trip to the “continent” represented by an Englishman’s participation in the Tour (235). Blondin uses the term “continent” to describe mainland Europe, further reinforcing the physical separation of the British Isles and indicative also of the mental distance Britons perceive between themselves and “Europe” but congratulates the British riders on the 1961 Tour for their particular contribution in extending the horizons of the great event. John Marks suggests that the stereotyped view of the English evident in Blondin’s “playful and allusive pieces” represents “a fascinating reminder of the physical and cultural gulfs that still existed between Britain and continental Europe at that time” (Marks, 2003: 215).

Blondin mentions the English counties of Yorkshire (510) and Devonshire (695) and the green pastures of the Irish county of Longford (305) as if the names are evocative of a particular landscape and by association a certain mentality or personality. In celebrating Shay Elliott’s stage victory in Roubaix in 1963, he incorporates references to the banks of the Liffey, the mist over the Irish Sea, the sod of the famous Lansdowne Road rugby ground, and the red-brick cottages of Dublin’s Dawson Street. He also manages to mention another Irish county in imagining that the sweet music of victory ringing in Elliott’s ears would be to the tune of “It’s a long

way to Tipperary” so popular with British and Irish soldiers who fought in the First World War battles of the nearby Flanders Fields (305-06).

Discussing Elliott’s winning performance in wet conditions, Blondin observes that some men seem to adopt the climatic characteristics of their place of birth, suggesting that Elliott’s temperament was in part forged by the unpredictability of the Irish weather, a link he made years later in reference to Seán Kelly’s emerging reputation as a formidable competitor, and quotes a journalist colleague who had spent some time in Belfast who was of the view that the Irish are like “Spaniards who have been rained on” (867). Such considerations are not inconsistent with right-wing notions of place and race and may betray Blondin’s own political leanings as expressed in some of the vitriolic and at times overtly racist material he contributed to various extreme-right wing publications in the late 1940s and early 1950s. This more sinister and controversial side to the author is absent from the pages of *L’Équipe*, a self-proclaimed apolitical space. A notable exception was his very first guest contribution, entitled « *Et si on les renvoyait à la mine pour un an ?* », commenting on a 3-1 defeat of the French football team in an international friendly at the hands of Italy published in *L’Équipe* on 14 April 1954 and which was quite risqué in its humorous yet deliberately provocative criticism of the French team’s performance. The suggestion that the French players be sent to the mines to reacquaint themselves with the values of honest endeavour and commitment to the cause is a reference to the growing influence of players of Polish descent in French football at the time and that particular immigrant population’s representation in the coal-mining communities of the North East and East.¹⁵

« *De Grandes Espérances* » / “Great Expectations” (509-11) is the title of the chronicle describing stage 19 of the 1968 Tour won by Englishman Barry Hoban. Blondin evokes the festive feeling prompted by a rare English victory, particularly

when Hoban would not have been expected to win a mountain stage. From Wakefield (and not London as the reference to his “cockney” features appeared to suggest), Hoban is described as a brave lad who is not afraid to look beyond the horizon of his native Yorkshire and seek his fortune abroad. Blondin wonders whether such an appetite for freedom and drive to succeed are the natural urges of this (and possibly every) British champion. The presence of a Union Jack at the head of the peloton provides, Blondin feels, a tangible image of England as “a solitary island, surrounded on all sides by admiration”.

Blondin felt it was almost inevitable that Michael Wright would win on stage 10 of the 1973 Tour given that it had started in Nice on the seaside thoroughfare of the *Promenade des Anglais* (663). In highlighting further wins by Wright and Barry Hoban on that particular Tour he suggested that in a spirit of reciprocity, with the Tour scheduled to visit Britain for the first time the following year, French sprinters might be able to win on British soil in an arrangement similar to that of the *au-pair* exchange (664).

“Rule, Britannia!”

Historical figures are frequently presented as representing or even shaping aspects of national character and temperament. A stage finish in the Vendée prompts Blondin to remember one of the region’s most famous sons, Georges Clemenceau, nicknamed the “Tiger” and described as “the Winston Churchill of the First World War” (743). For many French observers, Churchill was the epitome of a stubbornly indomitable British spirit sometimes represented in the figure of a bull-dog. Charleroi’s proximity to Waterloo (234) and an incursion into Spain via the town of Vitoria (771) warrant commemoration of famous British victories over Napoleonic France masterminded by

the Duke of Wellington and inspire approximate puns on the names of London railway stations.

Evidence for Britain's reputation as "ruler of the waves" receives ample corroboration in references to the sea and famous seafarers. A team time trial which takes place in sight of the Atlantic has Blondin looking towards the horizon in search of solo sailor Sir Francis Chichester, the first man to single-handedly circumnavigate the globe (618). Prior to departing for England and stage 2 of the 1974 Tour, Blondin remarks that such a crossing has posed problems to many would-be conquerors (and competitors). Legend has it that the future William the First of England tripped over his armour getting off the boat before going on to win the Battle of Hastings (683). Three Spaniards in a group of four on a mountain stage in 1974 cause Blondin to wonder whether an Invincible Armada is being formed and he places his hopes for a Drake-like figure to disperse it in lone Belgian Eddie Merckx, remembering that Sir Francis was a proud son of Plymouth which had hosted the second stage of that year's Tour (696). Before leaving the port town of Nantes and the province of Brittany, Blondin feels it appropriate to remember the deeds of the famous privateer Robert Surcouf and his jousts with the might of the Royal Navy and the Lords of the Admiralty (867-68).

The legacy of Britain's relationship with her former colonies is alluded to in a chronicle mentioning Irishman Seán Kelly who was first to cross the line on stage 9 of the 1980 Tour. He appeared over a number of days to have had a score to settle with Jan Raas, the leader of the English TI-Raleigh team. In a chaotic surge for the line, Kelly, employing tactics described by Blondin as those of a "terrorist", thought he had won his own personal "War of Independence" only to suffer the disappointment of relegation (867-68). References to Britain and Ireland's turbulent relationship had already been made in Blondin's chronicle recording Shay Elliott's win in 1963 and

were subsequently re-hashed almost word for word when Seán Kelly won stage six of his debut Tour in 1978. On that occasion, the stage finished in the suburbs of Poitiers adjacent to the magnificent rose gardens of the Parc Floral, an ironic backdrop against which to witness an Irishman “flourish”, given the traditional antipathy of the “*sinn-feiners*” towards the British crown as represented by the “rose of Lancaster” (807-08). On a similar theme of strained relations between neighbouring countries, a stage finish in Rouen, won by a Frenchman and which Englishman John Andrews failed to start, reminds Blondin of the ordeal suffered by Joan of Arc at the hands of the English and prompts him to suggest that Cazala’s motive in winning might have been revenge for such an act of treachery (161).

In the multi-volume collection edited by Pierre Nora entitled *Les Lieux de mémoire*, Georges Vigarello identifies the Tour de France as one such “place of remembrance” and makes linkages between the Tour and what Christopher Thompson describes as “important questions of history, memory and identity” (269). Also featured in Nora’s collection is *Le Tour de la France par deux enfants*, a standard primary school text book from its first publication in 1877 up until the 1930s, and which Blondin would almost necessarily have encountered.¹⁶ A voyage of discovery undertaken by two recently orphaned brothers disguises a curriculum of lessons in geography, history, regional traditions and specialties, civics, nature and the economy. For many French people, it was the principal means by which they felt a connection with and knew about the country outside of their own department or region. In certain respects, Blondin’s chronicles continue this pedagogical vocation, providing a humorous yet meaningful insertion of foreigners into the landscape, history, memory and identity of the Tour and France itself. Blondin’s examples of the good, the bad, and the ugly from Britain’s past and the parallels he draws with people and incidents from the Tour de France were in part inspired by the grounding in « *histoire-géo* »¹⁷

typical of a classically educated member of the French upper middle class of Blondin's vintage but ultimately depended on the spontaneity of the prompt provided by the ins and outs of the race as it unfolded and therein lies the particular originality of the associations.

« *L'anglais tel qu'on le court* »

1954, the year of Blondin's first collaboration with *L'Équipe*, saw the publication and success of Pierre Daninos's *Les Carnets du Major Thompson*. The subtitle describes the book as a "Discovery of France and the French" on the part of Major W. Marmaduke Thompson, as translated into French by Pierre Daninos. In purporting to look at his own country, France, through the eyes of a fictional English visitor, Daninos was at least as much looking towards Britain and the British. The title of the chronicle in which Blondin first mentions British riders is a deliberate pun on « *Le français tel qu'on le parle* » / "Spoken French", one of the chapters in Daninos's *Carnets*. Blondin frequently comments on both the "language" of cycling, with its terminology, jargon, slang, coded messages, and gestures and also the languages of the different competing nationalities. Welcoming the novelty of the British accent on the 1955 Tour, he points out that the sound of English, virtually unheard of in the "travel agency" that is the Tour de France peloton, identifies those who speak it as the odd men out amid the *lingua franca* of Mediterranean exclamations and Flemish swear words (28).

Blondin plays on the similarities between the words "tower" and "tour" in French suggesting that the Tour is a meeting point of nations and languages transcending the boundaries between countries and where a sound he describes as the "babble of Babel" (157) can be heard. The 1962 Tour saw trade teams replace

national or regional formations for the first time since 1930. Once again, Blondin puns on the Tower / Tour of Babel coming up with the “Tour of Labels” / « *Tour des labels* » as a formula for this new arrangement, describing the teams as formations where the same language is no longer spoken (266). Blondin puns on the Common Market / « *marché commun* » and the joint venture of a breakaway / « *marche commune* » (536) on a number of occasions, speculating on the likelihood of the English joining either. Interestingly, the only Anglophones on that year’s Tour were Britons Alan Ramsbottom and Tom Simpson and the Common Market would remain an English-language free zone until the accession of the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland in 1973.

Blondin uses the *franglais* terms “gentleman’s agreement” and “no man’s land” to explain some of the tactics of a day’s action which saw Hoban win stage 8 of the 1975 Tour in Bordeaux. Punning on the Englishman’s first name and the punishingly long Bordeaux-Paris endurance race, he reminds us that Hoban is something of a « *Bordeaux-Barry* » specialist (722-23). The French pronunciation of Barry Hoban’s name inspired several classic Blondin puns. Blondin imagines Mrs Hoban exclaiming « *Ciel! mon Barry* » in surprise at her husband’s stage win on stage 19 of the 1969 Tour (544). This is a play on the famous French exclamation « *Ciel, mon mari!* », itself stereotypically uttered by a cheating wife being caught red-handed by her husband in an act of infidelity. Further plays on language prompted by the relative novelty of English include noting that the apocryphal phrase from a Berlitz guide to learning English – “My tailor is rich” – assumes a particular relevance when applied to the manager of the British team, Alex Taylor, who stood to do very well out of the good showing from his riders on the 1968 Tour (510).

Elsewhere, *franglais* is used by Blondin when a stereotypically English behavioural trait or attitude warrants consideration. Britain’s reputation for courtesy,

civility and good manners is reflected in terms such as “fair-play” (193), “Good Luck” (281), and “gentleman’s agreement” (722). When situating a competitor in the hierarchy of the peloton, links to class structure are made by means of terms such as “*la gentry*” (206) and the appropriate form of address to one’s betters such as “*Milord*” and “*Milady*” whom he imagines exclaiming “*By Jove!*” (695). One’s place in society (and in the general classification) can be ascertained by reference to a “*Who’s who*” (695). As an aside, Tom Simpson, who was from a very modest working-class background, was described for effect by Blondin as having “aristocratic legs” (281), while we are reminded that tourists along the roadside supporting the British riders are “subjects” (476). Britain’s historical contribution to the codification, organisation and etiquette of sport is recognised in the adoption by the French language of terms such as “club house”, “bunker”, “green” (750), “no contest” (483), and “uppercut” (696), all of which Blondin weaves into the fabric of his narrative when appropriate to the intrigue of the race, as he does familiar English rituals such as the “garden party” (179) and the institution that is the “nice cup of tea” (694).

Writing the other as literary caricature

One of the distinguishing features of Blondin’s « *chroniques* » over the duration of his collaboration with *L’Équipe* was a tendency to construct national identities, principally French but also, as we will see, English / British in terms of literary models. The effectiveness of the match presupposes a familiarity on the part of the reader with the authors and characters quoted. The choice of material is of its time but also very obviously reflects the “cultural capital”, to adopt Pierre Bourdieu’s terminology, from which Blondin drew. Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, which dates back to 1719, is exploited to good effect particularly when Britain’s Brian

Robinson caught Blondin's attention. The metaphor of a man being stranded on a desert island fits with the isolation of either a solo leader or an abandoned straggler, and *Man Friday* is a good representation of the supporting role played by *domestiques* (142).

Honoré de Balzac's novels that make up *La Comédie humaine* portray the full gamut of types representative of the human condition. As near contemporaries, Dickens could be described as something of an English Balzac. The cast of characters from Dickens's novels can be matched effectively to the circumstances and intrigue of the Tour de France. Specific individuals are identified as Mr. Pickwick and David Copperfield (28), while "Great Expectations" (509-11) is an appropriate title for a chronicle reflecting on the hope that springs eternal at the beginning of each stage but also the promise shown by a number of pioneering English riders. French readers of the time would have been quite familiar with the works of Dickens whose atmospheric novels paint evocative pictures of the different faces of nineteenth century England. A chronicle purporting to have been written from London in 1959 parodies Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's detective stories, in which the very English Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson set out to solve the "Mystery of the Broom Wagon" / « *L'Affaire de la voiture balai* » (158-61) and in so doing ascertain the whereabouts of the missing English rider John Andrews.

English gentleman Phileas Fogg and his French manservant Passe-Partout were the heroes of Jules Verne's 1873 novel *Around the World in Eighty Days*. An earlier and less well known Verne novel, *Five Weeks in a Balloon*, published in English in 1869, announces itself as a tale of "Journeys and Discoveries in Africa by Three Englishmen". As the only Englishman (left) in the race after stage 2 of the 1956 Tour, the role of "globetrotter" (68) is being assumed by Brian Robinson. Blondin remarks that Robinson has shown himself to be a true athlete but suggests that to his

English qualities as best exemplified in Phileas Fogg, all he needs to add in order to become the complete cyclist are the French qualities of agility and ingenuity as displayed by Passe-Partout. In a chronicle entitled « *Le Tour de France en quatre et vingt jours* » / “Around France in four and twenty days” (834-35) Blondin suggests that Verne could have written variations on the themes of both books to mark the Tour de France visiting his home town of Amiens and which would acknowledge the challenges faced by intrepid “explorers” in unfamiliar “territory”. Blondin likens the fortunes of the Swedish Petterson brothers who rode the 1971 Tour to the story of the English family at the centre of John Galsworthy’s *The Forsyte Saga* (585) who had risen up the echelons of society from far humbler origins but who nonetheless had to grapple with the issue of acceptance into the more established upper class. A gruelling stage on the 1980 Tour reminds Blondin of a scene from the screen adaptation of the *Bridge on the River Kwai*, ironically by French writer Pierre Boulle, in which British prisoners of war commanded by a Colonel Nicholson hide their wounds and the misery of their situation to defiantly and proudly parade before their Japanese captors in a textbook demonstration of confronting adversity with a stiff upper lip (872).

Blondin was a master of the literary pastiche which he used to great effect on a number of occasions in the Tour de France chronicles featured in *L'Équipe*. In a “poem” entitled “*If*” credited with being in the style of Rudyard Kipling (732-33), Blondin considers the uncertainties and imponderables a race like the Tour can throw up and elsewhere suggests that the intrigue of the whole event is not unlike a “*Jungle Book*” (911). A number of other references indicate the extent of the appeal and influence of the great works of English literature whereby the names of certain works and some famous quotations have passed into common usage even in translation. Blondin quotes from Shakespeare on a number of occasions. In particular, he plays on the title of the play “*Much ado about nothing*” (166) to summarise a stage during

which the main protagonists flattered to deceive. Similarly, on a day of reckoning for the riders, Blondin feels it appropriate to quote the line “Do not ask for whom the bell tolls” from John Donne (330). Elsewhere, it seems fitting to remark (in English) as did Keats that “a thing of beauty is a joy forever” (683).

A much broader definition of what constitutes “culture”, the variety of means by which it is transmitted, and the speed with which it circulates in the twenty-first century would no doubt give rise to a completely different set of references and representations today. Nevertheless, Blondin’s pen-pictures retain their value as a sport-inflected snapshot of widely held French attitudes to Britain and Ireland at a pivotal moment in European history.

Conclusion

The Tour today is truly international and far more English-speaking than in Blondin’s time. Thirty-one nationalities were represented in 2012 as opposed to eleven in 1955 and teams are more cosmopolitan entities than previously was the case. While each of the twenty-two nine-man competing teams on the 2012 tour as corporate entities has a nationality corresponding to the country of its registered place of business, only two were composed exclusively of riders from a single country, the all-French Saur-Sojasun team and the all-Spanish Euskatel-Euskadi formation. The sheer novelty of the British presence in 1955 and the comments Blondin makes concerning the paucity of the coverage afforded such a first by the cross-channel media is in stark contrast to the dominance of the British team and riders in 2012 and to a lesser extent in 2013. Almost coincidentally, but certainly ironically, team sponsor Sky is an international media giant.

What would Blondin have made of the all-conquering British Sky Procycling team on the 2012 Tour? How might he have depicted Manxman Mark Cavendish's explosive charges to the line in sprint finishes and how would he have interpreted the selfless efforts of second-placed Chris Froome in guiding Bradley Wiggins to a first ever British win in the Tour?¹⁸ Given the focus of this particular article, it would have been interesting to see to which stereotypical representation of an Englishman Blondin would have likened Wiggins given the retro nineteen seventies look epitomised most strikingly in his sideburns. An investigation of the reversal of roles and their potential representations when compared with 1955 would have been fascinating. A review of current journalistic depictions of the British in French newspapers would be particularly interesting given the spectacular turn around in the cycling fortunes of both nations, with Blondin's chronicles providing valuable material for comparisons with another era.

The Tour de France is no longer uncharted territory for Britons who have been represented in every Tour up to the present, with the exception of 1976, 2004 and 2005. While Australians had taken part in the Tour even before the first World War and have featured, sometimes sporadically, in nearly every decade of the Tour's existence since, the participation of the Great Britain team in 1955 paved the way for the wider participation and ultimate acceptance of Anglophone riders and cultures in the Tour de France peloton which up until then had an almost exclusively continental European flavour. Riders from the USA, Canada and South Africa made their Tour debuts in 1981, 1985 and 2001 respectively.¹⁹

In turning the looking glass towards the British Isles when the occasion presented itself over the period of his Tour de France chronicles, Blondin cast a certain amount of light, by reflection, on France. The stereotypes investigated, comparisons made and differences highlighted by Blondin do not demonstrate any

antipathy towards Britain or the British. They display respect and even affection for their “peculiarity” in the positive sense of the word. Far from denigrating, Blondin admires, enjoys and celebrates. *L'Équipe*'s front page headline on the morning following Bradley Wiggins' historic win exclaimed in block capitals « CIEL, QUEL WIGGINS ! ». Blondin would definitely have approved of the sentiment expressed and also appreciated the flattery implicit in the imitation.²⁰ Through his cycling chronicles Blondin offered the French a reassuring image of themselves at a time of profound social transformation. As this discussion has shown, that comforting representation included a gently comic interrogation of France's abidingly mysterious neighbours across the English Channel and the Irish Sea.

What then of Blondin's own personal legacy and lasting significance? He was a much sought after preface, particularly of books on sport.²¹ As a poet laureate-type figure, he is probably the most quoted author on the Tour de France, his puns, linguistic virtuosity, and literary perspective still relevant, enjoyed and imitated to this day. The early promise of a prodigious talent was never fully realized in terms of his output as a novelist but his journalistic production on sport, and in particular on the Tour de France, became the stand-out component of his *œuvre*. Blondin's unique association with *L'Équipe* as “writer in residence” on the Tour de France, allied to the craft, style and enduring quality of the chronicles, in which the dual role of man of letters and passionately knowledgeable observer is combined, provide a fascinating blurring of the boundaries between sport, journalism and literature.

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Notes

¹ Among the best known examples are Albert Londres's reports from the 1924 Tour for *Le Petit Parisien*, later published in book form and Roland Barthes's essay on the 1955 Tour which featured in the collected *Mythologies*.

² *The Independent*, 24 March 2006.

³ Page references to Blondin quotes are, except where otherwise stated, from *Tours de France: Chroniques intégrales de L'Équipe 1954-82*. I accept responsibility for translations into English.

⁴ The term was coined by the critic Bernard Frank in an article entitled « *Grognards et Hussards* » published in the December 1952 number of *Les Temps Modernes*, an influential review founded by Sartre, in which the literary and political issues of the day were analyzed and debated. The label was probably prompted by the title of Roger Nimier's 1950 novel, *Le Hussard bleu*. Frank described the *Hussards* as being "fascist" for want of a better word.

⁵ This invitation may have corresponded to a deliberate editorial desire to broaden the coverage of the event and possibly also to appeal to an as yet untapped readership. *L'Auto*, the newspaper from whose ashes *L'Équipe* was born in 1946, had already broken similar ground in the late 1930s by inviting writers to be part of the Tour "caravan" and share their literary perspective of the event with a largely working class readership. Jacques Perret covered a number of stages in 1937 and again in 1938. The following year, *L'Auto* opened its pages to writers of the stature of Henri Troyat, Pierre Mac Orlan and Tristan Bernard.

⁶ The genius of the pun title invariably gets lost in translation. A notable exception is probably the most famous of them all, « *Roule, Britannia !* » celebrating Britain's first yellow jersey in 1962. See note 11 below. Frequently, a literary or cultural reference provides the inspiration for the play on words. Among the best examples are « *L'Iliade et Le Dissez* » from 1959 at page 179 ; « *Jour de faites* » (1961 : 256) ; « *A la recherche du temps perdu (dans la Madeleine)* » (1969 : 529), and « *Dernier Tango à Barry* » (1973 : 663).

⁷ Kristin Ross's *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture* (1995) is an excellent study of particular aspects of the « *Trente Glorieuses* » period in French history. Tony Judt's *Postwar Europe* (2005) is also an extremely helpful reference in respect of the broader landscape.

⁸ Facts and figures pertaining to the Tour are from the official Tour de France website <http://www.letour.fr/HISTO/fr/TDF/index.html>

⁹ William Fotheringham is an acclaimed writer on the sport of cycling and is the author of the definitive history of British competitors in the Tour de France (2006) as well as award winning biographies of some of the legends of the sport such as Tom Simpson (2003), Fausto Coppi (2010) and most recently Eddy Merckx (2012).

¹⁰ A variation on this pun was first used by Blondin in reference to Brian Robinson on the 1956 Tour (94). Gilles Simon writing in *L'Équipe* on the morning following Bradley Wiggins's victory in 2012 couldn't improve on « *Roule Britannia* » to herald what he described as the British Sky team's "total triumph". Mark Cavendish won the final sprint on the Champs Élysées and Chris Froome finished in second place overall. "Rule, Britannia!" is a patriotic poem and song which celebrates Britain's naval might, defiantly proclaiming that Britons never will be slaves.

¹¹ Simpson is one of only three competitors to have died on the Tour in its 109 year history to date.

¹² Seamus (Shay) Elliott's first of six Tours was in 1956 with the Île-de-France regional formation. Interestingly, he was the only non Briton on the 1961 Great Britain team.

¹³ The term “fair-play” has passed into common usage in French.

¹⁴ The references are to the title of Pierre Bourry’s 1997 study, *La France du Tour: Le Tour de France, un Espace Sportif à Géographie Variable*.

¹⁵ Raymond Kopa (Kopaszewski) who was born in France to Polish parents and Thadée (Tadeusz) Cisowski who was born in Poland both played on the team which attracted Blondin’s criticism. This piece features in a 2006 collection of lesser-known Blondin articles edited and presented by Alain Cresciucci entitled *Mes petits papiers*.

¹⁶ The chapter in Volume I entitled «*Le tour de la France par deux enfants: Le petit livre rouge de la République*» is by Jacques and Mona Ozouf. The original textbook was written by Mme Augustine Fouillée using the alias G. Bruno.

¹⁷ The disciplines History and Geography are taught as one subject in the French primary and secondary education system and are an obligatory component of the curriculum.

¹⁸ Born in Kenya and educated in South Africa, Chris Froome was the convincing winner of the 2013 Tour de France. He represented his country of birth in the 2006 Commonwealth Games before declaring for Great Britain.

¹⁹ New Zealand was represented by a sole participant in 1928. Paul Jezzon who rode the 1979 Tour and Eric McKenzie who made his debut in 1982 both escaped Blondin’s attention.

²⁰ *L’Équipe* 23 July 2012. See page 16 and the discussion of the playfulness implicit in the puns on the expression «*Ciel, mon mari !* »

²¹ He is also quoted and referenced in books by English authors on the Tour, such was his knack for saying something interesting in his inimitable way about cycling and cyclists.