



VINTAGE

ROULE BRITANNIA

WILLIAM FOTHERINGHAM

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About the Book

In 2012 Bradley Wiggins made history by becoming the first Briton ever to win the Tour de France. His compatriot Chris Froome came second while fellow Brits, the 'fastest man on earth' Mark Cavendish and reformed doper David Millar, made sure that between them Britain accounted for 7 of a possible 21 stage wins. Great Britain had conquered the Tour de France.

In *Roule Britannia*, number one best-selling author William Fotheringham, charts British cycling's rise to the top. From the early days of Brian Robison to Bradley Wiggins's dominant ride via Tom Simpson, Robert Millar, Chris Boardman and many others, *Roule Britannia* celebrates a nation's love affair with the greatest race of all.

About the Author

William Fotheringham writes for the *Guardian* and *Observer* on cycling and rugby. A former racing cyclist and launch editor of *procyling* and *Cycle Sport* magazines, he has reported on over twenty Tours de France as well as Six Nations rugby and the Olympic Games. His biography of Tom Simpson, *Put Me Back on My Bike*, was acclaimed by *Vélo* magazine as 'the best cycling biography ever written'.

Also by William Fotheringham

Put Me Back on My Bike: In Search of Tom Simpson

Fallen Angel: The Passion of Fausto Coppi

Merckx: Half Man, Half Bike

Cyclopedia: It's All About the Bike

A Century of Cycling

Fotheringham's Sporting Trivia

*Fotheringham's Sporting Trivia: The Greatest Sporting
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To my father, Alex, who would have loved to have seen a
first British victory on the Tour.

ROULE BRITANNIA

A History of Britons in the Tour de France

William Fotheringham



YELLOW JERSEY PRESS
LONDON

'Roule Britannia'

Headline, *L'Equipe*, 7 July 1962

Rouleur: [*Sports*] a cyclist who can maintain a rapid, regular pace.

Le Petit Robert

Prologue

The sky was a clearest blue above the Champs-Élysées on Sunday 22 July 2012. We crushed onto the barriers by the finish line, waiting for the final moments when the long string of cyclists would fly towards us for the last time. We knew Mark Cavendish would lead them in, and so it proved as he raced up the slight slope, close to the right-hand side of the road, stage victory in his sights. A few seconds later, well back in the heart of the bunch, it was the turn of Bradley Wiggins, his arms in the air as he turned to his teammate Michael Rogers, with the pair embracing on their bikes as they passed us. The Tour de France was won. The first British victory in the race was complete. And on they went for a few yards, before Wiggins climbed off his bike and was suddenly lost in a sea of cameras, only his yellow crash hat in the throng showing that he was there at all.

I walked back down the Champs a few minutes later, towards the team buses parked on the Place de la Concorde. As I did, I turned to watch Christian Knees, Wiggins' German 'watchdog', who had spent kilometre after kilometre on the front of the peloton, and was now enjoying his moment of glory: as the crowd cheered on either side of the boulevard, he zigzagged from one side to the other to wave at them and milk the applause, his face crushed into a massive grin.

It is rare for journalists covering the Tour de France to schlep down to the Champs. By the final day of the Tour battle fatigue has set in, and the lengthy trip there and back from the press centre at Porte Maillot cuts into

writing time on a day of tight deadlines. And there was far more than usual to be written on this particular Sunday: the life story of Wiggins, how he had transformed himself from Olympic track gold medallist into Tour de France winner, how he and Team Sky had come to rule the greatest, toughest cycle race in the world. That story would dominate the British press the following day.

But on this occasion the trip had to be made. As a cycling fan I had waited thirty-five years to see this, ever since the day my late father bought me the book *The Great Bike Race* by Geoffrey Nicholson. As a writer I had waited twenty-two years since covering my first Tour de France, back in the days when we followed the fortunes of Robert Millar and Stephen Roche. I had seen the Tourmen pass for the first time, on a back road deep in the lush Normandy countryside, and over the years the connection between me and the stars on two wheels had changed, subtly and strongly.

In 1984, when I watched Robert Millar and Stephen Roche pedal past, along with Paul Sherwen, the hero of my teenage years, the link was different. At the time, I was trying - in a far less significant way and ultimately to no great effect - to do what they had done: come to France, live the cycling life, race hard, and see how far my passion would take me. 'Living in a cold-water flat, trying to be a pro,' was how Millar put it. That in turn kept up a connection that went back thirty years, to the time when Brian Robinson, Tom Simpson and Barry Hoban had crossed the Channel to, in the words of Robinson 'live like the French did, and learn from them'.

I admired all of them, because I had an idea of what they had achieved. I could not begin to imagine the sporting side, but the leap in the dark that they had all made was the same: packing a bag and a bike, getting on the ferry to go somewhere you barely knew, throwing yourself on the mercy of people you had never met at a time of life when

you had never lived away from home, all on the strength of a single letter and a phone call, and with the hope that the people waiting would not prove to be charlatans or crooks. For all of us who got the ferry, at whatever level, the leap of faith was the same. You bought your ticket; you hoped it would work out on the opposite side of the Channel. The stakes were different: my livelihood would not depend on it, although the experience was formative. But certain things were the same: the language and cultural barriers, the need to learn rapidly, in spite of those barriers; the isolation, the need to save one-franc pieces for the weekly phone call home, the need to last the days until the next race through fatigue, injury, illness and solitude. As Millar said, 'if the French didn't make it they could go back to their parents. If we went home, everyone would say, "You weren't good enough".'

With Wiggins, the connection was different. It was a matter of shared history, moments when our paths had crossed. With other bike racers in West London in the late 1990s, I had discussed the phenomenal junior from the Archer Road Club who would massacre us all if we were unlucky enough to come across him at a race somewhere (I never did, so cannot boast to having taken a kicking from a teenage 'Wiggo'). I had commiserated with a close friend - and remonstrated with the relevant coach - when young Wiggins was selected for the junior world championships in 1998 and my friend's son wasn't. I had ghost-written his columns for the *Observer*, listened on the phone when he ranted about this or that, shared coffees in the start village of the Tour, crucified myself to stay with him when we rode up the climb to Val d'Isère on the rest day of the 2007 race, and got seriously disillusioned with the whole of cycling when he had to leave the Tour with the Cofidis team later in the race after one of their number tested positive. I had seen him win his gold medals in Beijing and Athens, and I still get shivers up my spine when I remember the best

Madisons he ever raced: in Athens with Rob Hayles, and in Manchester at the 2008 world track championships with Mark Cavendish. I had wondered, a little sceptically, when he told me in 2009 he wanted to finish in the top ten of the Tour. As he would say, it had been emotional. The journey didn't end on the Champs-Élysées, but the end of that part of the journey was a moment that had to be lived.

The original reason for writing this book was to trace the path taken by British cyclists in the Tour from the 1950s over the half-century that ended with Chris Boardman and David Millar. The stories of Robinson - who was there to see Wiggins's ride up the Champs in yellow - Simpson, Hoban and all the others, stars and obscurities alike, did not deserve to be forgotten. The British legacy in the Tour, I wrote in 2004, was a rich one, embracing glory, tragedy, joy, scandal, courage and bankruptcy. It still is, but it now includes overall victory, that goal which eluded Robert Millar, which killed Simpson and frustrated Boardman.

There was another reason to go to the Champs. Earlier in the summer of 2012 my father died suddenly. I remembered, always, the cycling memories he had passed on to me: most of all, his tale of watching Tom Simpson race on the other side of the Seine at the Velodrome d'Hiver. Simpson had gone. So had the great velodrome. But the memory remained, and it had been handed down from him to me. So there was no option but to make the effort this time, so that I could place those new images in my mind: a man in yellow hugging a man in black as they crossed a finish line, a yellow Kask helmet in a sea of cameras, a blissful *domestique* weaving down an empty road. I can tell my children, and perhaps, one day, my grandchildren: I was there.

CHAPTER ONE

The First Great Prize

IN SMALL FRENCH villages, even on the cosmopolitan Côte d'Azur, new and peculiar things do not stay unnoticed for long. And there was much that was new and peculiar about the group of British cyclists who turned up in Les Issambres, halfway between St-Tropez and St-Raphaël, in early February 1955.

Their bikes and jerseys bore a name that any half-educated Frenchman knew was that of a mythical hero with the strength of ten men: Hercules. But strength is not always enough: as they rode in an elegant crocodile along the coast roads and up the hills of the *arrière-pays* in the thin winter sun, each man carried a Michelin map tucked into the back pocket of his jersey. Clearly, they feared getting lost. None of them spoke French fluently, although some had learned a smattering at school, and the chances were they wouldn't be able to understand any local who tried to explain the way back to La Finca, their pink rented villa down by the shore.

They were pioneers, strangers in a foreign country. When they sat down to dinner, wine was placed in front of them. Finding it not to their liking, they mixed it with water and sugar. It turned from red to blue, like a school chemistry experiment. But they were pioneers in a sporting sense as well, preparing to do something that no British team had ever done before: ride the Tour de France, and finish the race.

The Riviera was where the French professional teams came to prepare for the first races, held locally as soon as

the weather warmed up. In the villa next door were none other than the double Tour de France winner Louison Bobet and his brother Jean, together with their team. They saw the English group as a curiosity, joked about them at the dinner table. When they heard that the new arrivals were preparing to ride 'their' Tour, an event which they all adored and feared, they found that even more peculiar. As far as they were concerned, Englishmen did not race bikes, let alone in *le Tour*. If Englishmen appeared in France at all, they were tourists, or an army landing to liberate them from the Germans.

A contemporary French view of the English and cycling is found in Pierre Daninos's *Les Carnets du Major Thompson*, an affectionate fictional account of a stiff-upper-lipped Englishman's discovery of France and things French. The hero comes across the Tour one July and is shocked that the traffic is stopped for hours, shocked at the attire of the cyclists, and shocked that world affairs (and particularly Commonwealth matters) are driven off the front pages by blanket coverage of the Tour.

Thompson concedes that there is a Tour of Britain, but it is a very different proposition. 'Our cyclists do not cause the traffic to be halted, but race right in it. They stop at red lights, *comme tout le monde*; they are amateurs who are sheltered from the dirty deals done by sponsors, who say "excuse me" as they pass an opponent, and get off their bikes for tea; last but not least these young people, to whom no one pays any attention, are properly dressed.'

What the amused, mystified French professional cyclists witnessed on the Côte d'Azur that February was the moment when the two cultures met and began to shed their received ideas. The scene would be repeated again and again, but in different parts of France, and rarely again involving a whole team. British cyclists would turn up in France to race their bikes, not speaking the language or knowing quite what to expect, but determined that their

end goal was the country's great Tour. Over time, however, the ambitious *Britanniques* and the great national sport would subtly adapt to each other, like partners in a marriage. The outcome? Not true love or total understanding perhaps, but at least a shared acceptance of mutual need.

In the next half-century only two Tours de France would take place without at least one Briton on the start line. The Tour would twice visit British shores, and would arrange a trip to the British capital. Millions of British fans would travel to watch the race. Over fifty British cyclists would take part, although less than half would manage to reach the finish in Paris. Only seven would make a major impact. One, Tom Simpson, would die in the attempt.

In Les Issambres that January, the more thoughtful French cyclists, such as Jean Bobet, noticed that the strangers didn't look like bad bike riders. They had a strong and purposeful air. And like any other bike riders, they made the same jokes, teaching the maid and cook who looked after them that the English for '*bonjour*' was 'bollocks'.

Jean had studied English in Aberdeen, and he had accompanied Louison to London the previous winter for an award ceremony. There, they had been struck by the glamour, the black ties and dinner suits, and the mass of well-dressed club cyclists on their big night out. British cycling was insular, but it was clearly flourishing.

For the Bobet brothers' *équipiers*, however, the issue was less complex. It was hard to imagine a group of young *Anglais* taking their sport seriously. Some knew the team manager Syd Cozens's past career as a track racer; they knew nothing of his protégés. Wait for the first races: *on verra bien*. We shall see.

Recent history made scepticism the more prudent course. The first cycle road race, from Paris to Rouen in 1869, had

been won by an Englishman, James Moore, but from the turn of the century to the Second World War, British cycling had been a backwater. It was teeming with life, but it existed on its own, with little connection to the wider two-wheeled world. While on the Continent the great races such as the Tour de France, Giro d'Italia and Tour of Flanders flourished and drew huge crowds, road racing had been banned in Britain since 1897. British cyclists' main activity was time trials, 'alone and unpaced' against the watch at the crack of dawn in remote places on code-named courses to avoid any police interest.

Racing on the banked velodromes drew big crowds, while time trialling was massively popular. The awards night the Bobet brothers had been invited to attend was the Road Time Trial's Council's Champions' Gala, so prestigious and well funded that it was held at venues such as the Albert Hall. But British cycling bore no relation to cycle racing as the Bobets knew it. It was a pastoral world of gentle cycle touring and races ridden by Brylcreemed heroes wearing anonymous black alpaca jackets, and the ethos was largely amateur: the big cycle companies - Raleigh, Hercules, BSA - had a mutual agreement that professionalism would be discouraged to avoid the high costs involved.

The isolation was not total. One Briton, Bill Mills, rode for a Paris-based professional team in the 1930s. Two more, Bill Burl and Charly Holland, had been invited to the Tour in 1937. Towards the end of the 1930s, British teams were invited to ride the world road race championships, and 'massed start' events were run on airfields and, famously, at the Brooklands car-racing circuit. Mills founded a magazine, *The Bicycle*, in 1936 and hired a young journalist by the name of Jock Wadley, and the pair of them set about informing the British about Continental cycle racing.

In the 1940s, as British cyclists became aware that there was another world across the Channel, the sport became

bitterly divided. During the 10 years before the Herculeans landed in Les Issambres, British road-racing enthusiasts had begun to organise events Continental style, on the open road, taking advantage of a lack of traffic during the war. However, the body which oversaw track racing and events such as Brooklands, the National Cycle Union, was fearful of anything that might upset the status quo. They banned the organisers and riders, who promptly formed a breakaway group, the British League of Racing Cyclists.

The BLRC grew rapidly, and road racing based on the European model of place-to-place and stage events mushroomed. Events such as the Tour of Britain and London -Holyhead were organised, to popular acclaim, and small professional teams began to appear. The sport was rapidly split three ways. The 'Leaguers' felt that Europe was the model to follow, the NCU traditionalists liked their quiet backwater, while the time trialists had an inverse snobbery of their own, centred on the Corinthian purity of the event, where the strongest rider always won, without the taint of professionalism.

The 'Leaguers' had their own uniform, imitating their European heroes, with tyres draped round the neck and motor-racing goggles. They read French magazines such as *But et Club* and *Miroir-Sprint*, passed around in the same slightly clandestine way that schoolboys might swap *Penthouse*. 'Up the League' they would shout as they whizzed past a group of slower moving Unionists. Many cyclists ended up joining two clubs and racing in both bodies' events. The legacy of the great schism is an enduring one: large British towns often have two or more cycling clubs, one of whose names has a 'continental' prefix (such as 'Vélo Club' or 'Groupe Sportif') or suffix (such as 'Coureurs') to denote its old BLRC allegiance. And time trialling has continued, pretty much unchanged in its basic principles and in its lack of connection to the broader cycling world, for almost a century.

Without the great post-war upheaval in British cycling, there would have been no British athletes capable of riding the Tour de France in 1955, and no professional teams capable of bringing them together to prepare for the event. The idea would simply never have occurred to anyone, let alone to the select group of men who gathered in a bar called Nino's in the Swiss town of Lugano on a warm evening in August 1953.

The whole of cycling - fans, racers, media, officials - had descended on the little lakeside town for the world championships. Before they watched the world professional road-race title, the great and the good of British cycling congregated in the bar, although the evening cannot have been particularly drunken, thanks to the presence of H.H. England, the austere editor of the official organ of all British life on two wheels, *Cycling*. With him were a smattering of British journalists, including Mills and his editor Peter Bryan, a cycle-shop owner, Rory O'Brien, and, critically, one 'Mac' McLachlan, a dapper little Scotsman who was publicity director of the Hercules bicycle company.

It is no longer clear precisely who said what or when. Most of those present are now dead; surviving memories are hazy. At some point during the evening, however, the idea of entering a British team in the Tour was mooted. It almost made sense. Hercules, Mac's company, backed a small but successful professional team; one of their four riders, the 'Pocket Rocket' Dave Bedwell, was competing in the professional race in Lugano and would finish twenty-third. That was part of a wider trend.

After being cut off from the mainstream for so long, in the post-war years British cyclists had done more than stay at home and imitate the Europeans. They were now competing internationally on a regular basis as amateurs, and were not disgracing themselves. The previous summer, for example, the Scotsman Ian Steel had won the toughest

amateur race in the world, the Warsaw-Berlin-Prague 'Peace Race'. Why not aim higher?

British cycling was divided, but the injection of energy that had come with the formation of the BLRC had inspired a feeling that anything was possible. After years of frustration, occasional 'massed start' events on motor test tracks and a few abortive trips to the world championships, British cyclists were suddenly travelling to places such as Mexico and the Communist bloc and competing more than honourably. Back home, an entire sport had sprung from nothing in the teeth of bitter opposition in a dozen years. A generation of young cyclists had appeared from nowhere and they looked as good as their European counterparts. Why not now aim for what England would refer to as 'the first great prize'?

There had been one, abortive, British foray to the Tour before. At the end of June 1937, England had been the only onlooker at Victoria station when Charles Holland and Bill Burl boarded the Golden Arrow for Paris and the great bike race. They were accompanied by 'very little luggage apart from two pairs of handlebars'; bikes, standard yellow, were provided by the Tour organisers.

They were handicapped partly by injury - Burl was getting over broken ribs, Holland a fractured collarbone - and partly by inexperience. The greatest bugbear, however, was that they had no experienced back-up or support staff and were constantly forced to ask for help from other teams. Holland had ridden the world road-race championship, but he and Burl started the Tour in almost total ignorance. 'The riders who live near the mountains practise, so I am told, coming round the bends at terrific speeds ... Cornering plays an important part. I hope to learn all about it!' wrote Holland before the start for England's magazine.

The Tour of the 1930s was as much a test of individual initiative as of physical strength. Burl and Holland were issued their race bikes only to find they were not in working order. The bikes were cloistered away before the start to avoid tampering; to enter the room to work on them the riders needed a pass from the race organisers, who, at the vital moment, were at a banquet. Cobbled roads, huge potholes nicknamed 'birds nests', unlit tunnels in the mountains and tramlines in town centres meant crashes were a constant danger. Most of the higher cols were unmetalled, and turned to mud as the snow melted. 'No matter what the weather, we always arrive at the end of a stage covered in mud, dirt or tar,' wrote Holland. Nicknamed 'Sir Holland' by the French, he lasted fourteen days as the lone representative of the three-man 'Empire Aces' team, two crashes in the first two days having put paid to Burl, while the Canadian Pierre Gachon disappeared soon after the race left Paris.

Holland's dispatches for *Cycling* have something of the tourist about them ('We left Digne, noted for its lavender'), and a little of the *Boy's Own* hero: 'In a large courtyard [in Toulon] we sat down to lunch ... bread, vegetables, meat, fruit, mineral waters, beer, wine. This was some "bun fight".' Physically, Holland was able to stand the pace but in those days Tourmen had to repair their own bikes, and he was, in the end, let down by his equipment. In a two-wheeled variant of the horseshoe nail that lost the battle, a warped washer in his pump valve ended his race when he had a string of punctures in the Pyrenees.

Half a century later, Holland was still bitter at the way it ended. He was convinced the organisers had wanted him out. 'They didn't give me a fair do as far as helping me went. To have an organisation for one man was not their way. They had taken all the publicity they could out of me, and I had the impression they wanted me out because what

would people think if I could finish the Tour without any help?’

Another factor must have been at the back of all those British minds in Nino’s bar. Post-war austerity was becoming a memory, and the universal optimism that would lead Harold Macmillan to proclaim Britain had ‘never had it so good’ extended to the British cycle industry. For men like McLachlan, famed for seizing on anything and turning it into publicity, and Bobby Thom, manager of the Viking Cycles team, competing in the world’s greatest cycle race would have made sound economic sense.

With large-scale car ownership just around the corner, the mid-1950s would mark the last hurrah of the world-leading British cycle trade. Half a century on, with mass production of bikes extinct in the UK, it is hard to believe that in the first eight months of 1955, for example, over two million bikes were produced in Britain. The bulk of these were exported, mainly to captive markets in the Commonwealth. The leaders were Raleigh, with its vast complex in Nottingham, and Tube Investments, based in Aston, Birmingham, who owned Hercules.

McLachlan had already been behind Hercules’s highly successful backing of the record-breaking time trialist Eileen Sheridan, marketed as ‘the pocket Hercules’. The company was known mainly for producing cheap working men’s clunkers; McLachlan was looking for a more glamorous, sporty image. At a time when the ‘Leaguers’ were avid for anything ‘Continental’, putting his bikes in the Tour de France would lend just the right veneer of glamour. And there would be a chance to break into the thriving European marketplace.

McLachlan was a flamboyant character, though sober in dress and with the quiet accent of a well-educated east coast Scot, and he was not inhibited when it came to publicity stunts. He knew little of cycling, but he

understood what made men tick. One 'Mac' legend has him being driven - he famously took taxis or company cars wherever he went - alongside Bedwell as the latter attempted to win a stage in the Tour of Britain. He waved a wad of banknotes out of the car window: the 'Pocket Rocket' delivered.

Putting the first British team in the Tour also appealed to the race organiser, Jacques Goddet. He was an Anglophile, who had been educated at Oxford. There was even something British in his appearance, especially in the shorts and colonial pith helmet he wore on hot days in the Tour. As editor of the organising newspaper and sponsor *L'Equipe*, he was constantly looking for new ways to gain publicity for his event. He had already made attempts to broaden the international appeal of the race. From 1950 to 1952 a North African team had taken part, reflecting France's colonial interests. They earned their place in Tour legend when one team member, Abdel Kader Zaaf, fell asleep under a tree in the Midi and rode the wrong way up the road after he woke up.

The deal to ensure a British team would ride the 1955 Tour was sealed at the Earls Court cycle show in autumn 1954 by McLachlan, Jean Garnaud, the Tour's director of logistics, and Hugh Palin, head of the British Cycle Trade Manufacturers' Union. However, there remained one issue for Hercules. Because the Tour was contested by national selections rather than professional trade teams, the ten best British professional cyclists would be selected and there was no guarantee how many would be from Hercules. McLachlan's solution was to ensure that his riders were the best prepared, so that they would at least provide the bulk of the team. Hence the decision to send them to Les Issambres to train as the Continentals did, and to enter the team in the major European races which formed the build-up to the Tour.

When the ten-man British team finally assembled in Le Havre in late June, McLachlan's tactic had paid off. Six were from Hercules and had been racing the European professional circuit since the spring: Dave Bedwell, who had been with the team since its foundation in 1953, Tony Hoar, who had quit his job as an admiralty plumber at Portsmouth to join Hercules that year, Fred Krebs, Bob Maitland, Bernard Pusey and Brian Robinson.

The others were based in Britain: Stan Jones was a part-time racer, who worked in the office at Tube Investments, Ken Mitchell raced for Wearwell Cycles, and Ian Steel and Bev Wood rode for Viking Cycles. Jones had taken three weeks off work to train, but the others were racing fulltime: Steel and Mitchell had both started that year's Tour of Spain in a Great Britain team managed by Bob Thom. Alongside Syd Cozens, the Hercules manager, the mechanics - Thom and the Frenchman Louis Debruycker - and the masseur Julien Schramm, they had a professional film crew with them; sadly, the footage has vanished into the ether.

McLachlan's wheeze was one of the most successful pieces of marketing cycling has ever seen. Half a century on, it remains fixed in the British cycling consciousness that Hercules was the first British team to ride the Tour. (Indeed, it is the only thing for which the Hercules name is still known.) That was, however, manifestly not the case: the 1955 squad was a British national team in a Tour ridden by national teams. The misapprehension is understandable. Robinson saw it this way: 'The Tour organisers provided the jerseys and as far as the French were concerned it was a national team, but personally I was riding for Hercules.'

In Le Havre, the *Britanniques* received their Tour kit from the race organisers, an echo of the days when everything down to bikes was provided in the interests of equity and in order to curb commercial sponsors. 'Two jerseys, a tracksuit, goggles, a waterproof jacket, two caps

and a couple of compressed air bottles along with an aluminium case for the clothes. All was signed for and was to be charged if not returned.'

Opinions varied as to how they would fare. A three-page article in *Cycling* in January 1955 was adamant that a team should not be sent until the following year, and that 1955 should be used to train up riders and gather information. 'We cannot send a team to the Tour unless we are willing to gamble heavily with men's reputations, our future in the race, and Britain's sporting prestige.' ... 'Any rider we could send in 1955 could know no more about the Tour than what he had read, heard, or imagined,' wrote Ken Bowden. 'It would fall far short of reality, for the Tour is unique in terrain, weather variation, racing technique and a hundred and one other things.'

There were more optimistic voices, such as the journalists of *L'Equipe*, who had at least seen the Hercules men in action. The novelist Antoine Blondin felt that Robinson would be on the attack in the opening week, that Maitland offered the best chance for the overall standings, and that Bedwell would be in the hunt for the green points jersey.

He was wrong on every count, even though the team had not raced badly in the build-up. Robinson had finished fourth in the Flèche Wallonne single-day classic and had taken eighth in Paris-Nice, then as now the toughest early-season race in Europe; Maitland was twelfth and took third on one stage. Pusey had finished third in a race in Marseille. Bedwell had finished fourth in the Tour of Calvados. Robinson had worn the leader's jersey in the now-defunct Tour of Six Provinces, a selection race for the Tour. Maitland had come in the top thirty in the Dauphiné Libéré, the hardest event in France after the Tour.

These were performances which, if not directly earning the Britons their place in the Tour, at least proved they had a right to be there. *Cycling* hedged its bets: 'What we can

definitely bank on is the best display of British guts and tenacity in any foreign event so far. This is indeed a great moment in our sporting history ... Such participation today would have seemed a fantastic dream but a few years ago. It is an honour to be permitted to ride in such a race. That was the first great prize to be won.'

The headline in *L'Equipe*, 'RICHER IN COURAGE THAN IN EXPERIENCE', perfectly summed up the British team. This was evident in the second stage, the team time trial round Dieppe, when each squad raced together against the watch. The British team had done no training for the stage, were 'disjointed' according to one team member, and left Bedwell and Jones behind from the start, which can hardly have done wonders for their morale.

They were, says Maitland, not a happy team, more 'a lot of individuals put together, just a shambles'. Not all the squad would share his opinion, but it is clear that tensions arose from the fact that he and Cozens, a former star of the winter 'six-day' track races, had been brought in from BSA, Hercules's bitter rivals in domestic racing. There were factions within the team: Maitland and Hoar did not see eye to eye, neither did Robinson and Cozens, while Jones and Krebs just did not get on. At the stage finish in Namur, for example, Krebs ran out of energy, and Jones pushed him up to the finish in the citadel. Jones was fined by the judges, and said he had never paid a fine less willingly.

With considerable prescience, the writer Ken Bowden had pointed out that a British Tour team would suffer language difficulties, and would have trouble adapting to the diet and sleeping in rowdy stage towns. He predicted the punctures and crashes which would cut a swathe through the British team, and made the point that there was no manager in Britain capable of matching the best on the Continent. Cozens, for all that he spoke French, had no experience of road racing, but was a track-racing specialist.

In today's Tour, punctures are at worst an irritation, thanks to modern tyre technology and the fact that many French communities resurface the roads before the Tour passes through. In the 1955 Tour, however, the risk of punctures could not be taken lightly. Perversely, until 1956, team-support cars were not allowed to give their riders a spare wheel with a pumped-up tyre, so that they could simply dismount, change the wheel and ride on. (This was a throwback to the days when the only service cars were 'neutral', and at the very back of the race; then, riders would repair their own bikes as far as possible.) Instead, when a rider punctured, the team mechanic had to get out of the car with a tyre and wheel, and he was not permitted to begin putting the tyre on the rim until his feet had touched the ground. The rider would already have stripped off the old tyre, but fitting a new one on the rim and inflating it could take several minutes. However, to muddy the waters further, if a wheel was broken in any other way it could be replaced complete with tyre; a common mechanics' ploy was to damage a punctured wheel out of the referees' sight. In any case, the energy spent regaining the bunch or riding alone to the finish would take its toll. Maitland recalls chasing the bunch for two hours on one stage, after Jones had punctured on the start line.

The Britons were at a further disadvantage: the Dunlop tyre company had promised the team a £200 bonus for riding its tubular tyres, which were, unfortunately, not up to standard. 'The first question we asked was "Are the tyres mature?"' says Hoar. Like wine, tubular tyres improve with age. The rubber hardens and the cotton casing becomes stronger, making them more puncture-resistant, and to this end professional team mechanics and equipment-conscious cyclists keep them for up to two years, ideally in a dark cellar, or perhaps in the spare bed, before use.

'We were assured that they were [mature],' continues Hoar, 'but we had more punctures than any other team. We

all got pissed off with it, so we cut them open - they had the date stamped on the inner tubes and they were only a few months old.'

'The tyres were shit,' recalls Robinson. He had brought his own from Italy, while Maitland had got tyres of the standard he wanted through connections at Dunlop.

Pusey was worst hit by the curse of Dunlop. On stage two, from Dieppe to Roubaix, he waited for Krebs, who had punctured. As they rode up through the convoy of cars behind the bunch, he punctured himself. The British car was ahead in the convoy, so he put on the spare tyre that all riders carried, but within five miles he had punctured again. With no spare, he rode the final twelve miles on a flat tyre - barely able to control his bike on the bumpy cobbled roads of northern France - then found the gates of the velodrome where the stage finished shut because everyone had gone home.

Steel had a different problem. A hugely talented cyclist, still the only Briton ever to win the toughest amateur stage race in the world, the Peace Race, he fell victim to the conflict of interest that arose when a trade-team boss was in charge of a national squad. The Scot was riding strongly, but he was a member of the Viking team, Hercules's big domestic rival. When Cozens ordered him to drop back from the main group to support a teammate during a mountain stage, Steel protested that he was not willing to sacrifice his own chances. He was threatened with expulsion, and duly went home, his morale in tatters.

Fatally for the British, it was a hot summer: the temperature added to the suffering on the road, and made it hard to sleep amid the hubbub of the city centres after the race finished. 'You were wound up, it was difficult to sleep, and the biggest problem was thinking you hadn't closed your eyes, waking up feeling as though you hadn't slept,' says Robinson. Each stage was followed by the nightly *animation* - a glitzy spectacular, in which