

ted the interests and values of his time. In turn he stirred the imaginings of those who read and heard of his novel which was set in 1867, as the velocipede craze gathered steam, and was first published as a book in 1869 following its serialization in *Le Vélocipède Illustré*. Indeed his geographical imaginaries probably gave impetus to the dreams of several cyclists who did subsequently attempt long-distance rides and who made technical improvements to the velocipede.

Lesclide's hero - Jonathan Shopp - was the personification of modern man, anxious to disseminate to the world the material possibilities of the velocipede [FIG 3]. The journey takes place in 1867, only 2 years after René and Aimé Olivier had astounded French citizens by riding from Paris to Avignon in approximately 10 days, averaging close to 100 kilometres a day. I suspect it took some time for the significance of that ride to sink in, but it evidently did as Lesclide imagined an even greater ride, led by his American protagonist, who embarked from Paris with his companion, Victorine, and two young Frenchmen, Abel and Albert, all on velocipedes equipped with several imagined technical improvements, intent on circumnavigating the globe. In his imagination Lesclide jumped geographical scale by taking the reality of a bicycle ride at a national scale - as demonstrated by the Olivier brothers and de la Bouglise - and mapping it onto the globe, he foresaw - almost as science fiction - a velocipede that could cover 300 kilometers in a day!!.

Before engaging in a deconstruction of Lesclide's novel, three factual pieces of information are needed to set the scene.

First, Jacques Seray (2009) has already presented an excellent commentary on Lesclide's romantic novel, situating the work and its author in its historical context. ⁽⁴⁾ I have only a little to add, with my contribution intended to highlight the geographical significance of this work and hopefully make it better known to anglophones.

Second, as Jacques Seray makes clear, Richard Lesclide was not well travelled. For sure he had visited parts of Western Europe, but not further afield. In the tradition of science and geographical fiction writing, he substituted a fertile imagination and second-hand information for the substantial gaps in his personal knowledge of the world. Besides, few of his readers would have visited the parts unknown, while the explosion of geographical writing in the mid-Victorian era had provided a lot of factual information - both accurate and inaccurate. And he clearly consulted maps and gazetteers since the places his protagonists pass through are located correctly.

The novel was written during a period of intense continental exploration which was a key part of the project of imperial expansion at that time. During the two previous centuries the world had been mapped from the sea, but the continental interiors remained largely unknown to European explorers. In Siberia, in Australia, and in Africa a series of explorers searched the interior, wrote accounts of their travels, and lectured to large crowds in such places as the *Royal Geographical Society* in London ⁽⁵⁾ and St. Petersburg's *Russian Geographical Society*. ⁽⁶⁾ Indeed Aimé Olivier - later Comte de Sanderval - became the leading French explorer in what is now Guinea in West Africa. In turn fiction writers picked up the factual findings of these

explorers and embellished them in various forms of travel stories. In 1873 the most famous of these stories, Jules Verne's *Around the World in 80 Days*, was surely inspired in part by Lesclide's novel published in Paris only 4 years earlier. ⁽⁷⁾

Richard Lesclide was born in Bordeaux in 1825, at the dawn of the steam era. He began publishing at the age of 18 and continued to publish and edit for the rest of his life. He is best known for his erotic novel, *La Diligence du Lyon*, but also for his efforts in the 1860s to promote the velocipede including, in 1869, *Le Vélocipède Illustré* - which remains the most important cycling magazine of that early phase - and in the same year his "how to" *Manuel du Vélocipède*. Also in 1869 he published the subject of this short note - *Le Tour du Monde en Vélocipède*. After that he wrote some literary and artistic reviews before becoming secretary to France's most famous author of that era, Victor Hugo, in 1875. He remained Hugo's secretary until the author's death in 1885 after which he wrote a book on his recollections of the great author. He died in 1892 at the age of 67.



Fig 3

(4) Seray, op. cit. pp. 135-145.

(5) Royal Geographical Society (2005) *To the Ends of the Earth: Visions of a Changing World - 175 Years of Exploration and Photography*. (London: RGS-IBG).

(6) Hirsch, Francine. 2005. *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press).

(7) Verne, Jules (1873) *Le tour du monde en quatre-vingts jours*. (Paris: Pierre-Jules Hetzel).

(8) Harvey, David (2003) *Paris: Capital of Modernity* (London and New York: Routledge).



Fig 4

The novel is as much a love story as a travel yarn. The principal character is Jonathan Shopp, an extremely rich and well connected American, and a friend of the narrator (Jacques). He appears to be between 30 and 40 years old. He decides he needs a female companion for his round the world ride, and invites Victorine, a giantess at a local fair, to come. She accepts. Two young Frenchmen infatuated with Victorine, Abel and Albert, also join the caravan although Shopp doubts that they will last 8 days [FIG 4]. In Kaunas at the Russian border (now in Lithuania) they are forcibly entertained by the commandant who introduces his son, Serge, to Victorine. They are almost the same height, and he falls in love with her almost immediately.

At Nizhny Novgorod Serge's father arranges a driver (Michel) and a talenta drawn by 5 horses to accompany them. After entering Siberia, Shopp forces the group to do a night ride. Shopp - riding alone - is attacked by a pack of wolves but shoots one and escapes while the rest of the pack devours the carcass. But only Victorine and Serge in the second group survive an attack by a huge pack of wolves; and Abel, Albert, and Michel are presumed dead [FIG 5] (shows a version of this attack, but shifted to the

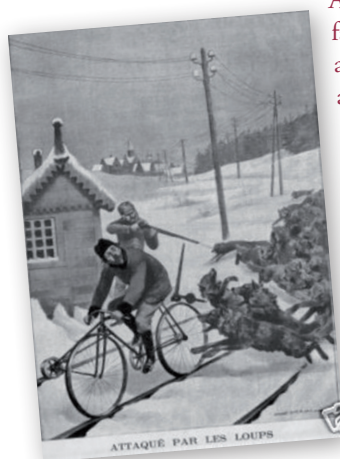


Fig 5

safety bicycle era). At the melancholic end of the story Shopp deliberately abandons Victorine and Serge in Yalutorovsk as he heads on alone, leaving them to return to the west.

I will take up two of the geographical themes in Lesclide's novel.

DIFFUSING MODERNITY INTO A TRADITIONAL WORLD

As David Harvey demonstrates in his 2003 book, Parisians saw their home city as the Capital of Modernity, and actively worked to burnish that reality. (8) As flâneurs on the boulevards, artists at the Salon des Refusés, consumers in department stores, and technicians in numerous small workshops; many Parisians reveled in modern life. On the technical front, Lesclide reminds his readers time and again that the velocipede presented one of the cutting edges of technology. Its maker – presumably Michaux but not actually named – is described as the “Napoléon du Véloupède”. Although by 1867 the velocipede had become a familiar sight on the streets of Paris, the further one traveled from Paris the more spectators were astonished by the vehicle. Moreover Shopp is a proud republican who feels that through technology he controls the future - at least until his project falls apart in Siberia.

The diffusion of things modern - both technological and cultural - was in places received with enthusiasm by a receptive audience, but occasionally resisted in backwaters suspicious of change. Although Lesclide had never personally visited many of the places encountered by Shopp on his trip, he anticipated quite well some of the situations that Thomas Stevens would encounter a few years later on his world tour as a result of introducing a novel artifact into a traditional world. Much like Thomas Stevens' stoning by Chinese peasants on his world trip, Shopp's party is attacked by Russian railway workers at Korsovka, and the attackers only relent when he pulls his revolver and produces an authorization which – he says – is signed by the Czar (fortunately for Shopp they were illiterate). In the German countryside some peasants make angry gestures because the velocipedes frighten their horses and children. But locals in the boondocks are generally dumbfounded by the velocipedes, and by the sociable tricycle that Abel and Albert took up at Namur in Belgium [FIG 6], and they crowd round to see the novelties.



Fig 6

For his story Lesclide invents several new technologies, seemingly to speed up the progress of his adventurers (perhaps so that they do not spend an interminable number of pages crossing Russia and Siberia). Three of these inventions are nonsense, but one is years ahead of its time. Briefly:

i) In Verviers his riders attached sails to their velocipedes [FIG 7] and to the tricycle to take advantage of a tailwind which he suggests blew them along at speeds around 30 km/h ... until Victorine crashes [FIG 8]. Wind is too variable a force for this to work for long – riders are bound to be unbalanced very quickly.

ii) (p.81) Shopp gets permission to ride the rails from Hannover in Germany using a rim with flanges that prevent the wheel from slipping off the track. They double their speed on the rails – he claims they achieve 30 km / hour and cover distances from 160 km up to 300 km in a day. As any velocipede rider would know, this is impossible: first because the required cadence of the legs is unsustainable; second because a front-driver bicycle traces a sine wave as pressure is put alternately on the two pedals - since these flanges would eliminate the ability to steer and force the bicycle to ride the straight line of the rails, they would be impossible to balance and turn the machines into versions of de Sivrac's apocryphal *Celerifere*; and third, the top of Schopp's velocipede forks are shown in illustrations to be about 4 cm wide whereas this flange would have to be 10 cm wide to cover a standard rail, so the wheel could not possibly fit though the forks. Perhaps realizing this problem, when his riders reach Berlin, Lesclide attempts to solve it by having the two velocipedes connected with rods, one on each rail, so that they are stable [FIG 9]. Albert and Abel switch to a similar quadricycle in St. Petersburg.

iii) In Siberia it begins to snow with the onset of winter. After leaving Nizny Novgorod, Shopp and Victorine spread plates attached to their rims (p.183) which makes them 10 cm. wide and distributes their weight over the snow so that they are able to travel fast, covering 120 km in a day. Again, this invention is problematic: the top of the forks of a velocipede are about 4 cm wide, so like the rail adaptation, the rim would not fit through the forks. Realizing this (perhaps a reader pointed it out), Lesclide belatedly announces (p.183) that the forks have a bulge at the top to allow the rim to pass [FIG 10]. Such a bulge would render the forks very weak, and the idea is clearly an afterthought that does not appear in any of the illustrations.

iv) In De Svijajsk approaching Tartarstan (p.202), Shopp and Victorine fit geared hubs to their velocipedes which doubles their speed by getting 2 rotations of the wheel for one of the pedals (just like the Crypto geared hub). This was an idea 30 years ahead of its time, with Lesclide claiming that the sun and planet gear allowed them to travel at 20 to 23 km/h. In practice, as any Crypto rider will have observed, the gear also increases the rotational friction so that the gain in speed is more modest.

There is a scarcely concealed excitement in Lesclide's novel about the possibilities of the velocipede, and the way it diffuses one manifestation of technological modernity from a leading centre of innovation (Paris) to the numerous backward places the riders pass through on their voyage. The further the ri-

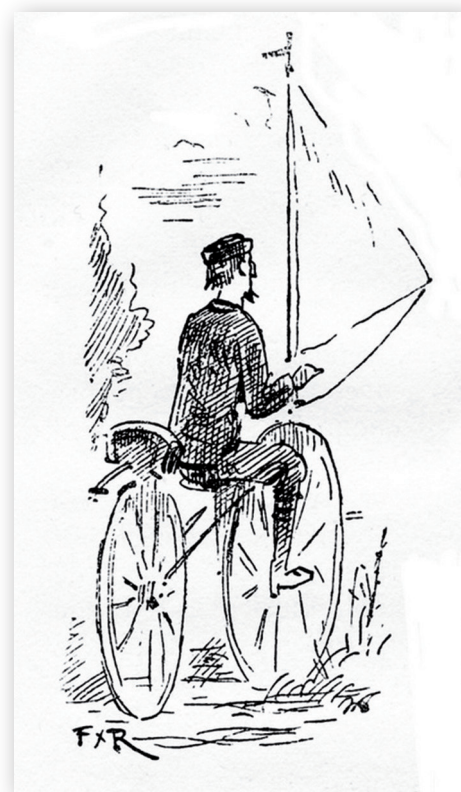


Fig 7



Fig 8

ders penetrate the continental interior of Russia, the more the vehicles are perceived as technological wonders.

TIME-SPACE COMPRESSION

David Harvey presents time-space compression as a central feature of modern life. ⁽⁹⁾ He attributes this process not only to technological innovation, but also to new political economies that tear down trade and other barriers, promote imperial expansion and globalization, and reject the time-constant geographies of the pre-modern age. In Lesclide's era Gladstonian liberalism and free-trade were increasingly opening up the world to commerce, while the expansion of several European

empires had incorporated many of the world's peripheries into imperial core regions as suppliers of raw materials and cheap labour. This compression of space facilitated the flow of people, of trade, of migrants, of capital, and of information. In the context of Lesclide's novel, the expansion of the Russian Empire which unified territory from the Baltic to the Pacific made Shopp's ride a feasible project (especially with a letter of safe travel from the Tsar himself), as did the ability of the velocipede to cover substantial distances (although these distances were greatly exaggerated by Lesclide).

The Paris-Avignon ride by the Olivier brothers and Lesclide's novel represent steps of fundamental importance to our imagined world. Territories labelled *terra incognita* were rapidly being erased as land exploration pushed back their frontiers. The trans-Siberian railway was not completed until 1916, long after Shopp's imagined ride, while America's first trans-continental railroad was completed in 1869, the same year that Lesclide's novel was published. So land transport - be it railways or velocipedes - was beginning to connect far-flung parts of the terrestrial world. Shopp recognizes this when he comments (p.177): "Je crois, en effet, qu'un jour viendra où des routes spéciales, créées pour les Véloces, sillonneront les pays civilisés. Nous n'avons fait que devancer ce temps." (I believe, in fact,

that the day will come when special pathways, built for cycling, will criss-cross civilized countries. We have brought forward that time). He correctly sees bicycle paths that criss-cross the countryside becoming the norm.

Lesclide's imagined world in which men and women could travel across countries and continents under their own steam helped launch the age of cyclotourism. It was soon followed by a boom in rail tourism of continental proportions as train trips across the Rocky Mountains in America, across Europe to Istanbul, and across Australia's outback became popular vacations. In fact Lesclide was the first to envision personal land transport on cycles as a viable means of transcontinental travel. It is ironic, therefore, that the narrator, Jacques, says to Victorine (p.5) "C'est tout bonnement une extravagance. Savez-vous un peu de géographie?" [It's over the top. Don't you know any geography?].

Acknowledgement: I am very grateful to Jacques Seray for his help in interpreting Lesclide's oeuvre, and in preparing good copies of the illustrations. ■

(9) Harvey, David (1990) *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*. (Oxford: Blackwell).



Fig 9

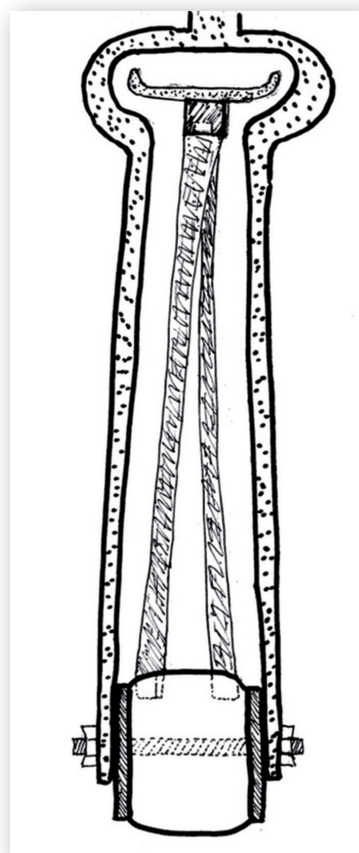


Fig 10