

Marketing Michelin: Advertising and Cultural Identity in Twentieth-Century France. *By Steven Harp*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 2001. xiii + 356 pp. Index, notes, bibliography, illustrations, maps. Cloth, \$39.95. ISBN 0-801-86651-0.

Reviewed by Vanessa R. Schwartz

Anyone who has ever visited France has no doubt come into contact with the Michelin company. Whether one drives on Michelin tires at home or abroad, the company's universally recognized Michelin Man has helped guide eager tourists through France and other parts of the world with what admittedly is the premier set of guidebooks and maps for automobile tourism. Steven Harp treats the history of Michelin tires, its man, and the company's marketing more generally in this study that looks at the role of business in constructing French national identity from the late nineteenth century until the eve of the Second World War.

Harp describes the Michelin company (primarily under the direction of brothers André and Edouard Michelin) and its axiomatic assumption that to increase profits it needed to sell more tires. In pursuit of this goal, the company promoted the unfettered growth of automobile tourism. To this end, Michelin took up "motoring" as a cause in the earliest moments of the history of the automobile: the company offered French towns free road signs so that travelers would know when they left one and entered the next; it printed road maps whose colors and symbols became the standard road maps in France; and it lobbied to have roads numbered, even supplying the painted milestones, known as "bornes," that are ubiquitous roadside markers in France.

The social and cultural implications of automobility is largely absent from Harp's account, except to say that it was part of an expanding touristic horizon. Yet, as his chapter on tours of the trenches of World War I makes clear, car travel created an entirely fresh horizon of sites to visit because of greater access. Harp relegates the history of French road-building and the development of the autoroute in France to the background, but the history of tourism within France is not a simple one-way road toward the greater freedom afforded by the car—coasts and mountains were best navigated by trains long after the rise of the car. He misses the opportunity to reflect on the way that Michelin "mapped" France and how it transformed the French sense of their nation's geography. Finally, Michelin's guides clearly became the primary tool by which French motorists navigated their countryside. Did foreigners use the guides as frequently? While Harp explains that Michelin reflected the broader French cultural interest in regionalism and gastronomy, the particular originality of Michelin in generating rather than reflecting these

developments is not identified here, although I suspect those maps and guidebooks did have a transformative effect.

Harp writes his history almost exclusively from the “supply” side and describes what Michelin did without tapping sources such as the mass press (other than Michelin’s own ads), literature, and local and departmental archives that attest to a transformed countryside. These sources might have shed light on how people actually received and implemented Michelin’s agenda. We also never learn whether all the investment in tourism did sell more tires, or whether and when and how Michelin’s maps and guidebooks became a viable business on their own. For, rather than a simple history of marketing, the case of Michelin demonstrates the twentieth-century tendency toward conglomeration. Michelin may not have branched out into car manufacturing until it acquired Citroën in 1934, but it went into the map and guidebook business far earlier and with greater brand identification. After all, outside of France especially, the company is best known for its tubby “Michelin man,” a transatlantic cousin of our own Pillsbury Dough Boy.

The reader anticipates that a book about the marketing of Michelin would explain the history of one of the most successful advertising icons of all time, and Harp does so in the book’s first chapter. The company icon has a name—“Bibendum” (a play on the epicurean phrase “now let us drink”), and his portly stature, monocle, and later cigar signified the association of tires and cars with the early segment of Michelin’s market—the luxury consumer. Harp never really identifies this most intriguing class identification in the context of the history of the mass marketing of luxury, which has received much recent attention in books such as James Twitchell’s *Living it Up* (2002). Harp, instead, runs through the categories of class, race, and gender to show the ways that the advertising campaign reflected many of the prejudices and hierarchies present in France in other forms. He also claims that Bibendum functioned as a national symbol of France, but a poster of him as a British knight (p. 30) and an even more remarkable one (from 1914) in which he shows a British gentleman that he has built a “Chunnel” made of Michelin tires (p. 53) suggests a far more labile and internationalist identity. The “Michelin man” has been one of the world’s great advertising icons as well as one of its first. The reader would like to know more about that phenomenon in the context of a cultural history of advertising that would engage with the work of historians like Roland Marchand, especially his *Creating the Corporate Soul* (1998).

Harp’s training as a French historian leads him to frame his study in terms of “national” interest. He includes a chapter on Michelin’s promotion of Taylorism and scientific management in order to engage in the debate about “Americanization.” He concludes that Michelin believed that to preserve being French they had to become more American. But, as Michelin well knew,

because its greatest competition in France was from the British firm Dunlop, selling tires was an international affair, and although Bibendum may have started life as a French aristocrat, he is today just “the Michelin man”: a seemingly neutered chubby and friendly male, no more French than the Jolly Green Giant is American. (Where is the Green Valley, anyway?) Rather than chapters that seem tangential to the reader, such as the company’s promotion of the French pronatalist agenda or the company’s backing of the development of aviation, we might have benefited from a longer-term examination of Michelin’s icon, much as other scholars have done for Mickey Mouse or Aunt Jemima. The relation between an advertising based on text and one based on logos and images is still in need of greater attention. The way cars and automobility transformed advertising has been touched upon in books about billboards and Las Vegas. There may or may not be a particularly “French” valence to this story, but an approach that emphasized “marketing” and “advertising” rather than “France” would have highlighted what is signal about Michelin versus what folds it into the broader landscape of French history. The story of Michelin, famous for its logo, maps, and guidebooks, is a potentially rich subject for a history of business and advertising, but it is one whose frame may have to be bigger than the nation, since the reach of Michelin’s products certainly were and continue to be.

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