

MERCKX: HALF MAN, HALF BIKE

William Fotheringham writes for the *Guardian* and *Observer* on cycling and rugby. A racing cyclist and launch editor of *Procycling* and *Cycle Sport* magazines, he has reported on over twenty Tours de France. He is the critically lauded author of *Fallen Angel*, *Roule Britannia*, and *Put Me Back on My Bike*, which *Vélo* magazine called 'The best cycling biography ever written'. He lives in Herefordshire with his wife and two children.

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WILLIAM FOTHERINGHAM

MERCKX: HALF MAN, HALF BIKE



YELLOW JERSEY PRESS
LONDON

Published by Yellow Jersey Press 2013

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

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First published in Great Britain in 2012 by
Yellow Jersey Press
Random House, 20 Vauxhall Bridge Road,
London SW1V 2SA

www.vintage-books.co.uk

Addresses for companies within The Random House Group Limited can be found at:
www.randomhouse.co.uk/offices.htm

The Random House Group Limited Reg. No. 954009

A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library

ISBN 9780224074513

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Typeset in Fairfield Light by Palimpsest Book Production Limited,
Falkirk, Stirlingshire
Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CRO 4YY

*This book is dedicated to the late Laurent Fignon, a man
who loved la course en tête*

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For sharing memories of Merckx on various occasions I should like to thank: Jørgen Leth, Jean-Luc Vandenbroucke, Gian-Paolo Ormezzano, Bob Addy, Ian Banbury, Sean Kelly, Michael Wright, Jiří Daler, Joël Godaert, Giorgio Albani, Bernard Thévenet, Ole Ritter, Vittorio Adorni, Ernesto Colnago, Sid Barras, Emile Daems. Particular thanks should go to Jos Bruyère, Guillaume Michiels and Bob Lelangue, all of whom were generous with their time when discussing their years at Merckx's side.

During research for a future book on Flandrian cycling, the name Merckx inevitably came up when I interviewed Rik Van Looy, Patrick Sercu, Walter Godefroot, Herman Van Springel and Frans Verbeeck. I would like to thank all of these greats for their help.

For providing telephone numbers and general advice, I should like to thank Stéphane Thirion, Marc Ghyselinck, Marco Pastonesi and Philippe Bouvet. Their names seemed to open doors wherever I looked.

Other valuable assistance came from Chris Boardman and Peter Keen, both of whom provided insights into their Hour Records and that of Merckx. I am indebted to my brother Alasdair for helping with interviews with Raphael Geminiani and Txomin Perurena, and to Barbara Rumpus at *l'Equipe* for sourcing one particular piece of writing. Jacinto Vidarte and Javier de Dalmases were generous with their memories of José Manuel Fuente while Joël Godaert provided insights into the final months of Merckx's career and supplied extracts from his

book *Eddy Merckx La Roue de la Fortune*, reproduced in *La Dernière Heure*. Many thanks to Tim Harris and Jos Ryan for good coffee, encouragement and the loan of their spare bed in East Flanders while I was interviewing. My son Patrick will remember this book for his first paid writing assignment – Merckx’s palmares – for which many thanks.

My agent John Pawsey and my sports editor at the *Guardian*, Ian Prior, have both provided valuable backing over many years now. At Yellow Jersey Press my editor Matt Phillips was a tower of strength from start to finish, while thanks are also due to James Jones in design for the cover, Bethan Jones in publicity, Phil Brown in production, the copy editor, Richard Collins and the proof reader, Myra Jones.

As ever, I owe the biggest and most enduring debt to Caroline, Patrick and Miranda, who have been unstinting in their love and support in the face of yet more absences in foreign parts and many days when my heart and mind were in Flanders or the Dolomites.

INTRODUCTION

Eddy Merckx made his first attack as the five leaders went under the small triangle of red cloth hanging from a long string over the road that marked a kilometre to ride until the finish line at the Avoriaz ski station. Suddenly, he dived up the right-hand side of the narrow corridor of road between the crowds of cycling fans. After that there were only three of them: Merckx, riding in the rainbow jersey of world champion, the Dutchman Joop Zoetemelk in the blue of Gan-Mercier, and the stocky Frenchman Bernard Thévenet, the man in the yellow jersey, leader of the 1975 Tour de France. It was Thévenet who retrieved Merckx when he attempted to get away a second time, 250 metres from the line, but when the world champion went again immediately, having given the Frenchman no time to recover, Thévenet let him go. The three attacks gained Merckx third place behind the winner Vicente López Carril of Spain, and allowed him to finish two seconds ahead of Thévenet.

Given that Merckx had won close to five hundred races, the third place was insignificant. Given that Thévenet enjoyed an advantage of nearly three minutes, the seconds looked meaningless. But for a man who had broken his jaw that morning the series of brutal accelerations and the minuscule time gain were truly remarkable. He should have been in hospital, or lying on a sofa nursing the double fracture that had left his face swollen and bruised. Instead, he had fought his way over three massive Alpine passes, through 225 kilometres in the blazing sun, he had led the way down the descent to Morzine,

the resort at the foot of the final climb – Thévenet was a clumsy descender, and it was worth pushing him to the limit – in a style that can only be described as heroic. It was futile. It was also self-destructive. It was glorious.

At first sight, the crash could hardly have been more innocuous. They were not even racing at the time. At the start of the stage in the little Alpine town of Valloire, as the Tour de France peloton progressed slowly from the assembly point on to the lower slopes of the Col du Télégraphe, the Dane Ole Ritter moved suddenly to avoid colliding with another rider. The speed was slow, but Eddy Merckx, who was riding alongside, could not miss Ritter's handlebars: they became entangled with his. He could no longer control the bike: down he went, forwards and sideways. It could have been *rien de grave*, as the Tour commentators usually say: but just this once, the impact was not absorbed by an outstretched arm or knee. Merckx fell on his face.

Even when the race doctor Pierre Dumas arrived to treat him, the real extent of his injuries was not immediately apparent. His face over the left cheekbone swelled up as if he had received a right hook in a pub brawl. Dumas smeared painkilling ointment over his cheek, making it look as if a sickly white mould was growing there. He was dazed and probably concussed: he spoke in Flemish to a Spanish rider he knew well, hardly the behaviour of a lucid man. He was advised, urged, implored to quit the race, the chorus led by Dumas, echoed by his teammates and his manager, Bob Lelangue. He kept pedalling. Why? He still cannot put his finger on it.

He was made to talk to television after that stage finish as he shivered in his transparent Adidas race cape, the arm of the loud-shirted interviewer placed protectively around his shoulder. The words slurred together as he tried to limit the movement in his jaw, but the sentences still came out fluently,

courteously. The interrogation lasted five minutes. Why had he continued? Why had he made the pace down the final descent? Might he abandon in the morning? Was the Merckx era over? Did he feel he had few friends in the peloton? Did he feel Bernard Thévenet would be a worthy winner of the Tour de France? And finally, as he walked away to nurse his wounds, he was called back. Look, here was Thévenet, could he talk about Merckx, and could Merckx talk about him? And could they shake hands, please, for the cameras? A lesser man would have thrown a blue screaming hissy fit, raged about the need to get medical treatment. The stoicism of the man who had dominated cycling for seven years is a wonder to behold.

That evening X-rays showed he had broken his cheekbone – further tests after the race showed a double fracture, with a bone splinter floating near his sinuses. He had virtually no sensation in his jaw: he could only take fluids. Dumas and his medical team advised that if he continued the Tour, he did so at his own risk. The race was lost: before the crash, Thévenet had opened a gap of nearly three minutes which, even if Merckx had been in one piece, would have been impossible to close. ‘Almost any other rider would have accepted this abundant excuse and abandoned the Tour.’ Instead, Merckx continued. It was a Calvary, as the French call it, which lasted six days: out of the Alps through Châtel and Thonon-les-Bains, north-west to Chalon-sur-Saône after 256 kilometres, nine hours in the saddle and into Paris to the Champs-Élysées.

Rather than nursing his injuries, Merckx contested the rest of the race with Thévenet as he had fought at the finish at Avoriaz. To that first brace of seconds, he added fifteen in the next day’s time trial at Châtel, and a further sixteen on the stage to Senlis when the Frenchman fell off near the finish. With Merckx fighting on in this way instead of opting for passive acquiescence, no one could question Thévenet’s right

to win the race. No one could argue that the Frenchman had had an easy ride. 'I didn't believe I was going to win the Tour until two laps from the finish on the Champs-Élysées,' Thévenet told me. 'I felt I couldn't leave the door open for him for a moment, he might jump. I didn't have a peaceful time.'

By staying in the race and contesting it to the finish, 'Merckx granted Thévenet a total triumph,' said one eyewitness. 'Had he retired, that victory would have been questionable.' Quite why he remained in that Tour Merckx himself could not say, although with hindsight he felt it was a foolish act that had hastened his eventual decline. One factor was the prize money that would make a massive difference to the incomes of the teammates who were dependent on him. His own explanation, to the television interviewer, was simple: 'Getting off by the side of the road is not my way.' The most simple explanation is this, however: the odds might have been heavily against him, but he still had a chance of winning. If he had gone home, and then Thévenet had fallen off in his turn or fallen ill, how would he have felt?

For years fans and media had looked on as Merckx dominated the sport with inexorable power. His feats were so hard to convey, to understand, that it was more straightforward to dismiss him as an automaton, a superhuman figure, 'the monster', 'the crocodile', 'the Cannibal'. Avoriaz and its aftermath showed facets of Merckx which had always been there, in spadefuls, but which had been overlooked. Professional conscience, all-consuming determination, unwillingness to submit to the dictates of fate, a sheer blind love for his *métier*, fear of doing something he would regret: he put all these things into public view in those six days. That explained why when he eventually reached Paris in second place – the first time in eight years he had finished a major Tour anywhere other than first – he was more popular than he had ever been. Half man,

half bike, one writer had called him: after Avoriaz he was all too human.

It was twenty years between the day Eddy Merckx first entered my world, and the day I finally met him. On 13 July 1977 I came out of school in Exeter to find my father waiting in the car listening to the Tour de France commentary from the Alps on French radio. It had, he told me, been an extraordinary day on the race: thirty backmarkers eliminated, Eddy Merckx dropped by the leaders and suffering like a dog to stay in contention. That had coincided with the gift of the paperback of Geoffrey Nicholson's account of the 1976 Tour: *The Great Bike Race*, a book which I have read to pieces over the last thirty-five years. Nicholson painted an evocative picture of the greatest cyclist in the history of the sport. He described a distant man, with 'the graven features of a totem pole', who was so serious, so much of the time, that it had become a game among newspaper journalists to find pictures of him smiling. Merckx took his métier so seriously that no one was surprised at the chain of events that had kept him out of the 1976 race. An injury in the Giro d'Italia left Merckx to choose between his own desire to win six Tours, and professional obligation, which dictated he should continue the Giro even though he had no chance of winning. It was, said Nicholson, utterly typical that he chose the latter course.

At the close of 1997, I travelled to Belgium to interview Merckx and was struck by two things I had not expected. He had taken the trouble to wait for me at Brussels airport for my delayed flight with no sign of impatience let alone annoyance. He could have let me find my own way, or delegated the task to a minion; but no: we had an appointment and he was going to keep it. If that was a surprise, so was his height. In the old photographs I had seen, he had always looked no bigger than

average for a cyclist. They were the classic pictures: Merckx bent over his bike in Paris–Roubaix 1970, Merckx being picked up off his bike after breaking the Hour Record in 1972, Merckx seeming to punch the pedals as he attacked yet again for yet another win. There was nothing to prepare me for the sight of the greatest cyclist in the world towering over the majority of the crowd in the arrivals hall.

Merckx's surprising height is an apt metaphor for a man who bestrides his sport, and world sport. The man waiting – surprisingly unrecognised by the public – at Zaventem that day was one of the most prolific winners ever seen in any field. In cycling, he will remain unique for the quantity of his victories as well as their quality. For several years, he managed the seemingly impossible feat of making this most volatile of sports as close to being predictable as it could ever be. The rate at which he won races in his best years will never be equalled: 250 wins in 650 starts between 1969 and 1973. In some years he was close to winning one in two races that he started. The tally is colossal: five Tours de France, five Tours of Italy – three times the magic 'double' of both races in the same year – three world road race championships, the record for stage wins in the Tour de France and for the number of days spent wearing the prestigious yellow jersey, the prized Hour Record and over thirty wins in one-day Classic races. It is a scale of achievement that was completely stunning at the time, and which will never be matched.

Merckx changed the standards by which cycling is judged, setting the bar impossibly high. He raced in a new way, always attacking, taking every race on from start to finish. His approach brooked no compromise, no matter where the race, what its context and no matter what the weather. He was the first rider to dominate the Tour, consistently, day by day, in the style followed later by Bernard Hinault, Miguel Indurain and Lance

Armstrong. Their Tour triumphs are sometimes compared to Merckx or considered greater but the Merckx victories have to be seen in their context. Each was part of a kaleidoscope of domination of an entire season, just as each season was part of a bigger picture of seven years' total ascendancy over his sport. In his status as the nonpareil of cycling, the eternal reference point, Merckx is the two-wheeled equivalent of Muhammad Ali, Pelé, Ayrton Senna.

There are other sides to Merckx as well. Like Pelé, like George Best, like Ali, he is a visual icon as well as a man who dominated his sport. There are the unforgettable images – Merckx like a crucified Christ after being punched by a spectator in the 1974 Tour, Merckx with his head angled as his full body strength is used to push the pedals round, Merckx with his arms and shoulders covered with snow in the Tour of Belgium in 1970. But the film footage is also extensive: *La Course en Tête*, *Stars and Watercarriers*, *The Greatest Show on Earth*. If Fausto Coppi is the cyclist whose life was a novel, Merckx's would be a film, but a documentary rather than a romance.

The sequence that best captures the visual essence of Merckx comes from *La Course en Tête*, where he is seen training on static rollers at his home near Brussels: the sweat drips down his nose and cheeks to gather in a puddle on the floor, the long legs whirl faster and impossibly faster again, the tyres rock back and forth, but the Elvis Presley quiff above the mod sideboards remains pristine. Like Fausto Coppi, Merckx is a style icon, but one for the 1970s: those sideburns and cheekbones, matched with white polo-neck jumpers, sharp suits, wide collars. He is one of the few men who have ever looked good in flares.

Capturing the essence of such a visual, sporting and human icon poses particular issues for a journalist. Ours is a reductive

art: stripping what we are presented with to an immediate bite. The issues have to be explored within a limited window of time. You can't cover them all. The question I was mulling over all the way to Brussels was the same one I would have asked Senna, Ali or Pele, and which I was lucky enough, later, to be given the opportunity to ask other huge, and in some cases, prolific winners: the jockey Tony McCoy, Sir Chris Hoy, Serge Blanco, Lennox Lewis. What I wanted to know was not how Merckx became the greatest. The question in my mind was why?

Why the years of total focus? When defeat happened, why was the only solace to be found in victory, the only way that the sheet could be wiped clean? What had inspired in this man a need to win on such an epic scale, confined only by the sheer physical limitation of what one human body could achieve before it finally ran up the white flag? Why, when he had won a Classic such as Milan–San Remo five times, did he still want to win it again? Why, when you have an impregnable lead in the Tour de France, do you make a 140-kilometre solo escape, and add another eight minutes to your margin, as Merckx did at Mourenx in the 1969 Tour? Why, in short, was this man so insatiable?

With Merckx, it was clear that if his body had not eventually given way, he would have kept winning. Indeed, closer examination of his career suggests that he began to feel his physical limitations as early as the third year of his dominance. As the ride to Avoriaz and its aftermath showed, he was truly unstoppable, to the point of recklessness, in the same way that the true greats of mountaineering seem to ignore the potential consequences of their actions. The self-destruction that marked the end of Merckx's career was the cycling equivalent of the climber who continues towards the top of Everest or K2 knowing death is not far away. Rational thinking does not come into it.

I didn't expect a clear-cut answer from Eddy, but I got the beginnings of one. 'Passion, only passion' was the reply to my question, the word repeated like a mantra. 'At school they asked me what I wanted to do and I said "I want to be a racing cyclist". They said "but that's not a job". I don't know why it was [I felt like that]. There were no cyclists in my family. It really was just passion. I don't know how to explain it.' It was, he said, not merely a question of winning, but of fulfilling what you were given, to the best of your ability.

Human genius takes many forms, but it is not restricted to art, science or industry. Sport is a hobby to most of the world, but its supreme practitioners are as driven and creative as a Mozart or a Brunel, a Dickens or a Shakespeare. All seem to be possessed by their *métier* in the same way. The French writer Pierre Chany saw this, producing the perfect riposte for those who criticised Merckx for making cycling predictable: 'has anyone wondered whether Molière damaged theatre, Bach harmed music, Cézanne was detrimental to painting or Chaplin ruined cinema?'

What Merckx created in his eight years at the top of cycling was a series of little masterpieces. His escape to Mourenx, the Hour Record, or his attack to win his seventh Milan–San Remo were works of sporting genius. They were not born of brute force and ignorance, but each was the culmination of a lengthy process: countless hours of training, sleepless nights of worry, experience, acquired knowledge. They were not mere stunts to earn prize money. Famously, Merckx never knew what cash might be on offer for any given event. And as the 1975 Tour de France's denouement showed, he could lose in style. Cycling was about more than merely winning, or earning a good living.

Merckx is not an expansive man, but he was clearly capable of waxing lyrical in his guttural *Bruxellois* French about passion.

That intrigued me, because other greats of cycling I had met, most notably Bernard Hinault, were almost dismissive about their cycling careers. Others had regrets that seemed to consume them. Others had raced hard and didn't delve into the whys and wherefores. Merckx had expanded on it elsewhere: 'It's the most beautiful thing that there is in the whole world. If nature has given you exceptional ability it would be a shame not to use it. You have to work on what you are given. Otherwise you will have achieved nothing in your life and wasted what you have in you.' What drove him, he said in another interview, was 'dreaming [in my view another term for 'passion']. It was stronger than me. I was a slave to it. There was no reasoning involved.'

Passion was Merckx's word for what drove him, and it provided a perfectly adequate sound-bite answer for a magazine interview, but it didn't completely get to the heart of the question. Passion is a catch-all term for enthusiasm, drive, motivation. Merckx described it as the most beautiful thing in the world. With that veneration came a sense of his respect, duty and his fear of the guilt that would come were that duty not fulfilled. Merckx told me: 'As well as being the best, crossing the line in first place, the fact that you are making your living out of your passion is very important. When something is your passion and you can make it into your profession, that is the most beautiful thing anyone can have.' These are words that could have been spoken by a genius in any field of human endeavour, from Ernest Shackleton to Albert Einstein. Therein lies the eternal fascination with such figures.

As sports fans and sports writers, we spend our lives watching legends from a distance. We know what they do and how they do it. We rarely meet them. Some of us know the facts and statistics in more detail than may be entirely healthy. We marvel at the little strokes of genius produced by a Dan Carter or a

George Best, shake our heads at the insatiable urge of a McCoy, a Michael Schumacher or a Merckx, and perhaps hope that some of it may rub off on our own attempts to be the best we can. But we rarely understand why our idols are so driven.

For the bulk of the human race, 'the why' is the hardest thing to understand when we look at heroes who achieve on the scale of Merckx. That is because, as normal human beings, we are satisfied with what we can get, within certain limits. Most of us keep our lives in proportion. What we strive to comprehend is what drives these people to go beyond the limits of what is physically or psychologically reasonable. These men visit places that are out of reach of 99.9 per cent of the human race. Hence the eternal fascination.

Perhaps, first time round, I had dismissed the 'how' a little too readily. The how and the why are conjoined. The Merckx story is about competition pure and simple. Within cycling, Merckx is one of the few greats where the passion relates solely to two wheels. Coppi had his 'White Lady', a sexual intrigue that convulsed his country, and his place in Italian history as an icon of post-war reconstruction. Tom Simpson's tale was that of a tragically premature death in cycling's greatest drugs scandal. The story of Lance Armstrong encompasses cancer and controversy; Jacques Anquetil's drugs and sex as well as five Tour wins. A lack of 'reason' is the only side to Merckx, whose story was described by the French writer Philippe Brunel as 'a vocation fulfilled in exemplary style'.

The 'why' and the 'how' are not just about the man in question: they encompass the motivations that drive men to compete, what makes some better than others, and what made one man much better than all the rest. For once, it actually is about the bike.

PART ONE

THE 1960s

FATHER AND SON

He was too small to have any chance of winning. That was the feeling among the group of teenage cyclists, maybe fifteen strong, when the little lad attacked as they sped across the old market place in Enghien, a small town south-west of Brussels. The boy was aged sixteen years and four months, a couple of years younger than most of the others, and was riding a smaller gear, pedalling at a furious cadence on his single-speed bike. He would never keep it up. The local youths had put their heads together before the start and had decided that one of them should win; the attacker was not a local, indeed they had no idea who this youngster was in the red jersey on the blue bike. But he looked too small to hang on to the finish line located across the Brussels highway, a few hundred yards down the road, outside the Café Alodie – known as the Pink Café – in Petit-Enghien. Or so they thought.

The race on 1 October 1961 was just one of seven such events run in Enghien each year by the local cycling club, *Pedale Petit-Enghiennoise*, and one of thousands of circuit races held across Belgium between March and October. They were usually organised to add a bit of pizzazz to a local fair, or *kermis*, with signing-on, start and finish at the local café. The Enghien race was over eight laps of a small circuit taking in the town centre, with *primes* – intermediate prizes – in front of each of the three cafés as the race went past. *Kermis* circuits, some claim, are specially designed so that the lap time is just long enough for the spectators to pop inside after the bunch has passed, order a round of brown beers, and get outside again

to catch the next lap. For this race, a tombola had enabled the cycling club to put up 6000 francs in prize money, with 400 to the winner. The bouquet and cup were handed to the victor by a local girl, Marianne Leyre, daughter of the local police chief who was making sure the race was run safely. She was a friend of the organisers' two daughters and it just happened to be her turn that day. She was a little put out because her platinum-blond hair had been poorly dyed chestnut.

Petit-Enghien was the first of eighty victories that Edouard Merckx – as the brief report in the *Courrier d'Escaut* newspaper called him – would take as an amateur, the first of a total of 525 wins he would land in more than 1800 races he would start in his career. It was not a particularly auspicious event. He had raced a dozen times since his first outing in July, at Laeken, the location of the bike shop run by the former professional Félicien Vervaecke where he had bought his blue bike. He had abandoned four times, come close to winning in a couple. His studies and his work in his parents' grocer's shop left him little time to train: he estimated he had put in two training runs of twenty kilometers, plus the daily trip to and from school. He was felt to be too frail to use the same gear as the others, so he rode a smaller one in order not to put too much strain on his young legs. It put him at a disadvantage.*

The Merckx family were proud of their boy. Jenny Merckx, Edouard's mother, took the photograph of him smiling shyly alongside Marianne Leyre, bouquet and cup in his hand. Even then, in spite of his lack of success, young Edouard had two *supporters* – used in Flemish the English word implies a following more obsessive than in most sports – and so the vegetable merchant and the neighbour who lived above the bookshop

* Aficionados might like to know that the usual underage gear was 49x17; young Merckx was using 50x18.

across the road were invited for dinner that night. Although the following weekend Edouard Merckx was brought back to reality when he finished eighteenth in his last race of the season, he and his advisers drew confidence from that first victory. And no one would ever consider him 'too small to win' again.

Young Eddy had also been dismissed as too fat. Guillaume Michiels still smiles about that, more than half a century on. In the mid-1950s, Michiels was a professional cyclist who lived a few hundred yards away from the Merckxs' grocery, up what was then a steep hill but is now a gently sloping lawn in front of a block of flats. His mother helped the Merckx family in the shop, cleaning, cooking items while they manned the counter; they in turn helped her feed her four children with items from the business which were no longer quite good enough to sell, but could still be eaten. Michiels did not have a car – his father had died a few years earlier and the family was short of cash – so occasionally Eddy's father, Jules Merckx, a cycling fan, would help Guillaume get to races with a lift. On Sundays, when the shop closed at lunchtime, the family would come as well if the *kermis* was close by. It is likely that these were Eddy Merckx's first encounters with cycle racing.

One day, as they stood in the shop door, Eddy said to Guillaume – who was only ten years older than him – '*moi, je vais faire coureur* – I'm going to be a bike racer too.' Michiels laughs as he remembers it, at his own reaction rather than the youth's words. 'I said "*le foitie*" – this is something he cannot translate from *Bruxellois* dialect, but it relates to corpulence – "in five years you won't get through that door, Eddy, given how fat you are".' Ten, fifteen, twenty years later, they would joke about the exchange as Michiels drove Eddy from race to race, the small plump boy now the greatest cyclist the world had ever seen.

Even now, Woluwe is a curious mix of suburbia with hints of deep countryside. The villas and semi-detached houses cluster close together on the gentle slope, where the British Army placed an anti-aircraft battery after retaking the Belgian capital in 1944. The little suburb's centre with its avenue, vast Catholic church and its school is just over the crest of the hill. The great triumphal arch that marks the road to Brussels stands in one direction. Down the other way lies the deep forest that used to surround the Belgian capital. Just a few streets below where the Merckx family made their home above their grocery shop on Place des Bouvreuils, the vast old trees survive in thick knots now broken up with roads, parkland, new housing, motorways and business parks.

From his eighth-floor flat in Woluwe, Michiels paints a bucolic if hard-working picture of life in the Brussels suburb in the late 1940s and 1950s. The community is only a few kilometres to the south-east of the centre of Brussels, but in those days it had not quite been subsumed into the capital. Where there are now ranks of apartment blocks and houses, there were fields with peasants growing strawberries and beetroot and tending cattle. Children could be sent out to play in perfect safety. It was quite a contrast with what Jules and Jenny had experienced not long before they moved here with their one-year-old son in 1946. The greatest cyclist in the world was brought up in a very green suburb but he had been born in a community that had been ripped to shreds by atrocities of a ferocity and scale that are now barely imaginable.

Meensel-Kiezegem is a pair of small villages of some five hundred people fifty kilometres south-east of Brussels, in the peaceful rural heart of Flemish Brabant. It amounts to two little huddles of brick-built houses less than a mile apart on the top of a gently rolling hill. There have been many Merckxs in Kiezegem, the smaller of the two hamlets. Along with the

name Pittomvils, Merckx is the most common on the stones in the small graveyard next to the brick-built church close to the road junction at the heart of the hamlet. One particular branch of the Merckx family, Rémy, his wife and their children, lived in no. 4 Kerkstraat, right next to the church at the cross-roads where the lines of houses converge. When war came and the Germans marched through Belgium, Rémy Merckx's family, and another landowner, Félix Broos, sided with the occupiers. Gaston Merckx, the third oldest of the sons, was a member of Vlaamse Wacht, a Flemish paramilitary organisation sympathetic to the Nazis.

By July 1944 the tide had turned in favour of the Allies and the resistance became more confident, more open in its actions. There was the occasional 'liquidation' of a collaborator: these were isolated events, not always followed up by the Germans and their local allies, but in Meensel-Kiezegem it was different. On 30 July 1944, as he was walking to the nearby fair at Altenrode, Gaston Merckx was shot dead, a little distance from the village, right at the end of Kerkstraat, where his family lived.

Reprisals from the German SS and the local paramilitaries were swift and deadly. There were two round-ups, on 1 and 11 August, when most of the male population was gathered in the playing field of the school in Meensel. In total ninety-one people, some from outside the villages, but sixty-three from Meensel and fifteen from Kiezegem, were transported to prisons in Leuven and Brussels where they were tortured before seventy-one of them were taken to Germany, mainly to the concentration camp at Neuengamme, near Hamburg. Only eight returned. The detainees were mainly men: a large proportion of the male inhabitants of Meensel in particular was detained, and deported.

Just under ten months later, the man who would make the name Merckx a byword for immense achievement, colossal

physical and mental courage and an unstinting work ethic was born into this devastated community. His father, Jules, was a distant cousin of Rémy Merckx. Jules had married Eugénie (Jenny) Pittomvils, a farmer's daughter, on 24 April 1943. Edouard was their first child, born at 29 Tieltstraat on the outskirts of Kiezegem on 17 June 1945. The house is several hundred yards down the hill from the church, the last in the road heading north to the fields and the neighbouring village of Tielt-Winge; the village football pitch lies opposite. The birth was a difficult one; Jenny Merckx was initially assisted by neighbours and a local midwife. When the doctor eventually arrived, he had to use forceps, which left marks on the boy's forehead. He was christened Edouard Louis Joseph; the name Edouard ran in the family.

By the time of his birth, peace had been declared in Europe, but that did not leave Meensel-Kiezegem at peace. This was a small community: every face was known, memories were long where even minor events were concerned. The impact of the events of August 1944 was immense and long-lasting. Jules Merckx, father of young Edouard, appears to have been blameless. He is said to have hidden in a septic tank which fortunately had been cleaned out just before the Germans began searching the village. It can be assumed that if he had had any allegiance to Rémy Merckx and that branch of the Merckx family, he would not have concealed himself.

Guilt or innocence was only one part of the lasting issue, however. Before the Allies appeared Gaston Merckx's three brothers, Maurice, Marcel and Albert, had escaped, most probably to Germany, and no one knew where they were: they were never seen again. There was no immediate closure. There were two waves of reprisals in Meensel-Kiezegem, one following liberation in September 1944, and a second when the few survivors of the round-ups returned to the villages from May 1945.

As in other communities across Europe, there was harassment and violence and destruction of property. Armed men searched houses at dead of night for collaborators who had escaped. In August 1945, one of the handful of men who had survived the concentration camps returned to the village and heard rumours that one of the Merckx brothers might be hiding on a farm owned by a member of the Pittomvils family, Louis. A group of former resistance men gathered by night and burned the place. Louis Pittomvils was shot dead, although he was innocent of any misdeed. The perpetrators were never brought to justice.

Jules, Jenny and young Edouard moved to the Brussels suburbs a year after the war ended. The events of 1944 and 1945 in Meensel-Kiezegegem may or may not have played a part in the decision, but they are there in the background nonetheless. The community had been ripped to pieces by the atrocities, and the family had suffered. Two of Jenny's brothers, Petrus and Josef, had been deported to Germany. Josef died in Bergen-Belsen on 14 March 1945. Petrus was a 110-kilo colossus when he left but returned a wraith of just thirty-eight kilos, his legs deeply scarred from beatings by the Gestapo. His doctors said it was better that he did not discuss his experiences. Two other members of the wider Pittomvils family had died in Neuengamme.

In those difficult post-war years, the opportunity to lease the grocer's shop must have been too good to pass up on. Jules had left his family farm to work as a carpenter in the nearby town of Leuven but did not get on with his boss and was unhappy. Jenny's sister had a shop in the Brussels suburb of Anderlecht and Jenny went there regularly to help her so she knew what was involved. It was Jenny who heard about the grocer's shop being up for lease; speaking to the writer

Stéphane Thirion, she said, 'I wanted something else, for us and our son.' The chance for her son to learn French also mattered. Jules was less enthusiastic, she said, and 'accepted out of love'.

Jenny Merckx was also the driving force behind the running of the shop. It was not far from her sister, and also within reach of Jenny's parents, who remained in Kiezegem: the family returned to visit the farm at weekends. Eddy Merckx himself makes the point that they were warmly welcomed. He raced there at least twice in his early years; once in an event that has never been recorded when he was about twelve, the second a race in his first season, 1961, which he did not finish.

The grocer's shop which was taken over by Jules and Jenny in September 1946 in Place des Bouvreuils, Woluwe-Saint-Pierre, was in a tiny square, barely fifty metres across, well away from the bustle of Woluwe's commercial centre. It lay on the south side of the square, which still boasts a newsagent's in another of the buildings: a small plaque in the traffic island in the middle of the street denotes the fact that Eddy Merckx was brought up here. They had moved a mere fifty kilometres – nowadays a rapid run down the motorway that passes the university town of Leuven – but the Merckx family did more than merely move house: they crossed the language divide, from a Flemish-speaking area, Brabant, to one where French was spoken, leaving the grandparents behind.

Belgium is a linguistic and cultural patchwork, divided between the largely Flemish-speaking north, Flanders, and the French-speaking south, Wallonia, with French-speaking enclaves to the west, Hainaut Occidental, and in the centre, the region around Brussels. It would be inaccurate to say that Walloons and Flandrians are completely separate: during research for this book, I kept meeting couples who were

bilingual. The distinction between the various areas is clear, however. Like most Flandrians, Jules spoke only Flemish, although Jenny was fluent in French, having been taught the language by her grandmother. As well as crossing the language divide, they were also crossing a social divide: they were country people in a relatively rich suburb.

The move from Meensel-Kiezezem to Brussels had an important effect on young Edouard's future career, his identity, and the impact he would make on his divided nation. Most fundamentally, the name that is now synonymous with world domination in cycling would probably not have been Eddy. Merckx, with its consonants, is a Dutch name. The contraction of Edouard to Eddy is a customary French nickname. Had he been a pure Flandrian, it would probably have been shortened to Ward.

Had Edouard become Ward rather than Eddy, he would probably still have been a racing cyclist, given that Meensel-Kiezezem had its own champion, the double Paris–Roubaix winner, Georges Claes, who ran a local bike shop and took groups of youngsters from the area out riding on Sundays. That alternative trajectory would have made Merckx another member of a generation of cyclists from Belgium's Flemish-speaking regions that was arguably the most talented produced by a single nation at any time in cycling history. Merckx's contemporaries included stars such as Walter Godefroot, Herman Van Springel, Eric Leman, Roger De Vlaeminck and Freddy Maertens. Ward Merckx might still have turned out to be the strongest of the lot, but he might not have ended up a cycling demi-god.

Young Eddy was a hyperactive child who wanted to be outdoors, something his mother struggled with, especially when the twins Michel and Micheline were born in May 1948. He spent hours

in the little hills and woods of the south-east Brussels suburbs and loved to spend time on his grandmother's farm at Meensel-Kiezegem helping to look after the animals. Woluwe must have been a child's paradise with lakes and deep forests just a couple of blocks away. It was no wonder that Eddy sometimes stayed out longer than he should and returned covered in scratches from his adventures. 'It was permanent anguish,' Jenny said. On one occasion he went fishing, and was out so long that the police were called and he got into trouble – the worst of it being, from Eddy's point of view, that he was grounded. He was kept in for a day after climbing a crane when his parents were having gutters installed and, on another occasion, he began playing in a building site with his friends as night fell: they had a climbing race up another crane, and he was twenty metres higher than the next youth by the time they were stopped.

That set the pattern for a conflicted childhood and adolescence. Eddy would try to escape constraints such as school and the confines of the shop, which became cramped as the family expanded, with all the children sharing one room and a lodger occupying another. His mother would try to restrain him. Jules would grumble at him that he would never be any good at anything, Guillaume Michiels recalls, for example, when he was carrying empty bottles out of the shop, and dropped one or two. Eventually, thanks to the bike, he would escape for good and become a nomad, living almost constantly on the road, either training, racing or travelling.

Eddy took after his father, who had been a good runner and a better than average footballer, and remained a cycling fan. Merckx junior was not the healthiest child, suffering from earache, headaches, growing pains and cramps, but that didn't restrain him. Any sport would do: Eddy would try them all – boxing, basketball, table tennis, lawn tennis, and football as

well as races on his bike round the local streets. He played lawn tennis for his school, and inside-right for the junior side of the local team which later became Royal White Star Woluwe (motto today *Be The Best*). After one match, he was made to stay behind so he could be given a full set of kit as a reward for scoring several goals. A photograph in the Merckx family album, reprinted in Pierre Thonon's account of his early years (*Eddy Merckx, l'Irrésistible Ascension d'un Jeune Champion*) shows him borne shoulder-high by his peers after winning a local boxing tournament, one glove punching the air in the style of Muhammad Ali.

Such successes mattered. He was an immensely competitive child. He loved playing cards, and was extremely unhappy if he didn't win a table-tennis match or if he lost at dominoes. Later, he was just as competitive in poker games in race hotels while killing time with his teammates. He had a love of mechanical things from early on, making soapbox carts and sometimes stripping his first racing bike and repainting it. He was curiously sensitive – he cried when his younger brother and sister told him Father Christmas did not exist, and his mother confirmed the devastating news. All these traits would shine through in the man and the champion.

The Merckxs were a Catholic family. There was mass on Sunday – something young Eddy found difficult because of the need to keep still for more than a short while – and prayers in May in front of the statue of Mary at the end of the road. It was a hard-working environment. Sunday was a busy day in the shop, because competing businesses were closed, so young Eddy had to help out cutting ham and cheese, weighing fruit and serving behind the counter, while his friends were playing.

Later, Eddy would insist that they were not a rich family. These things are relative. The accommodation above the shop was cramped – Jules's comment when Jenny told him she was

expecting twins was ‘where shall we put them?’ – but the Merckxs were by no means poor. They certainly did not experience the near-starvation that was the background to the early lives of Fausto Coppi, Federico Bahamontes, Rik Van Steenbergen, or even a contemporary such as Luis Ocaña, who walked four miles a day each way to school in the Pyrenees, without a coat, as his parents could not afford one. The few pictures of the young Coppi show groups of children with the stick legs and big heads that speak of deprivation. Young Eddy has fat cheeks and is often dressed up for this or that celebration. The Merckxs could afford a car and seaside holidays. Eddy would be given his chance to ‘move up’ socially in the conventional way, by studying and getting a good job, but he chose cycling. Unlike Coppi, Bahamontes or Van Steenbergen, cycling was a life choice for Eddy Merckx. The alternative was not subsistence agriculture or industrial labouring, but something easier and probably nearly as lucrative: a comfortable middle-class life. Eddy clearly needed to race his bike but he didn’t have to do it out of economic necessity.

Jules and Jenny Merckx were contrasting characters. ‘My mother was very gentle, with beautiful manners, very concerned at the idea I might have an accident,’ recalled Eddy. ‘I inherited her kind nature, perhaps a bit too much of it.’ As for Jules, ‘nervous, introverted and permanently worried . . . and not given to talking much’ were terms that Eddy used to describe him. They could also be used for Eddy himself. Jules had a short fuse, but was never angry for long. He was ‘not a man for discussion. Most of the time, he preferred a slap to a long sermon,’ said Eddy. Jules liked to use maxims such as ‘the more you have, the more you want’ and ‘in life, you will always find someone who is superior’. The first applied to his elder son, the second clearly didn’t.

Trained as a carpenter, turned grocer, Jules’s life ‘was work, work again, and always work,’ said Eddy. Early in the morning,

Jules would go to the market to buy fresh vegetables for the shop: every day in summer, three or four times a week in winter, on foot because initially at least they did not have a car. His acute sensibility made him shy, partly because of the language barrier no doubt. It was Jenny who served behind the counter in the shop, while Jules put his carpentry skills to use in making the wooden boxes in which the goods were displayed, working through the night to do so. The picture painted of Jules is that of an economic migrant, working his fingers to the bone for fear that he might fail and have to return whence he came.

He was a despot, said Eddy's younger brother Michel, a patriarchal character. 'No one dared put their spoon in their soup before him.' Michel recalled him as an 'unhappy ascetic, a man skinned alive, a sensitive character who hid his feelings with a tyrant's image', a man who worried so much it made him ill, and who would then hide the resulting stomach pains. It was Eddy who was most often on the receiving end of his temper – so disruptive an influence that at times Jules had to soak his head in cold water to calm him down. And on occasion, it was Eddy who would intervene to ensure that he got punished rather than his siblings.

Like a good Catholic father, Jules was strict: plates had to be cleared at the dinner table, and clear moral lines were laid down, as Eddy found out at the age of seven when he sneaked a toy off one of his teachers' desks, then told his mother it was a present. There were occasional little acts of rebellion. The teenage Eddy would sometimes smoke illicit cigarettes and would be berated when his father realised what was going on. One day, Eddy insisted on the barber shaving his head like a convict's. Tellingly, the youth was so sure this was what he wanted that he refused to get out of the barber's chair unless the razor was used. That didn't go down well either.

Guillaume Michiels recalls the Merckx parents as being ‘too kind, too generous’, something that would later be said of their celebrated son. ‘When he raced, Eddy had four or five local supporters. After the race on a Sunday, Mme Merckx would say “come and drink a glass”. Then they would stay to eat – because Jenny had the shop, it was just a matter of cutting a few slices of ham from behind the counter. Eddy would say *‘ma mère invite tout le monde’* – my mum asks everyone round. Michiels describes Jules as ‘a man who would get an idea and stick to it’.

As his son grew increasingly famous, Jules would immerse himself in his work, and stay away from bike races. ‘He was an introvert, he would never show his feelings, which he drowned in litres of coffee. He could not express his pride,’ Jenny Merckx told Thirion. Eddy described his father as ‘hypersensitive’, and put it down to his shyness, which Jules himself apparently viewed as a weakness. Merckx senior was naïve, lost money to merchants who were more cunning – and again, his son would later show similar traits. Jules was a worrier, who, when he took his son to his first bike race in Laeken, on the other side of Brussels, ordered a taxi to make sure they wouldn’t get lost. And he was also a perfectionist, who would watch his son cleaning his racing bike in the evenings and would then clean it again himself, just to make sure.

Jules Merckx’s only distraction from his work was his long-standing love of cycling. In 1935, at the age of fifteen, he had ridden his bike the fifty-five kilometres from Meensel-Kiezegeg south to Floreffe, close to Namur, to watch Jean Aerts become world road race champion. Eddy Merckx and his father were both fans of Constant Ockers – Stan to the Walloons, Stanneke to the Flemish – the Antwerp champion whose career coincided

with Merckx's childhood years. Eddy was only six when Ockers came second to Coppi in the 1952 Tour de France, only ten when he won the 1955 world road race championship. Racing around the neighbourhood, Merckx played the role of Ockers while his friends acted the parts of Rik Van Steenbergen or the Flandrian hero Brik Schotte. He was only eleven when Ockers died of head injuries sustained in a track race at Antwerp, on 29 September 1956. Jenny Merckx was aware of the death of her husband and son's hero, and it was one reason why she was initially against Eddy becoming a cyclist. She remained worried about her son racing for many years: when he eventually quit bike racing after seventeen years in the saddle, she said it was the biggest relief of her life.

Merckx senior and junior were by no means Ockers's only fans: briefly, in the mid-1950s, Ockers became massively popular throughout Belgium for his combative racing style and his funeral was close to being a state occasion. Given Merckx's future career, Ockers was an intriguing role model. He was not a beefy Flandrian in the Van Steenbergen mould, but a small man, aggressive in his racing style. He was not a pure Classics man but able to perform in the Tours and the hillier Classics such as Flèche Wallonne and Liège–Bastogne–Liège, a rider who had all-round talent as both sprinter and climber. But unlike Merckx, who would blossom from his early twenties, Ockers did not achieve greatness until well into his thirties.

Merckx's admiration for Ockers reflected the fact that his view of cycling as a child was subtly different from that of a pure Flandrian. 'People where I lived called me "Tour de France",' he told me, adding that he wasn't interested in the Classics – something which would have been unthinkable for a child brought up in Flanders. Another reason for this was the fact the great one-day races took place on a Sunday. On

that day he would have been working in the shop or was perhaps en famille with his grandmother at Meensel-Kiezegem. 'I listened to the Tour on the radio and my father took me to see it two or three times, and a couple of times he took me to see the six-day at the Brussels Palais des Sports', he told me in 1997. Still more improbably for a young Belgian, another boyhood hero was Jacques Anquetil, whose best years coincided with Eddy's adolescence. Merckx's wife Claudine told the writer François Terbéen: 'You can repeat it and shout it loud, Eddy placed Anquetil above them all, he was his hero. He dreamed only of him and deeply admired him.'

Eddy had begun riding a bike at three or four and by the age of eight he was riding to school, climbing back up the steep Kouterstraat every day. Later he was given a more substantial machine to deliver packages for his father. The story went that he didn't get paid tips from customers because he was the boss's son, so he transferred his services to the local milkman, which meant that he could save up for a racing bike. He used his bicycle to brave trams and cars to visit a bakery where they sold a cake called 'the atomic bomb'. On one occasion when he was with his mother, he broke the pedal of his kid's bike trying to catch a *vélomoteur* on a cycle path: he fell off and hit his head.

Jenny Merckx was not particularly happy at the idea of her son racing his bike, particularly as he became more serious about it. In 1960, at the age of fifteen, Eddy watched the Olympic Games road race, televised from Rome. The event was won by the USSR's Viktor Kapitonov, and the youngster set himself a target: he would be selected to ride in the 1964 Games in Tokyo. He had already raced his bike, at the age of twelve, in an unofficial event at Meensel-Kiezegem, against a field mainly composed of older children, up to eighteen. Jenny, on the other hand, had looked into it and had been told

– correctly – that the dropout rate was high; that no matter how promising a young cyclist's talent might be, only a few ever made a living out of it. She felt that her son's health was not suitable, and that Eddy was intelligent enough to pass his exams. She probably also feared that disappointment would make him unhappy. Jules, on the other hand, was apparently more cold-blooded about it: 'let him go and fight in the peloton if he doesn't want to go to school. Maybe he'll come back in tears.'

In the summer of 1961, Eddy did not go on the usual seaside holiday but stayed at home to help his father in the shop. That enabled him to earn enough to take out his first racing licence, and he rode his first race a month after his sixteenth birthday. His mother, according to some versions, was kept in the dark. Eddy and his father had worked out that being a cyclist was not in her plans for her son. The race at Laeken was a comedy classic. Eddy was wearing shoes that were too tight for his feet. He couldn't stand the pain they gave him and had to pull in by the road and wait for his father to come along in his van with another pair. He was determined to finish the race anyway and took various shortcuts to reach the finish, coming in two minutes ahead of the front runners. He probably should have been disqualified but was awarded sixth place, but it would be five weeks before he again came in the top ten.

It was clearly his father who was the driving force in his bike racing, but the relationship between father and son was a largely unspoken one. Jules took Eddy to every race as a youth, sometimes taking a lift in a wholesaler's lorry, but they rarely talked much. 'He transmitted his emotion to me,' Eddy recalled for Stéphane Thirion in *Tout Eddy*. 'When I won he would have tears in his eyes. He would say, "Eddy, how on earth have you done it again?" When I married, one day he just stopped coming. He never explained why.' Perhaps Jules

felt that he no longer had a place as his son's key supporter, and felt embarrassed to be in the wings. 'Maybe I just wanted to make my parents proud of me – my father was . . . very hard, very severe with us. I'm probably a bit like him.' Jules died young, in 1983, after a life of hard work, little sleep and many cigarettes. Eddy felt he had been 'satisfied' with what his son had achieved, although he never said it.

It was not just Jules. Both Merckx's parents were closer to him than might have been the case in other families. He left home at a relatively late age, twenty-two, and other riders noted the time he spent on the telephone to them at night early in his career. There was pressure from Jenny as well, but more subliminally. 'I think I wanted to show my mother that it was important in life to do what you loved. And also that I could make my way without going to university because to start with she wasn't keen on my riding the bike. She wanted me to study, to go to university and have a stable, permanent job.' There was no safety net, once the decision was taken to drop his studies: it was worth going through all the pain and the angst to avoid any sense that his mother might be thinking 'I told you so' or his father might think he had not tried enough. He was, in short, caught between a workaholic, perfectionist father and a worrying mother. He inherited the best of both, and would try to live up to both.

Victory in Petit-Enghien gave young Merckx confidence, and it prompted Félicien Vervaecke to take more of an interest. That winter, the craggy old professional took Merckx to the velodrome at Schaerbeek, in the centre of Brussels, conveniently between the Merckxs' grocery in Woluwe and his bike shop in Laeken. Track racing is the perfect entrée for young cyclists, developing their pedalling speed, racing skills and the ability to negotiate a fast-moving bunch. The year 1962 began

with young Merckx's second victory, in the *kermis* race at Haacht on 11 March, with no flukish element to it: he escaped early on, and was never seen again. As they say in Belgium, there was 'no one else in the photograph'. It was in that year that Eddy Merckx decided to become a full-time cyclist, surprisingly soon for one who had less than a year's racing behind him.