

## Homage to Pierre de Coubertin

1863-1963

On January 1st, 1963, the Olympic world will commemorate the centenary of the birth of Baron Pierre de Coubertin, the Renovator of the Olympics of the modern era. This means that an event of considerable importance is about to take place.

The quadrennial sport Festival of universal youth was, in the eyes of de Coubertin, only a means to restore the educative and civic value of sport celebrations in ancient Greece. In his mind, the relationship of sport to the humanities constituted only one factor in the restoration of human values and of the civic community, an ideal which he had striven to realize ever since the days of his youth, in all his efforts as a publicist, a Frenchman and a European.

At the age of twenty, he crossed the Channel and probably unconsciously influenced by the book: *Tom Brown's school days*, he went to Rugby where Thomas Arnold gave outstanding leadership in reforming the system of education between the years 1828-1842. There, in the gothic chapel situated in the centre of the group of buildings and school houses of this famous public school, de Coubertin went into a profound meditation, standing in front of the famous headmaster's grave. De Coubertin

reflected on the astonishing career of this pedagogue who initiated the first steps of reform both spiritual and political which took place in the Anglo-Saxon world during the middle of the XIXth century. It was there that de Coubertin conceived his vocation and set himself the task to do for his country what Arnold had done for his, namely to produce: men! also to restore the national community and thereby sow the seeds of an international structure which would encourage the flowering of true civilization.

One cannot stress sufficiently the enormous influence which Arnold made on the pedagogic and social conceptions of de Coubertin. Apart from Rugby, he was not long in analysing this educative system, the effects of which made such a vivid impression on him on the personal and civic plane. His reflections led him to the consideration of two historical and spiritual values, the first, that of ancient Greece; the second developed by Christian Europe! The cults of athletics and of chivalry. Thus, in his mind, he worked out a standard of universal value which would be able to give renewed inspiration to popular education and to promote spiritual culture, not merely in any country, but in the whole world.

This union of ascetics and of stoic ideals had a two-fold purpose: first, the revival of spirit of service of the mediaeval knight, of the cult of honour and self-respect which were the aims of Arnold's system of education; secondly it gave the essential initiative to the educational system which de Coubertin strove from the outset to define and to promote. If the new Olympism took its principal support from this 'marvellous tripod, which bore the Hellenic culture, consisting of athletics, civics and art', its creator was too clear-headed to visualize a form of culture which would be exactly adapted to a fully completed civilization: or that the Greek City-State could be transplanted in its original form in a different mode of civilization, and could constitute an instrument of international culture. Actually, the new Olympism is, essentially, a syncretism, or if one prefers, an attempt to create a synthesis between the most characteristic values of hellenism and Christianity, of the ancient and the modern world.

Coubertin was an educator and a sociologist. This is proved by his numerous writings and his speeches. When he spoke to the sport world or wrote for its benefit, he did so always as a humanist and not as an expert. He never thought sport was an end in itself, but always as a means, a method or a tool. It was not the performance or the record which interested him: it was the spirit and the attitude which sport tends to develop in those who practise it and the kind of community which would be created among them.

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The 1914-1918 war was a hard blow for him. However, it did give him the opportunity for a temporary but exemplary demonstration of the value and the fertility of the ideas he had so long foreseen. Because he had been settled at Lausanne since 1913 (where he had established in April 1915 the international administrative centre and the archives of the new Olympism), he was commissioned by the French Government to organize educational courses for French and Belgian internees, when the prisoners of war, who were evacuated from the German prison camps, came to be interned in Switzerland. This led to the establishment of the *Olympic Institute of Lausanne* which, after his death, became *The Olympic Institute Pierre de Coubertin* which was taken over after the Second World War by the International Olympic Committee.

When peace was signed, the first task was to re-establish the olympic relationships between the countries which had been pitted against each other in a war which had settled nothing. He gave generously of his time from 1918 to 1925 to the work of an ambassador of the Olympian idea. Here

he made excellent use of his talents of courtesy, psychological sense and, above all, of his remarkable ability to couple an uncompromising strength of principle to the suppleness... of a fencer. But he delayed too long in the work of unifying under one structure and into one system, the general reform of education, of which the re-establishment of the Olympic Games had been only one aspect or one episode, as it is obvious in the light of today. We read in his *Olympic Memoirs* these revealing lines, testifying to his state of mind in this period: 'What does not cease to disquiet me, is the increasing aggravation of the intellectual poverty of our present time... Having studied this problem, its probable consequences and possible solutions during a quarter of a century, I was strongly desirous to consecrate all my energy in the future to it, and perhaps it is why the Olympic endeavours in Prague (he was speaking of the International Olympic Committee Session held in this city in 1925) often found me a bit inattentive and distracted...'

In 1917, he had already thought of relinquishing his heavy presidential task, but it was not until 1925 that the Prague Congress gave him a successor: the Count Henri de Baillet-Latour. From that moment on, without losing his interest in the institution to which his name was still attached, he exercised all his resources indefatigably towards his ultimate purpose of educational reform, which, in his eyes, was an essential factor of the political problem - perhaps even more, for it constituted the very core of the political problem. From a pamphlet which he published, in 1923, entitled: *Whither Europe?* we quote this paragraph: 'In the realm of reform nothing is of value without the assistance of an educational system which has been entirely rejuvenated. European education has three misdeeds on its conscience: it has produced individual non-intelligence and, in the last analysis, it caused social misunderstanding. In a word, it has gone bankrupt.'

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Coubertin estimated that every individual had a right to sport. He foresaw the creation of new gymnasia on the model of the ancient institutions and he wanted to place responsibility on the City-State which were to provide as freely as possible to all adult citizens the means to create and to maintain for themselves a good athletic fitness without an obligation to belong to any particular institution. The 1921 Lausanne Conference incorporated this idea in one of its resolutions. It also proclaimed, on Coubertin's suggestion, that any adult who, owing to lack of spare time or resources, had not been able to participate in the higher life of the spirit, is authorized to expect that the

community will ensure him contact and disinterested culture, with the understanding that this would permit him to do better than just skim through the whole field of culture, and get a general view from the outside of all utilitarian and professional occupations.

In his seventieth year, in 1933, he addressed a pathetic appeal to the President of the League of Nations, asking that its purposes be clarified and that its moral atmosphere be purified. He had kept the faith and he still spoke in the name of the young people, to whom he had devoted the whole of his existence, and at the commemoration of the 40th anniversary of the re-establishment of the Olympic Games, on June 23rd, 1934, he declared in the Aula of the University of Lausanne: 'The dawn, which is breaking, is still the aftermath of the storm, but towards midday, the sky will clear... The days of history are long. Let us be patient and retain our confidence.'

Men like de Coubertin take away with them when they die, the most vital secrets of their dynamism.