

Pierre de Coubertin

by the Comte de Madre

When, in 1894, Baron Pierre de COUBERTIN announced the revival of the Olympic Games to the gathering at the Sorbonne, almost general scepticism greeted this declaration. Public opinion was so little prepared for it that people viewed this project as an eccentric whim devoid of interest and, at the most, destined to a success due more to curiosity than anything else.

However, the idea had not come to its author in one of those sudden flashes of inspiration that have no roots; nor was it the result of selfish calculations or a desire for glory. No one was freer than Pierre de COUBERTIN from personal ambition and self-seeking. His project was the fruit of long work, great thought, serious studies and enlightening journeys.

The idea of Sport is so deeply rooted in our way of life today that it is difficult, even impossible, for modern generations to realize just what it represented at the time. In actual fact, it was either non-existent or almost so; the word itself was practically unknown.

In France, as in most other countries in the world, sport consisted of a few individual games played purely for the fun of it. The vast mass of the population was totally indifferent and even hostile to the idea.

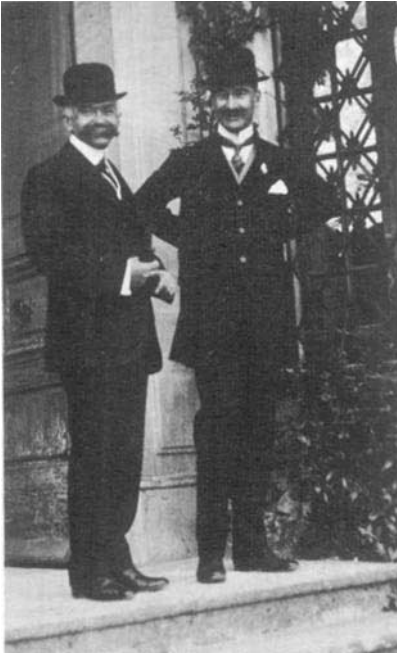
The few people, in a very limited circle, who realized

the value of physical exercise soon had cause to regret their enthusiasm. To give but one example, there was the case of Mr. GODART, Head of the *Ecole Monge* in Paris, whose pupils were recruited from among the rich and cultured classes. His attempt was harmless enough, consisting of taking groups of pupils every Thursday by bus to play football on Pré Catalan or to go boating on the lake in the Bois de Boulogne.

After the first enthusiasm, parents began to feel that their children's studies were suffering from the new system. Gradually, one by one, the students were taken away and the *Ecole Monge* had to close down, leaving Mr. GODART in a precarious position he did not deserve.

We are not exaggerating therefore if we say that people in those days were completely indifferent to sport or even totally ignorant of it. On the one hand, there were the masses busy all day with manual work, for whom the idea of sport had absolutely no appeal, and on the other, the educated classes, for whom intellectual work seemed to exclude all idea of regular physical exercise.

When studying the work of Pierre de COUBERTIN, it should not be forgotten that he was above all a great teacher and that even more than the lack of public interest, the greatest obstacles with which he was faced were the rigid routine of schools and the opposition of educated circles.



To recall this is to give a slight idea of the energy, tenacity and farsightedness needed by Pierre de COUBERTIN to put on its feet and carry through his gigantic scheme, which can, without exaggeration, be described as of world significance.

Like all precursors and creators, he came up against and had to overcome scepticism, irony, hostility and above all the tremendous resistance created by the general inertia.

It was in England that Pierre de COUBERTIN was first struck by the physiological and moral force of sport. The whole English educational system had been completely transformed by ARNOLD, the brilliant headmaster of the famous public school of Rugby.

Abandoning old methods, fighting inveterate abuses, the latter had succeeded in instil-

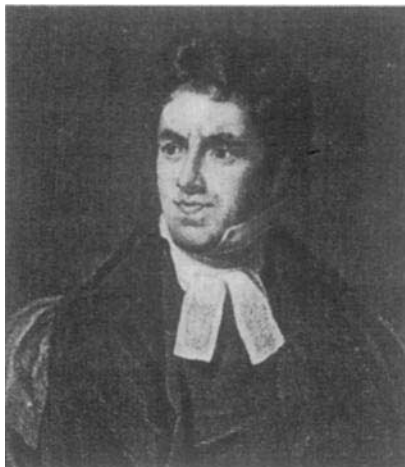
Pierre de COUBERTIN and
le baron de BLONAY in 1913.

ling in the universities a sense of personal responsibility, closely bound up with loyalty and a spirit of camaraderie. The playing of games, properly channelled and developed, had given birth to team spirit, something quite unknown till then.

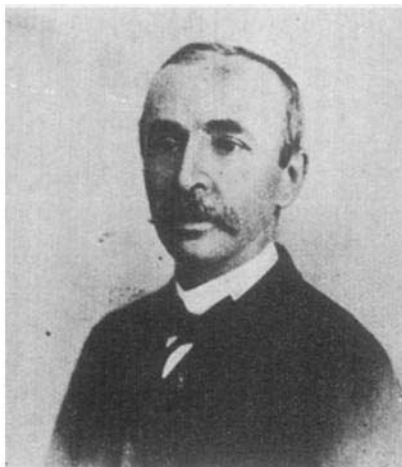
After studying English education and sport, Pierre de COUBERTIN turned to America and toured its universities. In his book "*Transatlantic Universities*", he summed up in a number of short sketches full of charm and interesting observations, not only his travel impressions but also the conclusions he drew from his studies. Later, his first impressions of the United States were completed by a second trip, an account of which is given in his "*Memories of America and Greece*".

It might seem strange to include these two names together in the same title, for there would seem to be little connection between the cradle of ancient western civilization and the brand new land of mechanization. And yet this association is almost a symbol and a motto for the work of Pierre de COUBERTIN, because an even greater, even more productive influence than any of the others was to illuminate his work and give it its true aspect, that is to say "Hellenism."

Pierre de COUBERTIN had succeeded in discovering the harmony prevailing in Greek civilization, a property that he



Thomas ARNOLD



M. A. GODART

Le Père DIDON



made his own: harmony of body and mind, interdependence of human endeavour in the material and spiritual fields.

This idea dominated his life's work. One can see evidence of it not only in the regulations and the programme of the Olympic Games in which an important place is reserved for Art and Literature, but also in his many writings in which he expressed his ideas, in the efforts he made to associate manual workers in the intellectual movement, and even in the motto he chose: "*Mons fervida in corpore lacertese*".

But Hellenism alone was not enough to complete the guiding cycle of his brain. He added chivalry. His remarkable facility for analysis enabled him to discern the main beauty of the Middle Ages - the spirit of chivalry. That keenness in the fight, that intrepidity whose ideal masked all savagery, that disinterestedness of aims, that readiness for sacrifice without any thought of material gain, all were the perfect complement to his conception of modern Olympism and modified anything down-to-earth in English sport and anything that might be too pagan in Hellenism.

In all Pierre de COUBERTIN's work we see again and again the simultaneous action of these three influences, which re-appear in the struggles of the reviver of the Olympic Games.

What essentially were his aims? First of all, to streng-

then the body by cultivating the muscles; then, on this healthy, permanent basis, to cultivate the mind which is to dominate the body.

Sport is no longer a violent limited exercise. It is a means of culture that must be brought within the reach of all. An indispensable complement to intellectual culture, it must be practised methodically and disinterestedly. Any lucrative aim must be banished from it.

And then there arises the serious question of amateurism which is so difficult to solve and has aroused so much controversy. There is just no point in trying to find a perfect solution. It is as impossible as trying to square the circle since, unfortunately but inevitably, no sports can be practised or organized without expense. But obviously carefully thought regulations can to a sufficient extent save sport from the spirit of gain which would undermine the ideal.

At any rate, from now on, sports contests should be held in a sincere spirit of disinterestedness. The "*Olympic Oath*" devised and drafted by Pierre de COUBERTIN, gives lasting proof of the importance he attached to this principle.

Once these first points had been made, it only remained to work out the means of achieving them. For it is not sufficient to conceive fine ideas and outline their frame; the frame

needs to be filled and it is not always easy to go from theory to practice and from conception to execution.

Here again, Pierre de COUBERTIN's exceptional qualities came to the fore. Not only did he favour and do everything in his power to implement the creation of sports clubs and associations, but he succeeded in France in grouping them into a federation known as the *"Union of French Athletic Sports Clubs"*.

Modestly, he assumed the functions of Secretary-General. That is to say he was at the same time the mainstay and the prime mover. This Union published a regular and complete Bulletin, which he edited almost entirely on his own.

A link had at last been forged between the various clubs and an interpenetration started between the different sports.

Then, Pierre de COUBERTIN set out to codify sports rules and regulations, and in order to do so, not only did he study each sport thoroughly so as to discover its educational value but he even practised most of them, not as a champion but as an analyst and at the same time a dilettante. His written works included very detailed and very technical manuals on certain sports.

When the time came to set this revival of the Olympic Games in motion, Pierre de COUBERTIN knew his subject tho-

roughly; he knew what he wanted and where he was going.

From then on, by the spoken word, in writing and through his direct and untiring intervention, he set up this new organisation that was to meet with unprecedented success and reach out to the remotest parts of the earth.

Already, by the force of his persuasion, by his almost "apostle" faith, by the clarity of his reasoning, he had succeeded in converting to his cause and bringing together a number of keen and devoted collaborators. The whole birth of the movement is described in his book *"A Twenty-One Year Campaign"*, in which one can see the gradual emergence of the revolution of customs culminating in modern Olympism.

It might be thought that, when it came to the practical side of matters, to putting his scheme into practice, a man like Pierre de COUBERTIN, wholly caught up in his cause, would feel handicapped when faced with the tremendous material difficulties standing in his way. Not at all. With a simplicity matching his clear intelligence, he foresaw everything, organised everything, with a very sure hand and great discernment, he drafted statutes, made rules, and formed groups.

Thus, for example, when he created the International Olympic Committee (I.O.C.), in order to ensure complete independence for it, he stipulated

that the I.O.C. should only renew itself through itself.

A movement as important as Olympism was bound to be a temptation to many ambitions. Whether for political, social or simply personal aims, many people would want to get their hands on this tremendous active force and subjugate it to their designs. Attempts were by no means lacking.

Thanks to Pierre de COUBERTIN's clear-sightedness, all intrigues, all pressures were thwarted. Neither money, nor influence was able to modify this self-recruitment and today just as 35 years ago, the I.O.C. enjoys the most complete independence. I have just written the word "*money*"; a word which one cannot, unfortunately, erase from the language of man and which so often threatens to spoil man's noblest enterprises.

It might have seemed that, in order to set such a colossal undertaking on its feet, Pierre de COUBERTIN ought to have come out first of all with brilliant plans for financing his scheme. One cannot imagine a campaign like the one he waged without a substantial budget, offices, premises, an army of employees. One is astounded to see that the miracle occurred and that this tremendous organisation emerged with a minimum of expenditure and without money playing a depressingly dominant role.

In fact, Pierre de COUBERTIN was not only the creator of today's Olympiads, but the humble performer of the meanest tasks. This man, who stirred the world and whose encyclopedic brain has produced so many works, never even had a secretary for himself. He did everything himself and one's mind is overwhelmed at the thought of the stupendous task he as-

sumed and accomplished without fuss or stir.

All the I.O.C.'s correspondence, which came from and was despatched back to the four corners of the earth, was handled by COUBERTIN himself, in longhand, without a typewriter and without a stenographer; the invitations, the sending out of programmes, he handled too. And this work did not prevent him from carrying out other intellectual work of rare value and variety.

Out of his own pocket - and his resources were never abundant - he paid for the stamps and paper; his time and his efforts he gave willingly. This was the whole machinery that moved, the innumerable pawns of modern Olympism, on the chessboard of the world.

As for the I.O.C., its members received no compensation, not even their travel expenses. Like their founder, they paid out of their own pockets for the expensive journeys necessitated by Congresses held in distant towns as well as the resulting entertainment expenses.

Never before in history has there been a similar example of an organisation like the I.O.C. that has accomplished so much without a budget, without subscription fees and without ever having accepted the slightest subsidy.

On the other hand, though the reviver of Olympism and the Committee he presided over

asked nothing for themselves, at least they had the merit of knowing how to win over devoted partisans, generous backers and powerful aids. As everyone knows, the first Olympic Games, held in Athens in 1896, were only made possible through the generosity of the modern Greek maecenas Mr. AVEROF, who re-built the stadium with his own funds.

This abnegation, this modesty in action, explain to a great extent the comparative obscurity in which the name of Pierre de COUBERTIN has remained among the general public. At a time when advertising and bluff establish strident reputations so quickly, the world cares little for those who labour in the dark for their own progress. And we must confess with a certain sadness that France, his country which he served so well, shares a big burden of the responsibility for this silent ingratitude.

If general ignorance prevails with regard to Pierre de COUBERTIN's Olympic work, what can be said of the ignorance enveloping his educational work? Who, except for a very limited number of specialists, knows anything of his numerous foundations, who has read his speeches, his articles, his books, all those countless pages which swarm with new and intelligent ideas and in which he has attempted to set down his doctrine and his ideal?

Even merely looking through the titles, one is struck by the universality of his knowledge, the power and versatility of his mind. Such a man, in other times, would have acquired a brilliant reputation and his name would have been known everywhere. It is because he was too sincere and too disinterested that Pierre de COUBERTIN has not acquired,

in the eyes of the crowds, that halo of glory and recognition which he so fully deserved.

Having worked all his life for youth and peace, he will have to wait for one or the other to pay him the tribute they owe him.

It is the fate of many men not to see their value recognised until much later. But seldom do the fertile ideas of a generous sower not succeed in time in yielding their fruit. Pierre de COUBERTIN was not only a great Sower, but a great Doer, not only a great Frenchman but a great citizen of the World.

One day perhaps, some of his ideas will suddenly blossom forth and bear magnificent fruit in the intellectual and moral fields.

Perhaps too, as a result of bold schemes, in more favourable times, a new building will be seen rising on the shores of the Lake of Geneva which he loved so much and which has seen the birth of the International Red Cross and the League of Nations, a building symbolizing his efforts: a Palace of Modern Olympism, of which his beloved town of Lausanne will have the glory of being the Modern Capital.

