

# Through Coubertin's writings



*Mr. Geoffroy de Navacelle, great-nephew of Pierre de Coubertin, is working to spread the achievement of his ancestor while at the same time protecting it. Thanks to his understanding we are able to announce that we shall shortly be publishing the "Mémoires Olympiques" in our Review chapter by chapter.*

*Since its publication in 1932 this fundamental work on Olympism has not been reprinted. On behalf of all our readers, we should like to thank Mr. de Navacelle for allowing us to do so. We hope we are thus making the work of the "Renovator" of the Games better known, and are sure that young enthusiasts of Olympism will benefit from the discovery of these valuable writings.*

*As a preface to the publication of the "Mémoires", the first chapter of which is to be included in our number 101, Mr. de Navacelle gives us below some of his impressions on the book and introduces us to one of his great-uncle's last texts, entitled "La Symphonie inachevée" (The Unfinished Symphony). Our readers will find it on page 32.*

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## *Comments on the "Mémoires Olympiques"*

*by Geoffroy de Navacelle*

Many works have related the history of the Olympic Games of the modern era and *Olympica* by Monique Berlioux is probably the most monumental among them.

But how many people have read the *Mémoires Olympiques* by the man who, renewing a thousand-year-old tradition, created the new Games? Pierre de Coubertin was 69 when he published the *Mémoires Olympiques* in 1931. He could therefore look back with sufficient perspective over the period of the beginnings when, alone and against everybody, he started to build up his work.

As he points out at the end of his book, he endeavoured to confine himself to the facts by respecting their proportional value and their strict natural sequence. In doing so he apologises for having to use the first person so often, the only accurate and sincere form.

The story of his long struggle appears in the context of the period, which is evoked on every page. Mentalities, ways and customs, political geography and historical events are the moving background against which the Institution grew among the "tangle of diplomatic problems, little personal intrigues, touchiness to be appeased, wounded pride, hidden traps..." Is it very different today?

He also recalls that there were already problems such as national representation, communities merged in empires, rivalry between cities wishing to stage the Games, and of course amateurism: "Ever present, identical and elusive like a waterpolo ball, with the inveterate habit of slipping away from under your hand and bobbing up again four metres away!"

In 1925 "*the corpse cupboard was opened and the amateurism mummy and its retinue were taken out and studied again.*" Unfortunately it was not the last time.

One is overwhelmed by this man's efficiency if one considers that at that time all correspondence was done by hand, that he had no secretariat and that travelling was far from being done by plane!

Using of course his social position, many doors were opened to him; he gathered the co-operation of many well-to-do people and easily approached crowned heads, who were still numerous and influential before the first world war. The impression of extraordinary pragmatism in the service of great diplomacy is evident when reading this work. The use of tricks was not scorned. What could be cleverer than calling the Congress of 1894 at which he obtained the proclamation, almost by surprise one could say, of the re-establishment of the Games, or the agreement of the President of the French Council of Ministers to patronise the celebration of the 20th anniversary of the Games in 1914 in a letter which Pierre de Coubertin had prepared in advance and slipped into the hands of the Cabinet head!

In his book Pierre de Coubertin often emphasises the intellectual and philosophical nature of his enterprise and his wish "*to place the IOC's role from the outset far above that of the simple sports groups.*" This was the essential theme of the first Congress he organised in 1897 at Le Havre, in his beloved Normandy.

His solicitude to reunite "*the Muscle and the Spirit*", "*past divorcees*", recurs frequently. Did he not applaud the President of the Society of Men of Letters at the 1905 Congress, who had come from Paris to speak on "*the Spirit at the school of Sport*"?

But here again the undertaking was difficult and he stresses that "*the short stages*

*method*" had always seemed the best to him for any large scale undertaking which wished to last. The 1906 Consultative Conference on Arts, Letters and Sport seems to have been short-lived, and would it not be appropriate to rethink this important question?

When the reader reaches the concluding pages of the *Mémoires* he will read this sentence which depicts the man well: "*If I have a high opinion of and great pride in the work I have been given to accomplish, I take no merit for it*", *feeling constantly supported "with regard to this task by a kind of internal force"*.

Five years after completing the **Mémoires Olympiques** Pierre de Coubertin began the last chapter of the *Mémoires* which he had carefully put down in little school exercise books.

Entitled **La Symphonie inachevée** (The Unfinished Symphony), this chapter—itself unfinished and unpublished—contains the following sentence showing the scope of the work to which he aspired: "*but Olympism only represents part of my undertaking, about half*", and this 74-year-old man announces that he will "naturally" devote himself to finishing the second part. The following year his death interrupted this work.

If reading the *Mémoires Olympiques* affords better insight into the man who renovated the Games, it also throws new light on the institution, unique in its kind, of the International Olympic Committee.

By reading too many comments on his work one sometimes loses the purity of the author's intentions in his original texts.

G. de N.

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