

# The Unfinished Symphony

by *Pierre de Coubertin* ©

The date is 1936. It is fifty years now since I took up the idea of educational reform to which I have devoted the better part of my life and the best of my efforts. Abandoning, once and for all, everything that had interested me in other careers, from then on I concentrated on this idea alone. But my work is far from completed. I am in my seventy-fourth year and, with the latter part of my life having been darkened with great worries and sorrows, I fear that my brain may lose some of its power. That is why, interrupting the regular course that I would have liked to follow in my memoirs, I am fitting in here the fifth and last of these small volumes, while the fourth and even the third are still only in the early stages of compilation. The first, entitled “Memories of childhood and youth” has been finished for a long time now, but is not yet printed. The second, “Olympic Memories”, was published in 1932, while the Games of the 10th Olympiad were being celebrated in Los Angeles. The third is to be called “Politics, Experience and National Propaganda”; it deals with various subjects. Undoubtedly it is my friendship with Th. Delcassé that will give it its main interest, that is to say my friendship with a man whom I liked and admired greatly and with whom I enjoyed talking a great deal, without our necessarily being in agreement on all points because my views on Europe and the interests of France were quite different to his. Finally, the fourth volume, which I have called “Headless Victory”, describes the war—and especially the peace that followed—as I saw them.

It will perhaps be thought that I have a partiality for fanciful names, choosing to call this last volume “The Unfinished Symphony”. I remember explaining this in a lecture I gave at the Polytechnicum in Zurich on 1st November 1935. Every human being, I said, belongs to the great orchestra of mankind. Most of us, it must be admitted, play a very minor role. Not everyone is able to fit in; some never succeed in finding their place. Very few are favoured by fate to the extent of being allowed to compose pieces themselves. Rarer still are those who are privileged to hear them performed during their lifetime. I know that people consider me to be among the latter because of Neo-Olympism, whose steady progress appears to have created so much surprise. People greeted it at first with smiles, then irony, then annoyance and even hostility. But nothing has been able to weaken it, not even four years of world war, which it survived without ill effects.

But Olympism is only part of my life’s work, approximately half in fact. Consequently my educational “symphony” consists of a part that is complete and another that is still unfinished. Quite naturally, it is with the latter that I am going to deal in the pages that follow.



There will be grave flaws in the form and also, undoubtedly, in the substance. My time is too limited for me to be able to reflect sufficiently deeply and my brain will not be equal to the task of polishing the form as I would have liked. But what worries me most is the difficulty of finding those who will take over and continue the work I have started. To my mind, this is the most important point. Please forgive me therefore for the rambling nature of these notes with all their repetitions and reiterations. My main concern is that my meaning should be clear.

No, indeed, I would not have chosen to live in a period of history so full, so varied and so powerful as the one in which I have been a spectator, and even, to a certain extent, an actor. My earliest memory of public life dates back to Napoleon III and the 1867 Universal Exhibition in Paris; and now, on the eve of the eleventh of the modern Olympiads that I have revived, the strange figure of Adolf Hitler, one of the most curious and most unexpected that I have ever come across in my study of history, appears on the scene.

All through my life, universal history, of which I have been so fond—even from my schooldays—has remained closely linked with all my thoughts and reflections, and I have always felt that it could not be ignored if one wanted to comprehend collective life in its entirety. For me, it has been not only a constant source of inspiration but also, in moments of sorrow and pain, a source of real consolation.

Those who have been kind enough to take a favourable interest in my work distinguish two distinct and successive enterprises—particularly as the methods I have used have been very different. Athletics—and especially its crowning glory, Olympism—has been the object, on my part, of a somewhat noisy—and even, if you like, loud and insistent—development. It was the only way to achieve anything. The attempt to reform education, on the other hand, has been the object of slow, silent, gradual and long thought-out study. Olympism has sailed serenely over the world like a gleaming airship, the reform of education has borrowed the method of moles, burrowing unseen a whole network of runs and raising veritable molehills here and there on the surface. But there is one thing they have in common: whether it was a matter of muscular training or improvement of the mind, the effort has, if I may say so, always been clearly defined and localised. The average Frenchman's infuriating sense of logic made my friends reproach me: you are working for the adolescent, for the boy... what are you planning to do for the child, for the girl?... Nothing at all, was my answer. They are not going to advance my cause. The reform that I am aiming at is not in the interests of grammar or hygiene. It is *a social reform or rather it is the foundation of a new era that I can see coming and which will have no value or force unless it is firmly based on the principle of a completely new type of education.*

It was pure instinct that made me feel this way half a century ago. 1886 was the year of my long sojourns as an observer in English universities. I watched, I listened, but spoke little. What did I care about statistics and documents? Neither England nor France, at the time, gave much thought to the future. Nor did Germany. And Italy, even less. Towards the end of the 18th century all countries concentrated on the present, pursued practical and particular aims, goals that were both shrewd and reasonable. No one was aware of any need for a “renovation” of any kind whatsoever. In religion alone, a few mystical and inspired groups thought about it, or perhaps the champions of social reform and a re-organisation of the intricate wheels of society, all of which, at the time, was still pure utopia.

That the day would come when such a utopia would become reality was however within the realms of possibility. I was already taking great interest in noting the signs—even though few and far between—of an evolution that seemed as though it would eventually occur along these lines but extremely slowly. In any case, this evolution presupposed a prior reform of popular education, the creation of a neo-encyclopedism, wider programmes simplified methods...

But no one wanted to give it a thought.

P. de C.