

Victorian ‘Muscular Christianity’

Prologue to the Olympic Games Philosophy

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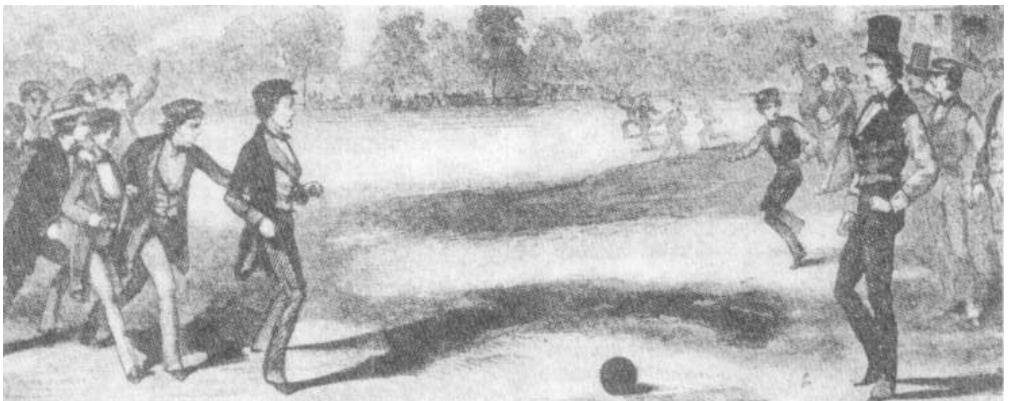
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We present below the second half of this article which we printed in our previous issue. We would recall that this was the lecture given by Professor John Apostol Lucas at the XVth Session of the International Olympic Academy.

‘Muscular Christianity’ and the Knife-edge of Criticism

Some of England’s keenest minds began taking tight-lipped, unhumorous shots at the whole mushrooming world of competitive athletics—especially the kind that was encapsulated in patriotism, religiosity, and moving in so-called anti-intellectual directions. This began in the 1870s—surprisingly early in the history of full-blown English school athletics. This “orgy of athleticism”—as some called it—was perceived even by one of its prime architects, when Thomas Hughes said in 1873: “These things (athletic games) are made too much of nowadays, until the

training and competitions for them outrun all rational bounds”²¹. Even earlier, an editorial inspired by Wilkie Collins’ popular novel, *Man and Wife*, criticized athletics as devoid of any virtue except courage, and only the lowest and least valuable kind of courage at that²². Wilkie Collins (1824-1889) was very widely read in England; chapter 45 of his melodrama *Man and Wife* is called “The Footrace” and is essentially an indictment of the “national passion for hardening the arms and legs by throwing hammers and cricket-ball...”²³. And Sir Leslie Stephens (1832-1904), outstanding athlete in his earlier days, significant literary figure of his time and father of Virginia Woolf, couldn’t refrain from criticizing athletics—a good thing gone mad, he felt. “Breathe a little more intellect”, he said, “into these masses of bone and muscle, and they would be really creditable persons”²⁴. All this and much more was levelled at the cult of sport in the 1870s—after only a thin score years of wide popularity! The massive support of competitive games by all levels of the social strata, always stronger than its critics, could not suppress the exasperation and frequently bitter anti-sport com-



ments of respected individuals like A. Granville Bradley, Oscar Browning, J. H. Simpson, Alec Waugh, and others—all opponents of what was sometimes called the athletic “blood system”²⁵. Equally responsible persons from the United States found the exaggeration of competitive athletics just as unacceptable. In a remarkably short period—less than forty years—a tradition had been started, grew almost without a governor, and came under heavy fire. So in love with the extraordinary vigor of the British Isles that the voice of the sporting critic escaped him, was the young and brooding French aristocrat, Pierre de Coubertin.

Coubertin's Anglomania 1886-1896

Never for a moment did the young scholar, Baron Pierre de Coubertin (1863-1937), forget the deep obligation owed by the western world to the ancient Greeks. Yet this “rénovateur des Jeux Olympiques modernes” was far more influenced by nineteenth century English sporting philosophy than the idealism of sixth and fifth century Greece. Olympic philosophy is essentially Coubertin's philosophy and it is heavy with essences of the nineteenth century English gentlemanly ideal—identifiable with social status and avowed moral superiority. Coubertin, like so many European intellectuals during the last twenty-five years of the nineteenth century, was completely captivated by almost all things British. Coubertin, I think, would have completely agreed with the modern writer, Rupert Wilkinson, that English public schools during the second half of the last century produced the great majority of the nation's leaders, that significant physical and moral lessons were permanently ingrained in her youth, and, especially, that these schools were perfect training grounds for British political leadership²⁶. The Frenchman, Coubertin, joined an influential group that agreed with F. A. M. Webster that the composite history of English public schools is, in reality, the history of England, “since the British Empire has been in the main built up by the founders of the schools and the pupils who gained their knowledge and characters moulded in those institutions”²⁷.

The impressionable Coubertin knew a great deal about the English through readings and made at least six Channel crossings during the years 1883 and 1887²⁸. He was convinced that a lack of a sporting tradition was killing France and that this same athletic emphasis was a powerful catalyst for the British Empire's unrivalled greatness.

And he said so over and over again in his vast writings—using Thomas Arnold and the Rugby School setting for nearly endless examples. Coubertin's early works, *Souvenirs d'Oxford et de Cambridge* (1887) and *L'Education en Angleterre-Colleges et Universités* (1888), are replete with the kind of moral and athletic education taught certain English youngsters—students “laying the ground work for citizenship”. The tidy Baron de Coubertin worshipped the name of Thomas Arnold and in his own peculiar way credited the English headmaster with initiating the revolution of ‘muscular Christianity’. Musing in the Rugby Chapel, the young French romantic stared at Arnold's tomb and “meditated on this cornerstone of the British Empire”²⁹. At the Boston Physical Training Conference of 1889, Coubertin's essential message was that no system of education “stands higher than the English athletic sport system” and Thomas Arnold stood tall as the greatest of modern teachers³⁰. On the eve of the first modern Olympic Games—solely a Coubertin creation—the Baron addressed the Athenian Parnasse Society. He lionized sport in Arnoldian England as having transformed the British Empire. “Thomas Arnold, le plus grand éducateur des temps modernes”, he said, had made a significant contribution to western culture in giving birth to an honorable and purely moral kind of athletics, an institutional philosophy that might be given greater range, sweeping the world through the Olympic Games.³¹ He was wrong on this first count, of course. Arnold did not invent ‘muscular Christianity,’ the cult of English athletics. On the second score, the perfervid Frenchman had remarkable success; 131 nations of the world understand the Olympic philosophy and profess to abide by its regulations. The cynics will rise as one at this last statement, but the concluding portion of this paper will address itself to the unique as well as the unhappy modern state of Olympism.

Coubertin Plants the Seeds of Olympism 1897-1920

Coubertin was a life-long 'muscular Christian'—with less emphasis on the "Christian" than the "muscular". He was born a Roman Catholic but remained unconvinced as to its dogma. Rather (and he said so many times) his was the religion of amateur sport. The sports field is a holy temple, he said, "a laboratory for manliness... an incomparable pedagogical tool..."—and it was all the invention of the Reverend Thomas Arnold.³² The Rugby School experiment, he said, gave birth to 'muscular Christianity'—"a Greek formula perfected by Anglo-Saxon Civilization."³³

Coubertin frequently wrote in an unclear and pedestrian manner. He was (and is) poorly understood because of this literary disorder, and because his ideas were innovative to many. The amateur spirit—the concept of absolutely no material gain was to him "a religion, with church, dogma and cult."³⁴

Coubertin's conception of sport was the most obvious aspect of a grand attempt to fuse academic training with moral and physical education. The catalyst would be sport. His habitual "Pollyanna" view of sport was a fortress as well as a continuing puzzle and weakness. This grandiosity and philanthropic overkill is emphasized by the Olympic headquarters wall poster: "Olympism tends to bring together in a radiant gathering, all the principles contributing to the perfection of man." In the mind of the Founder, the definition of Olympic philosophy was well established by the war's end, 1920, and the Antwerp Games of the Fifth Olympiad. For Pierre de Coubertin, Olympism embraced the best of ancient Greece, the proven power of English 'muscular Christianity', rhythm, art, beauty, and balance. Olympism encompasses an understanding that the body and the mind and the soul of man have an integrated glory. It is this symbiosis that can lead man to understand, as Socrates said, "his chief and proper concern—knowledge of himself and of the right way to live." All of us who love beauty, peace, athletics, who have done no impiety or sacrilege, who believe in fair play, are advocates of Olympism, and are Greeks in the highest sense.

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The Tremulous World of Olympism 1921-1937

The idea of 'muscular Christianity' and its first cousin 'Olympism' were the target of murderous criticism during the period of the 1920s and 1930s. Yet it seemed to weather the knock-out punches better than in the present era. Alec Waugh's novel *The Loom of Youth* found sport excess inexcusable and its zealots less than whole men. The book's hero, Gordan, was "at once brought face to face with the fact that success lay in a blind worship at the shrine of the god of Athleticism."³⁵ John Tunis and a host of correspondents found the Olympic Games wanting in fraternity; rather, they said, one would have "difficulty in discovering many which did not leave a series of unfortunate incidents in their train."³⁶ Yet the old man, Coubertin, exiled in Switzerland, no longer wealthy, subjected to innumerable barbs, found strength on the eve of the 1936 Berlin Olympics to note that his mission was on its way to success. "Stadiums without number throughout the world ring out the message of muscular joy and service to all mankind."³⁷ The next year, in September of 1937, the old man passed away; typical of him and symbolically, he was buried in Paris, his heart at Olympia. His sport philosophy was an amalgam of Greek idealism, the best of medieval chivalry, the gentlemanly sporting ethos of the eighteenth century English landed gentry, and nineteenth century 'muscular Christianity.' Despite life-long professions that his Olympic Games were for all peoples regardless of social and economic status, Coubertin remained true to and was never able to escape from his own aristocratic heritage. He rendered an enormous service to the community of nations; the many flaws in his Olympic jewel only highlight the fact that it is a precious commodity constantly in need of care, polishing, and possibly, a sharp blow to cut it into manageable parts.

Pierre de Coubertin's philosophy of sport or "Olympism" is a hybrid of the ideal Greek, the ideal chivalric, and the ideal English. His enormously energetic pen over a fifty year period never failed to mention a personal debt of gratitude to the English life-style of his own century. Preoccupied with Arnoldianism, the gentlemanly code, the deeper meaning of the amateur spirit; 'muscular Christianity', his writings reflect a highly personalized definition of these esoteric phrases.

In some of Coubertin's larger works, *The Evolution of France under the Third Republic* (1897) and his four-volume *Histoire Universelle* (1925), the omniscient figure of Thomas Arnold is eulogized almost too often. His *Pedagogie Sportive* (1934) credits "Canon Kingsley and his 'muscular Christians,'" along with Arnold, in transforming for all time the definition and direction of non-professional sport. His speech ran to superlatives, frequent exaggerations, sometimes factual errors, undisguised idealism, and all couched in a style that suffers more than most in the translation. Coubertin's description of "L'usine Britannique," (British power) in *Pages d'Histoire Contemporaine* (1909) and in *Notes sur l'Education Publique* (1901) do not always give us real insight into what was happening in English society during the middle decades of the nineteenth century. Scores of periodical articles, dating from 1887 to 1937, frequently more revealing of the author than of the people and period subsumed under the title, typify many of Coubertin's literary contributions. By many standards, Pierre de Coubertin, founder of the modern Olympic movement, was a great man. This French citizen, but spiritual "child of Albion," was emotionally and intellectually dominated by the impossible dream—the apostolic mission of introducing untrammelled 'muscular Christianity' to the whole world. No one, especially the revisionist historians, however, should judge him too harshly; Coubertin did, in the last analysis, believe in the intrinsic goodness of the human race, and, along with Charles Beard, Jacob Bronowski, and others, saw in mankind's gradual ascent and progress some kind of universal "mundane republic."

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²¹ Thomas Hughes, **Memoir of a Brother** (Boston: James R. Osgood and Co., 1873), p. 18.

²² "The Morality of Muscularity", **Every Saturday**, 1 (August 13, 1870), pp. 525-26.

²³ Wilkie Collins, **Man and Wife** (New York: Peter Fenelon Collier, Pub., 1870), Vol. 4, pp. 130-1.

²⁴ Leslie Stephen, "Athletic Sports and University Studies", **Fraser's Magazine**, 82 (December, 1870), p. 694.

²⁵ See "Athleticism and the Blood System" in Howard J. Savage, **Games and Sports in British Schools and Universities** (New York: Carnegie Foundation, 1926), pp. 43-5.

²⁶ See Rupert Wilkinson, **Gentlemanly Power - British Leadership and Public School Tradition** (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), pp. VII, IX, Chapter 3 "Unwritten Restraint", passim.

²⁷ F. A. M. Webster, **Our Great Public Schools** (London: Ward, Lock, and Co. Ltd., 1937), p. 9.

²⁸ See Chapter IV, "The Influence of Dr. Thomas Arnold", in John Lucas, "Baron Pierre de Coubertin and the Formative Years of the Modern International Olympic Movement 1883-1896" (unpublished Ed. D. dissertation, University of Maryland, 1962); the chapter might better have been called, "The Influence of Thomas Arnold on Coubertin".

²⁹ Pierre de Coubertin, **Une campagne de vingt et un ans, 1887-1908** (Paris: Librairie de l'éducation physique, 1908), p. 5.

³⁰ Pierre de Coubertin as quoted in Isabel Barrow (ed.), **Physical Training - A Full Report of the Papers and Discussions of the Conference held in Boston in November, 1889** (Boston: Press of George H. Ellis, 1890), p. 112.

³¹ Pierre de Coubertin, "L'athlétisme dans le monde moderne et les Jeux olympiques". **Bulletin du Comité International des Jeux Olympiques**, 2 (January, 1895), p. 4.

³² Pierre de Coubertin, "Le sport et la société moderne". **La Revue Hebdomadaire**, 6 (June, 1914), p. 380.

³³ Pierre de Coubertin, **Ce que nous pouvons maintenant demander au sport** (Lausanne: Edition de l'Association des Hellènes Libéraux de Lausanne, 1918), n. p.

³⁴ Pierre de Coubertin, **Mémoires Olympiques** (Lausanne: Bureau international de Pédagogie sportive, 1931), p. 102.

³⁵ Alec Waugh as quoted in Brian Dobbs, **Edwardians at Play-Sport 1890-1914** (London: Pelham Books, 1973), p. 27.

³⁶ John Tunis, "The Olympic Games", **Harper's Monthly Magazine**, 157 (August, 1928), p. 316.

³⁷ Pierre de Coubertin, "Aux Coureurs d'Olympia-Berlin" (two-page pamphlet published by the International Olympic Committee, 1936).