

# *Olympic Memoirs*

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In this issue we are printing chapter VIII of the « Olympic Memoirs » written by the renovator of the Games. The previous chapters appear in our numbers 101-102, 103-104, 105-106, 107-108, 109-110, 111 and 112.

## VIII\*

# The inclusion of Literature and the Arts

It was not enough to bring “Muscle and Mind, ex-partners”... together before the Registrar (in this instance, Mr. Jules Claretie, who officiated at the ceremony in the historic foyer of the “Comédie Française”, with Madame Bartet and Mr. Mounet-Sully on either side of him); it was equally important for the union to be fruitful. The fruit of this union was a long time in coming however, the first not appearing until 1926, some twenty years later. And among the early offspring, how many were imperfect or still-born! But in 1906, the important thing was merely to bring about a reconciliation between the two partners, who seemed to possess everything necessary to get on together but who, it must be confessed, really did not appear to care for each other at all. The important thing however was that the union should take place and above all that it should bear fruit.

I have already repeated—so often that I am a trifle ashamed of doing so once again, but so many people still do not seem to have understood—that the Olympic Games are not just ordinary world championships but a four-yearly festival of universal youth, “the spring of mankind”, a festival of supreme efforts, multiple ambitions and all forms of youthful activity celebrated by each succeeding generation as it arrives on the threshold of life. It was no mere matter of chance that in ancient times writers and artists gathered together at Olympia to celebrate the Games, thus creating the inestimable prestige the Games have enjoyed for so long. Wishing to revive not so much the form but the very principle of this millennial institution, because I felt it would give my country and mankind as a whole the educational stimulus they needed, I had to try and restore the powerful buttresses that had supported it in the past: the intellectual buttress, the moral buttress and, to a certain extent, the religious buttress. To which the modern world added two new forces: technical improvements and democratic internationalism.

In Athens, in 1896, the solemnity of this first contact of contemporary youth with Pericles’ rebuilt stadium prevented the search for new artistic and literary works inspired by the idea of sport.

It would have been foolish. Moreover, it was not possible to do everything at once. Proceeding gradually by stages has always seemed to me the best way of going about any large-scale enterprise expected to last. In Paris, in 1900, apart from the unfavourable circumstances I have already described, the Universal Exhibition wallowed in a veritable plethora of new forms and ideas, far too abundant for there to be any point in trying to include an effort so detailed and of such a special nature... But right from the start Chicago showed an interest in this aspect of the Olympic question. The programmes I mentioned above made allowances, a trifle awkwardly but nevertheless sincerely and enthusiastically, for art and thought. From this point of view, transferring the Games to St. Louis had been a misfortune. All efforts along these lines had to be postponed once more. Rome was now

tending to fade away over the horizon. Wavering, a lessening of purpose and confidence began to become apparent, caused in fact by a regionalism that was still much too strong in spite of the appearance of unity... Another transfer was considered, this time to London. As time would then be very short, we should have to improvise a great deal and the artistic side of the Games would inevitably suffer...

The fear of seeing the launching of this idea delayed once again made me decide to summon a "Consultative Conference on Art, Letters and Sport" for the spring of 1906. At the same time, I would be able to use this as an excuse for not going to Athens, a journey I particularly wished to avoid. Even though we were now on very good terms with the Hellenic Committee, the reconciliation was a result more of a conscious effort on the part of both parties than of a serious alteration of our respective positions. Finally, what name should be given to these "additional" Games in 1906? How often should they be held? The idea of an intermediate four-year period, in which I had acquiesced without much conviction, was abandoned. In Athens, they were now thinking of a ten-year interval, which would make the two series coincide in 1916... All this was very uncertain; the situation would always be a trifle delicate. In any case, a great deal of friction and many difficulties were bound to arise during the contests. It was best for everyone and for everything that I should not be there. Count Brunetta d'Usseaux would take my place and would hedge whenever possible, saying the matter would have to be put to me, in this way delaying any awkward questions and avoiding hasty decisions.

I well remember the smile of delight on the face of André Beaunier—that sensitive, friendly writer who was carried off in the prime of life by a jealous fate—as I showed him, in his office at *Le Figaro*, the invitation to the Conference to be held at the Comédie Française. The invitation was to "come and study to what extent and in what way art and literature could be included in the celebration of the modern Olympiads and be associated with the practice of sport in general so as not only to benefit from it but at the same time ennoble it". "How beautifully put," he said, "and how well it goes with the setting chosen!" A rather unusual setting undoubtedly, and our request had certainly startled Jules Claretie at first. But he had grown used to the idea and presided happily at the opening of a conference to which practically all artists and writers of note had been invited. Only about sixty actually came, but those who attended the first day returned for the discussions on the following days and helped draft the plans. Jean Richepin, Bourgault-Ducoudray and Poilpot were enthusiastic about the whole idea. They had visions of processions, massed choirs, impressive tableaux and triumphal odes. Others backed the scheme somewhat less enthusiastically or simply weighed the difficulties. The main stumbling block can be summed up in a few words: fear of the classical. The young artists, who considered classical and stereotyped as synonymous, were obviously those on whom the success of the scheme would depend. But this aversion of theirs turned them against the idea. In addition, in architecture no new needs had yet been expressed; in painting, sports scenes required more *line* than *colour*, that is to say the opposite of the reigning trends, while in music, the public had completely lost all taste for open-air cantatas, and in literature writers—for the most part personally wholly unfamiliar with the joys of violent muscular effort—were incapable of describing them for a public not very familiar with them either.



It would have been possible to remedy all this to a certain extent by calling on other countries to participate. This was a step I made the big mistake of not taking, limiting myself to sending out letters of invitation which were not fully understood and which brought us many telegrams of solidarity and encouragement, but no effective aid. Only the Royal Academy of Arts in London showed itself really in favour of the idea, which was a good omen for the next Games (the choice of London becoming more and more likely). At the opening session, Laffan had once again made one of his delightful speeches in French... and Madame Bartet, enchanted, reached over behind Claretie and tugged me by the sleeve: "Who is he?" she asked with great curiosity mingled with admiration... "Who is he?"

The 1906 Conference none the less fulfilled its main purpose by proposing that the IOC should create "five contests of architecture, sculpture, music, painting and literature for original works directly inspired by sport, such contests henceforth to become an integral part of the celebration of each Olympiad". The IOC would have made itself ridiculous if it had attempted to create contests of this kind right away, on its own. Invited to do so by a competent group composed of members of high repute, the IOC was well and truly supported in the eyes of the public.

In this respect, the Consultative Conference, which was brought to a fitting close with a very fine Festival of Sport and Art held at the Sorbonne, had not failed in its chief aim. The Charter of revived Olympism was now complete...

Or nearly so. The list of points drawn up by the original Congress in 1894 included a suggestion to the IOC (which had just been created) "to include within its regulations a clause authorising it to exclude from the Games any person who, by his earlier deeds, might tarnish the reputation enjoyed by the Games." This wording was not likely to please André Beaunier! The idea was not only awkwardly put but not even very clear. However, the proposal had been made so as to keep the door open for some form of moral protection, thus gradually setting modern Olympism along the path towards the "purification" of the competitor that had been one of the fundamental tenets of ancient Olympism.

In what form though? I was not too sure, but since we could not get round the difficulties involved in the question of amateurism, it occurred to me that a start could be made by introducing the Olympic oath, which would be the occasion for a moving ceremony and would put the competitor on his honour while simplifying research into his status.

In sporting circles, in those days, no one was at all prepared for such a novelty and, my first overtures having brought forth nothing but smiles or protests, it was to the Fédération des Patronages that I made my first public proposal. At the time it had about fifty thousand members. It was continually persecuted, but it managed to survive even so and succeeded in obtaining playing fields without anyone really knowing how. At the end of the Federation's festivities in the spring of 1906, I wrote to its Secretary General, Charles Simon, who was a keen advocate as well as a remarkable organiser, a letter later published in the July number of the *Olympic Review*. In it, I recommended the introduction of the Olympic oath. The idea met with approval much more quickly than might have been expected and precisely in those lay circles which had been the most refractory up till then.

*(To be continued)*