

# Lord Noel-Baker and Olympism

Lord Noel-Baker was the epitome of intelligence and a man of great heart. A few days before his death, I received a letter from him. He had had it typed. His sight had been failing for some time. This old advocate of peace and sport had nevertheless made the effort to write the last few words in his own handwriting, which was as round and neat as ever.

He had just informed President Samaranch that major obligations would unfortunately prevent his attending a coming meeting. As we were to have seen each other on that occasion, he had been kind enough to write to me too, to apologise and ask me to give him a ring next time I was in London.

He never complained. He never admitted defeat. He was always fighting, not against something but always for some thing or some cause. His convictions were as firm as rock. He never with held nor bartered his friendship. He gave it wholeheartedly. He trusted people. But if ever he felt he had been let down, he broke off the relationship right away. And for ever.

He was nearing 93. I had met him for the first time at the Games in London. Minister of Commonwealth Relations at the time - a delicate post if ever there was one, in those post-war days so full of change - Philip Noel-Baker would rush off to watch the Olympic events whenever he had a moment. His political stature, his past as a champion, his aura of integrity and idealism, made him a celebrity. I was introduced to him half an hour before the start of my heat, while I was on my way to the dressing rooms at the swimming pool to change into my costume for the heat. « At a moment like this, you could very well do without having to shake hands with a minister, I imagine ! » he said with a smile, adding: « I know what it is like ! »

For a long time he remained physically the way he always wanted to be: slim and active, cultivating a deliberately casual elegance, he could have been a dandy except for his big piercing eyes, his strong, warm voice, and the vitality in his Roman face.

A Quaker by birth, and consequently a non-combatant by conviction, he had volunteered

to serve in the 14-18 war as a stretcher-bearer in the front line, on the French and Italian fronts. His courage gained this pacifist a number of much coveted military decorations. During the second World War, Churchill included him in his government.

Philip Noel-Baker's constant crusade in favour of peace and disarmament went hand in hand with his patriotism and his unswerving loyalty to the ideals of the Labour Party.

Now this seeking after the absolute, this hatred of hatred, this inner certainty that world peace could be achieved were inseparably bound up, in him, with his devotion to sport and Olympism. The miracle of the Games, the teachings of Ancient Greece, the revival of the Games by Pierre de Coubertin, were not just admirable-the Olympic flame was the beacon of peace; it was world brotherhood on the march. I can still hear him declaiming, as he did two years ago : *"Of all the forces which can influence the choice that every man and statesman has now to make, of all the forces that can work for our survival, I believe international sport is now the strongest"*.

Altruistic. Generous. Eternally curious. Possessing an encyclopedic culture. A burning desire to build. Ardour. History will remember the achievements and the influence of this astonishing, pure figure. His writings are in keeping with his character: direct, proud, lively, his convictions always delivered like sword thrusts.

The week before his death, he spoke at the Labour Party Congress in Blackpool. He received a standing ovation. He was the party's greatest living monument. He succeeded in quietening the applause and, in his own inimitable manner, he started : *"Some of you must have thought I was dead.."*

He always made a point of keeping fit. At 82, he still spent several hours a week climbing, swimming or walking briskly, without neglecting gymnastics. In September 1973, at the Olympic Congress in Varna, he arrived with a walking stick, because of pains in his back which kept recurring whenever he "forced the old machine too much", as he put it. Even so



he continued his daily exercise right to the end. He became a little stooped with age, but one could sense the vigour in his slender wiry frame. And how young in heart he still was! He kept his Caesar's profile, with which his white mane of hair thrown back went so well. Behind his spectacles, his eyes, of a blue that had almost turned to grey, remained piercing. He hammered out his ideas with vigour and in a voice that commanded attention.

When he was not in Greece with his grandchildren, in Mexico, Moscow or Japan on lecture tours, he lived with his family in Eaton Square, in the heart of patrician London. I loved to visit him in his home, an old Victorian mansion, white and staid, with its porch flanked by two squat columns. He would quickly draw me into his study, a small round room very discreetly lit. It had apparently been a sort of lumber-room, but he was perfectly happy there (beneath the gaze of the cats which allowed him a place in this sanctum !) One photograph on the wall, behind his desk: the finish of the 1500 m at the Antwerp Games. It showed Philip Baker of Great Britain winning the silver medal. As soon as he crossed the finishing line, he congratulated the winner, his compatriot A. G. Hill, saying : "The best man won. I am glad it was you".

At the Games in Stockholm in 1912. in the same event, he had come sixth. He had sacrificed his own chances of winning to make sure of the victory of another Englishman, Arnold Jackson. "You understand", he explained to me, "Arnold was better than I was, that year. So we decided to play safe... How pleased he was ! And how pleased I was too".

There was also naturally a lovely portrait of his wife Irene on his desk.

What an exemplary life, right to the very end.

Born in November 1889, he came of solid middle-class stock. His father was a well-known Member of Parliament. Philip did brilliantly at school, and later as an undergraduate at King's College Cambridge. At the early age of 24, his qualities as an economist and an historian caused him to be elected Vice-

Principal and Director of Studies at Ruskin College, Oxford. Then came the Great War. After the Armistice, he continued his brilliant career.

In the course of a political career which extended over half a century, he was one of the founders of the League of Nations and then of UNO, as well as being the United Kingdom's delegate to the most important international conferences. He was a Member of Parliament for a total of 36 years, and Minister of the Crown for ten years. In 1959, he received the supreme accolade, the award of the Nobel Prize for Peace. All this, while never for a moment ceasing to serve sport and Olympism with great effect.

He and his wife, nee Noel, formed a close-knit couple, with many faithful friends. How pleased his wife was when Philip Baker joined the name of Noel to his own ! Their son Francis was to become a Labour Member of Parliament in his turn.

Given a peerage in 1977, Lord Noel-Baker, Baron of the City of Derby, as he then became, heaped with so many honours and chairmanships that merely to enumerate them would fill pages, the old apostle always showed great scorn for material goods, cheerfully sacrificing any prospects of financial ease to the furtherance of his cause, never hesitating to make donations, to travel at his own expense, fired as he was with altruism. Don Anthony, who understood this great man so well, has written : *"I can say in all honesty that every moment I have spent in his company has been an education for me..."* He was another Socrates.

On his death, Lord Noel-Baker left his family a total inheritance of no more than 25,000 pounds.

Such was the man.

Monique Berlioux

