

ON THE ARTICLE "OLYMPIC DREAMER"

After reading the article "Olympic Dreamer" by Cyril Bracegirdle in issue No. 284 of the Olympic Review, Professor Yves Boulogne, a specialist on Coubertin, sent us some historical clarifications concerning the restoration of the Games which we are reproducing here.

No-one disputes the fact that Dr Brookes organized Olympic competitions in Much Wenlock in 1890 (1). Neither did Coubertin, who paid tribute to him (2), nor does the writer of these lines, who was the first in Francophone literature to draw attention to Dr Brookes's contribution (3). And it is true that Coubertin found cause for rejoicing in what he saw when present at Much Wenlock in 1890, at the invitation of Dr Brookes with whom he had been corresponding regularly for several years in the context of his crusade for the internationalization of sport. For the first time, he was seeing the concrete realization - but at a local level, and this detail is important - of that which he desired for the youth of the world on an international level. The references to ancient Olympism and medieval chivalry, in the tradition of Anglican "muscular Christianity", were the ones which Coubertin had already made his own, and which he was to expound in detail in 1892 and 1894 at the Sorbonne.

To accuse Coubertin of plagiarism on this point is totally unacceptable. The historical truth is completely different, more manifold and complex, from that which the eminent Cyril Bracegirdle writes.

The fact is that the Olympic ideal and the celebration of the Olympic Games were never absent from the Western consciousness during the centuries which followed the edict by Theodosius (392). The memory of the Games can be read in the

writings of the monks who transcribed works in the middle ages, men of the Renaissance, moralists and writers from the Classical age. There are indelible traces in the work of the French encyclopaedists and the German philanthropists. The excavations at the site of Olympia by Abel Blouet, and then by the great Prussian archaeologists, gave impetus to this powerful current of interest in Olympia and the ancient games.

Moreover, during the 16th, 17th, 18th and 19th centuries, local or national - and sometimes nationalist - Olympic games were staged on the occasion of traditional fairs or shows in Ireland, Scotland, England, Sweden, Poland and Greece. Through the well-known phenomenon of diaspora, such contests spread to Canada, the United States, Australia and New Zealand. In France itself, two contemporaries of Coubertin, Ferdinand de Lesseps and Philippe Daryl, called for Olympic, but French, games. At the seminary in Rondeau, near Grenoble, "Olympic" games (which included a sack race) were held throughout almost the entire 19th century. Does that then mean that we should regard the archbishops of Grenoble as the putative fathers of the modern Olympic Games ?

To bring a suit against Coubertin concerning the paternity of the modern Games is a non-issue, as the idea was in the air, in a striking and symptomatic way, throughout a 19th century marked by the birth of modern sport and accelerated development of the principle of nationalities. Coubertin might thus have been no more than one of the many initiators of national Olympic games, "à la française". Fortunately for humanity, he was not.

Coubertin's genius indeed lay in his desire for the modern Olympic Games to be internationalized, "in the service of the youth of the world".

To structure the nascent movement he was creating, he called upon leading figures from the arts and literature, from academia, the army and the international gentry, so much so that, through the strength of its ideal, the Olympic Move-

ment has survived two world wars and communist revolutions, and is still today perfectly adapted to the brutal transformations of the contemporary world.

And what is more, faithful to the lessons of history, Coubertin had the inspired intuition to set modern Olympism within the conceptual framework of a cosmopolitan liberal democracy. None could deny that his claim to fame will for ever be that he alone endowed Olympism with its theoretical and ethical corpus. It is Coubertin that humanity has to thank for the "Olympic spirit", however often it may be misused by the money-changers in the temple.

Let us pay him this unqualified tribute. And let there be an end to these corrosive attacks which do nothing to further the reputation of their authors.

After all, history has long since settled the issue.

YB.

We have also received a letter from Mr Uhri Simri of Herzliyah-B (ISR), rectifying certain points in the article by Mr Don Anthony 'IOC Sessions in Great Britain', which appeared in the '*Olympic Review*' No 285.

I beg to differ on two points raised by Dr Don Anthony in his article on "IOC Sessions in Great Britain" in the July 1991

issue. Mr Anthony states that "women were admitted to yachting" in the 1948 session as if no women had competed prior to that in Olympic competitions. The fact is that a British woman competed as early as 1908 in the Olympic Games, and was followed by compatriots in 1920, 1928 and 1936. France was also represented by a female sailor in 1928, as was Sweden in 1936 by two. These women gained a number of Olympic medals in 1908, 1920, 1928 and 1936. The fact is that the Olympic Congress of 1930 in Berlin forbade open competitions in the Games, but the IYRU did not adhere to that ruling. The IOC gave in and declared in 1948 the sailing competitions to be open ones.

Moreover, Mr Anthony fails to mention that the Palestine Olympic Committee, which had been recognized as early as 1935, consisted of Jewish officials only. The committee simply asked for the approval of a change in its name, which was rejected..."

1) The centenary of Much Wenlock Games was the occasion for celebration at which Geoffroy de Navacelle repeated the gesture of friendship of his great uncle by planting an oak tree on the same spot 76 years later. He wished thereby to draw attention to the esteem in which the "restorer of the games" held Dr Brookes whose inspiration was akin to his own.

2) Coubertin (Pierre de) - A typical Englishman- Dr W. P. Brookes of Wenlock in Shropshire. (American Review of Reviews. January 1897 pp 62-65)

3) Boulogne (Yves Piere) " La vie et l'oeuvre pédagogique de Pierre de Coubertin (The Life of pedagogical work of Pierre de Coubertin) 1863-1937. Published by Leméac, Montreal 1975- Distributor for France: Actes Sud.