

# PIERRE DE COUBERTIN

## THE MAN, HIS FAMILY, HIS TIMES

In recent decades, many works have been published on Pierre de Coubertin and Olympism. Added to these is the information published by the media, particularly during such events as the celebration of the IOC's centenary in Paris in 1994 and the proclamation in the Sorbonne.

All too often this information gives an inaccurate picture of the restorer of the Olympic Games, although there are some excellent researchers,



*Pierre de Coubertin with his family*

these changes: *"the times I lived through were particularly favourable to the enterprise of the boy-scout."* he said. Which was why this "revolutionary", this self-avowed "rebel" against all preconceived ideas, can be considered a "visionary" if we look at him in the light of his own times and of today. However, there was one very important factor that he did not predict - tele-

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enlightening contribution to many works.

The main lines of Olympic history can be found in the "Olympic Memoirs" by Pierre de Coubertin himself. Similarly, the "Textes Choisis", a selection of his monumental output, published under this title by the IOC in 1987, are a treasure trove for anyone interested in the man and the Olympic portion of his output. More recently, "A century of the International Olympic Committee" completes the picture with a very interesting synoptic table.

It is clear that in any serious work on Olympism, reference to Pierre de Coubertin is a constant, and his presence can be detected behind every page.

It is therefore important to know the man well in order to be able to understand his ideals, his motivation and his behaviour. This man, born in the 19th century, lived through a third of the 20th century, and was naturally marked by his extraordinary era. Indeed, this half-century or so saw profound upheavals which we find difficult to conceive of today, which obliged people constantly to readjust their way of thinking and everyday habits. The same applied to Pierre de Coubertin, whose mindset, although making this manoeuvre easier for him, led him to outstrip the evolution brought on by

In order to arrive at an objective appreciation we must beware of judging him, a man of his times, as if he were aware of everything we have learned since then. This comment is directed at those who are inclined to judge him too hastily over the 1936 Games in Berlin, for example.

Finally, a reading of his works can reveal opinions that are diametrically opposed, depending on when these writings saw the light. Coubertin, an intelligent man, evolved according to events that he encountered throughout his life. The following lines are therefore an attempt to paint a portrait of Pierre de Coubertin in a few brushstrokes that gives as good a likeness as possible

Pierre de Coubertin's family is reputed to be of Italian origin. A family of de Fredys lived in Rome, and later, in 1506, a Félice de Fredy who owned an estate in Viterbo discovered there a sculpted group called "du Laocoon", which he gave to Pope Julius II.

It is certain, on the other hand, that a man called Pierre Fredy was Chamberlain to the King of France, Louis XI. He was ennobled in 1477 and settled in a region to the west of Paris called "Ile de France".

In 1577 a descendant, Jean Fredy, acquired the estate and fief of Coubertin, which was also in Ile de France,

and from that time the family took the name Fredy de Coubertin. In 1629 the Ring of France, Louis XIII confirmed their nobility. The Coubertins, through the centuries, occupied important posts in the Parliament, the army and the navy. Many were high-ranking civil servants. There were even some who made their mark in international commerce.

The mother of Pierre de Coubertin, Marie-Marcelle Gigaut de Crisenoy, grand-daughter of the Marquis de Mirville, was Norman, and a descendent of the companions of the first Duke of Normandy, the Viking Rollo (911).

Later on the ancestors of Marie-Marcelle were probably in the entourage of William the Conqueror in the 11th century (1027-1087).

Although it is doubtful that the fief of Mirville was granted to one of them on their return from the battle of Hastings (1066) during which England was conquered, it is very likely that "Chevalier" Adam de Mirville built the Motte de Mirville around 1105. This is described by archeologists as a "motte and bailey castle" or "baronial fortification", and was the first wooden fort among the minor local lords. Marie-Marcelle brought with her on her marriage the estate of Mirville, with its chateau that was reconstructed in the 16th century on a site dating from 1431. This highly cultured woman opened Pierre's mind to Greek and Latin. An attentive wife and mother, she was very religious and guided her husband's artistic inspiration towards religious subjects.

*"My mother," said Pierre, "occupied me with questions well beyond my years, which she knew how to make clear in my mind."* *"She drew prettily and was a talented pianist."* *"As a young girl she joined in her brothers' exercises and even their fencing lessons."* Pierre appreciated his mother's Celtic milieu, and said *"I thank heaven for allowing me to grow up with such influences."*

The father of Pierre de Coubertin, Charles Fredy, Baron de Coubertin, whose birth certificate includes the Christian name Louis (which he never used) was a painter, trained in the studio of the master Picot. He considered himself a professional. From his time spent in Italy and numerous other journeys he brought back a fine collection of drawings, watercolours and oil paintings. He was also an excellent portraitist. Some of his canvases are in Rome at the Vatican Museum, notably his portrait of all the dignitaries in the "pontifical college". He was deco-

rated with the order of the legion d'honneur in recognition of his status as an eminent painter of the 19th century. Neither Charles' artistic temperament nor the Coubertins' spirit of independence freed him from his respect for keeping up appearances, which was a heavy responsibility at the time, but he did it with a certain detachment. His *savoir vivre*, which was certainly a reflection of his social milieu, was therefore as unrestricting as possible.

Charles sometimes left his easel to oversee the balanced upbringing of his four children.

Although he occasionally frequented several Parisian "circles" sometimes improperly termed "clubs", he was far from being the typical "club man". On the contrary, his time spent at the Fine Arts school led him to identify with the "Bohemian" morals of the time. Pierre described these circles as *"places of relative comfort, certain boredom, overweening snobbery and foolishness."*

Charles was a patriot who experienced the events of his country and participated in them: for example, as a national guard, training men in the community of Mirville in the use of arms, in the hope of being able to defend the region during the 1870 Franco-Prussian war.

The Coubertin family consisted of three brothers and one sister, in addition to the parents. Pierre, the youngest, was very attached to his sister, who was seven years his elder. According to Pierre she liked *"science, machines, sports..."* As the only daughter, she was raised in a very masculine atmosphere. This independent girl pursued studies in chemistry at the Sorbonne, which was very un-

usual for young girls with her social background at the time, and joined the Société Astronomique de France. As a young man Pierre frequented the Parisian salons, but tired of them very quickly and spoke harshly of this worldly society and the dandies he rubbed shoulders with. He would have considered it insulting to be associated with this type of person. The label of "baronet's son" that he has been given is all the less appropriate since this title, created in England in 1611, has no equivalent in France and could not therefore have been carried by his father.

It is certain that the social position of Coubertin's family greatly aided Pierre in the realization of his work. Europe at the end of the 19th century had numerous monarchies and Pierre did not hesitate to approach "crown-



*A well-known work by Pierre de Coubertin's father.*

ed heads”, along with ministers, statesmen, Presidents of Republics and celebrities of the time. This social facility came from his upbringing. Once away the movers and shakers of the world, Pierre liked to retire to the depths of his native Norman countryside. He would roam around on horseback or on foot, or more frequently on a bicycle, and share the meals of peasants in their cottages. He appreciated their simplicity and common sense.

He would often cycle to Etretat, 25 km from Mirville. Before the first world war this seaside resort was very popular during the summer season with all the most famous literary and artistic circles - Maupassant, Offenbach, the Impressionist painters, musicians... Some old houses in Etretat still contain paintings by Charles de Coubertin today. Every year the Coubertins would spend six weeks there in the family houses, before spending two and a half months of the summer at Mirville, three weeks in the autumn in Coubertin, and finally settling in their “*bôtel particulier*” in rue Oudinot, Paris, for the winter months.

Once he had his Baccalauréat in sciences and literature, Pierre decided not to enter the Saint Cyr military academy for which he had prepared, but at the request of his father agreed to enter the Faculty of Law. He was pleasantly astonished to obtain a diploma, having attended hardly any lessons, which he found extremely dull. This was the concession he had made to his father, who accepted Pierre's taking the Republican side, although the family was traditionally monarchist, an important choice in French 19th-century society. Turning his

back on the political career for which he had appeared to be destined in Normandy, he enrolled with the Ecole des Sciences Politiques in Paris, where to his delight he discovered great minds with whom he could sympathize. One of these, Albert Sorel, would be a witness at his wedding. Later he would return as a lecturer to this prestigious school.

All too often Pierre de Coubertin is described as a “misogynist”, which is completely inappropriate if one sticks to the strict sense of the term, “one who hates all women”. On the contrary, he was very susceptible to feminine charm, as his family souvenirs attest: letters, dedications, photographs. His prematurely white hair was the result of an af-

fair of the heart: a young Irish woman turned him down after he had gone to Rugby to ask for her hand.

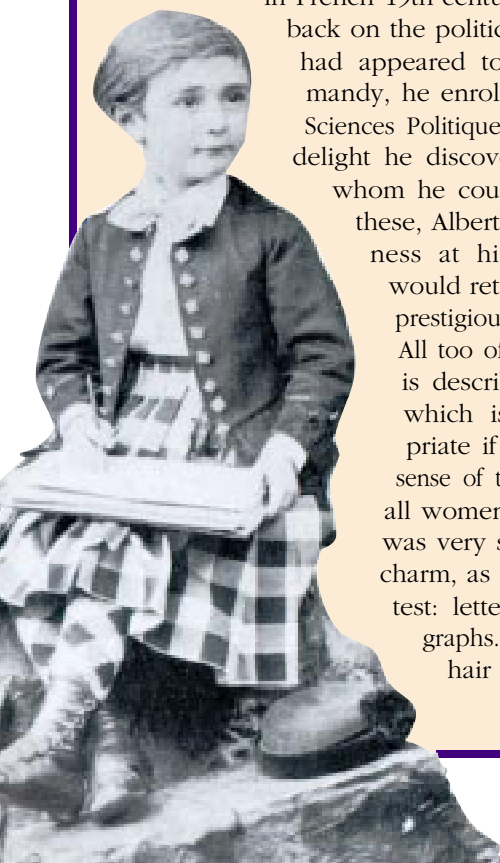
Of course, he opposed the admission of women to the Olympic Games, on the grounds that they should not make a spectacle of themselves performing violent exercise, which he thought likely to ruin their charm. This conformity to the social mores of the time and the ancient tradition whereby women were barred from entering the “Altis” illustrates the exception that proves the rule for the Coubertins. It is known, moreover, that he strongly encouraged women to practise sports, including team sports.

In 1895 he married a young Alsatian woman whose father, Gustave Rothan, was a French diplomat and Minister for France in Frankfurt, as well as being a great art lover and collector. Marie Rothan, a wife whose difficult character caused Pierre many trials towards the end of his life, provided him with unfailing support in the accomplishment of his work. At the time mixed marriages were frowned upon. Pierre, a Catholic, and Marie, a Protestant, were married in a family service both in a church and a temple, which is a tribute to the open-mindedness of the Coubertins compared with their contemporaries. Charles, Pierre's father, recounted the day's events in his memoirs as being bathed in radiant sunshine.

The nuances of France's social structure, forged throughout its history, escape many people, particularly non-natives. The usages and customs that went with it are difficult to conceive of today, although they go a long way towards explaining a great deal of the Coubertins' behaviour, while highlighting their individuality.

Pierre has sometimes been called a ‘bourgeois’, even a “grand bourgeois”. This is inaccurate if we refer to what is meant by the “bourgeois mentality”. The dictionary tells us in fact that the traditional defects of the French bourgeoisie are “narrowness of spirit, fear of change, lack of high-mindedness or idealism.” This assessment is severe if we remember that the bourgeois class can be proud of many great men, such as the great entrepreneurs who marked the rise of the industrial age. Nevertheless, this social category was aware of the advantages of money, and the power it could bring with it. This was the opposite of the Coubertinian spirit.

The “aristocracy” represent the opposite mentality. Although they have their faults, they nevertheless have a positive side that should not be underestimated: a sense of disinterestedness, devotion to the common good, broad-mindedness, respect for certain traditions and excellence. The practice of these virtues is certainly facilitated by the fortune possessed by certain aristocrats, whether as revenue from their land or reward



from their often considerable duties. Of course, the above definitions have only relative value, since every class has its qualities and faults.

The fact remains that Pierre de Coubertin, who is impossible to pigeonhole, belonged by virtue of his social position and his character to the aristocracy. He perpetuated the aristocratic traditions through a life devoted to works with high moral and human benefits, neglecting all material gains.

Thus his fortune was devoured by his work, which led to a difficult financial situation at the end of his life. Although, like a number of his compatriots, he lost a great deal of money in Russian bonds, the management of his portfolio cannot be described as bad. What is more, the Coubertins' tradition in this area is that of good estate management, which gave Pierre a sound financial basis. We know that he experienced periods of sadness, even depression, at the end of his life, which he spent with his family, financially ruined by his generosity. This comes through in his correspondence of the time. The future of his son, Jacques, who was handicapped after suffering sunstroke as a child, and his daughter Renée, a spinster and, some thought, overly sharp-witted, caused him much anguish. With reduced means, he was unable even to buy Mirville when it was put up for sale by his elder brother, Paul. His wife Marie restricted all expenditure she considered unnecessary. The septuagenarian Pierre went to great lengths, applying in vain for a modest job, to avoid the humiliation caused by some people's offers of assistance. He resisted stoically.

Coubertin said: *"the crowd follows him but has forgotten; it credits others with his work, but he goes on more ardent, more ambitious, with in his heart the painful burden of injustice."* Some years before his death he wrote to the President of the Society of Nations that he had lost *"in the twilight of his life, neither his love for the young nor his faith in their future."* *"I have always been pessimistic from an individual point of view,"* he said, *"but this pessimism has not in the slightest affected my collective optimism. I have always believed good to be the dominant force in the world, and that progress was not a vain word. Nothing of what I have seen, and none of the painful experiences I have had has seriously affected this optimistic leaning of my spirit."*

Some people, thinking of the term "Religio athletae", thought that Pierre de Coubertin had leanings towards a form of paganism. This should be interpreted on the level of the positive spirit and mutual respect made possible through the meeting of the youth of the world thanks to Olympism: "religio" should therefore be

understood as the "cult of certain values". With his solid religious foundations acquired in Jesuit schools, Pierre did not lose his faith in God. Many of his writings bear witness to this. He fiercely defended his pure and free obedience of his personal God, and affirmed that God was against any blind and intransigent religious absolutism. Here too, we see the mark of his fiercely independent spirit. It is probable that this spirit closed the doors of the university world to him; he was unwilling to submit to the rules of usage which would have guaranteed him entrance.

Finally, his private writings testify to a complete absence of pride in this man who was simply aware of the value of his family lineage, the depth of his convictions, the extent of his abilities and his need for perfection.

To round off this portrait of Pierre de Coubertin and his family, we should add that he was astonishingly talented in many areas, particularly art, which explains his wish to associate art and culture with Olympism and its manifestations. This artistic talent, which he inherited from his father, appeared in numerous drawings. He designed the IOC's emblem, and fine-tuned the arrangement of the rings with his young nephew by marriage, Gaétan de Navacelle. Navacelle was also a painter, and author of the oil of Pierre that was donated in 1955 to the French Olympic Committee. Similarly, the appearance of



Geoffroy de Navacelle.

harp on the stage at the Sorbonne in 1894 as part of the musical programme can be explained by Pierre's love for music (he was an excellent pianist himself), and for this instrument in particular, which was played by one of his favourite nieces.

We can say that, although the Arts were part of young people's education in the "good society" of the time, the Coubertin family excelled in them, even on Pierre's mother's side of the family. The family archives contain countless pictures, portraits, sketches, watercolours, and also references to musical evenings or concerts in which the Coubertins, their relations and friends participated on their various instruments. Pierre played the piano marvellously, without ever having learned music theory, just as he obtained a law degree without attending classes! He was a remarkable man with talents in many areas. The quadrennial festivals of "human springtime", the Olympic Games of the modern era, can and must provide the world with the opportunity to remember this exceptional man who called himself a "pedagogue", but who also deserved the noble titles of humanist and artisan of Peace.

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