

The Death and Burial of Coubertin: A Retrospective By John Lucas, Prof. Emeritus

In the same year of his death, 1937, the Modern Olympic Games' founder, Baron Pierre de Coubertin (born 1863), wrote:

*I have not been able to carry out to the end what I wanted to perfect. I believe that a Centre of Olympic Studies would aid the preservation and progress of my work more than anything else, and would keep it from the false paths which I fear.*¹

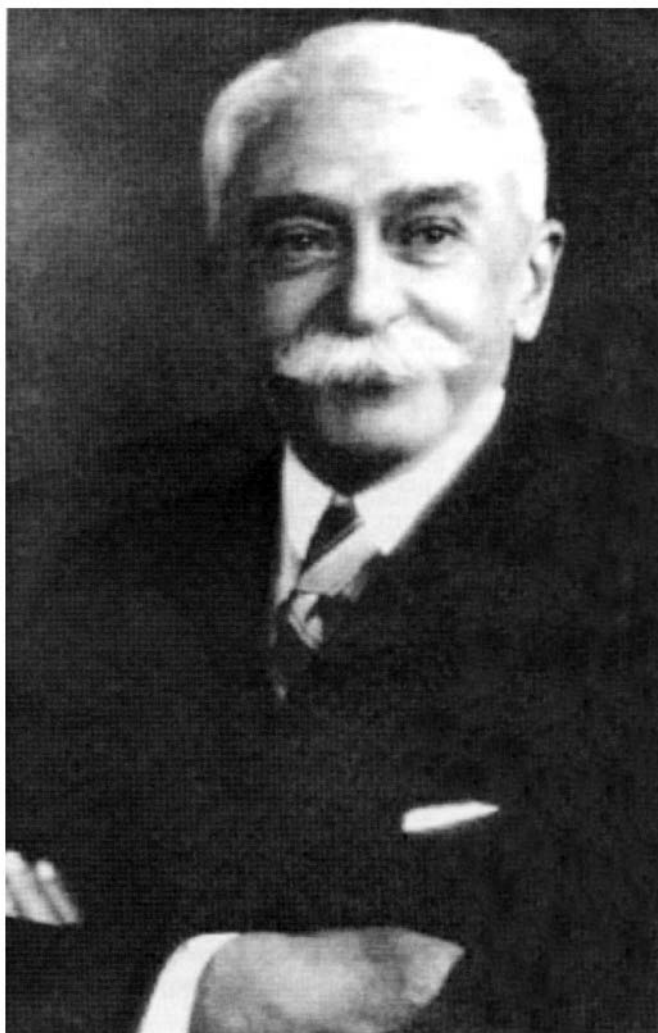
The destitute Coubertin was living alone in a small apartment in Geneva, rather than at his home and museum, "Mon Repos", in the center of Lausanne, Switzerland.² Coubertin specialists agree that the baron was ill in body, and also in a kind of spiritual melancholy in the months following the Berlin Olympic Games of 1936. French historian Louis Callebat hints that these so-called "Nazi-Olympics" were confusing to Coubertin, who refused an invitation to attend.

Callebat wrote that these games may have engendered within Coubertin a bewildering mix "of seduction and perversion mingling with beauty and grandeur."³ The American "tough guy", Avery Brundage, both president of the American Olympic Committee [AOC] and a member of the International Olympic Committee [IOC], wrote his colleague Gustavus Town Kirby about Coubertin's multiple crises. "Why don't we set up a fund for him?", he wrote.⁴ Olympic historian Yves-Pierre Bouloungne has in his possession a Coubertin letter written on August 5, 1937, to his best friend Dr. Francis Messerli:

*These adverse circumstances have created an agonizing situation. The loss of my personal fortune threatens my life-long effort at enlightening pedagogical progress.*⁵

But it was too late. The baron died on September 2, 1937, and most major newspapers, world wide, took notice.⁶

So did Coubertin's own *Bulletin du CIO* which pronounced, correctly, that "the memory of Coubertin will be long lasting and practical".⁷ *The Times* of London wrote that "Baron Pierre de Coubertin ...died suddenly yesterday afternoon from apoplexy while walking in the park at La Grange in Geneva"⁸



Pierre Lorme's lengthy Coubertin obituary in the Paris *L'Illustration* of September 11, 1937, failed to mention the Olympic Games, but called Coubertin "a profoundly humanistic creator of an educational philosophy called 'Olympism'."⁹ Professor Lennartz, from the Carl Diem Institute in Cologne, Germany, wrote that "The mortal remains of the man [Coubertin] were buried in Lausanne. His heart, however, in accordance with his will, found its last resting place in Olympia."¹⁰

But nearly seven months passed before the heart of

Coubertin was transported to the ancient ruins in the Greek Peloponnesus. It was late March of 1938 and the whole of the European continent was on the edge of the greatest of catastrophes – World War II.

IOC President, Henri de Baillet-Latour, found time to praise his friend Coubertin. "*The world has lost a genius,*" he said.¹¹

Three Coubertin memorial ceremonies took place, and in order of magnitude they are: Lausanne March 26, 1938:

*Coubertin's funeral took place at the Church of Notre Dame du Valentin and then his burial in the City of Lausanne Bois-de-Vaux Cemetery.*¹²

A second and larger ceremony took place that same day in Paris, the birthplace of Coubertin [1863] and his residence until 1915. At 10:30 A.M., a ceremony took place in the Roman Catholic Church of the Trinity, with French Olympic Committee members, representatives of sporting groups and numerous personalities in attendance. An hour later in the Porte de Saint-Cloud Municipal Stadium and in the presence of M. Faillot (president, Municipal Council); Armand Massard (IOC member, 1946-1970); Misters Bucaille, G. Prade, J. de Castelaine, and Leo Lagrange (under-secretary of state for physical education), a solemn ceremony took place:

*Before an easel portrait of Pierre de Coubertin, draped in crepe and the national colours, a wreath of greenery and flowers was laid by a member of the French Olympic Committee [COF]. Three speeches by Faillot, Massard and Lagrange praised Coubertin whose entire life was dedicated to the Olympic Games rebirth and to the physical and intellectual development of youth everywhere. Physical education students from Joinville School and from the École Normale formed an honorary line, all accompanied by police department musicians.*¹³

An imposing ceremony took place at Olympia on Saturday, March 26, 1938. Several hundred people moved around the "sacred soil", some of them prominent in the worlds of theology, politics, and the Olympic movement.¹⁴ All honor to the Greeks on their anniversary of national independence and all glory to the memory of the late Baron de Coubertin. A

journalist writing in the Paris *L'Auto* wrote of the appropriateness and importance of this gathering at Olympia:

*What a simple and yet grand ceremony took place at Olympia. The Greek Prince Royal placed the urn containing the heart of Coubertin inside the commemorative monument. At the same time a similar religious ceremony took place in Paris, honoring this man who dedicated his life to the greater perception of the noble, idealized human, capable of attainment by all of us.*¹⁵

Of course, the many Athens newspapers covered in detail the unique ceremony at Olympia. It was a modest but sacred ritual wrote one. A dignified ceremony for the baron, elevating humanity through his philosophy of 'Olympism', wrote another eye-witness journalist. This great heart of the Baron de Coubertin has returned to Greece, was another note from a newspaper writer that made the trip from Athens.¹⁶

With no disrespect for the memory of the late Olympic Games' founder, the Greek people, especially their government representatives, were also celebrating their independence day.¹⁷

It seemed appropriate for several foreign diplomats to make the arduous trip to Olympia from Athens. One of them was Lincoln MacVeagh of the United States Legation. He wrote a detailed report of all that he saw and heard to his Secretary of State. "The morning was one of the most beautiful imaginable", he wrote, "with Greek peasants gathered on the outskirts". He spoke of the ceremony itself, the Grand Marshall, the Crown Prince, the Minister Governor of Athens, the Ministers of both France and the USA. The remainder of MacVeagh's report is "all politics":

The German Third Reich had taken over sacred Olympia for further exploration, but no German official was at the burial ceremony when the Crown Prince of Greece planted a Frenchman's heart squarely at the entrance of the German excavation. This burial was France's answer to the German claim at Olympia. The Olympic Committee doubtless thought that all they had done was to lay the heart of their old chief to rest near the sacred spot he loved, but those whose business keeps them aware of



Prince Paul placing the urn in the stele

*conflicting interests in this little corner of the world knew that what we had witnessed was also the placing of the seal of France on the German claim...as neat a little piece of the expropriation of kudos as one could wish to see.*¹⁸

A careful description of the 1938 "Cérémonie d'Olympie" appeared in that year's *Revue Olympique* and then an abridged version appeared in the *Olympic Review* of 1987, in recognition of the 50th year since the death of Coubertin.¹⁹ The most careful description of this unique 1938 ceremony is contained on pages one to three of the French language, Athens-based newspaper *Le Messager d'Athènes* for March 22, 1938. Probably nothing of importance escaped the writer in this vivid 1700-word narrative, accompanied by three photographs. This researcher found no overt or veiled strident political views in this *Messenger* account, unusual in a 1938 Europe, overwhelmed with the trumpets of war.²⁰

The lengthy ceremony is more clearly summarized in the 1938 *Revue Olympique* mentioned above.

Slowly approaching the marble upright stele and representing the Family Coubertin were Count Albert Bertier de Sauvigny of France [IOC 1904-1920] and another ancient one", Count Alexandre Mercati [Greek

IOC member 1897-1925]; the young Greek Crown Prince Paul; Count Henri de Baillet-Latour, all followed by churchmen, Hellenic and IOC members, as well as the necessary diplomats from many nations. Grand Marshall Mercati was first to speak, and called Coubertin "a great Philhellène, a noble man who returned the Olympic Games to Greece during that nation's very difficult days."²¹ Sauvigny was next, his whole few moments taken in reading a letter from the widow Coubertin, Madame Marie Rothan [1860-1964], still living in Lausanne's "Mon Repos". I cannot be with you, but thank you to all who revere the name of Pierre de Coubertin, she wrote, and special thanks to the Royal Prince Constantine who, in 1896, allowed the first games to take place. And let us not forget:

*Those like-minded men on the first 1894 IOC: Bikelas; Balk; Sloane; Gebhardt; Boutowsky; Kémény, and especially Mr. Jiri-Guth-Jarkovsky, who survives to this day. The torch has passed from Coubertin to those who will hold it high and pass it on to others...his flame will never be extinguished.*²²

Thus spoke with eloquence the 78 year old Madame Coubertin, a powerful, little understood force in the life of her late husband. The Greek Minister of Culture, C. Georgacopoulos, was the next speaker and the essence of his 400-word oration was sincere as well as good history. Coubertin was the enlightened creator of the Modern Olympic Games and "Greece enthusiastically accepted [his] decision." He continued his praise of Coubertin, that man of noble soul:

*Your heart is at this moment deposited on the sacred soil of Olympia....A block of white Hellenic marble... will for ever mark your illuminated passage in this world and will consecrate the memory of your struggles for the Olympic Games.*²³

Just moments before Georgacopoulos spoke, the Crown Prince Paul placed the green urn containing Coubertin's heart into a resting place inside the stele, to be followed by a brief prayer by a Greek Orthodox priest acknowledging the eternal state of blessedness of Coubertin's soul. De Baillet-Latour spoke last. "Farewell Pierre de Coubertin. May thy soul rest in peace", said the IOC President and friend of the Founder for more than thirty-five years.²⁴

Following this ceremony a luncheon took place at the Hotel S.P.A.P. in Olympia, hosted by the Hellenic Olympic Committee. Prince Paul recognized two Olympic athletes, "Mrs. Alin Matousevska and Mr. Peter Lann from England with olive branches. At 2:15 p.m. the Prince and guests returned to Athens".²⁵



The stele in Olympia with the wreaths

While at the S.P.A.P., De Baillet-Latour sent off a short handwritten note to far away Madame Coubertin, offering condolences and noting that her husband's friends had completed proper recognition. She immediately replied.²⁶

John J. MacAloon's research on this 1938 scenario is valuable. He combined sober factual data with his unique psycho-historical, almost eurythmic interpretation:

*...something rather more and rather different was achieved in these strangely appropriate last rites. In them, race, moment, and milieu – the grand trinity of Hippolyte Taine, who had helped start Coubertin on his journey half a century before – were confounded one last time.*²⁷

Conclusions

MacAloon goes on at some length, looking into the mind of Baron de Coubertin and why he insisted on his own double funeral ceremonies – one in Switzerland, one in Greece – but none in France.

There is merit in reading this kind of thoughtful interpretative history.

Historical recapitulation is not a strict science and proven fact must frequently blend with intuitive thinking to arrive at something close to exactly what happened...and why.

The International Olympic Committee and its vast network of alliances likes to call itself a peace movement. All well and good. So do many other organizations call themselves world pacificatory agents.

"One World" utterances come regularly from the European Union [EU], from UNESCO, the UN, NATO, international courts of arbitration, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent, and many others. They all want peace, equality and economic stability for the whole human race. So does the IOC. Not one of them has succeeded in halting a world war, holy wars, mini regional conflicts. Very few call for the abolishment of these agencies because of their frustrating record of failures.

The IOC can never bring peace on earth, and the twenty books written by Pierre de Coubertin, many dealing with the pacific concept of Olympism, cannot ensure fairness and a world elevation of its standard of living.

The voices heard at the Coubertin funeral ceremonies [1937 and 1938] in Lausanne, Paris, and at Olympia, Greece, all spoke of Coubertin's life dream of peace on earth through sport... a special kind of Olympian sport. The armada of cynics around the world usually prefer to be called "scientific realists" and they make short thrift of some organizations mentioned above, including the Olympic Movement, for their excessive lofty aims, and, as a result, their endless

failures. Coubertin was an unbridled optimist regarding his fellow creature and therefore doomed to failure. His creation cannot do all that it claims. None of this is reason enough for the dissolution of a single one of these imperfectly created unions, committees, partnerships. The world cannot exist without both idealists and pragmatists. Without expertise in philosophy or ideologies, this researcher-historian urges that what is needed in the world and in the Olympic world is what Pierre de Coubertin was not . . . a hyphenated leader with a strongly idealistic-realistic bent.

The Coubertin burial ceremonies brought together a segment of societies to honor an imperfect man who sought impossible perfection in himself, in his Olympic world, and in the larger social segment.

It may be that the voice of existential castle builders must not be quieted.²⁸

END NOTES:

1. "Letter to German Government", dated March 16, 1937. See: *Revue Olympique*, #1 [1938], page 3.

2. Karl Lennartz, "The Presidency of Henri de Baillet-Latour (1925-1942)", located in volume 1 of three volumes: *The International Olympic Committee – One Hundred Years 1894-1994* [Lausanne: CIO 1994], page 212 (hereafter IOC 1894-1994).

3. Louis Callebat, *Pierre de Coubertin* [Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1988], page 214.

4. See Brundage to Kirby; letter dated January 4, 1937, in the *Avery Brundage Collection* (hereafter ABC); reel 17; box 30. Brundage learned the bad news from a letter sent to him by Frederick W. Rubien, the Secretary of the American Olympic Committee. This December 22, 1936 letter [ABC, *ibid*] recommended that \$100.00 "be appropriated" to be added to the fund already established by the IOC and announced "in the last issue of their *Bulletin*".

5. See Boulongne, *La Vie et l'oeuvre pedagogique de Pierre de Coubertin 1863-1937* [Ottawa: Editions Leméac, 1975], page 69.

6. See *The Times* [London], September 3, 1937, page 14, and a biography in that same newspaper, September 7, 1937. "Coubertin dies" was the headline in *The New York Times* (hereafter NYT), September 3, 1937, page 17. Also, see *New York Herald Tribune*, September 3, 1937, page 14. *Le Figaro* of Paris (3 September 1937, page 3) had an

insightful obituary of Coubertin, the modern man who emphasized the ancient Hellenic cry to health and sanity for "body, mind and spirit" (Maurice Capella, author). Another Coubertin friend wrote: "A grand and noble figure has left us, one whose contributions to Olympism and to humanity are beyond measure". See Fr. M. Messerli: *Histoire des Sports et de l'Olympisme* [Lausanne, 1950], page 22. This researcher has read scores of Coubertin obituaries from newspapers on three continents. A newspaper journalist in Alexandria, Egypt, wrote of the late Coubertin: "He was a philosopher who lived for athletics and the Olympic spirit". See *The Egyptian Gazette*, September 4, 1937, page 7.

7. *CIO Bulletin* October 1937, number 35, pages 2-3. For even greater insight, see Otto Mayer: *A Travers les Anneaux Olympiques* [Genève, Caillier, 1960], pages 166-167.

8. See endnote 6.

9. See Lorme in Volume 198, page 31.

10. See Lennartz, IOC 1894-1994, page 213.

11. See *The Japan Magazine*, "Olympic Number" 1; volume 28 (1938), page 19, for De Baillet-Latour's remarks. Additional eulogies of the late Coubertin are included here: James C. Merrick, IOC member from Canada (pages 17-18); William May Garland, IOC member from USA (pages 19-20), and Lord Aberdare, IOC member from Great Britain (page 20). Also included here is what was called "Coubertin's last message to IOC Technical advisor, Werner Klingeberg", dated "Geneva, July 29, 1937." Coubertin, never a great prognosticator, looked forward to the 1940 Olympic Games, "where Hellenism might combine with the refined culture and art of Asia. It is a most enjoyable thought to me". See page 17 of this *Japan Magazine* located in the New York Public Library "Oriental Division".

12. Christian Gilliéron read the official city of Lausanne *Procès-verbaux de la Municipalité*. See Gilliéron's *Les Relations de Lausanne et du Mouvement Olympique à l'Époque de Pierre de Coubertin 1894-1939* [Lausanne: CIO 1993], page 161.

13. See lengthy description titled: "Le Coeur de Pierre de Coubertin a été déposé hier à Olympie" in *Le Figaro* [Paris], 27 mars 1938, page 3.

14. Several persons or groups not mentioned in this less than perfect list were present at Olympia on March 26, 1938:

- a. Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts
- b. M. Rêdiadis, sous-secrétarie d'État
- c. Due de Mecklenbourg [IOC]
- d. M. Ritter von Halt [IOC]

- e. Marquis de Polignac [IOC]
- f. Angelo C. Bolanaki [IOC]
- g. "Delegates" from Poland, Norway, Sweden, USA, Hungary, Bulgaria, Japan and Canada.
- h. "Members of the Hellenic Olympic Committee".
- i. M. Ketséas.
- j. M. Rinoploulos.
- k. M. Castritis.
- l. M. Nicolaidis.
- m. M. Ftêris.
- n. M. Baltazzis.
- o. M. Athanassiadis.
- p. M. Demangel [Paris].
- q. M. Klinkenberg [Berlin].
- r. M. Kuntz.
- s. M. Apostolidis.
- t. M. Papavassiliou.

15. See *L'Auto* [Paris], 27 mars 1938. Researcher unable to read page number.

16. See *Kathimgrini* [Athens], March 27, 1938, pages 1, 4; *Ethnos* [Athens], March 26, 1938, page 6; *Elgfhgron Vima* [Athens], March 27, 1938, page 3; *Proia* [Athens], March 27, 1938, page 6.

17. The Greeks asserted themselves and won their independence from Turkish rule in early 1828. See Edwin Emerson, Jr., *A History of the Nineteenth Century By Year*, volume 2 of three volumes [New York: P.F. Collier and sons, 1902], page 758.

18. MacVeagh's letter is dated April 29, 1938, and is located in the United States National Archives in Washington, D.C. See Microfilm M1179; reel 7.

19. *Revue Olympique* 3 [1938], pages 41-43; *Olympic Review* 239 [September 1987], pages 448-450.

20. *Le Messager d'Athènes*, Dimanche 27 mars 1938, pages 1-3, is testimony to the newspaper editors of the dual importance of Coubertin's entombment and the vital significance of the nation's independence day celebrations.

21. *Ibid*, page 41.

22. *Ibid*, page 42-43.

23. *Olympic Review* 239 [September 1987], page 450.

24. *Ibid*. This ceremony seemed important enough to be included in the *NYT*, March 27, 1938, page 29; the *New York Herald Tribune*, March 27, 1938, page 26; *The Times* of London, March 29, 1938, page 15. The mystical writer, Marie-Thérèse Eyquem, spoke of this 1938 burial "amidst this sacred place of both battle and eurythmie". See Eyquem's *L'Épopée Olympique* [Paris: Calmann-Levy, 1966], page 289. Long-time IOC member from Greece, Nikos Filaretos, was almost old enough to have been present there in 1938. See his comment in *The Centennial Presidents* [Lausanne: CIO 1997], pages 44-49. Coubertin's grand-nephew, Geoffroy de Navacelle, quoted the exact inscription carved on the stele:

Remise du coeur de Coubertin, par le prince-héritier Paul de Grèce, dans la stèle édifée à Olympie selon son désir. Cette stèle a été transférée à l'entrée de l'Académie Internationale Olympique non loin du Stade.

See *Pierre de Coubertin – Sa Vie par l'Image* [Zurich: Weidmann 1991], page 89.

25. Seen Endnote 16. This researcher sought the services of a Greek translator and this quote is either from *Kathimgrini* or *Elgfhgron Vima*.

26. This researcher has copies of these letters, but had the greatest difficulty in reading the "hurry-up" script in the French language. See Madame Coubertin to Baillet-Latour letter dated March 25, 1938, and Baillet-Latour to Madame Coubertin letter dated March 26, 1938, in the IOC archives.

27. John J. MacAloon, *This Great Symbol – Pierre de Coubertin and the Origins of the Modern Olympic Games* [Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981], page 7.

28. As is always true, the merits and deficiencies of this manuscript are entirely those of the researcher. But many generous colleagues supplied me with extant primary documents. Some of these individuals are: Dave Kelly, The Library of Congress; Nikos Filaretos and Dr. "Kostas" Georgiadis from the Hellenic Olympic Committee; Margo Stavros, State College, Pennsylvania; Jean-François Pahud, Barbara Schenkel from the IOC's archives depository, as well as the small army of scholars known to me by their books and manuscripts.