

Book Reviews

To avoid criticism, do nothing, say nothing, be nothing.
Elbert Hubbard

Rühl, Joachim. *Die Olympischen Spiele Robert Dovers (Robert Dover's Olympic Games)*. Heidelberg: University of Heidelberg Press, 1975. Pp. 261. Index, footnotes, bibliography, maps.

In this work Rühl has closely analyzed the events and conditions leading to the institution of Robert Dover's Games, tracing their development from the 17th Century, when they were called the Cotswold Games, through the 18th and 19th Centuries, when they were titled Dover's Meetings, until the 20th Century when they became Robert Dover's Games.

An examination is also made of popular church festivals from the beginnings of Christianity in England until their decline in the 17th Century. Ecclesiastical records provided an account of these festivals and gave some indication of the activities that made up the festival programme.

Rühl examines how the festivals were conducted and financed, and for what purpose the proceeds were used. He also gives an account of the way in which they changed in the course of time and the varying success achieved by the Puritans in banning the festivals for their "heathen elements."

Prior to the intervention of the Puritans, the Church had quietly allowed games and competitions to follow the church services on Sunday. The royalty had themselves condoned such practices and expressed their support through the then liberal *Declaration of Sports* appearing during the reigns of Charles I and James I.

In his biography of Robert Dover, Rühl gives reasons for Dover's move from Norfolk to Gloucestershire and outlines his activities as a lawyer and a notary. At that time Dover's acquaintances held influential positions as justices of the peace, municipal judges, and landowners, and so were able to substantially support him in his desire to promote the Cotswold Games. Among Dover's patrons were Charles I and James I who were to provide him with guns, garments, and ammunition to be used in some of the festival activities.

When G. Goodman became the Bishop of Gloucester diocese in 1625, the

Puritans temporarily lost much of their influence. Goodman was a friend of Porter, a strong supporter of Dover, and had publicly spoken in favour of competitions on Sundays and holidays, at the same time donating prizes to be given to the winners. Unfortunately this generous support was to be of no lasting help as the Civil War in England in 1642 finally brought an end to the Cotswold Games.

Finally in 1644, a restrictive ordinance was passed “for the better observation of the Lords Day,” which supported the Puritan attitudes and gave them strength to fight and subsequently outlaw such festivals.

Rühl’s examination of the programme of the Cotswold Games relies mainly on *Annalia Dubrensia*, an anthology of poems in praise of Robert Dover, together with other contemporary reports, decrees and by-laws. Although it was difficult to ascertain the sequence of individual competitions from this material, the programme of the Cotswold Games offered competitions for the nobility (horse racing, hunting), and competitions for the lower classes such as quarter staff, fencing, running, jumping, throwing events and wrestling. Traditional sports of past church festivals such as dice, cards, bowling, acrobatics, cock fighting and bull baiting were also included.

From the *Annalia Dubrensia* and other writings which touch on Dover’s reasons for instituting the Cotswold Games, Rühl feels that statements suggesting that Dover wished to establish a copy of the Olympic Games rest more on literary convention than on fact. Comparisons with famous models (such as the Olympic Festival) were well known literary devices of the time used for lauding the works of particular authors. Rather did the Cotswold Games represent a revival of English popular festivals which gave local people an opportunity to take part in a common festival using games similar to earlier times. The Cotswold Games did not copy a specific English pastoral festival but rather were a composite festival using games and competitions found in many other festivals.

Rühl’s examination of the *Annalia Dubrensia* indicated that the authors of this work included poets, dramatic actors, who, because of their occupation, had been exposed to criticism from the Puritans. This was likewise the case with Dover’s friends and supporters.

After Robert Dover’s death, his games were adopted under the name of Dover’s Meeting. By the 18th Century, their management lay in the hands of inn keepers in the Chipping Camden area who made considerable profit out of the event. In the 18th Century Dover’s Meeting was hardly different from other fairs, being simply a festival for the rural population.

After the enclosure system was introduced in the Chipping Camden parish in

1799, the games were moved to the region of the Weston-sub-Edge parish. Consequently the innkeepers of Chipping Camden were forced to sign leases with the farmers of Weston-sub-Edge who owned the grounds. The games reached a high point by 1812, and finally the restrictions of the enclosure system terminated Dover's Meeting, the last gathering taking place in 1857.

In the second half of the 19th Century, nothing remained of Dover's Meeting but a fair that took place on Saturdays in the Chipping Camden market place which enabled it to avoid the restrictions of the enclosure system. This fair, which from 1887 forward was called Scuttlebrook Wake, eventually developed its own programme, which had hardly undergone noteworthy changes even to this day. The hill on which the Cotswold Games and Dover's Meeting had taken place became part of the National Trust in 1928. After a break of 100 years, a one-time effort at reviving Robert Dover's Games was attempted during the 1951 Festival of Britain. It was not particularly popular. In 1963, three members of the Scuttlebrook Wake Committee founded an independent Robert Dover's Games Society, whose goal was to raise money for charitable purposes by reviving Robert Dover's Games with activities more in line with modern taste.

Rühl concludes by saying that in the 19th Century the fair tended to be an insignificant appendage of Dover's Meeting and today Robert Dover's Games likewise represent an insignificant appendage of the Scuttlebrook Wake. It remains to be seen whether the time will come when a revival is made of Dover's Games in its original format as a source of income and as a tourist attraction.

The depth and precise nature of Rühl's research in "Die Olympischen Spiele Robert Dovers" make this work a valuable contribution to the history of sport. It is unfortunate that this work appears at present only in the German language since it deals with an important phase in English history. More than anything else Rühl puts Dover's "contributions" in their rightful place and helps to dispel the misunderstanding surrounding Dover's Games and their relationship to the revival of the Olympic Games in modern times.

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