Journal of Sport History, Vol. 8, No. 2 (Summer, 1981)

Book Reviews

History is from day to day; and it is not events,
it is sociology; it is the progress of thought.
Alfred North Whitehead

MacAloon, John J. *This Great Symbol: Pierre de Coubertin and the Origins of the Modern Olympic Games.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981. Pp. xiv, 359. Index, bibliography, notes, plates. $25.00

Armed with the anthropological and psychoanalytical theories of Victor Turner and Erik Erikson, MacAloon sets out to slay a pair of dragons: the first is history written without social theory and the second is social theory removed from history. The dragons will survive (they are probably immortal), but MacAloon deserves knighthood for his efforts. He has, to change the metaphor, built upon the historical work of John A. Lucas, Marie-Thérèse Eyquem, and Richard Mandell, corrected a number of their minor errors, and offered an interpretation of both the modern Olympic Games and their *Rénovateur.* The games he sees as ritual; the man he sees as a psychologically troubled aristocrat in a republican age for whom the revival of the games solved, more or less, the problems of identity.

MacAloon's analysis of the Games is more successful than his psychoanalysis of Pierre de Coubertin. ''Competition, consecration, enjoyment and wonder are primary modes of human action, orchestrated, and in turn orchestrating, ideological, social, and psychological formations. These modes of action and experience are particularly condensed in discreet genres of cultural performance: games, rites, festivals, spectacles.'' (p. 269). It is precisely this sense of the interaction among different kinds of cultural activity which gives *This Great Symbol* its complexity and fascination. In describing the games at Athens in 1896, MacAloon moves from the athletic competitions to the ceremonies in which they were embedded, to the parades and banquets and spontaneous outbreaks of enthusiasm that accompanied the contests, to the entire sequence of events as spectacle. MacAloon shows how difficult it is theoretically to draw the lines between the various aspects of the ritual. For the jubilant Greeks who welcomed their countryman's victory in the marathon, the race was as much a proclamation of national identity as the Olympic hymn and the blue and white flags. MacAloon is especially good in his commentary on the uncertainties of the first Games: ''Spectatorial structures of attention, etiquette, and evaluation, no less than the athletes' and officials' codes of per-

formance and judgment were often enough ad hoc." (p. 270). Everyone was, inevitably, somewhat uncertain about how to behave. No one, not even Coubertin, realized fully how important the Games were to become as a symbol both of the modern and of the primitive, which the modern seeks to repress and which appears, nonetheless, in the ritual process.

In order to demonstrate that the Games were, indeed, a symbol of the modern and the primitive, MacAloon writes extensively of the cultural context. He does a little with the United States and its influence upon Coubertin, much more with England, where Coubertin found much of his inspiration, and a great deal with France, whose collective search for a national identity seemed in many ways the macroscopic version of Coubertin's travail. To say that MacAloon does a great deal is to understate. In fact, he has investigated the political tensions of the Third Republic, the social strains behind the politics, and the intellectual milieu in which men like Hippolyte Taine, Frederic Le Play, and Émile Durkheim sought for solutions to the devastating problems that wracked their nation. MacAloon demonstrates in detail what others have suggested: that Taine and Le Play were important influences on Coubertin, that Durkheim (who had little or no direct influence) was in some intriguing ways a kindred spirit.

Since Coubertin was a member of the nobility, he shared with them the crisis of identity suffered by the aristocracy in a world where rank depends increasingly on personal achievement rather than upon the ascriptive qualities of birth. In Coubertin's case, the question became very precise: what was he to do with himself once it became clear that he wanted to become neither a soldier nor a diplomat? In MacAloon's terms, how was Coubertin to demonstrate his *prouesse* when he shunned the two careers traditionally open to the nineteenth-century aristocrat? In retrospect, the answer seems wonderfully paradoxical. Although MacAloon makes little of the irony, Coubertin smuggled aristocratic values into the most meritocratic and achievement-oriented of institutions—modern sports. Upon the abstract plane of quantified competition he called forth (in Victor Turner's phrase) "a forest of symbols."

MacAloon's placement of Coubertin among the declassé aristocrats seems almost self-evidently right, but his assertions about Coubertin's personal psychic history are unpersuasive. On the basis of very shaky evidence, MacAloon portrays Coubertin in rebellion against his father and in secret alliance with the spirit of a "black sheep" great-uncle. Referring confidently to this "mysterious *homme maudit*" (p. 28), MacAloon explores Coubertin's novella, "Le Roman d'un rallié," for clues to what this great-uncle might have meant to young Pierre. Unfortunately, the novella is the *only* evidence we have that such a mysterious relative ever existed or that Pierre was drawn to him or that the indisputable vision at the tomb of Thomas Arnold was matched

by a vision at the grave of ''M. de Lesneven." When one searches the footnotes to discover who "M. de Lesneven" actually was, one finds that MacAloon himself failed to locate anyone whose personal history even approximated that of the fictional ''M. de Lesneven."

There is additional psychoanalytical legerdemain in MacAloon's interpretation of the novella. The figure of ''M. de Lesneven" is said to have served ''to mediate . . . deep psychological and intrafamilial conflicts," (p. 94), but these conflicts are, for the most part, inferred from the novel. Since Etienne, the autobiographical hero of the novella, is an only child, as Coubertin was not, MacAloon asserts that the author has committed fratricide. Confronted with the awkward fact that Etienne laments his lack of brothers, MacAloon remarks, in the footnotes, that Etienne's lament is not convincing. (p. 289n51). With such subjective evidence as this, MacAloon refers to "elder siblings towards whom [Coubertin] maintained a lifelong ambivalence and rivalry." (p. 40). Since the fictional hero's father dies in battle, MacAloon accuses the author of ''symbolic patricide.'' (p. 55). If the novella's hero *had* killed his father, one might with some plausibility wonder about Coubertin's oedipal impulses, but Etienne *admires* his father, who fell fighting the Prussians at Loigny. Coubertin may have suffered from "psychodynamic conflict" (p. 32) of the sort averred, but, for the present, skepticism is in order.

There is recklessness in the psychological interpretation of literary evidence and there is a related problem in MacAloon's own rather elegant prose. In an age when scholars often write as carelessly as undergraduates, MacAloon shows a truly admirable love of language. Like others in love, however, he sometimes commits excesses. He is fond of French words, which usually work well to communicate a sense of Coubertin's milieu, but *marathonomaque* (taken from Charles Maurras) will puzzle some readers. *Eponym* is a lovely word, but MacAloon's fondness for it leads him to use it nine times when he means *epithet.*

MacAloon refers several times to a collection of essays which he has edited under the title *Rite, Drama, Festival, Spectacle* and to work-in-progress on the Olympics as ritual. May he curb some of his psychoanalytical enthusiasm and tame his poetic style while continuing to give more or less free rein to his first-rate anthropological imagination.

Amherst College — Allen Guttmann