

Lucas, John A. *The Modern Olympic Games*. New York: A.S. Barnes, 1980. Pp. 242. Photographs, no bibliography, no notes. \$12.95.

John Lucas' *The Modern Olympic Games* is a work of optimism and belief. It reads like the sole survivor of a plane crash who commented that most of the flight was smooth. This may be true, but the seconds of tragedy and disaster far outweigh the hours of tranquility. Lucas states his position clearly enough in his introduction: "The human animal needs an increasing number of effective alternative means of communication besides the written and spoken word. . . . and sport can serve as [an] alternative to language. . . . The Olympic Games, at their best, can function as one singular instrument among many toward initiating real communication among and between all men and women. We are still far from a stable, rational, and loving world. Yet, as never before, the potential for progress toward such a state exists" (p. 7). Exactly where Lucas sees the proof of "the potential for progress" is uncertain, as is his rosy attitude toward the value of sport. Lucas deals less in the realm of proof than in the world of theology: "I believe in the Olympic Idea and the Olympic Games" (p. 8). There it is again—belief, a word that transcends all rational objections. And those whom may disagree, Lucas characterizes as "that veritable army of nincompoops who over the decades have served up an undirected and inflammatory mishmash against the whole Olympic concept" and have engaged in "mindless Olympic tattletale" (p. 9).

I have dealt at length with Lucas' introduction because the philosophical position stated therein totally dominates the whole of his book. *The Modern Olympic Games* is like Baron Pierre de Coubertin, one of its many heroes. At times it rambles and at more times it's redundant, but the mind behind it can be creative and is always noble. The work shares the same Arnoldian assumptions of Muscular Christianity and fair play that de Coubertin endorsed. And when confronted with ugliness, brutality, and evil, it often chooses not to see the ultimate implication. Both, indeed, are quixotic in the purest sense; they reflect life as it should be, not as it all too often is.

Take, for example, the controversial 1936 Games. Controversial, of course, is used euphemistically, for about the intent of the Games there was nor is the slightest question: sport was used for nationalistic and propagandistic ends. In Lucas' index the word Nazi never appears, although—and this is a telling point—Nobel Peace Prize does. About the Games, Lucas gives us eight pages of a paragraph by paragraph results of who won which medal. Then, evaluating the importance of the Games to Nazi ideology, comments that the "jury has been out ever since these Berlin Olympics became history" (p. 130). What follows is a very brief discussion of the evidence which the "jury" must examine, but which does not interest Lucas much. This uneven balance is deceptive. It's nice to know that "little one-hundred-pound Kitei Son won the 42-kilometer," that "the brilliant Robert Charpentier won the

individual 100-kilometer cycling road race,” that “Ilmari Salminen, Arvo Askola, and Iso-Hollo swept the twenty-five-lap 10,000 meter race,” and that Anwar Mohammed Mesbah did so well in lightweight weightlifting. Certainly individual efforts should not be overlooked—though I am inclined to forget canoe specialist Zdenek Skrdlant, or at least confuse him with Vaclav Mottl—but the reality of the 1936 Games cannot be summarized on box scores.

Lucas’ treatment of Avery Brundage also raises questions. Although Lucas attempts to present different facets of Brundage’s character, he fails because Brundage shared de Coubertin’s (and Lucas’) belief that “the Olympic Games *must* be held every four years and that no earthly power be allowed to interrupt the celebration of the games” (p. 165). True Brundage was “tough and intransigent, with an old-fashioned work ethic that overcame poverty, weathered all the slings and arrows, [and] refused to be broken” (p. 172). And true he probably believed in the Olympic ideal. But he was still mean, vicious, and racist. Lucas admits that Brundage was anti-Semitic, but when he addresses such criticisms of Brundage he attempts to explain them away environmentally. When the Games were attacked on moral grounds in 1935 and 1936, Brundage struck out with the venom of a cobra. “We . . . do not care about the ‘Jew-Nazi altercation’ in Germany, especially if it might prevent our great Olympic teams from participating in the games,” Brundage said during one of his less anti-Semitic moments (p. 165). Was this Brundage’s concept of sport serving as an “alternative means of communication” and showing the “potential for progress”?

I have, then, severe philosophical and conceptual differences with Lucas, and I do not consider myself a troop in the “army of nincompoops” who have criticized the Olympic Movement. In the best of years—that is, years of relative international peace—the Games have worked fairly well. But during times of stress they have reflected and occasionally exacerbated the tension. Lucas’ book also is good when discussing the best in the history of the Olympic Movement; indeed, there are many moving and eloquent passages in the volume. But when theory confronts reality, when the Olympic Ideal faces a world of passionate nationalism and irrational evil, Lucas’ faith and optimism seem inadequate and unfounded.

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