
RENSON, ROLAND. *The Games Reborn: The VIII Olympiad Antwerp, 1920*. Antwerp: Pandora, 1996. Illustrations. Pp. 96.

If the games celebrated in 1936 are the problem child of the Olympic movement, those of 1920 are the orphan. I suspect that less has been written about them than about any other Olympics, and the thin accounts that have been published are “incomplete and often inaccurate” (p. 7). And yet, as Renson remarks in his introduction, “The Olympic Games which took place in Antwerp in 1920 are of exceptional historical importance. They represent the rebirth of the Olympic movement from the ashes of the First World War” (p. 7). *The Games Reborn* is lucid, witty, richly informative, and beautifully illustrated with more than two hundred illustrations. Renson has rectified a historiographical wrong.

At the thirteenth session of the IOC, which took place in Basel in March of 1912, Baron Edouard de Laveleye, who was president of both the Belgian Olympic Committee and the Belgian Football Union, presented the committee with Antwerp’s unofficial bid for the 1920 games. A provisional organizing committee

with four elected presidents and twenty-two vice presidents was established on August 9, 1913. Prominent among them was Count Henri de Baillet-Latour, destined to become Coubertin's successor in 1925. Before the IOC made a decision about the 1920 games, World War I intervened.

Once the guns fell silent, Coubertin spoke up and urged the Belgians to renew their bid. Antwerp was selected on April 5, 1919, which gave the organizing committee just sixteen months to prepare. What followed was "heroic improvisation" (p. 18) and the reconstructed stadium at the Royal Beerschot Athletic Club offered less than ideal conditions for track-and-field competition. Many events took place at venues distant from Antwerp. The oarsmen competed, for instance, in Brussels on the Willebroeck Canal and Coubertin described the spot as "a place so hideous that no attempts have been made to try and disguise its ugliness" (p. 22). Cycling, ice hockey, and figure skating were among the events that took place as much as six months before the opening ceremony on August 14th.

Renson discusses various controversies—were the *living* conditions as bad as the Americans alleged? Did the healthy young athletes cavort nocturnally with "venus kittens"? (p. 38)—But most of his text is devoted to a detailed account of the sports competitions per se. The illustrations, which are marvelous, accompany the text, which is not always the case in scholarly books.

There are two chapters on the economic aspects of the games, which Renson characterizes as a "financial debacle" (p. 81). The penultimate chapter deals with the alleged apathy of the Belgian press and with the claim that the games were designed—and the tickets priced—to appeal to Belgium's elite rather than its masses. Renson rejects the first allegation, but supports the second with some strong language: "The organisers realized too late that the Olympic ideals had not gone beyond the realms of their elitist circles and. . . remained a symbol of the 'conspicuous consumption' of an obsolete 'leisure class' left behind from the 'Belle Epoque'" (p. 87).

Were the games then the "unique failure," the "debacle," that foreign commentators called them, or were they a "great success from all points of view," which is how Belgium's Rodolphe-William Seeldrayers characterized them? Renson concludes that it was a great *political* achievement simply to have had the games barely two years after the end of the devastating war. They were, indeed, the "salvation of the international sporting movement" (p. 91). Socially and culturally, however, the games were retrograde in that female and working-class athletes were as marginalized as they had been before the war. Renson does not offer a summary judgement on the success or failure of the sports competitions per se, but there was good reason to be satisfied despite some inevitable squabbles. Charles Paddock, Paavo Nurmi, Norman Ross, Duke Kahanamoku, Aileen Riggin, John B. Kelly, Suzanne Lenglen, et al., still provide plenty of copy for popular (and unpopular) Olympic historians.

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