

Reflections of a Distinguished Tourist: De Coubertin in Canada, 1889

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Last year saw the centenary of Pierre de Coubertin's visit to North America in 1889, and a Conference in Quebec City this year which celebrated the fact. The Baron has written at length about his tour, and his participation at the Physical Training Conference in Boston, November 29-30, 1889, has been the main focus of historians' attention. Few have elaborated upon his time spent in Canada or his comments made while touring this country. Yet Coubertin's opinions are interesting and worthwhile on several counts.

His visits to both English and French educational institutions in Montreal, Ottawa and Toronto, afford him several opportunities to compare systems, and strongly favour the alleged character-building qualities of British games and sports in the curriculum—a familiar theme explored elsewhere in discussions of Coubertin's visit to Rugby School, in England, in particular. The Baron's narrative demonstrates his impressive knowledge of Canadian history and contemporary politics, and he never hesitates to offer his forceful opinions on both topics. On another level, he shows entertaining skill as a travel-writer, intriguing the reader with colourful and vivid descriptions of the scenery and sights encountered en route. Lastly, there is evidence throughout of another of Coubertin's qualities which is too often overlooked, i.e. his sense of humour. In many ways, in fact, one might be tempted to describe this Canadian narrative as "vintage Coubertin" . . . except that he was only 26 years old at the time.