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The Visit of Pierre de Coubertin to Montréal in 1889: Muscles or Brain for the French Canadian?

In 1889, the Public Instruction Minister of France gave Baron Pierre de Coubertin the mission of visiting and studying many universities and colleges throughout the United States and Canada, and reporting back on how the athletic associations were organized in both countries. This study was then to be used to guide the organization of physical education in France.

After visiting many cities in North America, de Coubertin produced a report published in Paris in 1890. In its pages, he told his readers of the universities and colleges he toured, the people he met, and also some of his impressions as a sightseer.

But not everyone in the Québec city of Montréal appreciated what he had to say about it. One compatriot of de Coubertin, the Vicomte de Bouthillier-Chavigny, who had lived in Québec for some years, was upset by his comments about French Canadians. After having married a local woman, he felt he had to reply to the Baron. The Vicomte published a book, *Justice aux Canadiens-français*, that provided an alternative account of the school system in Québec in general, and in Montreal in particular. This work provided a much more extensive treatment of the Montréal system than that of the Baron.

This paper compares two different late-nineteenth century views, one from France and one from Québec. de Coubertin was influenced greatly by the British sense of sport, and by Thomas Arnold in particular, while de Bouthillier-Chavigny was closer to the Catholic Church of Québec, which then controlled education and society. The paper also offers a different perception of who controlled political power and the economy. de Coubertin believed that sport and physical education were two measures of British influence in Montreal, a notion that de Bouthillier-Chavigny re-worked to question and undermine the Baron's argument and challenge his conclusions.

It would take some five to ten years after de Coubertin's visit to Montréal for sport to become part of French Canadian culture. The English community engaged in sports like lacrosse, hockey, snowshoeing and cricket, but only snowshoeing was practiced by many French Canadians; baseball was becoming popular outside the city, in some French rural villages. de Coubertin's observations of Montreal were not wrong. But by attacking the Catholic Church, he provided an impetus and occasion for the Vicomte de Bouthillier-Chavigny to reply and give another view of what French Canadians perceived of themselves.