

*Le Rêve Blanc, Olympisme et Sport d'hiver en France: Chamonix 1924, Grenoble 1968* by Pierre Arnaud and Thierry Terret (Bordeaux: Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux, 1993). Reviewed by E. John B. Allen, Plymouth State College, Plymouth, New Hampshire, USA.

Expanded from the authors' report, "Effets d'entraînement des Jeux Olympiques d'Albertville 1992," presented to the CNRS--PPSH (Plan Pluriannuel en Sciences Humaines), *Le Rêve Blanc* has little to do with the actual competitions. The authors analyze social, political and economic factors of the pre and post years of the Winter Olympics of Chamonix in 1924 and the Grenoble Games of 1968 because commentary on the approaching Albertville Games (the report was tendered in 1991) was uncritical of these vital matters. The book is divided unequally between the two Games; the Grenoble section is more detailed. Both sections of the book cover preparations for the Games, administration and committee work, and analyzes the after-effects. Many comparisons between 1924 and 1968 are made, but in the end, the book is a warning for the upcoming 1992 extravaganza and, by extension, for future Games.

The book's subtitle, 'Olympisme et Sport d'hiver en France', indicates that this work is not merely a comparison of Chamonix and Grenoble. The authors analyze the differences among 'winter games', 'winter sports', and Olympic competition. Nationalism, winter tourism, demographic concerns, economics, health, fitness of the French race all receive notice, some more than others. The authors correctly claim that previous histories of winter sports and Winter Olympics have not been exhaustive and often merely repeat what others have written. This book is to remedy those two defects of previous works. You will not, however, find much about the actual sporting events; this is a history of the hopes and perceptions of those involved in the organizing and administration of these two Olympics. It is not, then, an exhaustive study covering all aspects of the two French-organized Winter Games, yet no future historian of the Winter Olympics nor of winter sports will be able to ignore *Le Rêve Blanc*, for it shows clearly how initial plans get changed, how original organization and administrative functions are buffeted by outside forces, and finally how very difficult it is to find out who benefits from the Games.

The book's analysis is based on materials drawn from forty-nine archives and institutions which are listed under their initials, modern abracadabra to which the French seem particularly addicted. I did not enjoy C.E.M.A.G.R.E.F., A.M.S.F.S.H., A.N.C.E.S.F. and A.S.A.D.A.C., to pick the six and seven letter varieties. The section 'Methodological Aspects' includes bibliographic information which is sometimes incomplete. The list includes, for example, "ouvrages spécialisés, encyclopédies des sports, almanachs et annuaires." Perhaps we do not need to know the encyclopedias of sport which have been consulted but surely the arcana of almanachs and annuals need to be revealed, and the authors do, indeed, give us an indication: "PLM, Association des maires des stations de sports d'hiver." P.L.M. is

the well known Paris-Lyon-Méditerranée Railway Company, but we are not told where the archives are, nor could I locate the A.M.S.F.S.H. archive. Johannes Pallière, "Les premiers Jeux d'hiver de 1924: La grande bataille de Chamonix," *L'Histoire en Savoie* 26, 103 (septembre 1991) is a good companion piece to *Le Rêve Blanc*, but I was surprised not to see any mention of Mathilde Lafournier's, "La vie alpestre transformée par le ski," *Revue de Deux Mondes* XXIX, 14 (octobre 1935), 879-891 since the transformation of the alps was also Arnaud and Terret's concern.

The events at Chamonix included games of winter and skiing as a peasant activity, as well as winter sports and skating as an urban pastime. The connections -- hardly ever mentioned in histories of winter sports -- between the French army, the French Alpine Club, the National Tourist Office and the Olympics are well drawn in the years prior to World War I. The international background, Coubertin's uncertainty about winter games, the already existing (since 1900) Northern Games and the general antagonism of the Scandinavians all receive attention as background for the "Grande semaine internationale des sports d'hiver" held at Chamonix in 1924 and which became the First Winter Olympic Games by IOC decision a year later.

The authors hardly touch on the sporting events themselves; their interest lies in the aftermath. Since the Scandinavian peasants swept the skiing events, those with an eye to raising French prestige promoted the idea of supplying 'skis to the mountain folk.' Other commentators realized that winter games had become bourgeois consumer sport. Much of the analysis rests on the writings of Gabriel Hanot, a *Miroir des Sports* journalist. Perhaps a more even-handed way, especially when writing of perceptions, might have been to include the views of Charles Faroux writing for *L'Auto*. Besides *Le Monde*, the major dailies, *Le Figaro* and *Le Temps* (Lauwick and Rousseau) do not appear to have been consulted.

If the Chamonix Games were an organizational success and, one might judge, a political success too, they were -- at a cost of 3.5 million francs -- an economic disaster. Gate receipts totalled only 120,000 francs of which 31,000 alone came from the ice hockey final. It is still unclear how Chamonix paid its 2 million francs obligation.

There is no doubt that Chamonix was already France's premier sporting venue in 1924. The Games added further stature to the town. Yet the festival that year had really only been "a simple competition among amateurs," and the post-Games impressive lift construction, new hotels, (filled with an increasing clientele, shown neatly in a table of Residence Tax), came from an economic, not an Olympic, impetus.

Over the next decade, "les années folles," Chamonix came to provide urban luxury along with various "anglo-saxon eccentricities" such as ski-joring (being pulled by a rope) behind aircraft, ice-yachting and snow-mobiling. There was also an appeal to new classes of skiers: women and students. Ski business improved in the French Alps, ski manufacturers flourished, ski schools proliferated, and the French ski technique, laid out by Allais and Gignoux in *Ski Français*, finally competed with some success both on the race course and in appealing to a foreign clientele with the Swiss and the Austrians. Emile Allais and James Couttet won the World Championship in 1937 and 1938. But these 'modern' developments had very little to do with the events at Chamonix a decade earlier, thus -- again -- the authors show that

the Olympics were not the driving force in the development of skiing. However, the Games did have one result which no one had expected; they separated skiing out from all the other winter sports. The formation of both the Fédération Française de Ski and the Federation Internationale de Ski (FIS) which controls the sport of skiing to this day, took place at Chamonix. These Games, then, gave the imprimatur to skiing.

Turning to 1968, the authors write that the city of Grenoble is torn “between its haste to forget the event and its gratitude for it.” *Le Rêve Blanc* should be required reading for all municipal officials who contemplate tendering an Olympic bid!

Grenoble city leadership had determined that the Games would undoubtedly rejuvenate the mountain economy as well as provide the opportunity to reconstruct their city. I found the detailed analysis of Grenoble's increase of population since the early 1930s particularly instructive. At the same time the city never became part of the connected development of modern France. Once Grenoble had ‘won’ the Games, the city authorities became prey to larger national aspirations, mostly tied up with ‘prestige’. National prestige is expensive, and the Grenoble Games were used to try out the “techno-structure” of “snow doctrine”, meaning the orchestration of all facets of skiing on and off slope. Grenoble's roads, railways and telecommunications were up-dated, the university re-housed, and “constructions of prestige,” arenas, cultural palaces, the jump and bob-runs all played their part in giving Grenoble a new image. This new image, which included an effort to “market” the Grenoble smile, was to “develop new discipline ... among the young.” There was nothing, it seemed to the optimistic, that the Games could not/would not do. It was hard to find any nay-sayers, though taxes would.

The authors document the increasing rate of taxation at about 24% per annum, the rising prices of construction, and the extraordinary publicity to attract spectators and business, particularly from North American and northern Europe. Television -- in color no less -- probably brought the Games to 500 million people world wide, including the huge majority of Frenchmen (including President Georges Pompidou) who found the prices of admission exorbitant (1500-2000 francs minimum). Then there was the defence of the home piste; the French were determined to end “the insolent domination of the Austrians.” Ski manufacturers, Dynamic, allowed French racers to try out fifty models. It worked! Killy became a ‘phenomenon’, a ‘God’, a ‘formidable moral force.’ Old nationalisms thrived in a Europe becoming ever more integrated.

Even if there were problems with cost and housing, the Games at Grenoble had nearly every appearance of organizational success. Two long-term negative results, however, were almost immediately evident. One was economic and practical: the jump has never been used again. The other was economic and philosophical: the urbanization of the mountains has brought boredom. The word ‘ennui’, when used by the French, often has a foreboding quality about it. When a paper as influential as *Le Monde* uses it, those in the ski business had better take note. They haven't. But, of course, one should not lay all the blame for today's urbanized ski vacation at the door of the Grenoble Games.

One of the immediate and unexpected developments after the Games, and related to them in only a most marginal way, has been the development of cross-country skiing. The authors suggest that the changing attitudes to the environment were one

of the prime reasons for the increased participation in cross-country, for it offered “a cultural vision of the mountains” just at a time when alpine skiing became a prolongation of city life.

The conclusions of *Le Rêve Blanc* cannot be quarrelled with: once Winter Games have been awarded, the inevitable intrusion of the State reduces local control. The question of the enormous and seemingly ever-rising costs must be measured against the benefits, perceived or actual. Much of the (very expensive) equipment never receives further use. Foreign clientele is not seduced into returning. And lastly: it is extremely difficult to find out who benefits from the Winter Olympic Games. I can only agree that what was a “culture of effort” has given way to a “culture of pleasure” in which economics in its many guises has made the Winter Olympic Games just another part of our materialistic existence. *Le Rêve Blanc* should be read by all who are interested in winter sports and Winter Olympics; its warning should not go unheeded.

Now that the Lillehammer Games are over, it may seem that Arnaud and Terret’s warning is not so urgent. What we saw in Norway was something which had not been seen in Winter Olympics before: huge crowds celebrating sporting excellence whether from Alaska or Austria. The difference between this last Winter Olympics and all others is this: skiing in Norway is part of the culture of *Idraet*. For all other nations it is a sporting pursuit. It would be folly not to pay attention to Arnaud and Terret’s warning.