

La VIIIème Olympiade Anvers 1920: Les Jeux Ressuscités by Roland Renson (Comité Olympique et Interfédéral Belge, 1995). Reviewed by E. John B. Allen, Plymouth State College, Plymouth, New Hampshire, U.S.A.

On the occasion of the 75th anniversary of the first major sporting event after World War I, the VIIIth Olympic Games, the Belgian Olympic Committee (BOC) and the city of Antwerp have celebrated the memory by producing *Les Jeux Ressuscités*, an 80 page paperback written by Roland Renson. Though Budapest was the favored venue for the 1920 Olympic Games, Antwerp instead received the first post-war Olympics by way of recognizing Belgium's sacrifices. The final sentence of the book returns to the theme of the world war, as does the title of the book, namely, that after the horrors of the war, the Games were revived in pre-war fashion, but at the same time the resuscitation also gave them a new direction. The BOC's accomplishment in producing the volume is matched by the author's tight exposition. Each of the nineteen chapters receives about three pages, sometimes in two columns, sometimes one. Obviously, then, the book is not a full analysis of the Antwerp Olympics, but it is remarkable how much Renson has been able to tell, not only about the Games themselves, but what they meant at the time and for the future. There are photographs on almost every page, and an excellent four page bibliography.

It is too bad more money was not spent on the production; the excellent selection of illustrations merits excellent printing. One other objection (which is really a commentary on my own inadequacy -- but I suspect I am not alone): there are about forty quotes in Flemish, bearing few clues as to their meaning. This is a Belgian book, so who am I to complain? Roland Renson's language expertise is well known, but I wish he would help the rest of us.

Beginning with a discussion of the political and socio-cultural context of the general post-World War ambience Renson expounds on sport in Belgium in general and in Antwerp in particular. From there, Renson progresses to delineate how the city obtained the Games. Antwerp had only sixteen months to prepare. This was difficult enough in itself, but given the massive construction required during a period of mounting inflation, it was almost a miracle that all was ready in time, which it was.

The weather was not cooperative. The new track became rutted; the much publicized model swimming pool was remembered by competitors as dirty and cold; there were arguments over the shooting; the yachting events held at Ostend were a farce; the fencing took place on linoleum strips. Renson paints an unhappy picture.

I found the two most interesting chapters were those which concerned the war. The analyses of the parallels between war -- the great game -- and sport (particularly the opening ceremonies) "exorcising the war," made fascinating reading. In contravention to Baron de Coubertin's hopes that Olympic sports might promote world peace, Renson describes arguments over lodging, controversy surrounding Dutch neutrality during the war, the Bolshevik threat, attacks by Belgian supporters on the British water polo team, complaints over the boxing and cycling results, and

the brutality of Czech football players. All these events laced the Games with a quality far less than the Baron de Coubertin had hoped for.

In short, the Antwerp competitions had many birth pangs in the renaissance of the Olympic cycle. The gymnasts were very popular. As Renson remarks, even though several events exhibited traces of snobbism, some more than others, of course; gymnastics was a popular sport even though it plainly brought out the division between Swedish and 'European' (which really meant German) varieties. Since the Germans because of their role in the War were not represented at these Olympics, even the gymnastics were tainted. The aristocratic sports: horse events, fencing, polo, sailing and field hockey are analyzed, as are the popular sports: cycling, boxing, wrestling, dumb-bell competition and archery. Because the best cyclists were all professionals, the matches were not taken seriously. Boxing suffered in the same way.

Renson's chapters sixteen and seventeen detail some of the economic matters. The author shows how Antwerp's business elite -- bankers, shippers, exporters and diamond merchants -- had a stake in the Olympics for their own ends. Money found its way into various exhibitions not having much to do with things Olympic; a mock air battle and a jeweler's exhibition are two examples.

Since publicity was so important, both before and during the Games, the analysis of the press, with an easy-to-follow chart is most instructive. In spite of a general lack of interest and the inherent elitism of many of the events, Renson maintains that these Olympic Games served as a catalyst for the rapid development of sport. I think this is overstating the case; the growth of sport in the 1920s had more to do with the organizing of huge numbers of the less well-off into sporting clubs, both as participant and spectator, than it did with the Antwerp Olympic Games.

As to the competitions for women, these events were judged by most men as amusing curiosities. Coubertin, captive to the male, chivalric ideal, was against women's participation and Count Henri Baillet Latour, Belgium's chief Olympic figure, was a misogynist. Despite all this, the fact of the matter was that women's sports became increasingly popular during the 1920s, and Renson argues that the Antwerp Games did much to pave the way for the IOC's greater acceptance of women into the Olympics.

The thesis of the book is that these Games revived the Olympics. Much of the book delineates, as I have attempted to show here, those aspects which certainly did not correspond to Coubertin's assessment of the Antwerp Games as . . . "perfection and dignity." But they were a success from a political point of view. Simply to have athletes coming from all over the world only two years after the last shot was fired was an almost unbelievable feat of management.

Thus the Antwerp Games, loaded with the elite pre-War sporting traditions and events, provided an opportunity to move the Games into the new era of post-War sports. The Games, then, looked both backwards and forwards. That Renson has been able to encompass all this in 3-page mini-chapters is extraordinary. The book, however, is a celebratory excursion, and the many interesting details call for further analysis. The author obviously recognizes this, for at one stage he all but promises a book of documents. I look forward to that as supplement to *Les Jeux Ressuscités*.