

Origins and Aspects of Olympism by John T. Powell (Champaign, Illinois: Stipes Publishing Company, 1994). Reviewed by Douglas Brown, The International Centre for Olympic Studies, The University of Western Ontario, London, Canada.

John Powell's *Origins and Aspects of Olympism* is a book that straddles a variety of literary and academic genre, sometimes successfully and other times precariously. Powell's discussion of 'Olympism'--a late nineteenth century European amateur sporting ideology--oscillates between history, philosophy, epistle and even propaganda. *Origins and Aspects of Olympism* expresses some provocative thoughts on modern sporting culture. The breadth of its content, however, detracts from the cohesiveness of the author's message. This book does not pretend to offer a critical analysis of Olympism. Instead, it is a defence of the idea, as well as a tribute to one institution that is committed to the promotion of this ideology. Powell does not challenge the notion that Olympism exists. In fact, the author demands that the reader take a leap of faith when, in the "Preface," he states the purpose of the book: "This book is an attempt to show how Olympism permeates Olympic life" (p. iii). At the root of all the arguments in this book is the assumption that, somehow, an "Olympic life" is a desirable and attainable reality.

From the very beginning, the reader's ability to digest the content of the book and grasp Powell's message is thwarted by the weak structure of the book. Although Powell has organized the book into three sections, he provides no formal introduction. Furthermore, he has not used descriptive titles to elucidate the content and themes of the different sections. Instead, the "Table of Contents" simply lists the sections as Part I, Part II and Part III. Under these headings are individual chapter titles that offer the reader some sense of the themes of the book and the logic of their presentation. In the "Preface," Powell offers his book as a tribute to the International Olympic Academy, in Ancient Olympia, Greece. This is an important detail to consider when reading *Origins and Aspects of Olympism*. As well, the back inside cover of the book reveals Powell's personal involvement with the International Olympic Academy over a period of some twenty years.

Rather than an introduction, Powell has chosen to open the book with two definitions of Olympism; one that is extracted from the International Olympic Committee's *Olympic Charter* (1991), and another that Powell, himself, developed in 1976 (and which was adopted by the Canadian Olympic Committee in 1986). These are ethereally-styled definitions that suggest Olympism is some kind of force that leads humankind towards ideals of harmonious and unified existence. On the page facing these definitions of Olympism is a poem composed by Powell that explores the qualities of Olympism. The poem is entitled "What is it?" The problem with this creative introduction to *Origins and Aspects of Olympism* is that it is completely devoid of historical context. For readers who are unfamiliar with the word Olympism and the notion of a Modern Olympic Movement, this approach into the first section of the book is ineffectual.

“Part I” offers a historical description of ancient Greek sporting culture and is, by far, the least controversial of the three sections in *Origins and Aspects of Olympism*. Powell uses reliable and conventional secondary sources as well as English translations of standard ancient texts by Pausanias, Pindar, Homer, Xenophanes and Plato, etc. This section, which contains four thematic chapters, is informative and interesting. The rationale for including this history of ancient Greek sporting culture in a book that is dedicated to the discussion of a modern sporting ideology is not explained or justified. Nevertheless, by stating that the lives of ancient Greeks (and to a certain extent modern Greeks) were guided by an Olympic spirit “which stems from unwritten laws of decency, of fairness, of chivalry” (p. 60) Powell uses these chapters as both rationale and prelude to the discussion of Olympism in modern times.

The second section of this book is Powell’s most original contribution to the history of the Modern Olympic Movement. At the same time, however, it is the most problematic from the perspective of historical method and interpretation. Powell leaps from the history of ancient Greek sporting culture to 1927 when the founder of the Modern Olympic Movement, Baron Pierre de Coubertin, first discussed the idea of establishing an educational institution for the promotion of Olympism. In essence, this section is about the International Olympic Academy (IOA) and the importance of establishing educational programs that will propagate Olympism throughout the world. The problem is, however, that Powell begins discussing the origins of the IOA and the concept of Olympic Education without providing any historical context. As one moves through the various chapters of “Part II” a fragmented history of the Modern Olympic Movement does emerge, but the idea of Olympism remains oddly free of any institutional affiliation. In other words, the International Olympic Committee and the formal (institutional) structure of the Olympic Movement (the National Olympic Committees and the International Sport Federations) are portrayed as the guardians of Olympism rather than its progenitors. This, of course, supports Powell’s assertion that Olympism is a universal concept that humankind need only embrace as its own. From the discussion of educational programs that promote Olympism, Part II develops into a discussion on such esoteric topics as “Creating an Olympic World” (Chapter XI) and “Olympism, Sport and World Society” (Chapter XII). Powell certainly addresses legitimate and contemporary social and political issues that confront the Olympic Movement. The discussion of these issues, however, reflects a nostalgic, and even a utopian philosophy of sport. For example, the exploitation of the Olympic Games by national governments is condemned; amateur athletes are portrayed as mere pawns of political extremism and boycotts of Olympic Games. Powell rejects the inherently political nature of international sport. This may explain why he never describes Olympism as, simply, an ideology.

“Part III” of *Origins and Aspects of Olympism* is a collection of short essays on diverse topics related to sport. In this section, the discussion of Olympism is more implicit than the previous section. Powell examines the use of performance-enhancing substances, violence and aggression in sport, teaching methods for sport, holism and health, and aesthetics, art and movement. He approaches these topic from a variety of perspectives. For example, ‘The Limits of Ergogenic Aids in Sport’ is discussed, fundamentally, from the perspective of moral

philosophy. The chapter “Holism and Health,” on the other hand, is much more prescriptive and applied. Common to all of these chapters are Powell’s efforts to examine the present conditions of physical activity and sport with references to ancient Greek history.

John Powell has integrated a number of his own poems into the book. Generally, the poetry serves to introduce the general concepts of a particular chapter or reinforce themes that are carried from one chapter to another. This creative element of *Origins and Aspects of Olympism* is an important quality that merits a few brief comments. First of all, Powell’s poetry underscores the personal nature of the entire work. I mentioned in the first paragraph of this review that Powell’s affiliation with the International Olympic Academy must be recognized by the reader. As well, I suggested that the book straddles a variety of literary genre. Inclusion of the author’s own poetry into an academic-style text certainly supports this claim. In the case of *Origins and Aspects of Olympism*, this mix of genre helps the reader identify the uniqueness and value of Powell’s perspective on the idea of Olympism. Acknowledging that Powell has invested personally in the ideology of Olympism and volunteered at one of the premier institutions within the Olympic Movement (the International Olympic Academy) forces us to treat this book as a bonafide primary source as opposed to an objective secondary source.

To conclude, *Origins and Aspects of Olympism* presents ideas and arguments that are vital and essential to the discourse of modern physical culture. Indeed, John Powell has expressed his views in an assertive and, at times lyrical, monograph. And certainly, anyone who has dedicated such time and energy, both physically and intellectually, to the education and enlightenment of youth through the study of sport and the Olympic Movement should be encouraged to share their ideas and opinions. Unfortunately, the structure of this book does not do justice to his experiences or expertise. I would suggest that a more explicitly autobiographical work would result in a more provocative and legitimate contribution to this field of study.