

The Modern Olympics: A Struggle for Revival by David C. Young (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996). Reviewed by Robert K. Barney, International Centre for Olympic Studies, The University of Western Ontario, London, Canada.

The Baron Pierre de Coubertin was not truly the man who “invented” the modern Olympic Games. Blasphemy! How could this be? The now 100 year history of the Modern Olympic Games has glorified Coubertin from the beginning as the sole grand conceiver of the sporting event which has no rival for the attention of world-wide television viewers, corporation boardrooms, national governments, and simple pilgrims of sport. But wait! It was not really a Frenchman, but rather an English physician and a gaggle of 19th century Greeks who made the most indelible contributions towards conceiving and establishing what we now know as Olympic Games in the Modern era. So argues David C. Young, a University of Florida classicist who has spent the greater part of the last ten years researching the subject.

As he has done on other occasions, David Young has provided us with a carefully researched examination of two important and much misunderstood episodes in Modern Olympic history, the genesis of the most vigorous and successful early attempts to organize Olympic Games in modern context. Though Coubertin universally comes off in history as the *renovateur* of what we now know as the Modern Olympic Movement, the Baron plays only a secondary role in Young’s research, which focusses instead on an examination of more important figures, namely, the rich Greek turned philanthropist, Evangelis Zappas, and the more modest-in-fortune but every bit as inspired-in-deed Englishman William Penny Brookes, physician, writer, energetic organizer and a man with true international perspective. But, more about that later.

First, something about Young himself. Young is a classical scholar who for years specialized in the study of the ancient Greek poet Pindar and his lyric poetry. As is true for most classicists, Young, of course, reads ancient Greek and Latin; but what sets him apart from all but a few of his classicist colleagues is his ability to read modern Greek, a literary language crucial for the study of events which this book examines. Beyond Young’s knowledge and ability to get at sources in English, are his abilities to read appropriate material in German (particularly the *Diplomarbeiten* of Benno Neümuller on Brookes, Anette Keuser on the Liverpool Olympics, and Anastase Kivroglou on Zappas) and, equally important, the impressive body of germane literature in French. Young’s work in Greek archives, however, mostly located in Athens, combined with investigation of sources in English found in various archival repositories in England, the most important being the William Penny Brookes papers in the village of Much Wenlock, mark this work as being far and away the most authoritative and comprehensive portrayal of the subject yet produced. Together with the usual friendly, courteous and extremely helpful aid of officials in the International Olympic Committee’s Archival Documents Department in the Olympic Museum in Lausanne, the corpus of research data produced by Young in this study is far beyond admiration, it is altogether staggering. But that’s Young, a scholar whom I know from professional experience does not state a case unless the evidence is overpowering. And, such it is with *The Modern Olympics: A Struggle for Revival*.

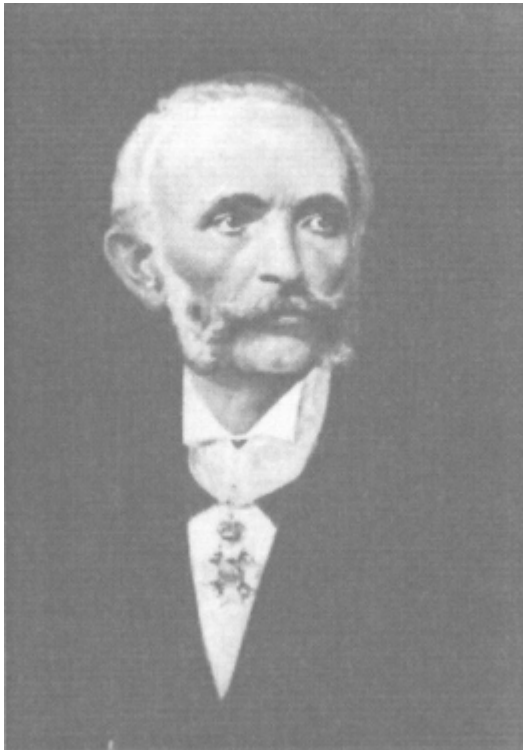


Dr. William Penny Brookes

The popular story of the revival of Olympic Games in modern context, of course, points to the creative genius and steadfast inspiration and industry of Pierre de Coubertin. After all, was it not he who organized an international congress in Paris in 1894 at which an idea for Modern Olympic Games was placed before sports representatives present? Did he not organize the first International Olympic Committee following that Sorbonne Congress? Was it not the Baron who was able to orchestrate both personalities and events to galvanize Greeks to stage the first Modern Olympic Games in Athens in 1896? Did not Coubertin stand at the helm of the Olympic ship for the first 30 years of its now 100 year odyssey? And finally, did not Coubertin, consciously and intentionally defend the notion that the great and noble Olympic crusade was his idea, and his alone? The answer to all those questions is, yes, most certainly! Be that as it may, however, the idea of Olympic Games in modern times (as distinct from the Ancient Games in Greek antiquity) was not originally Coubertin's; he brought no such immaculate conception idea to modern sport. Indeed, there were numerous attempts long before Coubertin was born in France in 1863 to form and develop sport festivals inspired by and patterned after the ancient Greek model, some of which were steadfast and important in local, regional and national sport culture. One such festival even harbored the aspiration of becoming truly international. There is absolutely no doubt, as Young's research resoundingly substantiates, that Couber-

tin knew of the two most contemporary and important examples, the Much Wenlock Games in England which occurred for the first time in the late summer of 1850 and the so-called Zappian Games in Athens, the first edition of which was organized in the spring of 1859. Neither in his memoirs, nor anywhere in the vast corpus of literature dealing with sport matters written by Coubertin in his lifetime, can one find an acknowledgement of any of these “early Olympic” ventures. With regard to the Much Wenlock and Zappian Olympic episodes, each was brought to his attention well before the now well-known events of the Sorbonne Congress.

What exactly has Young proven with regard to William Penny Brookes and efforts in England to establish Olympic Games? Utilizing a vast store of archival material, Young consolidates the fact that the energetic and visionary Brookes was successful in bringing about in national context what he had been successful in organizing in the small village of Much Wenlock, namely, the celebration of Olympian Games. The first of such national Olympic festivals took place in London in 1866. Coubertin was three years old at the time. Readers will be interested to know that a young man by the name of W. G. Grace from Bristol won the 440 yard hurdle race in a time of 1 minute, 10 seconds. Much later, of course, Grace, a storied cricketeer, attained sport hero prominence in the British Isles and elsewhere in Britain’s global Empire equal to Babe Ruth in America, or the more contemporary soccer maestro, Brazil’s Pele.



Evangelis Zappas, financial benefactor of modern Greek Olympian Games

In Greece, too, efforts had reached fruition to reincarnate the Olympic tradition of antiquity. In 1859 the first so-called Zappian Olympic Games were organized, financed by the wealthy Romanian Greek Evangelis Zappas and organized by local Athenian sports authorities. Cash prizes were awarded the victors. From England Dr. Brookes sent ten pounds sterling to be awarded the Greek victor in “tilting at the ring,” a medieval-flavored event that Brookes had instituted in his own Much Wenlock Games the year previous, 1858. At the second Zappian Games eleven years later, athletes competed at running, jumping, discus and javelin throwing, pole vault, wrestling, pole and rope climbs, and tug-of-war, events of the Much Wenlock Games, a program schedule of which Brookes had sent to his Greek friends as early as 1859.

As Young clearly demonstrates, the cross-fertilization between Brookes and authorities in Greece associated with the Zappian Games was critically important in beginning to turn Brookes’ mind towards Olympic Games in international perspective. He requested King George of Greece to donate a prize for the pentathlon winner in the British Olympic Games of 1877. The King agreed, and a handsome inscribed cup arrived in time for its presentation at the Games held in Shrewsbury. The inscription read:

George I, King of the Hellenes,
For the man who won the Pentathlon
at the Modern Olympics of the British
at Shrewsbury in August, 1877.

By the autumn of 1880, as Young substantiates, Brookes had conceived the idea of International Olympic Games. Dr. Brookes wanted them to take place permanently in Athens, every four years. This idea was conveyed to Greece and published in Athenian newspapers as early as 1881. The world would come to Greece. Brookes’ International Olympic Games idea was conveyed to Athenian sporting folks through John Gennadius, then *chargé d’affaires* at the Greek embassy in London. Prompted by Brookes to bring the idea to fruition, Gennadius dragged his heels. Brookes persisted. Gennadius, in turn, delayed on the matter. Wrote Brookes, “There are but two classes in the world; one to hammer, and the other to be hammered at. So I shall hammer on” (Young, p. 53). At least five times, between 1888 and 1891, Brookes wrote to Gennadius imploring him to use his good offices to help establish International Olympic Games in Athens. Gennadius failed to act, but in early January 1893, on the eve of his departure from London to Greece following the end of his tour of duty in England, he wrote to Brookes implying that he would do all that he could to nurture the Olympic “movement” idea in Athens. Home in Athens three years later, in the fateful spring of 1896, who should write the following in an Athenian newspaper: “They [the Games] are due to the sudden growth of athletic sports in France . . . [and] an International Congress . . . in Paris . . . 1894 . . . Baron Pierre de Coubertin, the secretary and moving spirit of the Congress.” “Thank you, Mr. Gennadius,” might Brookes have angrily complained back in England if he had been a vain man, which he was not. There is little doubt that if Gennadius, Brooke’s perceived advocate to the “powers-to-be” in Athens, had been as convinced and dedicated to the Olympic mission as was Demetrius Vikelas, later on, to Greek authorities on behalf of Pierre de Coubertin’s plan, Olympic history books might well relate a far different

story than they leave with us today.



Dimitrios Vikelas, Coubertin's 'man' in Athens - 1894 to 1896

There are fascinating scenarios galore in Young's book, all underscored by meticulous research, but because Coubertin is so well known to historians, and the fact that many of Young's important characters are brought to our attention for the first time, it naturally follows that of utmost interest and curiosity to us is the relationship between the venerable Brooks and the young upstart from France who had no idea whatsoever, at least before 1890, about Olympic Games in modern times. The relationship between Coubertin and Brookes is underscored by an exchange of letters, pamphlets, memoranda, announcements, and newspaper clippings dating between 1889 and 1894. Young speculates that the nature of the first correspondence of record between Coubertin and Brookes in 1889 suggests that there had been literary exchanges previously. What Young argues, supported by indelible record, is the fact that Brookes sent Coubertin packages of materials on the subjects of health, physical education, athletic sport, and his activities in Olympic matters in England. Brookes' notations on "things Olympic" never seemed to arouse a response from the Baron. Coubertin's queries, statements, and requests for advice sent to Brookes dealt entirely with physical education matters. Brookes invited him to Much Wenlock in 1889. Coubertin accepted, arriving in Much Wenlock in the autumn to witness a staging of the annual Much Wenlock Olympian Games with all their celebratory, ritual, and athletic activities reminiscent of ancient Greece. Coubertin must have been impressed. After his visit to Much Wenlock, the word *Olympic* and the *idea Olympic* began to penetrate into the Baron's lexicon of sport/physical education jargon. Not only did

Coubertin witness first hand “things Olympic” in England, there is little doubt that during the Baron’s visit Brookes enlightened his guest on “matters Zappian” in Greece as well as recounting his frustration at getting nowhere with his plans for International Olympic Games in Athens every four years.

And so the Olympic idea was born in Coubertin’s psyche. Could the Baron subsequently have thought, “A great idea, but let’s not give the whole thing to the Greeks, let’s bring Brookes’ ‘movement’ to the world.” The evidence suggests so.

There is more in Young’s masterpiece of research. He goes miles beyond Mandell,¹ yards further than MacAloon,² and outstrips the sometimes excellent but only partial examinations on the subject by German, English, and Greek authors with regard to the story of the Sorbonne Conference, the gaining of the first Olympic Games by Athens, and the resulting organization and execution of them. In effect, Young “brings it all together” in a marathon-like research and writing performance, and then does an extra lap for good measure with an analysis of the Games’ aftermath, including some pungent remarks about the Greek-hosted 1906 intercalary Games, successful even beyond the glorious dimensions of those celebrated in Athens ten years earlier.

There is one bit of research material that escaped the Young dragnet in putting his story together. To be fair, though, the timing between this book’s publication date (1996) and the arrival of the Charles Waldstein papers at the IOC archives in Lausanne (September 18, 1996) may well have made them unavailable to Young before he submitted his final manuscript to the Johns Hopkins Press. Who was Charles Waldstein? American-born in 1856 and German-educated (PhD, Heidelberg), Waldstein, by 1880, was a lecturer in classical archaeology at Cambridge University in England. He was director of the Fitzwilliam Museum at Cambridge from 1883 to 1889 and then moved to Athens where he was Director of the American School of Classical Studies until late 1893. While in Greece he was in charge of excavations at Argolis. Coubertin first met Waldstein on a visit to England in 1886. A friendship resulted. Coubertin included Waldstein’s name on his letterhead list of dignitaries for the 1894 Sorbonne Congress. It is Young’s contention that Coubertin, knowing absolutely no-one in Athens to investigate the possibility of Athens hosting the first Olympic Games, turned to Waldstein to use his influence with King George and the Royal family to support an Olympic initiative. Much of Young’s argument along these lines is based on circumstantial evidence. In the spring of 1997 I examined the Waldstein papers in Lausanne to try and corroborate Young’s conjecture on this point. Though Waldstein’s papers are replete with a record of his correspondence to and from the Royal families of England, Denmark and Greece (including announcements to them of his impending marriage, the birth of his first child, and the winning of the esteemed Slade professorship at Cambridge in 1895), there is nothing to shed substantive light on the matter of how the first Modern Olympic Games arrived in Athens, and what part, if any, Waldstein might have had in the process. After viewing the Waldstein papers with regard to early Olympic matters, I cannot support Don Anthony’s notion, that “the remarkable Charles Waldstein [was] a powerful wheeler-dealer behind the scenes in the organization of the first Olympic Games in Athens in 1896 . . .”³

There is one interesting aspect of the Waldstein papers in Lausanne that Young might well wish to examine, the Waldstein diary, particularly the professor’s entries concerning his viewing of the Athens Games in the spring of 1896. Following the

Games, Waldstein wrote three articles about his experiences at the first Olympics for *Harper's Weekly* in New York, for which he received the princely sum of \$175.00.⁴ Of much more prospective interest to Young, however, is a Waldstein entry to his diary of Tuesday, 14 April 1896 where he states that in the morning he went to the stadium to witness the awarding of prizes (it rained so hard, reported Waldstein, that the awards ceremonies were postponed until the next day). On the afternoon of 14 April, Waldstein recounts a visit with the Crown Prince [Constantine] on the matter of Greek Games in even-numbered years, between Coubertin's Olympic Games quadrennial schedule. Waldstein states that he visited with Coubertin the same afternoon and got the Baron to agree to such a plan, beginning with Greek-organized Games in Athens in 1898 (and conceivably, in 1902, 1906, and so on).⁵ To Young's credit, and to MacAloon's too, the story of the prospect of intercalary "Panathenaic Games" is noted, based on material published in the *New York Times* of 16 April 1896.



Crown Prince Constantine, Head of the Organising Committee, Athens, 1896 & 1906

Finally, the readers of this book, beyond being spellbound by the highly readable style and solid arguments presented, will be pleased by the publishing qualities of the volume, an excellent type-size, solid binding, and an attractive dust cover. There is an exhaustive index, some four pages of notes on the document collections the author consulted, and, most importantly, 66 pages of endnotes, many of them with informative and interesting annotations. There are no pictures. I know that pictures of some of the important personalities figuring in Young's account are available. Their inclusion would have added to the overall and lasting impression of the book, expensive as

they might have been to reproduce by the publisher.



Modern Olympic Games revival -- Closure!

Actually, there is one picture - it appears on the front of the dust-cover. It shows the finish of the 100 meter sprint in the 1906 Games in Athens' Panathenaic Stadium (above). At first thought, the choice of this scene to complement the book's title seems odd indeed. But on further pondering, a Young conclusion seeps through. The tale of *The Modern Olympics: A Struggle for Revival* ends in 1906. Thus, I conclude that in Young's mind, the gloriously celebrated intercalary Games in Athens in 1906 marked the end of the true period of "revival." At that moment, the Modern Olympic Movement and its most celebratory dimension, the Olympic Games, arrived. Revival became the past. Survival remained as future consideration. Young should now turn his attention to Olympic events "beyond revival." For the time being though, scholarly treatment dealing with the period of the Games' revival will be hard put to match the magnitude of this effort. I count this book on the Olympics as one of the three best books I have yet to encounter on the subject.

Endnotes

1. Richard D. Mandell, *The First Modern Olympics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976).
2. John J. MacAloon, *This Great Symbol: Pierre de Coubertin and the Origins of the Modern Olympic Games* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).
3. Don Anthony, "The Remarkable Waldstein," in *Journal of Olympic History*, Volume 5, Number 1, Spring 1997, p. 19.
4. The Editors (Harper's and Brothers) to Charles Waldstein, 13 May 1896, in Waldstein Papers, International Olympic Committee Archives, Lausanne.
5. *The Diary of Charles Waldstein*, IOC Archives. I am grateful to Don Anthony for locating the Waldstein Papers in the attic of a surviving grandson (Oliver Walston) and for seeing to it that they went to Lausanne instead of Cambridge University. I am also indebted to Karl Lennartz at the Deutsche Sporthochschule in Köln for alerting me in advance about particular entries in the diary concerning the Olympic Games.