

The 1896 Olympic Games: Results for All Competitors in All Events, with Commentary by Bill Mallon and Ture Widlund (Jefferson, North Carolina and London, England: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 1998). Reviewed by Robert K. Barney, The University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario, Canada.

Surrounding the jubilee celebration of the Olympic Games in 1996, there quite naturally arose renewed interest in the “bookend” equivalent of the Atlanta festival celebration, that is, the very first of the festivals that initiated the now 100 years of Modern Olympic Games history—those celebrated in Athens in 1896. Despite such well known works dealing wholly or in part with the subject of the 1896 Athens Games by Young,¹ Mandell,² MacAloon³ and others, much missing detail remains for the industry of those continuing to be bent on adding to the finite recapturing of those historic events in the springtime of 1896.

Bill Mallon and Ture Widlund have produced a book which adds significantly to the corpus of known facts about the initial Olympic Games. To produce this volume, Mallon and Widlund, two demonstrated masters of producing facts and figures of Olympic athletic performances, combined an industrious survey of the records of numerous museums with an examination of archival material located in the headquarters of National Olympic Committees of countries whose athletes comprised the event participants at the 1896 Athens Games. The result is impressive.

The book opens with an *Introduction* in which the authors state that their intent was “to present in detail the most comprehensive results ever seen of the 1896 Olympic Games . . . the emphasis here is on the statistics, and we have not intended to present new political or sociological analyses of the first Modern Games . . . we leave that to our academic colleagues (ix).” Be that as it may, this book is more than simply a presentation of statistics—who did what, how well, on what date, etc. The word “commentary” in the title should not be taken lightly. In effect, there is plenty of commentary, and it meshes well with the statistical tables.

Roughly half of the book’s 150 pages focuses on descriptions of each sporting event as it unfolded in Athens between April 5-13, if one follows the Gregorian calendar, March 24-April 1 on the Julian calendar. (Two remaining days were given over to celebratory breakfasts, dinners, and prize-giving). Elaborate competition detail of each event, “Athletics” (track and field) to “wrestling,” is complemented with prose commentary. Everything is there: names of each competitor, ages, each preliminary heat or trial, place of finish, winning times, distances, and marks. And, there are some interesting “side-bar” stories, as well. For instance, the youngest competitor at the Games was Dimitrios Loundros, a ten year old lad who was a member of the Greek gymnastics squad which took third place in the team parallel-bars competitions (p. 19). The Danish military rifle and pistol shooter, Holger Nielsen, though not winning a medal at the Games, went on in life to invent the famous artificial respiration process known world-wide as the Holger Neilsen System. German-Jewish gymnasts, brothers Alfred and Gustav Flatow, competed in all the individual gymnastics events except rope climbing. Alfred Flatow won the parallel-bars event and placed second on the horizontal bar. Almost fifty years later, the nation that celebrated the Flatow brothers’ Olympic successes sent them to Nazi concentration

camps, from which neither emerged alive (p. 94). These, and other fascinating asides, help to personalize the mini-dramas that most certainly occurred in each event.

The statistical material presented is supported by in-depth notes which elaborate on all sorts of information. For instance, there is a record of athletes entered but who did not compete in the Games and explanations of results that differ from those published by scholars on other occasions. There are exhaustive footnotes of reference material. For instance, in their treatment of "athletics," the authors have produced 125 endnotes of interesting, substantive material; for cycling, 46 notes; for the various shooting events, 38 notes. The endnotes tell a story in themselves. This demonstrates the care and attention to detail that underscores the work of the two authors.



Alfred Flatow wins parallel bars at Athens - 1896

But there is more than simply tables, statistics, and citations. The authors have seen fit to include a reprinting of six articles about the 1896 Games written for publication in American popular journals. In this vein one reads about the "on site" reminiscences of Charles Waldstein, Pierre de Coubertin, Miss Maynard Butler, Thomas Curtis (winner of the hurdles event), Rufus Richardson, and G. S. Robertson. These fascinating vignettes contribute a rich texture to the volume and offer the type of credibility to what actually happened in Athens that Mallon/Widlund have attempted to complement on the basis of their dedicated "historical digging."

The book features other attributes helpful to the scholar/reader. There is a table of abbreviations for major terms used throughout the book. There are four pages of bibliography. A chapter on *Analysis and Summaries of the 1896 Olympic Games*

condenses material on a number of important considerations, i.e. the Sorbonne Conference and the evolution of the idea for Modern Olympic Games; the work of the Athenian organizing committee; a description of the opening day's ceremonies and events. There is also a section on sports that were scheduled to be held during the Games, but for various reasons were cancelled because of weather circumstances (rowing) or were simply left unorganized (epee fencing, yachting, water polo). The book concludes with a comprehensive index.

One is invariably led to make comparisons between Mallon's and Widlund's book and other contemporary efforts on the identical theme—the 1896 Athens Games. In this regard, three works might be considered as close rivals. One is published in English (that is, an English-German edition), *The Olympic Games* (reprint of the work that serves as the Official Report of the Athens Games by S. P. Lambros and N. G. Polites [Part I] and N. G. Polites and C. Anninos [Part II], Athens 1897). Two others of importance, published in German are: (1) *100 Jahre Olympische Spiele* by Wolfgang Decker, Georgio Dolianitis and Karl Lennartz (Wurzburg: Egon Verlag, 1996); and (2) *Die Olympischen Spiele 1896 in Athens* (Kassel: Agon Sporverlag, 1996), edited by Karl Lennartz, to which both Bill Mallon and Ture Widlund contributed. Because the Mallon/Widlund book is in English it will invariably reach a larger reading audience than the three works cited above.

That fact aside, however, each of the three works cited above, even though each is published (for the most part) in German, they showcase a critically-valuable feature that is completely absent in the Mallon/Widlund book. Mallon and Widlund present no pictorial material in a volume otherwise produced in admirable fashion (binding, print type, paper quality, etc.). The lack of documentary pictorial material is a serious flaw. As the old saying goes: “a picture is worth a thousand words.” There are many historians who count the credibility percentage of pictures vs. the written word as something close to 90% vs. 50%, respectively. Although moving pictures had yet to be invented, “still photography” was well into its fourth generation of technological development by the time of the Athens Games and as it turned out, hundreds of pictures were taken of various aspects of the initial festival. Scores of these survive in archives spread around the world. Publication of photographs is always a selective and expensive proposition, but Mallon and Widlund should have stomped their feet and insisted that the publisher include photographic evidence.

This shortcoming aside, if one gets right down to making a “bottom-line” judgement, the Mallon/Widlund book, for what it boasts: “to present in detail the most complete results ever seen of the 1896 Olympic Games,” is superior to all those yet produced, but only if one considers the term *results* to pertain solely to athletic events. The athletic events, of course, comprise only one of the several intriguing dimensions of the celebration of Olympic Games. Thus, the works in German cited above, render a richer overall picture of the first Olympic Games than the Mallon/Widlund effort, even though none approach the labor-intensive statistical detail reflected in this book written by its American and Swedish authorship team. This book is the first in a planned series of forthcoming volumes that Bill Mallon plans to produce on Olympic Games celebrated between 1900 and 1920. Perhaps those works of the future will be enhanced by the lessons learned from this first endeavor.

Endnotes

1. David C. Young, *The Modern Olympics: A Struggle for Revival* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).
2. Richard D. Mandell, *The First Modern Olympics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976).
3. John J. MacAloon, *This Great Symbol: Pierre de Coubertin and the Origins of the Modern Olympic Games* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).