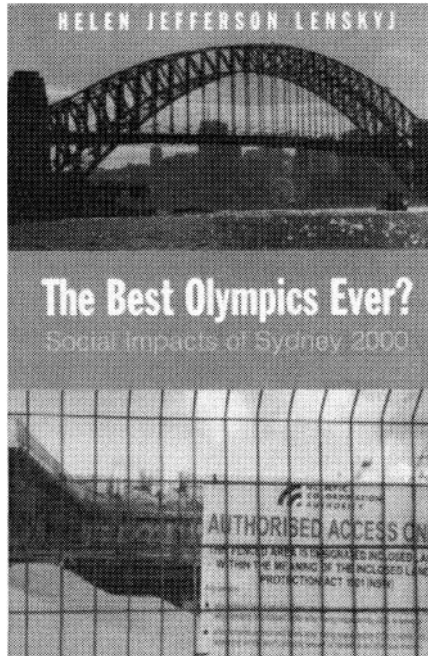

Book Review

The Best Olympics Ever? Social Impact of Sydney 2000 by Helen Jefferson Lenskyj (Albany: State University Of New York Press 2002), 262 pp. Reviewed by William McTeer, Wilfrid Laurier University, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada.



This book presents an interesting and sometimes tedious examination of the political forces at work during the preparation and immediate lead up to the 2000 Olympic Games in Sydney, Australia. We are given a detailed analysis of the dominant power structure, which Lenskyj refers to as the Olympic industry, and how its web of influence ensured that the voices of the common man were at best heard but not heeded, or at worst, not heard at all. The tone of the book is critical of the Olympic movement, and the content has little which will be of interest to the reader who is an avid follower of the games themselves. Nor does it touch on any of the issues that plague the Olympic movement. For those who find themselves in an extremely critical position of modern capitalist society, this will be an important read as it adds to the continuing rant. Throughout the book we are presented with extremely rich detail of protests by community groups over land use, the environment, security, human rights and the use of public money for private profit. It is in the details associated with these issues that the reader may get bogged down. On the other hand, persevering through the myriad acronyms and the exhaustive detail surrounding these issues does provide the reader with an excellent account of the events associated with the political

action groups and the Olympic industry as they unfolded. The account, however, is extremely biased. The book is anything but a balanced examination of the social impacts of the Olympic Games, as the title implies, but rather it is a systematic criticism of the process of Olympism at the local level. Lenskyj states at the outset, "I do not deny that there were positive outcomes, but it is not the purpose of this book to examine them in detail" (p. 1). Indeed, there is no mention of a positive outcome for the Olympic Games, and the notion of even the briefest of details of such outcomes would appear to be the furthest thing from the author's mind. It would appear that Lenskyj tends to view the Olympic Games, and perhaps other social phenomena as well, as having only two observational stances: blind support or all-encompassing criticism. She refers to other Olympic scholars who see the games from a different perspective (not sharing Lenskyj's view) as "sycophants of the Olympic industry" (p. 4). To be fair, she too could be accused of the same kind of allegiance to the community action groups that were opposed to the games in Sydney as they played out in the preparation stages.

The chapter dedicated to the mass media showed the changing pattern of support at the outset to mild criticism as events unfolded, which cast the organizing committee, and indeed, the Games themselves in a less than favourable light. The media, of course, represents the most effective tool available to political action groups, the grass roots, as Lenskyj calls them, for getting the message out. While some members of the print media took a critical role in supporting some of the citizen groups and criticizing the organizing committee over issues such as the over spending of public money, the general consensus reached by the author is that the media did not report objectively, and at the end of the day they were largely responsible for creating a climate of ill informed support.

Lenskyj is clearly not a supporter of the Olympic Games as they currently exist, and she is not alone when it comes to a call for significant change in the demeanour of the games. But one could argue that the true nature of this book is quite apart from anything Olympic. As large cities in any part of the world embark on mega-projects, be they part of a sport celebration or urban re-development, there will be those whose interests are not well served by the project. These tend to be the powerless in a capitalist system where the holders of power are able to influence the important decisions on which the projects depend. The story of the Sydney Olympic Games as presented in *The Best Olympics Ever*, is an effective chronicle of the events. Perhaps its most redeeming feature is its true to life picture of the varying attitudes toward change associated with a capitalist system and what some might describe as the price of progress.