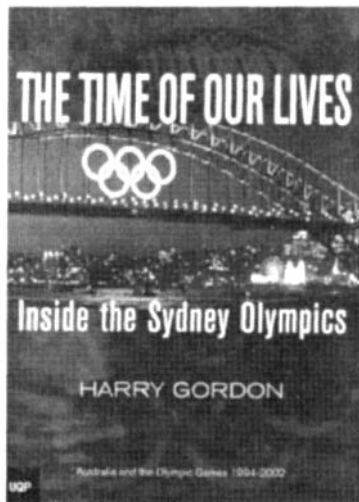


BOOK REVIEW

The Time of Our Lives: Inside the Sydney Olympics — Australia and the Olympic Games 1994-2002 by Harry Gordon (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2003), 360 pp. Reviewed by Gordon MacDonald, London, Ontario, Canada.

Some title pages suggest much, others less so, about the attitude of the author towards the contents that follow. Harry Gordon's most recent book on the Olympics certainly falls in the former category. Any volume entitled *The Time of Our Lives* is not likely to be negative in tone. Yet, beyond being suggestive of a particular viewpoint, the rather extended title also implies that the contents will cover more than the Sydney Olympics. And, indeed, this turns out to be true. This volume fulfils two main purposes. First and foremost, it is paean to the Australian administrators, volunteers, and athletes (mostly medal winners) who organized, ran, and competed in the 2000 Olympic Games. Second, it is a modified continuation of Gordon's earlier work, *Australia and the Olympic Games*, a history that covered Australia's participation in the Games to 1994.



The book is divided into three sections: the first deals with the Atlanta Games, the second with Sydney, and the third with Salt Lake City. The inclusion of the first and third part of the book explains why such an extended title appears, given that close to ¼ of the book is devoted to Olympic Games other than those staged in Sydney. Gordon offers a caveat in his introduction as to why the book is structured in this manner. Initially he wished to update *Australia and the Olympic Games*. However, because Sydney was host to the 2000 Games, he realized much more than usual could be written. The machinations behind bidding for, winning, organizing, and then running the 2000 Olympic Games are worthy of extended treatment and Gordon suggests that these events could have occupied a book of their own. I agree, although a volume devoted solely to the background of the Sydney Games would likely attract less of an audience than one that includes tales of athletic exploits.

Gordon writes with a veteran journalist's flair and is unabashedly pro-Olympic. The sections dealing with Australia's athletes are full of praise for their efforts. Likewise, those that examine the organization of the Games are optimistic in outlook. He does not probe deeper questions concerning the efficacy of public funding of mega-events such as the Olympic Games, or the extent to which these events actually bring together a city or a country in the long term. Of course, again, the title gives this point of view away. Long before readers arrive at sections that deal with controversies, they know not to expect stinging criticism.

Gordon devotes much of six chapters to the issues and personalities behind the planning and organization of the Games. He has interviewed a number of the key players and writes of the numerous struggles between them in a manner that is well paced and entertaining. His descriptions of struggles between various entities over control of money and organizational power - issues that could make for dry reading - he keeps moving. Despite the multiplicity of organizations involved, he manages to avoid burying the reader in a blizzard of acronyms. However, in all of these cases, Gordon's tone is ultimately conciliatory; the struggles were merely bumps in the road along the way to a greater goal. Indeed, implicit in Gordon's lack of criticism is that attainment of the greater goal of winning the bid and then organizing the Games excuses or at least mitigates behaviours that might otherwise be severely questioned. For example, though Gordon castigates the behaviour of the IOC members implicated in the Salt Lake City bribery scandal, his treatment of Australian officials who offered money to IOC members during Sydney's bid is significantly more conciliatory. Likewise, he makes a concerted effort to rehabilitate Australian IOC member Philip Coles, whose behaviour surrounding Olympic bid processes were party to two separate IOC investigations.

Perhaps a measure of caution is merited concerning Gordon's interviews since the context in which he conducted them was undoubtedly mostly positive. Readers would do well to remember that interviewee's comments were given with the benefit of knowing that, in the end, the Games turned out well (the 'best ever' Gordon states on several occasions). Thus, interviewees had the luxury of being able to be more magnanimous than if things had not turned out so well. Given that reservation, Gordon's interviews with key personalities remains the strongest suit of the book. Whether athletes or administrators, hearing the voices of these people lends insight into their perceptions and personalities, their strengths and weaknesses, their desires and doubts and, often, their peculiar vanities.

Beyond organizational issues, Gordon tells stories of the athletes who competed for Australia at three successive Olympic Games. Not surprisingly, his focus is first upon Australia's star athletes, followed by those who overcame unusual obstacles or hardships to win a medal. No athlete is given more attention than Cathy Freeman. Gordon devotes a significant portion of two different chapters to the 400m runner who was chosen to light the stadium cauldron. With her status as the reigning 400m world champion (1997 and 1999), Australians held high hopes for her at Sydney. Furthermore, because she is Aboriginal, many, Gordon included, believe Freeman to be emblematic of the theme of reconciliation between Australia's Aboriginals and the rest of the population. Hence, her central role in the opening ceremonies was seen as a significant symbol in the process of reconciliation. Indeed, Gordon states that the theme of reconciliation was a substantial part of both the opening and closing ceremonies, though it is not clear if the presence of Aboriginals went beyond being symbolic.

I enjoy a tale of athletic prowess as much as anyone else and Gordon has a well-honed ability to relate the challenges athletes overcome in their quests for Olympic glory. Given his access to athletes, Gordon also uncovers details that might not otherwise come to light. Some of these, while presented as hurdles that athletes overcome, also raise questions. For example, the number of injuries that athletes are willing to risk and endure is remarkable. Gordon lists the shocking number of injuries suffered by aerial skier Alisa Camplin in her quest for an Olympic medal. And this risk is all for a moment of, for many, fleeting glory. There may be many good reasons for a person to take significant and even life-threatening physical risks: is an Olympic medal one of them?

Gordon's stories of Australian medal winners invariably are linked to statements about the number of medals Australia won. This number is often followed by a statement as to where this put Australia in the 'standings' vis à vis other countries. This comparison of how many medals 'we' won with how many all the 'others' won is common to many members of the media from a variety of countries. It is a peculiar measure of national self-worth, one that has been linked historically to broader ideological battles between Cold War adversaries. Yet, here it is again, only now the number of medals won is cited as justification for the public money Australians have put into elite Olympic sports. Is this money 'well spent,' as Gordon suggests? That depends upon a person's point of view.

Beyond these broader questions that Gordon's stories raise, some other brief comments about the book are in order. He includes extensive appendices that are an extremely useful reference tool for finding information about Australia's Olympic team members from 1996 and 2002. The book also contains an index and there are endnotes for each chapter. Most of the notes refer to personal interviews. Furthermore, numerous black and white, photos appear throughout the text as well as two sections that contain colour photos — not all of which contain Australians. Indeed, the hard cover edition is a handsome volume.

How one finally assesses Gordon's book depends entirely upon how one approaches it. As noted earlier, the title indicates that it is not a critical account that asks deeper questions of the Olympic enterprise. If the expectation is of a celebration of the Olympic Games with some entertaining stories of the personalities who organize and compete in them, then Gordon delivers. However, for scholars looking for a sober, analytical examination of the Olympic Games, then this volume is best used a resource tool, particularly its interviews.