

John J. MacAloon, *This Great Symbol: Pierre de Coubertin and the Origins of the Modern Olympic Games*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1984. Index. pp.359. \$US28 cloth, \$US9.95 paper.

Baron Pierre de Coubertin was a rather dull and talentless young man, yet he was the main force behind the revival of what was to become the most exciting sporting spectacle of the twentieth century: the modern Olympic Games. As MacAloon shows in this densely argued work on the early life of the baron, if Coubertin was only one of several who had notions of reviving the ancient games, it was he who made the dream a reality, ultimately triumphing over the indifference of his own country, the political machinations of the Greeks at the Athens Games in 1896, and the farce and inefficiency that marked the first two Games of this century to make his own name inseparable from this great international sporting competition, embodying the finest of sporting ideals.

Coubertin's apprenticeship in adversity began early in life when he rejected the beliefs of his family, royalist and catholic bigots of the most narrow kind to declare himself a republican and a nationalist, ideas which remained of central importance in his pursuit of social peace through international understanding. His married and family life were tragic, and he was to suffer the disappointment of discovering that he was not the serious academic he thought he was. Though he died a somewhat sad and lonely man, his fortune dissipated in his efforts to keep the Games alive and his reputation sullied by his support for the Nazi Olympics the year

before he died, he rightly remains the 'Great Symbol' of the modern Olympic Games.

MacAloon's biography is concerned only with Coubertin's early life: how he became interested in the education of character through sport and then, through an extension of the ideals of the English public schools, to spreading these ideals on an international basis. Therein lies one of the great ironies, if not hypocrisies, that has beset the idealism of the Games since their inception. However, Coubertin's conception of how the Games should be run was never as narrow or hypocritical as that of Avery Brundage, a successor who held a too long and unfortunate grip on the Games after 1936.

MacAloon traces the influence of the French "sociologists" Frederic Leplay and Hyppolite Taine on the young Coubertin, but particularly notes the impact of *Tom Brown's Schooldays* and the trip to England where he visited the tomb of the much (if wrongfully) idolised Dr. Arnold. MacAloon devotes an entire chapter to 'The Vision at Rugby Chapel' and 'The Arnold Imago', and in an interesting, if somewhat discursive chapter on 'The Olympic Ideal', shows the influence of 'Exhibitions' (Crystal Palace, 1851; Paris, 1889, for example) which, although potentially disastrous at the 1900, 1904 and 1908 Games, gave the Games, according to MacAloon, their cultural significance and mass appeal.

This is as much a history of the first modern Olympics as it is of Coubertin, and MacAloon traces in fascinating detail the interplay of Greek politics, factional infighting and the tensions between native hospitality and a craving for national glory that surrounded the Athens Games. His description of the Games themselves is superb.

For such reasons, then, the reader should not be put off by the alarming and grandiose theoretical statement in the introduction, where MacAloon claims that, in the absence of letters and private documents, he:

had strategic recourse to concepts and methods borrowed from contemporary culture theory, sociology, and psychology. I have endeavored to turn anthropological kinship theory into an interpretive method, to get at the subjective meanings of Coubertin's genealogy and aristocratic heritage through the key cultural concepts of *proesse*

and patronage. I have made use of the sociological concepts of marginality and liminality, and have employed psychoanalytic and psychobiographical methods to explore the inner skin of the baron's familial dramas. In turn, these approaches are joined with recent processual symbolic analysis, with its attention to root metaphors and symbolic paradigms as interfaces between individual and social identities and projects.

The book is far less theoretically frightening. Although the reader is every now and then burdened by MacAloon's methodological *baggage*, and at times may think MacAloon is using Coubertin to test his theory rather than theory to explain Coubertin, the narrative journey, though a mite long, is well worth the effort. There may even be some people who enjoy the lapses into jargon, and who will look forward in more open anticipation to the second volume, where the author threatens to use his anthropological skills with more abandon. In the meantime, however, this is a book with much to offer, whether the reader's interest be sports history, French history or the use of social scientific apparatus.

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