

**RICHARD COOMBES AND THE OLYMPIC
MOVEMENT IN AUSTRALIA : IMPERIALISM
AND NATIONALISM IN ACTION**

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This discussion of Richard Coombes as ‘imperialism’ and ‘nationalism’ in action will be presented by briefly considering biographical material pertaining to his up-bringing in Britain and his sporting and journalistic career in Australia. His significance in these domains and its relationship to the Olympic movement will then be examined by placing his ideals, efforts and contributions within the context of late nineteenth and early twentieth century society.

Richard Coombes was born in 1855 at Hampton Court and educated at Hampton Grammar School in an era when an integral component of the Public School system was organised sports and games. Perkin has stated that they were seen as the

... cradle of leadership, team spirit, altruistic self reliance and loyalty to comrades - all the qualities needed for the chief goal of upper middle-class education, the public service.¹

When boys graduated from the Public Schools and went out to the colonies they took with them these ascribed qualities inherent in organised games and sports. Although Coombes left school at the age of fifteen, he had these qualities entrenched by his intense involvement in sport during his youth and Young-adult life in England. He was exposed to, and

actively involved in, various sporting pursuits including horse - racing, sculling and rowing, cycling, coursing and rifle shooting. However, it was primarily athletics in which he was most concerned, becoming well-known in England as a champion walker and cross-country runner. ²

A component of organised sports and games acquired in the Public School system and cemented through leisure activities was the class-based consciousness of 'gentleman-amateur' inherent in amateur sport. The lower classes and professionals were excluded from the ranks of amateurism, which remained the exclusive domain of the Public School graduate. It was these qualities of amateurism and athleticism, coupled with strong imperialistic inclinations, that Richard Coombes brought with him when he emigrated to Australia in 1886. As a journalist and editor of the Sydney-based sporting newspaper, *The Referee*, Coombes was confronted by an emerging spirit of nationalism, some of which was manifested and focused through sport. It will be seen that there were some athletic expressions of nationalism which conflicted with loyalty and devotion to Great Britain and the Empire. ⁴

In 1891, J. Astley Cooper⁵ proposed a Pan-Britannic Festival ⁶and Anglo-saxon Olympiad to 'draw closer the ties between the nations of the Empire'.⁷ The concept appealed to Coombes' sense of Empire and he wrote prophetically:

The signs of the times are that athletics will have a more powerful effect upon the Empire in time to come than has been the case for centuries.⁸

J. Astley Cooper maintained that the athletic section of his scheme was designed to elevate the standard and aims of athleticism and to harness the untapped power of imperial sentiment within the colonies of

the British Empire.⁹ As one of the most influential figures in Australian amateur sport, Coombes was in a position to promote the Pan-Britannic Festival and he regularly took the opportunity to editorialise on the topic.¹⁰ However, these sentiments were not unanimous as other local writers, influenced by the rising nationalistic spirit, came out against them. They were in favour of the festival for local patriotic reasons and saw in it a means of expressing this new-found nationalism. The *British Australasian* stated:

... the rising generation in Australia is intensely patriotic, but the sentiment is local, and not imperial. In their dear eyes old England does not loom so largely as it does before those as Mr Astley Cooper.¹¹

Cooper's plan for a Pan-Britannic Festival did not materialise, with one cause being his lack of leadership in its organisation. He seems to have confined his participation to the conceptual level, corresponding with various individuals but not following up with concrete proposals or organisation.¹² Coombes, the strongest supporter for the scheme in Australia, questioned the lack of detail emanating from Cooper:

...we are still completely in the dark as to when and where the affair will take place, and the actual conditions under which the various events will be brought off.¹³

Although a detailed proposal outlining the scheme and possible dates was published in Coombes' 'Amateur Athletics' column in *The Referee* in September 1893, nothing came of this and by 1894 the scheme was dead.¹⁴ Coombes, however, found another sporting festival to promote in his columns.

Baron Pierre de Coubertin's idea of reviving the ancient Olympic Games became a reality in 1896, pre-empting an Empire Games by many years. Although Australia had only one representative at the first games the successes of Edwin Flack at Athens focused Australian nationalism and national identity, and generated interest in the Olympic movement.¹⁵ Coombes was an ardent supporter of the Olympic movement, being one of those 'senior sports officials' in 1895 from which the Australian Olympic Federation was formed, as well as being the Australasian (and later Australian) representative on the International Olympic Committee from 1905 to 1932, when he retired.¹⁶

The philosophy behind Olympism was based on Victorian ideals of morality, nobility and purity as well as physical endurance and energy. However, this was conditional on the athlete continually raising his concept of honour and sporting disinterestedness to the height of his muscular strength. Winning was important but so was the participation and performance to the best of one's ability. This concept of 'sport for sport's sake' concurred with Coombes' own ideals of sport and amateurism." Consequently, for Coombes, support of the Olympic movement assumed paramount importance; even greater than loyalty to Empire. However, if it was possible to combine Olympism and Imperialism, then Coombes pursued this objective ardently, as can be seen from his efforts to include a British Empire team in the Olympic Games of 1912 and 1916.¹⁸

Coombes was also to wear the hats of nationalism and imperialism - concepts of apparent mutual exclusion - due to his all-consuming love of amateur sport which was epitomised through the Olympic Games. Nationalism for Australia was possible for him as long as it did not

threaten his loyalty to the British Empire. This loyalty was directed more to the Empire per se than to England. This notion is consistent with that of Sir John Foster-Fraser who wrote ‘There is loyalty in Australia, but it is loyalty to the Empire, not Great Britain.’¹⁹ Coombes commented:

One needs to understand the mind workings of many of the leaders in British sport, and to remember that those in control of some branches still cling to the belief that English Championships are the last Word, something considerably more important than the Olympic Games, for example, and in a greater measure so as compared to, say, a Festival of Empire.

He was very critical of British apathy to sport and the lack of reciprocal tours of Australia by British athletes.²¹ It was amateur sport, and athletics in particular, that he considered of primary importance.

The Festival of Empire in England, set for 1911, was planned as a means of celebrating the coronation of George V. It also provided an ideal platform for unifying the far-distant and diverse elements of the Empire.²² Unconvincing performances at the Olympic Games in 1908 and the brewing threat of war in Europe a few years later provided more reasons for the staging of this Empire spectacular. A sports meeting was to be part of the Festival celebrations, and a sports committee under the chairmanship of Lord Desborough, IOC member in Britain, handled the arrangements.²³ Only male athletes from the white dominions of Canada, South Africa, and Australasia were invited to attend. “In Australia, Coombes was paid the compliment of an invitation to act as the team’s honorary manager.”²⁵

The Festival opened on May 12, 1911, amidst great enthusiasm, with *The Times* reporting:

There is only one sentiment that animates us all, that of personal loyalty and affection quickened by a Common impulse of Imperial solidarity and sympathy.²⁶

Canada were the victors at the sports carnival, receiving the Lonsdale Cup as a token of their supremacy.²⁷ During a dinner to celebrate the occasion, Richard Coombes and James Merrick, manager of the Canadian team, proposed a British Empire Team to comprise athletes from Canada, Australasia, South Africa and Great Britain. This Empire Team would train together in England before travelling to Stockholm for the 1912 Olympic Games.²⁸ Coombes, writing as 'The Prodigal' later explained the proposal:

The scheme, then, is that the Colonies - Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and South Africa - will select their teams and the whole contingent be brought together in London, say, a fortnight before they are due to leave for Stockholm. The British team will also be concentrated in London as far as is possible, and then the whole army will train together under the care of responsible coaches and trainers, and be got into the best possible condition for the descent on Sweden . . . This is surely the very ideal of Empire - the forces of the Mother Country and her children, and Colonies, congregating on the shores of Britain to concentrate the forces of Empire, and then voyaging to the battle-ground of Stockholm to challenge in friendly warfare the best of the world's athletes.²⁹

The scheme initially received rousing support from various sources both at home and abroad.³⁰ *The Argus* reported support for the entering of an Empire team at future Olympic Games 'instead of dissipating their strength by breaking up into units'³¹, but once the first

flush of enthusiasm had worn off, strong dissension and disagreement appeared. One of the main objectives was the loss of national identity that would result. *The Times* had assumed that:

The glory which accrues to the individual Dominions is but moderate in amount, and the sentimental satisfaction which each derives from its separate representation cannot be great. Certainly the Colonials themselves feel that it would be vastly better to be associated with a powerful Empire team, the flag of which everybody at the Games knows and respects and to help to keep that Empire in its place at the head of the nations.³²

Coombes supported this notion in a series of articles in *The Referee* in which he defended his proposal against criticism from the *Sydney Morning Herald*.³³ This objection to loss of identity indicates the increasing political independence of the colonies and the desire for separate national Olympic representation. This view was most clearly and realistically expressed in the *Sydney Morning Herald*:

At present any competitor sent from Australia competes in the Games as an Australasian, and any victory credited to him is recognized by the hoisting of an Australian flag. Apart from all questions of loyalty to the Empire, there is a narrower local patriotism for Australia, which is certainly gratified by the present system, which is also a tremendous advertisement to this continent. And in this advertisement lies the Australian council's main hope in financing an Olympic team.³⁴

Coombes persisted in supporting the British Empire team concept through his columns in *The Referee* until finally, in 1913, the International Olympic Committee dispelled all possibility of it eventuating by ruling that the dominions should compete separately.³⁵

It was becoming apparent that Britain's shift from prominence in

the world was occurring; as her power declined she tried to hang on to her Empire through sporting links. However, this was being resisted by her colonies as their increasing sense of identity manifested itself in the desire for national representation at Olympic Games. Although the British Empire Team concept did not eventuate, Coombes emerged from the 1911 Festival of Empire and the 1912 Stockholm Olympics and its aftermath as a respected sports authority. Despite his previous promulgation and support for the British Empire Team proposal, upon its demise he launched himself, through his columns in *The Referee* into a programme of fund-raising for the preparation and expense of a prestigious Australian team to Britain in 1916.

The Great War of 1914-1918 was an immense disruption to international sport. The 1916 Berlin Games were cancelled as were many tours and athletic contests - both nationally and internationally.³⁶ Many of the athletes 'joined up', which severely depleted the number available for local sports carnivals.³⁷ During this period, Coombes concentrated on school and University athletics, seeing in the young a chance to further his ideology of sport for its own sake. Through coaching sessions and lectures to schools and Y.M.C.A.'s he was able to promote and encourage amateur athletics in Australia.³⁸ He had become an admirer of the American system of sport, probably because of their Olympic successes, and he attempted to remove emphasis from the club system of sports in Australia to the American system of concentrating interest upon schools and colleges to produce specialist athletes rather than all-round sportsmen.³⁹

In the post-war period, Coombes kept reiterating in his newspaper columns the necessity for Continuity of management, early selection of

Olympic athletes and the provision of sufficient and capable team administrative personnel to ensure adequate team preparation and smoothness of operation. This, coupled with early arrival on site, were to enhance Australia's chances of victory at future Games.⁴⁰ He also stressed the need to Select quality athletes, feeling that they needed to meet world standards before they were acceptable to him; they should at least stand a chance of achieving a medal. As editor of *The Referee* he was able to promote these ideas in the Sydney press⁴¹ and, as an Australian Olympic Federation member, the president of both the Amateur Athletic Union of Australia and New South Wales Amateur Athletics Association, as well as holder of many other administrative positions within Australian sporting circles, he was in a position to influence many decision-making processes. As the International Olympic Committee member in Australia he was in constant communication with de Coubertin and the hierarchy of the Olympic movement, which made him a very influential person in Australian sport.

It would seem that Coombes was able to accommodate both nationalism and imperialism through sport. This apparent nationalistic fervour also served to reinforce the power and prestige of the Empire. One example is recorded by 'The Prodigal' in 1923:

...General Kentish (honorary secretary to the BOA) proposes that Great Britain and the dominions within the Empire shall be housed together and parade together with a clear-cut line of demarcation between each unit of the Empire, so that the identity of each shall be well-defined, and with each carrying or flying its own national flag. It is a spirit of Empire, and the proposal appeals to me greatly.

I may point out that, on the alphabetical order basis of parade, the Empire units would be widely scattered . . . The British Olympic Association has ascertained that the

Empire units will be able to follow one another, provided they are all agreeable to the scheme - and I should say surely would be.⁴²

Furthermore, at the conclusion of the 1920, 1924 and 1928 Olympic Games, athletic contests were held between combined Empire Teams and teams from the United States.⁴³ These contests were considered by Coombes as an ideal opportunity for the Britisher (from the Home Country as well as the Overseas Dominions) to show his worth, for them to come together and present a united front of 'assembled Britishers', to show the world the merit of the Anglo-saxon spirit: '...a Splendid tribute to the Empire's men...'; and a '...Real Spirit of Sport'.⁴⁴

It was to this spirit of Empire that the Empire Games proved a great boon. Initiated in 1930 by Bobby Robinson of Canada, they were to be held every four years, midway between Olympic Games.⁴⁵ Coombes maintained that the 1930 Games were really the second in the series, the first being proposed by him in 1911:

Since then I have again and again advocated a revival of the Empire Games, so there is nothing fresh in the suggestion.

Aided by a generous offer from the Canadians of £1,000⁴⁷ Australia sent a team to Hamilton to compete. The Games were seen by Australians as an agency of furthering Empire relations⁴⁸ and this was signified in the 'oath of allegiance' proclaimed at the start of the Games on behalf of the competitors:

We declare that we are all loyal subjects of His Majesty, the King Emperor, and will take part in the British Empire Games in the spirit of true sportsmanship, recognising the rules which govern them, desirous of participating in them for the honour of our Empire and

for the glory of sport.⁴⁹

The Games proved very successful, so much so that some people were openly advocating withdrawal of the British Empire from the Olympic Games and just concentrating on the Empire Games.⁵⁰ Coombes was not one of these advocates. Although he recognised the importance of the Empire Games for emphasising and unifying the Empire, he openly supported the continuation of the Olympic Games. Furthermore, he noted in *The Referee* the dominant position of the Olympic Games.

One thing is certain, viz, Empire Games or no Empire Games, the Olympiads will still continue, and Great Britain and the dominions will continue to participate in them.⁵¹

A study of Richard Coombes reveals the history of a man raised in nineteenth-century England possessing the Victorian ideals of amateurism and imperialism. These attributes were instilled through the Public School system and reinforced during his athletic youth in England but when brought to Australia they were confronted by the rising nationalism of this colony. Coombes was able to adjust his own sense of Australian nationalism over time, and align it within the embrace of Empire. What was good for Australian sport became, by extension, a greater benefit for the British Empire. Consequently, it is no surprise then, that he came to be called the ‘father of Australian amateur athletics’⁵² as well as the ‘father of Empire sport’.⁵³ But over-riding and permeating throughout these nationalistic and imperialistic sentiments was the love of international amateur sport as epitomised in the Olympic Games. Writing as ‘Argus’ in 1922, Coombes espoused his basic

philosophy:

The good fellowship of sport belongs to no country, no people. It is the possession of the world. To be proficient in some branch is, as a rule, the open sesame to the people of other lands.⁵⁴

Coombes was, in his promulgation of the Olympic movement, both imperialism and nationalism in action.

NOTES

1. H. Perkin, 'Sport and society : Empire into Commonwealth' in J.A. Managan and R.B. Small, Sport, Culture, Society : Proceedines of the VIII Commonwealth and International Conference on Soort. Physical Education, Dance, Recreation and Health (London: E. & EN. Spon, 1986), p. 4.
2. P. Serle, Dictionary of Australian Biography 1. (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1949), p. 193; B. Nairn and G. Serle, Australian Dictionary of Biography (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1981), p. 105.
3. C.R. Veitch, 'Play up! play up and win the war! The propaganda of athleticism in Britain, 1914-1918' in G. Redmond (ed.) Sport and Politics (Champaign: Human Kinetics Publishers, Inc., 1984.)
4. ibid., p.3.
5. J. Blanch, and P. Jenes, Australia's Complete History of the Commonwealth Games, (Sydney: John Blanch Pubhshing Pty Ltd, 1982), p.1. These authors refer to J. Astley Cooper as 'Reverend' which is incorrect as The Reverend Cooper was J. Astley's father.
6. For a detailed account of Coombes' involvement in the Pan-Britannic Festival, see K. Moore, 'One Voice in the Wildemess: Richard Combes and the Promotion of the Pan-Britannic Festival Concept in Austraiia 1891-1911', Sporting Traditions, 5, No.2 (May 1989) pp.188-203; K Moore, 'The Concept of the British Empire Comes: An Analysis of its Origin and Evolution from 1891 to 1930'. Unpublished PhD dissertation, the University of Queensland (1986).
7. Cited in I. Jobling, 'The making of a nation through sport: Australia and the Olympic Comes from Athens to Berlin, 1896-1916', Australian Journal of Politics and History 34, No.2 (1988) p. 161.
8. The Referee, Sydney 17 August 1892.
9. K Moore, 'The Proposed Pan-Britannic Festival: A tangible Expression of Empire Unity.'

- Paper presented to the XI HISPA International Congress. Glasgow, (1985). p. 5.
10. The Referee, Sydney, 18 April, 1935; K. Moore, 'The Proposed Pan-Brittanian Festival...' op.cit. p.5; I Jobling, 'Australia and the Commonwealth Games: the formative years.', Quest, (May 1982) p. 4.
 11. As cited in I. Jobling 'The Making of a Nation through Sport...' op.cit. p. 4.
 12. K. Moore, 'Strange Bedfellows and Cooperative Partners: The Influence of the Olympic Games on the Establishment of the British Empire Games' in G. Redmond (ed.), op.cit. p. 119; I. Jobling, 'Australia and the 18% Olympic Games'. Paper presented at the Fifth International Session for Educationists, International Olympic Academy, Olympia, Greece (1982) p. 4.
 13. The Referee, Sydney, 25 January, 1893.
 14. K. Moore, 'The Proposed Pan-Brittanian Festival...' op.cit. p. 9.
 15. I. Jobling, 'Australia and the 18% Olympic Games' op.cit. p. 4.
 16. 'Australia and Olympism', Olympic Review 146, (December, 1979) p.697. The Australian Olympic Federation was initially a formation of a committee of senior sports officials; it then became the Australian Olympic Council and later, in 1914, the Australian Olympic Federation.
 17. Sydney Mail, 4 February, 1899, p.292.
 18. I. Jobling, 'The Lion, the Eagle and the Kangaroo: Politics and Proposals for a British Empire Team at the 1916 Berlin Olympics' in G. Redmond (ed.) op.cit.
 19. J. Foster-Fraser, Australia: the makine of a nation (London: Cassell 1910).
 20. The Referee, Sydney, 8 November 1916.
 21. K. Moore, 'The 1911 Festival of Empire: A final fling?' in J.A. Mangan and R.B. Small (eds.), op.cit., p. 88.
 22. B. Stoddart, 'Sport, Culture and Postcolonial Relations: A Preliminary Analysis of the Commonwealth Gantes' in G. Redmond (ed.) op.cit. .K Moore 'The Concept of the British Empire Games', op.cit. p. 97.
 23. K. Moore, 'The 1911 Festival of Empire...' op.cit., pp.86-87.
 24. The Referee, Sydney, April 5,1911; K. Moore 'Strange Bedfellows and Cooperative Partners...' op.cit., J. Blanch and P. Jenes op.cit., p.3.
 25. The Referee, Sydney, 1 March, 1911.
 26. The Times, London, 13 May, 1911.
 27. There appears to be some discrepancy in the newspaper reporting regarding the awarding of the Lonsdale Cup. The report in The Times of London (26 June) implies that the Cup was won on the basis of athletics (track and field) only. K Moore, 'The Concept of the British Empire Games...' op.cit., has stated that the winner of the Cup was determined after the results in all four sports (athletics, swimming, boxing and wrestling) were known and has cited the Minutes of the Second Annual Meeting of the AAU of Canada held at Toronto on November 25,1911 (pp.49-50) as her source.
 28. The Argus, Melbourne, 2 August, 1911; The Referee, Sydney, 27 September, 1911.

29. The Referee, Sydney, 21 September, 1911.
30. The Referee, Sydney, 17 July, 1912.
31. The Argus, Melbourne, 19 July 1912.
32. The Times, London, 18 July 1912.
33. See Sydney Morning Herald, 10 August, 1912, p. 15; 30 October, 1912, p.11; and Coombes' replies in The Referee, Sydney, 14 August, 1912, p. 1 and 6 November, 1912, p.9.
34. Sydney Morning Herald, 30 October, 1912.
35. The Argus, Melbourne, 6 September, 1913, p. 19. I, Jobling 'The Lion, the Eagle and the Kangaroo' &, op.cit., 105) has stated that the British Olympic Association secretary wrote that the question of an Empire team 'has been settled by the International Olympic Committee and the overseas dominions shall compete separately' (The Referee, Sydney, 10 September, 1913). However, Jobling has stated that he had been unable to confirm from his perusal of minutes and reports of the IOC that this question was ever discussed. Regardless, it is clear that Australian sporting officials and commentators dismissed the idea from this time.
36. The Referee, Sydney, 17 March, 1915.
37. ibid., 8 November, 1916, p.10; 2 May, 1917, p.10.
38. ibid., 18 March, 1914, p.16; 15 April, 1914, p.9; 10 June, 1914, p.16; 30 September, 1914, p.6.
39. ibid., 18 February 18, 1918, p.16; 22 July, 1914, p.6.
40. ibid., 12 May, 1920, p.20; 19 May, 1920, p.10; 29 December, 1920, p.9.
41. ibid., 12 September, 1923, p.16; 19 September, 1923, p.9; 28 November, 1923, p.9.
42. The Times of London 7 July, 1924 reported that the teams entered in French alphabetical order, so that South Africa (Afrique du Sud) was followed by Argentina.
43. K Moore 'Strange bedfellows...' op.cit., p.120.
44. The Referee, Sydney, 27 October, 1920, p.9.
45. J. Bianchi and P. Jenes op.cit., p.1.
46. The Referee, Sydney, 15 August, 1928, p.11.
47. ibid., 29 January, 1930, p.1.
48. I. Jobling 'Australia and the Commonwealth Games...' op.cit., p.4.
49. ibid.,
50. The Referee, Sydney, 8 January, 1930, p.15; 5 February, 1930, p.1.; 11 June, 1930, p.15.
51. ibid., 15 August 1928.
52. The Mercury, Sydney, 14 January, 1924, p.8; P. Serle op.cit.,
53. The Referee, Sydney, 9 December, 1931, p.21.
54. ibid., 6 September, 1922, p.9.