

Ode to the Games

Continued from yesterday's edition

II

*O Lady Glory, and Mirth, delight-
ing in music,
Children of the most mighty of
Gods,
Listen now, and Health, lover of
the dance,
Look on the company lightly
treading after friendly fortune.
I have come with a song for
Asopichos
In the Lydian style with careful
art;
For through you the Minyan race
Is victorious at Olympia.
Go now, Echo, to the black walls
Of Persephona's house
And bring the fine news to his
father;
See Kleodamos and tell him
How his son
In the famous valleys of Pytho
Has crowned his young hair
With the wings of a glorious tri-
umph.*

I have commented before on my opinion of the validity of different translations of some Latin poems, but my knowledge of Greek is virtually zero. The differences are interesting, insofar as they show how one can form an impression of a poet in translation only through the ear of the translator!

So much for the archaic view of the Olympics. The idea of reviving the Olympic Games, in the sense of a national unifying concept had to wait until Greece was once again a nation, and this was in the early years of the nineteenth century. In last week's piece about Lord Byron I mentioned his involvement with the Greek freedom movement.

After the foundation of the modern Greek state, in the beginning of the 19th century, there were some attempts to revive the Olympic Games. In 1833 the poet Alexandros Soutsos recalled the glorious and peaceful character of the Olympic Games and through his poetry sent the message for their revival. In 1838, the municipality of Letrinoi, an area near ancient Olympia, decided to revive the Olympic Games. According to their plans, the games would take place every four years in the city of Pyrgos. Since no additional information about these games is available, historians believe that they never took place. However, this is an important item of information because it shows that the idea of relating the new Greek state with the ancient Greek culture - an issue that greatly concerned the scholars and politicians of that period - also met with positive response from a

large part of the population.

The Greeks continued to attempt to revive the Panhellenic Games concept. They organized the Zappian Games in Athens four times, in 1859, 1870, 1875 and 1889. However, consistent with the original model, these Games were exclusively Greek in character, both with regard to the athletes that participated and the spectators that watched them.

In 1833, the newspaper Helios published a poem by Alexandros Soutsos which referred to the necessity of reviving the Olympic Games. The newspaper was published in Nauplion, the first capital of the new born Greek state, at the Peloponnese. A Cry for the Restoration of the Olympic Games is our second Poem of the Week (again, it is in translation).

A wealthy Greek from Northern Greece, Evangelos Zappas, inspired by Alexandros Soutsos' idea of reviving the ancient Olympics Games, proposed that the Greek government finance the foundation of a Modern Olympics.

A.R. Rangaves, Greek Foreign Minister and classical scholar, objected: "today's spirit is different from the one of ancient times; the actual nations are competing in industry and artifacts, and not in stadiums."

According to Rangaves' opinion, modern Olympic Games should have focused on agricultural and industrial progress, not on athletics. So, he proposed to Zappas a mixed organization including both agricultural/industrial competition and athletic games, in order to amuse the people. In fact the industrial part in the Zappian Olympics was held regularly and got more attention and far more money than the athletics.

The Zappian Games took

place first in 1859; here is a description:

As the renovation of the ancient Stadium was not yet completed, the Games of 1859 took place in Loudovicos' Square (today's Omonoia Square, at the center of Athens). All the official representatives - the Royal Family, the members of the Government, Military and Public Authorities - and many thousands of people attended. As it was one of the first mass gatherings, neither the people nor the police had any previous experience of keeping the necessary order for the event. The fact that it was a new experience makes the event a very interesting case-study for the first mass gathering in the new era of the modern societies.

The athletic competition had more game-like than sportive character: as there were not athletes at that time, the Organizing Committee accepted the participation of workers, porters, etc., who were attracted by the monetary prizes of the games. According to the press of the time, many anecdotes took place during the games: a policeman who was there keeping the order, left his post and participated in the races. Even a beggar, who pretended to be blind, participated in the races as well!

The following day, the press criticized the games, but the ideal of the athletic competition was generally accepted, and this was the beginning of the whole process of the Olympic Games.

As is clear both from Soutsos and Byron, in what we might call the Western World the general awakening described as the 'Century of Light' and the demands of people for national independence and self determination had brought the eternal values of the classical Greek spirit once again to the foreground. Amongst these was faith in the concurrent development of the body and the mind and the ideals of sport as expressed in its finest form in the Olympic Games of antiquity.

It is in this light that the efforts made during the 18th century, and chiefly at the beginning of the 19th century, can be explained. Many times, however, these efforts did not have a purely athletic nature. Various European countries such as Poland in 1830 and Sweden in 1839 organized so-called "Greek Games" for professional athletes. Such events

took place until the last decade of the 19th century - and not only in Europe!

In 1834 and in 1836 a Pan-Scandinavian Olympic Games was organized, and in 1844 a Traveling Olympic Games took place in Germany. From 1862 to 1864 the Liverpool Athletic Club in England organized three Olympic Games - events which the Great Britain Athletic Union copied in 1866 and 1867 when they organized Olympic Festivals in Wales. Approximately 25 years later in 1893, San Francisco in the United States staged the Greco-Roman Games.

However, it is generally agreed that the architect of the modern Olympics was Pierre, Baron de Coubertin. Pierre Frdy, Baron de Coubertin, was born in Paris on New Year's Day in 1863. His family originated in Normandy where he spent many of his summers in the family Chateau de Mirville, near Le Havre. He refused the military career planned for him by his family, as well as renouncing a promising political career. By the age of 24 he had already decided the aim of his life: he would help bring back the noble spirit of France by reforming its old-fashioned and unimaginative education system.

Coubertin, whose father was an artist and mother a musician, was raised in cultivated and aristocratic surroundings. He had always been deeply interested in questions of education. For him, education was the key to the future of society, and he sought the means to make France rise once more after its defeat in the war in 1870. As a young man he was intensely interested in literature and in education and sociology. Family tradition pointed to an army career or possibly politics, but at the age of 24 Coubertin decided that his future lay in education. At the same time, he had the idea of reviving the Olympic Games, and he propounded his desire for a new era in international sport when on November 25, 1892, at a meeting of the Union des Sports Athltiques in Paris, he said:

"Let us export our oarsmen, our runners, our fencers into other lands. That is the true Free Trade of the future; and the day it is introduced into Europe the cause of Peace will have received a new and strong ally. It inspires me to touch upon another step I now

propose and in it I shall ask that the help you have given me hitherto you will extend again, so that together we may attempt to realize, upon a basis suitable to the conditions of our modern life, the splendid and beneficent task of reviving the Olympic Games."

The speech did not produce any appreciable activity, but Coubertin was not fainthearted. At a conference on international sport in Paris in June 1894, at which Coubertin raised the possibility of the revival of the Olympic Games, there were 79 delegates representing 49 organizations from nine countries. Coubertin himself wrote that except for his coworkers Dimvtrios Vikulas of Greece, who was to be the first president of the International Olympic Committee, and Professor William M. Sloane of the United States, from the College of New Jersey (later Princeton University), no one had real interest in the revival of the Games. Nevertheless, and to quote Coubertin again, "a unanimous vote in favor of revival was rendered at the end of the Congress chiefly to please me."

It was at first agreed that the Games should be held in Paris in 1900. Six years seemed a long time to wait, however, and it was decided to change the venue - what better site than Athens, the capital of Greece - and the date, to April 1896. A great deal of indifference, if not opposition, had to be overcome, including a refusal by Athens to stage the Games at all. But Coubertin and his newly elected International Olympic Committee of 14 members won through, and the Games were opened by the king of Greece in the first week of April 1896.

So there we are. It seems sad, on the whole, that the idea of having the games include cultural matters seems to have vanished: the structure of the Celtic celebrations, such as the Welsh Eisteddfod, which involve poetry and singing, would seem to have something to share.

It is also sad, perhaps, that the Byronic concept of the athlete/poet does not seem to be in the mainstream any more - but whose fault is that?

