

An Anglophile Amateur? New Zealanders' Perceptions of Pierre de Coubertin

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Introduction

In 1932 the Belgian Count de Baillet Latour, president of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) between 1925 and 1942, visited Australia and New Zealand after the conclusion of the Olympic Games in San Francisco. During his tour, he was asked by the New Zealand Olympic Committee to convey to his predecessor, Pierre de Coubertin, their “deep sense of appreciation of all he had done and the hope that he would be long spared to enjoy his great achievement.”¹ As will be discussed later, the esteem in which Coubertin was held was in contrast to the generally unfavorable perceptions of France in New Zealand. Moreover, whereas today New Zealand’s performances at the Olympic Games play an important role in promoting its self-image as a country which “punches above its weight” in sport, they were not yet prominently linked to nation-building in New Zealand.² There has been extensive discussion of New Zealand’s involvement in the Olympic Games in the works of Palenski, Maddaford and Romanos, and some scholarly analyses conducted by Kohe, Warren and Ryan. These works, however, contain little examination of New Zealand perceptions of Baron Pierre de Coubertin, founder of the modern Olympic Games and president of the IOC between 1896 and 1925.³ This paper focuses on representations of Coubertin in *Papers Past*, a digital repository of New Zealand’s newspapers. It argues that the main reasons for his generally favourable reception are that he was represented as an anglophile amateur and that his contact with New Zealanders, although limited, reinforced New Zealand’s self-image as an influential player in global and imperial networks.⁴

Baron Pierre de Coubertin and the Changing Status of Sports during the Nineteenth Century

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¹ [n.a.], “Olympic Movement. A Man and his Dream.”

² [NZ] Ministry for Culture and Heritage, “NZ’s First Olympic Century.”

³ Maddaford and Palenski, *The Games*; Romanos, *Our Olympic Century*; Kohe, *At the Heart of Sport*; Warren, “Politics and Sport Don’t Mix – Or do They?”; Ryan, “The Turning Point”.

⁴ Richardson and Richardson, *Anthony Wilding*, 121.

It is generally agreed among sports historians that the key features of the modern sporting world as we know it today emerged during the nineteenth century in Victorian Britain. These were: the transition from localized rules to national sports organizations administering their codes according to a common set of rules; the emergence of international sport and its linkage to developing national identities; the development of distinct amateur and professional competitions in different sports; the phenomenon of mass spectator sport played according to a regular schedule and an accompanying belief that sports teams reflected community identities and aspirations; a widespread belief that sport created good citizens; and, finally, the integration of sport into schools as a means of providing both physical and moral development.⁵ Among these developments, the integration of sport into schools, beginning with elite boys' schools before extending to girls' schools and state schools, was perhaps the most significant, because it ensured a continuous supply of ex-pupils inculcated with a common set of sporting values. Chief among these were the notion of "the game for the game's sake" – the belief that sport ought to be played honorably and without expectation of material reward – and a "healthy mind in a healthy body". The gentleman amateur, it was argued, epitomized these values because they played sport without concern over whether they won or lost (a value which resonated deeply with Coubertin), and had a rounded outlook on life.⁶ Physical health and moral virtue were closely interconnected in the Victorian outlook on sport, which was given spiritual legitimacy in the ideals of "Muscular Christianity". Health was of particular concern to many Victorians, in part owing to fears that sedentary lifestyles could lead to "degeneracy", and a related belief that maintaining the health of the Anglo-Saxon race was central to the ongoing viability of the British Empire.⁷

The rise of organized sport coincided with the rise of imperialism and there was a close connection between the two. "Through sport," Brian Stoddart argued, "were transferred dominant British beliefs as to behaviour, standards, relations and conformity."⁸ Evelyne Combeau-Marie argues along similar lines in regard to sport and the French empire, albeit with a slight difference in that the French initially favored teaching gymnastics rather than sports. Coubertin, she notes, was an ardent supporter of colonization and believed sport should be widely practiced by both colonizers and colonized peoples, because it would teach discipline and minimize the threat of social unrest and rebellion.⁹

Initially, the Victorian ideology of sport largely excluded females because sport was primarily seen as a means of developing "manliness". From the last quarter of the nineteenth century, however, women were gradually admitted into physical education and individual and team sports on the grounds that it was in the self-interest of the Empire that women be healthy mothers, albeit on the basis that women's sport was played in a "feminine" manner.¹⁰

This was the sporting world into which Coubertin (1863–1937) was born and which he himself would significantly shape. His life spanned the emergence of the modern sporting world. The Football Association, the first national sports organization, was formed in the year of his birth and he died one year after the 1936 Berlin Olympics, an event many regard as the most egregious instance of the appropriation of sport for nationalist ends. Born into an aristocratic family, Coubertin, Clastres argued, came to view sport as a means by which he could shape society and leave an enduring legacy.¹¹ During a series of visits to English Schools between 1883 and 1886, he developed a blueprint of his ideal sporting world. He was

⁵ See, for example, Holt, *Sport and the British*, 74–134; Collins, *Sport in Capitalist Society*, 21–37, 48–59.

⁶ Holt, *Sport and the British*, 98–100.

⁷ Collins, *Sport in Capitalist Society*, 21–47.

⁸ Stoddart, "Sport and British Cultural Imperialism", 651.

⁹ Combeau-Marie, "Sport in the French Colonies", 28–29.

¹⁰ Collins, *Sport in Capitalist Society*, 38–47. Hargreaves, *Sporting Females*, 42–111.

¹¹ Clastres, "Pierre de Coubertin", 35–36.

particularly struck by the ways in which British public schools (the name given to a select group of endowed schools which predominantly taught children from the upper classes) used sport as a means of simultaneously teaching leadership, initiative and the acceptance of rules and Muscular Christian morality.¹² This philosophy of sport, he believed, largely accounted for Britain's pre-eminence in world affairs; in marked contrast to France's much weakened position after its defeat in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870.¹³ Coubertin came to believe that the Ancient Olympic Games represented the ideal expression of sport and that their revival would display the best ideals of sportsmanship to the world, thereby facilitating their global adoption. In 1888 he became general secretary of the Union of French Athletic Sports Clubs (Union des sociétés françaises de sports athlétiques, UFSFA), a position he utilized to promote international competition for French athletes – among which was the event attended by Leonard Cuff and the New Zealand athletics team in Paris in 1892.¹⁴ After traveling extensively through Britain, Europe and the United States, and encountering considerable scepticism and outright opposition, he secured approval for his concept in Paris in 1894. Central to the acceptance of his proposal was his commitment to amateur sport, without which the Amateur Athletic Union would not have supported the proposal. Indeed the primary purpose of the 1894 meeting was arriving at an agreed definition of amateurism, which was interpreted very differently between countries and organizations. For example, some, such as the Amateur Rowing Association, barred manual workers, but others were more liberal in admitting workers and the reimbursement of expenses. Social class played a significant role in shaping both the definition and application of amateurism. Holt suggests it “was in practice frequently a means of excluding working-class players from high-level competition.”¹⁵ Hill and Clastres suggest Coubertin was not as rigid in his interpretation of amateurism as some English sporting authorities, such as the Amateur Rowing Association, but was vehemently opposed to outright professionalism, which he saw as degrading and contrary to the essence of true sport.¹⁶

If Coubertin might be regarded as middle-of-the-road in his outlook on amateurism, he was unequivocal in his view that the Olympic Games ought to be primarily, if not exclusively, the preserve of male athletes. Jennifer Hargreaves characterizes him as “intransigent in his opposition to women's participation in Olympic competition”, noting that the very few events in which women were allowed to compete between 1900 and 1924 were added without his approval and women's athletics was only added to the Olympic programme after he retired.¹⁷

Sport and Society in New Zealand

The sporting culture of Victorian Britain was successfully transplanted to New Zealand. After more than seventy years of commercial and religious contacts, New Zealand formally became a colony of Britain in 1840. From the outset, historians such as James Belich have noted, New Zealand positioned itself as a “Britain of the South Seas”; the colony with the greatest geographical; political and cultural similarities to Britain. In popular belief, as well as official statements, New Zealanders were more British than the British.¹⁸ Sport soon became a key part of such assertions. Games were a popular feature of the earliest anniversaries of newly-formed settlements and by 1914 cricket and rugby union were established as the premier summer and winter men's sports. These sports were initially fostered by the armed forces and a network of

¹² Clastres, “Pierre de Coubertin”, 38–39; Coubertin, *Olympism: Selected Writings*, 51–68.

¹³ Hill, *Olympic Politics*, 5–9.

¹⁴ Clastres, “Pierre de Coubertin,” 42–44.

¹⁵ Holt, *Sport and the British*, 104.

¹⁶ Hill, *Olympic Politics*, 6–9, 18–23; Clastres, “Pierre de Coubertin,” 46–47.

¹⁷ Hargreaves, *Sporting Females*, 209–13.

¹⁸ Belich, *Making Peoples*, 278–312, 446–50.

elite schools modeled on the British public schools, before extending to the urban middle and working classes. By virtue of its temperate climate, the easy accessibility of the outdoors to its citizens and the purportedly vigorous lifestyles of its inhabitants, many New Zealanders believed their colony exhibited the very best moral and physical characteristics of Britons, while avoiding the moral and social evils of urban degeneracy.¹⁹ By virtue of its network of committed advocates, its early adoption by schools and its association with provincial identity, rugby union emerged as the national sport from the 1880s. The physicality of the game and the successes of New Zealand teams against overseas opposition – New Zealand representative teams lost only seven of their 123 games against international opposition between 1884 and 1914 – reinforced notions of New Zealand males as possessed of an elevated level of masculinity.²⁰ Such views were further reinforced by the successful contributions of New Zealand's armed forces in the South African War (1899–1902) and the First World War.²¹ The prominent participation of Māori, the indigenous people of New Zealand, in both rugby union and in the New Zealand armed forces, further underscored its status as the national game.²² The first New Zealand team to travel to Britain was the 1888–89 Native Team, predominantly comprised of Māori. Their tour, which occurred before the New Zealand Rugby Football Union was founded in 1892, was hailed as proof that the “civilizing mission”, which many British regarded as a unique feature of their Empire, had been fulfilled in New Zealand.²³ Women were selectively admitted to sports. Their presence in individual sports such as tennis and croquet was permitted because these games were often played in private venues and offered opportunities for social mixing between “suitable” men and women. Hockey and netball emerged as the favored team sports for women, but like their European counterparts, their participation in sports remained constrained by enduring concerns over their physical capacity to partake in sport and an accompanying desire that they play games in a feminine manner.²⁴

Not only did sport give New Zealanders a sense of self-esteem, it also provided them with a national symbol which endures to this day – a silver fern typically worn on a black uniform.²⁵ The New Zealand Athletic team which visited Europe in 1892 was the first New Zealand team formally selected by a national sporting association (the New Zealand Amateur Athletic Association having been formed in 1887) to wear a black uniform with a silver fern on a tour to Europe. Although rugby union became the sport most closely linked to nation building, New Zealand athletes also achieved international recognition. Godfrey Shaw, a hurdler, won the Amateur Athletic Association 120 yard hurdles event four years running between 1893 and 1896. Six years later another New Zealander, George Smith, won the same event.²⁶

A number of historians have argued that it was during the period between 1890 and 1914 that New Zealanders acquired a sense of themselves as a distinct people. Among the key contributors to this emerging nationalism were the formation of national organizations; the recognition of New Zealand as a progressive “social laboratory”, as seen in granting women the right to vote in 1893; participation in the South African War; the decision to reject federation with Australia in 1901 and, finally, New Zealand's aforementioned sporting

¹⁹ Ryan and Watson, *Sport and the New Zealanders*, 29–82; Crawford, “Rugby and the Forging of a National Identity”, 5–19.

²⁰ Crawford, “Rugby and the Forging of a National Identity”, 7; Ryan and Watson, *Sport and the New Zealanders*, 56–64.

²¹ Phillips, *A Man's Country?*, 82–162.

²² King, *Penguin History of New Zealand*, 386–87.

²³ Ryan, *Forerunners of the All Blacks*, 50–51.

²⁴ Ryan and Watson, *Sport and the New Zealanders*, 100–10.

²⁵ Palenski, *The Making of New Zealanders*, 111.

²⁶ Heidenstrom, *Athletes of the Century*, 71–73.

achievements.²⁷ The narrative that New Zealanders were particularly good at sport was especially important at a time when physical achievements were seen as a reflection on a nation's moral character and ability to contribute towards the ongoing maintenance of the British Empire. This emerging national identity reinforced, rather than undermined, popular allegiance to Britain. The progress of New Zealand was viewed as a positive reflection on its British heritage, the New Zealand and British identities being two sides of the same coin.²⁸

Coubertin's presidency coincided with the formative and somewhat ambivalent phase of New Zealand's involvement in the Olympic Games.²⁹ Although Leonard Cuff was made a founding member of the IOC in 1894, New Zealand athletes did not compete at the Olympics until the 1908 and 1912 games in London and Stockholm, when they participated as members of an Australasian team.³⁰ The early iterations of the Olympic Games received little publicity in New Zealand owing to their distance and the rather disorganized nature of the 1900 and 1904 games. In addition, some Australian and New Zealand administrators believed that as British subjects they ought to compete under the banner of Great Britain or as part of an imperial team.³¹ Even when New Zealand competed in its own right at the Olympic Games from 1920, its teams were small in the interwar period – four athletes in 1920 and 1924, ten in 1928, twenty-one in 1932, and seven in 1936. Some of those who did attend, including 1936 gold medallist Jack Lovelock, thought the games too nationalistic and commercialized.³² New Zealand's ambivalent engagement with the Olympic Games partially reflected a wider trend of a renewed imperialism in sport and politics. New Zealand rugby came firmly into line with its British counterpart after 1930, abandoning its wing forward and sanctioning of localized rules.³³ The Statute of Westminster, which granted all dominions full rights of self-government in 1931, was viewed warily in New Zealand and was not formally adopted until 1947.³⁴

Representations of Coubertin in New Zealand Newspapers

Ron Palenski credits newspapers with playing a significant role in the formation of national identity in New Zealand. Initially polemical and localized in nature, they became increasingly focused on national issues following the formation of the New Zealand Press Association in 1878. Despite its small population (New Zealand numbered just over one million people in 1911), virtually every locality in New Zealand had a newspaper, there being 209 newspapers in 1905, of which sixty-one were dailies.³⁵ Despite New Zealand's geographical isolation, its citizens were well informed on overseas news, particularly events in Britain, which were often reported under the banner "News from Home". From 1876 overseas news was received via telegraph, thereby connecting New Zealanders with world news almost instantaneously. Historians interested in New Zealand have, since 2007, been able to access *Papers Past*, a digital repository of New Zealand newspapers, magazines, letters and parliamentary papers for the years 1839–1950. In January 2021 *Papers Past* contained 158 New Zealand newspapers and four Samoan newspapers, which makes its coverage comprehensive (albeit incomplete in some respects because not all newspapers on the site are covered for their entire publication period). The advantage of *Papers Past* is that it allows immediate access to newspaper coverage

²⁷ Sinclair, *A Destiny Apart*; Palenski, *The Making of New Zealanders*, 303–12.

²⁸ Sinclair, *The Native Born*, 9.

²⁹ Kohe, "(Dis)located Olympic Patriots," 800–804.

³⁰ Little and Cashman, "Ambiguous and Overlapping Identities," 81–96.

³¹ Palenski, *The Making of New Zealanders*, 264–66; Little and Cashman, "Ambiguous and Overlapping Identities," 88–92; Nielsen, *Sport and the British World*, 152–80.

³² Ryan and Watson, *Sport and the New Zealanders*, 171–72.

³³ Ryan, "A Tale of Two Dinners," 1421–22.

³⁴ Belich, *Paradise Reforged*, 318–19.

³⁵ Palenski, *The Making of New Zealanders*, 51–67.

on any given topic and allows researchers to compare and contrast reportage of these issues in different newspapers. Its potential disadvantages, however, are that the results may be influenced by the choice of search keywords, which may or may not capture all relevant entries, and that a specific focus on particular topics can obscure understanding of the wider historical context within which events took place.³⁶ A search of the newspapers section using the term “Coubertin” found 270 articles in which Coubertin was mentioned.

Interestingly, although Coubertin was primarily mentioned in relation to sport in New Zealand newspapers, his earliest mention appears to be in an 1889 editorial of the *Auckland Star* on the subject of imperial federation (a proposal to form a parliament of England’s colonies). The article cited a talk by Coubertin in which he cautioned against views that England was in decline, citing imperial federation as a means of potentially making Britain stronger and therefore placing France at a disadvantage.³⁷ Indeed prior to the First World War, Coubertin’s writings on international affairs, particularly those relating to France’s relationship with Britain, were extensively cited in New Zealand’s newspapers. In 1898 the *Thames Advertiser*, a provincial newspaper, published an article entitled “A French Appreciation of Empire”, which contained extensive excerpts from a letter by Coubertin published in *The Times*. Coubertin openly acknowledged his “Anglo-mania” and stated that many in France shared his outlook. “The Power of the British Empire resides”, he argued, “not in the Government or in laws, but in the race.”³⁸ A reflection on the esteem in which Coubertin was held as an authority on Franco-British relations can be seen in a 1900 *Auckland Star* editorial on tensions between Britain and France which asserted he had “a very special claim to become a mediator between France and England. He loves the one and admires the other.”³⁹ Because of these traits, Coubertin was seen as ideally placed to defuse the tensions which had arisen over British colonialism in Africa. The editorial was, however, not unequivocal in its assessment of Coubertin, alluding to his “Continental limitations of thought” with regard to his criticisms of the Second Anglo-Boer (South African) War.⁴⁰ His book *France Since 1814* was sold in New Zealand bookstores.⁴¹

Most of the New Zealand newspaper coverage of Coubertin was, however, in reference to sport. The first mention of Coubertin in a sporting context was in 1890, in an article entitled “Free Games and Gymnastics” in the *Press*, the leading Christchurch morning newspaper. The article noted Coubertin’s enthusiasm for the way sport is taught in Britain’s public schools and asserted all of Coubertin’s writings on football and baseball were set forth in “strains worthy of ‘Tom Brown’”, a reference to Thomas Hughes’ novel *Tom Brown’s Schooldays*, the classic evocation of sport in public schools.⁴²

New Zealand newspapers frequently cited Coubertin’s support for amateurism, the dominant ideology of the Olympic Games from its inception until the early 1990s. An 1895 article in the *Lyttelton Times* cited excerpts from an article by Albert Shaw in the *American Review of Reviews* on the formative stages of the Modern Olympic Movement. Noting Coubertin’s intention to form “a sort of high moral jurisdiction over the whole world of honourable and manly games of sport,” it approvingly reported “a high ethical standard was adopted, professionals sharply ruled out and money prizes tabooed.”⁴³ In 1914, Arthur Marryatt, chairman of the New Zealand Olympic Committee, wrote to Coubertin to

³⁶ Daley, “Papers from the Past”, 65.

³⁷ [n.a.], Editorial, *Auckland Star*, April 2, 1889.

³⁸ [n.a.], “A French Appreciation of Empire.”

³⁹ [n.a.], “France and England.”

⁴⁰ [n.a.], “France and England.”

⁴¹ [n.a.], “Whitcombe & Tombs Limited. List of New Books.”

⁴² [n.a.], “Free Games v. Gymnastics.” Collins, *Sport in Capitalist Society*, 30.

⁴³ [n.a.], “Athletic Notes.”

congratulate him on having completed two terms as president. The letter expressed the hope that “in view of his great service to the cause of amateurism in the world” he would “see his way to take up a third term of office.”⁴⁴

Coubertin’s advocacy of amateurism resonated strongly with New Zealand’s sports administrators because most prided themselves on their amateur ethos. One newspaper report from 1924 approvingly quoted the manager of the visiting Chinese Universities football team calling New Zealand “the most amateur country in the World”.⁴⁵ It is interesting to reflect on why a country so ostensibly committed to egalitarianism as New Zealand embraced a concept as deeply embedded in social class as amateurism. A possible explanation is that amateurism was seen as democratizing sport by making it available to the masses and the archetypal amateur in a New Zealand context was a public-spirited volunteer rather than an upper-class gatekeeper.⁴⁶ The interwar period saw a renewed assertion of amateurism in New Zealand amidst a wider crusade against perceived immorality and physical degeneracy which James Belich called “the great tightening”.⁴⁷ Illustrative of this is a 1928 editorial in the *New Zealand Herald*, Auckland’s leading morning newspaper, alluding to the controversy over Bill Tilden’s amateur status for the United States Davis Cup tennis team. It noted that the Davis Cup and Olympic Games were “established on a strictly amateur basis. Baron Pierre de Coubertin, who originated the modern Olympic Games, regarded this basis as essential.”⁴⁸ The editorial restated the principal objections to professionalism. Professionalism, it was asserted, undermined “the zest of the game for the game’s sake”. Decrying “the bane of the onlooker”, the editorial also criticized the building of lavish stadiums and emphasis on spectatorship in modern sport on the grounds that it undermined active participation in games. This, it cautioned, was reminiscent of “the state of affairs that brought ancient Rome to ruin.”⁴⁹ The criticism of stadiums aligned with Coubertin’s views. A *New Zealand Herald* article from 1911 reported his “wish that the Olympic Committees should strongly discourage the construction of big stadia” because they encouraged people to be inactive spectators rather than active athletes.⁵⁰

In addition to his support for amateurism, Coubertin’s evocation of Greek sporting ideals, or at least his interpretation of them, also endeared him to many New Zealand sports administrators, many of whom came from schools in which classical education featured prominently. The characterization of Coubertin as a reviver and upholder of these values elided his French identity, and positioned him as a classical Greek (and by extension British) figure. A “classical education” was a core component of British public schools and there was a sense in which many British administrators viewed themselves as having inherited the mantle of ancient Greece.⁵¹ A *Stratford Evening Post* article, published during the 1936 Olympic Games, praised Coubertin for continuing the purported Greek ideals of amateurism in sport. The subheading of the article read “Laurel Wreath Was Sole Trophy”, alluding to the often-stated belief that athletes in the ancient Olympic Games participated without any expectations of material reward. Coubertin was credited with having modeled the Olympic Games, “on the festivals of the Ancient Greeks, whose ideals led them to make a religion of sport.” In what may have been an editorial juxtaposition, the article appeared alongside a report of golf professionals complaining about meagre prizemoney in sport.⁵² An earlier article discussing

⁴⁴ [n.a.], “News of the Day.”

⁴⁵ [n.a.], “A Hearty Welcome,” *Evening Post*, July 17, 1924.

⁴⁶ Ryan and Watson, *Sport and the New Zealanders*, 99–100.

⁴⁷ Belich, *Paradise Reforged*, 121–25.

⁴⁸ [n.a.], “The Amateur Imperilled.”

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ [n.a.], “Athletics. The Fifth Olympiad.”

⁵¹ Hall and Stead, *A People’s History of Classics*, 21–44.

⁵² [n.a.], “Olympic Games. Greek Ideal.”

Coubertin being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1928, similarly positioned him as an exemplar of the classical ideal. “In the study of the Olympic idea, as shown at Ancient Olympia in Greece,” it noted, “the president, a man of classical training and spirit, consulted not only men of similar calibre in his own land, but those in other countries as well.”⁵³ The eventual burial of his heart near the stadium where the 1896 Olympic Games had been held, in partial fulfilment of his wishes that his heart be buried at Olympia, was also widely reported.⁵⁴ The extent to which Coubertin’s philosophy of Olympism accurately reflected the practice of sport in ancient Greece is debated. Young has argued that “no ancient Olympic athlete” would have met the criteria for amateurism adopted for the modern Olympic Games.⁵⁵ Irrespective of their historical accuracy, however, such views were undeniably influential.

The death of Coubertin on September 2, 1937 was widely, if fleetingly, reported in New Zealand newspapers. Most acknowledged his sporting achievements, but others, such as the *Wairarapa Daily Times*, focused on both his scholarly and literary achievements.⁵⁶ The article reporting his death in the *New Zealand Herald* was relatively extensive compared to other newspapers, and reflected the general perception of Coubertin as an Anglophile Frenchman who promoted and upheld the proper values of sport. It approvingly noted that he had studied at English and American Universities and was an admirer of the ancient Greeks.⁵⁷ He was also credited with having overcome “innumerable difficulties” in the process of “resuscitating” the Olympic games, thereby epitomizing the pluck and perseverance the English public school system prided itself in teaching.⁵⁸ Coubertin’s ideals remained the benchmark by which the Olympic Games were judged in New Zealand. When the British Empire Games (later to become the Commonwealth Games) were first held in 1930 (they were founded owing to concerns of excessive nationalism and commercialism at the Olympics), it was not seen as a repudiation of Coubertin but of the failure of the IOC to maintain the ideals of its founder. The *Ellesmere Guardian* reprinted an article from the *Manchester Guardian* which advocated for Britain to withdraw from the games because they “have long lost their original significance and purpose.” Contrary to what Coubertin wanted, it argued, “Nations send their teams to the Olympic Games to win at any price.”⁵⁹

The generally favorable perceptions of Coubertin in New Zealand stood in marked contrast to the mostly pejorative attitudes towards France expressed in its media. With reference to the period prior to the First World War, Alistair Watts has identified a “persistent and pervasive negative sentiment towards France, and matters French” in New Zealand.⁶⁰ France was variously depicted as a historic rival and colonial competitor to Britain and a failed contender to colonize New Zealand. To the extent that France featured at all in New Zealand histories, it was usually as a catalyst for British annexation of New Zealand, owing to the existence of a French colony in Akaroa between 1838 and 1843 and Baron de Thierry briefly proclaiming in 1837 himself a “sovereign” ruler in the Hokianga district.⁶¹ Despite tens of thousands of New Zealand troops having served in France during the First World War, these attitudes did not, Watts argues, notably change in the interwar period.⁶² Indeed, as a number of historians have observed, participation in the First World War strengthened, rather than undermined, New Zealand’s imperial connections. Coubertin’s lifespan largely coincided with

⁵³ [n.a.], “Nobel Peace Prize Awarded for 1928.”

⁵⁴ [n.a.], “Olympiad Founder. Heart to be Buried.”; [n.a.], “Heart Burial Plan.”

⁵⁵ Young, “Professionalism in Archaic and Classical Greek Athletics.” 82.

⁵⁶ [n.a.], “Death at Seventy-Four”; [n.a.], “Obituary. Baron de Coubertin.”

⁵⁷ [n.a.], “Sudden Death.”

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ [n.a.], “International Sport.”

⁶⁰ Watts, “Why, when the image of the French,” 159.

⁶¹ Belich, *Making Peoples*, 179–84.

⁶² Watts, “Options and Opportunities for New Zealand and France”, 305–19.

what James Belich calls the recolonization of New Zealand by Britain circa 1880–1960. By this he means that Britain became New Zealand’s leading trading partner and the intellectual capital of New Zealand. It also remained the primary point of emotional reference for New Zealanders.⁶³ Alignment with Britain did not, however, mean subservience. New Zealanders, Belich argues, saw themselves as junior shareholders in the Empire, and therefore had a self-interest in its maintenance. A consequence of “recolonization”, however, was an enduring suspicion of non-Anglo-Saxon peoples.

Leonard Cuff, Coubertin and New Zealand Transnational and Imperial Networks

Although fleeting in nature, the contact between Leonard Cuff and Coubertin is relevant because it provides an insight into how sport connected New Zealanders with imperial and transnational networks.⁶⁴ Born in 1866, Cuff was a talented athlete. A New Zealand long jump champion, he also represented New Zealand in cricket in 1894, as well as being secretary of the New Zealand Amateur Athletic Association between 1887 and 1896. He moved to Australia in 1896 and remained there for the rest of his life.⁶⁵ Like Coubertin, Cuff was eager for New Zealand athletes to engage in international competition. To this end, he organized a New Zealand team to participate in the New South Wales Championships in 1890, and in 1892 he managed a team of four athletes on a tour of Europe. During this tour, Cuff met Coubertin, when the New Zealand team competed at an athletics meeting the latter had organized in Paris. The opportunity for New Zealand to compete at this event appears to have been at the instigation of Charles Herbert, Secretary of the Amateur Athletic Association, with whom Cuff had been in contact.⁶⁶ Cuff was subsequently nominated by Coubertin as one of the twelve founding members of the International Committee, on which he served until he tendered his resignation in 1905. Letters and Jobling suggest that Cuff’s selection may, in part, have been a piece of “geographic propaganda” by Coubertin to demonstrate the global interest in the Olympic movement. In addition, Cuff’s multifaceted skills as an amateur sportsman reflected Coubertin’s ideal type of sporting amateur.⁶⁷ Coubertin himself noted that the people he nominated as inaugural members of the IOC were “almost exclusively absentee members”, something he saw as giving himself “elbow room” to steer the Olympic Movement in the direction he wanted.⁶⁸ Being based in New Zealand and Australia, Cuff certainly met this criteria.

Cuff was not particularly close to Coubertin. He met him only once and appears to have written only five times to Coubertin during his ten years on the IOC.⁶⁹ Indeed his association with Coubertin received little publicity at the time. So far as can be ascertained, only one newspaper, the *Lyttelton Times*, which included an article from athletics correspondent “Sprinter” containing extracts from a letter Coubertin wrote to Cuff in 1894, referred to the correspondence between the two, although Cuff was occasionally mentioned in passing as an IOC member.⁷⁰ Subsequently, however, their association has become something of a foundation story of New Zealand Olympism. Ron Palenski suggests that as a consequence of their meeting “New Zealand...was thus in on the ground floor of what would become the

⁶³ Belich, *Paradise Reforged*, 76–86.

⁶⁴ Palenski, *The Making of New Zealanders*, 256–66.

⁶⁵ Letters and Jobling, “Forgotten Links,” 91–110.

⁶⁶ Letters and Jobling, “Forgotten Links,” 92.

⁶⁷ Letters and Jobling, “Forgotten Links,” 94–97.

⁶⁸ Coubertin, *Olympism: Selected Writings*, 320.

⁶⁹ Letters and Jobling, “Forgotten Links,” 97.

⁷⁰ “Sprinter”, “Athletic Notes.” See, for example, [n.a.], “Football.”; [n.a.], “Topics of the Day.”

biggest sporting event in the world.”⁷¹ Others are more circumspect about its importance.⁷² Arguably, the significance of Cuff’s encounter with Coubertin is the way it mirrored wider narratives of the capacity of New Zealanders to prosper abroad, a recurring point of insecurity for many of its residents.⁷³ Various a resident of New Zealand and Australia, Cuff exemplifies the circulation of peoples, ideas and commodities characteristic of the “British World.”⁷⁴ Although isolated geographically, through people like Cuff, New Zealand was integrated into global commercial and cultural networks.

New Zealand featured occasionally in the writings of Coubertin, typically as an example of the successful export of Olympic ideals. In an 1887 paper on the worldwide spread of English style education in the Anglo-Saxon world, Coubertin wrote “whether they are ‘squatters’ in New Zealand or planters in America, they are better off for having received such a strong physical and moral education in their schools. Muscles and character are objects of urgent necessity in such circumstances.”⁷⁵ New Zealand was subsequently cited as a stimulus to continue his quest to revive the Olympic games. Recalling his discouragement at the unenthusiastic reception his proposals received in the United States and London in 1893 and 1894; Coubertin resolved to continue, in part, because “applications to join...were coming from all over the world, from New Zealand and Jamaica, as well as from Amiens and Bordeaux.”⁷⁶ In a 1913 article in the *Revue Olympique*, he cited the formation of the Amateur Athletic Union of Australasia as part of a worldwide movement towards athletic unification, which was one of the goals of Olympism.⁷⁷

Conclusion

Coubertin was one of the few French figures consistently represented favorably in New Zealand. It has been argued here that the principal reasons for this is his construction as an Anglophile who exhibited the best ideals of the amateur sportsperson. These two characteristics were particularly significant to many New Zealanders because they reflected the then-dominant representation of New Zealand as a “Better Britain” in which the best values of amateur sport could be found. Moreover, the recognition he gave New Zealand, by selecting Leonard Cuff as a founding member of the IOC, reflected a wider national story of New Zealanders’ capacity to succeed on the world stage courtesy of their access to imperial and international networks. Although French by birth, Coubertin was in this way co-opted into “Better Britonism” by virtue of his promotion of Britain’s sporting values and awarding prestigious positions to members of its empire.

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⁷¹ Palenski, *The Making of New Zealanders*, 263; Palenski and Maddaford, *The Games*, 13–14.

⁷² Letters and Jobling, “Forgotten Links,” 91–110; Kohe, “(Dis)located Olympic Patriots,” 811.

⁷³ Belich, *Paradise Reforged*, 326–45.

⁷⁴ Ballantyne, *Webs of Empire*, 264–82. Nielsen, *Sport and the British World*, 14–16.

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