

## The Reverend Robert S. de Courcy Laffan: Baron Pierre de Coubertin and the Olympic Movement



After Father Didon had roused the passions of the meeting on Tuesday 29<sup>th</sup> July 1897, chance - perhaps even fate - led de Coubertin to think of asking one of the latecomers to speak.<sup>1</sup> The Principal of Cheltenham College, the Reverend Robert Stuart de Courcy Laffan had just come off the boat from Southampton, and on entering the hall he and de Coubertin seemed to exchange understanding looks.<sup>2</sup> In de Coubertin's opinion a sort of vacuum had developed in the proceedings, and he considered that the gathering might benefit from hearing the sound of an English voice. But de Coubertin could not have predicted what happened next. When Laffan spoke so eloquently and in apparently faultless French, it is no surprise that the effect of this newly found ally on de Coubertin led him to be „[...] convinced that a new collaborator of the most invaluable quality had come down from the heavens to help us“.<sup>3</sup> It is worth recounting de Coubertin's description of his first impressions, as the friendship that developed between de Coubertin and Laffan was to be „profound and stable“: *„Without haste, without any hesitation, both modest and confident, Monsieur Laffan rose, and with a French of the utmost purity, with a measure and choice of expression altogether unexpected, he described his theory of the moral use of the sporting phenomenon. His ideas accorded with those of Father Didon, but the form was so different: at the same time with a sober and refined elegance, that the contrast transported the audience to a new level of enthusiasm, and the meeting was orchestrated into a true expression of French eloquence.“*<sup>4</sup>

In his presentation Laffan spoke of the broader value of sporting activity. He said that it was through physical exercise that man came to better know himself, and that this in turn would lead to the establishment of the Brotherhood of Man.<sup>5</sup> The endorsement of both the spiritual and physical benefits of sport were much appreciated by the audience. He presented a different slant on the potential contained within the concept of Olympism: a more overtly philanthropic aim which would have been recognised by the audience as highly palatable to their respective

1 During the course of my research for this paper I have received assistance from many quarters. I would like to thank, in particular: Don Anthony, Ian Buchanan, Jean Durry, Norbert Müller, Karl Lennartz, Jean-Marc Jaillet (Bibliothèque Municipale, Le Havre), Cathérine Carpuis (IOC Museum and Study Centre), Dr Robert Bearman (The Shakespeare Centre), Dr Stephen Gunn and Mrs Wilkes (Merton College, Oxford), and the British Olympic Association.

2 Cf. Journal du Havre, 29 Juillet 1897, p. 2.

3 Coubertin, P. de: Mémoires olympiques, Lausanne 1932, p. 46 - author's translation.

4 Ibid.

5 Cf. Journal du Havre, 29 Juillet 1897, p. 2.

supporters at home. At the closing banquet it fell to Laffan to propose the toast to France - which he had loved since his childhood.<sup>6</sup> Before he left Le Havre Robert Laffan was to be co-opted onto the International Olympic Committee.

It is the purpose of this paper to examine why Laffan had such a strong impact on Pierre de Coubertin. Certainly the surprise that the invited speaker immediately launched into such accurate use of the French language, when English had been expected, made Laffan's discourse at Le Havre more significant. He was a striking man to look at, de Coubertin recalled him at Le Havre as: „[...] still a young man, svelte, with a face of rare finesse. In all his being was shown a perfect balance of intelligence, strength and sensitivity”.<sup>7</sup> De Coubertin's preoccupation with English education will have added to his own expectations. The fact that Laffan had been nominated to represent the Headmaster's Conference at Le Havre was important because of the focus de Coubertin had placed on the benefits of the system of the English Public Schools, and the teachings of Thomas Arnold in particular. The Headmasters' Conference, an autocratic and self-perpetuating body, carried great sway in holding together the most highly regarded schools in Britain. Membership was strictly by invitation, with institutions only being able to call themselves Public Schools if their Headmaster was a member of the Headmasters' Conference.<sup>8</sup> The Principal of Cheltenham College was therefore the ambassador of the system of education that had been so energetically studied by de Coubertin in the years preceding the foundation of the International Olympic Committee.<sup>9</sup> Pierre de Coubertin himself wrote in his memoirs that he had been trying to „implant Arnold's teachings in France” for the past ten years.<sup>10</sup>

The work of Thomas Arnold, Headmaster of Rugby School between 1827 and 1842, has been much misunderstood. The fundamental tendency has been to attribute the interpretations and actions of his „disciples” and products back to Arnold's specific philosophy. It has been widely agreed that Thomas Arnold did not encourage the mania for games that developed in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>11</sup> Neither did he invent the systems of boy-government and control in schools. There is no doubt that Arnold was responsible for leading the eventual moral reformation in the Public Schools from their crude and brutish eighteenth century condition, but his intention had been to generate Christian gentlemen. The desirable „manliness” so frequently referred to throughout the nineteenth century by educators and religious leaders was one which should have, in Arnold's eyes, aimed at a loss of childishness and a development of spirituality. But the manliness actually encouraged after Arnold by Thomas Hughes and Charles Kingsley, for example, was one which gave emphasis to a robust and anti-feminine physical vitality.<sup>12</sup> Thus the image of „godliness and good learning” projected by Laffan as he spoke to the Congress in 1897, together with the adaptation of Arnold's original message into the „muscular Christian” thesis Laffan was describing, is likely to have found great favour with de Coubertin and the audience.<sup>13</sup>

Probably unknown to de Coubertin at this stage was the even closer connection between Thomas Arnold and Robert Laffan. Together with George Robertson, author and declaimer of the Greek Ode at the First Olympiad of the modern era, in 1896, they had all been educated at Winchester College in England. It is this Public School, founded

6 Cf. Journal du Havre, 1 et 2 août 1897, p. 1.

7 Coubertin, P. de: Mémoires olympiques, Lausanne 1932, p. 46 - author's translation.

8 The Headmasters' Conference still exists in this form today (with a concession to Headmistresses), although it is politically more correct to refer to the „Independent Schools” rather than the „Public Schools”. The first meeting took place in London on 2nd March 1869, with some 26 people present.

9 See Coubertin P. de: L'Éducation en Angleterre: Collèges et Universités. Hachette, Paris 1888.

10 Coubertin, P. de: Mémoires olympiques, Lausanne 1932, p. 47 - author's translation.

11 See Armytage, W.H.G.: Thomas Arnold's views on Physical Education. In: Journal of Physical Education, Vol. 47 (March 1955), pp. 27-8; S Honey, J.R. de: Tom Brown's Universe (1977); Bamford, T.W.: Thomas Arnold (1960); Bamford, T.W.: Thomas Arnold on Education (1970); A Percival Very Superior Men (London 1973).

12 Cf. Newsome, D.: Godliness and Good Learning. John Murray, 1961, pp. 197-198.

13 The phrase „godliness and good learning” comes from the Collect of Thanksgiving for the Founder of Winchester College, William of Wykeham. This prayer dates from the beginning of the 15th century.

in 1382, that had the prefectorial system of boy-government written into its first Statutes which date from the year 1400. Pierre de Coubertin actually visited Winchester in 1886 or 1887, during his several excursions to educational establishments across the Channel.<sup>14</sup> He met with the Reverend James du Boulay, Housemaster of Southgate Hill. Although Laffan was by this time already headmastering elsewhere, George Robertson was blazing an academic trail in the school, and was to be a Fellow of New College, Oxford when ten years later in Athens he competed in the discus and was crowned with a laurel wreath by de Coubertin for his classical scholarship.

### Laffan at Winchester College

Sir Robert and Lady Emma Laffan had four sons and one daughter. After a sparkling career as a military engineer and five years in the House of Commons as Member for St Ives, Cornwall, Sir Robert ended his days as Governor of Bermuda.<sup>15</sup> It was during his father's military service that the young Robert benefited from extensive travel in Europe, thus acquiring a mastery of several languages. Before going to Winchester College at the age of fourteen Laffan had been at school in France and Switzerland. He had reached fluency in French, German and Italian. Laffan's father clearly acknowledged the value of such skills, as he had been schooled at the college of Pont Levoy, near Blois in France.

Robert Laffan entered as a Commoner of Winchester College in 1867. He was an academic success, claiming several coveted prizes.<sup>16</sup> Although not a games player of renown, he did take part in Winchester Football and he was a keen athlete.<sup>17</sup> Significant in terms of questioning whether Laffan was typical of the „muscular and manly“ category of the period, he did not participate in Cricket or Association Football. But identification of Laffan as part of the hierarchy is easily made when we note that he was a Prefect, and Head of his boarding house.

### Merton College, Oxford

Laffan matriculated into Merton College, Oxford as an Exhibitioner in October 1874 at the grand old age of 21. Three years before, in 1871, Laffan had competed unsuccessfully for one of the six places at New College, Oxford, reserved for pupils from Winchester. He is listed as „Proxime Accessit“ - a near miss!<sup>18</sup> This would have been a blow to his pride and to his plans. Unsure of his future direction, Laffan decided to spend three years in the Indian Civil Service.<sup>19</sup> On his return from the Empire to academia he proved that he had lost nothing of his classical skills, while also making his mark in the sporting world. Laffan obtained a First in Classical Moderations, followed by a First Class Honours in his Bachelor of Arts Degree - in Latin and Greek. Although he had not rowed at Winchester, he stroked the Merton VIII in 1877 and 1879 - by now aged 26.

### Headmastering

14 Cf. MacAloon, J.J.: *This Great Symbol: Pierre de Coubertin and the Origins of the Modern Olympic Games*. University of Chicago Press, 1984, p. 52; Cf. Durry, J.: *Coubertin and the English-Speaking World*, unpublished manuscript in British Olympic Association Archives.

15 Cf. Sidney, L. (ed.): *Dictionary of National Biography*, Vol. XXXI, Smith, Elder & Co London, 1892, pp. 395-396.

16 Laffan 'Raised Books' (ie came first in his class) in 1869 and 1870, and won the Duncan Reading Prize in 1870.

17 On the „roll“ for Commoners XV for the major annual Winchester Football match appears the name 'R.S. Laffan' (See *Annals of Commoners*, Rev. W.A. Fearon's House 1868-1921). He won 'vaulting' with 6' 5" in April 1871. *The Wykehamist* no. 38, April 1871, p. 6.

18 Cf. *The Wykehamist* No 42, October 1871, p. 3.

19 Cf. *Annals of Commoners in The Rev. W.A. Fearon's House, Winchester College, 1868-1921* p. 12.

After completing his degree he moved into the teaching profession: first as Senior Classical Master at Derby School (1880-84), then into the post of Headmaster at King Edward VI School, Stratford-upon-Avon. It was this school that had been entrusted with the education of William Shakespeare several centuries before. Robert Laffan was ordained into the Anglican Church; as a Deacon in 1882, then as a Vicar in 1883. It was during his time at Stratford-upon-Avon that Laffan's strength of interest in the educational use of physical activity came to the fore. King Edward VI School opened its doors to Laffan with fewer than 40 pupils and only two masters.<sup>20</sup> Seven years later Laffan had turned the school around: 100 pupils were taught by seven masters. Classrooms were built and furnished at Laffan's personal expense. New academic and cultural subjects were introduced, as was compulsory physical training. A Preparatory School was established. A gymnasium was opened on the old school playground. An examiner wrote of the school under Laffan: „*The tone of the boys is beyond praise. No better manners, no more gentlemanly behaviour, no more genuine courtesy can be met with in any of our public schools*“. But King Edward VI School was NOT one of the Public Schools, and its headmaster needed to move on to greater things. When Laffan moved to Cheltenham College in 1895, such was his effect that a large number of the boarders from King Edward VI moved to remain with him!

Cheltenham College had already undergone revival under Herbert James, who left in 1895 to become Headmaster of Rugby School. When Laffan succeeded to the Principal's position at Cheltenham an admirable stability was in place - the result of a popular and sensitive leader. There was a highly independent prefectorial body. A vast array of inter-house and inter-school sporting fixtures was organised by the „Playground Committee“, made up of six prefects and one master.<sup>21</sup> Compulsory games had been imposed in 1889. The strongly patriotic and imperialistic mood carried the games fervour to even greater levels. But these were not happy times for Laffan. He found that he could not effect the range of changes that had made him an innovator and benefactor during his ten years at Stratford. At Cheltenham he encountered a much bigger and more diverse institution. There was to be antagonism between Laffan and several of his staff, even leading to resignations. In the end it was controversy involving his wife, Bertha, that led Laffan to leave Cheltenham College. She was an independent and very outspoken woman, a dramatist and writer; author of the Scout Song and numerous popular novels. At Stratford she had involved herself very much in the life of the boarding house which the Headmaster ran, but when she tried to do the same at Cheltenham there was an outcry. Among the accusations were claims that Mrs Laffan was actively corrupting the morals of the boys. An inquiry was ordered by the Council, the school's Governing Body, and feelings were so strong that Laffan resigned in April 1899, within a month of the inquiry's completion.

### **Onto the International Olympic Committee**

So, as Laffan was speaking to the Le Havre Congress in 1897, he was to remain in headmastering for only another two years. In 1897 Laffan was co-opted onto the International Olympic Committee, and began his 30 year service. This was really a new life for him. In thirty years he missed only two meetings of the IOC. He became Rector of St Stephen's, Walbrook in 1899, and was able to balance his service between the needs of his parishioners and the struggle to ensure that the Olympic message was made more widely known.<sup>22</sup> He himself acknowledged that he was not altogether convinced at first that there was anything more than optimistic theorising on the part of the earliest

20 This information was obtained from Leslie Watkins *The Story of Shakespeare's School 1853-1953*, Herald Press, 1953, pp. 112-149.

21 Cf. Morgan, M.C.: *Cheltenham College: the first hundred years*. Richard Sadler, 1968, p. 112.

22 The full appointment was as Rector of St Stephen, Walbrook, with St Benet, Sherehog, City and Diocese of London.

proponents of the Olympic revival. He said: „I came to the Olympic Movement prepared to scoff and I remained to admire“ - and to work.<sup>23</sup>

### Foundation of the British Olympic Association

One direct result of the friendship between Robert Laffan and Pierre de Coubertin, was the rationalisation of British involvement in the Olympic Games, through the establishment of the British Olympic Association (BOA) in 1905. Laffan and Sir Howard Vincent made the arrangements for a meeting of the International Olympic Committee in London in June 1904. This was a grand week, with greetings from the Lord Mayor of London; drinks with the Prince of Wales at Marlborough House, and even a reception given by King Edward VII at Windsor Castle.<sup>24</sup> Ostensibly, the business meetings were to decide between Rome and Berlin as the venue for the IVth Olympiad, in 1908, but the proximity of the members of the International Olympic Committee to the British representatives for such a continuous period was bound to inspire the host country.<sup>25</sup> Action took the form of preparations for a meeting in the House of Commons in May 1905, when William Grenfell, later Lord Desborough, was elected Chairman of the British Olympic Association. Robert Laffan took on the role of Honorary Secretary - a role he was to fulfil for almost twenty years. The structure of the new organisation apparently was copied by other countries. In a letter to the British Olympic Association de Coubertin thanked its members for giving a lead to other national committees; which de Coubertin suggested „have been more or less shaped after the English pattern“.<sup>26</sup> In communications between Laffan and de Coubertin a close interest in the progress of the new British organisation is clearly evident.<sup>27</sup>

### 1908 London Olympic Games

When it became clear that Rome could not host the 1908 Olympic Games Lord Desborough was asked whether he thought London could possibly host the Games, but with only two years to prepare. With the British Olympic Association already in existence, and agreement from the relevant national sporting associations, the British Olympic Council was established for the purpose of organising and managing the 1908 London Games. The Council comprised representatives of the BOA, together with representatives of the sporting and athletic associations. Now came the time for Robert Laffan to exert his greatest energies. He was an exceptional administrator and a competent diplomat. Combined with his linguistic skills and the „direct line“ to the International Olympic Committee brought by close friendship to de Coubertin, Laffan went about the gruelling process of making the Games workable. It is reported that he wrote some 11,000 letters in four languages.<sup>28</sup> He translated the rules into French and German (while making it absolutely clear that the English version was the definitive one!). The facilities for the Games had to be constructed, and Laffan was central to the negotiations with

23 Rev. Robert Laffan: Handwritten speech delivered at Banquet to Olympic Competitors and Officials, 31st October 1908. (British Olympic Association Archives), p. 17.

24 Cf. Reunion du Comity International Olympique à Londres, 20 - 26 Juin 1904, Typescript minutes, (British Olympic Association Archives).

25 The British members in attendance included: Sir Howard Vincent, Lord Kinnaid, the Earl of Darnley, the Hon. Herbert Gladstone, Rev. de Courcy Laffan, Sir Lees Knowles, Sir William Grenfell M.P. (later Lord Desborough).

26 In British Olympic Association Yearbook, 1914, p. 15.

27 See, for example, letter from de Coubertin to Laffan 9 February 1906.

28 Cf. Cook, T.A.: The Fourth Olympiad: being the Official Report of the Olympic Games of 1908 celebrated in London (British Olympic Association, n.d.).

the Franco-British Exhibition Committee that agreed to wholly finance the work at a cost of £44,000. Metric units of measurement were insisted upon at the Games, although the usual British reluctance to acknowledge that any other system than their own is correct, led to perverse reports of events as 109.3 yards instead of 100 metres. The programme was agreed by the International Olympic Committee in the Hague in May 1907, but the organisation of the separate sporting events was entirely in the hands of the governing bodies of sports in Britain. To some degree this latter fact contributed to the problems encountered during the Games themselves. There were significant claims of chauvinism and partiality on the part of the all-British group of officials, particularly where competitors from the United States were adversely affected. National newspapers waded into the fray. The *New York Times* of 18<sup>th</sup> November 1908 was straightforward in claiming that „[...] the American competitors were treated unfairly by the British officials“. But the real issue at the time was the absence of any official statement from the British Olympic Council. Robert Laffan was hounded: „[...] the apostle of the movement, why was he silent? Perhaps he felt that his peace and goodwill movement had failed. Perhaps he wanted to smooth the trouble over“.<sup>29</sup> Unfortunately for Laffan, his brother Old Wykehamist (as former pupils of Winchester are called) Robertson was not silent on the matter. At the London Athletic Club dinner Robertson called the leaders of the American team *“liars and no sportsmen“*.<sup>30</sup> Laffan suffered the stinging criticism that in the absence of a response he had allowed the integrity of all that he stood for to be sullied: *„The eloquent and reverend Mr Laffan has been silent [...] when the honour of his country is traduced and the sportsmanship of his co-workers is assailed“*.<sup>31</sup> Privately Laffan admitted that the international incidents which arose in sport were *„an inevitable concomitant of education in sportsmanship“*.<sup>32</sup> Even in the face of such difficulties and errors of judgement, the enormity of Laffan’s personal input to the administration of the London Games must be appreciated.

Was Laffan a pompous man? Perhaps the answer to this question should be „yes“. He was elevated greatly and given new direction in life through his service to the Olympic Movement, especially in the light of his departure from Cheltenham College. There may be an inkling of pretension when one looks at his use of his own name. He was christened Robert Stuart de Courcy Laffan. The family surname was Laffan, but Robert was given the Christian name „de Courcy“ to honour a distant relative, Walter Laffan, who married Eleonora de Courcy. None of his immediate family carried the de Courcy name. Once he had finished at University, Robert raised the de Courcy name from being one of his middle names to the status of a surname: he seemed to have become Robert *de Courcy Laffan*. Certainly throughout his school and university careers only the Laffan name was used. As Headmaster of Cheltenham he was Reverend Laffan, but in the IOC he was Reverend de Courcy Laffan. This change was affectation, and had the effect of insinuating an elevated status upon Laffan - perhaps a false nobility, and in its way this also enabled a closer association between himself and the founder of the modern Olympic Movement.

But whatever may have been Laffan’s earlier pretensions he threw himself into sustained service of Olympism with the intensity of a zealot. He ascribed to de Coubertin credit for recognising the ancient Olympic Games as a: *„[...] vast manufactory of virile forces trained by the Greek nation for the highest purposes of national endeavour“*.<sup>33</sup> And again elsewhere Laffan wrote: *“The Games celebrated during a period of over 1200 years in the Altis of Olympia were [...] much more than great athletic gatherings [...]. They constituted a bond of unity between the members of the Greek race“*.<sup>34</sup>

During the First World War Laffan served as Chaplain to the British Forces, receiving mentions in dispatches. While still performing military duties in 1919, and now also Chairman of the British Olympic Council, he wrote to British

29 Truth, 9 December 1908, p. 1389.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.

32 Dedication of a memorial to the late Reverend R S de Courcy Laffan. In: British Olympic Journal, Dec. 1928, p. 209.

33 Cook, T.A.: The Fourth Olympiad: being the Official Report of the Olympic Games of 1908 celebrated in London. (British Olympic Association, n.d.), p. 16.

34 Fundraising memorandum. British Olympic Association, approx. 1906.

governing bodies of sport to urge support for Belgium's wish to undertake the hosting of the 1920 Games. He employed terms such as „honour“ and „duty“ in supporting a country that had so essentially made sacrifices in the War: *„The question is not whether we can achieve a large number of victories at Antwerp, but whether we are bound in honour to play the game by Belgium, as Belgium played the game by us in 1914“*.<sup>35</sup> Laffan acknowledged that to talk in these terms was rather foreign to the usual „stiff upper lip“ approach that might be expected of the British; it was „sentiment“. *„I am not afraid of the word. It was 'sentiment' which moved Belgium in 1914 [...]. Today she asks us in our turn to forget ourselves and side with her in the proclamation which she makes of her unquenchable spirit by claiming the Olympiad of 1920.“*

Looking at the years of Laffan's work for the International Olympic Committee after London, we can describe an individual who was interested in the detail, the minutiae of regulations. He became deeply involved with the regular debates about amateurism.<sup>36</sup> He was outspoken on aspects of nationalism and on the impact of the Games in their broader influence. Laffan even proposed in 1924 that two centres should be established for the „broader propagation of Olympism“ - one in Europe and one in the United States of America. He felt strongly that the Olympiad must be celebrated at fixed intervals and in different cities. This was, he said, at the *„root of the Olympic revival“*.<sup>37</sup> Sitting on various commissions and committees of the IOC meant that many subjects passed before Laffan's gaze. But he retained an overwhelming wish, shared with the President himself, to fight for the educational aims of sport and the Olympic Games to be maintained.<sup>38</sup>

## Conclusion

Robert Laffan was not a figurehead or helmsman like Lord Desborough, not the weighty and influential individual with flair and humour, but he was an extraordinary workhorse. It was said of Laffan that he possessed a „silver tongue“ - what we might commonly call today „the gift of the gab“. <sup>39</sup> The inscription on the 300 year old clock presented to Laffan by his co-workers on the British Olympic Council after the London Games thanked him for the *„[...] kindly, tactful and wholehearted manner“* in which he had carried out every duty. He is said to have served „nobly and disinterestedly“. <sup>40</sup> Laffan benefited from de Coubertin's predilection for all things English. If one adds to this Laffan's ability in European languages, his position as representative to Le Havre of the Public School headmasters, and the apparent image of scholar-athlete/christian gentleman, we can see the attraction of this man. But the friendship that developed between Laffan and the President of the International Olympic Committee was remarkably deep and consistent. There can be no doubt that Robert Laffan needed the Olympic Movement at least as much as, and possibly more than, it needed him. At the time of the 1897 Congress his world was falling apart: he had discovered that after ten successful years as headmaster of a small school he could not make a success of leading one of the major Public Schools. The advent of new inspiration in the form of the Olympic Movement - a new direction for Laffan's passion and commitment, was more than just chance. He admitted to de Coubertin early on that he had felt „called“ to his involvement; something explained by de Coubertin as the mystical tendencies of Laffan's Irish origins. <sup>41</sup> To Laffan there was significant spiritual meaning in this timely arrival of new

35 Memorandum, 6 May 1919.

36 See Circular letters from Laffan 1909 and 1910, (British Olympic Association Archives).

37 Fundraising memorandum. British Olympic Association, approx 1906.

38 Olympic Panorama No. 2, 1996 p53f. See also letters and press cuttings - particularly The Morning Post 29 July 1924; The Friend (Bloemfontein) 21 July 1924; Letter from Laffan to Sir Charles Walston 1 August 1924.

39 William Hayes Fisher (President of the National Skating Association) in speech at the Dinner for Competitors and Officials of the 1908 Olympic Games.

40 Lord Desborough in speech at the Dinner for Competitors and Officials of the 1908 Olympic Games.

41 Coubertin, P. de: Mémoires olympiques, Lausanne 1932, p. 47 - author's translation.

opportunity.<sup>42</sup> Although he served the IOC for 30 years, his most lasting contribution to Olympism was in his work for the British Olympic Association. It is easy to forget that there was serious opposition to the Olympic idea in Britain, and Robert Laffan was the man who publicly stood as a proud evangelist for the Movement.

Robert Laffan attributed many qualities to the Olympic Movement as the vehicle for the improvement of mankind's ability to live and work together. Sometimes unrealistic in his claims for what is now such an important world phenomenon, Laffan provided great inspiration for others in the early days by devoting all his enthusiasm and working capacity to help pave the way for the future. In his view the Olympic Movement existed to achieve: „[...] *the perfect physical development of a new humanity; the spreading all over the world of a spirit of sport - that is the spirit of the truest chivalry; and the drawing together of all the nations of the earth in the bonds of peace and mutual amity*“.<sup>43</sup>

To Laffan the Olympic Movement was everything: „*It is to me a privilege in itself to have been allowed to do something for what I consider one of the greatest concerns on earth, the cause which has as its supreme ideal Peace on earth and goodwill towards men*“.<sup>44</sup>

## Résumé

### **Le Révérent Père Robert S. de Courcy-Laffan, le Baron Pierre de Coubertin et le mouvement olympique**

Robert Laffan fut un émissaire exceptionnel. Au Congrès du Havre il représenta la conférence des directeurs - l'association des directeurs des Ecoles privées britannique. Ce personnage n'était ni professeur d'éducation physique, ni un athlète exceptionnel. Du Congrès du Havre il en rapporta un message, qui révélait le véritable engagement pour une valeur de l'activité sportive et de son intégration dans le système éducatif, que Coubertin avait profondément étudié. L'exposé de Laffan, lors du Congrès du Havre, considéré au départ comme étant une chance de pouvoir prendre la parole en public toucha profondément les auditeurs des différentes fractions, et en particulier Coubertin lui-même. Au Havre Coubertin avait reconnu le potentiel existant dans la requête de Laffan et comme il le dit dans ses Mémoires, sur ce point, il était persuadé que: „*Un nouveau compagnon de lutte d'une valeur inestimable nous tombe des cieux pour venir à notre aide.*“

En 1897, Robert Laffan fut désigné membre du CIO. En 1904, lors de la première visite du CIO à Londres, il fut l'un des membres décisifs qui participa à la fondation de l'Association olympique britannique un an plus tard. De 1905 jusqu'à sa mort, en 1927, il en fut son secrétaire à titre honorifique. Robert Laffan consacra sa vie au mouvement olympique, il sut marier son travail à une profonde croyance religieuse.

42 The religious side of Laffan did not frequently surface in his Olympic work. An exception was at the Opening Ceremony of the 1912 Stockholm Games, when Laffan led the prayers: (see Allen Guttman *The Olympics: a history of the Modern Games*, University of Illinois Press, 1992, p. 32).

43 Rev Robert Laffan: Handwritten speech delivered at Banquet to Olympic Competitors and Officials, 31st October 1908', (British Olympic Association Archives), p. 17.

44 Ibid., p.19.