

THAT CLOSING CEREMONY IN MELBOURNE THE CHINESE BOY, THE CHIEF ORGANISER AND AVERY BRUNDAGE

by Harry Gordon

Among more than three hundred heroes who returned to Melbourne in late November 2006 for the 50th anniversary of the 1956 Olympic Games was one man who had never competed in anger, or in any other mood for that matter. He had never even pulled on a tracksuit. He was Chinese, very trim for his age of 67, and he'd travelled all the way from London. Even though he'd never been an athlete, he deserved to be feted: he had made a huge, enduring contribution to the Olympics.

John Ian WING, a retired builder and restaurateur, had been living away from Australia, mostly in Britain, for nearly 40 years. What he had done a half a century before, when he was just 17 and an apprentice carpenter, was to come up with a charming, cheeky idea that would change the Games forever: one that would cause those Games to be dubbed the Friendly Games. Some would call his proposal, which had the symbolic effect of transforming 67 separate nations into just one family, Melbourne's greatest gift to the Olympic movement.

WING'S father ran a Chinese restaurant in Bourke Street, in the heart of Melbourne, and sometimes young John would help out in the kitchen. It was in his bedroom above the restaurant that he wrote a letter that is now a valuable piece of history, held in the archives of the Australian National Library in Canberra. It is an unlikely document, scrawled in just-out-of-school handwriting, with some words crossed out and others pluckily misspelled. (One of the key words in it emerged, in capitals, as OLYMIPIC). It was obviously written in a hurry, and with some raw passion.

His main motivation for writing it was the unhappy state of the world in November 1956, and the effect politics were having on those Olympic Games. Soviet tanks had rumbled into Budapest; armies had massed beside the Suez Canal; the two Chinas and two Germanys sulked and jostled, and the Cold War simmered. Six nations - the Netherlands, Spain, Switzerland, Egypt, Lebanon and Iraq - had refused to attend the Games, blam-

ing global unrest. The Soviet team stayed away from the athletes' Village, living instead on board a passenger liner moored in Port Phillip Bay. The water polo teams of the Soviet and Hungary traded punches in the pool, and newspapers carried reports of athletes being ordered not to mix with athletes from other countries. "It was all pretty depressing," WING says now. "I worried about it a lot, and finally thought it would be terrific if we could show world leaders that athletes at the Olympics could mix together [...]

that people from all nations could befriends."

WING'S disarmingly audacious letter, addressed to the chairman of the Melbourne Olympic Organising Committee, Wilfrid (later Sir Wilfrid) KENT HUGHES, made the point that the opening ceremony had been enjoyable enough, but that the closing parade needed to be decidedly different. He began it, "Dear Friend", and signed it just "John Ian", neglecting to put either his surname or his address on it. In it he confessed that he had felt that the opening ceremony might turn out to be "a muddle", but it had been a success - mainly because of "the friendliness of Melbourne people."

Then he cut to the chase:

"The march I have in mind is different than the one during the Opening Ceremony, and will make these Games even greater. During the march there will be only 1 NATION. War, politics and nationality will all be forgotten. What more could anybody want, if the whole world could be made as one nation? Well, you can do it in a small way."

Then he explained, with the aid of a diagram and a set of crayons, how it should be done. No team should be "kept together", he wrote. The teams needed to be broken up, and spread out evenly. (Here he drew a column of multi-coloured blobs, to signify athletes from different nations).

"THEY MUST NOT MARCH," the apprentice carpenter warned the chief organiser, but should walk freely, and wave to the public. "I'm certain everybody, even yourself, would agree with me, that this would be a great occasion, and no one would forget it. It



Wilfrid Kent Hughes (The Official Report of the Organizing Committee for the Games of the XVI Olympiad Melbourne 1956, Melbourne 1958, p. 17)

will show the world how friendly Australia is." When he had finished, WING carried the letter on foot to the office of the organizing committee, a few blocks away. He didn't want bother with the postal system. He was still in a hurry, because the closing ceremony was just three days away.

KENT HUGHES was a crusty man, a former army colonel who had been a Rhodes Scholar, a hurdler in the 1924 Olympics, a hero in two world wars, a prisoner of the Japanese, a published poet, a self-proclaimed fascist, and a maverick minister in the conservative government of Robert (later Sir Robert) MENZIES. Maybe the greatest wonder of this whole episode is that, amid the mood of frantic bustle that existed at the heart of those Olympics, this formidable figure even found time to read such an out-of-the-blue letter. It is certainly to his eternal credit that he decided to act on it, so very late in the day - and, in doing so, symbolically pull the rug on Olympic tradition.

The closing ceremony did follow substantially the instructions outlined in WING'S letter. Athletes joined others from different countries, linked arms, laughed, waved and strolled around the main stadium, the *Melbourne Cricket Ground*. They behaved as if their only mission was to have fun. And this mood of easy disorder, without separate contingents, has marked all Olympic closing ceremonies since. The concept has also since been adopted for Commonwealth Games and world championships.

John Ian WING did not attend the closing day, or any other day, of the Melbourne Olympics. He couldn't afford a ticket - and he watched the opening ceremony, and some track-and-field and swimming events, on black-and-white television in a department-store window. (TV was new to Melbourne in 1956: the total number of sets in a city whose population was 1.6 million was 5000). On the final day a Saturday, he went to the movies and watched a western whose name he's forgotten. When he came out in the late afternoon, he joined a small crowd outside a shop window watching the close of the Games. He wasn't sure whether the Olympic boss had taken any notice of his letter.

"They [the athletes] all seemed to be doing what I wanted them to do," he explained later. "But I wasn't sure whether it was because of my letter, or whether the organisers had planned it that way anyway. This was on the Saturday, and there

were no Sunday newspapers then in Melbourne. Then on the Monday it was in all the newspapers about what a success this anonymous idea had been. One of them called it the idea of the century. The press wanted me to come forward. I overheard people talking about it at work, but I decided not to say anything. I was just too embarrassed. I didn't even tell my father. I was frightened he might be upset."

The official report of the Melbourne Games called the closing ceremony "a prophetic image of a new future for mankind", and "a fiesta of friendship", offering "scarce-imagined possibilities for the race of man." The Prime Minister (and president of the Games) Robert MENZIES wrote in his foreword:

"On the first day [the athletes] had all marched as competitors in their national teams, preserving their national identity, headed by their national flags. On the last day they went around the arena as men and women who had learned to be friends, who had broken down some of the barriers of language, of strangeness, of private prejudices. And because of this, the last day became a remarkable international demonstration, carrying with it a significance which was not overlooked by anybody who was lucky enough to be present."

The report's chapter of the closing ceremony made it clear that the mixed parade, which it described as "unexpected", had been the result of a very late decision. It mentioned that two or three days before the ceremony, "a suggestion" had been made; that it was not un-

til mid-day on the day before the closing ceremony that organisers were instructed about the prospect of a different kind of parade; that on the last night a meeting was called of *chefs de mission*, some of whom were unable to attend; and that there was no opportunity to "arrange precise procedure" for the ceremony.

In Melbourne November 2006, at a ceremony on the *Melbourne Cricket Ground* attended by all the returning Olympians, including such multiple champions as the discus thrower Al OERTER and the diver Pat MCCORMICK, Ron CLARKE ran a lap of the arena as the final torch-bearer and John LANDY took the athletes' oath - just as they had in 1956. John Ian WING, from a podium in the middle of the stadium, read aloud the letter which caused that closing ceremony and all of those that followed, to be changed. At a crowded civic reception for the



Avery Brundage (The Official Report of the Organizing Committee for the Games of the XVI Olympiad Melbourne 1956, Melbourne 1958, p. 10)

veterans of Melbourne 1956, WING found himself being confused with Melbourne's popular Lord Mayor John So, who is also Chinese, of similar age and build. Congratulated more than once on the quality of the food and drink, WING would say with a grin: "Thanks, but the Lord Mayor's over there. He's not quite as good-looking as I am."

WING did finally write a second letter to KENT HUGHES about a week after the Games, giving his identity and address. Soon afterwards, an official car pulled up outside his father's restaurant, and

honour at the opening of the *Melbourne Cricket Club's Australian Gallery of Sport and Olympic Museum*. We had further contact in 2000, when I had the task of nominating street names in Sydney's Olympic precinct and athletes' village, and opted for the name John Ian WING Parade for the road leading into the main stadium. Again, he was invited to return to Australia as a guest of honour at the Games.

While the story of John Ian WING provides a pleasant example of how a modest idea can become a great one, some questions remain. The chief one is: how did



The Parade at the Closing Ceremony (The Official Report of the Organizing Committee for the Games of the XVI Olympiad Melbourne 1956, Melbourne 1958, p. 718)

the driver brought in a bronze commemorative medallion. When WING came downstairs and told him his name, the driver handed it over with the words: "Mr Kent Hughes wants you to have this" KENT HUGHES later wrote to WING, but he never saw the letter. "My father, not knowing what it was all about, probably just threw it away," he says now. Soon after the Games the episode seemed to disappear from public consciousness, and WING left Australia in the late 1960s. Nothing more was heard of him until I wrote an essay in *Time Australia* magazine in 1986, headed, "Where Are You, John Ian Wing?" Such is the power of the media that he quickly surfaced in England, and returned to Melbourne as a guest of

it happen? Wilfrid KENT HUGHES was an autocratic man, but surely he couldn't just impose WING'S plan on those Olympics. Wouldn't he need to mention it to his own organising committee? And what about the *International Olympic Committee*, whose sanction for such a departure from tradition would obviously have been needed? What about its equally autocratic Avery BRUNDAGE, who was on the spot in Melbourne? Wouldn't he have had the last say?

While preparing this article I contacted the only three surviving members of the Organising Committee of the Melbourne Olympics: Jack HOWSON, Arthur TUNSTALL and J. Eddin LINTON. All three were emphatic that the committee did not meet

formally during the Games, that running decisions were made by KENT HUGHES, sometimes in consultation with the honorary secretary, Edgar TANNER, or specific experts. They were certain that KENT HUGHES - who, while he was a forceful conservative, had often been prepared in politics to stand alone - would have made the judgment to take up the Chinese boy's idea. He was the recipient of the original letter, he liked its idea of a message of peace and tolerance at a time of global conflict, and, once he decided it was worth doing, he would not have tolerated any dissent from members of his own committee.

Wolf LYBERG'S record of the IOC's four sessions held before and during the Melbourne Games makes no mention of the closing ceremony idea - but that isn't surprising. The last session was held a couple of days before John Ian WING wrote his letter. HOWSON and TUNSTALL are both certain that the IOC approval came verbally and enthusiastically from BRUNDAGE, possibly in company with his vice-president, the Marquis of EXETER, in a last-day conversation with KENT HUGHES. (LINTON, who left Melbourne because of family illness before the end of the Games, was unable to offer a view). It was a judgment that had to be made on the run ... there was no time left for formal meetings. On the Saturday night, after the last flag had been lowered and the flame extinguished, BRUNDAGE and EXETER told reporters that the mixed parade had been a fine idea, one they hoped would become a permanent "*part of the Olympic picture*".

There is some piquancy in the notion of KENT HUGHES and BRUNDAGE, both very formal, blunt and sometimes aggressive men, in harmony over a break with tradition. They were not much in the habit of agreeing, and their relationship during the Games was said to be testy BRUNDAGE had made KENT HUGHES angry by making a flying visit to Melbourne in April 1955, without giving KENT HUGHES any advance notice, then fiercely criticising the organisation of the Games, and finally threatening to take them away. KENT HUGHES responded at the time by writing to the Marquis of EXETER (Lord David BURGHLEY), accusing BRUNDAGE of being "*definitely anti-Australian*", and having "*thrown spanner after spanner into the delicate machinery of negotiations*". In another letter to Exeter, he wrote: "*I have every reason to believe the Games will be a tremendous success, but if Mr Brundage remains [as president], I venture to prophesy in advance that there will not be many more Olympic contests.*" BRUNDAGE'S response was that he had only one regret: that he hadn't gone to Melbourne and read the riot act earlier.

On that last day, as the two leaders finally strode off the arena in double-breasted unison, they had reason finally to feel like allies. The historic parade had been the brainchild of John Ian WING - but between them, by their receptiveness and flexibility, they had made it happen.



**John Ian Wing in Melbourne 2006
50 years after his Olympic idea was realised**