

ETHELBERT TALBOT

His Life and Place in Olympic History

Ture Widlund

Who was Ethelbert Talbot, Bishop of Bethlehem? He is one of the lesser-known personalities in the history of the Olympic Movement, yet he has made a significant contribution to Olympic history and has had an impact that goes far beyond what most of us can imagine. It is no understatement to say that millions of people are familiar with the saying: *“The important thing in the Olympic Games is not winning but taking part, for the essential thing in life is not conquering but fighting well.”*

The origin of this phrase can be traced back to the Olympic Games in London 1908. We all know that it was Pierre de Coubertin who coined it, but not many know that Ethelbert Talbot is the man behind it. Without him, Pierre de Coubertin would probably never have phrased the saying the way he did.

This paper will tell something about the circumstances surrounding the creation of the saying. It will, above all, tell something about the man behind it, his life, his career, and his achievements. It will trace the career of Ethelbert Talbot from his schooling, through his pastoral charge, his election to Bishop, to his promotion to Presiding Bishop of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States (the equivalent of Archbishop in other countries).

Ethelbert Talbot was born in Fayette, Missouri on 9 October 1848¹, the son of John Alnut Talbot and Alice Daly Talbot. His father was a physician of distinction and a man of great influence in the community where he lived. His mother was the daughter of Professor Lawrence Daly, one of the pioneer teachers of the west and a graduate of Trinity College, Dublin.²

Ethelbert Talbot prepped for college in his native town and in the fall 1866 entered Dartmouth College, graduating in 1870.³ He then began to study for the ministry in the General Theological Seminary, New York, from which he graduated in 1873.⁴ In the same year he was ordained as a deacon on 29 June and as a priest on 4 November.⁵ The day after his ordination, he married Dora Frances

Harvery of Roanoke, Missouri. They later had one child, a daughter, Anne, who married Francis Donaldson.⁶

Talbot’s first and only pastoral charge was in the St James’ Church, Macon City, Missouri, where he became rector in 1873.⁷ During his residence in Macon City he built up a strong parish and established several missions in neighboring towns.⁸ He also founded a school, of which he was headmaster and which grew into St James’ Military Academy. Originally it was a training school for boys but later a separate girls’ school was established.⁹

In 1886, the General Convention elected Ethelbert Talbot first Missionary Bishop of Wyoming and Idaho.¹⁰ After some hesitation he resigned from his posts in Macon and was consecrated Missionary Bishop of Wyoming and Idaho in Christchurch, St. Louis, 27 May 1887, the 143rd in succession in the American Episcopate.¹¹

In 1887, the University of Missouri conferred on Talbot the honorary degree of *Doctor of Law* and the General Theological Seminary (New York) the degree of *Doctor of Sacred Theology*. In 1888, he received the honorary degree of Doctor of Divinity from Dartmouth College.¹²

Upon arrival in his diocese, he found only four clergy in each of the two states.¹³ Under his administration the jurisdiction grew rapidly, and his clergy list increased from eight to 30.¹⁴ Within ten years he had built 38 churches and St Matthew’s Cathedral at Laramie, Wyoming.¹⁵ The cathedral, which is a building of great dignity and beauty, cost \$50,000 to build.¹⁶

He traveled widely and his summers were largely spent in preaching in mining camps and towns. On one of his many travels, a road agent held up the coach in which he was the lone passenger.¹⁷

“Surely you wouldn’t rob a poor bishop?” said Talbot.

“Did you say you were a bishop?” asked the bandit.

“Yes, just a poor bishop.”

“What church?”

“The Episcopal.”

“The hell you are! Why that’s the church I belong to!
Go along driver.”

Once, when he appeared at a mining camp to preach, it turned out *en masse* to hear him. News of his coming were furnished by a sign outside the leading gambling place, which read:¹⁸

“The bishop is coming. Let’s all turn out to hear the bishop. Service in George and Human’s Hall tomorrow, Sunday, 11 AM and 8 PM. Please leave your guns with the usher.”

While in the West, Ethelbert Talbot made bronco riding one of his recreations. In the fall of 1922, on his way home from the General Episcopal Convention in Portland, Oregon, he stopped to visit his old haunts and was a spectator of his favorite sport. He received a royal welcome, many of those he had baptized and confirmed in their youth then being the leading men and women of their towns.¹⁹

Talbot summed up his experience in the West in the book *My People of the Plains*, which is filled with anecdotes without losing its serious character.²⁰ He founded three schools, St Margaret’s School in Boise, Idaho for the Christian education of girls,²¹ a school for American-Indian girls,²² and St Matthew’s Hall for boys at Laramie, Wyoming.²³ He also established the Frances Holland Hospital at Wallace, Idaho.²⁴

He took an active interest in all the missionary operations of the church and was also in touch with the current social and political questions.²⁵ He was offered nominations for governor and senator and was regarded by all as “our bishop.”²⁶

In 1891, Ethelbert Talbot was elected Bishop of Georgia but he declined the honor.²⁷ On 11 November 1897, he was elected Bishop of Central Pennsylvania, which he accepted.²⁸ On 2 February 1898, he was enthroned in the pro-cathedral, the Church of the Nativity, South Bethlehem, Pennsylvania,²⁹ becoming the 3rd Bishop of Central Pennsylvania.³⁰ He at once began work towards the division of his unwieldy diocese, which was accomplished by the establishment of the Diocese of Harrisburg in 1904.³¹ Bishop Talbot continued in charge of the remaining area.

In 1908, the project of an associate mission led to the opening of Leonard Hall in South Bethlehem, an accomplishment of which Bishop Talbot was proud. The building was developed mainly, in accordance with a minor purpose in its foundation, as a residence for postulants for holy orders taking their college work at Lehigh University.³²

In the summer of 1908, Talbot went to London to attend the 5th Conference of Anglican Bishops, also called the Pan-Anglican Conference, or more commonly,

the Lambeth Conference, based in Lambeth House, where the conference was held. It took place between 6 July and 6 August 1908. The Lambeth Conference had been held for the first time in 1867 and then again in 1878, 1888, and 1897. About 320 bishops from the United Kingdom, its possessions and the United States of America were invited to the 1908 conference and 247 took part, of which a little more than 50 were from the United States of America.³³

The protocol of the Lambeth Conference was strict and a list of the bishops was arranged according to the date of their consecration. Archbishops and some other bishops were entitled to special precedence, the Archbishop of Canterbury being No. 1, the Archbishop of York No. 2, the Presiding Bishop of the United States of America No. 8 (there is no Anglican Archbishop in the United States), and the Premier Archbishop of Ireland No. 17, and last of those being given special precedence. The Bishop of Central Pennsylvania was No. 41.³⁴

Eleven committees were appointed to consider the various questions and to prepare them for the full session of the Conference. Ethelbert Talbot was a member of a committee of 58 bishops, including four archbishops, dealing with “Reunion and Intercommunion,” with regard to Episcopal Churches, Non-Episcopal Churches, and the Unitas Fratrum (better known as the Moravian Brethren).³⁵ The committee prepared a report in 21 points, which were adopted as resolutions by the full session of the Lambeth Conference.³⁶

The Lambeth Conference coincided with the Games of the 4th Olympiad of the Modern Era, the main events of which took place at the White City Stadium at Shepherd’s Bush in London, 13-25 July.³⁷ These were characterized by an intense rivalry between the United Kingdom and the United States. The Americans, who declared they had come to win the Championships of the Olympic Games, thought their aims and ambitions were deliberately thwarted by British Officials and British rulings. They protested vigorously against some real, but mostly alleged, injustices. They accused the British officials of being partial, anti-American, and of supporting their own countrymen. This attitude of the Americans made them very unpopular with the British public, who thought they were cocky, displayed poor sportsmanship, were bad losers, and were ignorant of the rules. Few American protests were upheld by the (British) Jury of Appeal. During the first week of the Olympic Games, 13-19 July, there was not a day without at least one British-American incident.³⁸

This did not go unnoticed by Ethelbert Talbot. He did not approve of the attitude of winning as the all-important thing and the numerous American protests against the rulings of the British officials. But what could he do?

During the Lambeth Conference the attending bishops were invited to preach in various churches. Thus, the Bishop of Central Pennsylvania was the preacher at a service in St Paul’s Cathedral on Sunday, 19 July,³⁹ to

which the athletes and officials of the Olympic Games were specially invited.⁴⁰ He now had the opportunity of addressing the Olympic athletes and officials. And he took it! In the course of his sermon, he said:⁴¹

“We have just been contemplating the great Olympic Games. What does it mean? It means that young men of robust physical life have come from all parts of the world. It does mean, I think, as someone has said, that this era of internationalism as seen in the Stadium has an element of danger. Of course, it is very true, as he says, that each athlete strives not only for the sake of sport, but for the sake of his country. Thus, a new rivalry is invented. If England be beaten on the river, or America out-distanced on the racing path, or that American has lost the strength which she once possessed. Well, what of it? The only safety after all lies in the lesson of the real Olympia – that the Games themselves are better than the race and the prize. St. Paul tells us how insignificant is the prize. Our prize is not corruptible, but incorruptible, and though only one may wear the laurel wreath, all may share the equal joy of the contest. All encouragement, therefore, be given to the exhilarating – I might also say soul-saving – interest that comes in active and fair and clean athletic sports.” [Widlund underscoring]

It did seem as if what he said went unnoticed, for the worst incidents of the 1908 Olympic Games were yet to come, in the 400 meters and the marathon race, well-known to everyone familiar with the history of the Olympic Games. There was, however, one person who really did notice, Baron Pierre de Coubertin, *rénovateur* of the Olympic Games and at that time President of the International Olympic Committee. In a speech at a banquet at the Grafton Galleries on Friday, 24 July, given by His Majesty’s Government to the members of the International Olympic Committee, the Comité d’Honneur, and the British Olympic Council, the diplomatic representatives, and the Agents-Generals for the Colonies, he interpreted Bishop Talbot’s underscored words as “*L’important dans ces Olympiades, c’est moins d’y gagner que d’y prendre part.*” (“The importance of these Olympiads is not so much to win as to take part.”) He then went on to say that these very words were the foundation of a clear and sound philosophy.⁴²

“L’important dans la vie ce n’est point le triomphe mais le combat. L’essential ce n’est pas d’avoir vaincu mais de s’être bien battu.” [“The important thing in life is not the triumph but the struggle. The essential thing is not to have won but to have fought well.”]

In connection with the Olympic Games in Stockholm 1912⁴³ and Antwerp 1920,⁴⁴ Pierre de Coubertin again

spoke of the words of the Bishop of Central Pennsylvania, but it did not attract any notice.

Meanwhile, Ethelbert Talbot continued in charge of the Diocese of Central Pennsylvania, which in 1909 took the name of the Diocese of Bethlehem.⁴⁵ The number of communicants had doubled since 1898 and his Diocese of Bethlehem was now almost as strong as the original Diocese of Central Pennsylvania had been in 1898.⁴⁶

Bishop Talbot was a successful administrator and he was loved as pastor and friend both by clergy and laity. He summed up his teaching in two books, *A Bishop Among His Flock* (1914), addressed to the laity of his diocese, and *A Bishop’s Message* (1917), addressed to the clergy. In thought his position was a moderate, but definite, Anglicanism aiming at charity both within and without the Church. He had learned to combine breadth of sympathy with firmness of conviction in the days when he preached to “wild westerners” on “temperance, righteousness, and judgment to come.”⁴⁸ In street dress, he followed that of the Church of England, wearing knee-breeches, gaiters, and black silk apron.⁴⁹

In 1914, he published *Tim, Autobiography of a Dog*, a sentimental and humorous account of his daughter’s bulldog.⁵⁰ He was also the author of numerous articles and pamphlets and many of his sermons were published.⁵¹

In his later years, Bishop Talbot’s attention was given increasingly to the growing industrial and foreign population of his diocese, to social problems and church unity. He served for many years as Chairman of the General Convention Commission on Christian Unity. A contribution by him to a symposium, “The Problem of Christian Unity” (1921), recommended as “the next step” immediate organic unions between American Protestant bodies.⁵²

Bishop Talbot was for many years a representative of the General Convention at the meeting of the Federal Council of Christ in America. Although the Episcopal Church permits its delegates simply to sit as “listeners-in,” Bishop Talbot was a regular attendant. He was Chairman of the Commission on Revision of the Lectionary of the General Convention.⁵³

In 1923, he obtained the assistance of a co-adjutor, Bishop Frank W. Starrett.⁵⁴ By the death of Bishop Alexander C. Garrett of Dallas on 18 February 1924, Ethelbert Talbot became the senior diocesan and Presiding Bishop of the Protestant Episcopal Church. In 1925, he presided at the General Convention. On 1 January 1926 he handed over the office to the first elected President, John Gardner Murray,⁵⁵ Bishop of the Diocese of Maryland.⁵⁶ Until the election of Bishop Murray the office had been occupied according to canon law by the oldest bishop in point of his consecration.⁵⁷ Thus, Bishop Talbot was the last to hold office by seniority, since it was then changed from a formal and representative post to an administrative one.⁵⁸

On 19 April 1927, Bishop Talbot was elected chaplain of the Pennsylvania Society, succeeding the Right

Reverend Thomas J. Garland, Bishop of Pennsylvania.⁵⁹ Rapidly aging, on 15 September 1927, Bishop Talbot resigned the administration of his diocese to Bishop Starrett.⁶⁰ He retired from active duty on 1 October 1927 because of illness.⁶¹ Soon afterward he suffered a stroke while in Boston.⁶² After being in a coma for his last 36 hours, he died peacefully at 10:55 p.m. on 27 February 1928 at the home of his daughter, Mrs Francis Donaldson, in Tuckahoe, New York. Mr and Mrs Donaldson, Dr Harry E. Stevens, and two nurses were present. He was the oldest bishop in the Episcopal Church in the United States when he passed away.⁶³

At the Olympic Games in 1924 and 1928, no reference was made to Bishop Talbot's sermon in St Paul's Cathedral in 1908. However, at the Olympic Games in Los Angeles (1932) there was a message from Pierre de Coubertin, who by then had resigned as President of the International Olympic Committee. The message appeared during the Opening Ceremony on the great scoreboard of the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum, slowly unfolding, letter-by-letter, in rhythmic cadence:⁶⁴

"The important thing in the Olympic Games is not winning but taking part. The essential thing is not conquering but fighting well." – Pierre de Coubertin

Pierre de Coubertin had in his eloquent and inimitable way merged Ethelbert Talbot's and his own ideas into a forceful expression, which catches the spirit or sportsmanship in the Olympic Games. To Pierre de Coubertin, the Olympic Games were not an end unto themselves, they were a step in the educational process to moral perfection. By some mistake or mishap, "In Life" was omitted from the second part of the message. It received its final wording and was finally established at the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin when, at the Opening Ceremony, Pierre de Coubertin's voice was heard over the loudspeaker, in a recording, delivering his message:⁶⁵

"Important aux Jeux Olympiques, ce n'est pas tant d'y gagner que d'y avoir pris part; car l'essentiel dans la vie, ce n'est pas tant de conquérir que d'avoir bien lutté." ["Important in the Olympic Games is not winning but taking part; for the essential thing in life is not conquering but fighting well. "]

The Bishop of Bethlehem (formerly of Central Pennsylvania), Ethelbert Talbot, did not live long enough to experience either the creation or the triumphal progress of these imperishable words all over the world. However, his name will forever be closely associated with them, as his ideas in the sermon in St Paul's Cathedral on 19 July 1908, inspired Pierre de Coubertin to the point of writing the Olympic Message. The Message links the ideas of Bishop Talbot with Baron de Coubertin's own moral/

philosophical expression from his speech at the official banquet given by His Majesty's Government on 24 July 1908. ■

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Notes and References

- 1 *Dictionary of American Biography* (DAB), p. 276.
- 2 *National Cyclopaedia of American Biography* (NCAB), p. 390.
- 3 *Ibid.*
- 4 *Ibid.*
- 5 DAB, loc. cit.
- 6 DAB, p. 277.
- 7 DAB, p. 276; NCAB, p. 390.
- 8 DAB, loc. cit.; NCAB, loc. cit.
- 9 DAB, loc. cit.
- 10 *Ibid.*
- 11 NCAB, loc. cit.
- 12 NCAB, p. 390; *The New York Times* (NYT), 28 Feb 1928.
- 13 DAB, p. 277.
- 14 NCAB, loc. cit.
- 15 DAB, loc. cit.
- 16 NCAB, loc. cit.
- 17 NYT, loc. cit.
- 18 *Ibid.*
- 19 *Ibid.*
- 20 DAB, loc. cit.
- 21 NCAB, loc. cit.
- 22 DAB, loc. cit.
- 23 NCAB, loc. cit.
- 24 *Ibid.*
- 25 NCAB, loc. cit.
- 26 DAB, loc. cit.
- 27 *Ibid.*
- 28 NCAB, loc. cit.
- 29 DAB, loc. cit.
- 30 NCAB, loc. cit.
- 31 DAB, loc. cit.
- 32 *Ibid.*
- 33 *The Times* (of London), 6 Jul 1908; *The Morning Post*, 6 Jul 1908.
- 34 *The Times*, 6 Jul 1908.
- 35 *The Times*, 13 Jul 1908.
- 36 *The Times*, 8 Aug 1908.
- 37 Cook, Theodore Andrea: *The Fourth Olympiad: Being the Official Report of the Olympic Games of 1908 Celebrated in London Under the Patronage of His Most Gracious Majesty King Edward VII*, pp. 626-655 (OR08).
- 38 Widlund, Ture, "Det olympiska valspråket-bakgrund och tillkomst", in: *Idrott historia samhälle Svenska idrottshistorika föreningsens årsskrift 1982 Stockholm 1982*. pp. 50-57.
- 39 *The Daily Telegraph*, 18 Jul 1908; *The Morning Post*, 18 Jul 1908. The name of the preacher in St Paul's Cathedral was not known for 74 years, until it was disclosed by Widlund in 1982. In OR08 he is mentioned twice, on p. 399 and in the speech of Pierre de Coubertin, p. 793. Both times, he is referred to as the Bishop of Pennsylvania. The Bishop of Pennsylvania was not present at the

Lambeth Conference but his co-adjutor, Alexander Mackay-Smith, was. This led some to believe that it was Alexander Mackay-Smith who preached in St Paul's Cathedral on 19 July 1908.

- 40 OR08, p. 399.
- 41 *The Guardian*, 22 Jul 1908, p. 1247.
- 42 OR08, p. 793.
- 43 Otto Mayer: *A Travers les Anneaux Olympiques*. Genève, 1960. p. 69. Otto Mayer is quoting a speech given by Pierre de Coubertin in Stockholm during the 1912 Olympic Games, published in the October issue of *Revue Olympique* (1912). The speech in question is not published in the 1912 Official Report and the author has not had access to *Revue Olympique* (1912).
- 44 Pierre de Coubertin, quoted in *The Report of the American Olympic Committee: Seventh Olympic Games, Antwerp, Belgium 1920*. New York, NY, USA, 1921. (AOC20).
- 45 DAB, loc. cit.
- 46 Ibid.
- 47 Ibid.
- 48 Ibid.
- 49 NYT, 28 Feb 1928.
- 50 DAB, loc. cit.
- 51 NYT, loc. cit.
- 52 DAB, loc. cit.
- 53 NYT, 28 Feb 1928.
- 54 DAB, loc. cit.
- 55 Ibid.
- 56 NYT, 28 Feb 1928.
- 57 Ibid.
- 58 DAB, loc. cit.
- 59 NYT, 28 Feb 1928.
- 60 DAB, loc. cit.
- 61 NYT, 28 Feb 1928.
- 62 Ibid.
- 63 Ibid.
- 64 *The Games of the Xth Olympiad Los Angeles 1932. Official Report*. Los Angeles, 1933 (OR32).

- 65 Recording by *Sverige Radio* of the Opening Ceremony in Berlin 1936. It should be noted that the quotation of Pierre de Coubertin's message in OR36 is incorrect. In OR36, p. 562, the wording of the message is: "*L'important aux Jeux Olympiques n'est pas d'y gagner mais d'y prendre part; car l'essentiel dans la vie, ce n'est pas tout de conquérir que de bien lutter.*" Not much difference, but nevertheless several discrepancies.

Commentary by John Lucas

I've not had the privilege of meeting Ture Widlund. His writings are those of the thorough and professional historian. He displayed disappointment (irritation?) with my inexcusable error of calling him "Norwegian" (p. 97 of my recent textbook *The Future of the Olympic Games*. I have written him and apologized). It is obvious to all that Widlund discovered the correct title and identity of the Pennsylvania clergyman who delivered a sermon in St Paul's cathedral in July 1908. It is also clear, that I uncovered/discovered the exact nature of the 1,500-word speech spoken by the Bishop of Central Pennsylvania, Ethelbert Talbot.

[To find this,] I traveled to the Texas depository of the American Episcopal Church and read *The Guardian of the American Episcopal Church* (note that Widlund's use of the term "The Guardian" is incorrect as it would surely be confused with *The Guardian* of Manchester, England). Subsequent publications of mine identify Widlund as the discoverer of the Bishop of Central Pennsylvania's identity, and Lucas as the person locating the exact speech of Talbot. Mr Widlund has several times not given me credit for the latter. Of course, it's not a "big thing." Not unimportantly, aside from identifying which *Guardian* and not mentioning Lucas' name as the one locating the exact sermon of Bishop Talbot, Ture Widlund's paper is superb ... a contribution to Olympic literature.