



# Organic Olympism Or Olympic Orgy: The Roots of Modern Olympism And the Mystery of John Hulley

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The last few years have been good for William Penny Brookes of Wenlock in Shropshire, England. The founder of the Wenlock Olympian Association [WOS] 150 years ago, Dr. Brookes is getting his dues at last. In September 1999, the Second Schools Forum, organized by the Pierre de Coubertin International Committee [CIPC], took place in Wenlock. Schools from Estonia, Austria, Germany, Greece, and England, celebrated the life and work of the venerable doctor. The two schools from Greece, one from Athens another from Olympia, sang the Greek national anthem at the celebration of the Wenlock Olympian Society's first honorary member, Petros Velisarios. A tree was planted in the name of this winner of the 'long foot race' of the Zappas Games of 1859. Velisarios became a member of the WOS a year later. Pierre de Coubertin became the fifth honorary member in 1891.

There were two other honorary members elected in that year: Charles Beresford and the Earl of Meath. Beresford was a leading light in the National Physical Recreation Society [NPRS]; Meath also, but primarily as the man who steered through the Houses of Parliament the first bill calling for physical education in

all elementary schools in England. In 1905, the NPRS was a founder member of the British Olympic Association [BOA], and three years later offered a major prize at the London Olympic Games.<sup>1</sup>

In the last 10 years much has been published about Brookes. In Brookes' obituary, for example, Coubertin paid a glowing tribute when he wrote of 'the revival of the Games being more to do with Brookes than the Greeks'. He noted the wish of Brookes to stage a modern international Olympian Games-but always in Athens. Indeed, Brookes made some 18 interventions, in his lifetime, regarding international Olympian matters.

In 1865, Brookes joined with two others to found the National Olympian Association [NOA] in Liverpool.

The two others were E. Ravenstein, director of the German Gymnastic Society in London, and John Hulley, director of the Liverpool Gymnasium. Ravenstein began his work in the early 1860's; Hulley similarly. Ravenstein was the son of August Ravenstein a pupil of Friedrich Ludwig Jahn-the "father of German gymnastics".

There is scant knowledge about him; how-

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ever, what is known is that his German Gymnastics Society [GGS] was extremely international. After a few years of ground-work more than 30 nationalities were in membership. They were mostly tradesmen working in London, with the English outnumbering the Germans. Many took part in the first National Olympian Games. The overall winner was Hugo Landsberger from the GGS. The Society also gave prizes for arts and sciences.<sup>2</sup> Norbert Müller discovered that Ravenstein, in the later years of his life, applied to join the IOC. His application was turned down because he was not resident in his country of birth-or some such.

These first National Olympian Games were held at London's Crystal Palace. They were successful despite being gazumped by the first Amateur Athletics Championships held a few weeks before. Peter Lovesey has it that the AAA initiative seemed to be mainly an attempt to thwart the NOA whose affiliated bodies all seemed to favour the participation of 'workers'. Undoubtedly this posed a threat to gentlemanly sport as advocated by the Oxbridge elite. At the Crystal Palace, Brookes gave a sterling speech in which he alluded to the ancient Games. A copy of this speech, together with several similar publications, found its way to Coubertin when he called for papers for his first international conference on physical education, Paris, 1889.

This is a matter confirmed by Coubertin in his Brookes obituary.

The NOA stated clearly in its first constitution that it was "open to all comers". In 1874 at a meeting called to revitalise the organisation, the president, the Earl of Bradford, again stated that its competitions were "open to the world".

Ravenstein and Hulley collaborated in the publication of a major book of gymnastic instruction<sup>3</sup>.

**B**ut who was Hulley? At the inaugural meeting of the NOA in 1865, Hulley was elected chairman. His Liverpool Olympic Festivals have been well researched by both Roy Rees and Joachim Rühl and his colleagues of the Cologne Sporthochschule. These studies show that athletes from Paris

and Marseilles took part in the Liverpool festival of 1867. They show that gold, silver, and bronze medals, were awarded. At the first NOA meeting the French fencing master Andrée Durbec attended. He was the fencing teacher at the Liverpool Gymnasium.

A report of the first NOA Games in London describes the entry of a figure "dressed as a Turk to present the East" and insisting on the Greek title "gymnasiarch" (teacher of physical education) . . . . "It was Mr. Hulley himself!"

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I ask myself (concerning Ravenstein) is it perhaps because Ravenstein was German and suffered the bad odour existing in England after the First World War? Is it perhaps because he might have been Jewish and suffered anti-Semitic discrimination? Is it even that he was Jewish, but a secular Jew, and suffered discrimination by mainline Jewish scholars?

The German Gymnastic Society took part in the 1908 Olympic Games and Karl Lennartz (Sporthochschule) has some nice tales to tell about that. The GGS had a library of several thousands texts and busts of leading German gymnasts. What happened to them?

The German Gymnasium itself, the Turnhalle, still stands. Next to Kings Cross Station in London, it is under constant threat of demolition, saved only by its listed status. Its roof is of great architectural value and thought to be the original roof of Kings Cross Station.

**S**ome of us created the Ravenstein Sports Hall Trust some years ago. We try to hang on despite nil support from the English Sports Council and lip-service only from the British Olympic Association. This, despite the fact that national governing bodies (British) for such sports as fencing, gymnastics, wrestling, weightlifting, were all established by these Germans and in that building. So was swimming, and the AAA had the GGS as a founder member! Who will research this area seriously?

So we come to Hulley. John Hulley was born in Liverpool in 1832 and raised there. He died in 1875. He matriculated at the Collegiate Institution on Shaw Street in his home town. There is no record of his having married. At school he was taught physical education by one Louis Huguenin, who had arrived in Liverpool in 1844 and taught gymnastics for 25 years. It was Huguenin, it is thought, who shaped Hulley's interest in Olympian Games and taught him the skills of gymnastics. Initial discussions with French colleagues regarding the need to research Huguenin went up like a lead balloon, so to speak.

A well-known gymnastic performer, publicist, and activator, Hulley had been appointed the first director of the Liverpool Gymnasium. The new building was opened in 1865. It was commended by Thomas Hughes M.P. and described in *Porcupine* (28 October 1866) as "Mr. Hulley's Temple." It was, they wrote, like a railway terminus, a market, a theatre, or public baths with wash houses.

Hulley had researched 'the leading gymnasia in Europe' and his creation was thought to be the biggest and best at that time on the continent. One year after the opening, *Porcupine* reported that the gymnasium, which had been at its inception 'looked upon simply in the light of an experiment', was celebrated by 'several hundred gentlemen' who came together to honour



*Champion Hugo Landsberger of the German Gymnastics Society*

'the complete and triumphant success of physical education, and its preacher'.

*Porcupine* was again laudatory (10 November 1866) despite wishing 'that Hulley would not call himself the Gymnasiarch'. They wrote that the celebration was perfectly organized, and 'perfectly adapted to the physical education of the young men of this town'. They

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were also 'in expectation' that, when Mr. Hulley's physical education had provided them with the "corpus sanum", they would be more open to culture and development of the "mens sana"!

Later Hulley ventured into the area of 'ladies classes'. There was a great hue and cry; excitable adjectives like 'malignant activity' abounded. Hulley was not disturbed. Since school, he had built up a reputation for eccentricity. The manner of his dress, the style of his hair, the success of his PR 'at every fete and festive gathering'.

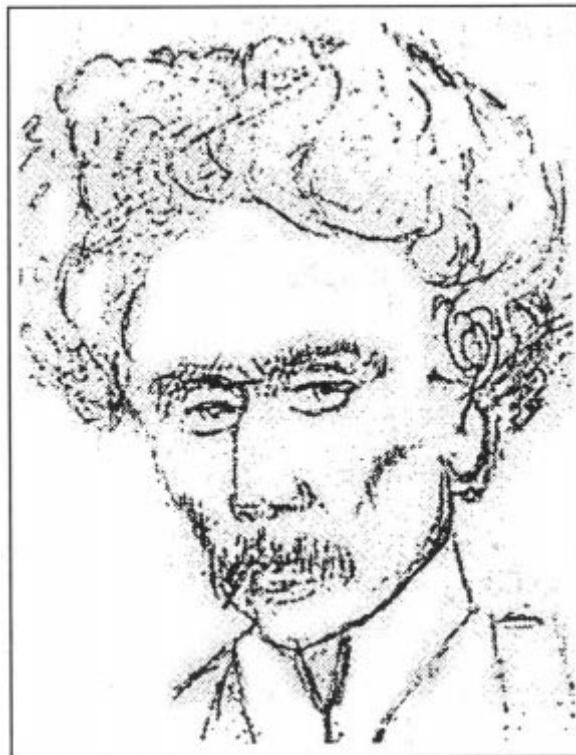
In the Liverpool Citizen of 25 February 1888, a correspondent reflected on Hulley's life. He concluded that his 'harmless eccentricities' had not detracted from the high regard Liverpool citizens in general held for him: 'Professor of gymnastics and Gymnasiarch', John Hulley, 'is still a pleasant memory in his native city and his surviving pupils retain an affectionate remembrance of their old teacher. Hulley was born with a mission which he fulfilled, and, take him for all and all, we may never see his like again'.

Many of the Liverpool 'establishment' did not take kindly to him, however. As a professional earning a living from the teaching of gymnastics, he was not on the Mayor's list for the Opening Ceremony of his own Gymnasium. The money to build the Gymnasium had been raised mainly by public subscription and maintained by membership fees and 'events'. Local press reports criticised this demotion of the Gymnasiarch, who they described as "the son of a gentleman". Of course, this sort of discrimination was widespread in British sport of the period. Even today it is not common to see the manager of a top British soccer club at home in the Directors Lounge.

The Fourth Olympic Festival of Liverpool was held in 1867. After this, it was reported that Hulley 'took to foreign travel . . . all over the Americas'. It seemed he also experienced a severe chest disease and endeavoured to spend every winter in sunnier climes than Liverpool (tuberculosis was rife in those days).

Porcupine (9 January 1875) reports his passing:

'Latterly John Hulley, the Gymnasiarch, as he loved to be called, had not been seen moving about as of old. Disease in the shape of a



*John Hulley, the "Gymnasiarch"*

remorseless and wearing chest complaint, had fastened upon his once athletic frame and, omitting this year to winter in Algiers, he succumbed to the severity of the recent frost and died at the comparatively early age of forty-two. Mr. Hulley had his whimsicalities which sometimes offended and worried other people but, looking at him now, as we have only the right to do . . . as a public man, it must be acknowledged that his enthusiasm and indomitable energy gave a stimulus to physical education in Liverpool, which no other man was both willing and competent to impart.'

The National Olympian Association sorely missed the energy and drive of Hulley. He had become very close to Brookes after his visit to Wenlock in the early 1860's. Perhaps Brookes saw him as a "Crown Prince" of the Olympian

Movement? The facts speak for themselves: the National Olympian Games had a good start in London in 1866; their second festival, in Birmingham, a year later was also outstanding and, among other things, poetry competitions were instituted.

Thereafter they tended to fizzle out and finally expired in 1883, despite a renewed attempt at revival in 1874. It seems that Hulley was the missing dynamo. 1867 seems to be the defining date when he completed his joint book with Ravenstein and then began his over-seas travel and battle against ill-health.

In that same year, Hulley expressed his thoughts nicely about the link between physical education and the Olympic idea. He said: 'What I desire to impress upon you is that Olympic Festivals are not the end of physical education. Physical Education, or rather its dissemination, is the end. Olympian festivals are the means of securing that end'.

Four years earlier, he had delivered a lecture setting out what was, in his view, an Olympic Education:

The need for athletic institutes for public gymnastic exercises . . . for both sexes . . . in all our towns and cities for 'the free use of the people . . . an agreeable resort for the aged and a pastime for the young'.

Such a development would do more to safeguard the country than miles of fortifications. A correct system of political and religious education 'should embrace a proper exercise of the body and the intellect'. 'Partial comprehension' had resulted in 'people of warm hearts and good sense' to believe 'that sound morals and high intellect could be evolved without the full growth, strength, and perfect harmonious development of the human body'.

Such thoughts were not only pertinent 140 years ago; they are highly relevant today when 'public exercise' is more and more abandoned to the forces of globalisation and commerce.

Hulley was certainly a tour de force. He began to define Olympism long before the formation of the International Olympic Committee. Like Brookes and Ravenstein he influenced the thinking of the young Coubertin.

As I said at the beginning, this year has been good for the early Olympian founders. Brookes has been honoured in several ways. The BOA National Olympic Academy was staged at Lilleshall Hall, Britain's premier sports training centre which has one hall named Wenlock and which is in the vicinity of that town. At

the Guildhall in Wenlock, refurbished by Brookes in grand style, a special CIPC plaque was presented to the Wenlock Olympian Society. This plaque was engraved with Coubertin's favourite motto: 'See afar, speak frankly, act firmly'. The scroll was signed and endorsed by IOC President Juan Antonio Samaranch. The scroll testifies to the long friendship and mutual admiration of Brookes and the Baron. The latter's oak tree, planted during his first visit in 1890 flourishes, and was visited. In July, the British 'Olympians' had their AGM in Wenlock and experienced the new 'Olympian trail'.

Next year promises equal excitement. At Lausanne in September 2001 will be held the Third CIPC Schools Forum. Those in attendance at Wenlock last year will be joined by the Galatasaray Lycee from Istanbul, who were prevented from reaching Wenlock by earthquake, by French and Czech schools, perhaps one from Russia, and with, it is hoped, generous local participation. Each school will demonstrate its sporting skills, its artistic achievements, and its community concern. These are the roots of Olympism for which Coubertin fought so valiantly during his lifetime and hopefully they will again flourish in the city where he lived and died. They are the same values pursued by Brookes, Ravenstein, and Hulley. Some of these new seeds might even fall in fertile ground.

In 2002, it might be that the skeleton knowledge regarding Hulley can be fleshed out, and that a grand exhibition concerning his work can be part of the activities surrounding the Manchester Commonwealth Games. Unfortunately, many records were destroyed in the Second World War, and we are all clutching at straws. However, perhaps the name Huguenin might jog a few French brains and some Liverpoolians will dig into their memory banks.

One Mancunian now working in Liverpool is Pam Nugent, the first woman to be appointed director of a British YMCA. The Liverpool Gymnasium was bought by the YMCA in 1882 and sold to the Liverpool Hospital Board in 1951. The Liverpool YMCA now has a home in Mount Pleasant, Liverpool, and the director has become intrigued by the history of John Hulley. There are grandiose plans for future YMCA development and it might be that a room will be found for a permanent memorial to the Gymnasiarch. Meanwhile, I hope that the IOC Museum and Study Centre will be moved to honour these early Olympians in the manner they deserve.

However, all these bits and pieces do not make a serious history of John Hulley. That has yet to come. I

hope that this article might be the spur to new action. Hulley's disappearance from the National Olympian Association's affairs after 1867 is still a mystery. Had he stayed and applied himself completely to the NOA there might have been competitors from places further afield than those from Paris and Marseilles-reputed to have taken part in a Liverpool festival.

There were a series of events which badly hit the NOA and its Games: deaths in the Brookes family; rising costs of staging Olympian Games making them prohibitive for hosting towns; and the 'disappearance' of Hulley from the scene. All too much to bear.

**I**n conclusion some thoughts on 'What if? What if Hulley had not died so young? He would have been only 62 in the year 1894, when the International Olympic Committee was constituted. Brookes would surely have 'pushed' his disciple into the inner circle of the Olympic embryo.

He was described as 'eccentric' and 'whimsical'; two qualities which the modern Olympic movement sorely needs. 'Odd' is also a synonym for whimsical. Today I identify odd as an acronym for 'Olympic Down Dumbing'. We need a little whimsy to reverse that trend. In my national Olympic family-the British Olympic Association-BOA-b a o. . . . I call for 'born against Olympians'.

Hulley was an 'organic Olympian'. Not only that, he was also a concurrent showman. Television would have been his forte. The modern Olympic Games has become a gigantic television spectacle; nothing wrong with that in essence, provided it is backed up with organic Olympian elements: education, health, development, arts, peace. We need some new whimsy to break the moulds. For example, why persist Olympic City criteria which will restrict the Games to rich cities in rich countries for the foreseeable future? Any African city which tried to meet those criteria would be unethical-they are the wrong criteria in the wrong place at the wrong time. The Olympic idea needs some urgent eccentricity-some Gandhian leadership.

The 'Hulley-mind' would not shrink from the eccentric suggestion that the 2008 Games-

or 2012 if you are a coward-should be staged in Africa, but funded by the IOC, the United Nations, NOCs, Governments, and so on. In this needy African continent it would thus create a great Olympic City with the organizational know-how. This is somewhat better than the recent G8 proposal whereby the major reason for education in Africa will be so that children may get one good meal a day if they go to school!

Eccentric means also capricious and fantastic. These are what the new millennium Olympic structure requires. An alternative scenario could see Olympic consumers degenerating into an orgy of re-branding obscene money prizes, and drug abuse.

Hulley might have come up with five O's to match the Olympic rings:

O rganic - Olympism - O r - O  
lympic - O rgy

That is the title of my next book (which is searching for a publisher). I came into this an innocent bystander fascinated by these unsung founding fathers of modern Olympism. I thought the Olympic world would welcome positive Olympic revisionism. I am dismayed. It sometimes shrinks in fear. My innocent academic hobby has thus become a crusade. And a most fascinating one it is.

#### Notes

1 The motto of the NOA was 'Civium vires civitatis vis'-the power of the state lies in the strength of its citizens. After the decline of the NOAS, the NPRS took on the same motto. In 1894 Brookes wrote to Coubertin suggesting a latin motto for the proposed IOC.

2 'Industrial attainments' were also recognised by the founder bodies of the NOA.

3 *'Volkstumbuch: A tribute to A. Ravenstein, 1867*, a copy available in the British Library.

4 Thomas Hughes was better known as the author of *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, the text which so moved Coubertin.