Wenlock and Mandeville

The names of Wenlock and Mandeville, the mascots for the 2012 Olympic Games, derive from the work of two doctors who are the subjects of papers in this issue of the Journal of Medical Biography.1,2

William Penny Brookes (1809–95) was a general practitioner who founded the Wenlock Olympian Games at Much Wenlock in Shropshire and who was one of the three founding members of the National Olympian Association in England. He was an important influence on Baron Pierre de Coubertin (1863–1937) who is regarded as the originator of the international Olympic movement.

Sir Ludwig Guttmann (1899–1980) was the first Director of the National Spinal Injuries Centre at Stoke Mandeville in England and the creator of the Stoke Mandeville Games which developed into the Paralympic Games.3 Biographical information about Guttmann is more extensive than that about Brookes, but what is known about the personalities of the two men reveals some interesting similarities as well as some contrasts.

Both were short in stature, Brookes lithe and Guttmann stocky, and both bustled with activity. Both had a strong social conscience which arose from their work among the agricultural labourers of Much Wenlock and the coalminers of Königshütte. Both were intolerant of injustice. Brookes lobbied on behalf of his pauper patients, on behalf of military surgeons who were treated less fairly than their combattant brethren and on behalf of his fellow general practitioners whose status was inferior to that of specialist surgeons and physicians. Guttmann, who had personal experience of racial injustice, later exerted his enormous energies in fighting the ignorance and restrictions faced by his paraplegic patients. In lobbying on behalf of others both men exhibited their own intolerance – an intolerance of bureaucracy!

Brookes and Guttmann must be considered as outsiders, at least in their earlier years. Brookes was an active liberal in an overwhelmingly conservative borough and, when he ventured into national issues, he did so as an obscure provincial doctor. Guttmann was even further outside the establishment, first as a Jew in pre-war Germany and then as a German emigré who retained a strong foreign accent and whose Jewish origins, in his British citizenship and, despite all that he had suffered, he retained feelings of loyalty to his native Germany.3,4

Both took great pride in their origins, in their surroundings and in their work: Brookes in his profession, in Much Wenlock, in his country and in its empire1 and Guttmann in his Jewish origins, in his British citizenship and, above all perhaps, in their unshakeable conviction in the rightness of his cause.

Both men had great powers of persuasion but here the similarities end because those powers were manifest in very different ways. Thus Brookes’s obituarists write of a man with a cheerful word for everyone, ‘infusing his own spirit of enthusiasm among his neighbours’. They describe a man with ‘a fascination of persuasion which few could withstand’ and of ‘a magic power of persuasion which seemed to hypnotize opponents, who found themselves moulded to his wishes, and following in his wake before they knew of it’.5,6

In contrast Guttmann was often forceful and authoritarian, dictatorial and intolerant of dissent. So certain was he of his own opinions that he found it difficult to collaborate with others.7 He could be brutally critical of his own staff, to their faces and in public.8 Many who had been bruised by his powerful ego could still admire and respect his achievements but, although revered as ‘Poppa’ by many of his patients, their devotion was often tempered by deference and by trepidation.

However it is in their similarities that we should look for clues to the achievements of Brookes and Guttmann: in their tireless and indefatigable energy and, above all perhaps, in their unshakeable conviction of the rightness of their causes. Recognition came to Guttmann in his lifetime with a knighthood, honorary degrees and other awards.3 Brookes died almost unknown outside his own community and his recognition has come belatedly, more than a century after his death.1

So far as is known, Brookes’s bravery was never tested. Guttmann was a man of considerable physical courage, helping patients to escape from Germany under the noses of the Gestapo and resisting the diktats of the Nazi health authorities.3

Both men were pioneers. There were others who contributed but it was Brookes and Guttmann who, in their respective fields, were pre-eminent. Brookes was pre-eminent in both his vision and endeavour,1 whereas Guttmann built on the vision and preliminary work of others to create an integrated and comprehensive system of treatment.4 Guttmann appears to have had no real interests outside his work, other than the paralympic sports which stemmed directly from his immediate duties. In contrast Brookes was, at various times, active in civic work and in medical politics, and he was a keen botanist and antiquarian.9

Both men exhibited their own intolerance – an intolerance of injustice, later exerted his enormous energies in fighting the ignorance and restrictions faced by his paraplegic patients. In lobbying on behalf of others both men exhibited their own intolerance – an intolerance of bureaucracy!

Both men were Olympians and, as such, they deserve special remembrance in this year of the British Olympic and Paralympic Games.

Henry Connor
Hereford, UK
(email: hconnor@vineyardroad.plus.com)

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5 Obituary Wellington Journal and Shrewsbury News, 14 December 1895, p.8 col.F-G
6 Obituary Shrewsbury Chronicle, 13 December 1895, p.6 col.G

Human endeavour

Human endeavour is about us – people – and all of us although the impression that might first be conjured up is that it is only the extremes of human performance that should attract the limelight. Perhaps instead we should consider that the most important elements of human endeavour involve each of us, who should strive to attain the optimum, the most we can achieve.

Here, in this issue of JMB we read of the extreme exploits of some who have climbed high, who have promoted sport and games to test the limits of the participants, who have praised the good things that come from friendly competition, the personal rewards and the outward symbols of achievement, medals and plaques. The Olympic Games have developed from the early times in Greece via the resurrection of the spirit of the games in the nineteenth century and progression to today’s Games in different cities of the world and in 2012 in London, home of the publishers of this journal.

The material for this themed August issue exceeded the usual page count and so the November issue will explore the story further, on that occasion turning from the Games and focussing on those who have gone down under, to the extremes at the colder parts of the planet we inhabit. The stories of Antarctic exploration and the part played by those involved in health care there are just as enthralling as the more formal parts of the Olympic Games and in some ways they test the longer-term endurance of the human body and the degree of resoluteness that can drive individuals forward, often striving on their own in a hostile environment without the immediate cheering of those around them and without backup facilities that might prove lifesaving.

In its near twenty years of publishing JMB has carried stories of many who have broken the boundaries of knowledge but here we look more at the endurance of doctors, nurses and others whose powers of concentration drive them forwards in a setting other than their everyday work of caring for their patients. In a sense this is the English Victorian work ethic, the philosophy of encouraging perseverance in a setting where it is sporting rather than lifesaving, in the hope and sometimes the knowledge that it will help overcome the difficulties and vicissitudes of everyday life and thereby lead to great achievements.

Some have come so close to their ambition and been thwarted by the circumstances of others; think of those climbers who have turned back in order to save others – one such story appears in this issue, another recently in the newspaper where David O’Brien, the British mountaineer, turned back from close to the summit of Everest in order to rescue a Polish mountaineer who later was not able to identify his rescuer.

Certainly there are many further great achievements described in the pages that follow and, without more ado, we should read on and be inspired!

Christopher Gardner-Thorpe
Editor, Journal of Medical Biography
e-mail: cgardnerthorpe@me.com

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2 Editorial. Because he’s there, the Briton who saved a fellow climber is a true Everest hero. The Times, 2 June 2012, page 2