

FROM BONN TO ATHENS AND BACK

THE DIARY OF JOHN PIUS BOLAND. A UNIQUE DOCUMENT OF OLYMPIC HISTORY SOON TO BE PUBLISHED



by Heiner Gillmeister

Some time in 1994, the *British Olympic Association* received a parcel, and its anonymous sender (in a letter which accompanied it) explained that he was herewith returning a manuscript which he had borrowed from "*Jack Boland*" many years ago and which he had simply forgotten to return. He asked the Association to either send it to his family, or to place it in their archive. Of course, the BOA was definitely the wrong addressee. Apparently, the sender had been misled by that popular fallacy that "*Jack Boland*", the first Olympic tennis champion, was an Englishman. Fortunately, a member of the Association, Don ANTHONY, knew better and sought the advice of an Irishman, the late Lord KILLANIN. This "*Eminent Hibernian*" was a good choice. BOLAND, KILLANIN said, had been the very same man who had read the lesson at his wedding. He therefore knew him well but after intensive searches for living relatives even the former IOC president had to report that he had been unable to trace any. He therefore agreed with Don ANTHONY that the proper place for it would be the IOC museum in Lausanne.

That the sender of the parcel chose to preserve his anonymity was, perhaps, not entirely without a reason. His "forgetfulness" may be seen in connection with the mysterious history of BOLAND'S Olympic medals, which until shortly before his death had, in wooden velvet-lined frames to which withered laurel leaves were attached, adorned the walls of his London flat, but had at some time, according to the testimony of BOLAND'S daughter Bridget, been lent to "*an Irish club or association*". When in June 1998 the medals suddenly appeared at an auction at the Olympic Training Center in Colorado Springs, it transpired that they had been borrowed by the *Irish Olympic Association* in London with a view to highlighting with them an exhibition during the 1956 Melbourne Games. This exhibition, however, had never materialized. In the 1980's, the medals were sold to a London coin dealer, and it is perhaps a fair guess that our anonymous sender had a hand in this unauthorised deal. At any rate, it was from this source that they found their way to an American dealer, who auctioned both off for \$5,000 each to



two different American buyers. When one of them decided to sell his medal again, it came into the possession of US dealer Ingrid O'NEILL, who offered it for a minimum bid of \$11,500. However, after it had appeared in her auction catalogue, the *Olympic Council of Ireland* voiced their doubts as to the legitimacy of the deal, and on their behalf a representative of the *United States Olympic Committee* (USOC) read a protest note at the beginning of the auction. Upon which the auctioneer at first withdrew the item, but when its former owner was able to produce a certificate and an invoice proving the legitimacy of his purchase, the medal was eventually sold for \$13,500, despite the remonstrance from the OCI.

This, however, was by no means the end of the mysterious story. A

John
Pius
BOLAND

mail bid auction, again organized by Ingrid O'NEILL, was set for 17 April 2004, and here, as item c200 of the catalogue, BOLAND'S second medal reappeared. This time, prices again went up steeply, the minimum bid being \$20,000. Contrary to the situation which prevailed ten years ago, when Lord KILLANIN had failed to unearth any living relatives of BOLAND (a strange thing in itself considering that the Olympic champion had five daughters and one son), at least two of them, a grandnephew and a grandniece, are now known to exist, who both live in Ireland. And it remains to be seen how in these changed circumstances the whole deal will come off.

BOLAND called his diary a "journal", and by using this term may have wanted to be part of a literary tradition popularised by FIELDING and HERDER in the 18th century and continued only recently by Sue TOWNSEND in her best selling novel *The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole, Aged 13* (1982). If this is so, the language of his work is nevertheless not at all pretentious. There is, in fact, a world of difference between this piece of writing and what BOLAND had at the same time published in *The Oratory School Magazine* and *The Oxford Magazine*, or his later literary output, namely his autobiographical *Irishman's Day*, which because of his attempts at stylistic elegance is rather heavy going. A special feature of the journal are the many titbits from

Oratory
School Old
Boys' cricket
team 1895.
(The Oratory
School,
Archive,
Woodcote,
Reading,
Berks)

foreign languages with which BOLAND garnishes his narrative, especially German and, as soon as he had arrived in Athens, Greek. As for the acquisition of foreign languages, BOLAND could not vie with his wife who spoke half a dozen with ease. Her talent BOLAND hardly possessed. His grappling with that exotic language German, in particular, make his journal an extremely funny read, especially for native speakers of that language. This, however, is a rather marginal

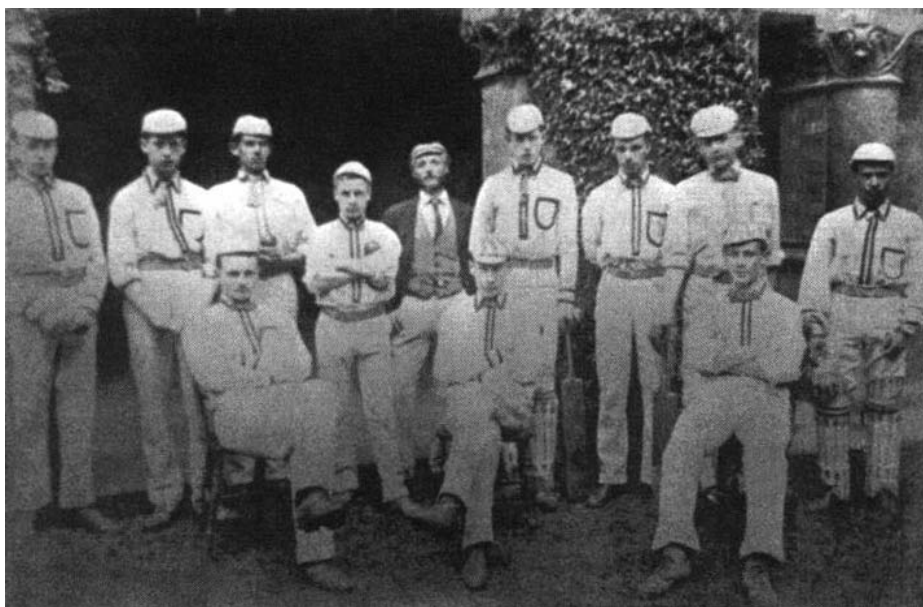


aspect of the journal. Of much greater importance from the view-point of cultural history are BOLAND'S matter of fact, though at times somewhat naïve observations (pardonable in someone so young) on everyday life in Bonn under the Kaiser. His comments on German university life and its representatives, and his description of that notorious "*Fifth Season*" in the Rhineland, carnival, are particularly interesting, as local historians have recently discovered. Occasionally, he evokes scenes of bygone times such as that of the "*hideous tug boats, with their following of four or five barges*" plodding wearily up stream emitting "*the blackest of smoke.*" This seems strange even to those who, like the present writer, have spent half of their life-time in Bonn. Of particular interest are BOLAND'S remarks on a man who was virtually a colleague of the present writer at the Department of English more than a hundred years ago, Professor Moritz TRAUTMANN. BOLAND had been fortunate to attend his lectures (on the "*History of English Literature up to the end of the Middle Ages*") when the professor was riding on his hobbyhorse, LANGLAND'S alliterative poem *Piers Plowman*. BOLAND, who himself never got rid of his Irish accent, greatly admired the pronunciation of the English words occurring in the German's discourse calling it "*extremely good*". But then he had this to say about the speaker: "*[...] as a whole he did not please me, for he has a sleepy manner of delivering. He speaks clearly enough, but with an entire absence of life or gesture.*"

Virtually unique, however, is BOLAND'S account of his journey to Athens, and the Olympic Games with its wealth of hitherto unknown details which not infrequently shed a completely new light on the event, setting right some of the hitherto

imperfectly known facts. He is, for example, the first to relate the correct results of the Olympic tennis event, and considering the pedantry with which he noted departure times of trains and boats throughout his journal, we can trust him when he states that the Austrian Schmal, winner of the twelve hours bicycle race, "*[...] didn't cover quite 300 kilometres [...]*" owing to the very high wind. It is disputed whether SCHMAL achieved 315 or 295.3 kilometres, but BOLAND'S testimony tips the scales in favour of the second figure. Sometimes his observations are of a subtle irony of which, of course, the Irishman at the time he was writing could hardly have been aware. On his way to Athens, his ship dropped anchor for half an hour at Santa Quaranta on the Albanian coast. Some forty Albanians boarded, and BOLAND turned up his nose at their "*national costume (which they were wearing, he remarked, "in all degrees") + - dirt.*" What would he have said had he known that Evangelos ZAPPAS, the real inventor of the modern Olympic Games, to whom the Greeks to this day lay claim as their national hero and benefactor, and whose grandiose sporting facility, the Zappeion, he would soon visit, had in reality been a true son of Albania, Vangel Zhapa?

What was John Pius BOLAND the man like? His daughter Bridget was not the only person captivated by his good looks. "*Well over six foot tall,*" she wrote, "*with an athlete's figure all his days, with eyes of a very light but startling blue, he exuded a kind of intelligent innocence which is a rare combination.*" He had a mellifluous voice which persuaded other people that he must be some kind of parson. This was, of course, not altogether wide of the mark! As also becomes evident from his journal, BOLAND was a deeply



reason for his not winning a blue was given by the Blue Manqué immediately after the Games, in his interview with *The Saturday Herald*: "An under graduate at Oxford, one of its best cricketers of the day he [Boland] regarded lawn tennis, the game in which his everlasting distinction [had] been won, as decidedly second to England's national pastime – cricket. But for his illness Oxford would have had him in time to take his

The Oratory
School
Cricket Team
1888.
(Oratory
School
Archive,
Reading)

religious man. Again according to his daughter Bridget, every day of his life BOLAND attended the seven o'clock Mass, *"always jogging there and back to keep fit"* - a curious instance of Muscular Christianity, to be sure. On 3 November 1895, he rose early in order to attend (in the company of two American priests) a procession for the feast of St Ursula's, the city's patron saint - at 6.45a.m.! He gives a vivid and detailed description of the procession which should be of great interest to local historians. In Athens, he patiently listened for more than an hour to a late afternoon sermon delivered by Father Henri DIDON, one of the many 19th-century inventors of Olympic Games and a confidant of COUBERTIN, although DIDON preached in French and the Irishman *"found him almost impossible to follow as his utterance was anything but clear."*

How good a tennis player was he? He almost certainly was not bad at cricket. From his days at the Oratory School, a photograph of the school's eleven survives on which he appears as one of the team's batsmen, the other being Father Edward PEREIRA. Pereira was an outstanding player, a county cricketer who represented Warwickshire, and the implication of the photograph seems to be that John BOLAND was at least the Oratory's second string. Boland himself commented on his game, claiming to have scored a century in the principal trial match at Oxford, that of the Seniors, and to have been Captain of the Christ Church Cricket XI for two years. Moreover, he said he had been invited to play for the University in one of its matches, but unfortunately his finals exam had been on at the same time so that he decided that it was better to make sure of his degree rather than try for a 'blue'. Commendable as this is, a different

place on her first eleven." The truth seems to be that neither of his reasons for his absence from Oxford's first Eleven holds water, and that the Olympic champion in retrospect somewhat overrated his performance as a cricketer.

As for lawn tennis, BOLAND was well aware of the outstanding performance of his two contemporaries and countrymen, Dr Joshua PIM and Harold Sigersen MAHONY. The former of whom won The Championship at *Wimbledon's All England Club* in 1893 and 1894, and the latter that of 1896, the year of the first Olympics. (BOLAND, after having stood for South Kerry, would later become MAHONY'S representative in the *House of Commons*!) Both PIM and MAHONY (with MAHONY emerging victorious) would in 1898 contend for the Championship of Germany in Bad Homburg. Of course, PIM and MAHONY played in a league of their own, but BOLAND had received intensive coaching from county cricketer PEREIRA at *The Oratory*, and although he had played little as an undergraduate in Oxford, he did beat his doubles partner TRAUN, a young and promising player from Hamburg, in the first round of the Olympic tournament, an achievement which should not be underrated. Despite his favourite game, cricket, BOLAND never abandoned lawn tennis and still enjoyed playing the game in his fifties during summer vacations in Picardy at the summer resort Wissant.

The edition of BOLAND'S journal will contain an assessment of his life and circumstances based on new source material both printed and pictorial. The text proper (137 manuscript pages) will be extensively annotated and illustrated by intriguing photographs of people and places mentioned by the Olympic champion in the course of his narrative.