Australia and the Olympic Games

By Harry Gordon. Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1994 (540 pp.)

Reviewed by Murray Phillips, School of Physical Education, Exercise, and Sport Studies, University of South Australia, Underdale Campus, Adelaide, Australia

Australia’s involvement in the Olympic Games is not unchartered waters, with at least ten other previous attempts by journalists and academics. Australia and the Olympic Games is a history commissioned by the Australian Olympic Committee and written by the award-winning and well-respected journalist, Harry Gordon. Gordon’s tome, stretching to 540 pages, is the most comprehensive history to date. It is a descriptive, chronological, and narrative account of Australian participation in the Games from the late 19th century to the successful Sydney Olympic bid for the 2000 Games. Each Games is summarized in discrete chapters emphasizing Australia’s contribution in sporting performance and administration. Gordon effectively narratives the conquests of Australia’s successful athletes and coaches, and the achievements of the administrators who have played important roles in the national and international Olympic movement.

Australia and the Olympic Games has many strengths. First, Gordon attempts to contextualize Australia’s involvement in the Games with wider political issues. The reader is informed about the Australian Jewish boxer who declined to go to the 1936 Games, the Australian sprinter—Peter Norman—who supported Tommie Smith and John Carlos in their protest at the 1968 Games, and the peripheral role of Australians in the tragedy surrounding the slaughter of Israeli athletes and coaches at the 1972 Games. Similarly, the divisive boycott of the 1980 Games is covered in detail, with analysis of the athletes’, sporting administrators’, and political figures’ roles. The role of political identities and, to a lesser extent, athletes in the 1980 Games has been dealt with previously, but the conflict between sporting administrators is new ground. In this sense, this history provides an Australian aspect to the political dimensions of the Games. Second, Gordon addresses the internal politics of the Australian Olympic movement. He provides details about the formation of and structural changes to the Australian Olympic Committee, as well as commentary on amateurism, professionalism, and commercialism of the Games. There is also debate about gender equity in participation, which began prior to the 1912 Games with the inclusion of the first female Australian swimmers, and the discrimination against winter Olympic sports by summer athletics. The internal politics
are often interwoven with the key personalities of the Olympic movement. Third, valuable research uncovers new records on Australia’s first gold medallist, Edwin Flack, determining two more Australian gold medallists who have not been previously acknowledged, particularly in terms of oral history by interviewing prominent athletes and administrators. The interviews provide rich material that makes the history very appealing; hopefully, they are archived for future interested parties. Fourth, detailed appendices document the chronology of significant events, Australian teams at both the summer and winter Games (including all performances), and a comprehensive index. For sport historians, this is valuable material.

As much as there is plenty to admire, historians will be frustrated by the lack of consultation of previously published material on the Olympic Games and Australian sport history. Of all the major histories of the Olympic Movement (both celebratory and critical) few have been consulted, and Australian sport history sources are only occasionally referenced. Contextualization, which Gordon attempted throughout this history, was restricted by these exclusions. The result in many cases, such as the chapter on the Sydney Olympic bid, is that the critical edge is missing in the narrative. In essence, minimal consultation of academic work on the Games and general sport history reflects Gordon’s background as a journalist, not a historian. Nevertheless, this book is the most comprehensive history of Australian involvement in the Olympic movement; it will provide interesting reading for many people and a valuable resource for academics.