

2001

## An Olympic Experiment

Mark O'Connor

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi>

---

### Recommended Citation

O'Connor, Mark, An Olympic Experiment, *Kunapipi*, 23(1), 2001.  
Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol23/iss1/11>

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library:  
[research-pubs@uow.edu.au](mailto:research-pubs@uow.edu.au)

---

# An Olympic Experiment

## **Abstract**

In 2000 the Australia Council, the Australian government's arts funding instrument, gave poet Mark O'Connor a \$40,000 fellowship, to cover in poetry 'all aspects of the Sydney 2000 Games'. The appointment of the first 'Olympic poet' of the modern Olympiads brought intense media interest, and unexpected controversy. Mark O'Connor comments on the Australia Council's experiment.

MARK O'CONNOR

## An Olympic Experiment

In 2000 the Australia Council, the Australian government's arts funding instrument, gave poet Mark O'Connor a \$40,000 fellowship, to cover in poetry 'all aspects of the Sydney 2000 Games'. The appointment of the first 'Olympic poet' of the modern Olympiads brought intense media interest, and unexpected controversy. Mark O'Connor comments on the Australia Council's experiment.

My Olympic adventures began in Greece. In 1991 the Greek government invited me to Athens to help celebrate '2,500 years of Hellenic Democracy' (with a few gaps). Granted the importance of poetry in that part of the world, and specifically to Greek culture, the centre-piece of the celebrations was a sumptuously hosted World Conference of Poets. In the course of the conference I made several Greek friends, and I learned from them, with mild interest, that they were hoping to see the office of Olympic poet revived when Athens next got the Olympic Games. When instead Sydney got them first, it occurred to me that there was no need to wait till 2004. I have long believed that poets ought to be able to write about topical issues, and that one way for poetry in English to compete with that green sappy weed the novel, is for it to deal with current issues and 'news'. (I am ambivalent about the importance popular culture grants to sport, but ambivalence is no bar to literature).

I talked firstly to my friends Judith Wright and Les Murray, both of whom encouraged me to pursue the idea of creating the position of 'Olympic Poet' for the Sydney 2000 Games. Judith offered to write a letter in support of my application. (Les generously disqualified himself as a front runner for the position on a technicality, claiming: 'I can't stand sport'.) To make a long story short, after much political foot work, and with Premier Bob Carr's blessing, the Australia Council gave me a large fellowship for the project.

The Australian media were immediately interested. In a year of Olympic fervour, the idea of having an 'Olympic Poet' turned literature into news; but this publicity brought dangers. SOCOG, the powerful autonomous Sydney Organising Committee for the Olympic Games, was informed of the Australia Council's decision before it was publicised, and claimed to 'welcome' it; but it soon became clear that at least some of their committee were miffed. SOCOG had had a stream of PR reverses, and it may have seemed to some of their media people a madness to welcome backstage an independent literary writer whose responses they could not predict.

Since I needed ‘backstage access’ to do my job, and since I wanted there to be other Olympic poets at future Olympics, I made a point of pushing my case with SOCOG through various intermediaries. The Minister for Arts Peter McGauran and his Labor opposite number Bob McMullan were among those who did their best, but without success. It seemed that this job was going to be as much about politics as literature. All my requests for access to athletes, coaches, or ceremonies — not to mention media passes — were refused on the pedantic grounds that I was ‘not a journalist’. When interviewed about difficulties encountered, I made a point of explaining to journalists that my situation both was and was not official — emphasising that SOCOG was under no strict obligation to recognise or help me. To my surprise, the media sided strongly with me. In particular, the various radio and TV programs of the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) interviewed me at least three times a week during the three months that I was following the Olympic Torch around Australia. The fact that I was almost the only person following the Flame who was not with SOCOG’s official party made me the sort of independent commentator the media wanted.

I clinched a vehicle deal two days before leaving, and on the last day got a ‘floor’ put in it, so I could sleep on top of my gear. An advantage of the van was that I could have an air mattress blown up in the back, and could simply jump in the back and sleep for an hour or two when too exhausted to drive further, which means that for a few days I could drive more or less round the clock. Without that I would never have got to Uluru on time. [It was from Uluru, Australia’s notional centre, on June 8<sup>th</sup> that the flame was to begin its long and circuitous journey to Sydney.] By the time the van was loaded I had only two and a half days to drive from Canberra to Uluru. I got only two hours down the track, before I had to pull off the road and sleep. I was woken by a call on the mobile phone I had got for the trip. *Lateline* (the ABC TV program) wanted me to write (and read) some poetry about the Flame’s arrival for their program of June 8<sup>th</sup>. That added to the pressure to get there safely and on time. I reached Mildura the first night, the top of the Bight on the second, and then drove for twenty-two hours (with two one-hour naps) due North to reach Uluru at dawn.

I became one of the first independent commentators to report that the Olympic Torch Relay was proving a stunning success. SOCOG took a calculated risk in sending the torch relay initially through Northern areas, many of which had large Aboriginal populations. Yet despite rumblings — including Charlie Perkins’s famous claim that it would be ‘Burn, Baby, Burn at the Olympics’ — Aborigines not only did not boycott the Olympic Torch but turned out for it in far larger numbers than the rest of the population. By the time the relay came back into the wet and wintry south and its parades started to get rained on, it was already a media-anointed success.

Mind you, the price of this success was regimentation. The ceremonies in each town were largely identical. I, and the world-weary man who drove the

portable sewage block, would hear 200 mayors give the same speech. It began 'Today the eyes of the world are upon...'. It was a form letter. Only the name of the town and the shire were allowed to change. One got no sense of the speaker's personality. Yet each country town saw the Torch as something new — and the slowly fading towns would support anything that brought them the attention for which they had been starved, and helped them resist the pull of those population stealing black holes, the cities.

Yet there was plenty to comment on as I followed the Olympic torch for some 20,000 kms around the continent. The Torch relay was multiculturalism and One Nation rolled into one, and each wearing their blandest face. It was also globalisation and nationalism in an odd embrace. It was local patriotism and sometimes cultural cringe — it was one earth meeting the ideologies of national pride. It was 'us versus them' meeting the multicultural belief that there can be no us versus them. And it was win-at-all-costs meeting 'respect your enemy'. (As Pindar put it: 'Respect your enemy for what he does wholeheartedly and well'.) Sport, of course is an issue on which Australians are deeply divided. Australia has more than its share of sports fanatics, yet more people left Sydney for the Olympic period than arrived. Perhaps not all of those would have endorsed Barry Humphries' definition of sport as 'a loathsome and dangerous occupation'; yet my observation is that a good 30% of Australians wanted nothing to do with the Olympic Games.

The ABC's regular interviews were wide ranging and unpredictable. I phoned in one morning from a public phone, expecting to be asked to talk about Nero, who received Olympic wreaths in one ancient Games for three events: poetry, song, and chariot racing. Instead they said, 'We've just heard that Judith Wright has died. Can you announce her death, and talk about her life and work?' At two minutes notice I did my best. It was to be a Long Drive punctuated by funerals of friends. Three weeks later I was breaking the news to Radio National's breakfast listeners of A.D. Hope's death at 93. Then when I had followed the torch as far as Bundaberg on the Queensland coast, National Parks flew me back to Sydney to read a poem in St Andrews Cathedral in Sydney at the memorial service for a group of their people tragically killed by a fire in Kuringai Chase National Park. I was assured my travel worn clothes would be fine among the rangers' field uniforms, but they looked decidedly odd when I was shown on that evening's TV news reading between the Premier and the Governor General.

When I had applied for the grant and promised to follow the Flame, I envisaged a leisurely experience of Australia with many side excursions while keeping pace with joggers moving at eight kilometres an hour. In reality the Flame was run only about fifty kilometres a day (100 runners, doing a half-kilometre each) and that's what the media showed. But when you didn't see the flame, it was sitting in a first-class plane seat with a gas mantle on its head, and flying like the clappers. I went about twenty miles North of Alice Springs, then turned off to head east for

two days over gravel roads, getting fuel at cattle stations like Jervois. Local advice about this dirt road shortcut was the usual mixture of 'Don't even think of it' and 'a perfectly good road so long as you take it sensibly'. The truth was a bit in between, but the Landcruiser van coped, and forty-eight hours later I popped back onto the bitumen in Western Queensland.

In the 1956 Melbourne Games Australia worked through the poetic metaphor of 'bringing the Olympic flame from Olympus' as literally as possible, landing it in Cairns and running it straight down the East coast to Melbourne. In 2000 that idea had undergone a vast alteration. Instead of 'bringing the flame' to Sydney it was being carried on a lap of honour around the whole country. The media endorsed this change, though there were some grumbles when it made a purely scenic detour to Fraser Island. The day consisted of a convoy of 4-wheel drive vehicles rumbling around the island with the Flame in a miner's lamp. Occasionally it would stop at some beauty spot, a torch would be lit, twig markers placed on the ground, and the runners would get out and carry it around the desired course, so that the cameras could show it 'crossing the lake' on Fraser Island. Then it went back to the mainland.

By the time the Games began in September most of my grant money had gone on living, travelling and motor expenses, and I could afford only a handful of the exorbitantly expensive Olympic tickets that remained. Sympathetic ABC listeners, politicians, and diplomats donated further tickets, but these were mainly for the last week. I missed the opening ceremony and most of the first half of the Games, and also had no access to athletes or officials. My project was not wholly but significantly crippled. SOCOG were inflexible, but by now the international media were onto the story. Geraldine Brookes who interviewed me for the *Wall Street Journal* was indignant: 'I would have cost them nothing to throw you one of these', she said, gesturing to the media pass round her neck and to the hundreds of unfulfilled seats in the media section of the stands. Her long front page article of 27th September, four days before the end of the Games, brought immediate results. A few hours later there was a phone call from IOC President Samaranch's office. 'How many tickets could I use?' SOCOG's opposition vanished. I found myself with multiple tickets to the closing ceremony.