Olympics ring to sound of winning British ode

**By Philip Howard and Alan Hamilton**

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A classics tutor at Oxford has revived a poetic tradition of the ancient Games, but he will get an olive wreath and not a gold medal

BRITAIN is assured of at least one accolade at next month’s Olympic Games, if only because it is the sole competitor.

The Pindaric Ode is in the bag. Reviving a tradition of the ancient games, Armand D’Angour, a classics tutor at Jesus College, Oxford, has composed a 25-line poem of praise in Ancient Greek, to be read at the close of the Games in Athens on August 29.

He has the field to himself in one of the oldest events of the Games; no other country has offered a dactylo-epitrite dithyramb in the old style. Unfortunately the prize is a mere olive wreath, but true classicists would regard gold as much too banausic or, as we tend to say nowadays, vulgar.

Pindar was the ancient inventor of the victory ode, the grovelling over-the-top paean of praise. The idea of reviving his style for this year’s Olympics came from Dame Mary Glen-Haig, a longstanding member of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) who fenced foil for Britain in all the Games from 1948 to 1960. Dame Mary approached the classicist from Oxford, who at first demurred but eventually rose to the challenge. Mr D’Angour will read his ode at the closing IOC meeting in Athens, and Dame Mary will read the English translation.

The theme of the ode is strictly Pindaric. Praise of the city for its divine patron (Athena), its heroes (Theseus and others), its deeds (hosting the Olympics), and its qualities (wisdom and brilliance) linking the city to the splendour of the Games and to the brilliance and finesse of the poet himself.

Athenians will enjoy line 22: “O Mother-city of wisdom, famed of all Hellas.” Pindar wasn’t the one for dwelling on construction-site delays.

Virgil and Horace copied Pindar, as did Milton, Ben Jonson, Dryden and many others through Tennyson to Seamus Heaney, with varying shades of success. Perhaps his least successful imitator was George Stuart Robertson.

During the first Games of the modern era, in 1896, Robertson, another Oxford classical scholar, somehow infiltrated himself into the closing ceremony and stepped forward to recite a long ode he had composed in Ancient Greek, in the Pindaric style.

Unfortunately, hardly anyone understood a word of it. Even those spectators with a passing knowledge of Ancient Greek would have been completely baffled by Robertson’s pronunciation, declaiming Pindar as though he had been a Victorian Oxford don.

Problems remain, even now. Modern scholars believe that they pronounce Ancient Greek reasonably close to the original — who can tell? — but few modern Greeks listening to Mr D’Angour’s 25 carefully crafted lines will catch the finer nuances.