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## Eric Henry Liddell 100 Years on from 1924

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### ABSTRACT

At the former Stade Olympique de Colombes in Paris on March 22, 2024 a plaque was unveiled as a tribute to Eric Henry Liddell. The stadium was the main stadium for the 1924 Summer Olympic Games in which the Chinese born athlete, of Scottish parentage, running for Great Britain won Olympic Gold in the 400 metres in a world record time of 47.6s. This was not the only medal that the athlete won at these Olympic Games, but it was perhaps the most significant due to the circumstances. Because of his religious beliefs Liddell had refused to run in the 100 metres, one of the events that he had been selected for, because the heats for the event were scheduled for the Sunday. The core of the athlete's faith as a Scottish evangelical was a burning conviction in personal salvation through the merits of Jesus and this meant honouring the sabbath and not running on the Sunday. An act that was to contribute to the David Puttnam produced film *Chariots of Fire*, first released in 1981 and re-released on July 13, 2012 in support of the 2012 London Olympic Games. This paper examines the life of Eric Henry Liddell and its enduring significance 100 years on from the 1924 Paris Olympic Games. The research was supported by a grant from the Eric Liddell Foundation which enabled research assistance from the United Kingdom (UK) and the People's Republic of China (China). The paper draws upon newspaper reports, documents, memorabilia from the Eric Liddell Foundation archives and film footage from the BBC archives.

### KEYWORDS

Eric Liddell; Paris Olympics; 100 Years; 1924; 2024

## Introduction

Paris has hosted the Olympic Games on three occasions, first in 1900, 4 years after a Parisian, Pierre de Coubertin had helped to resurrect them in Athens, and again in 1924 and 2024. Paris 1924 was the sixth and last Olympics presided over by Baron de Coubertin. The French government had backed the enterprise, provided a budget

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of 20 million francs and a new stadium, the Stade Olympique de Colombes with a capacity of 45,000 at the time.<sup>1</sup> In 1928 the stadium was later to be re-named as Stade de Yves du Manoir in memory of a French rugby player. On the March 22, 2024 the local press and dignitaries from France, Scotland and the United Kingdom (UK) along with the Eric Liddell 100 Foundation unveiled a plaque which reads:

Cette plaque est en l'honneur d'Eric Liddell, "Écossais Volant", et de sa victoire au Stade Yves-du-Manoir lors des Jeux Olympiques de Paris en 1924. Un exemple sportif et humain qui demeure un symbole d'amitié entre la France, l'Écosse et le Royaume-Uni. Une légende. Un héritage. Une source d'inspiration.<sup>2</sup>

Translated into English, it reads:

This plaque is in honour of Eric Liddell, the "Flying Scotsman", and his victory at the Stade Yves-du-Manoir during the Paris Olympic Games in 1924. A sporting and human example which remains a symbol of friendship between France, Scotland and the United Kingdom. A legend. A heritage. A source of inspiration.<sup>3</sup>

The Scottish Minister for External Affairs added:

This is a really special way to recognise the immense talent of Eric Liddell and to highlight his Olympic success in this very stadium almost 100 years ago. I'm proud of all the work by the Scottish Government and partners that has gone into making this happen. It's important that his legacy is remembered, not just as one of Scotland's great sportsmen, but also as a man who was dedicated to improving the lives of people across the world.<sup>4</sup>

July 11, 2024 marked 100 years since Eric Henry Liddell won the 400 metres gold medal at the Paris Olympic Games in a world record time of 47.6s. Liddell is rightly remembered as a remarkable Scottish athlete, but his legacy is in part about his character as a person, his lifelong service to others, dedication to a higher purpose and putting the lives of others before his own. Eric Henry Liddell the Flying Scotsman, the Olympian, the missionary, the rugby internationalist, the Charioteer of Fire, born in the People's Republic of China (China), is remembered by many not just for his athletic endeavours but for his lived values and humanitarian acts of compassion in the most challenging of circumstances. Such insights suggest firstly that there is more to Eric Liddell than that depicted in the most dominant narrative of the Olympian and Charioteer depicted in David Puttnam's Hollywood film *Chariots of Fire* and secondly that the legacy of the athlete continues to help cities if not countries connect with one another.

Yet to develop and evidence any proposition that suggests that the values associated with Liddell, including the organisations and events that carry the athlete's name, continue to talk to the world of today it is necessary to both uncover and re-examine the past before connecting with the present. Not just to remember the past but just as importantly the lessons for today, if not tomorrow.

## Methods and Sources

The life of Eric Liddell has produced a plethora of biographies and materials.<sup>5</sup> Many have tended to focus upon his life in and around the 1924 Olympic Games in Paris. The works of Duncan Hamilton, John Keddle and Sally Magnusson have all provided

an extensive background and all of them have been consulted upon in the production of this article. The iconic image, legacy and reputation of Liddell is presented in the film *Chariots of Fire*. The much lesser-known narrative about Liddell in China is portrayed in the 2016 *On Wings of Eagles*. Some of the content from these sources is included in this article. Official International Olympic Committee (IOC) records of the 1924 Olympic Games in Paris have been used to check and reflect upon the facts of the 1924 event.

The data collection strategy for this article has included five stages or phases of data collection all of which collectively have enabled depth, meaning and validity. The research was supported by a grant from the Eric Liddell Community which enabled the appointment of both British and China based research assistants. Throughout all the research stages the research team looked to collect voices from people who knew Liddell, met Liddell and had memories of Liddell. The first stage involved an analysis of the extensive collection of artefacts and memorabilia held by the Eric Liddell Community. This included the original rugby cap from Liddell's first international appearance for Scotland in 1921. Working with the Eric Liddell Community staff from 2022 to 2024 helped to provide an extensive knowledge of the origin of the sources and the context in which they were obtained. It also helped to provide access to Eric Liddell family and relations for further checking given that many of the artefacts, letters and memorabilia had been gifted by the family. A second stage involved a period of field research, note taking and collecting photographs from cultural sites associated with the life of Eric Liddell in both Britain and China. These included the University of Edinburgh Eric Liddell archive which includes the original Olympic medals from 1924; pictures and transcriptions from memorial sites and statues such as the memorial site erected in honour of Eric Liddell in Weifang, Shandong Province, China and associated exhibitions and places where Liddell had lived in Scotland and England.

A third stage included a search of British Newspaper Archives which were consulted using a set of search terms including: 'Eric Liddell'; 'Liddell'; 'Flying Scotsman'; and 'Liddell, Flying Scotsman'. A broad range of papers from Britain and Ireland helped to inform the lived life of Eric Liddell and subsequent occasions in which his life was specifically honoured and or remembered. Individual archives from specific papers were also consulted including The Herald Digital Editions, The Edinburgh News and The Dundee Courier. The fourth stage focused upon (i) the Official report of the 1924 Paris Olympic Games which mentions Liddell on thirty-seven occasions (ii) a range of competition/match programmes including those from Liddell's college, university, the Scottish and English Athletic Associations, Scottish Rugby Union, regional sports events in China and memorabilia from Tianjin Anglo-Chinese College. and (iii) The Edinburgh Journal which includes interviews with athletes who either raced against or watched Liddell.

A fifth phase sought to collect and collate information from fellow internees with Liddell. The Edinburgh collection also included recordings of the 2012 Lord Putnam Lecture in which the Director of the film *Chariots of Fire* narrates the production and selection process surrounding the story presented in the film, the views of family members and questions and observations from, people in the audience who were, relatives of families whose parents had been in the internment camps with Eric

Liddell. Many of documents and voices are captured and displayed on the website, Weihsein Paintings.<sup>6</sup> Others have been included in news outlets or public/private documents over the years. The site contains diary entries, poems and paintings of the camp and documents experiences of internees. Some denote the contribution and support from Liddell to the internee community such as his him gifting another internee a pair of running shoes and how he helped organise and coordinate sporting opportunities in the camp to help to maintain moral and keep people physically and mentally fit.

## The Early Years Pre 1924

Eric Henry Liddell was born on January 16, 1902 in Tianjin (previously Tientsin), North China, the second son of Rev and Mrs James Dunlop Liddell who were missionaries with the London Mission Society (LMS). The family lived for a short period of time (1907–1908) at Ashbank, Old Gartmore Road, Drymen, North of Glasgow during which time the future Olympian attended Drymen village school for a year. At the age of six, Eric moved with his brother Rob to England in 1908 where they enrolled at the London Missionary School (LMSc) in Blackheath. The brother's parents and younger sister returned to China knowing they would not see their sons for another four and a half years. By 1912 the school had moved to Mottingham and been renamed Eltham College.

Eric Liddell played for both the school's 1917 1st Cricket XI and 1918 1st XV Rugby, later becoming Captain of both the school rugby team (1918) and cricket team (1919). In 1918, he set a new school record of 10.2s for 100-yard race. Eltham College voted and named Eric as the best overall athlete. By 1920 studies at Eltham College had been completed and both brothers gained entry to the University of Edinburgh. Eric Liddell first studied at Heriot-Watt before moving to study pure science at Edinburgh. It was as a student at the university that Liddell's athletic, rugby and Olympic potential flourished further. In June 1921 he entered his first Scottish Inter-University Championship winning his first championship titles in the 100 and 200 yards. In the next 5 years he never lost either of these events. That same month he also won his first national titles at the Scottish national championships in the same events. At the Amateur Athletics Association (AAA) Championships 1923, Liddell won the 100 yards and 200 yards. His time of 9.7s for 100 yards in 1923 stood as a British record until 1946 when it was equalled by McDonald Bailey. One week later he won the 100 yards, 220 yards and 440 yards at the international match between Scotland, England and Ireland at Stoke. He also played rugby for Edinburgh University, before going on to represent Scotland seven times.

Yet the sporting facts alone do not tell the whole pre 1924 picture. As Eltham College School sports Captain he dedicated hours to ensuring that his fellow students and school served not only each other but a bigger humanitarian purpose. As early as eight years old, Liddell dissuaded older pupils from bullying others. On one occasion when the headmaster was cycling through the quadrangle, Liddell shouted: 'Hey, no Cycling there' since in Liddell's eyes, everyone was to be treated and viewed equally.<sup>7</sup> As Colonel Ronald Campbell, the first Director of Physical Training appointed to Edinburgh University in 1929, recalls from when he had run against

Eric Liddell in the 1923 University Athletic Championships at Craiglockhart in Edinburgh:

In these days staggered starts and marked lanes were unknown, the runners drew for positions and started from a marked line. I drew the outside position and as we were going to our marks I was surprised when an athlete who had drawn the inside position came across and quietly offered to change places. I need not have been surprised for this generous gesture was made by Eric Liddell. Seventy years on I remember the incident as if it were yesterday and I am still proud to claim that I ran against Liddell.<sup>8</sup>

Eric Liddell made that offer simply because he knew he was running against a less experienced athlete. His sense of fairness was a value. How many athletes would swap lanes today to give another competitor the advantage of the inside track?

As a university student he helped to run a successful campaign across Scotland by organising 'Sport for boys' purposely aimed at increasing sports participation amongst youth as a means of supporting health outcomes and greater social cohesion through sport. In much the same way as the current rationale behind the 2015 United Nations world mandate given to sport uses it as a tool and an enabler for the 2030 sustainable development goals. With his sporting success helping to provide Liddell with a platform he also toured the UK giving talks about citizenship, sportsmanship, and advocating for exercise, and a teetotal lifestyle.<sup>9</sup> As a complete abstainer of alcohol, he led a 'no-license' campaign against alcohol and discouraged the anti-social behaviour often associated with its consumption.<sup>10</sup> Liddell recognised that many of the life lessons he had learned were acquired through participation in sport.<sup>11</sup> He gave speeches in schools to connect with youth and advocated for greater integration of physical activity, particularly athletics, within the public-school curriculum as means of supporting children from disadvantaged communities.<sup>12</sup> Like many contemporary sporting ambassadors and sporting diplomats Liddell recognised that both his sporting achievements, and his faith, gave him a platform to help others. Yet what about Liddell the Olympian?

## The Olympian and Flying Scotsman

On the track 1924 was a big year for Liddell. In June victory was achieved in the 100 yards, 220 yards and 440 yards at the Scottish Championships for the first time. That same month Olympic selection was assured having won the 440 yards title at the AAA Championships in London. On July 11, Liddell won the Olympic 400 metres title in Paris in a World record time of 47.6s having won the bronze medal in the 200 m 2 days earlier. In July 1924 the 400-metre world record holder ran the last leg of the 4 × 440 yards relay, in what was then called the British Empire v United States of America (USA) athletic meeting, taking over 4 yards down and winning by 4 yards. The all-British team set a national record that lasted for 10 years.

Liddell also graduated from the university July 17, 1924 6 days after his Olympic success which allowed the university Principal at the time, Sir Alfred Ewing, before rapturous applause, at the graduation ceremony in the McEwan Hall to offer the following comment 'Mr Liddell, you have shown that none, but your examiner can pass you'.<sup>13</sup> Many Edinburgh University Olympians have graduated in the same

McEwan Hall, but Eric Liddell remains the only one to be carried shoulder high in triumph out of the graduation hall.

Yet again the facts of the matter do not tell whole story. The 1924 Paris Games came in the aftermath of the 1920 Antwerp Games in which the public had stayed away in their droves. The exclusion of women had led to the creation of a new movement which had staged its own alternative Olympics by 1921. Only 5% of the athletes in Paris 1924 Olympics were women. The workers sports movement across the industrialised world was about to stage the Worker's Olympics in Frankfurt. An event that would attract more than 250,000 participants compared to the 3089 athletes who competed across 126 events in 17 sports at the 1924 games and the 19,052 spectators who gathered to watch the opening ceremony.<sup>14</sup> For the first time, the 1924 athletes were able to stay together in a purpose-built Olympic village. They were also the first to be broadcast live on radio. Several nations competed for the first time, including Argentina, Ecuador, Mexico and Uruguay, Lithuania, Poland, Romania and Yugoslavia<sup>15</sup>. Ireland was also recognized, for the first time, as an independent competing nation.<sup>16</sup> Significantly the Irish Olympic Council sent competitors to Paris to represent Ireland and not the Irish Free State. Belfast-born athletes represented Ireland in boxing, water polo and athletics.<sup>17</sup>

The British approach to Paris 2024 and the context in which Liddell's selection symbolically contributed was an attempt by a British, Conservative establishment to re-assert British sporting prestige if not British prestige more generally. As Llewellyn asserts the predominantly Conservative members of the British Olympic Association embraced the 1924 Olympic Games as a potential instrument of British soft power and as a perceived opportunity to assert British influence through sport as a substitute for Britain's declining standing on the world stage.<sup>18</sup> When Liddell informed the BOA of his decision not to run in the heats of the 100 metres because they were scheduled for a Sunday it was ultimately a message to the 5th Duke of Sutherland, President of the British Olympic Committee (1923–1936) and fellow Conservative peers although the grafting was left to 6th Earl of Cadogan, played by Patrick Magee in the *Chariots of Fire*, to try to negotiate a solution with Liddell. As Hamilton explains the man who ended 1924 as an Olympic Champion began it as an Olympic scapegoat and a victim of others incompetence.<sup>19</sup> On Sunday 6th July when the heats for the 100 metres were being held, Eric preached in the Scots Kirk in another part of the Paris. Three days later an Olympic bronze medal had been won in the 200 metres.

Liddell's reputation as the Flying Scotsman travelled with him to Paris. The athlete had made himself one of the most popular athletes in Paris, according to one newspaper report.<sup>20</sup> Winning the 400 metres gave Liddell international fame with *The Scotsman* newspaper reporting 'It is wonderful to think to how many millions in the world are there today to whom Eric Liddell is a household name'.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, confounding such anti-American sentiment at the 1924 Games, Liddell shook hands with Horatio Fitch, the American athlete who came second in the 400 metres. The Americans had initially taken the brunt of post war French hostility with their rugby team being refused the use of the Olympic Stadium to practice and not to mention Helen Wills, the then US Champion, being cheered in the women's Olympic final every time she dropped a stroke.<sup>22</sup> When Philip Christison,



assistant manager to the British team, offered his congratulations to Liddell after the race, Liddell commented:

Don't forget I wasn't running for Scotland. The Olympic Games are not like that, we've had enough struggles between nations, the Olympics are not a struggle between nations and should never be like that.<sup>23</sup>

The integrity of the athlete and the values demonstrated by Liddell have sometimes wavered within the Olympics. Some argued that in 1924 Liddell demonstrated more Olympism than the games themselves.<sup>24</sup> Even a cursory glance at the principles that constitute the Olympic charter for the 2024 Paris Olympic Games remind us that the Olympics is more than just an event but a movement that in principle talks to the idea of a better world, a more peaceful world and a world in which humanity is valued, cherished and worked for.<sup>25</sup> The ideal is bigger than particular sports, athletes, teams or nation states and the proposition is value-led. In the same way that the life of Liddell was value-led.

Many have argued that the modern games should be more about the Olympic movement than a 4-year event.<sup>26</sup> A former Chair of the Commonwealth Ministers Advisory Board on Sport called for renewed Olympic and Paralympic effort to affirm the spirit of humanitarian internationalism and the respect and dignity for all peoples.<sup>27</sup> Whatever the state of the world, the world needs international sport not so much as medal table of international prestige but as a medium of intercultural respect and understanding. At times it might be that the Olympic spirit is missing in action, but it is needed. Liddell offers us this and if anything, part of the real story of Eric Liddell and the 1924 Olympics was one of a sense of determination, respect for others and principle.

### **The Compassionate Athlete, Teacher, Mentor and Friend of China**

Although not his last race, Liddell's last race on British soil was the British Amateur Athletics Association event at Hampden Park in 1925 where he equalled his own Scottish championship record of 10.0 s in the 100 metres, won the 200 metres in 22.2 s, the 400 metres in 47.7 s and formed part of the winning relay team.<sup>28</sup> 14,000 fans turned up to bid farewell and show their appreciation for Liddell.<sup>29</sup> As one commentator asserted at the peak of his athletic career, with the world at his feet, 23-year-old Liddell turned away from it all and set his face toward China.<sup>30</sup> In July 1925 Liddell was re-united with his family in Beidaihe, a coastal resort in Hebei province. Whether it be as a teacher, missionary, mentor, and/or friend of China the lived life of Eric Liddell between 1924 and 1945 was one of sacrifice and compassion for others.

As an athlete and as an Olympian Liddell had a platform and used it in the same way that generations of Olympians have used it to enable social and political messages and causes. Social in the sense of being a humanitarian in that the term is used to save lives, strive to alleviate suffering and maintain human dignity. Political in the sense that whether it be Scotland, the United Kingdom, the United States of America, Canada or China the Liddell message was informed by a mix of faith, Scottish Presbyterianism in which God was the supreme authority, evangelism and Christianity. A Christian missionary message being delivered in a context that was a times



politically anti-Christian due to the impact of the Anti-Christian Movement (1922–1927) provoked by Chinese anti-imperialist sentiment.

As a teacher Liddell had moved to China to work as a Science teacher and Sports Coach at the Anglo-Chinese Christian Mission College in Tianjin. The city being close to his birthplace. It was here that he met Florence Mackenzie, a nurse whose parents had been Canadian Missionaries and whom he went onto marry 1934. They had three daughters: Patricia was born in 1935, Heather in 1937, and Maureen in 1941. By all accounts the teacher and mentor provided care and compassion to the community in Tianjin. He led his students in building a gymnasium in a disused wood factory. It was open to the public. He worked on the renovation of *The Minyuan Stadium* having consulted the blueprint for the Stamford Bridge stadium in London and went on to make many suggestions about the structure of the track, lighting equipment, and grandstands. The stadium attracted international sports events, including international athletic meetings and international football matches. Tianjin Anglo-Chinese College held three-day sports meetings in the Minyuan Stadium. Liddell was often referred to as the father of the Minyuan Sports Stadium.

The 1929 *Annual of Tianjin Anglo-Chinese College* stated that:

Between 1921 and 1929, the college witnessed the prosperity of physical education and sports due to the contribution of Liddell. We won a wide range of sports championships in Tianjin.<sup>31</sup>

One of his students Yu Wenji, recalled:

Physical education was our favourite course we knew Liddell was an Olympic champion and liked to learn sporting skills from him.<sup>32</sup>

It was in Tianjin that Liddell won his last gold medal. He had already turned down the opportunity to compete in the 1928 Amsterdam Olympics, preferring to focus on work and the desire to support children from both China and the international community. However, in 1929 Liddell attended the 1929 International Games in Tianjin. It was the last time he was to attend an international sporting competition and one in which he beat the German runner Otto Peltzer over 400 metres in a time of 49.1 s. The 1936 Berlin Games witnessed China's Olympic debut. As a former Olympic champion Liddell was invited as a coach for the Chinese Olympic Team. Before the delegation set off for Berlin, Zhang Boling organised a warm-up football match at Minyuan Stadium, with Liddell in charge. His contribution to promoting Olympism in China continues to be remembered. Whether it be through sport, faith, teaching and/or mentoring it was clear that by the time Liddell had run and won his last race, the North China Championships in 1930, that he cared about China and its people and was committed to service and helping those in need. A commitment and compassion that was about to be tested further.

In all of this lives Liddell the missionary. The paradox here is that as a Western missionary at the time Liddell would have been viewed as a marginalised figure, tainted with the broad brush of imperialism and their actions within China certainly criticised if acknowledged at all.<sup>33</sup> The association between missionaries and Western imperialism has dominated periods of Chinese communist historiography. Although the writers such as Changsheng, having moved to the USA, later softened their original position

the view was very much that such missionaries were a vanguard of a Western cultural invasion of China if not a perceived or otherwise threat of Chinese Protestantism.<sup>34</sup>

The London Missionary Society wanted Liddell to transfer to Xiaozhang mission station in rural Hebei and by 1937 Liddell had returned to where he had spent some of his earliest years, before moving to Britain, and many of the people he interacted with had fond memories of his missionary father. Hamilton has remarked that Liddell's 'prestige came from his lineage', not his Olympic fame.<sup>35</sup> Eric's wife and their daughters were stopped from going Xiaozhang by the Missionary Society as it was considered too dangerous. They stayed in Tientsin, nearly 200 miles away. His time was inextricably linked to the Japanese invasion of China, which started in full in 1937. People living in the village of Xiaozhang found themselves in the middle of the fighting. Liddell described his work in Xiaozhang as 'destiny- fulfilling' because of the freedom it provided to work among the common people.<sup>36</sup> He joined his brother Rob to work in the local hospital and was often known to cycle across hostile areas to reach sick people. On one occasion he saved two Chinese soldiers wounded by the Japanese and to express their gratitude one of them presented him with a painting with their signatures and seals.

In 1939, the family left China on furlough and returned to meet family members in both Canada, Scotland and the UK. He toured the UK giving talks about his experiences as an athlete and missionary. By 1940, they had returned to China with Liddell returning to Xiaozhang and the family remaining in Tientsin. In early 1941, the Xiaozhang station was closed by the Japanese and the missionaries returned to Tianjin. The dangers increased to the point that Liddell thought it best that his then pregnant wife and their two daughters leave for Canada. He never saw them again. That same year Nancy Maureen Liddell was born in Canada, but she never had the opportunity to meet her father. Within a month of the Japanese attack on pearl Harbour (December 7, 1941) Liddell had been placed under house arrest in Tianjin prior to being sent to a Japanese internment camp at Weifang in 1943 and where he passed away in 1945, aged 43.

Even in the camp at Weifang where he was interned his enthusiasm and commitment prevailed. He was the camp's brightest star, affectionately known as the Olympic Champion and 'Uncle Eric'. He organised sports' activities to raise morale for the old and the young. He told them the sad and miserable days would be over soon and the bright tomorrow would come. His dedication to community and helping children, made a deep impression on one Margaret Holden, aged 13, who was interned in the same prison camp. She recalled that when it came to the good of the children, he would referee games on a Sunday. Not only did he referee, but to make these sporting affairs possible, he used his own personal belongings to produce equipment. He used his bedsheets to repair hockey sticks. Stephen Metcalf, a fellow prisoner talked of how he had cared for him during the cold winter conditions. According to Metcalf, Liddell approached him one day to offer him his running shoes saying *'I see your shoes are worn out and it is now midwinter. Perhaps you will be able to get a few weeks of wear out of these'*. Metcalfe later wrote of Liddell:

He gave me two things. One was his worn-out running shoes, but the best thing he gave me was his baton of forgiveness. He taught me to love my enemies and to pray for them.

Terms such as legend, legacy and inspiration all carry their own health warnings. Maureen Moore, Liddell's youngest daughter, expressed that 'Everyone wants a piece of my dad and I have heard Chinese, Scots, and English all claim him as their own'.<sup>37</sup> Recent years, have also witnessed a transformation in the attitudes of state agencies towards the history of Chinese Christianity, including missionaries. Local authorities have organized commemorative activities of the Olympic champion and promoted an instrumental value in the legacy of such figures despite their religious connections. Eric Liddell the friend of China is very much part of the twenty-first Century narrative around the athlete.

Before the 2008 Beijing Olympics, President of Tianjin No. 17 Middle School claimed that:

Our international friend Eric Liddell helped China to develop physical education and sports activities and he promoted Olympism to China. China is now a strong sporting country, and now we have the responsibility to continue Liddell's spirit to promote Olympism to the world. Eric Liddell has not left us. He is living together with our modern-day peaceful China, Tianjin City, and our Middle School.<sup>38</sup>

Although Eric Liddell and Nelson Mandela never met, both attended the Olympic Games, Eric Liddell in 1924, and Nelson Mandela in 1992, 2 years after being released from prison and 1 year being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Both understood, perhaps in different ways, how sport could be employed to be a powerful tool for good. They both valued and saw a sense of humanity in others, and both worked hard to make the world a better place based upon their beliefs. It is also worth remembering the difference many athletes, rugby payers, footballers, and sports' people can make, if they choose to do so, in the lives of those less fortunate than themselves. Sportspeople like Eric Liddell, or Marcus Rashford who used his sporting fame to campaign for the hungry and the homeless and offer a sense of hope. Or athletes like The US Open Tennis champion Coco Gauff who points out that: '*You need to use your voice, however big or small the platform is*'.<sup>39</sup>

Liddell certainly offers a sense of sacrifice and compassion. Something that was amplified further both locally and internationally as a result of becoming one of the central characters in a Hollywood Film and being inducted into several sports halls of fame.

## The Charioteer and Halls of Fame

The 1924 Olympics also inspired the Oscar winning film *Chariots of Fire*. The 1981 film captures, with a bit of narrative flexibility, the story of British sprinters Harold Abrahams and Eric Liddell and their quest for Olympic gold. Produced by David Putnam, the film had its Gala Scottish Premiere in the Odeon Theatre in Edinburgh on April 3, 1981 with the proceeds going to the development of the Eric Liddell Athletic Training Centre.<sup>40</sup> The film was re-released in 2012 to coincide with the London Olympic Games whilst a second film, '*On the Wings of Eagles*', documented Liddell's time in China and was released in 2016.

*Chariots of Fire* further cemented Liddell's name in history, bringing him to a new audience. By July 1982 the film had taken £49.4 million in the United States of America (USA) making it at the time the biggest money-making foreign film in US

Box Office history. The film portrays a certain image of athleticism, social class and even Britain at the time. During the 1920s the ratio of university places to population was 1:318 in Scotland and 1:641 in England. In terms of British athletics and the 1924 Olympics, in both Scotland and England the situation existed where connected and well-placed families were able to confer differential advantages on their children and as such a certain degree of social self-recruitment occurred. 20% of the 1924 British Olympic team attended the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge.

The film does not hold back in presenting a backcloth to the story as one of those inter-linked British (including Scottish) bourgeois qualities of chauvinism, athleticism and imperialism clashing with Liddell's deep-rooted faith that was sensitive to a Calvinistic evangelical tradition and holding some similarities to the Scottish covenanters in that both were fervent, puritanical, and anxious to see their ideals adopted by society as its norms. Sally Magnusson's biography of Eric Liddell while still commenting upon Liddell's faith also made it clear that as an athlete he trained and worked hard at his athletics.<sup>41</sup> Even the producer Lord Putnam acknowledged that the film was hardly the whole truth. This is not a romantic story of someone running on metaphysical petrol. Liddell, like many others, was ahead of his time and embodied the contemporary term of a 'professional' due to his commitment to not only being the fastest runner, but the best version of himself. The portrayal found in *Chariots of Fire* in which Liddell was not aware of the Sunday race schedule until he was boarding the ship to France is also problematic given that the programme for the games was publicized at the end of 1923.<sup>42</sup>

Whether it be re-configuring of missionaries in China or re-imagining of what actually happened in Paris 1924 Liddell had certainly been brought to the attention of a number of national and international publics. The legacy of Eric Liddell has not only been appropriated by Chinese authorities but has similarly been used by the British authorities and other groups for their own purposes. As Maureen Moore, Liddell's youngest daughter once put it 'Everyone wants a piece of Dad and I have heard Chinese, Scots and English claim him as their own'.<sup>43</sup>

When the Scottish Sports Hall of Fame was set up in 2002, a joint venture between sportscotland and the National Museums of Scotland, its first roll of honour amounted to 50 inductees. Eric Liddell was not only inducted into the Scottish Sports Hall of Fame, but he topped the public vote for the most popular sporting legend produced in Scotland. Three years later he was inducted into the Scottish Athletics Hall of fame. On the January 2, 2022 Liddell was inducted into the Scottish Rugby Hall of Fame on the 100th anniversary of his first cap for Scotland.<sup>44</sup>

## Legacy and The Eric Liddell Community

While the Hollywood Film produced a narrative that turbo charged the athletes fame it was not the first intervention to appropriate naming rights. Scotland's 440-yard race was renamed The Eric Liddell Trophy in 1926; The Eric Liddell Memorial Fund alongside the Eric Liddell Memorial Committee was created in 1945 while the University of Edinburgh created an Eric Liddell Missionary Scholarship alongside an Eric Liddell memorial in North China.<sup>45</sup> The Eric Liddell Memorial Trophy was launched in 1949; in St Ninians's Conference and Training Centre in Edinburgh the Eric Liddell Room had been created by 1961 and The Eric Liddell Club was formed

in, what was then Perthshire, in 1965 while in 1974, 50th anniversary celebrations were held.<sup>46</sup> In 1981 Jennie Somerville, sister of Eric, opened a new sports hall at the University of Edinburgh carrying his name, while the newly refurbished Eric Liddell Gym was opened at the same University in 2023, by his niece Sue Caton, as part of the celebrations honouring 100 years since 1924.<sup>47</sup> The *Flying Scotsman* documentary was aired by the BBC in 1988.

The Eric Liddell Foundation Trust was set up in 1990 1 year before ex-prisoners from internment camp returned to Weifang to honour Liddell and put a wooden cross over his grave in China.<sup>48</sup> Weifang is a third-tier city acutely aware of the need to be more notable nationally and internationally. The city's main claim to fame is its International Kite Festival held each April since 1984. Some observers have argued that promotion of Liddell and the Weihsien Camp should be placed into this context of a local city and a local municipal authority seeking to generate greater attention. This history being increasingly thrust onto the world stage as an important carrier of international cultural exchange and becoming a political and cultural source for the municipal government. As one city leader explained, a recent mayor of Weifang symbolized the importance of how local authorities view this history by using the slogan 'Making the internment camp' Weifang's second business card, the first being the kite festival.<sup>49</sup>

In 1992, Patricia Russell, formerly Liddell, donated Eric's medals to the University of Edinburgh on Wednesday 20th of May.<sup>50</sup> The Eric Liddell Convention was held in Edinburgh in 1999, an Eric Liddell exhibition was launched to coincide with the 2012 London Olympics while an Eric Liddell 'Going for Gold' Dinner was held in 2017.<sup>51</sup>

The former Eric Liddell Centre was set up in Edinburgh in 1980 to support the local community and vulnerable individuals.<sup>52</sup> Soon after its establishment, Eric Liddell's daughters gave permission to use their father's name, to honour Eric's belief in community service whilst he lived and studied in Edinburgh, and dedicated it to inspiring, empowering, and supporting people of all ages, cultures, and abilities. The Eric Liddell Community reflects Eric's values and principles to help and support those who need it, and the people who look after them in the spirit of community, inclusivity, diversity, and generosity. The charity is connected to a number of international communities which celebrate Eric Liddell and recognise and embrace the worldwide connectivity that his name enables.

Mental Health disorders have been a top 10 cause of global disease burden for more than 30 years.<sup>53</sup> Mental health is central to wellbeing. The World Health Organisation have a triple billion target for health with one billion people enjoying better health and wellbeing by 2025.<sup>54</sup> As one of Edinburgh's few specialist dementia and mental health charities, The Eric Liddell Community works to change perceptions of living with dementia, disabilities, and mental health challenges. The National Lottery Community Fund awarded the Charity £109,000, in December 2023, to help tackle loneliness and isolation in Scotland.<sup>55</sup> It brings people together to forge a sense of community. The legacy of community and compassion that Liddell exemplified is upheld by an innovative care charity in Edinburgh that is named after him.

One recent journalist, talking about the charity, noted that:

It continues to offer a community hub that is building trust between people, addressing dementia, nurturing the vulnerable and anxious, advancing ideas, and actively developing compassionate well-being initiatives.<sup>56</sup>

While sport is just one mechanism that the Community employs, the Community's work exemplifies how sport and physical activity help to bridge many of the issues which they seek to resolve. Many of the services include an activity-based component. The community is involved and has access to the sporting memories project which uses the history of sport through a form of interactive quizzes to trigger memories. Sporting memories supports people across the UK who are living with dementia, depression, and loneliness.<sup>57</sup> It helps to engage people in social activities and helps them to recall memories of watching or playing sport. Sharing memories of sporting moments and tapping into a passion for sport, or even just a sporting moment helps people to connect with others and with their past. It helps people recall positive thoughts and feelings that can often remain hidden away.

### **Eric Liddell 100**

Finally, there is the Eric Liddell 100 which was specifically set up to plan a programme of events and activities to celebrate the centenary of Eric Liddell's efforts at the 1924 Paris Olympics. The Eric Liddell 100 intervention is a partnership initiative supported by The Eric Liddell Community and a wide range of partners. It is under the patronage of HRH Princess Anne, herself an Olympian and Vice-Chancellor of the University of Edinburgh where Liddell graduated. Its vision is to create a global community that celebrates 'Eric Liddell's inspirational legacy, values and integrity' and its mission is to bring the achievements to life and inspire a new generation to make a positive impact on their community, society, and the world. It is value driven in the same way that the life of Liddell was value driven albeit slightly different values in some instances.

The outcomes include a series of educational, cultural, sport and physical activity and interfaith interventions all with specific aims and developments attached to each of the respective workstream. The interventions while taking an orthodox and exclusionary approach to culture could be used to substantiate the argument that Eric Liddell 100 activity has provided opportunities to enable cultural relations building between and within communities. The overall outcomes of cultural relations tend to be greater connectivity, better mutual understanding, more and deeper relationships, mutually beneficial transactions and enhanced sustainable dialogue between states, peoples, non-state actors and cultures. It is tempting to suggest that if we take cultural relations to mean reciprocal, non-coercive transnational interactions between two or more cultures, encompassing a range of activities that are conducted both by state and non-state actors within the space of culture and civil society then the work of the Eric Liddell 100 has helped to enable a space for this to happen not just between cities but Scotland and China and Scotland, Hong Kong, France and England.

On a recent visit to the UK the Chinese ambassador talked of the spirit of Eric Liddell being the bridge between Scotland and China. He went on to comment that 'Liddell's life was short, but what he did is an ode to China-Scotland friendship and educational exchange. His name and story have lived on.'<sup>58</sup> Sporting ambassadors of which there are many helping countries talk to one another. Is this something sport offers the world today? If the answer is yes that is powerful, and we should use it. At the same time, we should not forget that our universities are regularly seen as amongst the top, if not the top cultural relations vehicle for countries and



communities to talk to one another. Sport and physical activity remain important components of what universities have to offer. Should sport in our universities be used more to help enable dialogue, mutuality and cultural relations building between communities? Has Eric Liddell's association with Edinburgh University helped Edinburgh develop country to country or city to city relationships?

## Conclusion

This article started with an illustrative example of Eric Henry Liddell helping to enable relationship building between Scotland, France and the United Kingdom and ended with the Flying Scotsman born in China being used as a modern-day symbol of friendship between Scotland and China. In revisiting the life and acts of Eric Henry Liddell, 100 years on from the 1924 Olympic Games in Paris, it has been argued that if there is any true story to be captured it is certainly one that recognises that there is much more to the prevailing dominant narrative of an Olympian and Charioteer who refused to run on a Sunday. There is the reality that the narrative surrounding aspects of the life of Eric Liddell have been framed and presented in different ways by different authorities. Yet there is a necessity to acknowledge that this person's short life continues to talk to the world today and lives on in many projects that take on his name. How the life of Eric Henry Liddell should be framed remains an open question but in drawing this contribution to a conclusion the following observations are offered.

However, the life of Liddell might have been appropriated or re-imagined there is much in this person's life and subsequent story that provides lessons for today. There is evidence to support the idea that sport can contribute to a nation's social and economic wealth. However, we should not lose sight of the fact that it is people who are the real wealth of nations. It is people who make things happen in their own communities and the wider stage, nationally and internationally. People are the wealth of nations; small things can make a big difference and Eric Henry Liddell made a difference. Little did Liddell think when he left Edinburgh University in 1924 that we would be talking about him 100 years later. More than a famous athlete, a rugby player, an Olympian, a Charioteer, a flying Scotsman, an Edinburgh University alumnus, or a person of faith.

What Liddell offers us is the best of all of us and the promise and invitation of what we could do to help others. Liddell offers us all an example of what is possible. Liddell's humanity is as good a foundation as any for striving to make the world a better place. It is a story of compassion, something that sport demonstrated during the Covid-19 pandemic and something that Liddell demonstrated when he gave his running shoes to Stephen Metcalfe and organised sport on Sunday for Margaret Holden and other children in the internment camp. The world of sport should develop and share more narratives of successful compassion in action.

Finally, Liddell reminds us about how important the choices that we make are and can be. We can choose to live in and fight for a world defined not by our differences but by our common hopes. We can choose to help a world defined not by conflict but by peace and opportunity. We can choose to use sport as a platform for good. We can choose as Liddell did to demonstrate that sport can provide moments of joy and despair but also be a resource of hope. If anything, sport provides a pillar of connectivity for dialogue between communities and how we decide to use it is also a choice.



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