

SACRED FLAME or PILOT-LIGHT?

WE asked our London correspondent to go to the Olympic Games, not to report them, but to report what meaning, if any, they had for an intelligent spectator whose thoughts run normally in other channels. Here is the result.

FIVE thousand competitors, 58 nations, 136 events in 17 sports, 200 broadcasters, 40 languages, a million spectators—it all sounds inhuman, and remote from my understanding, which I usually try to exercise on the individual and his works; nevertheless, because *The Listener* asked me to, I joined some 90,000 others and went out to the Wembley Stadium on August Bank Holiday, in the company of a New Zealander who knew without looking at his programme what records waited to be beaten in all the events, whether one man's style might beat another man's stride, whether the expected winners of the finals were exerting themselves in the heats, and all those things.

And I enjoyed myself, and went back again the next day. I daresay I seemed very vague, and insensitive about those important points, which were exercising the minds not only of my companion but of practically the whole of that polyglot multitude, but perhaps my excuse is acceptable in these days of psychological excuses. The only race I ever won in my life was a potato race, on the Basin Reserve in Wellington. As I was unquestionably the slowest boy there, I was given one potato fewer than the others. By

some oversight (or was it deliberate) the absent potato was the one on the far end of the row. At the age of seven, I won the race easily, satisfied that the handicap was a fair one, and very proudly accepted the certificate that was offered as a prize (which I think had a picture of Rodin's *Thinker* on it). It was not until some years later when I mastered the elements of geometry and algebra that I realised what a hollow victory it had been; my only race, and my victory had been a deceit, my certificate a lie!

I believe it must have been from that time that any share I had of a normal interest in winning races began to leave me. Therefore, my mind may have been wandering at the most important moments at Wembley—when the races were ending—such is the force of old psychological inhibitions; and certainly my binoculars were wandering at the starts. As at August, 1948, I still jump when the gun goes off, and binoculars have a way of leaping from the starting line to an empty stretch of track, or to a pile of clothing in the arena, or to the irrelevant Royal Party.

EVEN so, although I missed the very things other people bought their tickets to see. I not only enjoyed it, but was moved. Mainly by incidental and irrelevant things, of course; and yet perhaps they were not irrelevant to the idea of Baron de Coubertin, the descendant of Cyrano de Bergerac and Rubens, who is said to have originated this modern revival of the Olympiad. It was an idealistic belief in the power of an international gathering of sportsmen to recapture all that was good in the original Greek idea, and the moments I enjoyed enough to want to pass them on were the moments when I felt I was a human animal similar to those thousands of others who were thinking and talking in three dozen different tongues, and not different (as the headlines and the public men who govern our destinies here make one inevitably feel), not a unit of something separate and incompatible.

At Marylebone station I found a group of Negroes all talking together on the platform. When the Stadium train came in, I contrived to be behind them,

knowing that they would almost fill one compartment themselves; I think they were a little surprised that I chose to go in alone with them, and they never spoke to me, but they revealed themselves, in their cheerful humorous speculation on the day's events, and when we left the train I believed I understood a little more about the African Negro, though my understanding of the American who fears him must have decreased in the same proportion.

As the crowd from the train flowed towards the Stadium I found the French language coming in at one ear, a Slav language coming in at the other; and by walking slowly, so that the crowd was passing me all the way, I multiplied the number of tongues by three, and amused myself by trying to guess from dress and outward manner what language might belong. Results quite negative.

ALL of a sudden, there was a voice at my shoulder. I am so accustomed now to chance meetings with New Zealanders in London, that I assumed it was another, but it was a man I have never seen before.

"That was the Australian Flyer," he said, in a very confidential tone. "Oh!" I said. Quickly I deduced that he had not come from the train, but was on his way to the Stadium from some event at the Empire Pool.

"Mrs. someone-or-other," he went on. I forgot her name. They call her the Australian Flyer. She came through without a hair out of place. Not a hair out of place! Whew!"

Then he drew ahead and disappeared. To this day I have no idea what he meant, or who the Australian Flyer was—he may have meant Austrian—but I enjoyed meeting him.

I passed the birdcage where Jamaicans, Swedes, Cingalese, Belgians, were warming up on a miniature cinder track. At the entrance a harassed-looking London lady was coaxing two small children, who were armed with the autograph-book and pencil that strikes such fear into such brave athletes.

"Aw, go on," she said. "You missed a whole lot of them there. Try that Danish lady, quick."

Inside the Stadium I found my New Zealander in his seat, and joined him on a wooden bench only 30 feet from the sacred gas-ring, whose flame has not been as constant as might have been wished. (It went out twice at Dover, and was hastily rekindled from one of the two spares in the official's car, which were also lit from the light of



THE PENTATHLON, from a painting on a 5th Century Attic Cup

the sun in the temple of Zeus at Olympia.) It was a large floppy yellow flame, burning butane gas. The heat waves in the air above it made the binoculars useless for the starts of the hurdle races anyway, regardless of the gun.

I SETTLED down and began to take in my surroundings—90,000 other human beings in that huge basin; loud-speakers giving every announcement in English and French (McCorquodale sounds like an invention of Edward Lear's, in French); an oval of refreshing green contrasting very happily with the brick-red of the cinder track; thermos-flasks and sandwiches being fished out from the bags by my experienced neighbours: the hakas (if one may use our word) of the foreign claquees, who presumably booked their seats in bulk and now gave tongue with good effect, in time with the beat of their leaders, ending, "Eya, Eya. Eya." I think they were French.

It was not very Greek, of course. The competitors were not naked, and it was not necessary for a woman to enter the arena in disguise if she wished to see her son compete. Far from it; there were as many pretty hats to be seen as there shortly will be at the school sports 12,000 miles away—to say nothing of the incomparable Fanny Blankers-Koen and all the other female competitors. Neither was there any ostentatious displays by rich tyrants of four-horse chariots. Nor was it avowedly a pagan occasion. The Archbishop of York gave a dedicatory address at the opening, and Sir Malcolm Sargent conducted the Hallelujah Chorus.

It was emotional, though. Ninety thousand hearts beating faster and faster altogether (while the heart of Baron de Coubertin lies peacefully, at his own wish, in the Greek village of Olympia). Emotional and a little uncomfortable. Ninety thousand beating hearts, but a good fifty thousand sore bottoms on wooden benches, and another fifteen to twenty thousand pairs of legs shifting the balance restlessly from one to the other. Emotional, a little uncomfortable, and a little apprehensive about the weather.

It was fine when I arrived. But there was a threatening cloud.

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BARON PIERRE DE COUBERTIN
"An idealistic belief in the power of a gathering of sportsmen"