

LOOKING BACK ON IT ALL

THE excitement had been simmering for weeks. During the four or five days before the opening it began to rise to fever point. Three to four thousand people, at a shilling a time, were crowding into the stands at the Olympic Pool, just to see the swimmers paddling up and down in their training. Even when, after a session, only a diver or two remained, a big crowd lingered on, reluctant to miss anything at all. If the visiting swimmers had sat knitting, or paring their fingernails, there would still have been the same 200-yard queue outside the baths.

The divers from overseas quickly made friends with the spectators. George Athans, the young Canadian doctor; Peter Heatly, the smiling Scot; Allan Smith, from Ceylon; Ian Grace, from Rhodesia; and Edna Child, the English girl who made diving from the 10-metre tower look as easy as tossing pennies—all these will live long in the memories and affections of those who sat and watched them. And the superb diving of Athans, Heatly and Miss Child won't easily be forgotten.

We had plenty of opportunities of watching the swimmers beforehand. But the track athletes burst upon us like a succession of rockets on that first glorious day at Eden Park. Glorious it was, indeed. There was the crowd, packed in a solid mass against the skyline, and looking (oddly enough) very beautiful. Pale blue must be this season's fashionable colour, for it was dominant; and with the thousands of straw hats, made an opalescent glitter. There was the opening pageantry, which was done with fine restraint. The ingredients of colour, movement, fanfares and band music were present in just the right proportions. There was the release of the hundreds of pigeons, which made the sky look like a slice of seedcake. (An aeroplane passed near them, and the small

... Some impressions of the Empire Games, written for "The Listener" by A. R. D. FAIRBURN.

boy in front of me said, "He's goin' to mow them pigeons down if he ain't careful!") And then, of course, there was the succession of athletic events of a quality very few present had ever seen before. A day to be remembered without question. It was a family reunion on the grand scale, and even the flintiest hearts, the most hard-boiled sensibilities, must have been moved.

There was, most unfortunately, a gap of nearly three-quarters of an hour between the end of the ceremonies, when appetite was at its keenest, and the beginning of the races. The crowd fried gently on stands and terraces while the band played "selections," including the odd cornet solo. Irrelevance could hardly have gone further. Some really good Maori dances, and a display of chopping by Dinny Hoey, might have atoned for the delay. Nothing else, short of starting the athletics programme, could have done so. My companion and I went outside the ground in search of shade, lay down under a scraggy shrub, and rose shortly with a pattern of bidi-bids and crushed poison-apple stains on our backs. We re-entered the ground at the back of the main stands, where order was holding chaos at arm's length with some difficulty. There was what seemed at first sight to be a circular queue, so that anybody pushing his way into it would go round and round for ever. It turned out to be three long queues tangled together among a swirling mass of people, all sucking ice-creams, poring over programmes, or looking noisily for lost friends. The sun still beat down, and the ground rose to our nostrils in a mist of fine dust.

MY memories of that day are kaleidoscopic. The great six-mile race with its crescendo of excitement, lap after lap, like Ravel's "Bolero"; Nelson's victory, and Taylor's great sprint up the straight to miss second place by a whisker; Majekodunmi, the Nigerian, stalking the high jump bar like a cat after a bird, and in a flash wriggling up and over; John Treloar and Marjorie Jackson coming home in their sprint finals—so fast that one could hardly see what had happened until it was all over; the 440-yards hurdlers bobbing up and down as if they were worked by cams; the Canadian Norman and Jack Holden, the two marathon men, who ran for practice in the six-mile race, trailing far in the rear, and making some of the spectators think that they were old crocks who had got into the race by mistake; the poor applause when the Australian girls filled all three places in the 100-yards final; and the generous cheer that went up when it was announced

that Pettie would be running in the men's 100-yards final after all.

The little Canadian runner caused quite a fluttering in the doves— or would have done so, no doubt, if the pigeons had not already been released. His "breaking" in the sprint final, and the subsequent delay and argument, were already being referred to as the "Pettie incident" before the day was over. At one stage I noticed the starter and Pettie walking together in hot argument towards the judges' table, the starter brandishing his pistol in the air. I feared for a moment that he might shoot Pettie. But it all ended happily, and the crowd cheered and set the final seal on a decision that could have been made an hour earlier without bringing the Empire down in ruins.

NEITHER the "Pettie incident," nor the heat, nor anything else could mar the glory of that day. After it was over I walked to Newmarket (abandoning all hope of transport), dined on two ice-creams, and went to the Olympic Pool for the opening of the swimming carnival. I got myself into a small auxiliary stand high up on the eastern side, and relaxed while waiting for things to begin. Beyond the packed mass of people opposite there was a brilliant sunset, with the flags fluttering against it. As the



"The sun beat down . . .

light faded the emerald green of the floodlit pool below began to take on a deeper and lovelier hue. There was a cool breeze coming gently from the south. I felt comfortable after the heat and dust of the day, and settled down to enjoy the fantastic scene beneath me.

On the middle platform of the diving tower four trumpeters were seated, looking like a picture by Salvador Dali. (They were routed out later when the diving display began.) Their attitudes vaguely suggested a tableau of the death of Nelson (the Admiral, not the runner). Two swimmers moved up and down the pool, limbering up. The stands, by starting-time, were packed as full as a Christmas stocking. The hosts of officials moved about like a herd of white elephants in a jungle clearing. And then the massive machine of swimming officialdom began to rumble its way slowly and steadily through the programme of events.

I WAS struck by the contrast in dress styles among the women competitors. The Canadians in dark blue, the Australians in green, and the Scottish also in blue, all wore track-suits that looked workmanlike. The Canadians were spectacular in red. The New Zealand girls, in white bath-robcs, looked like vestal virgins. I noticed, too, that the Canadians always dived in and swam a bit before the race. One of them, J. Portelance, astonished the spectators by doing a brisk four lengths (220 yards) just before his heat of the 1650 yards race. It did him little good.

That first evening's swimming ended most happily, and crowned a perfect day. The New Zealand girls swam wonderfully well, and took their heats. Lucas won his heat of the 1650-yards race in excellent time. And we won the men's relay race rather easily. True, the Australians made our water-polo players look like pickled herrings; but since we have no national honour vested in water-polo we were unruffled by an eleven-to-four defeat.

I FOUND the second night of the swimming, on the Monday, a shade less enjoyable. The cool breeze had turned to a cold wind. Our girls came last in the final of the sprint, and Lucas



... and the crowd fried gently on stands and terraces"



The children, too, were "reluctant to miss anything at all"