

"SEE YOU AT HELSINKI"

By Máirín Allen

AN IRISHWOMAN'S IMPRESSIONS OF THE 1948 LONDON OLYMPIC GAMES

"Bienvenue a Londres !" **"Welcome to London!"**

The words were blazoned in gay colours over the entrance to the London Underground. They were written out, 'midst flags and symbols, in every shop window from Piccadilly to the Strand.

Looking back over those three weeks, it would seem that these Olympic Games at London were a unique experience. No such convergence of time and place and, above all, of people, can ever take place again. That moment has been savoured and has gone forever. The parting hope how fervent a hope in these troubled times "See you at Helsinki" may be realised for many - and Helsinki may have its "Flying Fanny" and its Consolini's and the rest - but for the veterans of the 1948 Games it will not be London, 1948 - a London which was, in fact, the hub of the world.

For more than one reason, the royal reception at Buckingham Palace was a thing to remember. There, for an hour or two, delegates from the sixty countries participating in the Games were gathered together in one place and could talk to each other, common languages permitting, as friends and fellow-guests. In softly-lit carpeted rooms, beneath the portraits of his ancestors, King George of England and his Queen welcomed each delegate to London with a warm handshake and a few words of friendly interest.

While the Queen-mother, the princesses and a host of royal ladies and noble lords, moved among guests from five continents. Wint, the long-limbed coloured Jamaican runner, went out of his way to collect a few Irish autographs. Now a couple of handsome bearded Pakistanians, now a delightful blue-blazered Indian, gravitated towards the green Irish blazers. As with the Egyptians, their friendliness to Ireland was long-standing. "We know of your struggle for freedom." "It has given us courage." So it went on. For the few people who had heard of Ireland in sport, a dozen knew in detail the story of our struggle for independence or had read the writings of Pearse and

Griffith of Sinn Fein and Easter Week ... There, under the portraits of Queen Anne and of William of Orange, glasses of champagne or whiskey ... or of orangeade were pledged in friendship by Indian and Irishman, American and Korean. And meanwhile the Olympic Games went on - to the glory of sport.

All the world went to Wembley and we went, too. A hundred mind-pictures are vivid. We watch British runner, Sylvia Cheeseman, come second in her heat in the first round of the 200 metres (25.7 seconds). She is a great-grand-niece of Daniel O'Connell, this dark-haired, fair-skinned girl - an Irish type despite the generations between her and Derrynane.

We see long-legged Wint from Jamaica romp home with the 400 metres and equal an Olympic record in 46.2 seconds - a wonder man! To think that Ireland's Reardon was drawn in the same heat with this coloured giant in the semi-finals! Another day at Wembley, two Flemish boys beside us in the competitors' enclosure are shouting for "Hann-senne! Hann-senne!" - a Frenchman in the 1500 metres. They talk fast in their own language and make signs to us. But signs and words of one syllable in English don't get far. We hazard a phrase or two of French, and one of them does speak French. He is Marcel van de Wattyne, whom we spotted earlier in the same heat with Barry in the 5,000 metres. He had pleasantly vague notions of Ireland but he is coming here to run in the spring.

The competitors' enclosure certainly was an international meeting-ground. Today we chat to a Welsh boxing official with a soft corner in his heart for Ireland and a detailed knowledge of Dublin. Tomorrow we get hopelessly involved with a couple of Maltese who think that our English is South American, or perhaps French, in accent ! They have crazy George-Borrowesque notions of Ireland and are too amazed to discover that we are actually "Ye Wilde Irische" in person. So they try talking politics and are not a little surprised at our vehemence and heat. And often we smile in no language at all and

protest that "No, we are not Anglaises at any rate." "Nor Inglese?" "Certainly not!" and in our own defence start up a quickfire conversation with a fellow-Irishman in musical Gaelic.

The atmosphere in Olympic Headquarters was serenely English, of course, and felt like a judicious combination of the army and the civil service. The two dark-eyed women-judges of gymnastics, all the way from Milan, whom I met there one morning, were puzzled by it all. They had been going from venue to venue in a taxi looking for an elusive meeting of international women gymnasts. Someone in the end had sent them to 37 Upper Brooke Street, and there they told their story with a vehemence that was almost operatic.

Could anyone help them? And this address, this meeting, where was it? But no one present had enough Italian to make anything of the story and the ladies responded with wild gestures in efforts to communicate with them in the Sax- Béarla. They understood not one word of English. It transpired, however, that they did speak a sort of Provençal French with some Italian words floating through it and they understood miraculously well the French of Dublin-on-the- Liffey. They are happy to tell their tale againhappy almost to tears. And the Olympic machine eventually gets down to the task of getting them fixed with travel passes and starts a hunt for the Secretary of the International Women Gymnasts' Federation. The dear ladies relax at last and pass around little Italian sweets and laugh: "These English," they confide, "they can speak only English...."

And that reminds me of the busload of girls from France, Switzerland, Italy and where -you-will who whiled away another half-an-hour conversing intelligibly in three different languages at once, with the Swiss to act as a clearing-house of difficulties. The whole thing started when a bright young American gymnast tried to tell a pig-tailed little Italian from Genoa that she, too, was almost Italian with the limitation of an Italian vocabulary consisting mostly of "Napoli", "padre", and "spaghetti"!

London, during the Games, seemed almost empty of children by comparison with Dublin's teeming streets. But many youngsters were out at Wembley - autograph-hunting. It was dangerous to walk down the Olympic Way sporting badge or blazer. Twenty school children would swarm around you, like flies after honey. "Ireland?" "Good old Ireland! My dad's from Ireland!" would greet you. A little Londoner would chip in, seeing

that you had signed in Irish: "My dad'll understand that; he's from Mayo." And yet another: "My mum and dad are from Cork." Then, at last, Treasurer P. J. Carroll or boxing judge Jim Healy would escape and head for Willesden, the Irish G.H.Q., and dinner. Many London-Irish must have been following the boxing. They came to the night session to cheer us on and many instructions were called: "Go on, Ireland!" "Go on, the shamrock!" "Box him, Ireland!" "Left, then right, Peter!" Or, maybe, just "Up de Valera!" (though he certainly was not in the ring!).

At one stage, when the Irish lads were singing: "When in Canadian woods we met.... Ireland boys, hurrah!" Mick McKeon was actually fighting a Canadian-Irishman, Keenan. The atmosphere of the boxing sessions was pretty tense. The Irish Olympic Committee, headed by Comdt J.F. Chisholm, chef de mission, didn't miss a minute of it. We got through the preliminaries and the second round going strong. But by the time the semi-finals were reached only Mick McKeon was left to battle for Ireland. Battle he did. And his three rounds with the British middle-weight, Wright, of Potter's Bar, should have taken him into the finals but for a decision that must have astonished no one more than the courageous Wright himself. Certainly, it took even the audience a full minute to realise that their fellow-countryman, Wright, had actually been awarded the fight. Mick took the decision like a man and, despite much natural surprise and some heated discussions, none of the Irishmen present lost control of their emotions.

But even victory can be a severe strain as was seen in supporters of the Hungarian, Papp. Unable to contain their enthusiasm, a couple of them jumped into the Blue Pool- over which the ring was built- and splashed their victorious way to cool normality. We Irish are an unexcitable people when all is said and done.

But excitement finds different outlets in different peoples ; witness girl swimmer, Ngaire Leine, who spent more than a pound a minute on a telephone home to tell her family, among things, that she had been over in Paris and seen the Mona Lisa.

And that brings us to another survival of the gracious Greek spirit: the competitions in the fine arts which are such an important part of every Olympic Festival.

We had been to the famed Albert Hall to hear an Olympic Symphony Concert conducted by Sir Malcolm Sargent and the grand Olympic Hymn, Quilter's musical interpretation of King David's poetry: "Non nobis

Domine.... Not unto us but unto Thy name, O Lord, be the glory." Nearby, at the Victoria and Albert Museum, was the Olympic Exhibition of Sport in Art, and here, among palms and bronze and stone and plaster athletes, the victorious nations accepted their awards in the fine arts from the hands of President Edström. Perhaps there was no Praxiteles among the artists exhibiting but there was, nevertheless, ample evidence that, in Europe at least, the Greek example had not been quite forgotten. Neither Australia nor the Americas contributed to the Exhibition, so that, with one or two exceptions - China, India and South Africa, I think - the show was mainly a manifestation of the European way of life. There was a special thrill for us of the Irish team when we saw that in music, literature, and painting our little island was not without world glory.

In the painting section, where competition was stiffest and the standard high, Miss Letitia Hamilton, R.H.A. carried off the Bronze Medal, third place and diploma. Another Irishwoman, gentle Miss Ina Boyle from Enniskerry, obtained a diploma in the music section for the "Lament for Bion". The only higher award in her section was a bronze medal to Italy. In the literature section, Cavan-born Stanislaus Lynch's "Echoes of the Hunting Horn" was similarly crowned.

To put up even one flag at an Olympic Games is no mean feat: it indicates world pre-eminence in something. Ireland, tiny as she is when set against Britain or the United States, has managed it, however, in every Games for which she has entered since her first Olympic effort in 1924, when the Irish painter, Lavery, raised the Irish tricolour in an Olympic Stadium for the first time.

A few weeks ago, at a simple ceremony at the Royal Hibernian Academy in Dublin, Ireland's victors in the Fine Arts Competitions were presented with their awards by the National Olympic President, Col. Eamonn Broy. In an atmosphere of homely friendliness, we talked and looked forward to Helsinki in 1952. On that occasion, Chef de Mission J.F. Chisholm made a suggestion which might, with advantage, be put into effect: the revival of the Tailteann Games in Ireland. Even in ancient Greece, Pan-Hellenic excellence had firm background of local glory.

But, vale, London!

Addendum by Séamus Ware

Máirin Allen was in 1948 the Hon. Secretary of the Arts Section of the Olympic Council of Ireland, and as such, had responsibility

for the Irish entries in the Olympic Arts Competition. In addition, she took, on extra duties when the attache, who was to liaise between the Irish team and the Organising Committee, withdrew.

There were Irish entries in the painting, literature, and music competitions, and as described in her article, three of them won awards. Máirin Allen wrote the above article for an Irish magazine, which was published in October 1948; I received a copy of the article from her son, from whom I received permission to send it to this Journal.

In 1952, Máirin Allen was again Hon. Secretary of the Arts Section of the O.C.I., which received an invitation to send entries to an Olympic Art Exhibition in Helsinki, instead of Art Competitions which were discontinued due to lack of interest. Among the Irish entries for the exhibition was a piece of sculpture by Dombhuall Ó Murchadha, later Professor of Sculpture and Director of the National College of Art in Dublin. He later married Máirin Allen; both are now deceased. Both Máirin and Dombhuall contributed to various aspects of Irish cultural life over many years.

Stanislaus Lynch, who was awarded a Diploma for poetry in 1948, again had an entry in the literature section of the 1952 Olympic Art Exhibition. We accompanied the Irish team who travelled by boat and train to Helsinki. On the return journey, as their ship was leaving Gothenburg for London, Séán Laran (the Irish team doctor) notified the ship's officers of an emergency as Lynch had severe stomach pains. The ship was stopped, pilot boat called, and Lynch was taken off on a stretcher. He was accompanied by Dr. Lavan to hospital where he had to undergo an operation for a perforated duodenal ulcer. After recovering, Stan Lynch and Dr. Lavan returned later to Ireland.

Explanatory Notes

- Daniel O'Connell, from Derrynane in Kerry, was an early 19th. Century Irish leader.
- "Sax-Béarla" is an Irish term for the English language.
- De Valera was an Irish political leader, later President, in the 20th. Century.
- The Tailteann Games were sporting contests organised as part of the great annual festival at Tailte, near Tara seat of the High Kings of Ireland; according to some accounts they started in 1829 B.C. (if so, preceding the Ancient Olympic Games by a thousand years), and they lasted until 920 A.D. ; the suggested revival was done in fact in 1924, 1928, and 1932, and ceased due to financial problems.
- Col. Eamonn Broy was in 1948 the President of the O.C.I, (his successor was Lord Killanin).
- Letitia Hamilton, the only medal-winner from the Irish team at the 1948 Olympics and the first woman competing for Ireland to have won an Olympic medal, had studied painting in London (under William Orpen) and in Belgium.