



THE ITMA TEAM (from left): Fred Yule, Joan Harben (Mona Lott), Hugh Morton, Lind Joyce, Tommy Handley, Hattie Jacques, Jack Train (Col. Chinstrap), Diana Morrison (Miss Hotchkiss), and Derek Guyler

## THE END OF ITMA

**T**OMMY HANDLEY, who was, in the opinion of millions of admirers in Britain and throughout the British Commonwealth, the world's greatest radio comedian, is dead and *ITMA* has died with him. On the morning of Sunday, January 9, he complained of sudden pain and he died the same afternoon from a cerebral haemorrhage. *ITMA* had been running for over eight years and the Sunday repeat performance of the 311th show was just finishing when the BBC received the news of the star's death.

*ITMA* has always been of particular interest to New Zealanders, for a New Zealander, Ted Kavanagh, has been the scriptwriter of the show throughout its long eventful history and its speed and brightness were in large measure the work of his wit. But Handley was always the core and centre of the team and it was Kavanagh who declared "There will be no more *ITMAS*." It was Kavanagh, too, who summed up most simply and impressively the effect of Handley's personality on those who worked most closely with him:

"In Tommy Handley's death," he said, "I have lost a great personal friend, a man who took up in himself a great part of my life, day in and day out, for many years."

Handley himself was too sensible to be falsely modest about the part he played in *ITMA*'s success but he knew how much was owed to the efforts of

others. "I am the pivot round which the others revolve," he once said, "but we work as a team. I've often sensed in other shows a feeling that there has been bickering and unpleasantness among the cast. We have none of that. I'm there all the time, but everyone of the characters has his own cameo and his own chance to shine."

And they did shine—Mrs. Mopp ("Can I do you now, sir?"), the redoubtable Colonel ("I don't mind if I do") Chinstrap, Mona Lott, who managed to keep going because she was So Cheerful—and a host of others.

Handley and his helpers will be remembered with greatest affection for the fun they brought to harassed British listeners during the darkest years of the war, when it seemed that there could not be much to laugh at anywhere. *ITMA*—the very title, *It's That Man Again*, was taken from a wry joke about Hitler—began in August, 1939, and its success with the listening public dated from the outbreak of war, when the team was evacuated to Bristol and Tommy was appointed Minister of Aggravation at the Office of Twerps. The blackout had come down, travelling was difficult, petrol and food rationing had been introduced and restrictive regulations



BBC Photograph  
TED KAVANAGH

appeared thick and fast. Handley and his friends helped to make restriction and regimentation bearable by poking fun at it, in the best British tradition. At this time, too, the war became alphabetical—there was ARP and NAAFI, ENSA and M.O.I.—so naturally *It's That Man Again* became *ITMA*, and *ITMA* it remained.

It was fitting that Ted Kavanagh should be chosen to speak the valedictory in *Radio Newsreel*, since he had been associated with Tommy Handley since 1926, when he broadcast the first radio script Kavanagh ever wrote.

"Handley lived quietly and without ostentation," said Kavanagh, "never believing that he was so famous and so beloved. He was a leading radio comedian for 25 years. Early listeners will remember in Savoy Hill days his *Radio Revels*, his *Tommy's Tours*, and his association with Ronald Frankau in *Murgatroyd* and *Winterbottom*. Then in 1939 came *ITMA* and, joined by Francis Worsley, our association became closer still. It brought him not only national but international fame, and to him it owed its extraordinary popularity. From the first edition to the last, Handley lived every moment of it. Together we went over the script. Every line of the original was gone over, polished and improved, and illumined by his wit and rare good humour. My own sense of personal loss will be felt by many, many of us."

New Zealand listeners are likely to hear *ITMA* for some time yet, but nothing quite like it can be recorded again. You can't have *It's That Man Again* without That Man.

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