

# ON THE INSIDE LOOKING OUT

(By Airmail — Special to  
"The Listener")

JANUARY 29

ENGLAND is the centre of the world. In apologising this week for the non-appearance of a speaker in a series of BBC talks on the colonies, the introducer of the series explained that the talk had actually been recorded in Barbadoes, and was being "flown back," but hadn't come. For some people in this little island there is only one way, the centripetal way, to look at journeys abroad, even at domicile abroad. Not only the Colonies and the Dominions ("out there") either, but America too. Ego-centric is surely one of the last words one would apply to such a man as E. M. Forster. Yet Mr. Forster, in talking over the BBC about his experiences in America in 1947, called America "out there." This is a habit which the Englishman exhibits when he is most at his ease (as Mr. Forster always is in front of the microphone). Some months ago a Fleet Street journalist of unusually broad outlook, a man with what I thought were fairly wide horizons, talked to me of Denmark, when I showed interest in it on hearing that he had been stationed there after the war. He spoke of the cultural life of Copenhagen, of hospitality there, of the food—and then out slipped the little phrase: "Yes, I had some marvellous experiences out there."



Now an Italian, Paolo Treves, has written a book on England (having been here during the war) which he calls *England, the Mysterious Island*. The *Manchester Guardian* reviews it this week, pricking a little at some of Signor Treves's observations of English oddities: "Indeed, Mr. Treves contributes at least as much to the mystery as do the people whom he studies. . . . The English have a social sense, they are unhurried, they are tolerant, they do not raise their voices, with them 'polite conversation is not supposed to be argumentative.' In short, they behave very unlike Italians, and there is your mystery." There it is indeed, and the mystery goes deeper still when one discovers that an Englishman cannot see that it is one. It is like the picture on the old Cerebos salt tins, containing-itself-containing-itself ad infinitum. The English are peculiar. But to say so is peculiar. It is peculiar that to say so is peculiar, is it not?

## Postscripts to ITMA

A POSTSCRIPT to what I wrote before of Tommy Handley: Speaking of him, both the Director-General of the

BBC (Sir William Haley) and the *Listener's* "Spoken Word" critic (Philip Hope-Wallace) alluded to Dr. Johnson's remark on the death of Garrick, that it had eclipsed the gaiety of nations; but both without committing themselves to using it of Handley. Sir William Haley, in fact, said that it was only a friendly exaggeration in the first instance. Now, a correspondent of the *Listener*, writing from Liverpool (which was Handley's place of origin), puts a case for regarding it as an exaggeration in the first

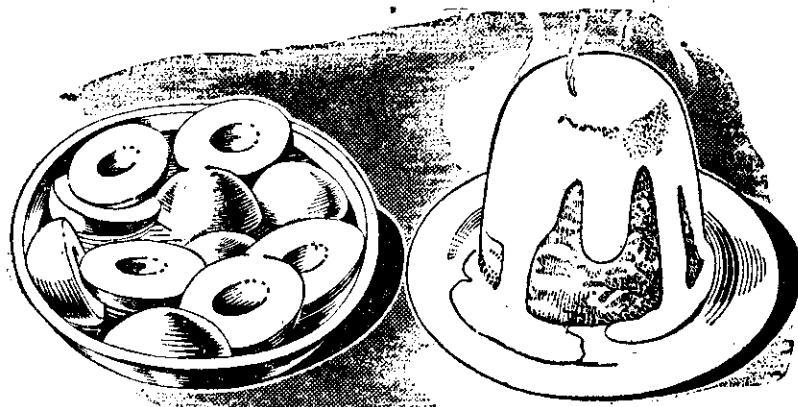
instance, but not in the case of Handley. That is as may be; but the correspondent is right (if Teutonic in his grammar) in saying that "into the reasons for . . . the popularity of Tommy Handley and *ITMA* itself it will be necessary for the social historian to go." *ITMA* was loved and waited for in every kind of home, whether the radio sat on the kitchen dresser or

was a console in a stately drawing room. On the only occasion when I sat in a chair once occupied by the literary great (a chair in which James Stephens used to sit arguing with Yeats, as I gathered) and nervously handed bread and butter to one distinguished woman novelist, while carrying on a conversation with a minor but distinguished poet and critic, the talk came round to *ITMA*. On the show of faces, and on the address, which was a couple of doors from Keats' home in Hampstead, it was a literary tea, and yet the talk came round (by way of margarine, petrol, and the servant shortage) to *ITMA*. As it still would, if *ITMA* still existed, or could again.

In the *Manchester Guardian* this week a correspondent contradicts another who said that Ben Jonson's comedies were the nearest parallel to *ITMA*, and wished to substitute Aristophanes. "Not only in its punning, its topical allusions, and uproarious and zestful ridicule of contemporary persons and institutions, but in its form does Aristophanic comedy present the closest of parallels to *ITMA*. For as in *ITMA* so in Aristophanes' comedies do we find not a close-knit dramatic unity but an almost formless succession of short scenes in which fantastic caricatures of contemporary Athenian types fit in and out to pest the main characters."

But the *Guardian* itself in its leader drew the important distinction. *ITMA* was "not tricked out with poetry." It will be remembered by name, but not in substance. Its place on Thursday nights has been taken by the fatuous

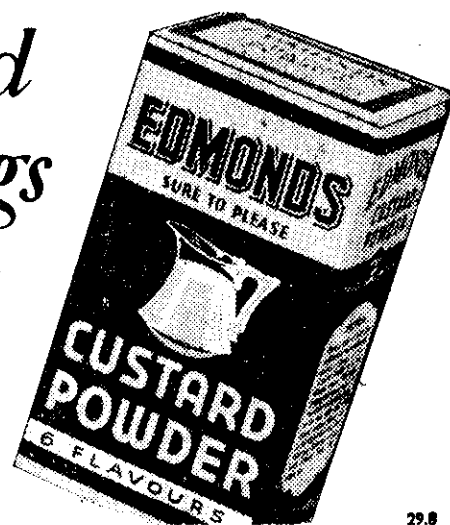
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