

Goodbye, Dr. Muffin

DR. MUFFIN, the irascible, bumbling, amusingly incompetent schoolmaster of St. Michael's, who never failed to rouse his radio audience's sympathy as well as their laughter in the BBC's famous *Will Hay Programme*, was in private life a well-known astronomer. He wrote a book, *Through My Telescope*, took part in *Brains Trust* sessions as a thoroughly serious "brain" with the other experts, and achieved his small quota of astronomical immortality by discovering, in 1933, a spot on Saturn, and in 1936 an entirely new star.

But astronomy was never more than a "recreation" for Will Hay (though he described it himself as more of a religion than a hobby), and he earned his living as a highly-specialised comedian of the stage, screen, and radio. He was born in 1888, and soon after leaving school he was apprenticed to the engineering trade, where he began to master the intricacies of electrical engineering. Even then, however, he fancied himself as a bit of an entertainer, and he sang comic songs at charity concerts, and so on. Eventually, from a welter of ideas, emerged the character of the lean, ferociously timid schoolmaster, and he decided to abandon the engineer's bench in favour of the footlights. He went seriously on the stage in 1909, and he soon became famous in the music halls with his schoolmaster sketch, which he brought to greater perfection and variety over the years.

In 1910 the second of his dominant interests asserted itself when he started flying—in a glider. Later he won his pilot's ticket as a first-class airman, and in his more prosperous days he once ran a couple of private planes of his own.

But although his active interest in flying declined with the passing years, he never gave up his work in astronomy. He was rarely too tired after a show to spend an hour or two in his splendidly equipped observatory, and he used to say it was the best cure for the blues that he knew of, for stars proved so absorbing that everything else was forgotten. He found an outlet for his engineering skill by manufacturing all sorts of ingenious gadgets to simplify observation, and he devoted himself to research work which had its fruits in his book and his celestial discoveries. In time he became a Fellow of the Royal Astronomical Society and a Member of the British Astronomical Association.

Trying to be Funny

As a radio entertainer he was one of Britain's veterans. His first broadcast was from the old Marconi House in the Strand in 1922—just about the time that Norman Long turned up with his famous "smile and a song."

The inimitable St. Michael's sketch was originally played by Will Hay alone, with an imaginary class. Then one boy was added. Harbottle, the ancient, was just a brilliant accident. Another boy was wanted in a hurry at one stage of the sketch's development, but Will couldn't get one for love or money. So he decided on the spur of the moment



BBC photograph
WILL HAY
Comedian, astronomer and airman

to create instead the character of an old man who had never left school.

When he broke into radio for the first time after 13 years in vaudeville, he realised the difficulty of changing his style from stage to microphone technique. "The great trouble with trying to be funny is that the longer you keep on, the less funny you become," he once said. "Take me for instance. I am a music-hall comedian specialising in sketches about schoolboy life. How long do you think one of these will last me? Well, any one of them is good for four or five years, and the best will survive as many as 10, possibly more. . . . The average year in the theatre is in the neighbourhood of 40 weeks, and there is no reason at all why I shouldn't use this same sketch during the whole of that time. At the very least, then, it is worth four times 40 weeks' engagements, that is 160 weeks. But it is not entirely done with even at the end of this time, for I can easily put it into cold storage and re-introduce it after a suitable period. But if I broadcast it, a single studio performance reaches as many people in a single night as I play to normally in the lifetime of a sketch."

In addition to having continually to think up more material for his broadcasts (he wrote and produced himself all the sessions in *The Will Hay Programme*), he found he had to recast his whole technique. In the music-hall his sketch was put over by his mannerisms and facial expressions and a lot of visual by-play, with the dialogue merely a peg on which to hang them. But dialogue is the radio sketch, so he had to change his procedure accordingly. A subtly changed inflection of the voice, little coughs and sniffs of bewilderment or scepticism, had to replace the famous uplifted eyebrow and ferocious scowl.

In 1945, when he was a lieutenant instructor in the R.N.V.R., Will Hay had a stroke which paralysed an arm and a leg and affected his speech. He was sent to Norway for treatment, but it didn't seem to do much good, so he went to South Africa for a year. By 1948 he seemed fully recovered, but on April 18, 1949, he died in London at the age of 60. Coming so soon after Tommy Handley's death, the passing of Dr. Muffin is a sad blow to British radio.

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