

THE LAST OF ITMA

ITMA began in September, 1939, and for the next decade it was broadcast by the BBC for 36 weeks or so of the 52 in each year. It used to break out every autumn and then rage unchecked until early summer, when the author (Ted Kavanagh) and the producer (Francis Worsley) were given time to relax and fortify themselves for next season's outburst. It probably reached its peak about 1946, when some 12 million listeners tuned in every night, and even in early 1949 its nearest rival was *Much-Binding-in-the-Marsh*, with about ten millions. Each session of *ITMA* used to be repeated nine times, twice for Home listeners, and seven times for listeners overseas. Either by direct transmission or by Transcription Service recordings, it was regularly rebroadcast in 20 other countries. Although Tommy Handley's death in January brought the series to an end, in the next few weeks New Zealand listeners will be able to hear recordings of some of the last broadcasts he made.

The 12th (and final) series of *ITMA* Transcription recordings starts soon from 2YA. This series takes Tommy Handley, in his capacity as a down-but-not-out, to Paddington railway station, where he tries his hand (and his humour) as a railway porter. The setting is clue enough to the way this final series develops, and it is all true to the form which listeners have learnt to expect. Even the paradox of the Colonel's compulsory temperance in the face of the dastardly machinations of his sinister chauffeur Creep is delightfully in character. And Joan is no less appealingly lugubrious in her married state of Mona Little than she was as spinster Mona Lot. The regular *ITMA* team is incidentally joined this time by George Mitchell and his Kerbside Choristers.

Many people have tried to explain why *ITMA* became the biggest comedy



BBC photograph
TOMMY HANDLEY tries out an aria for the benefit of George Mitchell (left) and his Kerbside Choristers who take part in the final series of "*ITMA*"

programme in Britain since radio started there in 1923. Some set great store by its catch-phrases, although nobody knew why some of them caught and some of them misfired. Another probable reason for its success was its speedy delivery (too fast for Bob Hope), and another its topicality. Francis Worsley may have come nearest the truth when he defined *ITMA* as "a special way of putting over one specific radio comedian." It was based, he said, "on Handley's capacity to react quickly and amusingly to curious and unexpected situations."

When it started, Worsley wanted to work up a programme that would really catch the public ear, and the flood of form-filling and red tape that suddenly descended on civilians when the war began gave Tommy Handley his first *ITMA* title. He became Minister of Aggravation and Mystery at the Office of Twerps. But like most Government offices at that time, the Office of Twerps was evacuated, commandeered, and set out in February, 1940, "in a chain of caravans for a destination unknown." When it returned to the air in 1941, cracks at officialdom were abandoned, and *ITMA* went to Foaming-at-the-Mouth, where Tommy became Mayor. During its two-year stay there, the *ITMA* myth got a hold on the public imagination which it never lost in its succeeding ups and downs at a war factory, on the land (Squire Handley bothered by the man from the Min. of Ag. and Fish), in post-war planning and electioneering, and at Tomtopia.

with many Mess medals on his tunic) created the most popular of all. The slightest suggestion of a drink would evoke his slogan, "I Don't Mind if I Do."—"I think, Colonel, you've been treated rather shabbily." "Chablis? Excellent wine, I don't mind if I do."—"You're always first in and last out." "Large stout? Certainly."—and so it went on, through every drink known—and a number previously unknown.

Non-visual Surrealism

Colonel Chinstrap was of course always played by Jack Train, but Handley himself had many incarnations in his *ITMA* career. He was Dr. Thomas Hacksaw, that "dubious dean of the medical profession," whose discovery of the great new ink-stain eradicator Fountain Penicillin made such a mark. He was Picklock Holmes, and the Governor of Tomtopia, and the Pukka Sahib from Rumblebellipore, and Miss Thom-asina, and the Principal Plumber, and a host of other fantastic personalities. The way he twisted words around his tongue was amazing. *ITMA* itself, for instance, he described in phrases like "A reprehensible relay of ridiculous ribaldry," or "a mad medley of muddled mumbling and misdirected minstrelsy."

The fantasy of *ITMA*, which was perhaps its most characteristic feature, was commented on by many critics. Sir Charles (then C.B.) Cochran described *ITMA* as "surrealism in non-visual entertainment." The well-known author and broadcaster A. G. Street however said, "For me *ITMA* is *Alice in Wonderland* all over again. Like *Alice*, it is always quotable, and its phrases have become an integral part of British conversation. It is a mirror in which the listener sees people drawn from life."

Catch-phrases That Caught

It was also during the Foaming-at-the-Mouth stage that the *ITMA* catch-phrases really caught on. Fighter pilots over the Channel used to call to each other on radio-telephone "After you, Claude—After you, Cecil." Shipwrecked sailors on the point of rescue would say hopefully "Don't forget the diver." And air-raid survivors called to their rescuers "Can you do me now?" All day long it went on like that throughout Britain. People would ring the BBC, chirp "Good morning—nice day," and ring off. Phrases like "This is Funff speaking," or "I go—I come back," echoed in the streets and subways, and of course that bibulous old backslider, Colonel Chinstrap (retired



NORMAN JOHNSTON, who is to represent the NZBS on the technical planning committee in Paris

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as satisfactory, and sufficient to provide a service to New Zealand territories and dependencies in the Pacific.

On the way to and from Mexico Mr. Harrison visited broadcasting stations in the United States and Canada and secured information on the latest developments there. He also visited the Canadian International Shortwave Broadcasting Station at Sackville, New Brunswick, which is one of the most modern stations of its type in the world. It was of great value, he said, to meet engineers from broadcasting organisations throughout the world and to discuss problems common to all countries; and it was, he thought, of the utmost importance that New Zealand should be represented at international conferences.

Norman B. Johnston, Assistant Engineer at the head office of the NZBS, and E. W. de Lisle, representing the New Zealand Post and Telegraph Department, have left for Paris to attend sessions of the technical planning committee appointed by the Mexico City Conference.