

# Wings Over The Cookhouse

THE horrors of war, as G. C. A. Wall says, are no laughing matter. But there are horrors and horrors, and the second kind can be amusing. In the last war, Mr. Wall admits, he was, in some degree, personally responsible for quite a few of them, and it's in the belief that they should be recorded once and for all for an incredulous posterity that he has confessed in *Wings Over the Cookhouse*—a series of reminiscences about the lighter side of R.A.F. catering which are to be heard from National stations of the NZBS. They will start first from 3YA in *Mainly for Women* at 2.0 p.m. on Wednesday, December 8.

Mr. Wall—to put the record straight—is already well known to listeners,

especially to those who listen to the Christchurch National stations, where he is Talks Officer, and, more widely, as the "man behind the counter" in *Book Shop* and the author and narrator of a number of entertaining radio short stories. But before he was ever near an NZBS microphone he had a distinguished career in the R.A.F., from which he retired with the rank of Group Captain in 1951. Quite early in that career he lost an eye in operations over the North-West Frontier of India, and was permanently grounded. A regular R.A.F. officer debarred from flying was even in peacetime the plaything of "that sadistic impersonality known as the Air Ministry," he says in *Wings Over the Cookhouse*. "In nine brief years I found myself doing at various times what in civil life would represent the duties of a schoolmaster, a night-watchman, a petrol station manager, a personal secretary to a business tycoon, a wholesale grocer, a laundry manager, a literary recluse, and a boy scout instructor." With the war these changes became even dizzier and more frequent, so when Mr. Wall was told in 1941 to report to "one of the highest and remotest of all the mighty moguls of the Air Ministry" he hardly batted an eyelid. And that's how the newly-established Catering Branch of the R.A.F. got its Head.

It wasn't just by chance that in 1941 Mr. Wall was pitchforked to the top of the Catering Branch, because as far back as the early days of the 1930's—"when we used to keep the atom firmly in its place"—he had been picked out, along with a

rather senior officer, "Gentleman George," to learn from the Royal Army Service Corps something about bulk rationing of foods for servicemen. Then as now, this job was normally done for the R.A.F. by the Army, but as there was no Army to do it before the war for R.A.F. garrisons in Iraq and Aden, and as "diddling native meat contractors and running butcheries and bakeries and so on," is a rather specialised business, a few R.A.F. people were trained every year to do the job in those two countries.

In due course Mr. Wall did a spell of duty in Iraq, which he describes in one of his talks, "By the Waters of Baghdad." It seems to have been a very pleasant spell, too, what with his cottage and garden, his vine and fig tree, his fire-pool with its fish and exotic ducks, and the music of the petrol tins—which is something listeners will have to wait patiently to be told about. They'll have to wait, too, for his story about the discovery of six one-gallon jars of pre-1914 navy rum, which Regulations sternly forbade him to issue to anyone except in dire emergency—"and even then only with the prior written consent of a whole Harley Street of doctors, counter-signed by the Privy Council and certified by the Archbishop of Canterbury," or so it seemed. Mr. Wall's months of meditating ways and means of finding a "legal and unexceptionable" way of getting a taste of this rum bore fruit in the end. There came the day when he hurried to the Commanding Officer with the glad news, and soon an incredulous medical officer arrived on a bicycle, with his tongue



"Running butcheries and bakeries for the R.A.F. is a rather specialised business".

hanging out! The sequel is worth waiting for.

There are other stories worth waiting for, too—the one about the caviare and the one about the bad onions and the story of the hotel guest with the new dentures who bought a bag of sticky toffee and persevered with it. There's an account of an experiment with a four-course Cornish pastie—"spaghetti in bags of tomato at one end for the soup course, then the meat and potato compartment, then the fruit, and finally a cheese mixture at the far end"—which looked like being ideal for troops going on long railway journeys. And no introduction to *Wings Over the Cookhouse* would be adequate without a mention of the Incident of the Self-heating Tin of Soup. The six talks are full of such amusing stories. Writing them was for Mr. Wall a busman's holiday, but he admits he thoroughly enjoyed it. That is likely to be the view of listeners, too, when they hear them.



G. C. A. WALL  
Pitchforked into the Catering branch

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cent times—the fall in Canterbury in 1945 was probably the heaviest on record. Falls of this sort, like the one described by Lady Barker, strike particularly heavily at high-country farmers. Finally, to the recent past belongs our most destructive tornado, which killed three people at Frankton in 1948. A

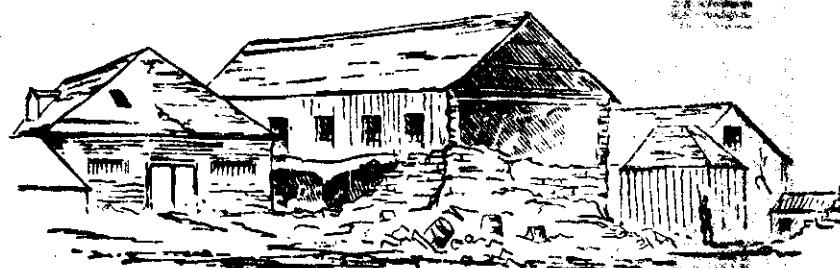
"freak" to most of us, it was, in fact, one of the many winds we experience of one kind and another which can cause damage and sometimes do if they strike in the wrong place or catch us unprepared.

Nature in Four Moods will start from 3YZ on Tuesday, December 7, at 10.0 p.m.

★ THERE were no photographers around when Wellington had its first big earthquake in 1848, but these sketches were made on the spot at the time. Hickson's store (below) was near Farish Street. At right are seen the Ordnance Store (with sentry on guard), and the Colonial Hospital, Thorndon



Hickson's store



Ordnance Store.



Colonial Hospital.