

When He Smiled —I Knew It Was Harry Thurston



Board's first overseas comedian to be starred. His last visit here was just over 12 years ago, under the Hugh Ward management. A personal friend of the late Sir Joseph Ward, Sir Joseph met him on his arrival in Auckland and the statesman and comedian spent much time together during the latter's stay in New Zealand.

Harry Thurston, who was born in London within sound of Bow Bells, first went on the boards as a boy soprano with the Burgess and Moore Minstrels in St. James' Hall. His association with music hall artists soon developed in him an aptitude for mimicry. This was encouraged by Mr. Eugene Stratton and at the age of 15 Harry Thurston was playing leads in various prominent variety theatres. Later he became a worthy and a serious rival to Albert Chevalier, Charles Godfrey, Arthur Roberts and others and finally he became a character comedian of note who succeeded in keeping the mice from nesting in the box office. Following a tour of the world he was starred at the London Hippodrome, where, in 1916, he was chosen by Captain Bruce Bairnsfather to portray the role of "Old Bill" in "The Better 'Ole." The King and Queen and other members of the Royal Family were present at the premiere and after the show personally congratulated Mr. Thurston on his performance.

Mr. Thurston was the first London comedian to broadcast for the B.B.C. He has since been heard over the air in many parts of the world, including France and the East. He was also the first English comedian to be sponsored for the National and Columbia broadcasting systems in America. He has also broadcast from the principal Australian stations.

Harry Thurston was remarkably enthusiastic about the new IYA studio building and he says that it is one of the best equipped, designed and most up to date of any he has ever seen—and he has seen many all over the world. He contends that radio is yet in its infancy. "I suppose out here you have people who criticise the broadcasting authorities?" he asked. I nodded. That was the same all over the world, he said. Although he had not been more than a few weeks in New Zealand, Mr. Thurston said he had taken much interest in broadcasting matters and had come to the conclusion that broadcasting was in the right hands here and that the programmes given offered excellent entertainment. "Since I have been here I have heard the demand for flesh and blood artists," he said. "That demand will surely be satisfied. Take my own case. The Broadcasting Board was eager to secure my services for the benefit of listeners. I was delighted that I was able to negotiate with the board and spare the necessary time to tour the New Zealand stations before I go back to Hollywood. I feel that I want to present to my New Zealand radio listeners something entirely new and original, not only because of my Dominion broadcasts, but because numerous people in America and Australia will be listening in."

I TRIED his hotel—"No, sir," said the desk clerk, "Mr. Thurston's gone out."

I tried two of the city clubs and was told that "Mr. Thurston has been here but he's just gone."

I tried the broadcasting studios. The station director showed me into a room in the middle of which was a large table littered with papers, song-sheets and so on. Seated at the table, with a typewriter in front of him, was a man of great avoirdupois, with his coat off, sleeves rolled up and a cigarette between his lips. "Surely this is not Harry Thurston, the English comedian?" thought I. To me the burly man looked more like one of George Walker's wrestling opponents. But when this man with the sleek, black hair looked at me and smiled, then I knew at once that he was a comedian, for Harry Thurston has got a funny face.

"Glad to meet you," he said in a low pitched but nevertheless cheery English voice. His smile faded when he learnt that I was a newspaper man and desired to interview him. "Who in the hell do you think I am?" he asked.

I knew that Harry Thurston didn't mean that. Had I not heard the bursts of laughter he had created in the non-teetotal bar of the Auckland Club and in the stewards' enclosure at the Epsom trotting course a few days previously. I knew that "Old Bill" was most popular and a cheery soul. But he proved a difficult subject for an interview. He wanted to talk about anything and everything except his profession, which was quite unusual for such a famous stage and screen personality. However, I eventually nailed him down and after telling the droll comedian that I did not want to waste his time or my own, we soon began to chat about broadcasting and other matters. After a few reminiscences on Mr. Thurston's part, I discovered that this is his third visit to the Dominion, although his first as a radio artist. He has many valued friendships in all parts of New Zealand and he is eagerly looking forward to his tour of the national stations as the Broadcasting