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“Some folks think our jokes just punny”: Sexual and national difference in Tommy Handley  
and Ronald Frankau’s double acts, 1929-1936

Neil Washbourne

This chapter explores spoken comedy dialogues of the gramophone performances of “North and South” and “Murgatroyd and Winterbottom” in order to explore both their fast and absurdist performances, and also the subordinate role given by them to women, foreigners and other lands in the representations contained in these sketches. The double act, adapted for record, radio and variety stage, consisted of Tommy Handley (1890-1949) and Ronald Frankau (1894-1951). Handley performed as both North and Winterbottom, Frankau as South and Murgatroyd. This chapter draws upon ideas from radio studies (Crisell 1986; 1994), popular music analysis of “voice” (Frith 1996) and literature on variety performance (Double 2011) to analyse seven commercially released recordings of both double acts. One aspect of the chapter is, therefore, to offer a close account of performances usually only rather generally or glibly referenced. The chapter focusses upon their routine handling of sexual and national difference in what was then received as a largely uncontroversial and highly praised act, whose unique selling point was the speed of their performance compared to the rambling and laconic styles of previous British comedians and double acts.

I argue that Handley and Frankau’s work should receive sustained analysis in the context of Adrian Bingham’s work on the popular inter-war press (2004; 2009). Bingham’s work is important because he explores in detail the diversity of material in popular daily newspapers and finds that such newspapers were “more complex, diverse and unpredictable than many critics have admitted” (Bingham 2009, 6). I draw on Bingham’s work to situate the act in terms of contemporaneous representations of gender, sexuality and notions of national belonging. This enables me to explore the act’s representations of women as

subordinate, in addition to the chauvinistic assumptions of British superiority upon which their high-speed performance often relied. Reference to Bingham's work also grounds rather generalised claims about their verbal dexterity, fast and "absurdist" patter in detailed analysis of performance, and the dominant meanings and assumptions necessary to the functioning of the 'jokes', puns and wordplay revealed in that performance.

Handley and Frankau's high-speed performances provided excitement in an age increasingly used to hearing disembodied voices and thus more open to fast performance styles. Yet the duo were hardly radical in the way they positioned women predominantly as sexual objects and non-citizens, and "foreign" lands as the sites of disgusting food, unreliable allies, and belligerent foes. In short, the modernity of their comic style barely disguised their largely traditional sexism and national chauvinism.

Handley's work with the *It's That Man Again (ITMA)* BBC radio show (1939-1949) during the Second World War has attracted a deal of academic attention, though oddly there is no sustained academic analysis of specific programmes.<sup>1</sup> Frankau's radio, stage, film and recorded work is very much less commented upon. In exploring and assessing contemporary and subsequent generalised claims about the speed and verbal dexterity of their performances (Scannell and Cardiff 1991, 250-51), I intend both to encourage analysis of such performances from other scholars and explore the dominant representations of women and "foreigners" in such performances.

Handley and Frankau both performed in concert parties and revues (*Daily Mail* 1928; *Daily Mail* 1936). Revues are different from a succession of variety turns (by having a title and a through narrative) and were developed to resolve a slump in variety in the 1920s; both Handley and Frankau demonstrated enterprise and innovation by organising revues for stage and radio (Double 2011, 47). They first met in 1917, and their paths crossed regularly, but

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they did not work together until 1929 when they made records together as “North and South”. Both were substantial variety stars by then, as well as regular and well-liked broadcasters. They also performed their double act on the variety stage from 1930 onward (Mellor 1982, 35, 45). Before Handley’s triumphs with *ITMA* (one of the most popular radio programmes of the Second World War), the double act in the form of “Murgatroyd and Winterbottom” was the high-point of Handley and Frankau’s careers. The characters are denizens of the suburban, consumer society that formed the emerging development of J.B.Priestley’s three Englands, as articulated in his widely read *English Journey* (the other two Englands being the devastated industrial North and coal-mining Wales and the remnants of old rural England) (Gardiner 2011, xxi; 26-27). The act was so fruitful and successful that Frankau attempted to continue a variant of it – Mr. Postlethwaite and Mr. Hugglethorpe – after Handley’s death in January 1949. Handley discusses the partnership with Frankau at some length in his autobiography (Handley 1938, 104; 134-41) and there notes their regular billing matter – “two minds with not a single thought” (Handley 1938, 135) – which also appears in *Radio Times* listings for the pair many times from 1935 onwards. One such listing, for April 9, 1936 - when they performed their famous ten-minute billed sketches on the National Programme - describes the pair thus:

In the ‘North and South’ records they could only get four jokes into three minutes, and they thought they would like to have fifty. They made these records as Mr. Murgatroyd and Mr. Winterbotham’ ... and they first broadcast as these characters in December 1934, and have been doing so ever since. They made a film [...] they did a cabaret and have several concerts in view [...] they are to tour as these famous characters. (*Radio Times*, April 9, 1936)<sup>2</sup>

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Each ten minute “sketch” was written by Handley and Frankau over a few afternoons (Handley 1938, 136). Though they had had success and recognition as North and South - including from Christopher Stone – the first radio disc jockey (Stone *Daily Express*, May 30,

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1934,<sup>10</sup>) – it was as Murgatroyd and Winterbottom that their success greatly multiplied and was sedimented in the thoughts of listeners, critics and the BBC. Their status on radio grew as the act became more coherently based on a verbally dextrous form of popular surrealism. This was immediately recognised by contemporary radio and record commentators in the press. Collie Knox, one of the most influential radio columnists of the 1930s, noted that “they are vastly entertaining” (Knox *Daily Mail*, September 11, 1935, 17). The previous year Knox – then an anonymous Radio Correspondent – had blown a fanfare for them:

Allow me to introduce to you Mr. Murgatroyd and Mr. Winterbottom. They are two new radio personalities and their arrival heralds a new era in variety broadcasts. In the past we have had many light entertainers who must have audio [a live audience] in the studio while they are broadcasting. They crack their jokes and the audience cackles but often the humour leaves the radio listener cold. [...] The Comedian who does not need an audience is much more amusing [...]. That is why Mr. Murgatroyd and Mr. Winterbottom are coming on the air. They will talk to each other before the microphone, for ten minutes or a quarter of an hour, discussing ordinary things in a funny way [...]. They will constitute a programme feature on their own and will not be sandwiched into an ordinary variety bill. (*Daily Mail Daily Mail*, September 21, 1934, 20)

€Knox in the (*Daily Mail*, May 30, 1938, 17) referred to them later referred to them in the as “one of the perfect radio turns. Their snap, their attack, and their colossal impertinences are Homeric”. Bernard Buckham, the radio columnist for the *Daily Mirror*, could comment, as late as 1939, that he loved Murgatroyd and Winterbottom’s radio appearance and their “bag of humorous all-sorts [...]. Jokes, clever, stupid, far-fetched, saucy, simple, obvious, unexpected, painful, chucklesome”, especially in comparison with “alleged comedians” who “come along and repeat, parrot-like, a string of ancient wheezes, and then sing some sort of song in a manner which suggests that they have long had a grudge against us and are determined to pay off old scores” (Buckham *Daily Mirror*, April 3, 1939). Buckham continued that: “it is quick-fire, hit-or-miss. If you don’t laugh at one thing you will at another [...] they seldom ‘fluff’”. Their popular surrealism – fully recognised by a range of

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press radio commentators – allowed them breezily to promote sexist representations of woman and chauvinistic representations of foreigners and overseas as part of the fluently expressed performances that refused to be taken seriously even in making consequential claims. This allowed them to circulate sexist and chauvinist claims without facing the consequences of explicitly arguing for them.

In this chapter, I use my own transcriptions from Handley and Frankau's performances from the Windyridge (2006) album of variety double acts from the 1920s and 1930s. The seven performances I use are by North and South: "Casabianca", "The Continong" and "Riding on a Camel" (all 1929) and by Murgatroyd and Winterbottom: "It's a Pity", "Disarmament" (both 1934), "Art" and "About Cruises" (both 1936). Though both double acts explore the novelty of verbally dextrous popular surrealism, there are differences in the double acts that demonstrate how they concentrated their novel approach to such an extent that it was worth renaming the act. The first difference between the two double acts is the great increase, in the transition from North and South to Murgatroyd and Winterbottom, in the time devoted to spoken patter rather than song: from 26% to 59% average of the total time of these recordings. Secondly, there is an intensified "branding" of the double act; they use each other's fictional names only twice in their North and South recordings but twenty-five times in Murgatroyd and Winterbottom (as well as a four further pet names and contractions – such as Troydy, Winter and Winterbot). This encourages a greater sense of identification with, and warmth for, the characters, as Double argues is apparent in successful variety performers of the time (2011, 101; 117-18). The third difference is that in North and South there is an attempt to embody culturally the name of the act in North's performed Lancashire accent, dropped aitches, occasional use of dialect words and tendency to play socially subordinate characters (a bosun to South's captain in "Casabianca" for example). North and South therefore much more closely embody the tension between J. B. Priestley's England of the depressed, working-class North and the rising, suburban, middle-class,

consumerist South (Gardiner 2011, xiii; 26-27). Fourth, whilst the North and South recordings use a small orchestra, the Murgatroyd and Winterbottom recordings use only a piano accompaniment to the sung parts. This gives an enhanced attention to the already extended pattern of the latter recordings and makes clear that the words are more important than the music (cf. Frith 1996, 187).

### Murgatroyd and Winterbottom's Popular Surrealism

A fundamental feature of Handley and Frankau's comedy is the exploration, embodiment and development of incongruity. They explore, in Bernard Buckham's words, the "stupid" and "far-fetched" ([Buckham \(Daily Mirror, April 3, 1939\)](#)). In their own words, they are "two minds without a single thought" and, in "About Cruises", declare that "nothing could be so *absurd* as us" (my italics). I argue in this section that such is the double act's commitment to high-speed verbal dexterity and following the puns and wordplays where they might go that their work represents a kind of popular surrealism. Contrary to the belief that comedy is predominantly visual, which we can see in slapstick comedy and the subtle, communicative glances of double acts each to each when they perform live or on a visual medium, radio and gramophone comedians increasingly treated the "blindness" of the medium as a "positive quality in its ability to liberate listeners' imaginations" (Crisell 1994, 164; 167). Their conjoint personalities are also foregrounded and it is clear that performance is as important as their material in creating presentations for their listeners (Double 2011, 99).

Repetition of puns foregrounds that they are able to use old chestnuts that might provoke not much more than a smile of recognition, as well as to update them and reward listeners' capacity to take pleasure from their expectations being toyed with. The first repeated pun I address is the use of the term "Bridge". In "About Cruises" it occurs in the

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midst of both simple and complex punning, whereby the first refers to two meanings being associated with the same word or word sound (homophone); here, the berth on a ship where one sleeps is played off a reference to Winterbottom's mother and her having given birth to him:

RF: I fell down once or twice. Did you have a good berth?

TH: Well, it's so long ago you'd better ask my mother.

RF: I mean what was your cabin like?

TH: It was on the starboard side. Did you sleep on the starboard side?

RF: I slept on my chest. I suppose you had lots of deck games?

TH: Oh, quoit, quoit. Did you have Bridge on your boat?

RF: The captain wouldn't let us play with it.

Here, bridge refers both to the card game and the control centre of the ship; the shift from the game meaning involves a wrench, since the game meaning is reinforced and reanimated by reference to "deck games" and the use of "quoit" for "quite". They establish a common world of reference points and play with those reference points to produce comic pleasure.

Another repeated pun is more of a "chestnut" (a venerable joke or pun which age has somewhat withered). In "Riding on A Camel" it occurs amongst a bundle of uses of Egyptian or vaguely Middle Eastern cultural reference points (to the pyramids, sphinx, Pharaoh, and Salome):

RF: Shut up! Here on the left is the Nile, and you must always hit the Nile on the head.

In "About Cruises" these reference points to popular knowledge about Egypt recur:

TH: I was very disappointed with Florence.

RF: Why?



TH: She didn't turn up. Oh did you strike the Nile?

RF: Yes, I hit the Nile on the head.

TH: How irrigating.

The Nile / nail chestnut is repeated but thicketed by other puns: Florence as place and female name, and the irrigation / irritation confusion. The Nile / nail pun, it is worth noting, is a typically a para-homophone (only a partial sound-alike). Its use may even refer to or resonate with particular English accents in which the Nile and nail sound similar. Such was the media and cultural prevalence of the cockney and (working class) London character who pronounce these words alike (for *them* they are homophones), that an extended series of connotations (what cockneys sound like and look like and the contrast between the prosaic cockney and the extraordinary Nile) might well follow from this denotation.

The third repeated pun to which I turn involves racier language, which provides some evidence of Buckham's claim about the 'saucy' jokes of the pair ([Buckham \*Daily Mirror\*, April 3, 1939](#)). In "Art", Murgatroyd and Winterbottom provide us with an example that also highlights the importance of what Cuddon calls the "tone colour" (1982, 699) of speech sounds:

TH: Of course, when I can afford it, I'm going to, er, in for alabasters.

RF I beg your pardon?

TH: I said, er, *alabasters*.

RF: Ooh! I'm going in for marbles.

TH: What's the matter with a game of shove-'appeney?

It is only when we see a repeated use of this creative para-homophone (rather than a simple pun where distinct words sound the same) that it becomes clear what the joke is. For example, in "About Cruises" we find the following dialogue:

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TH: Thank you. Is it right that they called you the Bar Steward's best customer?

RF: Yes, daddy! Anyway, I'm very glad I went.

In both cases what is being referred to is the word "bastard" – being born of unmarried parents – which was a violation of social norms amongst most classes in the UK of the 1930s (Haste 2002, 41). The hiddenness of the referenced quasi-homophone ensures the deniability of the utterances. In the first case it is merely the "bas" of alabaster and in the latter case the separated elements of the word Bar S[tew]ard assure the pun. In both cases, it might also signal men speaking to men, gendered affirmation of salty if coded language (you could not guarantee, with a recording, a male only audience). This salty language and the issues it codes for were banned by the Reithian BBC as providers of information, education and entertainment to the whole populace (Bingham 2009, 39). Through such puns, Murgatroyd and Winterbottom would ensure that they did not breach such bans when performing on air whilst giving their performances a subversive air.

The puns used by Murgatroyd and Winterbottom were also embedded in fast, vocally dextrous performances in which both performers were straight man *and* funny man and in which the puns intermingled with other word play such as alliteration and assonance. In "Art" for example we hear the following speedy interchange:

RF: Yes, once I start painting I stick to it!

TH: So do all the flies, I suppose?

RF: Do you like sculpture?

TH: Well, I was out on the bust last night. You know there's something very low in this modern sculpture.

RF: Usually the pedestal. I must admit I prefer the old stuff - look at Venus.

TH: Oh, she's quite 'armless. Then there's that boy throwing the discus.

RF: Oh, let's don't dis-cuss that.

TH: No.

RF: I love those enormous statues hewn out of granite.

TH: Carved out of stone.

RF: Modelled out of clay.

TH: Hacked out of chalk.

RF: Made out of ettin [not clear].

TH: Father out of sight.

RF: Mother out of sorts.

TH: Sister out of mind.

RF: Brother out of bounds.

TH: Gags out of book.

RF: Us out of work.

Both: ENOUGH!

The repetition of 'out of' with a range of different meanings at play – such as material manifestation, physical absence, discombobulation, absence without leave, plagiarism and unemployment – shows the richness of everyday language forms, which are revealed within the context of speedy performances and both gormless and more creative puns. The total seventeen comic constructions take only twenty eight seconds to perform, and the twelve "out of's" a mere twelve seconds. Recordings can of course afford to be more complex than live radio both because the released recording can be the best take and the recording is sold with the knowledge that it can be repeatedly listened to. The actual representations of women and foreigners and other countries (investigated below) sit within the format of the formally innovative and reflexive popular surrealism their high speed dialogues offer – seemingly unimportant compared to the form itself, but as we will see – articulating an agenda of sexism and national chauvinism.

## Representation of Women in Handley and Frankau's double act performances

Handley and Frankau's references to women across their performances socially situates them in relation to the changing social/cultural word and gendered social relationships between the two World Wars. Assumptions they make in their comic treatment of women include the automatic desirability of themselves (those they are performing "as" in each routine) as "eligible" males; their power to look at and assess women; and their assumption about the general authority and power of men over women. This is congruent with Bingham's findings that the popular press in the 1930s were increasingly organised and validated around a commercialised male gaze (2004, 151). In the case of their references to women, and as will become apparent later with respect to their reference to foreigners and experiences of being abroad, though absurd humour is still prevalent it is necessary to draw upon superiority theories of comedy to fully appreciate the superiority / inferiority being implied and asserted.<sup>3</sup>

Though wives appear in Murgatroyd and Winterbottom's performances and function as normative assurances of the men's masculine heterosexual normalcy, they are not the predominant representation of women in their songs and patter. Those representations function more as ongoing background assumptions and provide ways to set up social situations and activities to be referred to in the act. Reference to wives also manifest very few aspects of the housewife and mother discourses that Bingham found a key part of post-World War One modernity (2004, 19). Marriage did, however, remain a norm at this time (Gardiner 2011, 549; 559) and it was only in bohemian circles in which experiments in living might fundamentally challenge these norms (Nicholson 2003, 31-66). However seemingly trivial some examples appear, it is worth noting that "every public power arrangement depends upon the control of femininity and masculinity as concepts" (Boose 1993, 69). In "Riding on a Camel", Murgatroyd is looking for crocodiles near the Nile as "I want one for a bag for my wife". In "On the Continong", he is traveling in Europe "on my wife's recommendation"

(perhaps comically implying she wants rid of him). In “It’s a Pity”, both men refer to the wife of “a nouveau riche” who unfortunately ends up squashed under a steam-roller, and also to a jealous husband who suspects his wife of infidelity and who in his rage mistakenly kills another couple. In “Disarmament”, Winterbottom claims to “maintain” (pay her living expenses) Murgatroyd’s wife and he someone else’s. In “Art”, Murgatroyd “married a Miss Smith” in punning response to the listing of popular novelists they may have read

Much of Handley and Frankau’s reference to and discussion of women, however, has nothing to do with any fictional wives. I argue that it is in relation to their more general representation of women that they imply and assert specific, normative relations between men and women. For example, in “It’s a Pity”, Murgatroyd and Winterbottom reminisce about a game of tennis with two women:

TH: Don’t you remember we’ve played together and I won?

RF: Was I there, too?

TH: I think so.

RF: Well we both won. We were playing against these two girls. One was called Pansy.

TH: No, no, no – Nancy.

RF: Same thing! She had a fine pair of legs.

TH: A good thing too, the way she had to run about the court, because the other girl...

RF: Never came up to the bit of knitting at all.

TH: Knitting? [with emphasis]

RF: Yes, that crochet-work across the lawn.

TH: Oh you mean all those holes tied together with string?

RF: Yes, the, the net.

[...]

RF: It was a pity we didn’t finish that game

TH: Yes, what happened, I don’t remember?

RF: Why you said something that offended the girls - tennis nets to you or something.

TH: No! It was rackets to you, I said. [with quiet emphasis]

RF: Anyway, the girls blushed and walked off the courts.

The women – Nancy and Pansy (they do not entirely agree the name of the pair) – are treated as skilled enough at tennis to give them a testing doubles match. This perhaps refers to the increasing participation of women in tennis recognised at the national level by the success of British women tennis players in the 1930s (Winder 2016, 7-8; 37; 59; Bingham 2004, 70-74) and also to the activities of women as a striking means by which social change could be measured and symbolised (Bingham 2004, 48). Murgatroyd and Winterbottom are also seen as quite (comically) confused about the nomenclature of the game and thus are not actually straightforward heirs to masculine sporting superiority – though their concern in this sketch, however ignorant they appear, does involve a degree of self-identification with the manly heroes of male sports who were widely pictured and discussed in the press (Bingham 2004, 217). Women, however, are finally treated as adornments (“She had a fine pair of legs”).<sup>4</sup> They are also seen as *different* and inferior, blushing in response to the “strong language” of Murgatroyd and thus exhibiting emotion as opposed to the implied rationality of the men. There is also an implicit and bigoted reference to gay men in their attempts to remember the women’s names and Winterbottom’s claim that they “are the same thing” (pansies and Nancy boys). The homophobia of this sentiment aligns with Bingham’s work on a fear of effeminacy and a concomitant buttressing of traditional masculine virtues in the post-World War One world (2004, 21).

In the same performance Murgatroyd and Winterbottom discuss Winterbottom’s secretary in similarly deprecatory terms:

RF: Course, the best game is tennis.

TH: I agree! I agree! Mr Murgatroyd - providing you don't lose your amateur status.

RF: My secretary's lost hers. Because I'm first-class at tennis, are you?

TH: NO, I'm Pullman.

Amateur status was of great importance in many sports in Britain at that time with amateurism forming an important discourse in cricket, rugby, and (association) football, as well as in tennis itself. Amateurism implied not only a sporting but a positive social status (see Winder 2016, 41; 43; 198; Gardiner 2011, 713). However, here the secretary is implicitly being referred to as a prostitute (a professional). They continue - this time in song - to draw out a concluding moral (which does not, of course, strictly follow from the preceding):

[spoken]

TH: Ah, you never can judge a girl by what you hope she's going to be. For instance

[sung]

TH: A rich man met a chorus girl and thought she was divine

RF: He treated her to dances, and suppers and to wine

Both: It's a pity, it's a pity

Still he's really only got himself to blame

He bought her clothes and jewellery, two diamonds and a pearl

And murmured 'kiss me darling, for my heart is in a whirl'

And she said when she replied she was *not that sort of girl*

It's a pity, what a shame! Tch-tch-tch-tch-tch ... [tutting]

A hypocritical focus on women as objects of sexual interest that similarly judges them ("tch-tch-tch") for extramarital relations is also present in "Disarmament":

RF: Think of the women in this world!

TH: Oh, I do!

RF: They look to their governments with plea-ding eyes.

TH: What eyes?

RF: Pleading eyes!

TH: Oh, I see. Bloodshot eyes?

RF: What do they demand?

TH: Ali-mony.

RF: Who's he?

TH: Oh some Turkish admiral or somebody.

RF: Hah!

TH: Yes, it's up to you and me.

RF: And the man next door.

TH: Well he can play if he wants to. Yes, it's up to you and me and him to see that our women are clothed and fed.

RF: Well as long as they are fed!

TH: Yes, well that's the naked truth!

Women are positioned as objects of the sexual interest of men and the use of the pun for the oath "bleeding" associates their attempts to get men to answer their demands as the site of impassioned concern. These concerns are spoken in the style of contemporary political speeches or moral exhortations, and the modes of speech typical of both are foregrounded and self-consciously indicated through the call (and response) offered to what are, surely, rhetorical questions. Since these modes of speech would have become increasingly familiar both through radio and gramophone recordings and through awareness of the growth of a very large Peace movement in the 1930s, there would have been pleasure to be had in the juxtaposition of persuasive, moral speech for an absurd and disreputable purpose.

Women are also represented as supplicants, not citizens, relatively passive rather than active, as ex-wives not economic and domestic agents in their own right; as "*our* women" not their own persons. This is despite the fact that some women gained the vote in 1918 and



women's suffrage rights gained parity with men's in 1928. It is worth noting, however, that the weak pun on "alimony" raises the question of women ending marriages they are dissatisfied with. However uncommon divorce was in the interwar period, and however restricted it was to the wealthy, eager press coverage of divorce court cases did to a degree naturalise the idea and made its occurrence *seem* common (Bingham 2009, 142-43) and marriage itself a less solemn, and completely normative and binding institution.<sup>5</sup> As such, their representation of women – their desire to undermine and stereotype – reflects the social anxieties of the time with regards to women's increased rights in the social and political spheres. The comedy serves to place women as the Butts of the joke and reassert their inferior status in a manner that reflects a desperate bid to retain the upper hand.

#### Representation of foreign people and places in the universe of Handley and Frankau

There is both desire and repulsion as well as a quizzical response to foreigners and other countries expressed in their representations in Handley and Frankau's double acts. Foreign people and places frequently function in their work as the repository of the exotic, unusual and desirable. In "Casabianca", the pirate romance of the Spanish Main is contrasted with the profoundly more prosaic Dundee. In "Riding on a Camel" the seductiveness of Salome and her dance of the "dish cloths" marks the "Orient" as feminine and different (but also undercuts this by replacing the seven veils with the rather more prosaic dish cloth). Likewise, in "The Continong" ("the Continent" as they imagine it to be pronounced by a Frenchman) Wigan is contrasted, this time more defensively, with the delights, foods and smells of abroad. Handley affects a Lancashire accent so that Wigan contrasts aurally and not merely in verbal content with South's exposition of continental languages. "The Continong"

develops this desire-repulsion contrast much further as it fantasises about a future in which the channel tunnel (then only imagined) leads to regular trips abroad:

[Music, sung]

TH: Then you bet your life that everyone'll

Be over there, I do declare

Com ci, com ca, com ca, com ci, the Continong

We'll all be on the Continong

And parlez-vous the French au fond [unclear]

We'll drink vin blanc, la-la, the whole day long

RF: And entre-nous

[...]

We'll do the things we shouldn't do

And say tres bon, la-la, the Continong

"The Continong" is thus represented as the dangerous site of the pleasures of wine and sex ("the things we shouldn't do") and unlimited leisure ("the whole day long"). There is, however, a suspicion of these pleasures as they are partly manifested in unfamiliar food that cannot be trusted: "you see, they mix the soup with kerosene / and wash it down with gasoline / *I know*, I've been on the Continong" (my italics).

"About Cruises" plays out these concerns with less tension. The more controlled travelling of the offered by the cruise brings home comforts and comportment with them. They meet "charming people" on their separate cruises: the Leveson-Cholmondleys and the St. John Marjoribanks. The class belonging is signalled here by names famous for being spoken unlike they are written (and thus allowing for puns and word play galore). The cruise is much more a case of taking "home" with them and leads to a much more superficial

encounter with the country and its people, whereas, the trip to the “Continong” opened up the possibility of both desire and disgust.

“Disarmament” plays out a geopolitical scenario of Britain’s relations with other countries rather than individual trips abroad. They fear that the threat of war is barely controlled by a “languid League of Nations”. The dependency on a range of other countries implied by membership of the League of Nations (an intergovernmental organisation established in 1920 to prevent war) is colossal: the countries and cities of Prussia, Russia, Paris, London, Italy, Buenos Aires, Chile, Mexico, China and Japan are mentioned in the first twenty sung lines and a further fifteen countries and regions are mentioned – often in scathing terms (“scum of Scandinavia”) – before the end. Claims made about particular countries and regions are largely subordinate to the requirements of wordplay (the sentence continues “should build houses in Belgravia”), showing that alliteration and scansion are more important than particular geopolitical claims per se. However, the overall account is one of panic about the prospects for peace and great discomfort occasioning upon having to rely on so many foreigners in order to achieve said peace. Though many countries and groups are referred to as having to “make amends” and that “everybody’s got to play a part” there is no particular acknowledgment, let alone criticism, of Britain’s role in, or attitude towards, the League of Nations. There is, however, mention of the British role in the development and recognition of the Irish Free State though it is reduced to the personal relations between “J. H. Thomas [a British Minister] and [Eamon] de Valera” [an Irish Free State leader]. The British Empire is discussed only in terms of the personal issues of the skills and relationships of leaders: “If Churchill were but handy, to get the Goat of Gandhi”. Thus, questions of (imperial) power and interest are reduced to issues of personal motivation, skill and friendship rather than addressing questions of unequal power, dominance of the world’s resources and the aspirations of the poorer countries to become richer. Britain did not

dedicate itself to helping resolve these, then predominantly, European questions of military might being used to resolve conflicts both in Europe and involving European powers. Instead it preferred to defend its independent action with regard to its Empire and also depended quite concretely upon that Empire for access to material resources and markets. Access to both was perceived as providing marked advantages to Britain in the relations between nations. Pugh notes Britain's fundamental insularity in this period (2009, 393).

Murgatroyd asserts that what he wants is "peace" and hopes that weapons will be "turned into tools of peace." Peace movements gained huge memberships in the 1930s as the League of Nations was challenged by the rise of fascism and an increasing militarisation of foreign policy worldwide (Cortright 2008, 59-65; Gardiner 2009, 499-502). Though there were serious consequences in the real world of the 1930s to the eventual failures of peace movements, public debates concerning them provided a fruitful repository of puns for (Murgatroyd and Winterbottom) in their comic exploration of the use of biblical parables ("swords into ploughshares") and rhetorical speech-making of the contemporary peace movement:

RF: Anyhow do you know what we ought to do with our bayonets?

TH: I do!

RF: I'm afraid you don't see the point.

TH: Naturally not.

RF: Well we ought to turn them into ploughs.

TH: And scatter!

RF: Do you know what we ought to do with our calves?

TH: Yes, turn them into cows! But then do you know what to do with our cows?

RF: Yes, turn them into a field!

Both: Hoh-hoh-hoh ...

TH: Dear oh dear ...

RF: Yet every nation today, Mr Winterbottom, thinks in terms of bullets. Now what should we do with these bullets?

TH: Turn them into the same field as the cows?

RF: Think of the money spent on our weapons.

TH: I daren't.

RF: The *tools* of war should be turned into the *tools* of peace. [emphasis marked]

TH: Yes, and battleships into canoes!

RF: Shells should be put 'round the eggs again

TH: And every gun should be returned in a barrow to furnace [Barrow in Furness]

Murgatroyd and Winterbottom's solution to anxieties over war remains a personal one: "they ought to make it up and all be friends", thereby reducing the League of Nations' problem to one on a par with that of the heavyweight boxers "Max Baer and [Primo] Carnera": they could choose not to fight and be friends. Though simpler than the relation between nations, the relationship of the boxers is also an "absurd" image since both are professionals whose material financial interests would incline them to fight, and would hardly be counterweighed by any desire for amicable relations.

Handley and Frankau's performances manifest a form of popular surrealism, producing a high-speed, pun infested form of wordplay-centred comedy. Further, they manifest in comic form a whole cast of relations of dominance and subordination as relatively routine utterances. They accord women a lesser status than that accorded themselves and other men. They display desire and revulsion towards the exotic and a self-satisfied sense that Britain has little to answer for in geopolitical affairs and only a little to learn in terms of food and culture. For this latter aspect of their comic content the incongruity of their act gives way to a sense of politicised superiority. Handley and Frankau are able to articulate this superiority in part because it is also done with a degree of self-deprecation but also because

of the swiftness of their performances whereby the audience do not have time to round on them:

RF: Though nothing could be so absurd as us - agree if you've heard of us

TH: That our speed postpone our murders, nobody has time to bird us, if they could!

When they are making claims about the status of women or foreigners, their speed allows the seriousness of some of their assumptions and claims to be spared the full glare of attention. That speed allows for focussed pleasure in the punning, alliteration, assonance and tone colour of their voices in speech and song. This also allows their greatly subordinated representations of women and foreigners to be hidden from full view – often implied and suggested rather than directly asserted – enabling consequential prejudices to be reinforced and circulated.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, the following academic references to Handley's work on *ITMA*: Briggs 1970, 564-66; Crisell 1986, 161-62; Gorham 1952, 169, 226; Murphy 1992, 28; Williams 1996, 201-2. **Neil, are all of these in the bibliography? Please check, and add if not (same goes for all endnotes below)**

<sup>2</sup> They changed the name from Winterbotham to Winterbottom as a result of a letter of complaint from a listener who believed he would be identified with the character.

<sup>3</sup> For references to, and assessments of superiority theories of comedy see Carroll 2014, 8-16; Stott 2005, 131-134; Bevis 2013, 80.

<sup>4</sup> This occurred even in the case of the most successful female tennis players of the time. The British women's Wimbledon singles champion in 1934, Dorothy Round, was commented upon in a newsreel as possessing a "perfect slim and supple figure" rather than commented upon for her skill, strength, judgement or stamina (Winder 2016, 60).

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<sup>5</sup> For example, the divorce of Gracie Fields, the singer, stage and film star and recording artiste, was widely covered in the press in April 1939 (Pugh 2009, 143) and there appeared popular sympathy for her desire to start again.

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