

# SPEECH! SPEECH!

by A. R. D. FAIRBURN

FROM time to time onslaughts are made on New Zealand habits of speech—by teachers or visitors to these shores as a rule, but even in one recent instance, in the editorial columns of a newspaper. There are two things to be said at the outset about these critical attacks: first, that they are fully justified, and secondly, that they have no effect whatever.

One would think it would be a simple matter: demonstrate to a man that he is saying "foine" instead of "fine," and he at once corrects his pronunciation, as he might wipe a piece of egg or porridge off his chin when his attention was drawn to it. But this doesn't work. The mangling and maiming of vowels would seem, in practice, to be more like—what? Nail-biting? No, the analogy breaks down. Nail-biting is an involuntary habit. Nobody says, or implies, "I'm going on biting my nails, just to show you!" That, more or less, is the sort of attitude New Zealanders adopt, one feels, when they cling to their bad habits of speech in the face of continual criticism. What is the explanation?

Partly, I think, an innate feeling that the way a man speaks is an essential part of himself, and that to tamper with it is a sort of dishonesty, like putting the big strawberries on the top of the box, or an affectation, like wearing stovepipe trousers. Just so, we might imagine, one might object to giving too much attention to the cultivation of a moustache, or to taking lessons in the art of love-making. A certain healthiness and honesty of spirit underlies the New Zealander's refusal to brush up his vowels and consonants. Nevertheless, he is mistaken. If he can clear his mind of cant, and regard the whole matter in a detached and unselfconscious way, he will see that a

pleasant habit of speech is one aspect of good manners—and good manners do not imply affectation. On the contrary, they imply simplicity, naturalness and restraint (but not constriction). From another point of view, the use of one's voice is like the use of one's body—something in which one cultivates a certain degree of efficiency through exercise, without making a fetish of it.

This revulsion against what is taken to be affectation and "dog" has, I suggest, another aspect, which is a by-product of our unresolved colonialism. It arises from a self-conscious reaction towards England and Englishness. For the New Zealander, the speech of English people divides itself up into two sections: (1) The various local dialects, which are regarded as being without any special significance; the strongest feeling a New Zealander has towards Cockney or Lancashire speech is one of faint superiority, tinged with amusement; (2) "educated English" speech, which makes the New Zealander feel uncomfortable. He is conscious that a major social distinction, between upper and lower classes, is being manifested, and he instinctively disapproves of this situation. But he is not aware of the many fine distinctions maintained by Englishmen within the "educated" class, as ways of distinguishing members of sub-groups, repelling gate-crashers, and keeping clear the complicated anatomy of the English caste system. To his ear they all seem alike, and they all seem to be "trying too hard."

The New Zealander's instinct is right once again, up to a point. A great many "educated Englishmen" do speak with some sort of affectation. More often than not, they are unaware of doing so, because it is the result, not of individual initiative, but of conformity to the manners of a social group. Looked at

from the inside, it seems to the Englishman to be quite natural to do this. To the outsider—the New Zealander who is not strongly conscious of social distinctions—it appears to be affected and "prissy."

Amongst the varieties of "educated English" we find a large number of subtle variations in intonation and pronunciation. Some do nearly as much violence to the language as does New Zealand speech. But the New Zealander, to whom they all sound alike, tends to have one reaction—a fear of imitating them, of thus being guilty of "putting on dog." (Fear breeds, in due course, a measure of hostility.) He therefore clings to his own habits.

The only thing an intelligent and self-reliant New Zealander can do in the face of this situation is to be as objective as possible about it. Here is a list of typical pronunciations which he no doubt regards as being abhorrent:

fah	= fire
repawtid	= reported
Chemblin	= Chamberlain
todeh	= today
attityawd	= attitude
sairious	= serious
pwodocion	= production
pawleece	= police
Greht Broot'n	= Great Britain

Agreed that these are enough to set even artificial dentures on edge. Somewhere behind them lurks a desire to be exclusive, to draw aside the hem of the garment—in short, some species of social snobbery.

There is another kind of pronunciation adopted by New Zealanders (especially women) who consciously ape what they take to be the superior English manner:

praygramme	= programme
feeth, hape and cherrity	= faith, hope and charity



neh-oo	= no
mai tahn hahse	= my town house

Admittedly this sort of thing conduces to nausea. But if one dislikes both of the above types of pronunciation, what is one to say about this sort of thing as a possible alternative?

tempercher	= temperature
biologeeeee	= biology
fiaz or fleowz	= flowers
neow	= now
ice high	= I say
absloot	= absolute
crule	= cruel
twunny	= twenty
kymmunity	= community
yez	= years
Wullington	= Wellington
Choosdee	= Tuesday
feature	= future
jewing	= during
wold	= wild

To react from one to the other of these extremes is ridiculous. There is such a thing as Standard English, which lies apart from all such inflation or deflation of the currency of the spoken word. What more direct, simple, unaffected way of speaking have we heard than that of the Duke of Edinburgh?

I have been talking as if pronunciation were the heart of the matter. Intonation is even more important, but it is too difficult to deal with in cold print. All that need be said here is that the exponent of the N'Zillan accent might well abandon his sing-song, slightly hang-dog, corner-of-the-mouth way of speaking, which suggests partial or complete paralysis of the larynx, and learn something from the more clear-cut, confident and forthright manner of the "educated Englishman."

## DARTMOOR

MENTION Dartmoor to a New Zealander and he'll think first of the prison, but there is, of course, much more to Dartmoor than that. Twenty-two miles long, twelve miles wide, rising up to 2000 feet out of the middle of Devon, the moor is the last great wilderness left in England. In spite of buses and bulldozers, motors and machines, it still holds out against man: purple with heather in late summer, golden with furze or green with young bracken, but for most of the year brown and shaggy and rough as the coats of the moorland ponies which you will see, if you look closely, in the picture of Cherry Brook on the right.

In *The Last Wilderness*, a dramatised tour of Dartmoor to be heard from YA stations and 4YZ at 9.30 a.m. on Sunday, February 17, listeners will follow the experiences of a varied collection of people and see it through their eyes—a hiker and his girl friend lost in the swirling mists, a chatty motor-coach conductor acting as guide to a collection of holiday-makers, an escaped convict glad of the mist, with prison warders hunting him down; as well as other characters who provide local colour on this journey across the moor.

John Moore, who wrote *The Last Wilderness*, stayed on the moor for a fortnight while collecting material for the programme, and set out to investi-



gate it first by car, then by pony and finally on foot, which he discovered was the only practical way of getting about, at any rate in winter, when even the cleverest pony cannot cross the boggy places. "The November mists persisted and in fact I lost myself almost every day, sometimes by accident, and sometimes on purpose to see what it felt like," he wrote in the *Radio Times*. "Once or twice I was even a little frightened and perhaps I experienced something of what

a convict feels when he escapes in the moorland mist, even though I was not being hunted . . ."

The things that struck John Moore about Dartmoor were its immense loneliness and the slight impact man has made upon it. On several occasions he walked all day—alone with the Galloway cattle, the ponies, the horned Scotch sheep, the buzzards mewing like cats high above the tors—without seeing another human being.