

SWEATING out the question which might win him a free trip round the world, an overwrought contestant envied the quiz compère his mountainous calm and weight and majesty. He was deceived. Selwyn Featherston Toogood, quizmaster, was in an apprehensive lather. It wasn't so much that he stood to lose the equivalent of £1400; it was just that he wondered what on earth would happen next.

For the last six of his 41 years, Selwyn Toogood has put himself in this predicament two or three times a week. He hasn't exactly lost weight, but feels the need of a whisky or two (his choice), or a cup of tea (which he usually gets) to replace the lost perspiration. "I wouldn't," he swears, "enter one of my shows myself."

Though his second name commemorates Captain Toogood, a sea-going grandfather, who took to trade at Featherston last century, Selwyn first squeezed into New Zealand life at Wellington. Till he shifted out of town to Heretaunga five years ago, he had spent home, school and working life at the capital's centre.

The schoolboy Selwyn was apathetic about learning, and because of poor eyesight a failure at sport. "I played football as a forward," he says, "until I tried to pack down with some spectators, when they decided I should give it up." Out of school he "screamed round on bikes" like any city boy, sampling the delights of mountain and bush only as a tenderfoot in an urban troop of Boy Scouts. Burning down the wash-house while ironing his Scout hat caused a noticeable sag in his and the movement's prestige among the Toogoods.

Selwyn entered Wellington College in form 3B, subsided quietly into 4C, and left "more or less under a cloud" from 5D. Only the school cadets imposed a reassuring pattern on a confused world. He marched eagerly into Trentham Camp for his annual week's "barracks," and made vague plans for a career in the army. For the school, he did one good turn—he served as an example to worried parents. "We had a boy once who was completely wooden," declared a master recently. "He seems to have done all right." It was Selwyn he had in mind.

With his academic record, Selwyn found most of the skilled trades closed. He swept, dusted, and ran messages for a warehouse at 5/- weekly, less 3d Unemployment tax. The year was 1932. Warren, the eldest of his three brothers, introduced him to amateur theatricals, and he began spending most nights doing the multitudinous chores backstage. At 17 he made his debut, as a toff, complete with monocle, in *The Sport of Kings*. Under Leo du Chateau, of the Repertory Society, he learned patience and the ability to accept criticism. And flexibility. A Repertory production in 1936 required him to refer to the reigning monarch. One night he said Edward, the next night Albert, and the following night George. It was the throne rather than Selwyn that was slipping.

The next year found Selwyn performing, as one of the twins, in *One Man's Family*, the first and only radio soap opera produced in New Zealand. Selwyn enjoyed it, and the public enjoyed Selwyn, but unfortunately, he

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says, the sponsor went broke after 18 months. Even so, it was an inviting foretaste of the pleasures of broadcast fame.

Soon after, he gave up warehousing in favour of cinema management, distinguishing himself rapidly by presenting (unknowingly, he says) New Zealand's only uncensored screening of Sacha Guitry's risqué classic *The Cheat*. War broke out that year, and Selwyn was at the recruiting office the day enlistments opened. As each eye was tested he craftily covered only his bad one, but was rejected just the same as dentally unfit.

By February, 1940, Selwyn's dentist was richer and the army less exacting. He entered an N.C.O.'s course, and, when the 3rd Echelon found it was 35 officers short, took "pressure-cooked" training for a commission. He became a Second Lieutenant about the same time the 3rd Echelon discovered it was actually 35 officers over, but he sailed with the unit nevertheless. He served in Greece, and—till the flip of a coin took half his unit Egypt-wards before the battle—in Crete. High casualties among those who lost the toss led indirectly to quick promotion. He jumped straight from Second Lieutenant to Captain, and became ammunition officer at the New Zealand Divisional Headquarters. He was mentioned in dispatches for the effective way he supplied ammunition to the artillery for the barrage which opened the Battle of Alamein.

When the fighting finished, Selwyn decided peacetime soldiering looked pretty dull, and that with so many army friends theatre management would not be a paying proposition for his employers. Most of a five-month furlough in 1944 had been spent performing in radio plays for the NZBS, and even on the homecoming troopship in 1946 he had been in show business. He conducted his first quiz programme in the well-deck of the Tamaroa at sea, and rather enjoyed the sensation. He decided to remain in the public eye, earning an erratic living from performances in radio plays and variety shows. Relieving as 2ZB's breakfast-session announcer, he followed progress in loosing the Wanganella from Barrett's Reef from an eyrie on Beacon Hill, and after patient hours of waiting caught the dramatic moment when she was freed. Casual work for the National Film Unit involved speaking the verse commentary for the now-famous *Coaster*, and a great many unpoetic commentaries on Rugby and racing. These had to be read from a script. "With my eyesight," he says disgustedly, "it's hard enough following my own bloody horse."

Comedians who turn serious must expect to draw laughs in the wrong places, but in his Repertory work Selwyn weathered the prayer scene in *The Barretts of Wimpole Street* without raising a titter, and went on to further dramatic roles in *Born Yesterday*, *Othello* and *Dear Ruth*. Embarrassing at other times, his weight (at 22 stone, he was "Tiny" for his time in the army) gave him a huge advantage in stage presence, though it kept him out of romantic roles. Offstage, however, his gallantry with the fair won him the

hand of Cynthia Holden Webb, formerly of Nelson, a theatre sister at Hill Street Hospital. They married in 1948, Cynthia providing one of the few constant elements in what Selwyn calls the "hazardous and perilous" life of a radio casual worker.

In 1951, Selwyn joined the big business of soap sales, and now spends 15 weeks annually darting from place to place in a Ford ranch wagon to record his shows. By no great coincidence, he is usually to be found in the South Island at high summer, and around the Bay of Islands when the game-fishing season opens. But every mile of the 55,000 he has covered in the last two years is regretted. Selwyn is a home-loving character who mows the lawns, lays the lino, and has bought a set of power tools with the aim of becoming the compleat do-it-yourself man. People can't understand it, he says, but he really likes to stay at home at nights with his wife and two boys, Christopher, eight, and Philip, five. He entertains little, preferring to play Samba (a game like Canasta) or Scrabble in the enclosed stillness of family affection. A good husband and father, he is not the "scream to live with" that some of his fans believe. Nobody, he thinks, could live at the peak of alertness demanded by his shows. He is often caught by the occasion with his equip unready.

Selwyn still finds time for amateur theatricals. He acts partly with an eye to future TV stagecraft; partly just to relax. The professional stage has sometimes beckoned, and the consensus is that he would make good there. But he is convinced that professionals must act all the time, on stage and off. He prefers to remain split: the confident showman, clowning his way through his radio half-hours; and afterwards, the quiet worshipper at the shrine of home and family. Unable to buy a shoelace without his bulky figure drawing comment from bystanders, he feels the need of some protective shell.

On the air, Selwyn's darkest moments come when entrants miss their questions and he feels he is losing control of the show. Yet he dislikes seeing brilliant quiz minds in his programme. Such people have less need of the prizes, he thinks, and the human attribute he most dislikes is greed. After seeing thousands of people at the mike, he sets great store by a sense of humour, but finds it in regrettably short supply. New Zealanders do not readily laugh at themselves.

Neither does Selwyn, frequently, but he easily could. He sees himself whole, without the delusions of grandeur that commonly plague showmen. His big ego is not self-inflated, nor sustained by mock modesty. He knows he would be hard to replace, but likewise that the public is fickle and no man irreplaceable. The crowd's plaudits are welcome; they mean his show is going well. Yet the impression remains that he could board the cabin cruiser it is his ambition to own, take himself (and, of course, his family) away from it all, and be perfectly at ease if he never



Spencer Day photograph saw a microphone, an audience, an anxious prize-seeker, or a packet of soap ever again.

—A.S.F.

(Next week: Noeline Pritchard)