

WERE THEY REPRESSED?

By
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Yet Spelling Bee Fans Find Amusement In Their Battles

PSYCHO-ANALYSTS say that if Hitler hadn't been a small, thwarted, repressed little boy, very fond of his mother, he would not be buccaneering about Europe today. They say that his swash-buckling and grandiose methods are due to the small boy's desire to show his mother what a big strong man he could be if he liked.

It's a strange world that ties up the fate of Europe with the petticoats of a dead woman.

I WONDERED if the psycho-analysts would trace back the strange desire of the more ordinary people of New Zealand who go in for spelling-bee competitions on the air to the desire to show their mothers how good they could be at spelling if they tried.

All over New Zealand, sitting in horse-shoe circles for luck—"For you need a bit of luck in a spelling bee!" I was told—groups of people meet in the studios of the NCBS one evening a week to let themselves be put through a rigorous test in spelling. They do it at 1ZB, 2ZB, 3ZB, and now they are to do it at 4ZB.

They have gone back to school for amusement.

Infinite Variety

"It is very definitely competitive," Charles Thomas, the schoolmaster of this mixed class at 2ZB, told me last week, "and it is certainly good fun."

In his class he has people of all ages and both sexes. They range from youngsters of 12 to Harbottles of 70.

ON spelling nights they sit round him in the horse-shoe circle. The microphone, that will magnify their triumphs and failures for thousands to hear, hangs in the middle.

The people in the circle all have the same intent look on their faces. It is a battle they are to wage, a battle against each other, and especially against the man in the centre, who—alas for human fallibility—must always win.

Because why? Because all that Thursday morning he has been in the public library buried behind a pile of volumes of the Shorter Oxford Dictionary digging up words that will grow steadily harder to spell as the 12 minutes of the session go

WARFARE in words is waged at night in the studios of the Commercial stations in New Zealand. Sitting in a horseshoe circle for luck, intent competitors ranging from schoolboys to septuagenarians, fight always a losing contest against the man who catches them out. But they like it.

by. And the difference between him and his clientele is that he knows all the answers.

He has looked up some 3000 words since the session began a few months ago.

THE circle watch him as he begins. There is a dear

old lady of seventy who is going to be knocked out with the first word. There is a clergyman, and an M.A. student aged 22. Near them sits a scrubby little man whom they wouldn't let into the office at first until he became very annoyed. There is a schoolboy or two.

There is a man in a Government office who is going to be floored by a word that night and next morning is going to be chaffed about it all day by his colleagues in the office. "Spell fulfilment," they are going to say to him all next day. "I say, old man, would you mind spelling fulfilment for me?"

One man who regularly arrives for the session tells the Spelling Bee Man that he has never had any education, but nevertheless he has won the prize twice.

The Test Begins

AS each man is given the word to spell he is told the meaning of it. The word is repeated twice. The candidate is required to spell it within a reasonable time. When he is given the word, the speller stands up and spells it into the microphone. At the first sign of error the gong clashes, but each speller has two "lives."

Meanwhile, the Spelling Man has to use his judgment. He has only 12 minutes for his session and by the end of that time he has to eliminate every competitor but one.

FIRST he starts with reasonably easy words, and it is only when he finds that he still has a lot of spellers in at the end of eight minutes that he begins to use the more difficult words.

Sometimes he passes the same word on from speller to speller, unless it has an obvious alternative. For instance, if someone is gonged for spelling expense with a "c," it would be a gift to pass it on to the next person. Obviously the alternative is "s."

HE likes the simpler, trickier words, like "plebeian." It is astonishing to find how many people leave out the second "e." When I asked him for a list of his pet words, he gave me
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"SPELL IT!"

... Says Charles Thomas in the studio of 2ZB.