

The World Knows or Thinks it Knows

that

Scotsmen are mean.

The Irish are improvident.

Welshmen are untrustworthy.

Englishmen are reserved.

But

It's all Wrong!

Read what Dr. C. E. Beeby said
on the subject from 3YA

I FEEL that I am on dangerous ground to-night. When one talks about the differences between the mentalities of different nations, it is easy to make sweeping statements. The only trouble is that they are generally wrong. All the world knows, for instance—or thinks it knows—that the Scotsmen are mean, that the Irish are improvident, that you can only trust a Welshman as far as you can see him, and that the typical Englishman is silent and reserved and hides himself behind a newspaper in a railway carriage.

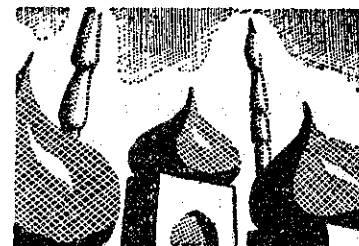
As a basis for funny stories, these generalisations are quite satisfactory, but I'm afraid that they don't work in practice. We have all known plenty of generous Scotsmen and plenty of thrifty Irish, and not a few reliable Welshmen. And as for the Englishman's strong, silent, Clive-Brookishness, I have had too many railway journeys ruined by his constant chatter to place much faith in his silence. I remember once starting on the deck of a steamer at Rarotonga watching the behaviour of the passengers getting off the gangway into the lighter, and of the natives working the boats. Somehow one always thinks of natives of any kind jabbering and fussing. But on this occasion the English and American tourists were squawking and squealing like so many magpies. The natives stood as rigid and solemn as Clive Brook himself, perfect public school Englishmen to the backbone.

That's the trouble with all generalisations about natural character. There are too many exceptions for any sweeping generalisation to mean much. And yet, of course, there are very real differences between the behaviour and outlook of different nations.

When arguing with my economist friends I sometimes take the example of the Mexican peasant to show that economic laws depend upon the character of a people.

The American owners of silver mines in Mexico considered that the output per man was not great enough. So they doubled the wages of the Mexican peasants who had been persuaded to work in the mines. For the first week all went well. But in the second week nobody turned up at the mines. Why should they? They had enough in the first week to keep them for two weeks and so they spent the second week in feasting. From then on they worked only half-time.

Now that is a point of view that is almost



inconceivable to the average New Zealander. Most of us would have shifted into a larger house, or paid a deposit on a radio, or bought a car, or put the extra money in the bank.

Not so the Mexican peasant. Utterly devoid of ambition, of any real money sense, or of desire to hoard possessions, he wants to earn just enough to live on. To work for anything further is to him sheer madness.

But there again, you see, you are up against a difficulty. Even the generalisations that I have been making about Mexicans are probably utterly wrong as regards some of them. There are almost certainly ambitious Mexicans just as there are lazy and improvident New Zealanders. That is, we can't say that every New Zealander is more energetic and more ambitious than every Mexican. At the very most we can only say that there is a tendency for New Zealanders to be more energetic than Mexicans. In the same way the Scottish may possibly tend (although I don't say it here) to be more careful on money matters than the English, but there still remain many generous Scots and many mean Englishmen.

ANOTHER trouble is that we don't know how far the Mexicans' laziness and the Scotsman's carefulness depend upon some in-born character and how far upon the climate and traditions of the countries in which they live. Might a Mexican be more energetic if he lived in a harder climate, and a Scotsman more careless of money if he lived in a softer one?

Take a single example: There are fairly well recognised differences between the characters of the English and the French. Now suppose every English baby were spirited away at birth and changed with a new-born French baby. In a generation or two all the inhabitants of England would be of French extraction. But would they behave like Englishmen or like Frenchmen? It's a pretty problem. I, for one, don't know the answer. For one thing they would all speak English. But would they remain chiefly Protestant instead of Catholic? Would they drink their wine at pavement cafes in Piccadilly or would they fight pitched battles over Prohibition like true Englishmen? Would their music-halls be as pure and dull as ours, or as cheekily attractive as Folies Bergere? That is to say, how much of the (Continued overleaf.)



Typical Mexican peasants. The average Mexican is utterly devoid of ambition, and to work for anything further than to secure enough to live on is to him sheer madness.