

Book Reviews

The Great Barrier Reef, by Isobel Bennett. Warne, £5.95.

To the world of marine biology the Great Barrier Reef has long been famous for its immense diversity of underwater species. Yet when my wife and I visited it only 16 years ago, and put our faces under water with masks and snorkels for the first time to see a whole new world of colourful life, it was surprisingly difficult to buy any equipment locally or find anyone to take us out on to the reefs. The idea that ordinary people, other than scientists, fishermen or keen young divers with spear guns could enjoy this immensely beautiful spectacle simply had not dawned on the average Australian.

Two years ago the Australian internal airlines introduced package tours for the first time. For people living in Melbourne a holiday in Queensland has to be compared with a holiday in the South of Italy or Greece for a Londoner. Now the Queensland coast is being rapidly developed and the wonders of the Reef are being exploited by a burgeoning tourist industry. And this is only one of the pressures on the coral environment. The importance of conservation is at last beginning to concern many Australians, and vigorous effort is now being directed against any human activities that may harm this fabulous wonder of the world.

In this and other contexts, Isobel Bennett's book is of the greatest importance. Most directly it will help people to learn and understand about the wonderful things they can see above and below the tideline. I know of no better book as an introduction to this unique part of the world.

The history, geography, reef formation, island vegetation, tidal system and weather patterns are all covered, and there is a wealth of information on the shore birds and mammals, corals and fishes. There are good maps and fantastic photographs both in colour and black and white. As a scientist Isobel Bennett writes authoritatively on marine biology but this book is not just for the scientist. Everyone who visits the Barrier Reef should read it, and will, I am sure, enjoy it.

PETER SCOTT

The Seychelles, by Guy Lionnet. David & Charles, £2.95.

Guy Lionnet is well-qualified to write about the Seychelles, having served for ten years as Director of Agriculture in the Seychelles Government. His book comes at an opportune time when these beautiful islands, now accessible by air, will be increasingly visited. It is designed, in fact, for the intelligent visitor and gives an accurate account of the historical, political, economic and social background, while mentioning also the chief attractions for the tourist, with photographic illustrations. Previous writings about the Seychelles have been mostly either of a scientific nature or in the form of descriptive and evocative reminiscence. The present unpretentious work falls into neither of these two classes and undoubtedly fills a gap. The chapters on the early French settlements and their aftermath are well done and contain much interesting information not easily accessible elsewhere, but the book does not set out to be a full-scale history nor yet a detailed guide-book; it is instead a useful compromise between the two.

The human history of the Seychelles is after all a matter of 200 years or so and is of a pattern with many parallels elsewhere. It is their natural history which is unique. The author is a naturalist of distinction and has included, as one might expect, a chapter dealing with the more remarkable

of the fauna and flora, many of them endemic and some so rare as to be in danger of extinction. It is unfortunate, if inevitable, that the book's scope should have precluded a fuller treatment of this aspect as he has much to tell us which he has not had the space to set down. One of the species most endangered is the magpie robin or 'pie chanteuse' on Frigate. It would be interesting to know whether expert opinion has ruled out the possibility of establishing this bird in the recently-formed Cousin Island sanctuary. To compensate for the brevity of this chapter it might be possible in a later edition to expand the section in the bibliography which relates to it. There is, for example, only a passing reference to the expeditions led by Professor Stanley Gardiner under the auspices of the Percy Sladen Trust. The 142 reports on these expeditions published in the Transactions of the Linnean Society of London are a mine of information for those interested in the fauna of Seychelles.

OXFORD AND ASQUITH

Life on Coral Reefs in the Seychelles, by Peter Vine.

If one is looking for an earthly paradise, one can more easily find it on one of the Seychelles than anywhere else, especially one of those removed from Mahé, the capital and aptly bearing a name such as Frigate, Silhouette, Curieuse, Praslin, Cousin and Cousine. And beyond these jungle-covered granite islands that support a wealth of wildlife, in the air on the land and in the sea, are the faraway coral atolls, Cosmoledo and the Amirantes.

The combination of true tropical islands and coral atolls has produced a unique richness and diversity in the living world of coral. Cousteau has written that the Seychelles are not particularly well endowed so far as coral reefs are concerned, but Peter Vine was not looking through the eyes of a writer and photographer seeking the dramatic. He was a scientist and recorder seeking—and I believe he found—a very special field for research, a complete ecosystem which reflects its existence in his recording. He gives information on just about every life form in the Seychelle sea, covering the structure of a coral reef, its life and death, animals and plants, worms and crustaceans, molluscs and echinoderms and of course, fish.

During my recent visit, on a diving and filming expedition, I found myself continually turning to Vine's book to check on a name of some sea creature or to seek inspiration for a particular film sequence, either from the text or from the superb variety of colour plates, more than thirty, by Walt Deas, an Englishman who emigrated to Australia for the love of diving and photography.

This is a book to assure any 'fish watcher', whether a qualified marine biologist or just plain interested, that he, or she, will find life on the coral reefs in the Seychelles.

LEY KENYON

Azraq: Desert Oasis, by Bryan Nelson. Allen Lane, £6.

No more different biotope could be imagined for a seabird specialist, with considerable field experience in the Galapagos Islands in the eastern Pacific, than the oasis of Azraq, on the north-western edge of the great deserts of Arabia, as I can vouch for myself, having visited both. But it is the hallmark of a good ecologist to be equally at home in diverse environments, and *Azraq: Desert Oasis* proves to be just as good as *Galapagos: Islands of Birds*, the fruit of Dr. Nelson's previous sojourn.

Azraq is indeed a fascinating place, never more so than when the great tides of Palaearctic bird migrants flood through it twice a year. Bryan Nelson not only deals comprehensively and readably with the wildlife,