

Book Reviews

Mato Grosso by Anthony Smith. Michael Joseph, £5.00.

Anyone who has flown over the Amazonian wilderness could be forgiven for thinking that its very immensity guaranteed it against destruction. For hour after hour the monotony of the closely woven tapestry of treetops is broken only by the meandering rivers. Or so it was until recently when long, thin gashes appeared in the green as the surrounding countries, aided by modern technology, began to drive roads into this greatest of tropical forests. Along these new arteries the squatters come, fanning out on either side to clear plots with axe and fire, moving on again in a couple of years when the soil has become impoverished or when large enterprises take over, adding bulldozing to the slash-and-burn technique to clear ranches the size of an English county, heedless of the erosion to come.

Invited by the Brazilian Government, the Royal Society and the Royal Geographical Society organised a team of scientists of many disciplines to study a still virgin area alongside the greatest of these penetration roads, eventually to link Brasilia with Manaus. Anthony Smith, the chronicler of this expedition, portrays the twilight of an ancient wilderness before it succumbs to the relentless march of our civilisation – the forest with its birds, beasts, plants and also its primitive tribesmen. The Xingu National Park has been set aside in a desperate effort to protect the last tribes – but can the wild men of the forest survive even in a Whipsnade the size of Wales?

The expedition's work included geography, soil, water, botany, zoology, medicine, anthropology; it required great skill to weld these diverse studies into a compact whole, and good writing to leave me wishing that this long story has been even longer. The lavish colour photographs are, appropriately, 'out of this world'.

G.T. CORLEY SMITH

Beyond the Frontier by Arthur Swinson. Hutchinson, £2.50.

This is the life-story of F.M. Bailey, distinguished naturalist and explorer, the man who first collected the Himalayan subspecies of the blue poppy named after him, *Meconopsis baileyi*. But he was many other things besides – soldier, political officer, linguist, secret agent – it all makes good reading. Bailey himself wrote three books about his adventures, but it is good to have their substance retold in a single volume. The glamour of his exploits, some bordering on the fantastic, tends to obscure the solid achievements of a varied life and the potential value of his expert knowledge of Tibet (he became a personal friend of the Dalai Lama). In 1904 he went with Younghusband's military expedition to Lhasa. In 1911 he made a trans-continental journey from Peking to Assam. In 1913 he was in Tibet exploring the course of the Tsangpo (or upper Brahmaputra). In the First World War he was wounded in Flanders and on Gallipoli before being sent on a mission to Tashkent. There he was eventually compelled to go underground to avoid the attention of the revolutionaries; emerging later with an Albanian identity he managed to enrol in the Bolshevik counter-espionage service – being then assigned to the task of finding himself! He was later British Resident in Sikkim and then the first British Minister to Nepal.