

Book Reviews

A Different Kind of Country by Raymond F. Dasmann. Macmillan, New York, \$5.95.

With this restrained philippic against the Gadarene tendencies of his countrymen in the latter half of the twentieth century, Ray Dasmann finally assumes the mantle of Aldo Leopold, which has been growing on him for some time. Conservation badly needs its prophet, and Frank Fraser Darling, the other major candidate, still has not distilled his wisdom into the book that we know is in him. I am not forgetting Lewis Mumford, a major prophet indeed, but one who was driven into the wildlife and conservation field by pressures in the social sciences. What we have not had until now is a prophet driven by pressures within the field of wildlife to synthesise his philosophy into an ecology of man.

A Different Kind of Country is a book that will stand re-reading. Its central theme is the need to preserve diversity in the future environment of mankind, at a time when all the technological pressures are towards a deadening uniformity of concrete buildings and plastic grass. For ultimately the only uniform habitat is the desert, and only very specialised groups of men, the Beduin, the Eskimos, and some modern city-dwellers, have been able to adapt themselves satisfactorily to desert life. The prospect before us is a menacing one, no less than the progressive destruction of the human environment, the air we breathe, the water we drink, the food we eat, the places where we live and recreate ourselves, by technological development and its concomitant wastes. Eventually, man being a thinking as well as a highly conservative animal, these trends will be reversed, though doubtless too late to save the world as we know it today, with its multi-form diversity of habitat and wildlife. The dawning of that moment of truth in the collective consciousness of mankind has been notably advanced by Ray Dasmann's book.

RICHARD FITTER

Penguins by Bernard Stonehouse. Barker, 21s. (USA: Golden Press, New York.)

Three cheers for the unconstipated scientist, the man who without sacrificing the integrity of his discipline is prepared to write popularly about his subject. This is a splendidly unstuffy treatment of a splendidly unstuffy group of animals. The blurb about the 'World of Animals' series, of which this is the latest one to appear, gives the impression that each book is about one species. But this volume, and presumably the Ken Backhouse one to come, on seals, is concerned with groups of closely related species. Editor Winwood Reade please note. The blurb about *Penguins* is refreshingly objective, and the ten lines about the author very modest. He must be one of the world's top ten students of the family of birds that itself is undisputed 'Top of the Avian Pops'.

The book is well illustrated with twenty-one line drawings and maps and seventy photographs, 16 in colour. It is difficult not to express a little disappointment at the reproduction of the colour plates, which is not up to the modern standard, and I would like to have seen a better photograph of a penguin under water than the one on page 27, which could easily have been obtained through a glass tank at either Len Hill's *Birdland* in Gloucestershire, or in Frankfurt Zoo. But this is a small point.

Bernard Stonehouse tells us that penguins are neither rare nor exclusively polar. The eighteen or so species are, however, confined to the southern hemi-

sphere, the northernmost population just reaching the equator at the Galapagos. Only three species nest entirely in ice and snow. The biggest known colony is of ten million chinstraps recently reported from Zavodovski Island in the South Sandwich group. These are just a few of the fascinating facts that emerge. Another is that, up to 1947, only two emperor colonies were known to science. In the last 20 years another 18 have been found. One of them was discovered by the author, but by a stroke of irony this very colony – and only this one – is *not* marked on the distribution map on page 20.

But this is the tiniest of blemishes in an absolutely excellent little book, well worth the guinea asked. On a month's trip to Chile and the Antarctic I found it a useful, colourful, readable and succinct summary of our knowledge of this family.

JEFFERY BOSWALL

Thorburn's Birds edited with an introduction and new text by James Fisher. Ebury Press and Michael Joseph, 50s.

Birds of Australia 2 Vols and Birds of Europe 2 Vols, by John Gould, text by Abram Rutgers. Methuen, 35s. each volume.

To a young student of painting, one of the great discoveries is the sudden ability to recognise the work of an artist without reading the signature. Among my first was Archibald Thorburn. His four-volume *British Birds* in the school library became a sort of bible to me. His integrity and accuracy were so great in my eyes that if I happened to see a wild bird that differed in some small way from the Thorburn illustration, I supposed without question that I had seen some sort of freak. Now that I have looked at all these familiar pictures again the veneration still persists even though many skilled modern painters have extended the tradition with their own original and welcome interpretations.

Thorburn's birds had feathers on. One could sense how they would feel to the touch and how different that would be from the textures of their background rock, mud, sand or tree bark. Yet like so many painters before and since his sketchbooks were often more exciting than his finished work.

Thorburn must surely be the greatest illustrator of birds this country has ever produced – a sort of British answer to Audubon, a scientifically-minded genius with a great sense of the decorative, a certainty of hand and a complete mastery of his medium. But there is a paradox that seems to date him by reflecting not just his own attitude but that of his period's ornithologists towards the birds they studied. The essential and peculiar capability of birds is flight, yet scientists avoided this aspect of bird movement as strenuously as Thorburn avoided it in his pictures. When he took the plunge he seemed out of his depth as though he knew full well he were attempting something neither he nor his contemporaries fully understood. Perspective often went wild. The feathers on the outstretched wings were feathers indeed but seldom were they feathers that now supported a body aloft or responded to the aerodynamic forces of the moment.

That such skill and understanding should have missed these things makes him a tradition and an era in one and sets Archibald Thorburn as a great milestone in the broadening treatment of birds as subjects to paint. James Fisher's new text has transformed the four-volume collector's item into a modern reference book on bird status and distribution while re-presenting all the wealth of the original plates. One may now call off the search for second-hand copies of *British Birds*; if one ignores sentiment, *Thorburn's Birds* is much more useful and costs only 50s.