

THE BIOLOGY OF BEEF PRODUCTION

Farming for Beef

By Dr. Allan Fraser. (Agricultural and Horticultural Series.) Pp. 144+24 plates. (London: Crosby Lockwood and Son, Ltd., 1950.) 10s. 6d. net.

IN these days of meat shortages, a book which not only gives facts about the industry but also makes concrete proposals for increased production should prove most useful.

There is no attempt to deal with the handling of the meat after slaughter, and in this respect some of the proposals made will possibly need further extension. As a protagonist of beef production, Dr. A. Fraser is a little hard on the milk producer in Great Britain, the reason being perhaps, as he remarks, the Milk Marketing Board has been so highly successful in promoting production and collection that it has induced producers to turn over from unorganized beef to well-organized milk production. He suggests as a remedy a Meat Marketing Board. As an example of one of the problems with which such a Board would have to deal is the fact that pasture as and where it grows—not living in the south of England the author forgets lucerne, the beef producer in the Argentine—should be the mainstay of converting the raw material into finished beef. Grass will produce cheap beef and plenty of it; but the seasonality of this production would need cold-storage facilities. In the past the home producer in Great Britain has been mistaken in rejecting the enormous marketing advantages afforded by refrigeration in order to secure a price premium of fresh over frozen meat, a premium ever tending towards progressive reduction. In discussing the relative merits of summer and winter fattening, it is pointed out that the extension of ley farming has offered the ploughed-in ley as a substitute for muck in the maintenance of soil fertility and humus content.

Throughout, Dr. Fraser raises a number of important scientific problems which have still to be answered. Why should the fattening value of grass decrease in the autumn, even when the amount remains plentiful and the fibre content low? Why do new grass leys fatten cattle so much better than old pastures on the same soil?

There is an excellent account of the biological and ecological principles underlying hill and marginal land farming. The over-riding biological character of hill pasture is its seasonality, and its stocking capacity is at present limited by the season of its most limited growth, namely, winter. As a result of this low rate of stocking in summer, deterioration sets in as a consequence of its not being fully grazed—a condition not dissimilar to the veldt of Africa. The author considers that this hill land should be married to marginal land in the area, which would provide food for the hill stock in winter.

There are biological principles buried in the wisdom of the cattle dealer which the professional biologist would do well to explore. The way an animal will respond to feeding depends on its past nutritive history as well as on its actual weight and the rations fed. Calves which are reared on a high plane of feeding thrive on poor feed later, in contrast to those which have been reared on a low plane. While everyone admits that the supply of milk to children has developed their growth potential, and that if the calf flesh is once lost it can never be regained,

why is it that Great Britain is filled with the pitiful lamentations of bovine 'Oliver Twists' asking for more? This is one of the causes of poor beef production to-day.

The geneticist, too, will find much of interest, not only in the very candid description of the good and bad qualities of the different breeds, but also as regards the characters inherited in first crosses; such as the dominance of hardiness in crosses between hill and lowland breeds and the possibility of bringing hardiness and early maturity a little closer together by a combination of genetics and nutritional environment.

Altogether this is a stimulating book written with cut and thrust in non-technical language.

JOHN HAMMOND

THE NOMAD ARAB

The Arab of the Desert

A Glimpse into Badawin Life in Kuwait and Sau'di Arabia. By H. R. P. Dickson. Pp. 648+56 plates. (London: George Allen and Unwin, Ltd., 1949.) 63s. net.

COLONEL H. R. P. DICKSON'S great book on the nomadic and the semi-nomadic Arab of Arabia should be in every official and club library in the Middle East; and it should be there not for the dilettante administrator whose career is to be built on a pile of minutes and memoranda, but for the man whose task it is to live with the Arab on terms of mutual friendship and understanding and for those who would appreciate his high and enduring civilization. For the civilization of the nomad Arab is superior to that of most settled races of the Middle East. It far transcends that of any other nomad race. Its customs, which have the effect of laws, are the fount of chivalry and justice in their code, if not always in their practice. More than the North American Indian, far more than the Mongol nomad, be he from the Arctic or the Far East, the Arab has risen above his environment. From his wandering home in the most terrible desert in the world has come Wahabism (one of the purest religions), one of the most expressive and far-spread languages, and an art of living at once unique and sufficient. The Arab is warmly human; he loves the beauty of a swinging tassel, the grace of his long-lipped vessels of copper and brass, the simple but perfect design of his handleless cups, and the barbaric power of ornament in necklace, saddle and sword.

To learn the structure of a civilization such as this takes more than most people can spare of time and travel. Colonel and Mrs. Dickson have neither spared time, travel nor themselves. Here is the whole equipment of the nomad, clearly described and beautifully illustrated. Here are the tents in which Abraham lived, the ropes which he made and the knots which he tied in them. Here is the camel litter in which Sarah rode. Here is the fountain of the arts which conquered half a world and made a glory of North Africa and Spain. Nor is this a heavy anthropological treatise, but a book for everyone, and not least for the boy who, tired perhaps of the vanished Redskin, may well delight now in the vigorous Arab of the great sands, with his black tents, his gracious ladies, his swift camels, his horses—the most beautiful animals in the world—his hounds and his hawks.