

## Book Reviews

**Africa, A Natural History**, by **Leslie Brown**. Hamish Hamilton, 5 Guineas.

It is a long time since I recall reading a book with so much pleasure as this large and magnificently illustrated volume. In the first place, it is no small challenge to write a satisfying book on the natural history of a continent, especially a continent embracing the stupendous, the extremes, the variety and the immense area of Africa; but those who know Leslie Brown take for granted his courage in such a task, for we know some of the things he has tackled during his quarter of a century in the Colonial Service in Africa.

Leslie Brown was concerned with agriculture, the science of which tends to give its followers a curiously slanted and pragmatic view of a country and its natural history. Happily, he was a naturalist first and an agricultural officer second, a combination and order which gives, perhaps, the most observant eye and fact-relating mind to a scientist. Brown's eye and mind hold no illusions, so despite his immense zest and enthusiasm, he is neither starry-eyed nor evangelical. He knows that Africa is very old, that man has been almost everywhere in Africa at some time since ever there were men, that man is the great destroyer of Africa, especially within the last half century since the colonial powers carved up the continent and fostered a rapid increase of population to levels Africa can scarcely maintain. "Forests are cut down, savannas and grasslands burned, wild animals wastefully slaughtered, and steppes degraded to near-desert by the too-numerous domestic stock of pastoral peoples," and, with a few exceptions, "generally both the wildlife and its habitat are degraded by man, and the continent as a whole is in slow decline. To replace exploitation by conservation, to save the remaining wonders for future generations, and to ensure the survival, under better and more stable conditions, for all forms of life, including man, is the major challenge for all who live in Africa and love it."

That, then, is Brown's canvas and style of approach. He takes areas and habitats, linking them as far as possible in description and fitting the animals indigenous to them. If the larger and more spectacular mammals and birds feature most prominently, we cannot grumble, for specialists can hunt out their own literature. The Mediterranean coast of Africa is the link with southern Europe; then there is the vast Sahara which is far from being all sand, especially near the massifs of the Hoggar and the Tibesti. The volcanic tableland of the Ethiopian Highlands has a chapter to itself and another describes the glorious dry steppe country which is a broad band from the Nile to the Atlantic seaboard south of the Sahara. Brown calls the Horn of Africa the land of tooth and claw: it is a harsh place, chronically short of water, and the temperature of 165°F. in the shade has been recorded.

The book passes to the Guinea savannas maintained by the interaction of soil, rainfall and fire, and which lie between the steppe and

the equatorial forests of the West African coast and the Congo. The great carrying capacity of this country for ungulates is not fulfilled in an area which holds a dense human population which has always hunted for meat. The great swamplands of the Nile Basin, from Uganda far into the Sudan are an endless-seeming world of their own. The floating masses of the sudd support a considerable head of wildlife and the ecology of the Bahr-el-Ghazal, the country of the rivers, with its alternating *toich* plains and bush, its cattle-keeping Nilotics and the wild game, is a life-time's study in itself.

We are led through the East African grasslands which the tourist knows so well, then southwards into the great forests and savannas of *miombo* which takes us to Rhodesia. The Cape coastal country of South Africa is one of the most favoured climates of the world, a quite glorious country, but still so truly Africa. Some short habitat chapters deal with the flamingos of the soda lakes regions, the vegetation of the high mountains, and the fauna of Madagascar.

Leslie Brown is no less aesthetically aware and in wonder through long contact with Africa. Rather is he the better aligned and never ashamed to let this side of his nature take charge of his writing from time to time. His English style is good and he never gets purple. Throughout, his ecological appreciation causes him to explain and encourage conservation as a necessary scientific discipline, not as an emotional plea, yet we know how deeply he feels. Indeed, his book is a distinctive achievement and an artistic whole.

The size and format of this book might cause the casual browser to think it another "coffee table" volume. Do not be misled, for the contents are sound and the size is justified by the quality and range of the pictures in colour and black and white by many of the best photographers of the day in Africa. The book should be gone through for the pictures alone and again for the reading of Leslie Brown.

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### **Budongo, by Vernon Reynolds. Methuen, 36s.**

As indicated in the sub-title "A Forest and its Chimpanzees", this is the story of a Central Uganda forest and its most interesting wild inhabitants. With a wealth of detail so skilfully presented that it never palls, the forest, its diverse conditions, its manifold hazards and its medley of wild life—large, small and strange—are fascinatingly described. It is not unusual for wanderers in such places to get lost, and one can sympathise with the author and his intrepid wife Frankie learning the hard way, in their introduction to such an unnerving experience in the wilds of Africa.

What did they find? The answer is chimpanzees in unexpected abundance, thus providing unique opportunities for the study of individual characteristics, group constitution, all manner of behavioural aspects, locomotion, voice, food, movements and range. Comprehensive, meticulous observations faithfully recorded on the spot enabled them to establish that chimpanzee movements—and they follow a set pattern—are governed by the availability of suitable food, as with so many wild creatures. Mainly frugivorous, the chimpanzees congregate in the localities and the trees where seasonally the most desirable fruits are found. Where this diet is plentiful they regale themselves noisily and advertise their enjoyment with resonant choruses