

## Book Reviews

### GROWTH PAINS OF BRITISH RAIL

#### British Railways in Transition

The Economic Problems of Britain's Railways since 1914. By Derek H. Aldcroft. Pp. xvi+252. (Macmillan: London; St Martin's Press: New York, February 1969.) 45s.

"WHAT is the matter with our bloody ships today?" cried Admiral Beatty at Jutland when another battle-cruiser went up in smoke; and indeed there proved to be quite a lot wrong with the direction, management, design and operation. But it does not do for anyone outside the Navy to give the answers. If for ships we substitute trains, we are involved in a national pastime, in which the public both ask the questions and give the answers, generally covered by some umbrella solution for the immediate future, such as "heads must roll".

Seldom do we get someone who asks the same question but turns back to history for the answers. Derek Aldcroft has done this and done it very well. Although he is an economist and because he is a lecturer, he writes in the active tense and without jargon. Add to that, that he is free from theory, prejudice and malice and we have in our hands a very readable book. It is one not only for the student of transport, for railwaymen and for railway enthusiasts, but for the far wider public who are genuinely bothered why British Rail has not been able to come to terms with its job.

The job, as defined by the nation in Acts of Parliament, is to provide safe, efficient and economical services, and to break even financially. In the past ten years British Rail has gone a long way to fulfilling its duty toward services. The inter-city passenger timetable, awarding marks for safety, speed, frequency, punctuality, comfort and cost, is in the round the best in the world. The French may be a bit faster and more punctual. They are also less frequent and more costly. The Japanese have one magnificent railway, but the JNR as a whole is a mess. The Canadians are more punctual but slower and less frequent. The Germans . . . and so on round the world. All the commuter services in London have been modernized. British Rail has pioneered two great advances in freight since 1960—Freightliner and Merry-go-Round. There is still much to do, but there is not a lot "the matter with our bloody trains today" which is not on the way to being put right.

It is in its duty to break even financially that British Rail has fallen flat on its face. Aldcroft is asking the right question when he asks "Why?". He has identified four threads which have run through history and may well be extrapolated into the future—legal and social interference; insufficient and ill-directed investment; wrong policies in pricing; and poor quality of direction and management.

In the days of monopoly—now forty years past—it was fair enough to legislate that railways must carry all things for all men, must not give one man an undue preference

over another, and must run "Parliamentary Trains" at a fare of a penny a mile. And the watch-dogs in Parliament were doing a good job in protecting their constituents from the bully-boys on the railway.

Now life is different. Railways need protection from the nation—unless we choose, as we have a right to choose, that we prefer to continue with railway deficits and to pay the price. My own share of the railway deficit paid as PAYE is £8 a week, and many of *Nature's* readers will be paying the same; all will be paying something. I would choose to encourage British Rail to charge the full price of the ride and break even. Aldcroft traces clearly enough the lapses of courage, particularly political courage by the railways, by the tribunals and by the Government. To put the matter right requires only an act of national will.

When he comes to investment Aldcroft breaks new ground for me. He calculates that railways were short of even maintaining their undertaking by over £150 million at 1930 prices between 1914 and 1937; and by over £650 million at 1960 prices between 1937 and 1953. To offset this they made a net investment of £250 million between 1953 and 1960; and he finds that much of this last sum was spent on the wrong things. He draws very relevantly on the findings of the Weir Committee in 1931 that the electrification of the main lines would produce a paltry return of only two per cent.

After a side-swipe at pricing where he thinks, like the Prices and Incomes Board, that standard fares and charges should be replaced by selective pricing, or the historic railway principle of charging what the traffic will bear, Aldcroft writes mildly enough about the directors and managers who have been charged with the duty of breaking even and have failed. In advancing for them the alibi of legal and social interference he may have remembered too much lesser men and remembered too little Lord Beeching who met the challenge of that kind of interference to the tune of tens of millions a year in extra revenue and economy.

Nevertheless, Aldcroft has faith in good management as an answer, if only it was there. He writes: "The rate of improvement in efficiency will depend very much on the calibre of management and it is far from clear that the railways possess the right talent at the top!" And he deduces that British Rail will not "break even".

On this score I part company from him. I believe British Rail has been set an easy task for the calibre of the management which it has. The test will come in the longer term. And here Aldcroft's agreeable journey through economic history signposts the way to avoid the mistakes of the past.

GERARD FIENNES

### ISLAND LIFE

#### The Theory of Island Biogeography

By Robert H. MacArthur and Edward O. Wilson. Pp. xi+203. (Princeton University Press: Princeton, NJ; Oxford University Press: London, April 1968.) 76s boards; 35s paper.

THIS short book will have a mixed reception. Drawing largely on their own investigations, the authors set out to develop in quantitative terms a general theory of island biogeography. Their theory is based on the empirically determined relationship between number of species and island area and is developed from theoretical considerations of immigration, extinction and population dynamics. The result is a book which is very different from previous treatments of island biogeography. Some will object that the mathematical analysis is unnecessarily complex when compared with the conclusions reached (and usefully summarized at the end of each chapter); others that the conclusions have either been recognized long ago or have