Book Reviews

PERSPECTIVES OF POPULATION

Population, Resources, Environment

Issues in Human Ecology. By Paul R. Ehrlich and Anne H. Ehrlich. (Series of Books in Biology.) Pp. 383. (Freeman: San Francisco and Reading, September 1970.) 84s.

Life Without Birth

A Journey Through the Third World in Search of the Population Explosion. By Stanley Johnson. Pp. xxii+364+24 photographs. (Heinemann: London, September 1970.) 50s.

IN spite of the objective evidence of an increase in the expectation of life from about twenty-five years in 1750 to about sixty years in 1970, the controversy over the possibility of improving the human condition continues to rage. *Population, Resources, Environment* is a notable contribution in the tradition of Malthusian pessimism. This beautifully produced book, appropriately swathed in a jet-black dust-cover, is a catalogue of apparently insuperable obstacles strewing the paths to further progress in the directions in which man's endeavours are leading. Although each individual extrapolation is suitably qualified by reference to ways in which the obstacles might be circumnavigated, the pall of gloom gathers deeper over the reader the further he advances.

There is a great deal of well arranged basic information on demography, ecology and food technology which is neutrally reported and attractively presented. This part of the work is useful textbook material at the sixth-form level. It is in assessing the significance of current trends and projecting these into the future that the authors' judgment becomes most obtrusive and at the same time conjectural.

The total available resources of the Earth do not suffice to develop duplicates of industrial societies all over the globe, even for the current level of population. Fuel, dozens of metals, productive land, marine resources are all inadequate and the authors document their case with care and ingenuity, interleaving the text with "boxes" containing capsulated case-histories and elementary lessons in fundamentals such as the law of natural selection, thermodynamics and the chemistry of herbicides. Many pollution hazards are detailed. Some of these hazards such as residual insecticides are grave threats to the ecological balance of life on Earth; other hazards described are speculative, of local significance only or are highly fanciful. In their anxiety to document the case against "growth mania", the Ehrlichs fail to make appropriate distinctions of this kind.

The section on family planning and population control suffers most severely from lack of balance. A table (p. 242), purporting to show the progress achieved by population programmes by 1969 measured against the targets set, conveys an impression of total failure, but all the figures quoted for 1969 are in fact from earlier years—in some cases for years before the programme being assessed started operation. Instead of a careful appraisal of the problems and principles involved in the task of providing

family planning services to total populations of agricultural societies and of inducing them to make use of them early in the process of family formation, the Ehrlichs devote the bulk of the space available to a consideration of dramatic and quite impractical strategies, some of which belong in the pages of the more lurid science fiction magazines. Indeed, valuable and comprehensive as this book is, it consistently fails to achieve a detached and balanced view of hazards and remedies because of the over-developed sense of doom and drama which pervades it. As if the limitations of the Earth and the byproducts of man's struggle to master it were not alarming enough, the authors throw in for good measure the possibilities of political and natural catastrophe which the future may hold—nuclear and biological warfare on the one hand, world inundation when Antarctica slumps into the sea or the Arctic ice-cap melts on the other. At the end of the book, the Ehrlichs call for de-development of the industrial countries. They may be right that this is the only course that will avert world disaster, but it seems the least feasible of all.

I approached Stanley Johnson's book with antipathy. After flicking through the pages I concluded that this was a dilettante travelogue loosely linked with human interest anecdotes of the hardships of population growth and as meandering as the author's journey. I left it with the conviction that it is by far the best non-technical book on the current population crisis yet available. Mr Johnson is not a specialist in any aspect of population study, but he is a specialist in observation, in insight and in communication.

Life Without Birth is indeed a travelogue, documenting the population scene in twelve countries (including Red China whose Tibetan profile the author glimpsed against the sky from Nepal). Each short chapter extracts what is relevant from the history and political alignment of the country and knits it together with population problems policies and programmes through conversations with officials and academics and the kaleidoscope of impressions that impinge on the traveller and which Stanley Johnson so unerringly dissects into its components.

The book has an air of innocence about it which is quite unusual. The author seems to have approached his task with no preconceptions and, if his repeated modest disclaimers are to be accepted, no relevant technical knowledge. If this approach has led to a somewhat uncritical acceptance of much that he was told by officials and advisers with their own preconceptions to advance or interests to guard, it has nonetheless resulted in a series of remarkably clear and comprehensive pictures of the past, present and future of population growth and policy in the countries visited. Although it is packed with factual information this never becomes overwhelming because it is placed in its logical setting and becomes part of an absorbing story. Whether it is a device or the very truth, the author's technical innocence enables him to take the reader's hand and lead him through the task of understanding the elementary demographic theory without which no population story can be told.

The contents of the book defy summary, for it has no didactic purpose and no capsulated messages. It is for those who like to form opinions on the basis of fact rather than slogans. It is thus an old-fashioned book and it is a surprise to find its author is only 29 years old. It is also a well written book, rising to the level of the genuinely epigrammatic time and again, and it is a courageous book, mincing no words in castigating Pope Paul VI for *Humanae Vitae*, or Westminster (perhaps a little unfairly) for the lack of official support for Hong Kong's family planning work.

Although written for a lay readership, *Life Without Birth* should be read by every "population expert" and "multidisciplinary family planning worker" in the world, for it has the three-dimensional quality which comes from the correct use of perspective.

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