Conversations with Haldane

Eric Ashby

The Man with Two Memories. By J. B. S. Haldane. Pp. 220. (Merlin: London, 1976.) £2.80.

THE style is unmistakable; it has the taut logic of Handel's music. So is the puckish barbed humour: "As I was at a day school, I did not adopt homosexual practices . . . ". And so are the sparks of exotic knowledge: "Of course I have a fair repertory of languages, including one or two unusual ones, such as Hittite, which I had to learn in order to study the earliest serious biological document, Kikkalish's instructions for training chariot horses." No-one but J. B. S. Haldane could write such stuff in such an enchanting style. Those who recollect his brilliant and sometimes exasperating conversation will find in this book a nostalgic re-creation of what it was like to spend an evening in his company. Those for whom J. B. S. Haldane is a somewhat romantic myth—a man who could turn from mathematical genetics to polemics on sociology in the *Daily Worker*, and who used to leave his laboratory at the end of term to spend the vacation in the civil war against Franco—will get an impression of what it was like to be a contemporary of the man.

I remember him at a dinner of the Society for Experimental Biology. It was a light-hearted informal occasion and for some reason J.B.S. was asked to make a speech. In that grave, hesitating voice, as though about to begin a scientific lecture, he said that although he could not bring himself to believe in heaven, he now had some inkling of what heaven would be like if there were such a place. For he had greatly enjoyed this dinner, "thanks to the delectable company of the young lady on my right and the young lady on my left. Now in a three dimensional world one can have only two ladies sitting next to one. Heaven I believe, might be conceived to be, a place in *n*-dimensional space, where one could therefore expect at dinner to enjoy the company of $n—1$ young ladies."

This book is a mixture of J. B. S. Haldane's startling breadth of knowledge with his sparkling and often grotesque imagination. It is a fantasia with a purpose. The purpose is to expose by ridicule the prudery and bigotry and credulity of twentieth century western civilisation and to put on record glimpses of the sort of utopia he himself would have enjoyed. It is a work published years after his death. The blurb on the dust cover suggests that it may be regarded as a philosophical and scientific testament. Anyone who opens it with this expectation will be disappointed. It has neither the cohesion or the conviction of a testament. It is a jumble of ideas, leaps of imagination, and exhibitions of prejudice which I don't think Haldane himself would have wished to publish. It has not got enough plot and movement to make it good science fiction, nor enough austerity of argument (and Haldane's scientific work was impeccably well argued) to make it good scholarship. Nor, I believe, did Haldane himself intend it to be in either of these categories. It is simply a feast comprising the after-dinner conversation of a man of extraordinary and fascinating personality.

The 'hero', James Robert Murchison, carries in his brain all the accumulated experience and response to experience of a British scientist. But there has also entered his brain and lodged there and become manifest to Murchison, all the accumulated experience of Ngok Thleg, a being from another planet. It is a case of memory transfer which can occur if two persons have similar genotypes. The planet from which Ngok's memory-and-experience bank comes has solved many of the scientific and social problems which perplex planet Earth. The people there may multiply by clones; anti-social behaviour is promptly cured by injections of drugs; the unit of time is that taken for light in a vacuum to traverse 2.317×10^{17} wavelengths of the red hydrogen emission line; cities are built of an alloy of titanium and are enclosed from the atmosphere, kept at a 10% higher pressure with pumps and filters to remove bacteria (disease, therefore, was an anachronism). There is some interplanetary travel; some computerised information services; and a little highly aseptic permissiveness: all developments which have made some headway since Haldane's death.

The book is unfinished. It is not the sort of work which readers of *Nature* need feel they *ought* to read. But if anyone who is going by train from, say, London to Edinburgh would like to have J. B. S. Haldane's company for the trip, talking rather as he did to me when I made that journey with him some 40 years ago, this book will give him that experience. □

Eric Ashby (Lord Ashby of Brandon) recently retired from the Mastership of Clare College, Cambridge.

Father of ethology

Aubrey Manning

Konrad Lorenz. By A. Nisbett. Pp. xiv+240+21 photographs. (Dent: London, 1977.) £5.95.

BIOGRAPHIES of living people, particularly those around whom controversy has gathered, are risky ventures. It is usually better to let the dust settle so that the subjects are seen more clearly in relation to their own time and place. Konrad Lorenz is clearly such a subject but Alec Nisbett's book is successful in avoiding the main pitfalls: this is a thoughtful and substantial biography. Nisbett has a background in mathematical physics but made a career in the British Broadcasting Corporation, where he has won many awards for his skills in presenting scientific subjects to the general public. His interest in Lorenz arose from such work, and having obtained grant to work on this biography, he spent much time talking to Lorenz and some of his key associates. Nisbett obviously likes Lorenz and so does this reviewer. Consequently for both of us there is the danger of becoming indulgent and less than adequately critical when discussing Lorenz's ideas and influence. This does set out to be a critical biography but the soft pedal is certainly applied in some places.

Konrad was the younger son of Adolf Lorenz, a successful orthopaedic surgeon (he almost got the Nobel prize for medicine himself) who identified with the Austro–Hungarian aristocrats and built himself a large house in the baroque style at Altenberg near Vienna. (Konrad has returned to this same house in retirement.) Adolf wanted his son to follow him into medicine: he did qualify, but already the jackdaws, herons, ducks and geese had taken over his life. Lorenz lectured on animal behaviour in Vienna, but had no formal research facilities; the animals all lived at home. During this period he published all his most influential papers and began collaborating with Tinbergen. Academic recognition was crowned by Lorenz going to the prestigious chair of psychology at Königsberg (then in East Prussia). The war had already begun and soon enveloped the eastern front. Lorenz ended up practising simple medicine and writing on philosophy in a Russian prisoner-of-war camp.

He was not repatriated until 1948 when he finally got back to Altenberg to reconstruct his career. It was much harder to regain academic recognition in Germany. No university position was forthcoming although a host of new students were gathering around Lorenz. He worked more or less on an *ad hoc* basis until the Max Planck Institute enabled him to obtain facilities at Seewiesen in 1955. He retired back to Altenberg with a smaller research institute in 1973.

©1977 Nature Publishing Group