

those with little or no previous experience.

The land mollusc fauna increases in richness from north to south in the area covered by the guide. Iceland has only 25 or so species, southern Britain about 100 species, and parts of France over 130 species. This kind of faunistic recording is fascinating, and is based upon data accumulated by a vast army of amateur and professional devotees. Outside ornithology, there are few areas of practical biology where the amateur can play a more effective part than malacology, the study of molluscs. The authors give us all the information we need to enable us to join in the fun. There are chapters on the shell, soft parts of the body, life-history,

feeding habits, classification, and an excellent introduction to finding, collecting and preserving land snails. Kerney and Cameron will win the gratitude of all those professionals who routinely identify and handle land molluscs, for surely many young malacologists will be recruited through reading this guide. I should like to see a copy in every haversack, along with the usual maps and ornithological field guides. **T.E. Thompson**

*T.E. Thompson is a professional malacologist whose most recent appointment was Visiting Professor of Biological Sciences, Florida Institute of Technology.*

## For the entomologist of the future

THREE recently published popular books on insects differ a good deal in their scope and treatment of the subject. Professor Karl von Frisch, a Nobel Laureate honoured for his work on bee behaviour, is well known to a wider audience of naturalists for his popular work, *The Dancing Bees*, a book which, to my mind, is very much more interesting than the one now under review. *Twelve Little Housemates* (Pergamon: Oxford and New York; hardback £8, paperback £2.50) is a revised and enlarged version of a book on ten groups of insects found in and around houses, and includes accounts of the house-fly, mosquitoes, fleas, lice, bed bugs, clothes moths, cockroaches, ants and aphids. The species are well chosen and their biology is described accurately and simply, in a way understandable by the complete layman or by a child. The book is hardly detailed enough to satisfy the serious amateur naturalist or the budding entomologist, and the rather forced humour of the text and the Victorian air of many illustrations are not likely to win over a sophisticated reader. But von Frisch is mildly discursive and despite some of the naively phrased passages he is able, in his own words, "to show that there is something wonderful about the most detested and despised of creatures".

Dr Carson Ritchie, an archivist and historian by training, believes, in his *Insects: The Creeping Conquerors and Human History* (Elsevier/Nelson: New York; \$7.95) that insects have had crucial effects on human history and sets out to describe some of these. For better or worse, the book is largely a collection of historical anecdotes, rather brashly presented and strung together in a loosely chronological sequence, on such subjects as silk production, singing insects, insects as human food, and insects in medicine and art. Entomology is not really one of the

author's strong points and the occasional howlers provide additional surprises in a book already packed with stories intended to excite, intrigue, startle, alarm or confound the reader. Entertaining snippets of information abound on every page. Did you know that machinery able to produce 318,504,960 yards of silken thread per day had been installed in Derby in 1718? Or that France imported 57 million medicinal leeches in 1823? (By an elastic definition of the Insecta, Dr Ritchie manages to include earthworms, spiders, palolo worms and *Teredo* among his creeping conquerors.) And there are illustrations of all manner of things from Maori tattooing chisels to what I presume are geisha girls entranced by the music of cicadas. But not all readers will be convinced by claims that the silk industry led to the Industrial Revolution or that *Phylloxera* played an important part in the downfall of Napoleon III. Certainly the scholar will regret the more uncritical passages and the almost complete absence

of references in support of so many facts.

By contrast, *Insects: An Illustrated Survey of the Most Successful Animals on Earth* (Hamlyn: London and New York; £10), by Brian Selman *et al.*, is a straightforward account, lavishly illustrated with more than 200 colour photographs, line drawings and diagrams. No doubt it will be the coloured illustrations which will fascinate the layman. They certainly convey a most vivid impression of the diversity of insects and, by often portraying things much larger than life, they enable anyone to see insects exactly as the professional entomologist views them through a stereoscopic microscope. The quality of reproduction is generally high and some are superb portraits of handsome subjects with gleaming cuticles, quivering wings, and alert activity suggested by every bristle! The text that accompanies these pictures is written by a group of specialists and deals in turn with the evolution and distribution of insects, their structure, physiology and development, their habitats and modes of life, their impact on man, and their classification. All these are discussed in an authoritative, modern way, and without over-simplification. The result is a book which depicts very successfully the great variety and biological interest of the insects. It can be enjoyed by a 14-year-old who is keen on biology, but it will also serve as a reference book for all but the more specialised undergraduate courses in entomology. Not cheap, but a good Christmas present, especially for the entomologist of the future.

**R.G. Davies**

*R.G. Davies is Reader in Entomology at Imperial College, University of London, UK.*

## Traditional remedies

THE great majority of the world's population is poor and their medicines are traditional, being mainly plant or animal in origin. These people either care for themselves when ill or use traditional healers. In both cases the sources of their remedies are well known, and children learn from an early age which plants can or cannot be used, and for what purposes. It was realised some time ago that the plants used in these traditional forms of medicine might well repay scientific investigation and there are various projects underway (and no doubt afoot) for doing just that. This is a long way, however, from the current fad for using herbal remedies instead of modern pharmaceutical products. The fashion seems to be confined to the English-speaking world, no doubt because the inhabitants of mainland Europe have never stopped using

traditional remedies for a variety of conditions. This may well be due to the fact that there are still peasants in these countries who know and collect the plants. Would that we had a reasonable reservoir of people here who could do the same, but I am afraid this is not the case. This raises a very important point. The books reviewed here are designed for amateurs, not professional botanists and plantsmen. It is essential that either the plants listed should not be harmful or the descriptions so detailed and clear that mistakes should not occur, within the limits of human fallibility. This is especially important when describing members of the Umbelliferae (parsley) family, most of which look alike to the layman and include both very useful herbs and extremely poisonous plants.

*Nicholas Culpeper's Complete Herbal and English Physician* (Gareth Powell: London; £15) is a facsimile of the 1826 edition but was first published in the seventeenth century, when medicines were