Man's place in Nature

The Ancient Science of Geomancy: Man in Harmony with the Earth. By Nigel Pennick. Pp. 180. (Thames and Hudson: New York and London, 1979.) $16,95; £5,95.

FOR those who believe that a proper understanding of our world can come only through the application of the scientific method — by observation, hypothesis, prediction and test, leading to verification or otherwise — this book will read as mystical nonsense. For those who believe that there are other, less rigorous ways to the truth, who prefer a mystical to an archaeological or historical approach to the past and who are also attracted to the idea of a return to a technologically simple and harmonious human culture, it may well have considerable appeal. This conclusion is quickly reached by reading the Introduction in which the author's basic assumptions are clearly stated they are vast, irrational and of a nature that precludes almost any kind of constructive criticism.

"The practice of geomancy, which may roughly be defined as the science of putting human habitats and activities into harmony with the visible and invisible world around us, was at one time universal, and vestiges of it remain in the landscape, architecture, ritual and folklore of almost all countries in the world. This remarkable series of correspondences between different cultures has been held to be evidence for a former world civilisation . . . These archetypal patterns . . . have produced the worldwide occurrence of outward form and inner purpose found in geomancy. Hence the seeking of cosmic power points on the surface of the Earth, special places where the mind can expand into new levels of consciousness . . ."

If one accepts these basic assumptions — a better phrase would be "this basic faith" — then all the rest follows. The book elaborates on the theme, describing a wide range of curious facts and phenomena as if their mere recounting is enough to prove the author's case. The Thoms' work on standing stones is inevitably brought in, as if this particular example of the refutation of the old simplistic idea of the steady progress of man from savagery to modern urban civilisation also proved the existence of a world-wide science in antiquity. Ley lines appear, as does dowsing; and holy wells, holy hills and geometrically designed buildings are thought of as places where the natural energies of the Earth were identified and tapped in ancient times. Proofs of the power of these energies — as of all aspects of geomancy — are invariably sought in unattributed and unverifiable reports of "evidence", as of an allegedly sacrificed animal removed from its burial place, of disasters following and ceasing with the return of the corpse to its tomb. Adverse criticism is exorcised in advance by allegations of bias and prejudice among professional scientists and scholars. The mind reels at the task — fortunately unnecessary — of analysing and assessing this mass of diverse and incoherent material. Probably it is best simply to regard the work as a compendium of bizarre and interesting phenomena and tales.

One general point, however, is worth making. The thread running through the book is that in early times (what archaeologists call the Palaeolithic, or hunting and food-gathering period) man lived in complete harmony with nature and that this harmony was later disrupted with the invention of agriculture. In a typical phrase, full of apparent meaning but defying close analysis, "settled life necessitated the enclosure of space, a stopping of the free flow of the spirit of the earth . . .". All signs of ancient skills and wisdom are interpreted in terms of early Man's knowledge and utilisation of the Earth forces assumed to exist behind such harmony. However, this "harmony" can also be interpreted quite unmystically in terms of the natural (that is, unconscious) selection of technologically primitive societies so that those survived which were best adapted to their environments. No alien spacemen, antediluvian Atlantean civilisations or practitioners of a world-wide geomantic science are needed — but a thorough knowledge of the available archaeological and historical evidence is.

This makes the point forcibly that, in the 120 years which have elapsed since the publication of *The Origin of Species*, the application of the theories of evolution and natural selection to the development of man and his societies has made too little headway. The second half of the Darwinian revolution is thus still incomplete and, as a result, a host of beliefs and dogmas based on assumptions about the special nature of *Homo sapiens*, and on his independences, of natural laws, continues to flourish. Until, in T.H. Huxley's phrase, "Man's place in nature" is properly and widely understood and accepted there will still be massive markets, even among educated people, for books of this kind in which the effects of natural selection are viewed anthropocentrically and attributed to primeval wisdom, or are explained by supernatural or extraterrestrial agencies.

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Glimpses of volcanoes

Volcanoes. By M.B. Lambert. Pp.64. (David and Charles: London and Newton Abbot, UK; University of Washington Press: Seattle, 1978.) £3.95; $10.95.

IT is amazing how little the author has managed to cram into this slim volume. The book runs to 64 pages, over half of which are devoted to pictures and diagrams, and it is divided into 10 principal sections, each of which consists of a few pages of text, some relevant pictures, a surprising amount of blank space and a vaguely volcanic snatch of verse. The sections cover fairly conventional topics such as "Major volcanic landforms", "Products of explosion", "Volcanoes in time and space", and so on. Unfortunately, the contents of the sections do not match up to their worthy titles. The section on "Volcanoes in time and space", for example, runs to only a few hundred words, about half of which are devoted to Canada.

It is difficult to see quite what kind of a book the author was aiming at. One could make a strong case for the publication of a good coffee-table book on volcanoes, but this one does not come anywhere near it, as although many of the photographs used are good, they are not numerous enough, not glossy enough, and not in colour. The book is also emphatically *not* a "simply yet thorough introduction to volcanoes", as the dust-jacket claims, but is instead a patchy, misleading digest of information on a subject which is inherently very popular among lay-readers.

Such readers are likely to fare badly from Lambert's book. What, for example, is the uninformed reader going to make of the 400 words on page 9, which includes a discussion of thermal gradients, upper mantle composition, partial melting and fractional crystallization? Not much, I suspect. The best that can be said about the text is that it is at least accurate for the most part, being derived from respectable sources to whom Lambert makes due acknowledgement. In many cases, however, Lambert's use of these sources is curiously ill considered. He quotes, for example, Macdonald's figure of 1,800,000 km^2 for the extent of the so-called 'Thuelan Plateau'. It is now generally accepted that it was never anything like this size, the various components having been widely separated by seafloor spreading. Macdonald even goes so far as to suggest this possibility, but Lambert ignores it.

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