

## Knocking about in the nineteen-eighties

Bernard Dixon

*The Cult of the Expert.* By Brian J. Ford. Pp.194. ISBN 0-241-10476-9. (Hamish Hamilton: 1982.) £5.95.

ONE of Dwight D. Eisenhower's more memorable remarks was that "public policy could itself become the captive of a scientific-technological elite". That forecast was underscored some years later by Dr Herbert York, Defense Department adviser to both Eisenhower and Kennedy, when he warned that the possible decision to initiate nuclear annihilation was passing "from the hands of statesmen to lower-level officers and ultimately computing machines and the technicians who program them".

Clearly, this is a theme, with parallels in fields as disparate as health and nutrition, communications and education, which is worthy of serious attention. Yet it has not been widely discussed — certainly not in books. Theodore Roszak's *The Making of a Counter Culture* (Faber & Faber, 1970) touched on the problem, but was more concerned with the domination of our society by the products and ideas of science than with the role of experts *per se*. So there certainly is an opportunity for a keen examination of specialists, their habits and attitudes, and their effect on the rest of us — citizens, consumers, customers, captives.

*The Cult of the Expert* appears at first sight to be such a book. It is (to take his conclusion first) Mr Ford's fleshing out of the following thesis:

From the way you are born to the manner of your dying, great and earth-shattering decisions are taken behind closed doors by people who may well have closed minds. For the Expert all that matters is that they are seen to have a monopoly on power. Their long and meaningless words, elaborate and expensive apparatus stacked in high security buildings, the machines that they secretly know no more than anyone else how to use for the good of the people, are all part of today's power structure. The omnipotence of the Expert pronouncement and the unchallengeable right to spend huge sums of money gratifying a lust that evolved only to be gratified; these are the pattern for the future.

In support of these somewhat inelegant propositions, Mr Ford tells us at great length that experts employ contorted language. He provides many examples such as "mobility transportation system" for "car", quotes a passage we may have missed from *Private Eye* showing that the word "situation" has become comic, and uses a menu to compare "plain language" with French. He states that Ulcerative Dermal Necrosis ("as far as it means anything at all") really means that ulcers of dead skin form on the surface of fish, and he devotes an entire chapter to rules such as "never use one word where many will do".

Mr Ford recounts the banning of cyclamates, the N-ray story, the polywater affair, the Kammerer and Burt episodes, and the work of Stanley Milgram, to show science in a variety of bad lights. He says that an Expert could ban air, and explains that nitrogen and its other constituents can be dangerous. He criticizes new maths and decimalization (predicting that Experts will next want to divide the year into 100 parts). He then complains about bank cards and gives many examples of "the way in which the infectious enthusiasm for believing in computers has come close to harming our lives", before vouchsafing that there are innumerable other such examples. He gives pupils rules such as "Do just what the teacher says, and on no account argue" and opines that the purpose of a university is "to provide a closetted and confined period of indoctrination for malleable minds". Finally, with embarrassing innocence of the real world, Mr Ford tells us that "elaborate and expensive research institutes" are needed only for Experts to perpetuate themselves, and that libraries will go on paying inflated prices for journals.

Anyone setting out to survey such (some

may think familiar) territory should decide whether their book is to be humorous or serious, and whether the aim is to flatter readers or make them feel uneasy. Mr Ford has done neither. He begins by taking a swipe at his readers' poor education and calling them "ordinary people", but then expects them to join in his sarcastic superiority. He enjoys his own knockabout fun but sours it all by being bitchy. He gets serious things wrong (the butter-margarine controversy was about the contribution of their respective fatty acids to coronary heart disease, not about which was more fattening) while trying to be witty by assuring us that Experts are above the law. And his publishers do not help by producing what they (presumably) intended to be a rib-tickling book with a dust jacket highlighting the author's "acid pen". Curious.

Mr Ford is not, I understand, a qualified scientist. So his words come with considerably less clout than those of, say, Sir Peter Medawar when he gently mocks some of his fellow experts. But then the very idea of Medawar writing *this* book is much funnier than anything Mr Ford has to say. □

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## Pictures, prose and a world of vegetation

Philip Stott

*Green Planet: The Story of Plant Life on Earth.* Edited by David M. Moore. Pp.288. ISBN 0-521-24610-5. (Cambridge University Press: 1982.) £12.50, \$27.50.

THE many recent attempts of science publishers to blend the visually attractive with the academically acceptable have not always proved felicitous. Solid content has all too often yielded to the simply picturesque. One notable exception is Duvigneaud's splendidly gallic *La Synthèse Écologique* (Doin, Paris; 1974). This new encyclopaedia of plant ecology and geography is another.

There are two clear reasons for the book's success. First, the text, which has been skilfully compiled from the separate contributions of 30 specialists, dominates the book and is, in the main, both comprehensive and accurate. Secondly, the visual material is used to illustrate and exemplify the text rather than, as is so often the case, the words being mere adjuncts to pretty pictures. In addition, it is especially gratifying to welcome a general work on biogeography which acknowledges nearly all of the main traditions of the subject. In the seven well-constructed chapters, the encyclopaedia thus embraces the key aspects of ecology, of plant geography in

its classical sense — meaning the study of the spatial distribution of plant taxa over the surface of the Earth — and of the role of man in nature. This last theme is perhaps the least satisfactorily covered and I was sorry to see no mention of the important applied textbooks of I.G. Simmons in the bibliography at the end of the book.

Obviously, in a survey of such breadth, there will be some blemishes. The term "ecology", for example, was not coined by the German biologist, Ernst Haeckel, in 1869 (p.21), but appears as early as 1858 in a letter of the American essayist and nature-lover, Henry David Thoreau; moreover, Haeckel himself first used the term in 1866. It is pleasing, however, to see both autecology and synecology adequately discussed.

Cladistics is well explained, as one would expect, by Heywood in his precise and useful entry on taxonomy and systematics, but nowhere is the possible phytogeographical significance of cladistic relationships explored. The closely related topic of vicariance biogeography is largely ignored, save for a short passage on vicariance written in a more traditional vein. It is also regrettable that many of the plant and vegetation distributions are still mapped on non-equal-area projections, which