

# Biology and the Bible

IT is comforting, when science makes nonsense of our opinions, to find that we have many companions. I need them all today. A letter reached me yesterday from John M. Ranstead, Matangi, enclosing information that I can neither refute, deny, nor ignore. Mr. Ranstead is gentle with me. He does not say that the Bible is right about hares and myself, and all other scoffers, wrong. He just lets that fact emerge without putting it into words. Here is his sledge-hammer:

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In 1939 the habit of refutation was rediscovered in the rabbit, and announced in *Nature* under the headline, "Do Rabbits Chew the Cud?", evidence being provided that in effect they do so. This is not done, as in the ruminant mammals, by returning food to the mouth from the stomach for chewing, but by passing practically all the food twice through the intestines instead of only once. The familiar dry pellet-shaped droppings of rabbits are produced only during the day; at night a very different form occurs. The night droppings are soft, moist, coated in mucus, more or less spherical, and generally small, though varying from one twelfth to nearly one-half of an inch in diameter. But they are not dropped: the rabbit takes them direct from the vent and swallows them without chewing, and in the morning they may form as much as half the total contents of the stomach. It has been found experimentally that over 80 per cent. of the food may thus be refuted.

Little is known of the phenomenon of refutation in hares beyond the fact that it does occur as a regular habit in the brown hare. . . . Refutation takes place mainly during the day, when hares lie up in their forms; most of the feeding occurs during the night between 7 p.m. and 7 a.m., especially between 9 p.m. and midnight. . . . It is peculiar that the rediscovery of the habit came at such a surprise to zoologists in 1939, seeing that not only had a paper on the subject in the rabbit been published in 1882, but that it was described for the hare in

by "SUNDOWNER"

1895 by Drane, whose observations were quoted in full by Millais in his great work published in 1904. (British Mammals. By Dr. L. Harrison Matthews.)

This, I am assured, is "the latest standard text-book on British mammals," and although I am for questioning authority when its voice is too loud, I can't think what to question here. I am not going to sit up all night watching a pet rabbit, and if I did it would probably not perform. After all authority allows it a 20 per cent. margin of non-conformity. Nor can I do anything at all about hares but look at their forms more carefully. My present impression is that my hares leave no droppings at all in their forms, or very few, but deposit these in the open. I shall probably find if I watch carefully enough that I am as far from the truth here as, this time yesterday, I was from the truth about their refutation. The only leg I have to stand on—it is a very wooden leg—is the difference between refutation and rumination, especially the absence of chewing.



"The dealers are here to risk a pound because they have seen you with twenty-one shillings"

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a feeling around that television is not a place where you can build up a serious reputation. This does not surprise me. Television presents a play each week. It is very seldom that its standard of either acting or production approaches that of a B-grade film. The Monday morning newspapers report another television flop with a regularity that cannot be entirely explained away by malice.

Yet there is one aspect of television that would justify the cost of installation. You cannot beat the camera for actuality. Every time the television cameras move away from the producers and the cookers-up of novelty programmes and the smarmy grins of the question-masters, and just look at things that really happen, the atmosphere of fake and contrivance drops away. People in England still say, "Ah, but you should have seen the Coronation programme." By great good fortune I did. It was repeated some months ago in its entirety. Nothing could have been better, because nothing was contrived. It all happened, and the cameras recorded faithfully, aided by the best men and women in

sound-radio as commentators. The same is true of sport. The cameras follow the



GILBERT HARDING  
The talk of the tube

But for Mrs. Carlyle's "miserable refutation of weak tea and tough toast" I might try to argue that refutation ended in the Middle Ages.

()NE of New Zealand's first school-teachers, still living but a very old man in 1910, told me that a cow had kicked him into teaching. It was a more intelligent kick than a cow has ever given me, but I begin to wonder if cows are not educating me by stealth. When I first heard of Mr. Ranstead he was breeding Milking Shorthorns—to the confusion of most of his

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rivals. When I first heard from him it was to ask for information about Paul Bunyan. That, with the help of the Lord and the United States Legation, I was able, indirectly, to supply. But I could not even think where to look for the answer when he asked me recently to identify Caspar Milquetoast. An hour in the Public Library brought no light, and most of my own books of reference are 20 years old, or older. Then I thought of Phillip and Eric and all those other bright boys in Wellington, and the answer came quickly. Caspar Milquetoast was a newspaper softy, born in a

comic strip, and served up in drug stores to sweeten the coffee. His contribution to the American way of life was the abominable adjective Milquetoastish still to be found in the Digests and Sunday editions. Fortunately the life of such a verbal monstrosity will be short. My point, however, is that I would never have known about it if Mr. Ranstead had not met with an accident that turned him from his cows to his books—to the relief, I am sure, of breeders of Shorthorns but not without confusion to me.

"ARE you buying or selling?" George asked me when we met the other day at Addington.

"Neither," I told him. "I'm just looking on to see what is going to happen to me next week."

"You would have been safer at home. You'll learn nothing here. If you're buying you'll pay through the nose for a name that may have meant

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something 20 years ago. If you're selling, they will skin you because you are a stranger."

"Who are they?"

"The auctioneers and the gulls."

"Not the dealers?"

"No. The dealers are here to deal—to risk a pound because they have seen you with twenty-one shillings. Changing pounds into guineas is their business. Everybody knows them, and everybody sooner or later finds them useful."

"Everybody knows the auctioneers."

"Yes. But the rest of us don't know what snobs and simpletons we are. The auctioneers know."

"But they have only a couple of minutes to talk to us."

"It's enough. Two minutes to you, and two to me; two to every simpleton who thinks that station sheep are better than farm sheep, and that buying station sheep makes you a friend and associate of the station owner. It's enough for any auctioneer who knows his business."

Where we would have gone from there, I don't know, but I think it would have been into comment that could not be reported. George however was called away, and I was left on the rail wondering how much he had said. I have bought in Addington and sold in Addington and only once been disappointed. But I could still be a gull. I am safe enough when I am selling because I then expect very little. I am in fact always a little worried about the buyer, and thankful that I don't know him personally. But buying is a different story. I pay, and know that I pay, for a place or a name, and the auctioneer knows that I will take that bait if he is not too clumsy in laying it. He knows that all his buyers will take it except the hard-heads, and that these are never numerous enough to cramp his style.

So George's remains a voice in the wilderness. As plainly as he could he was saying this to me: "If you are determined to be a gull don't go to Addington without your horn-book." But if I had mastered my horn-book I would not need it. I would know how many beans make five.

(To be continued)