

Man Among the Animals

ANIMALS, MEN AND MYTHS: A History of the Influence of Animals on Civilisation and Culture, by Morus; Victor Gollancz, English price 21/-.

(Reviewed by Oliver Duff)

I DON'T know for how large a group of readers this book was written, but I know that the group includes me. If I had ever been rich enough to order books from authors, as we order oatmeal or bacon from grocers, and foolish enough to think that money alone will evoke a book, this is one of the books I would long ago have ordered. But it is a difficult book to classify. Mark Twain could have written it if he had been a zoologist, but if "Morus" had been a Mark Twain he would almost certainly have written something else. Julian Huxley could have written it if he had been patient enough with fools, but I am not sure that Huxley would have been as contemptuous of mankind in general. Mark Twain would have been, and was. But it is very unlikely, I think, that "Morus" has read a line of Mark Twain. They are both debunkers of human pretensions, but they assault us from different angles.

"Morus" believes, for historical and scientific reasons, that man's dominion

over the animals is a tyranny. He rejects and scoffs at the idea that God gave us animals to enslave, drive, murder, and eat as we think necessity requires. I am not sure that I know precisely where "Morus" stands in philosophy, but he makes it clear in a long chapter called "The Battle for the Soul" that he utterly rejects the Cartesian view of animal intelligence—that it is a mechanical thing, fundamentally quite different from our own—and supports all those who deny that the gap between animals and men is unbridgeable. He does not go quite so far as the farmer's wife I met recently in Southland who overwhelmed me with kindness and then asked me, when I seemed dubious about the wisdom of keeping pet rabbits, "not to forget that men were slipping back and back and animals coming up and up." His argument is that nature, with all its "multiplicity," is

one. That is a flat denial of man as the non-animal lord of creation.

But most readers will enjoy "Morus" best when he is just the cynical observer and the satirical historian. He does not deny that man has ruled the earth so far; that however impudent his claims may be, he has established and does at present enjoy them; and that animals for many generations yet will go on feeding out of his hand. *Homo sapiens* is a bounder, but he has been clever enough to make animals obey him, work for him, suffer for him, and die for him—or disappear altogether. If this smart Alec is ever brought to his senses by animals, and put again in his place, it will not be by the only



creatures he recognises as animals, the larger mammals and vertebrates, but by insects carrying deadly diseases and destroying him or his crops. Here, too, he seems to be safe; and he is certainly in safe control of the other animals, which will share the earth with him only as long as it suits him to let them live.

It interests me as a shepherd to note

that "Morus" does not guarantee the future of sheep. The day may come, he says, when we will not be able to afford sheep, when calories will come more economically by the direct route from the soil and clothing more cheaply from the chemist. His vision is even more horrible than that. Laboratory-grown sheepskin, he says, is now possible, and has been made to yield six times as much wool per square inch as the skin on a sheep's back, so that tissue-breeding, fanciful though it seems now, may one day be cheaper than animal-breeding. Fortunately, for my peace of mind that is not an immediate threat. The future of animals reared for meat "seems secure as far as we can see ahead." The future of the others depends on fashion, on human whims and human vanities, and most of all perhaps on that perverted sentimentality which makes man put fences round the remnants of creatures, big and little, he has already all but destroyed.

Birds, "Morus" thinks—it sounds a bold thought in New Zealand—are not at present in danger, partly because their "food-gathering space is still large enough to permit an increase in the bird population, even in thickly-settled industrial countries," and partly because man, for all his predatoriness, has "created a moral-aesthetic zone of tabu within the animal kingdom which all civilised people have more or less respected." I hope "Morus" is right. But when I ask myself how many native birds I have seen in 40 years, how many

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