



LEFT: "Half a dozen left alive now will be half a thousand in a year or two if killing stops"

poultry and eggs, or intensify the war they have always waged on Australia's disappearing ground birds?

There can be no doubt, I think, that they will do all these things, and birds will probably pay the biggest toll. Here they will pay all of it, since there will be nothing left for ferrets, weasels, stoats and hawks but big and little birds, domesticated and wild. It is not a cheerful prospect even if we believe with some biologists that the breeding rate of most animals and birds rises and falls with their food supply. Yet I would not hesitate, if I had the power, to destroy every rabbit in New Zealand tonight. I would wake up in a country with which I would not be familiar, and with torn, ragged and painful gaps in my blanket of memories. But I would know that this was one of the associations of childhood that it would have been better for me never to have formed.

THE generosity of an anonymous correspondent, expressed during my absence in Australia, has turned me back this week to W. H. Hudson and *The Purple Land*. Hudson holds me as Guthrie-Smith does, but with bonds that have deeper roots because they laid

hold of me earlier in my life. I reverence both, but in general can't warm to either. The truth, I suppose, is that I am not high-minded enough to meet them on even terms on the level on which they normally lived. Hudson's early life, as he describes it in *Far Away and Long Ago*, touches me at many points, and if he had remained in Patagonia I would have found it easier to get close to him. But something happened when he moved to London, and I think it was this that shut me out. I think it shut out many of his readers. I think he was so unhappy in England, and remained so unhappy, that he buttoned his coat tightly about himself to keep the uncomprehending from touching him. His love of birds remained, and of some animals. There is warmth in his account of the emotions started by England's evening primrose. But it is only with children once or twice, and with villagers and illiterate farm workers, that he unbuttons his coat to human beings. Big men must always be lonely, since their number is so small. Hudson went to England because he was lonely in Patagonia. I think he stayed in England because he knew it was useless looking for fellowship anywhere else. It was, however, a choice between two forms of solitariness, and I have never been sure that it was the right choice.

(To be continued)

SHEPHERD'S CALENDAR

The Persistence of Rabbits

by "SUNDOWNER"

I HEARD today that three men with half a dozen dogs, shot-guns, ferrets, spades, and a small supply of poison took only a couple of days recently to clear a square mile of badly-infested country at Rae's Junction. Because the rabbits had everything they liked there—warm slopes, soft but dry ground, a never-failing food supply (from willow

bark to clover to ryegrass to oats to swedes), with acres of broom, gorse, manuka, and matagouri for shelter, their sudden annihilation sounds like a miracle to one who has watched that spot for 60 years. But 1954 is the rabbits' black year. An accidental epidemic in Europe, an induced epidemic in Australia, a systematic killing campaign in New Zealand—slaughter without profit or politics—must have returned more rabbits to the earth than it has ever received in so short a time. But rabbits are tough. In Australia they are developing a degree of immunity to myxomatosis that is worrying both the farmers and the biologists. It took years to persuade the authorities to let the biologists do their worst, and years before the biologists could persuade themselves that their worst would kill rabbits only. But it has apparently taken rabbits two or three years at most to begin protecting themselves. The facts are still obscure, as facts usually are in countries where everybody is free to talk, every newspaper free to report the talk, and only one man in many thousands trained to assemble facts and weigh them; but I gather that the myxomatosis wave is subsiding with many millions of rabbits still alive. The terrible fecundity of rabbits seems, in fact, to be conquering biological weapons as it has conquered guns, traps, poisons, ferrets, weasels, and hawks in

countries like New Zealand with no native predators, and all these enemies plus snakes, foxes, eagles and dingoes in Australia.

I am not, therefore, quite certain that I will see no more rabbits at Rae's Junction, and no more plagues of rabbits there. Half a dozen left alive now will be half a thousand in a year or two if killing stops, and tens of thousands after I am dead. Meanwhile it is mildly amusing to read that Australians are beginning to quarrel about the distribution of the award that the Government has not yet decided to give to the rabbit's biological conqueror.

THERE is one possible consequence of the war against rabbits that will worry Australian farmers more than farmers in New Zealand. Some landholders in Queensland are beginning to ask already what dingoes, foxes, and eagles will do when (if) the rabbits disappear. Though they are taxing themselves to erect a

dingo fence three thousand miles long, it will enclose an area about as big as our South Island with, in the early years at least, almost as many dingoes shut in as there will be shut out. Even if it is safe to assume that these will eventually be killed, they will not turn vegetarian before they die, and there are farmers who say they would sooner feed them on rabbits than on lambs, sheep, and young calves. So with the foxes and the eagles. At present these are about as troublesome in Australia as, say, ferrets and harrier hawks are here. In general it is not necessary for them to become pests to live. What will happen, some farmers are asking, if it does become necessary? Will they compete with the dingoes for lamb, get bolder and more cunning in the search for



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