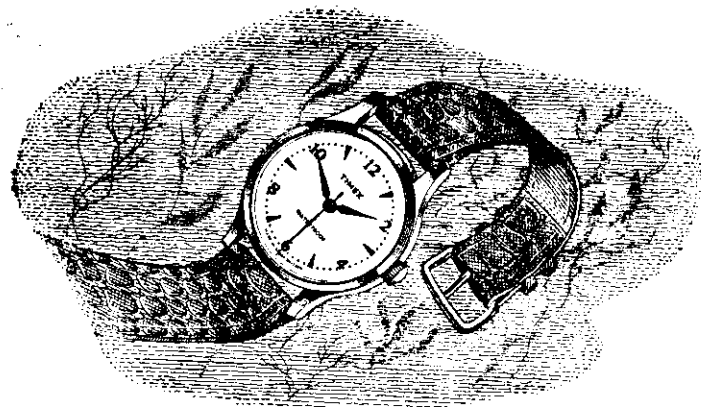


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BOOKS

Evolution Through Sex

SEX AND THE NATURE OF THINGS, by N. J. Berrill; Victor Gollancz, English price 13/6.

(Reviewed by J.D.McD.)

BY the time this review is printed New Zealanders may have received a report on the sexual morals of the young. Seldom can so important a report have been so rapidly compiled. In consequence, many folks, in search of a balanced outlook, may well feel the necessity for a little supplementary reading. Berrill is their man.

He leaves no doubt as to the immense importance of sex in making us what we are. His purpose is to trace the evolutionary process in terms of sex, from the earliest origins of life up to man. The determining factor, of course, has been natural selection operating on the variation possible by reason of sexual mating. Not that sex and reproduction are the same thing. Yet the essential similarities of all living things are best revealed in sex. It is only in the last chapter that we reach man, but we have been reaching towards him all the way.

He is at pains to show the sexual origin of a state of society, and his notes on the role of the male can do little to bolster male ego. The female is the social sex. The male "should be alive when required and not too hard to find."

The illustrations Berrill uses to make his points are, themselves, so intensely interesting that one is frequently beguiled by them, and must make a real effort to return to the theme. The social habits of birds, for example, parthenogenesis in the water flea, the grisly fascination of spider mating, bat pollination, change of sex, and devices for synchronising emotional releases.

His anthropomorphism is deliberate and frequently amusing. It is probably good for us, too. Certain shrimps are male when half-grown, but female next year. Hence, "Men would be half the size and age of women with the prospect of maternity always ahead of them."

There is frequently an arresting phrase which fairly demands quotation: "Growing from an egg is a hazardous enterprise, and most of us are luckier than we realise." "Tyranny should always be tempered with a little assassination." "An isolated barnacle is simultaneously a bachelor and an old maid." "Life justifies its own existence." "We find ourselves endowed with a mixture of unwanted heritage and the beginnings of spiritual grace."

The charm of his style, easy but never carelessly discursive, the aptness of his illustrations, his wry but friendly humour, combine to make the book eminently readable. His first-hand knowledge is impressive without being overwhelming, and he certainly provides the

material for endless argument. Yet a tiny doubt obtrudes. Among all the so carefully organised facts and argument he tells us, on page 206, of the mutton bird which nests in millions "on certain small islands off the Australian coast." From which you will gather that the rest of his illustrations will be received with due caution in Invercargill.

To Berrill's mind sex has made possible variation. Hence it is the major evolutionary factor. One event, which has determined something of the direction of that process, is our leaving the sea, and so having to maintain our internal liquid condition in a non-liquid environment. Another is the development of an internal heat control system which enables us to maintain a temperature above that of our surroundings, very close to the upper limit for the survival of protoplasm, in fact.

Nowhere in the book does he explicitly say, but everywhere he implies, that in natural conditions social maturity is reached simultaneously with sexual maturity. Here is the basic flaw in the organisation of modern society. This is the reason for the more spectacular aberrations of "juvenile delinquency." A sexually mature person, biologically an adult, is maintained in an infant status in society. I do not expect to see this fundamental matter raised in the Report. Yet I cannot see that there is much value in a report which ignores it.

EUROPE UNDER HITLER

SURVEY OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS, 1939-1946—HITLER'S EUROPE, edited by Arnold and Veronica Toynbee, DOCUMENTS ON INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS, 1939-1946, Vol. 2—HITLER'S EUROPE, edited by Margaret Carlyle. Both published by Geoffrey Cumberlege, Oxford University Press, English prices 63/- and 38/-.

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"In natural conditions social maturity is reached simultaneously with sexual maturity"

N.Z. LISTENER, NOVEMBER 26, 1954.