

# VIOLENT CONTINENT

IT is, I suppose, a necessary dullness in us that shuts us out of the calamities of other people. Without it we could not live. But I find it a little horrifying that the floods in Australia are to most of us just "far off unhappy things" that we don't allow our minds to carry round. I am even a little irritated personally that physical Australia should be making such nonsense of the Australia of my school books and dreams. When I followed a flood last year through the north-east corner of New

**MARCH 5** South Wales I could see where it came from and what caused it. I can understand dimly what caused this year's flood in the Hunter Valley. But as I write this note the people of Bourke are waiting in fear hundreds of miles away in the parched interior. They have been working day and night for more than a week to defend themselves against an approaching sea of water in the Darling basin while the Lachlan, 300 miles away, threatens another area as big as Canterbury. It is impossible to imagine any situation in New Zealand comparable with that, since most of our rivers reach the sea in a few hours and even the longest within a couple of days. But Australia has been doing this kind of thing as long as white men have known it, and we still think of it as an arid mass threatened by nothing but heat and drought.

I have only once heard Australia described by an Australian as a physically violent land, convulsed periodically by floods and droughts, and subject all the year round to shattering extremes of heat and cold. Why the other picture survives I don't know, but a possible explanation is the incurable optimism of the human race and its stubborn refusal to believe what it finds unpleasant. A necessary dullness, I called it a moment

ago; and that, I am sure, it is if we estimate necessity geologically. On a shorter view it is dangerous stupidity.

IT has been suggested to me by a friend in Matangi that if I want to get my consumption of food in proper focus I should consider moles and shrews instead of voles. I am not sure that it is what bright people nowadays call rewarding to discover how many times greedier or less greedy I am than a mouse, but while voles eat their own weight of food in about ten days, moles and shrews, my friend tells me, consume their own weight of food every

**MARCH 7** vole a quite abstemious beast, and allows for a considerably greater consumption of food by human beings before they become—what I am sure they are—the greediest creatures on earth when they are free to eat and forget the consequences.

Birds and cows have been the typical non-stop eaters in my own experience, but I don't think they often eat their weight in 24 hours. I have occasionally trailed Elsie through the succulent grass in the garden in an attempt to bring her to the stage at which food repelled her; but I have never quite succeeded. I can bring her in about an hour to the stage of relative indifference; to picking and choosing and looking about her; to listening to the calls of other cows about half a mile away; and sometimes to a complete stop for three or four minutes. But if I offer her an apple at this stage, or a cabbage, or a potato, she starts again with renewed zest. She does not resume her grazing when I turn her loose in the uninteresting paddock outside, but she snaps at interesting mouthfuls on the way to the gate,

and then turns round when she is through and looks back hopefully.

It is a poor performance beside a mole's: on her very greediest days she can hardly eat more than a tenth of her own weight. But it is a remarkable performance to watch: first the hollows filling up (always on one side first); then the whole body distending till she is just a truncated cone, with an outline from the rear that reminds me of the hoof mark of an unshod horse.

I CAN find no information about the consumption of food by birds, and hesitate to base an opinion on my own limited observations. I have read, or been told, that most birds die if they are kept without food

**MARCH 8** for 48 hours, but I have never seen that statement confirmed authoritatively.

Nestlings seem to require food three or four times an hour, and sometimes to get it ten or twenty times; but whether that is necessary for survival or not I don't know. I have watched fantails bringing food to a nest every two or three minutes, but the contribution at each visit would be small: sandflies and midges with, I suppose, a moth or a bigger fly now and again. I have never timed blackbirds, thrushes, or starlings, but I should not be surprised to learn that their daily contribution during the first week of growth approaches the young bird's body weight.

These, however, are all small birds. I have done very little watching of the bigger birds—hawks, gulls, magpies and pigeons, for example—but I spent an hour or two once in a boat not far from a rookery of shags, and the eating and excreting were almost continuous. I think Dr. Richdale kept a record of the number of meals given to their young by the albatrosses on Otago Peninsula, but I have not seen it. I wish Mrs. Kippis, before she wrote *Sold for a Farthing*, had weighed the bread and milk consumed by her sparrow, but she was interested chiefly in his mental development.

SO far my eight ewes (all pets) have shown no interest in my two rams, nor my two rams in them. Until a fortnight ago they were all on hard dry fare, which with sheep is not philoprogenitive. Now, however, there is sufficient young grass to change their minds. Even the stony faces are turning green, and if there

**MARCH 10** are no developments in the next week or ten days I shall begin to suspect a matrimonial rebellion. One of the eight is, in fact, a militant female now. Though she has all her teeth she has not yet had a lamb or tried to have one, and the Rachels of the ovine world are few. But of the others two are two-tooths and the remaining five four-tooths. They are in good, but not too good condition, and they were themselves all born in August. If I am to have lambs in August this year there is not much time to be lost.

Later: The situation is not quite as bad as I supposed. I have just returned from a walk round the hill, and black Dinah did not see me coming. She is the wildest of my ewes, but the most forward, and although I can hardly say yet that she was the cause, she was on the rams' side of the fence, and they were fighting.

(To be continued)



FLOODWATERS IN NEW SOUTH WALES

"Australia has been doing this kind of thing as long as white men have known it"

N.Z. LISTENER, APRIL 1, 1955.

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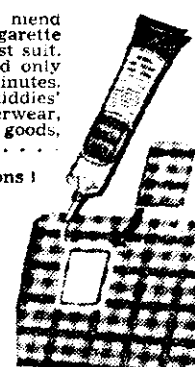
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