

References

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THE DOOMSDAY BOOK

by GORDON RATTRAY TAYLOR

A Fawcett Crest Book.

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Until such time as Paul and Anne Ehrlich's well researched hard-cover "Population, Resources, Environment" also appears in paperback, "The Doomsday Book" remains, in my view, the most readable, and probably the most important of the spate of popular, doom-and-gloom, ecology books; it has been in paperback only since September, 1971. It may be that the author's 1968 "The Biological Time Bomb" will prove more prophetic and in the long run more important, but it lacks the immediacy and urgency of the present work. This time the author avoids speculation and extrapolation wherever possible; instead he presents a fairly low-keyed digest of recently published work, lightly footnoted, annotated, referenced, and indexed. The data are largely from reputable original sources and reviews, notably and frequently from *Nature*, *Science*, *New Scientist*, *Science News*, and *Scientific American*.

Isaac Asimov refers to *The Doomsday Book* as "cool and unimpassioned", which well describes the writing. The tone should be acceptable both to the converted and to any layman who is not very clear on the ecology furore but is not about to be stamped by rhetoric or emotion. A few degrees of emotional heat do break through occasionally, for example in the section on radioactivity (chap. 8).

In any book as wide ranging as this, nit picking is easy. On p.85 we read that "the Tasmanian 'wolf' was . . . believed to be a predator — actually it is not a carnivore but a marsupial like a kangaroo." It is a marsupial alright, but a predator too — and probably extinct by now. Some examples from entomology are greatly oversimplified, e.g. the case of the codling moth (p.84). Aldrin and dieldrin (p.128) are the terrible organophosphorus twins. Plague is spread by

lice (p.77). But a dividend from the all-embracing approach is that DDT loses some of its preeminence and falls into its proper place as merely the most widespread and one of the most damaging pollutants amongst such other horrors as cadmium, mercury, lead, polychloro-biphenyls, asbestos, carbon monoxide, nitrites, nitrogen oxides, and radioactive wastes.

In "Ice Age or Heat Death" (chap.3) the conflicting arguments for both fates will probably confuse the reader. But he can hardly fail to realize, first, that astonishingly small inputs to the atmosphere will surely have an effects of some kind on the earth, ". . . climate is nothing like as stable as we tend to think," (p. 79); and second, that the whole earth is so closely tied to and affected by its atmosphere and climate that unpleasant changes may appear at several removes from the triggering mechanism, ". . . the web of cause and effect is too complicated for our present levels of scientific understanding. . . ." (p.73).

The author is at his best on the food and population crises and in marshalling his arguments against nuclear power. The views of Gofman and Tamplin are presented at some length in a 30-page section on radioactivity (chap.8).

It takes two full pages to acknowledge those who helped the author, including 18 very distinguished discussants (e.g. La Mont Cole, Fraser Darling, Kingsley Davis, Paul Ehrlich, Glenn Seaborg, Stewart Udall), and 56 others with impeccable affiliations, who gave help and information, including Barry Commoner, J. W. Gofman, Chas. F. Wurster and many Europeans.

On the cover of the paperback the publisher has put the cheering message: "Mankind can survive." The author seems to be less than certain.

H. R. MacCarthy