

Book Reviews

The Great Barrier Reef, by Isobel Bennett. Warne, £5.95.

To the world of marine biology the Great Barrier Reef has long been famous for its immense diversity of underwater species. Yet when my wife and I visited it only 16 years ago, and put our faces under water with masks and snorkels for the first time to see a whole new world of colourful life, it was surprisingly difficult to buy any equipment locally or find anyone to take us out on to the reefs. The idea that ordinary people, other than scientists, fishermen or keen young divers with spear guns could enjoy this immensely beautiful spectacle simply had not dawned on the average Australian.

Two years ago the Australian internal airlines introduced package tours for the first time. For people living in Melbourne a holiday in Queensland has to be compared with a holiday in the South of Italy or Greece for a Londoner. Now the Queensland coast is being rapidly developed and the wonders of the Reef are being exploited by a burgeoning tourist industry. And this is only one of the pressures on the coral environment. The importance of conservation is at last beginning to concern many Australians, and vigorous effort is now being directed against any human activities that may harm this fabulous wonder of the world.

In this and other contexts, Isobel Bennett's book is of the greatest importance. Most directly it will help people to learn and understand about the wonderful things they can see above and below the tideline. I know of no better book as an introduction to this unique part of the world.

The history, geography, reef formation, island vegetation, tidal system and weather patterns are all covered, and there is a wealth of information on the shore birds and mammals, corals and fishes. There are good maps and fantastic photographs both in colour and black and white. As a scientist Isobel Bennett writes authoritatively on marine biology but this book is not just for the scientist. Everyone who visits the Barrier Reef should read it, and will, I am sure, enjoy it.

PETER SCOTT

The Seychelles, by Guy Lionnet. David & Charles, £2.95.

Guy Lionnet is well-qualified to write about the Seychelles, having served for ten years as Director of Agriculture in the Seychelles Government. His book comes at an opportune time when these beautiful islands, now accessible by air, will be increasingly visited. It is designed, in fact, for the intelligent visitor and gives an accurate account of the historical, political, economic and social background, while mentioning also the chief attractions for the tourist, with photographic illustrations. Previous writings about the Seychelles have been mostly either of a scientific nature or in the form of descriptive and evocative reminiscence. The present unpretentious work falls into neither of these two classes and undoubtedly fills a gap. The chapters on the early French settlements and their aftermath are well done and contain much interesting information not easily accessible elsewhere, but the book does not set out to be a full-scale history nor yet a detailed guide-book; it is instead a useful compromise between the two.

The human history of the Seychelles is after all a matter of 200 years or so and is of a pattern with many parallels elsewhere. It is their natural history which is unique. The author is a naturalist of distinction and has included, as one might expect, a chapter dealing with the more remarkable