

BOOK AND VIDEO REVIEWS

Agriculture and the Citizen

Colin W Spedding (1996). Chapman & Hall: London. 282pp. Paperback. Obtainable from the publishers, 2-6 Boundary Row, London SE1 8HN, UK (ISBN 0 412 71520 1). Price £24.99.

Colin Spedding's latest book, *Agriculture and the Citizen* has evolved naturally from his earlier book, *An Introduction to Agricultural Systems*. The earlier book was aimed primarily at those directly involved in agricultural science. It created a series of logical frameworks for the definition, analysis and resolution of complex problems in agriculture and should, in my opinion, be required reading for all life scientists, particularly those who are reluctant to recognize the existence of life outside their own laboratories. 'What know they of harbours, who only harbours know?' he quotes before embarking, in this small book, on a voyage through some big seas and tricky waters.

The target audience for this new book is all sentient citizens; those who, in Spedding's words, are aware of their rights and responsibilities. The topics are equally ambitious, for example: 'Feeding the world', 'The concept of efficiency', 'Sustainability in agriculture', 'Animal welfare', 'Agriculture and human health' and 'Education of the citizen'. The approach is to provide a logical basis for discussion of these complex issues. Each chapter first identifies the most important input and output factors in the system under discussion, then creates models or skeletons of models for analysis of these systems. The system models are outlined by excellent text figures and illustrated by example, with information presented in tables or 'boxes'. These boxes are aimed at the citizen reader with little specialist knowledge of the science of agriculture and the environment, nutrition and human health. Inevitably, therefore, they will appear naive to the specialist, but then who needs a lifebelt when sitting on the harbour wall?

Two chapters of particular interest to readers of this journal are those on 'The role of animals' and 'Animal welfare'. The former considers the role of animals, both as defined by our needs, and by theirs, which may be defined simply as to eat, reproduce and be eaten. It attempts to embrace, in 18 pages, topics such as comparative digestion and animal nutrition, reproduction, animals for power, earthworms and fish farming, and the concept of size and efficiency. Here and elsewhere, in the attempt to cram in all sorts of interesting knowledge, the book tends to bite off more than it can chew. Box 6.2 attempts to outline nutritional needs (including differences in energy requirements between species and between homeotherms and poikilotherms) in one page. Box 6.9 correctly explains the concept of digestibility but then illustrates variations in digestibility with examples that will prove equally baffling to the novice and expert. For example, digestibility of crude fibre (undefined) in maize is given as 3.6% for cattle and -48.1% for sheep!

The chapter on animal welfare is much better, perhaps because it sticks to fundamental concepts. Here, the boxes provide excellent checklists for identifying potential sources of animal suffering on the farm, at markets, in transport and at the point of slaughter. This logical and comprehensive approach certainly achieves the author's objective which is to help the concerned, rational citizen towards a proper appreciation of the complexity of these topics and away from the tendency towards 'glib answers'.

Each chapter begins, enchantingly, with a proverb and ends, provocatively, with a series of questions. The chapter on sustainability is prefaced by 'He who speaks the truth should have one foot in the stirrup'. I am assured (but amazed) that all these proverbs are authentic. Questions at the end of the welfare chapter include 'Why don't we give as much freedom to

our dogs as to our cats?' These questions are all pertinent. They do, however, highlight a sense of growing unease which I developed while reading this book and which must be set against my admiration for its clarity and wit. The problems addressed are of critical importance, the concepts and the scholarship are excellent, *but there are absolutely no answers!*

I can understand the reasons for this. Colin Spedding makes it plain at the outset that he believes most opinions on agriculture and the citizen are glib because they are based on incomplete premises. The aim of the book is to provide blueprints and building blocks from which rational citizens can build informed opinions. However, we are given (almost) no conclusions, or even opinions, as a consequence of all this elegant thought. This is presumably from a desire to avoid preaching. However, it tends to leave the taste that all topics are so complex that every decision is probably a mistake. They may be so, but surely it is also a mistake for as informed and understanding a citizen as Colin Spedding not to offer the rest of us some of the conclusions of his lifetime study of these problems: at least some positive suggestions as to how we should proceed. In the real world of agriculture and the citizen, politicians, farmers and buyers have to take decisions which they know to be imperfect and they will not be helped by academics who tell them it is all too difficult. This is particularly pertinent in the emotion-charged arena of animal welfare which is overloaded with those who are full of a passionate intensity: in these circumstances the best can ill afford to lack conviction.

A J F Webster
School of Veterinary Science
University of Bristol, UK

Animal Experimentation: A Student Guide to Balancing the Issues

Vaughan Monamy (1996). ANZCCART: Glen Osmond. 56pp. Paperback. Obtainable from UFAW, 8 Hamilton Close, South Mimms, Potters Bar, Herts EN6 3QD, UK (ISBN 0 9586821 00). Price £5.00.

This book is a treasure, a stroke of genius, a must! It is a stroke of genius because it could still have been an excellent book at 10 times the length. The cool professionalism of the judgement of how little to say while avoiding superficiality is also close to genius. The ability to engage the readers narrative interest, to conduct a challenging but confidence-building dialogue and yet remain free of that last nudge towards the authors viewpoint also takes genius, humility and commitment to purpose. The purpose, quite simply, is neither to attack nor defend but teach how to think about the complex and contradictory issues associated with animal welfare and also to invoke, in a most fascinating way, a feeling for the way others have wrestled with the same problems over the centuries. Again, the confident and judicious use of quotations solely to enable the reader to glimpse an angle rather than impress reviewers with the length of scholarship is admirable. It takes real depth of scholarship to accomplish this – it is actually the greatest tennis players who have had the least need to show off. There are seven chapters covering general issues: history, opposition to animal experiments, moral status of animals, animal use and its regulation, alternatives and conclusions – which are not prescriptive but cement confidence in knowing how to address the subtleties and uncertainties. All that in 45 pages of text. There is also an excellent bibliography.