

Factory Farming. Andrew Johnson. Blackwells (1991): Oxford. 272 Pp. Price £19.95. ISBN 0 6311 78430

It was in 1964 that Ruth Harrison's seminal exposé, of what appeared to her as cruel methods of intensive animal production that had become established since the end of the last war, was published. Her book *Animal Machines* with its subtitle *the new factory farming industry* achieved its profound and far-reaching effect through wide quotation from contemporary and reliable sources, assisted by a number of startling, clear photographs. Its purpose was to present as complete a picture as possible of these relatively new animal husbandry systems, without obtruding a personal viewpoint until the final chapter. Here, Mrs Harrison made a number of clearly stated proposals designed to stop or greatly mitigate the cruelty associated with these systems. The book had such a profound effect that within months the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and the Secretary of State for Scotland felt impelled to appoint an independent committee to examine and report on the welfare of animals kept under intensive livestock husbandry systems. The committee, a mix of active farmers and scientists, with Professor F W Rogers Brambell FRS as its chairman, visited many factory farms in this country and abroad, and reported at the end of 1965. From this has flowed important legislation, ethological research and the continuing important work of the Farm Animal Welfare Council, itself the present focus for ameliorating action in the UK.

All this is only briefly mentioned in one of the short, concluding chapters of Andrew Johnson's book; rationally, it should have served as the starting point. There are six main sections entitled, Man the controller, Practical choices, Moral choices, The environmental angle, Do we get what we want? and Prospects for reform. Each is subdivided into three chapters. There are 10 Appendices most of them of one page, where data scattered through the text or new material are compressed into tabular form, where they can act as concentrated sources of gloom and despondency. The photographs throughout are of varying quality.

Since the first section is more than twice the length of most of the rest, it may serve to reveal the author's purposes. It is hard to believe that it is to inform the ignorant; for there can be few households now that do not know that most of our eggs are laid by hens kept in cages and, at the same time that it is increasingly possible, if more expensive, to buy free-range eggs and many other items of our diet that have been grown organically. I am forced to the conclusion that this section, like so much of the rest of the book, is an over-long, tendentious, often rambling account of Andrew Johnson's dislike of most, if not all modern methods of animal husbandry. An indication of the prejudiced, over-stated style appears on the first page when we are assured that 'pretty buildings have given way to flimsy shacks of asbestos and corrugated iron some venting wisps of foul-smelling steam', and, a few lines further on 'the animals have all been put in prisons' . . . He assures us that the meat from the modern pig or broiler 'often has a repulsively gelatinous texture', stating that 'marketing and price advantage have overcome consumer resistance to such tasteless pieces of flab'.

Then what does our author believe in? We are told on the book's dust cover that his occupation is the running of a restaurant on the Island of Harris where he serves his customers special Devon ham from 'traditional' breeds of pigs, beautiful Colston Bassett stilton and wild Atlantic salmon. There is a whole chapter devoted to explaining how disastrous in every way is the present expanding business of the artificial rearing of salmon in Scottish lochs, a subject in which we can assume he has personal knowledge. As usual, he paints a uniformly depressing picture, without any indication of what moves are being made or could be made to improve the system.

It is a pity that there is so much repetition in the book. The reader is likely to tire of re-reading about the wicked ways of force-feeding geese in parts of France to produce *pate-de-foie gras*, the manifest shortcomings of feed-lots in the USA, or the depressing figures of sheep deaths in Merinos shipped from Australia to Middle Eastern countries. Mistakes as well as exaggeration occur. Antibiotics are not used to treat viral infections (unfortunately it is only bacterial infections that respond to them), it is simply not true that 50 per cent of hens and broilers are always given antibiotics, and he should know that the movement of any calf through livestock markets is now reduced to once in 28 days. It is true that most of our EEC partners have not banned calf-rearing in crates, but none have been reared in this way in Great Britain for years, but it is several times discussed. Better to urge in the strongest terms the British veterinary profession's stance that no live animals should be transported from these shores.

Over the whole scene, one feels that Andrew Johnson has not fully informed himself upon how things are today. So many of his references are of information published up to seven years ago and one doubts whether statements published in *AgScene* or by *Chickens Lib* can always have equal validity to those in scientific journals subject to refereeing before publication. In discussing today's dairy farmers or beef producers, he should have discovered how much better their animals are housed and fed during the winter now that consistently well-made silage forms the main source of roughage.

He gives no indication how quickly during the last few years, pig-keepers have turned to the electronically controlled feeding station or outside rearing for sows, that sweat boxes have been discarded in the UK, nor of the increase in percherries for layers.

It has been a delight to read the author's frequent reference to remarks by classical writers, and there are throughout this book many pieces of interesting information. Like many another kind-hearted, concerned citizen contemplating the follies of the human race in relation to our environment, he has permitted himself too much of the luxury of despair, thus sadly making it an unbalanced book.

Perhaps there is, after 28 years, the need for a calm, comprehensive factually supported examination of intensive animal production methods in this country today — a requirement not covered, I fear, in this emotional book.

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