

Book Reviews

The Falkland Island, by Ian J. Strange. David & Charles, £3.50.

The Falkland Islands looks like a guide book with all the headings and coverage in depth a good guide book should have; but there is something rather different and special about it. For one thing the author lives there.

Now that I have read it I am not sure whether this derives from the fascination of the place itself, its bloody past, its solitude, its link with great men of the explorer/naturalist ilk or whether it is just that the author wrote a good and readable book.

The Falklands are spread over some 15,000 square miles of the South Atlantic at 52 degrees S, yet the population is only about 2000 with half of those living in the capital city—Port Stanley. The aspect of the islands is much that of the windy Hebrides. Shackleton claimed that his guest room at Government House was the coldest spot on earth. The elements dominate the scene and the scene is very beautiful.

Because *Homo sapiens* is so rare an animal, he is warm-hearted, resourceful and honest. One could pin a £5 note to the gatepost in Stanley and expect it still to be there in six months—unless it has been blown away or shredded by hail—but it was not always like this. The rowdy influx of sealers, whale men and near pirates in the days of sail have given it a violent background, and this Ian Strange has researched and revealed in a way that keeps one reading on, Geography and geology, climate, settlements, discovery, police, religion, navigation and shipwreck, sociology, and sealing take up three quarters of the book.

It is in the final chapters that the naturalist can enjoy the part that has been left, like all good things, to the end. Endemic species are plentiful in the Falklands. Birds offer a new dimension in tameness and trust. Elephant seals and sea-lions haul out on the beaches. Dolphins, the 'puffing pigs', leap and roll offshore. Albatrosses in thousands nest with the penguins in the grand alliance of the sub-Antarctic—master flyers in air and swimmers in water in a liaison of harmonious extremes. And the photographs of all this are as good as photographs can be. The only drawback I can find is that there are none of the author's line drawings to decorate the text.

KEITH SHACKLETON

The Life and Death of Whales, by Robert Burton. A. Deutsch, £2.50.

Close on fifty years ago I was in a whale-catcher on the whale feeding grounds off the coast of South Georgia, the island where Antarctic whaling began in 1904. It was a fine clear day with a fresh breeze, and as the catcher crested the swells we saw whales, or rather their blows, on all sides—in whatever direction we looked there were whales as far as the eye could see, certainly hundreds, probably thousands. Today you would be lucky to see half-a-dozen at one time.

The near extermination of the large whales in the Antarctic, and the drastic reduction of their numbers elsewhere, is an almost unbelievable example of human folly. Although a levy on the industry that was over-killing whales paid for scientific investigations into whale biology to discover the sustainable yield of the stocks, the information produced was consistently disregarded for decades. Now, at the last minute of the eleventh hour, the International Whaling Commission has got the remnant of a ruined industry to agree to regulations that will probably save the great whales from extermination and perhaps allow their numbers to recover.

Robert Burton discusses in some detail this sorry tale of commercial

indifference to expanding natural resources, provided profits are quick and large, in the closing chapters of his book, which ably deals with the biology of whales and their exploitation by man. Part I describes the different species of the larger whales and gives much information on many aspects of their lives; Part II is a succinct history of whaling—an excellent account compressed into the compass of 150 pages. It will give the interested general reader a reliable summary of the life and death of some of these most interesting mammals which, though often glimpsed at sea, are tantalisingly remote from close observation. There is an index, a short list of books for further reading, a useful collection of text figures and some interesting photographs.

L. H. MATTHEWS

The Last Resource: Man's Exploitation of the Oceans, by Tony Loftas. Pelican, 50p.

It is apposite that this book, first published in 1969, and now revised and issued as a paperback, should appear now with the UN Conference on the Law of the Sea scheduled to begin in Santiago in February 1974. It gives a good review of the present state of exploitation of the ocean for food, minerals, pharmaceuticals, water, energy, transport and military purposes; the concluding section deals with the debate about ocean resources which has resulted in that conference being held. Tony Loftas packs a considerable amount of information into his chapters but still manages to be readable and interesting. The book is well-balanced, and when he examines possible future developments he is careful to avoid the pitfall of moving into the realms of science fiction.

It is a pity, however, that he has not brought it up-to-date in a number of important respects. For example, he rightly points to the fact that there is too much fishing effort in the North Atlantic, but he does not mention the recent agreement between the 15 member countries of the International Commission for the Northwest Atlantic Fisheries fixing catch quotas for different species of fish in a number of areas, which is a significant step forward in the management of fish resources. Similarly, he gives the impression that the beam trawl is outmoded, whereas recent developments in the Netherlands have made it an extremely efficient device that is posing serious problems for the conservation of sole and plaice, and, although he gives a good account of the British attempts to develop marine fish and shellfish cultivation systems, he does not include the latest economic assessments which show that it is unlikely to be economic to 'farm' a common fish like plaice but that the 'farming' of species like turbot may eventually be possible.

The marine pollution section describes the recent conventions to prevent pollution by dumping from ships, but makes no mention of the other recommendations of the UN Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment, nor does it mention that the so-called high levels of mercury in tuna fish are now found to have been present for decades and not to be an effect of pollution.

There are, too, errors in some explanations of scientific findings: for example, a faulty account of the reasoning which allows the maximum sustainable yield of a fish stock to be determined, and the explanation of the development of the seasonal thermocline leads the reader to believe that sea water has its maximum density at a temperature of 4°C—this is the case for fresh water but sea water has a maximum density at about minus 2°C. Finally, there is at times a tendency to turn hypotheses into hard fact, as in the statement that PCBs were the cause of the seabird wreck in the Irish Sea