Second guess

Henry Gee

Man After Man. By Dougal Dixon. *Blandford: 1990. Pp.128. £14.95. To be published on 14 June.*

IN THE beginning, a zoologist turned full-time dreamer called Dougal Dixon concocted *After Man*, a bestiary of 50 million years hence. It was a vision of what evolution might have achieved by then if people suddenly vanished tomorrow Charming and insightful, After Man was conceptually novel and graphically witty.

Then came *The New Dinosaurs*. This time the premise was that the famous end-Cretaceous asteroid was off-target and the dinosaurs continued to diversify. The format followed that of *After Man*, but the fit was a little procrustean. The formal names, for example, so folksy in *After Man*, began to look a little contrived. But dinosaurs and asteroids were all the rage, especially both at once, and the book still worked.

Not so *Man After Man*, Dixon's latest. The idea is an extrapolation of human evolution 5 million years into the future, and Dixon's bandwagon-of-the-year is genetic engineering. His book reads like a synopsis for a science-fiction novel by Brian Aldiss. The fact that Aldiss wrote the preface would be funny if the text were not so jejeune — lots of ideas and wizard wheezes, but the social conscience of an orang utan. The pictures, too, are lumpen and adolescent, and the *After Man*-style format completely ridiculous. The fake Latin nomenclature, like the sight of a matron squeezing into a too-small swimsuit, is pathetic and ludicrous. If only all of the pictures were gone, and Aldiss had written a novel out of the idea, the result could have been grand.

The story goes like this. With the increase in population, human beings look to the stars for *lebensraum*. To help them, humanoids adapted for life under the sea and in the vacuum of space are engineered from spare parts. (This reminds me of the tale of the rabbi, who when confronted with the news of an impending world-wide flood, reminds his congregation that they have 48 hours to learn how to live under water.) These androids are not fertile, but someone somewhere succeeds in establishing a viable race of underwater people.

As the cities decay into squalor and barbarism, the cream of humanity heads for the stars. The rest of the human intelligentsia, crippled by accumulated mutations, prop themselves up by prostheses until these, like the cities, fail. But good old-fashioned biotechnology saves the day, and human beings are genetically engineered (from the germ line of the underclass, who seem grateful for the opportunity to contribute) into animals, to fill the ecological niches opening in the wilderness that has overgrown most of the cities.

After five million years of going forth and multiplication, evolution would have left us with a bunch of regular anthropophagi — humanoid anteaters, sloths (ground and tree-living varieties), dolphins, mole rats, cattle, carnivores and so on. And so they all plod about, each one with its face metaphorically inscribed in its chest, and a morose expression reminding us of long-lost intelligence and, no doubt, indigestion at what seems to be an exclusively cannibal feast. Then the descendants (genetically engineered) of the star-farers return, aliens in all but phylogeny, and wipe everybody out. And that just about wraps it up for humanity, except for a few fishy humanoids swimming sadly around a fashionable deep-sea vent, far from the ken of the none-too-prodigal sons, grooming themselves for a sequel.

Ugly face of the future — life moves once again from water to land.

My question is, if people could create this highly improbable mess by genetic engineering, why could they not have done it to themselves at the propped-up-by-prosthesis stage, and made life a lot more fun? Well, implies Dixon, humanity had made the world too ecologically unsound for itself by then, and special remedies were called for.

But Dixon only skirts over the ethics. Would the global environment ever deteriorate to the extent that humanity could justifiably throw morality to the wind and retrotranspose its way out of trouble? The current debates in Britain about abortion and embryo research suggest otherwise. Anyone even remotely aware of the scientific bases of these and other arguments would probably not be able to take this book very seriously. □

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New Journals

This year *Nature*'s annual new journals review supplement will appear in the issue of 11 October. Publishers and learned societies are invited to submit journals for review, taking note of the following criteria:

- Journals which first appeared after June 1988, and which issued at least four separate numbers by the end of April 1990, will be considered for review. The deadline for submission is the end of June.
- Journals covering any aspect of science are eligible, although those dealing with clinical medicine, engineering and pure mathematics are excluded, as are publications of abstracts.
- Frequency of publication must be at least three times a year.
- The main language used must be English. Translation journals in English are eligible.

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