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Frank Fenner and F. N. Ratcliffe
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MYXOMATOSIS

BY

FRANK FENNER

M.B.E., M.D., F.R.S.

Professor of Microbiology

John Curtin School of Medical Research

Australian National University

Canberra

AND

F. N. RATCLIFFE

O.B.E., B.A.

formerly Officer-in-Charge, Wildlife Survey Section,

Commonwealth Scientific & Industrial

Research Organization, Canberra



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*For our wives, Bobbie and Agnes
whose patient understanding contributed materially to
the preparation of this book*

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FOREWORD

Few diseases of wild animals not transmissible to man have had such an impact on the general public as infectious myxomatosis of rabbits. Although first recognized in 1896, until 1950 this disease was known only to a few pathologists interested in viruses and tumours. In December 1950 it spread in dramatic fashion through the wild rabbit population of south-eastern Australia, and greatly reduced the serious rabbit problem in that part of the world. In 1952 it was introduced into wild rabbits in France, and from this focus spread over the greater part of Europe, where it proved extremely lethal to both wild and domestic rabbits.

In Australia the virus was introduced to assist in the control of the major animal pest of that continent, the rabbit, and its behaviour was followed with great interest by both scientists and the general public. In Europe attitudes to the rabbit are more variable, and public reactions varied according to outlook and interests; hunting organizations were appalled at the loss of the major game animal, foresters and farmers welcomed the destruction of a pest, and breeders of domestic rabbits sought methods of protection of their stock.

For the scientist interested in the ecology of infectious disease, the spread of myxoma virus through the wild rabbits of Australia and Europe offered a unique opportunity to observe the interaction of a very lethal parasite with a highly susceptible, very common and reasonably large mammalian host. In this book an attempt has been made to consolidate the results of the investigations on the virus and its host which preceded and followed this unique event, and to see what bearing they may have on our knowledge of infectious diseases.

F. N. Ratcliffe was responsible for writing chapters 2, 3, 4, 12, and 16 and F. Fenner the other chapters, each author having received criticisms and suggestions from the other. For the reader who is not interested in technical details of virology and pathology a short summary has been provided at the end of each chapter concerned with these topics.

F.F.
F.N.R.

Canberra
December 1963

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