Introduction

The creation of an international organisation bringing together the needs of the hungry and the interests of farmers seems so logical that it is hard to imagine how revolutionary it was in the first half of the twentieth century.

The idea of international organisation was itself new. Late nineteenth and early twentieth-century advances in communications had made it feasible. The advent of professional scientists and other experts meant it could become a means of pooling knowledge and experience. International congresses and societies to share expertise in medicine had existed from the mid nineteenth century. Efforts to stem epidemic diseases brought further cooperation, but it was only after World War I, when the newly created League of Nations Council called for an organisation that would fight disease but also strive to prevent it, that programs to promote better health on an international scale were envisaged. The League of Nations Health Organization (LNHO) undertook work on public hygiene. Scientific studies in various countries increasingly showed poor levels of nutrition in many social groups; the LNHO published its own authoritative report on the problem in 1935.

Agricultural crises in the late nineteenth century provided a challenge, suggesting, for the first time, that international cooperation in agriculture might be desirable. The most notable response was the formation in 1905 of the International Institute of Agriculture, a body conceived as a world federation of farmers collecting and exchanging technological and market information to improve their own profitability. But in the crisis of the depression of the 1930s much more help was needed.

In 1935 the ‘marriage of health and agriculture’ was first promulgated at the League of Nations. The idea turned traditional policy on its head. Farm incomes had become an issue of public policy, but accepted remedies were restrictive: import quotas, production limits, protective tariffs and pooling schemes to keep prices high, thereby putting high-nutritive, ‘protective foods’ out of reach of the poor. The marriage of health and agriculture proposed increased production of those foods, to lower prices and thereby to increase consumption. The poor and hungry would benefit from the first, and farmers from the second.

This study traces the evolution of that idea in the thinking of a man almost forgotten by history. Frank Lidgett McDougall was an English-born fruit farmer in the Murray irrigation area of Australia, a self-taught expert on patterns of international trade. He became economic adviser to Stanley Melbourne Bruce, who was Australian Prime Minister in the 1920s and Australian High Commissioner in London in the 1930s and 1940s. McDougall was influenced
by the campaign of British scientist John Boyd Orr for government action on nutrition. While Bruce and Orr led the ‘nutrition initiative’ in public, it was McDougall behind the scenes whose thinking formed its basis. Bruce once said ‘McDougall brings me a new idea every morning’.¹ Some of those ideas became the basis for joint action.

The work and ideas of McDougall and of Bruce developed through three phases, reflected in the organisation of this study. The first phase covers the 1920s, when both believed that the British Empire could hold the key to greater rural prosperity in Australia, and that economic problems in Britain could also be solved by imperial economic cooperation. They saw the interests of the empire and its constituent countries as indivisible; London was the centre of their work to that end. Imperial cooperation came into being, to a limited extent, in the Ottawa Agreements of 1932.

By then it had become apparent that some problems were beyond the scope of an imperial solution. In the second phase, the League of Nations at Geneva seemed to offer a forum for international cooperation. There the ‘nutrition initiative’ succeeded beyond expectations. Nutrition was accepted as a proper subject for international cooperation, and resulting League publications increased public awareness of the problem. Bruce and McDougall went on to extend their thinking beyond nutrition, arguing that measures to implement social justice and higher standards of living could ease the political tensions of the late 1930s. They sought to renew the League as an agency for social reform.

Finally war turned their focus to Washington and ‘a new deal for the world’. In the United States McDougall took a significant part in planning for a postwar food and agriculture organisation—eventually to become the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)—while Bruce and Orr lobbied in support. All three were to play key roles in the early years of FAO, where McDougall’s memory is honoured still in a biennial McDougall Lecture.

A booklet published by FAO in 1956 was called *The McDougall Memoranda: Some Documents Relating to the Origins of FAO and the Contribution made by Frank L. McDougall.*² The booklet consists of four documents. Three were written in 1935 for the League of Nations. The first is a memorandum by McDougall called ‘The Agricultural and the Health Problems’, which urged placing adequate nutrition of populations in the forefront of economic policy. The second, a speech by Bruce on Australia’s behalf to the League Assembly, called for ‘the marriage of health and agriculture’. The third document is the subsequent Assembly resolution establishing nutrition as a subject for international consideration. The final document in the booklet is a memorandum written in October 1942

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² Copy of booklet in National Library of Australia [hereinafter NLA], MS6890/5/4.
by a Washington group including McDougall. It was essentially a revision of an earlier paper in which McDougall set out points he and Bruce had discussed. The memorandum outlined proposals for an international organisation that would ‘make the marriage between health and agriculture a reality’. This study aims to show how these documents and the organisation itself came into being.