1. Renmark

Summary

The story of the ‘marriage of food and agriculture’ begins with the arrival of twenty-five-year-old Englishman Frank McDougall at Renmark, South Australia, in 1909. This chapter describes a young man born into a devout, inventive and successful family, but struggling to find his own purpose in life. He was to find that purpose as a fruit-grower in Renmark, an irrigation settlement depending on self-help and technical efficiency. McDougall worried about the prospects for his rapidly growing industry; he studied market possibilities and concluded that the industry’s prosperity depended primarily upon gaining preferential tariff treatment in the world’s biggest market for dried fruits: Great Britain. His idea was developed in a series of memoranda written in the years immediately after World War I. With the support of press and fellow growers, he lobbied State governments and the Federal Government, gaining support in spite of a daunting political barrier: with a few minor exceptions, the British Government was committed to a policy of free trade.

The Making of ‘an incorrigible optimist’

The Murray River meanders for hundreds of kilometres through eastern and southern Australia. In the early twentieth century it formed, with its chief tributary, the Darling, an inland highway, carrying goods and passengers upstream from South Australia through the pastoral inland to settlements in Victoria and the far west of New South Wales.

In the spring of 1909 a paddle-steamer tied up at Renmark, on the eastern fringe of South Australia. It had churned its way past yellow sandstone cliffs topped with desert saltbush and mallee scrub, and skirted mazes of billabong and swamp. At times passengers had been asked to jump ashore and gather firewood to keep its engines going. It had been a long trip for all, but for none more than twenty-five-year-old Frank McDougall. In the past two years he had sailed three times from England to the southern hemisphere, spending several weeks in the tiny crown colony of St Helena and making two visits to the spectacular escarpments around the Umgeni Valley near Pietermaritzburg in Natal, part of the self-governing dominion of South Africa. Finally he had sailed to Adelaide,

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1 NLA, MS 6890/1/4, letters to family.
and then travelled by train north to the river port of Morgan and by paddle-steamer to Renmark. As he stepped ashore at Renmark, he may have thought he had reached his destination. He could not have imagined the extraordinary journey he was about to begin.

Such extensive travelling suggests that young McDougall’s family was no ordinary one. Members of his father’s family managed two successful national industries. Their lives were marked by discipline and a commitment to education and self-improvement, derived from a heritage of devout Methodism. The McDougalls applied their devotion equally to work and to social activism, and took an inventive, inquiring approach to the world and its workings. Frank’s grandfather, Alexander McDougall, had been a schoolmaster in Manchester and a keen amateur chemist. Alexander might well be seen as an example of the way in which scientific progress occurred in nineteenth-century Britain, where pioneering developments in both industrial and agricultural production were led by amateurs. Later industrial development was often pioneered in German universities, and American governments established colleges and agricultural extension services to support a massive development of agriculture, but early British innovators were nurtured by the scientific societies. The Royal Society, from 1660, and similar bodies in Birmingham, Manchester, Edinburgh and Liverpool a century later were first founded to cater for wealthy cultured enthusiasts. John Dalton, doyen of the Manchester Literary and Philosophical Society, represented a new kind of scientist: lower middle class, provincial, dissenting—and completely devoted to science. Unlike the earlier amateurs, these ‘devotees’ had concerns associated with professional science: research at the frontiers of science, publication, ‘keeping up’ with the output of leaders in their specialities, and scientific communication. Although they were generally self-taught, and in many cases unable or unwilling to make a career of science, their chief purpose and status lay in its pursuit. They worked not only for personal gratification. Like the utilitarians, they believed science to be vital to Britain’s progress.

Alexander McDougall had been drawn from his native Carlisle to Manchester by its scientific institutions and organisations and was probably taught by Dalton. Alexander based a successful milling industry on his invention of self-raising flour. McDougall’s Flour was merged with Hovis in 1957 and absorbed into the conglomerate Rank Hovis McDougall in 1962. Since 2007 it has been part of

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5 Ibid., pp. 35, 78.
Alexander made an important contribution to the welfare of Manchester, a ‘boom town’ suffering the inevitable pollution of smoky factories and rivers described as ‘stinking foul open sewers’. Edward Chadwick’s report of 1842 spurred a public health and sanitation movement and a royal commission. With professional chemist and crusader for research into air pollution Angus Smith, Alexander McDougall experimented on deodorisation of sewage. A disinfecting powder, patented by Smith and McDougall in 1854, was subsequently sold as ‘McDougall’s powder’. Alexander also marketed a liquid of carbolic acid and limewater for use in sewers; later it was used in dissecting rooms and for treating sores, dysentery and footrot. Joseph Lister claimed to have taken the idea of using carbolic acid for surgical purposes from its use disinfecting sewage at Carlisle, where McDougall’s process had been adopted. These inventions formed the basis of McDougall’s chemical company. By 1926, Coopers, McDougall & Robertson was the leading British supplier of sheep dip and insecticides and a major supplier of disinfectants; it was acquired by the Wellcome Foundation in 1959.

Privately funded regional colleges were gradually established to meet demands from British industry for training. Owens College in Manchester was established in 1851 by a bequest from a nonconformist cotton merchant. Alexander’s son, Arthur McDougall, won the Dalton Prize for original research at Owens College, but abandoned science for business. Owens College was to become Manchester University, and Arthur’s son, Sir Robert McDougall, one of its significant benefactors. But there were no counterparts in Britain for the large American foundations nurtured in the Social-Darwinist tradition that wealth should be used to benefit society.

The children of Alexander McDougall, however, were encouraged to teach in ragged schools in the slums of Manchester, and as adults they devoted their spare time to church and municipal work. Two of them—Frank’s father, John, and young Alexander—eventually sold out of the family business to concentrate on this work. John McDougall left his position as manager of McDougall’s London flour mill in 1888 to represent the district of Poplar on the London County Council (LCC), for 25 years. His chief interests were efficiency and social welfare, in particular lunatic asylums and drains; he spent three days a week visiting inmates in the former, and personally toured the latter. During

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6 A Matter of History: A Century of McDougall’s Self Raising Flour 1864–1964, in NLA, MS6890/5/4; company sites on Internet; E. McDougall.
9 NLA, MS6890/1/9, McDougall to Norman, 3 January 1926.
10 Kargon, Science in Victorian Manchester, p. 179; McDougall, McDougall Brothers and Sisters.
Frank’s childhood, John McDougall was pilloried in Punch and was a focus of demonstrations against his campaign to clean up entertainment offered in music halls. He was knighted as LCC Chairman in the coronation year of Edward VII. Traditions of disciplined devotion to work and social activism persisted in a third generation including high achievers and dedicated idealists: industrialists and academics, doctors and missionaries.

Frank Lidgett McDougall was born on 16 April 1884, in Blackheath, London, the eldest child and only son of John McDougall’s second marriage. Frank’s mother, Ellen Lidgett, also had a strong Methodist heritage. Her double first cousin, Dr John Scott Lidgett, ‘the grand old man of Methodism’, was co-founder of the Bermondsey Settlements, leader of the LCC Progressive Party from 1918 to 1928, and Editor of Contemporary Review and the Methodist Times. Ellen herself was serious and bookish, a writer of devotional works, some based on the McDougall and Lidgett families.\(^{12}\)

With this powerful array of examples it is hardly surprising that the young Frank McDougall believed he should devote his life to a worthy purpose. It is equally understandable that he struggled to find his own path. Frank completed his schooling to matriculation level at Blackheath Proprietary School in 1901, but his father had suffered financial difficulties and there was no money for university. There was thought of joining the family chemical business. In 1903 Frank spent time in Godesburg am Rhein learning German, and late in 1905 he was in Darmstadt, preparing to enter the famed University of Technology. He learned to enjoy reading German, but found ‘the language does not come very quickly’ and ‘everyone speaks too fast’.\(^{13}\) He did not complete any qualification. In 1906 he was back in England, tinkering with chemical experiments.\(^{14}\) He drifted. Members of his extended family conferred about possible employment. He was sent to investigate possibilities of wattle growing on St Helena, and in Natal where there were Lidgett relatives. Finally the decision was made to invest in a fruit block in South Australia, where there were also family connections. His oldest half-sister, Lucy, was married to Charles Napier Birks, of a prominent Adelaide retailing family, and the two families had other connections in England. The Birks family was active in charitable causes; Lucy later founded the Adelaide Babies Aid Society.\(^{15}\)

Frank was twenty-five years old when he reached Renmark. Long letters to his younger sister Kit, written between 1906 and 1909, have survived. In these one
sees a young man desperately searching for a purpose. He lectured her thus: ‘You have the job of choosing something to do, well let it be something really worth while’; adding, ‘I feel and you too will feel like the young man who went to Jesus to know what must I do to be saved. I think in a few years it will be clearer.’

Extensive reading shaped McDougall’s religious and political thinking: ‘Books are everything not quite!’ he wrote to Kit in 1907. A later letter provided an impressive list of recommended reading for her, drawn from his own favourites. Gradually he shed his Methodist heritage, briefly considering ‘High Puritanism’ and Anglo-Catholicism, but subsequently abandoning Christianity altogether. Much remained of his Christian upbringing: he was known ever after for his ability to recite Bible passages and his affection for the Book of Common Prayer and the Authorised Version. A colleague wrote of him being ‘always ready to cite scripture for his agricultural purposes’, but the obituary writer for The Times recalled that ‘there were some who held the view that what he quoted was not always to be found in Holy Writ’, adding, ‘he nevertheless could produce phrases which sounded as if they could have come from nowhere else’. More significant Methodist legacies were a dedication to disciplined, unremitting work; a preference for empirical, rather than theoretical, understanding of problems; and a belief in the perfectibility of man through his own efforts.

The young McDougall mentioned Immanuel Kant, Henry George and Max Nordau amongst those who led him briefly to consider socialism, and to aver that ‘the great standing lie is our present social system and our economic system’. He made no formal commitment to left-wing politics, but as a young man of twenty-three saw much in his own world needing change and, without any sense of direction, he wanted to help. He thought that ‘the social question’ (a euphemism for prostitution) was in truth much wider, perceiving evils in domestic service, in ‘Society’ living in idleness on the work of others, in obsession with material possessions, and even smoke pollution. He had difficulty in formulating a social philosophy, partly because of a fundamental aversion to compulsion, and partly in reconciling social activism with his youthful enjoyment of luxuries: ‘the hard thing is to get a reasonable line of junction for a love of Beauty and a dislike of luxury.’ The individualist ‘sees that no real progress for the individ[ual] can be made without the personal choice, while the Socialist is accused of the absurd belief that we can bring

16 NLA, MS6890/1/3, letter to Kit, 18 June 1907.
17 Ibid., letter of 1 June 1907; NLA, MS6890/1/4, letter of 9 February 1909.
19 Hempton, Methodism, pp. 50, 57–8.
20 NLA, MS6890/1/3, letter to Kit, 1 June 1907.
21 Ibid., letter to Kit, 18 June 1907.
about a millennium by Act of Parliament’. Nevertheless, perhaps with some bravado at home, he was happy to declare himself a socialist. He tried to connect Christianity and socialism by writing. In one proposed piece he was to imagine a Christian socialist parson working in London’s East End, falling asleep and dreaming of what England would be like 50 years after socialism had won a parliamentary majority. McDougall’s purpose in this project was to crystallise his ideas of ‘what we socialists want’.

The result of all this thinking is contained in the last such letter, written some months after reaching South Australia, and summarising his philosophical journey. From it, he wrote, he had emerged with three principles. First, he was, and hoped to remain, ‘lacking in reverence’, meaning that no belief could be acceptable if it failed the test of human logic. Second, he declared himself an optimist: ‘What I mean by that is that I believe that a man has the power to choose to live his own life in the way that seems to him best…“I am the master of my fate; I am the captain of my soul”.’ In a much later version, he would write: ‘I am an incorrigible optimist or at least feel that it is well worth while to make a great effort to secure an intelligent attitude towards economic problems!’ He called his third principle ‘the ascent of man’. ‘Man is capable by his own efforts of rising’—a belief ‘essential to the creed of a socialist as I understand the term’. In essence these principles were applied to all the problems he would encounter over more than 40 years. In very different times and amid calamitous events, McDougall would remain an optimist, pragmatic and independent—which surely adds up to ‘lacking in reverence’—and ever labouring for a better world.

**Renmark: Self-Help and Dissemination of Knowledge**

This, then, was the young man who arrived in Renmark in the spring of 1909. He came to a community and to an industry that had been created in response to ideas of Social Darwinism, progressivism and imperial efficiency.

In the later nineteenth century, ideas described collectively as ‘Social Darwinism’ were influential in the United States, where William Graham Sumner suggested that without state interference men are rewarded in proportion to their efforts;

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22 Ibid., letter to Kit, 8 June 1907.
23 NLA, MS6890/1/4, letter to Kit, 23 January 1909. The piece itself does not seem to have survived.
25 NLA, MS6890/1/5, letter to Kit, 20 April 1912.
only the fittest survive.\textsuperscript{26} In Britain such ideas combined readily with evidence that British industry was falling behind in a competitive world, encouraging scientists and organisations like the British Association for the Advancement of Science to lobby for government support. When British industry took few awards at the Paris Exhibition of 1867, the association successfully called for investigation into science teaching and research. The Devonshire Royal Commission on Scientific Instruction agreed in 1875 that development of research depended largely on the state being willing to ‘assume that large portion of the National Duty which individuals do not attempt to perform, or cannot satisfactorily accomplish’.\textsuperscript{27}

Social Darwinist thinking also underlay campaigns for ‘national efficiency’ triggered in Britain by German and American competition, and reinforced by revelations of the poor health of British recruits for the Boer War, weaknesses of army organisation and German technical superiority. Journalists warned of Britain’s imminent defeat in the ‘battle for commerce in almost every land on earth’. The British Science Guild was established in 1907 by J. Norman Lockyer, astronomer, Secretary to the Devonshire Royal Commission and founder of the journal \textit{Nature}, which he used as a vehicle for his arguments. The guild held an essay competition on ‘the best way of carrying on the struggle for existence and securing the survival of the fittest in national affairs’. In 1903 Lockyer called his presidential address to the British Association ‘The influence of Brain-power on History’, a deliberate allusion to Alfred Mahan’s \textit{The Influence of Sea Power upon History} (1890). Lockyer said ‘we have not learned that it is the duty of a State to organise its forces as carefully for peace as for war; that universities and other teaching centres are as important as battleships or big battalions; are, in fact, essential parts of a modern State’s machinery’.\textsuperscript{28}

Branches of the British Science Guild were established in Australia. Prime Minister Alfred Deakin was impressed by the British aim to achieve efficiency and by an informal movement called Progressivism in the United States. Progressivism embraced a wide range of measures—democratic reform, regulation of corporations and monopolies, labour rights, social justice—all aimed at mitigating the harsh effects of unregulated large-scale capitalism. Many Progressives campaigned for professionalism, rationality and efficiency in government. In 1907 Deakin expressed what might be called ‘imperial progressivism’:

The task of Empire is the…scientific conquest of its physical…problems.  
[We must] endeavour…to acquire that knowledge in scientific manner,
and by scientific methods, which shall enable us to appreciate...the vast, the incalculable natural resources which are present in our possession under the Flag—the means of utilising these instruments of material power for the benefit of our race.29

The term ‘pragmatic progressivism’ has been used to describe the coincidence of a new federal bureaucracy and a new interest in applying science to problems of agriculture, health and transport.30 Yet in the 1880s, before federation, Deakin as a Victorian State Minister had chaired a royal commission on irrigation and led a group investigating irrigation schemes in California. There he met brothers George and W. B. Chaffey, who came to Mildura in 1886 to demonstrate their methods. Deakin subsequently introduced the first legislation in Australia to promote irrigation systems and providing for state-aided local trusts, thereby enabling establishment of irrigation settlements at Mildura and Renmark in the late 1880s.31

The family decision that the young McDougall—drifting apparently without purpose—should go to Renmark demonstrates an imperial view: it has echoes of the long tradition of sending ‘remittance men’ who were an embarrassment to their families to the outposts of the empire, and of another tradition of investing in primary industries overseas. It also reflected a new phase of empire. Irrigation in the newly federated Australian colonies was barely a generation old when McDougall reached Renmark in 1909. Irrigation was in the forefront of consolidation of settlement, a pattern extending throughout the temperate empire, particularly in Canada and Australia, driven by the idea of creating a stable ‘yeoman class’ of small farmers, of diversifying production and of taming a harsh interior. Immigrants were sought to populate these new areas. New production could be exported to the imperial ‘centre’, Great Britain, in return for manufactured goods exported to lands on the imperial ‘periphery’. Within this pattern lay seeds of conflict between centre and periphery.

Most first-generation settlers at Renmark were genteel middle-class English families, with little knowledge of horticulture. They were attracted by illustrations of river scenes and by tales of healthy outdoor life and easy profits, found in the ‘Red Book’ produced by the Chaffey brothers’ London agent. They purchased orchard, town and residential blocks—all on 10-year terms.32 Through blisteringly hot summers and miserably cold winters, they camped

32 Prices in the late 1880s are given as £40 per acre for orchard and town blocks, and £200 for residential. G. Arch Grosvenor, Red Mud to Green Oasis, Raphael Arts Pty Ltd, Renmark, SA, 1979, p. 18.
in tents and set about tree clearing, stump removal and channel digging. The soil was fertile, irrigation work proceeded with only minor problems, but both settlements faced early difficulties: poor-quality or incorrect orchard stock, salt seepage from unlined channels, floods in 1890, untimely rains in 1895, and frosts. After years of waiting, there was fruit to harvest, but there remained risks of transporting it fresh to city markets over long distances by the uncertain river, which, unhindered by lock or dam, could shrink to a series of barely connected waterholes in a dry season and in flood spread miles beyond its banks. Improvised drying techniques brought poor results. Refusals to pay rates and bank failures bankrupted the Chaffeys; many settlers walked off their blocks.33

Figure 2 Renmark 1907: Spreading fruit to dry on the property of E. E. Hutton.

Source: Photograph by Reiners Studio, image courtesy of Renmark Branch, National Trust.

Those who remained drew on their own resources. A small State Government loan kept the Renmark settlement viable, but the foundations for its future success lay in self-help, cooperation and dissemination of technical knowledge. With no money to keep the irrigation pumps going, settlers cut wood for fuel to run them. The locally elected Irrigation Trust, established by State legislation, managed irrigation and water rights. A Community Trust Hotel sought to combat the sly grog trade that had flourished under the teetotal rule of the Chaffeys;

the town ‘drank itself into a state of solvency’.\textsuperscript{34} Fruit-growers organised to tackle the problems of transport and prices. The Secretary of the Renmark Fruit Packers’ Union was pioneer settler F. W. Cutlack, McDougall’s future father-in-law. Grower organisations in Renmark and Mildura amalgamated in 1907 to form the Australian Dried Fruits Association, controlling purchasing, packing and marketing. Distilling and citrus packing cooperatives followed in Renmark. Solutions were found for the early problems of cultivation: gypsum would break up heavy soils; wells could drain away salt; sultana grapes brought better prices than the Gordo Blanco (muscatel); the Greek practice of cincturing Zante currants would prevent early fruit loss.

\begin{figure}[h]
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\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure3.jpg}
\caption{The Murray River 1909: Paddle-steamers moored near stores of the Renmark Fruit Packing Union.}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{34} This is the version given in Hill (\textit{Water into Gold}, p. 171). Another is that ‘Renmark proceeded, as the year unfolded, to drink itself…into a state of beauty and prosperity’. F. M. Cutlack, \textit{Renmark: The Early Years}, Nancy B. Basey, Eltham, Vic., 1988, pp. 26–7.
turnover of one-third of members, thus helping newer arrivals who were most in need. By 1909 the population of Renmark numbered some 2000, and most aspects of a settler’s livelihood depended on these patterns of cooperation and shared technical knowledge. They were to influence profoundly McDougall’s future thinking.

With family funds, he purchased blocks totalling some 40 acres (16 ha) in an area close to the river known as ‘The Crescent’, where he grew vines and apricots. The holdings doubled as he was joined later by two half-brothers and a sister. He was fit and, despite apparent reluctance to accept the family decision, and references in letters to a determination to remain only briefly, he enjoyed the physical and intellectual challenges. In 1910 he reported with satisfaction that he could do three times as much manual work in a day as he had been able to achieve on arrival. Later he wrote that he enjoyed pruning most of all his tasks: ‘the work is interesting, requiring judgement and it’s full of hope for the next season’s crop for which one is pruning.’ His neighbours were congenial, many with interests similar to his own, and he participated in the Agricultural Bureau with enthusiasm. In October 1911, with a mere two years’ experience as a grower, he joined two prominent members of the Renmark Settlers’ Association travelling by river to Mildura to examine the new method of rack drying. He wrote a paper setting out designs they had seen, with advantages and disadvantages and costs. The paper was printed in the Renmark Pioneer, whose Editor, H. S. Taylor, was an influential advocate of causes benefiting growers and their organisations.

The block had prospered sufficiently for McDougall to take a holiday in England in the summer of 1914. He married Joyce Cutlack in 1915 shortly after enlisting in the Australian Imperial Force (AIF); their son, John, was born in England in 1918; a daughter, Elisabeth, followed in 1920. McDougall served on the Western Front as a lieutenant in the Cycle Corps, then as battalion quartermaster, and was promoted to captain. He was transferred to the AIF Education Service just days before the Armistice. He attended a school for instructors preparing troops for future careers on the land; then, from 18 December until his departure for home early in April 1919, he participated in a massive effort to keep troops busy and interested while they awaited repatriation. Staff hastily prepared suitable textbooks, with McDougall contributing some pamphlets on fruit-growing.

36 Registrar-General’s Unregistered Document Service, SA Department of Lands: Certificates of Title; Merridy Howie, ‘Personalities Remembered: No. 24, Frank McDougall’, Radio talk on 5CL, 15 November 1970. I am grateful to Mrs Howie for giving me a copy of her talk.
37 NLA, MS6890/1/5, letters to Kit, 18 November 1913 and 21 August 1910; NLA, MS6890/1/7, letter to Kit, 11 June 1921.
39 Resume of military service supplied by Central Army Records Office, Melbourne, 31 August 1983.
Figure 4 McDougall pruning vines, c. 1919: ‘full of hope for the next season’s crop.’

Source: E. McDougall.

Figure 5 F. L. McDougall, AIF, 1916.

Source: E. McDougall.
It was an immature Frank McDougall who had arrived in Renmark in 1909. Captain McDougall returned in 1919 as a family man of purpose, with an understanding of the importance of education and the problems of his industry. As a returned soldier, he received financial benefits, enabling him to repay the loans from his family and to plan expansion of his enterprise. Those plans were soon to be overtaken, however, by the first of his important ideas: a program to put Australian dried fruit on a sound export footing.

Australia’s Dried Fruit Industry

Cultivation in the Murray irrigation areas had increased gradually in the first decade of the twentieth century, in 1901 yielding 2050 tons of dried fruits (sultanas, currants and lexias—the last popularly called raisins) and 9000 tons in 1910. By 1912 local production was almost sufficient to supply the domestic
market. In 1913 Australia exported just over 1000 tons of dried fruits—roughly one-tenth of total production. About half of this, in value, went to the United Kingdom, and one-quarter to New Zealand. A smaller market was being developed in Canada.40

Production increased rapidly during the war years, encouraged by high prices at home and overseas. Exports rose gradually at first, and then leapt rapidly as blocks planted in response to high wartime demand began bearing. Between the 1914–15 and 1917–18 seasons Australian exports of dried fruits increased fourfold; returns increased more than sevenfold. Exports had doubled again by 1920–21, and returns trebled. Postwar soldier settlement rapidly expanded the acreage under vines; greater acreage stimulated technological innovation, further increasing output. Production exceeded 40 000 tons in 1924, and reached 55 000 tons in 1927. The local market at best could consume little more than 20 000 tons. With assistance from a wine bounty, that figure included some 6000 tons used by wineries and distilleries.41

Table 1 Australian Exports of Dried Fruits by Weight and Price.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Season</th>
<th>1000 lbs</th>
<th>£1000s</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1914–15</td>
<td>2314</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1916–16</td>
<td>8256</td>
<td>244</td>
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<tr>
<td>1916–17</td>
<td>13 480</td>
<td>373</td>
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<tr>
<td>1917–18</td>
<td>9427</td>
<td>286</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1918–19</td>
<td>8525</td>
<td>253</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1919–20</td>
<td>16 788</td>
<td>606</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1920–21</td>
<td>17 811</td>
<td>729</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: For clarity, numbers have been rounded to the nearest thousand. Figures for 1919–21 have been consolidated from separate categories.

Source: Year Books of the Commonwealth of Australia.

London was the largest market for dried vine fruits in the world, absorbing annually some 125 000 tons before 1914. Its most important source was the Mediterranean region, where labour and transport costs were low. A rapidly growing industry in California, subsidised by a large domestic market, could supply cost-competitive, high-quality products. Prices had risen as Mediterranean supplies were cut off by war, reaching a peak roughly three times the prewar level in 1919–20.

On his return to Renmark in 1919, McDougall found evidence of expansion and optimism. New irrigation areas were being planned and block prices were rising. His own property had almost doubled in value. Electric light and power had reached the area. A nearby orchard boasted a new heated drying house with trays carried in and out on a sunken railway. An automatic dip installed on another property processed 800 tins of sultanas an hour; at best a man could manage 2000 a day.42

McDougall’s optimism was tempered with understanding of the difficulties facing his industry. On his holiday home in the European summer of 1914, he had taken time to investigate the British market, seeking views in London and in northern cities from buyers, brokers and cooperative organisations. He had asked for comparison with Californian dried fruit and about government-controlled marketing of South African fresh fruit. He had learned that Australian fruit was supplied spasmodically and thought to be badly graded, over-dried and unattractively presented compared with the Californian product. He had concluded that Australian growers were ill informed about prices in Britain, with little understanding of the needs and views of British buyers.43

During the war, H. S Taylor is reported to have sent free copies of the Murray Pioneer to all Riverland volunteers serving overseas.44 These may have kept

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42 NLA, MS6890/1/9, letter to mother, 2 July 1919; MP, 28 February 1919.
McDougall abreast of developments in Renmark: higher prices, extended plantings and the prospects of soldier settlers adding to grower numbers.\footnote{Marilyn Lake, \textit{The Limits of Hope: Soldier Settlement in Victoria 1915–38}, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1987, p. 32.} In the rest camps in France he organised several ‘Agricultural Bureaux’ at which ‘good papers’ were followed by ‘keen discussion’.\footnote{Remarks by Norman McDougall at River Agricultural Bureaux Conference, 16 May 1919, in \textit{MP}, 23 May 1919.} He had estimated that some 3000 men awaiting repatriation were in the agriculture section of the AIF Education Service; he knew at first hand that many returned men were eager to take up land under soldier-settler schemes.\footnote{\textit{MP}, 17 June 1919. Total numbers, across agriculture, mechanics and commercial courses, were estimated at perhaps 40 000; Geoffrey Serle, \textit{John Monash: A Biography}, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1982, p. 409.} But he also knew that a postwar export market could not be assured.


McDougall was in his late teens in 1903 when Joseph Chamberlain’s tariff reform campaign began. With his strong social conscience and eagerness to find a place in the world, he must have taken some interest in it then. He had occasional home leave in London during the war, and probably had access to British newspapers, as well as mail, at other times. He would have known of renewed imperial sentiment and debate on the tariff as the date for the Budget of 1919 approached. During the last months of the war and its immediate aftermath, he wrote a paper about the problem of finding markets for Australia’s increasing dried-fruits crop. He later explained to the Renmark Returned Soldiers’ Association that he had some ‘difficulty in persuading the adjutant of his unit to allow the manuscript to be typed in the orderly room’.\footnote{\textit{MP}, 11 November 1921.} ‘Notes on the Dried Fruits Industry in Australia’ set out his ideas on marketing, considering every step of the trade from irrigation block to London retailer. He drew on his own experience. The paper was deceptively simple, its language matter-of-fact and unpretentious, but, like the best of the many papers McDougall was destined to write, it was authoritative, logical and persuasive. It was sent from England to be read at the Renmark Agricultural Bureau. Bureau President, F. H. Basey, thought it important enough to keep for the 1919 Conference of River Agricultural Bureaux. The paper was read there by McDougall’s half-brother Norman on 16 May.\footnote{\textit{MP}, 23 May 1919. The issue includes a full copy of the paper. A separately printed copy is in NLA, MS6890/4/2.}
The conference opened on a pessimistic note. A. J. Perkins, SA Director of Agriculture, recalled marketing difficulties of the past and predicted more with postwar expansion. He could see little hope for export markets, given high labour and production costs, even with mechanisation and cooperative methods; he could suggest no alternative crop for irrigation areas except sugar beet. Perkins’ speech was followed by McDougall’s paper. It also recalled past problems and dismissed some solutions. Export had not been taken seriously earlier and some fruits—currants, peaches and lexias—could not compete in world markets. The irrigation settlements had been saved in the past by establishment of distilleries and there was a view that canning and jam production offered the only hope of absorbing expanded postwar production. But then came a call for a ‘radical… change of viewpoint’:

...overseas markets will become of increasing importance…

I want the Dried Fruit Producers to establish an industry in the semi-arid districts of Australia which will be able to hold its own in the world’s markets and therefore to welcome expansion of the industry and to look forward to making the Murray Valley a second California…

I want us to maintain that the Dried Fruits Industry is particularly suited to Australia…

I want the industry to be in such a state that we can cheerfully claim that it is the pioneer industry of good working conditions…that it combines the healthy conditions of ordinary agricultural life with the reasonable hours and opportunities for recreation of the urban industries.

McDougall surveyed the industry’s problems, including the criticisms encountered during his own investigations in 1914. He proposed solutions under four headings: information, organisation, cooperation and British preference. He wanted efficiency and rational organisation. Growers themselves, with government support, should investigate and disseminate information on marketing conditions. He suggested tighter control by packing houses and use of cooperative organisations, well paid and run, to improve production, packing, finance and marketing, to eliminate middlemen and to maintain consistent quality.

His crucial argument, however, was the need for British tariff preference. As matters stood, Australian fruit could not compete with fruit from California, which was subsidised by an immense home market, or with Mediterranean fruit produced by cheap labour and with low transport costs. 50 Indications were that

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50 The daily wage for unskilled labour was the equivalent of 1/6d per day in Greece, 11/6d in Australia. Hill, Water into Gold, p. 235.
Britain was preparing to abandon its historic free-trade policy; it had already been chipped away by small revenue tariffs on some commodities, including most dried fruits. A British preferential tariff would allow Australian fruit to meet competitors on a level footing. He urged growers to establish exactly how high that tariff need be for a profitable export trade.

The paper drew considerable discussion and praise. It was read just after the British Budget of 1919 had been delivered, but before full details of the new British tariff—whether dried fruits were included in tariff duties and, if so, to what extent—had reached Australia. H. S. Taylor noted that dried fruits had not been mentioned in cabled information about British intentions, and asked whether the Australian Dried Fruits Association (ADFA) had brought the question before the British authorities. As the Agricultural Bureaux were self-help, not political, organisations, the conference passed a motion recommending ADFA ‘take such steps as are necessary to secure full British preference for Australian dried fruits’.51

The Australian Dried Fruits Association

ADFA owed its existence to W. B. Chaffey’s desire that growers cooperate to control marketing. It had grown from separate organisations in Mildura and Renmark to a membership including 95 per cent of all fruit-growers, some packing companies, agents and merchants. In theory it could control the product from grower to retailer. Australia’s prewar consumption of currants and sultanas, protected by tariff duties, was almost fully supplied by ADFA, and absorbed nearly all the product. Tentative prewar export consignments had generally proved unprofitable, and talk of developing markets in the Far East and the near north had been little more than that.52 When war opened up profitable export markets in Britain, ADFA undertook to supply home needs first, but soon found that much higher prices could be gained on the London market. Forty per cent of the 1919 crop was exported.53

ADFA’s first response to the problem of finding markets for postwar production was to increase home consumption. The 1918 ADFA Conference appointed a young Mildura businessman, C. J. De Garis, as its Director of Publicity. De Garis spent a lavish budget of £20,000 on a nationwide advertising campaign owing much to US inspiration. Richly rewarding competitions were launched on billboards and in newspapers throughout Australia. Slogans, recipe books and gimmicks followed. The Murray Pioneer reported campaign progress in detail and

51 MP, 23 May 1919.
52 Hill, Water into Gold, pp. 168–9, 178–81. See also speech by De Garis, MP, 30 May 1919.
53 See Figures 6 and 7 and Table 1.
carried its advertisements; it was doing well at the time McDougall’s paper was read. De Garis addressed the River Bureaux Conference, urging the importance of brand names, market research, public education about food values and tactics to change buying habits. Admirable as McDougall’s paper was, development of the home market offered better prospects than the ‘statesmanlike’ work for imperial preference.54

March 1921: ‘A British California on the Murray’

McDougall arrived back in Renmark at the end of May 1919, two weeks after his paper was read. For the next two years, he was busy with family, block and community work. He served a year as President of the Agricultural Bureau and as a member of the Irrigation Trust—effectively the local council. There he had experience of responsibilities for management of public money and control of works.

H. S. Taylor had bought what was then the Renmark Pioneer in 1905 and ‘transformed it into a major influence’ in the irrigation areas of the Murray Valley. Renamed the Murray Pioneer, Taylor’s paper advocated the cause of irrigation, locks for the Murray, closer settlement, organised marketing and producer cooperation. Taylor himself led deputations to premiers and government ministers.55 With Taylor’s help, McDougall campaigned for State Government support for conservation and cultivation of trees along the river to meet high demands for timber in the area. They achieved support from the 1921 State Conference of Agricultural Bureaux and advice from the State Advisor on Forests, but little in the long term.56 The campaign did teach McDougall the importance of press support and of expert opinion; it also taught him the need for persistence.

Publicly he did little for the preference cause; privately he talked with friends and rethought his 1919 paper.57 In 1921 he recast it for a broader audience of political figures and opinion framers in Australia and in Britain by appealing to the burgeoning interest in empire settlement. Its central proposition was now that in return for substantial preference on Australian fruit, irrigation land should be offered free to British returned soldiers. He described the Murray irrigation area, ‘thumped the big drum a little, fell back on statistics and finished with a lyrical purple patch over the scheme’s Imperial significance…

54 MP, 30 May 1919.
56 MP, 24 September and 8 October 1920, and 19 August, 23 September and 21 October 1921.
57 Recollection of T. C. Angove, reported in MP, 10 November 1922.
How I loathe the terms Empire and Imperial but what else can one use without elaborate explanations’. He called the new paper ‘A British California on the Murray’.

By year’s end McDougall was enthusiastically supporting development proposals, maintaining that half a million people could be settled on the Murray; he later revised that figure to one million. His estimates of potential production were sound and often surpassed in reality; the population prediction was of a piece with over-optimistic contemporary views represented by ‘Australia Unlimited’. In 1928 a compilation of essays by various experts included estimates of population potential ranging from 14 to 200 million. Prime Minister, W. M. Hughes, and some experts had endorsed a suggestion of 100 million. Australia’s population in 1921 was some five and a half millions; a population of one million in the Murray lands must have seemed a breathtaking figure. The potential of irrigation and other development schemes in Australia was nevertheless widely and enthusiastically embraced; the fragility of inland river systems was scarcely understood at all.

McDougall’s idea had taken its final shape by 1921, as had his plan of campaign. First steps would be based on ADFA and on the press in both Australia and Britain. By midyear, the Murray Pioneer could claim that preference was ‘coming on’. Another rural newspaper, The Leader, acknowledged that the dried-fruits industry was becoming increasingly dependent upon successful export. The problem might well be too big for ADFA. By ‘pouring settlers by the thousand’ into the industry, government had assumed some obligation to those who had already made it a success. The Editor of the Mildura Sun wanted the fruit industry put on ‘a war footing’ to deal with federal and State legislatures. ADFA should buy up his paper and the Murray Pioneer and use both to push ‘the greatest Imperial idea that has been heard of yet in Australia: the establishment…of a new, self-governing Rhodesia, in the shape of a Sun-Raysed State’. In May, State ministers of agriculture resolved to encourage substantial immigration within the empire and to lobby for increased preference on primary products, including fruits. A speech in the SA House of Assembly calling for preference in return for settling British ex-servicemen on the Murray

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58 NLA, MS6890/1/7, letter to Kit, 20 March 1921.
59 Ibid., undated letter to Kit, November–December 1921.
60 See, for example, Hancock, Survey, pp. 133–4; Powell, Historical Geography of Modern Australia, pp. 131–2.
62 NLA, MS6890/1/7, letter to Kit, 11 June 1921.
63 MP, 5 August 1921.
64 Leader article of 19 November, reprinted in MP, 2 December 1921.
65 Dated 12 September, published in MP, 23 September. Taylor, flattered but not tempted, wrote that the proposal was nevertheless worthy of serious consideration.
66 National Archives of Australia [hereinafter NAA], A458, R508/1, part 1. The resolution was forwarded by SA Premier, H. N. Barwell, to the Commonwealth Government on 28 June 1921, and supported by letters from the Premiers of New South Wales and Tasmania.
was greeted with cheers. H. S. Taylor had supported imperial preference for 17 years, ‘but it is only recently that it has been taken hold of by men really desirous of bringing the idea to fruition’. Taylor gave McDougall credit for originating the linking of preference and imperial soldier settlement.67

‘A substantial British preference’

Besides linking preference to settlement, McDougall’s 1921 version tackled a question left unanswered in 1919: how much preference was needed to make fruit export viable? The British Budget brought down on 30 April 1919 included preferences equivalent to one-sixth of low, existing revenue duties on tea, cocoa, coffee, sugar, tobacco and dried fruits. Most of the dried fruits attracted duty of 10/6d per hundredweight (cwt), which, reduced for empire products to 8/9d, meant a preference of 1/9d. Currants attracted a duty of only two shillings per cwt, reduced by a four pence imperial preference to 1/8d. The small reductions were unlikely to make Australian fruit competitive in normal times. Currants exported before the war had sold at a loss for 25–30 shillings per cwt; the wartime high of 90 shillings had fallen to 50 shillings by 1921. Lexias had not paid, prewar, at 30–40 shillings per cwt; sultanas had barely broken even at 45–65 shillings.68 McDougall believed that nothing less than threepence preference per pound (that is, 28 shillings per cwt) could give growers a comfortable income.69 The Leader later found this suggestion ‘manifestly extravagant’.70 It meant the price of foreign fruit in London would rise a further 28 shillings above prices of at least 50 shillings per cwt for empire fruit; it was asking a lot of British consumers and their government. But McDougall had argued to his audience of returned soldier ‘blockers’—most of them new to the industry—that price was more important than quantity of sales. New markets in Asia might be developed, as had been proposed, but these, like London markets, would be at risk of dumping from California as other supplies returned to normal. Substantial preference was the only sure protection for adequate returns for growers. The meeting carried unanimously a resolution urging other returned servicemen’s groups on the river to lobby the SA Premier to support ‘a substantial British preference’. The phrase gained currency: the Renmark Agricultural Bureau passed a motion proposed by McDougall, requesting the SA Advisory Board of Agriculture to recommend ‘all possible methods’ be used to obtain a substantial preference.71

67 MP, 5 August and 21 October 1921.
68 NAA, A458, K500/2, part 1. The figures were submitted by ADFA to the Premiers’ Conference in 1921.
69 Paper delivered by McDougall to Returned Soldiers’ Association in Renmark. MP, 11 November 1921; copy in NLA, MS6890/4/2.
70 Article printed in MP, 19 November 1921.
71 MP, 11 and 18 November 1921.
Daily Mail proprietor, Lord Northcliffe, who, McDougall believed, possessed ‘greater powers of useful publicity than any man in England’, toured the Antipodes in 1921. Both the Murray Pioneer and the Mildura Sun urged that Northcliffe be invited to the Murray to spark a publicity campaign attracting migration and investment to what was potentially ‘a mighty inland State stretching from Renmark far beyond Mildura and with a population of at least a million men’. ADFA representatives asked South Australia’s Premier, H. N. Barwell, to seek assurances to Northcliffe from all premiers that Murray lands would be supplied to British settlers in return for preference. Northcliffe did not visit the Murray, but A. E. Ross, a grower from Waikerie ‘with a fine presence’, was chosen to represent ADFA’s arguments to Northcliffe, who promised support from the Daily Mail once the scheme was launched in Britain. Barwell assured Renmark growers his government was determined to establish markets for the produce of ‘the great Murray lands’, and was exploring measures to open up promising trade prospects in the East. State ministers of agriculture had agreed that everything should be done to achieve substantial tariff preference. His own government had contacted the Commonwealth Government and concerted action by the States was contemplated. ‘We’ve progressed a fair way’, reflected McDougall, and thought his settlement scheme itself might be named ‘A British California on the Murray’.

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72 NLA, MS6890/1/7, letter to Kit, 3 October 1921.
73 Grant Hervey, Editor of the Mildura Sun, in MP, 2 September 1921.
74 MP, 16 September and 2 December 1921; NLA, MS6890/1/7, letter to Kit, 3 October 1921.