6. ‘The Marriage of Health and Agriculture’

Summary

The year 1935 marked the pivotal point in McDougall’s thinking. This chapter begins with an account of the development of scientific knowledge of human nutritional needs in the early twentieth century, particularly in understanding the importance of vitamin-rich ‘protective foods’ such as dairy products, vegetables and fruit. Surveys following establishment of dietary standards in the 1920s showed that substantial proportions of populations, even in advanced countries, could not afford a diet adequate for health. Concerned doctors and scientists, including John Boyd Orr, sought action but were met with resistance from the British Government, which feared the cost. Measures to increase milk consumption were taken in Britain, but on grounds of assistance to the agricultural economy.

In 1934 McDougall began to make the connection between poor nutrition and restrictive agricultural policies such as extreme protection. His suggestion for a campaign by scientists for adequate diets was enthusiastically supported by Orr, and by Bruce. McDougall completed his seminal memorandum, ‘The Agriculture and the Health Problems’, in early January 1935. This memorandum analysed the causes of agricultural problems, argued the benefits of improved nutrition and called for a reorientation of agricultural policy, meaning that industrial countries should concentrate on producing more of the protective foods, benefiting both consumers and producers. The ‘nutrition initiative’ was taken up by the International Labour Office at Geneva and the League of Nations; both passed resolutions calling for further investigation and action. The League established a ‘Mixed Committee’ of lay and specialist members, including McDougall, to report on nutrition to the 1936 Assembly and produced a four-volume report on the subject. Although immediate changes in government policies were negligible, nutrition became a subject of wider public debate and education.

Starvation in the Midst of Plenty

Nineteenth-century understanding of human nutrition was rudimentary. By that century’s end, orthodox theory proposed five food groups: protein for
growth, fats and carbohydrates for energy, salts for bones, blood and thyroid function, and water. Scientific studies were chiefly concerned with food as fuel and requirements in terms of quantity. Despite centuries-old experience that scurvy could be prevented by citrus fruit, and more recent experiments showing cod-liver oil prevented rickets, the connection between components of diet and health had scarcely been made.\footnote{J. C. Drummond and Anne Wilbraham, \textit{The Englishman's Food: A History of Five Centuries of the English Diet}, Jonathon Cape, London, 1939, pp. 429–30.} In the early twentieth century, understanding of the complex nature of foodstuffs developed. Amino acids were identified and shown to be present in differing proportions and types in various proteins. In 1901, after prolonged research in the Dutch East Indies, it was shown that brown rice would protect against beri-beri. Scientists began to suspect the presence of mysterious substances helping to prevent some diseases. In 1912 Cambridge chemical physiologist F. Gowland Hopkins published his conclusion that ‘minimal quantitative factors’ were likely to play a part in prevention of scurvy, while Polish chemist Casimir Funk, then at London’s Lister Institute, predicted many diseases would prove to be due to absence from diets of ‘special substances…which we call vitamines’.\footnote{Ibid., pp. 498–508; Barbara Griggs, \textit{The Food Factor: An Account of the Nutrition Revolution}, Penguin, London, 1986, pp. 36–8.} Vitamin C was identified in the following decade, and its effectiveness was proved in the aftermath of World War I when Dr Henriette Chick found that babies in food-starved Vienna did not develop scurvy when given orange juice.\footnote{Ibid., pp. 80–4; Drummond and Wilbraham, \textit{The Englishman’s Food}, pp. 519, 533–4.} In the 1920s, vitamins A and D were identified. Pellagra was shown to be linked to diets based largely on maize, although the precise deficiency, vitamin B₃ (niacin), was not yet understood.\footnote{Griggs, \textit{The Food Factor}, pp. 41–50.}

Dietary standards incorporating these early discoveries were devised in the 1920s. With a standard established, it was possible to calculate the cost of an adequate diet. Such exercises invariably showed that cost to be beyond the reach of the very poor, while other studies continued to demonstrate the benefits of improved diets. Nutrition policy clashed with economic and commercial policies. Tension developed between measures to raise agricultural prices and efforts to improve health.

In 1928 the French Government asked the League of Nations Health Organization to include nutrition in its program, and studies were undertaken in several countries, including one on the effect of the economic crisis on health. Conferences in Rome and Berlin considered both the effects of the crisis and the fundamental problem of establishing an adequate diet. In 1932 Dr George McGonigle, Medical Officer in Stockton-on-Tees, showed that tenants who were moved into improved housing and obliged to pay higher rents reduced
their expenditure on food and suffered a higher incidence of tuberculosis. In 1934 the League commissioned its officers Drs E. Burnet and W. R. Aykroyd to investigate nutrition policies in Britain, France, the United States, Denmark, Sweden, Norway and the USSR. The Burnet–Aykroyd Report of June 1935 acknowledged the relationship between nutrition and the economy, as well as the need to educate both the medical profession and the public on principles of good nutrition.

Edward Mellanby, best known for his work demonstrating vitamin D deficiency as the chief cause of rickets, published works on nutrition, chaired international conferences and was a member of many other committees in Britain, including the Medical Research Council, of which he was Secretary from 1933 to 1949. From 1927 Mellanby had led fruitless efforts to put the new knowledge of nutrition into practice. The Ministry of Health delayed appointment of a committee for the purpose and then stacked it with holders of opposing views to avoid the ministry having to ‘come down on the side of those with a positive policy’. After Mrs Annie Weaving starved herself to death in order to feed her seven children, the *Week-End Review* commissioned the ‘Hungry England’ inquiry early in 1933. The Health Ministry committee accepted the inquiry’s findings but could not agree on action. The Nutrition Committee of the British Medical Association (BMA) published its own report in November 1933, which estimated higher needs, at a cost of 5/11d for a working man, compared with 5 shillings for the ‘Hungry England’ estimate. The ministry, subjected to widespread press criticism, condemned the BMA report as ‘a Labour Party tract’ and a ‘stunt’ by McGonigle. It feared being involved in ‘a far-reaching economic issue, which is most important to avoid—an issue which might easily affect wages, cost of food, doles etc’. A joint committee of BMA and ministry nutrition committees agreed on a compromise sliding scale of minimum needs; the ministry committee chairman resigned on the issue and the ministry continued to deny any connection between low incomes and mortality. The ministry response demonstrates the difficulty of persuading governments to tackle the question of cost inherent in the problem of nutrition.

Industry promotion could persuade consumers of the nutritive value of particular foods, increasing sales and farm incomes. In the United States, the dairy industry promoted the nutritional value of milk. Biochemist Elmer McCollum, who had identified vitamin A, wrote magazine articles at the request of the industry,

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promoting the value of milk as ‘the greatest of all protective foods’. McCollum joined the US Advisory Committee on Alimentation, established in 1918, and contributed popular articles on nutrition to *McCall’s Magazine* for more than 20 years. US milk consumption doubled between 1918 and 1928, as did demand for lettuces; orange consumption tripled.9

Milk led the way in demonstrating the importance of nutrition and in state-sponsored schemes for greater consumption in Britain. During the 1920s a number of experiments, including EMB-funded work in Scotland, appeared to show improved growth rates in children. The intention, according to Orr’s own account, was to ‘show the nutritive value of milk and increase the sale of the more profitable liquid milk’.10 The results influenced nutrition pioneer Gowland Hopkins and George Newman, Chief Medical Officer of both the Ministry of Health and the Board of Education. In the 1930s more surveys were supported by the Milk Marketing Board and were complemented by animal experiments—some conducted at the Rowett Institute. ‘The connecting theme in much of this milk-feeding experimentation was the influence of John Boyd Orr.’ Orr became convinced ‘that an increased consumption of milk was important, especially for children’. Peter J. Atkins suggests that the research agenda may have been influenced by ‘Orr’s wish to use the results as a political lever. The underlying science was at times questionable but the publicity was positive and Orr’s political and networking skills are not in doubt.’ By 1933 more than one million British children received school milk, either as charitable feeding under the *Education Acts* or from voluntary milk clubs, increasing, from 1927, with encouragement from the National Milk Publicity Council. The milk club scheme provided a new market for some 9 million gallons per annum. It was taken over by the Milk Marketing Board in 1934 and funded by the Ministry of Agriculture for £1 million over two years. Half the elementary school population participated by 1939.11

The purpose, however, was to meet the economic needs of agriculture, rather than the health needs of the population. Milk and dairy products were second only to ‘fatstock’ in the gross agricultural product of England and Wales; the milk sector alone represented 27 per cent of the total. Some three-quarters of members of the National Farmers’ Union were milk producers to some extent; with the ‘generally distressed nature of agriculture’ in the 1920s and 1930s, farmers shifted towards milk production. Walter Elliot, in opposition in 1929, managed passage of a Private Member’s Bill that became the *Education (Scotland)*

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11 Peter J. Atkins, ‘Fattening Children or Fattening Farmers? School Milk in Britain, 1921–1941’, *Economic History Review*, Vol. LVIII, no. 1, 2005. Atkins notes that a 1987 thesis by E. C. Petty questions the reliability and methodology of the surveys, which were also controversial at the time.
Act of 1930, enabling Scottish authorities to provide subsidised or free school milk: 'His main argument was one of efficiency: pupils would get more from their education and taxpayers would have a better return for their investment in education.' As Minister of Agriculture from September 1932, Elliot introduced a second Agricultural Marketing Act and oversaw establishment of the Milk Marketing Board in September 1933. The Marketing Acts gave boards of producers 'powers of compulsion in the creation of a monopoly', in accordance with Elliot’s view on the necessity for planning, since the ‘fundamental failure’ of agrarian capitalism must be countered by ‘restructuring along corporatist lines with guidance and support from the State’. By then Elliot had moved away from the imperial solution, opposing dominion preference and pressing for greater self-sufficiency in dairy products. But the Ottawa decisions ‘derailed’ that policy. Preference for imports of empire dairy products meant a milk surplus, which, without those imports, ‘would have found a profitable outlet in manufacturing’. In 1934, therefore, Elliot introduced a Milk Act to ‘compensate farmers and manufacturers for the sacrifice of their interests at Ottawa’. As part of that legislation, he proposed a ‘Milk in Schools’ scheme, inspired, like his 1930 Act, by Orr’s experiments. He won Cabinet support, however, ‘with an agricultural and economic rather than a nutritional or public health rhetoric’.

Although the Milk Act subsidy for butter and cheese manufacture was three times the budget of school milk, Treasury feared the school measure might create a precedent for welfare food and clothing. While social reformers lobbied departments of health, agriculture and education in favour of poverty alleviation and provision of a basic diet, demanding wider provision of free milk (then available only on certification by the local medical officer), the Board of Education continued to claim that child malnutrition had been exaggerated. The ‘progressive dairy legislation’ of 1934 was possible ‘only because it appealed to the self-interest of the farming and milk trade lobbies’. Weight is added to this contention by the failure of attempts to have only pasteurised milk supplied and to make available more supplies of free or cheaper milk. Such measures were ‘perceived as threatening the prosperity of dairy farmers and milk traders’.

The primary aim of the 1933 Agricultural Marketing Act was to establish ‘an equilibrium of price levels’. Market-supply provisions of the Act promised ‘to effectively control the “glut” of production which was perceived as swamping agricultural prices’. There was some backlash against Elliot’s orderly marketing

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12 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
15 Ibid.
approach, on the grounds of rising prices for domestic staples.\textsuperscript{16} Orr records his own opposition to the idea of producers’ boards, since they would increase the cost of essential foods. As a member of a committee appointed to reorganise the Milk Marketing Board when it was threatened with bankruptcy because of oversupply of liquid milk, he pleaded, alone and in vain, for a plan to increase milk production. Orr was happier with later outcomes: funding to publicise the benefits of milk consumption, expansion of the school milk scheme and, in wartime, milk supplies distributed on the basis of need.\textsuperscript{17}

In the mid 1930s, Orr worked on broad population surveys of diet and income, covering 1152 families divided into six income groups. Results were published in his book \textit{Food, Health and Income}.\textsuperscript{18} The work was supported by Elliot and through him by the Agricultural Marketing Boards.\textsuperscript{19} When the survey results were in final stages of preparation for publication, however, ‘a very senior civil servant’ ordered civil servants to cease working on them. Orr and McGonigle were threatened with deregistration if they went ahead with a broadcast on the survey. McGonigle, still a practising doctor, withdrew; Orr broadcast alone. Fearing repercussions for civil servants, including staff at the Rowett Institute, Orr determined to publish under his own name, though much of the work had been done by others. In 1935, lest publication be somehow prevented, he delivered a public lecture, to which his friend, journalist Ritchie Calder, invited a large press contingent. ‘Sensational reports’ of the findings followed. Harold Macmillan agreed to publish; despite official displeasure, \textit{Food, Health and Income} first appeared in 1936 and went through three editions. Orr recalled:

\begin{quote}
The Establishment put up the strongest possible resistance to informing the public of what the true position was regarding under-nourishment among their fellow-citizens…The thought of mothers and children suffering malnutrition because they were too poor to afford the more expensive health foods was intolerable. At that time these foods were so abundant that the government was taking measures to reduce production so as to increase retail prices. I had never lost my hatred and anger against unnecessary poverty. Now, as a scientist, I had the chance of giving expression to that anger.\textsuperscript{20}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{17} Orr, \textit{As I Recall}, pp. 112–13.
\textsuperscript{19} Orr, \textit{As I Recall}, p. 115.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., pp. 115–18.
Countering ‘intolerable pessimism’

For McDougall and Bruce, the failures in 1933 to solve the international monetary crisis, and more particularly the wheat crisis, were to prove a profound disappointment but, ultimately, a turning point. It took little more than a year for McDougall to devise what they could believe to be a way out of the morass.

Writing in The Times, McDougall condemned—in words Bruce had used at the Economic Conference, but which could easily have been his own—the ‘doctrine of intolerable pessimism’ regarding restriction of production as a method of restoring prosperity to a poverty-stricken world. Groping for an answer to ‘intransigent economic nationalism’, he suggested an expanded imperial grouping with tariff protection, based on complementary trade. It could include close economic partners like Denmark and Argentina, and politically associated units like Egypt and Iraq. Free trade would not do, because it could not take account of national aspirations: France must grow wheat, Australia must have factories. He acknowledged difficulties in applying an Ottawa-type efficiency requirement to agriculture, but maintained that world trade would be strangled without some limitation on agricultural development in industrial nations. ‘McDougall must be a rather disillusioned man nowadays, but he obviously intends to fight to the last’, commented Rivett.

The summer months of 1934 were spent in tough negotiations under the International Wheat Agreement and with the British Government on the Ottawa meat quota. McDougall’s partnership with Bruce strengthened and settled into the mode of operation they would follow for the next decade: McDougall writing memoranda and suggesting courses of action, each then lobbying at appropriate levels for agreed purposes. Bruce had ‘further improved in the width of his outlook and the sanity of his point of view’.

He and I are doing our utmost in all sorts of ways to convince the British Ministers and other influential persons of the extremely grave danger of the undue expansion of British agriculture to the detriment of Great Britain’s imports from the dominions. I think we are having some success. They were urging appointment of a committee to study the problem of agricultural costs being higher in Britain than in the dominions, its report to be considered by all empire governments. At the same time, McDougall recorded

21 ‘Aid for British Agriculture’, The Times, 13 March 1934—the second of a series of three, published anonymously on consecutive days, under the general title ‘Factory and Farm’; copies sent to Rivett in NAA/CSIR, A10666, [4].
22 Third article, ‘Planning for Reciprocity’, The Times, 14 March. It was supported by a leading article of the same date.
23 NAA/CSIR, A9778, M14/34/3, Rivett to Casey, 24 March 1934.
24 Ibid., M14/34/8, McDougall to Rivett, 19 July 1934.
disappointment with Walter Elliot’s alignment with British producers’ interests. He had urged him to aim to be ‘a good Minister rather than...a superlatively good Minister of Agriculture’. He thought Elliot took the point, but ‘I have not seen any sign of a change of heart’. Elliot had, nevertheless, been ‘quite enthusiastic’ about The Times articles, which McDougall showed him before publication since they implied ‘serious criticism’ of his policy.25

Much of 1934 thus constituted a period of uneasy transition for McDougall, mopping up after Ottawa and admitting the existence of worldwide problems needing a global solution. Although his work on the Wheat Agreement had required him to think and act well beyond the British imperial framework, his thinking was still limited to a considerable extent by the empire idea. The period was also marked by a new personal relationship, possibly begun in Rome, where McDougall had attended his first meeting of the governing body of the International Institute of Agriculture in April. In May, Elspeth Huxley wrote delightedly that the friendship with ‘the Italian Bavarian ski champion...sounds excellent’. In August, just before attending the League Assembly, McDougall spent two weeks in a French mountain village near Geneva. Elspeth hoped ‘the mountain air is toning up the tissues, and the wide views soothing the spirit, and the companionship satisfying both the soul and the body’. She was later delighted to learn that ‘the walking tour was a success...It sounds fun and you deserve a bit of affection...Hurray for the signora!’ She continued to respond gleefully from travels in the United States as the relationship with ‘Beattie’ progressed.26 The correspondence provides no further information about the lady, and the relationship seems to have lasted only a year or two.

McDougall wrote to Elspeth in a depressed mood from Geneva, prompting her to reply: ‘you took a very defeatist point of view about the achievements of the past five years and evidently the atmosphere of Geneva is damping the optimist which is such an essential and characteristic part of your makeup.’27 But perhaps the ‘satisfaction of soul and body’ proved a catalyst to creative thinking. In October, happily reunited with ‘Beattie’ in Rome, McDougall first publicly made the connection between nutrition and agricultural policy. At the IIA, he welcomed a British speech calling for increased consumption, but added that decreasing consumption was a consequence of prices raised by extreme protection. At the same time, national conscience in many countries was being aroused by new understanding of the importance of diet to human welfare:

...it was to be hoped that the nations would soon realise how much it was to their own advantage to enable their people to obtain adequate supplies

25 Ibid., A10666, [4], McDougall to Rivett, 13 March 1934.
26 NLA, MS6890/2/5, 3 May, 23 August, 22 and 30 September 1934.
27 Ibid., 22 September 1934.
of such valuable human foods as dairy products, meat and fruit... A wide application of the doctrine of autarky means the persistence of poverty in the midst of plenty with disastrous consequences to the whole world.28

He had suggested in 1932 that decline in demand for foods such as fruit and vegetables was not a result of glut, but of ‘financial maladjustment’. Earlier he had also suggested encouraging greater consumption of liquid milk, for health reasons. The leap in 1934 was to connect poor diets with restrictive agricultural policies. Although the connection was made, the only remedies suggested in that speech were avoidance of extreme protection and reduction of internal costs. The IIA could help by studying factors involved in production costs; these costs would include protection.

Figure 12 F. L. McDougall at the Institute of Agriculture, Rome. McDougall is seated in the centre of the back row.

Source: E. McDougall.

Once back in London, McDougall decided that a direct attack on high agrarian protection could not succeed in the short term and he moved with speed to devise a campaign to tackle the problem in another way: ‘Possibly a fruitful method

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28 NAA/CSIR, A9778, M14/34/12, ‘Summary of Speech made by Mr F. L. McDougall in the general discussion which arose on Item 8 of the Agenda’, sent to Rivett, 8 November 1934.
would be a rally of scientific and medical opinion in favour of a reasonable standard of nutrition.” Bruce was persuaded. Orr was already ‘giving as much publicity as possible to the urgent need for a food policy based on health needs’ in speeches, writings and broadcasts. On 2 November, McDougall consulted him about

a point of view which, I think, should be pushed forward in every possible way, both nationally and internationally. In brief, I think the time has come when, in the interest of world recovery and the prosperity of the peoples of the British Empire, it is necessary to secure the greatest possible notice for modern ideas about nutrition.

Orr should launch the campaign with ‘a letter of great weight’ to The Times, warning of statisticians’ predictions of a stationary population in Britain unless infant and child mortality rates were reduced, and stressing the beneficial effect on those rates of adequate diet. The objective would be to increase demand, first in Britain and then in other countries, for milk and other dairy products, fruit and probably meat. The suggested diet, and its emphasis on dairy foods in particular, reflects the Eurocentric nature of most early research in nutrition. I am grateful to Barry Higman for pointing out that promotion in pioneering nutrition campaigns of a diet based on European preferences has had significant consequences for world food production.

Orr replied eagerly on 6 November. A similar idea had been ‘fermenting in my innards…during the last month or two’. Had it not been for his friendship with Elliot, he would have taken ‘a running kick’ at the milk-marketing scheme: ‘as near national lunacy as makes no difference.’ There was ‘a great expandable market for dairy products, fruit and meat’: production was not yet at a level equivalent to the amounts needed for the general health of the community. ‘The present schemes tend far too much to maintain the status quo on the unproved assumption that there is a glut.’ He suggested an imperial scheme encouraging consumption of liquid milk ‘until it reached a pint per head per day, which would double the output of dairy farming in this country’, yet still allow New Zealand and Australia to send butter until ‘every household in the country is using butter and has stopped the use of margarine’, which was then cheap, of poor quality and thought to lack the nutritional benefits of butter.

McDougall was already mapping out a broader campaign

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29 NAA/CSIR, A9778, M14/34/12, McDougall to Rivett, 8 November 1934.
30 Orr, As I Recall, p. 115.
31 Copy sent to Rivett in NAA/CSIR, A9778, M14/34/12.
32 Ibid.
to try to get scientific and medical opinion to express views, to which wide publicity could be given, and then to try and get the Health Section of the League of Nations working and to get the International Institute of Agriculture at Rome to obtain and publish comparative figures on the consumption per caput of milk, dairy products, fruit and meat, in Western Europe, United States, Great Britain, Scandinavia and the Dominions.33

He attended a meeting of the Wheat Advisory Committee in Budapest from mid November until early December, but had a rough draft of a memorandum by 17 December. A second draft followed on 9 January 1935, a third on 24 January.34 Copies were distributed to contacts from the Wheat Advisory Committee: a letter to Norman Robertson of the External Affairs Department in Ottawa suggested showing it to O. D. Skelton. Another was sent to Mordecai Ezekiel of the US Agricultural Adjustment Administration, from whom Elspeth Huxley had learned something of malnutrition figures in the United States, with a request that it be shown to Agriculture Secretary, Henry Wallace, as a personal, not an official Australian, paper.35

‘The Agricultural and the Health Problems’

The final form of the memorandum runs to fourteen and a half double-spaced, typed pages.36 It has a strong claim to being the most significant memorandum McDougall ever wrote. Yet there are some oddities. The title, with its two definite articles, reads awkwardly in English, perhaps less so in the League’s other official language, French. Titles of earlier drafts varied, some having no articles; the final could be an infelicitous result of re-translation. But there seems little doubt that McDougall himself intended the final form. He was a meticulous draftsman and editor: League files contain many examples of his minor corrections. He was unlikely to have let any version pass without scrutiny. When the memorandum was published by FAO in 1956, McDougall, although officially retired, still spent time in his office and was involved at least to some extent in the publication.37 It must be concluded that the two articles are there for emphasis: there are two problems and McDougall is proposing a solution for both of them. There is evidence, however, that McDougall was not entirely happy with the title. A letter to his mother, dated simply 7 May, but presumably

33 Ibid., Orr to McDougall, 6 November; McDougall to Rivett, 8 November 1934.
34 NAA/CSIR, A9778/4, M1 N43, related correspondence.
36 NLA, MS6890/4/4 and MS6890/4/6. The version published in more lavish layout by FAO is 17 pages long.
written in 1935, describes a discussion between McDougall, Earl De la Warr, Parliamentary Secretary at the Ministry of Agriculture, and David Lubbock, Orr’s son-in-law and assistant on the nutrition campaign, concerning ‘a good title or phrase for our campaign’. He wrote: “Agriculture and Health” all right for the initiated, “Increased consumption” sounds rather poor. The best phrase we could think of was “More Abundant Life”. I don’t wholly like it. Can you give me any suggestions?”

McDougall’s memoranda were working documents and generally pedestrian in style. Arresting statements were reserved for speeches. The opening sentence of this memorandum is both awkward and dreary: ‘Although the diagnosticians of the continuance of the depression vary in the emphasis they place upon the causes retarding world recovery, there would be general agreement today that the problems facing world agriculture are major factors.’ From then on, happily, the memorandum becomes clear and persuasive. It includes some of the best exposition to be found in McDougall’s work—for example: ‘It would argue a bankruptcy of statesmanship if it should prove impossible to bring together a great unsatisfied need for highly nutritious food and the immense potential production of modern agriculture.’

Considering the breadth of its subject matter, the memorandum is remarkably brief and simple. In 16 points, it summarises arguments McDougall had been making, in some cases for many years. It begins with the causes of agricultural problems: science-based increases in production levels, high protectionism and increasing US reliance on exports for economic recovery. The placement of the agricultural problems first, as in the title, is significant: this is the primary anxiety of statesmen everywhere.

Nutrition, however, takes up nine pages—the greater part of the text. McDougall makes it clear that ‘the very important question’ of nutrition in Asian countries is not dealt with; responsibility for a solution lies in the first place with ‘the more advanced countries’ where quantities of food consumed are generally adequate, but where substantial sections of populations—perhaps 10 million in the United Kingdom—suffer nutritional deficiencies of first and foremost milk, then fresh fruit and vegetables, dairy products including eggs and, for large masses of the poorer sections…meat. These commodities are exactly those which are causing the greatest concern to the Governments of the more advanced countries, whether normally importing or exporting agricultural products.

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38 NLA, MS6890/1/10.
39 The McDougall Memoranda, p. 6. Page numbers here and following refer to the printed version, not an earlier typed copy.
40 Ibid., pp. 5–7.
McDougall’s suggestions for tackling the problem rest largely on education and efforts to make the protective foods more affordable for the poor: ‘If a start was made in the United Kingdom and the United States of America through the mobilisation of scientific and medical opinion and the securing of adequate publicity, the results might be expected rapidly to spread to other countries.’ An education effort could be assisted by international bodies—the League, the International Labor Organization (ILO) and the IIA—providing useful facts and figures. He suggests ‘special prominence’ be given at the 1935 League General Assembly, to be followed by an international conference on agriculture and health, in which ‘the United States might be expected to play an important part’.41

He devotes two pages to the benefits of improved nutrition, which include better health and improved birthrates. ‘The immense potential demand’ of the US population could avoid the possibility of the world’s greatest creditor nation expanding her own agricultural exports. Improved nutrition as administration policy would mean no exports of meat or dairy products and more grain required for stockfeed.42 The advantage of his proposal for industrial countries is ‘an opportunity for a reorientation of agricultural policy; they could continue to protect efficient production but increased demand would allow of a simultaneous increase of import trade with beneficial effects upon their industrial export industries’. For agricultural countries, the policy means more export opportunities.43

Propaganda alone will not solve the problem; the poor need help to afford the right foods; state intervention may be necessary. McDougall suggests that President Roosevelt’s championing of ‘the cause of social justice’ has eased the way, as has the likely realisation that the alternative is ‘not a swing back to the right, but wild schemes of confiscation from the extreme left’. This fear has brought conservative leaders in other countries to discussion of ways to secure ‘a more equitable distribution of wealth’.44

Methods of state intervention are discussed briefly. ‘Social provision’, food as relief, is applied as free distribution in some countries, more to relieve pressing economic problems than for health. McDougall suggests universal provision of nutritious school lunches as a method less likely to lower the morale of recipients. Free education is widely accepted, but ‘education given to under-nourished children is frequently wasted’. The cost would be largely offset by savings in medical costs and of subsidies presently made to agriculture.45

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41 Ibid., pp. 7–8.
42 Ibid., pp. 8–10.
43 Ibid., p. 17.
44 Ibid., pp. 10–11.
Distribution costs are high in urban areas of Britain and the United States, but lower in countries where there are retail markets without extra charges for delivery, packaging and credit. McDougall wonders about replacing milk deliveries with central milk pumps, rather like petrol stations with facilities added to sterilise containers. Distribution of essential commodities like milk, and preliminary processing like flour milling, might be treated as public utilities rather than profit-making enterprises—this from a member of a prominent milling family! He demonstrates the high profitability of such enterprises in a note showing the rise in share prices of four British companies: United Dairy, Tate & Lyall, Spillers and Ranks, which have at least doubled since 1928; some have trebled or quadrupled.

Finally the effect of high protection policies is shown: butter prices in Paris are more than three times those in Britain. While conceding that agricultural policies in Europe have to maintain a high population of peasant farmers, McDougall calls for a simultaneous commitment to farmers’ efficiency: ‘An aroused public conscience might well insist that the price the farmer must pay for protection is reasonably high efficiency and prices must not be unduly restrictive on the consumption of the poorer classes.’

‘Mr McDougall’s action in the Assembly’

In March 1935, McDougall travelled to Geneva and Rome. Orr sent ahead of him an introduction to W. R. Aykroyd, joint author of the League Health Committee Report. H. R. Cummings of the League organisation in Britain also wrote to Aykroyd, foreshadowing both Australian and British action on the issue. The ground was being carefully prepared. Aykroyd read the memorandum, noting that his own report had marshalled evidence for McDougall’s proposition that subnormal nutrition was the rule, rather than the exception, in even the best-fed countries. ‘On purely health grounds [the Health Committee] must be in sympathy with Mr Bruce and his colleagues.’ But more than sympathy was needed: ‘By taking a definite standpoint as regards diet [health organisations] can indirectly influence economic policy.’

Copies of the memorandum spread. Dr Ludwik Rajchmann, Director of the League Health Secretariat, requested a dozen more copies, and found Grace

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46 Ibid., pp. 13–14.
47 This note is not included in FAO’s publication The McDougall Memoranda. A version in NLA (MS6890/4/4) does include it; that in NLA (MS6890/4/6) does not.
48 NLA, MS6890/5/4, printed version, pp. 14–16.
49 LN, 1933–46, 8A, 17356/2133, Orr to Aykroyd, 11 March; 1933–46, 8A, 17008/8855, Cummings to Aykroyd, 8 March 1935.
50 Ibid., note by Aykroyd, 15 March 1935.
Abbott, head of the US ILO delegation, most interested. A draft ILO resolution was in preparation by 9 April; cooperation between both organisations was rapid and effective. League officials approved the ILO draft, adding a clause affirming cooperation with the League Economic Organization and the IIA. Correspondence referred to ‘Mr McDougall’s action in the Assembly’ or ‘l’initiative McDougall’.

At the Nineteenth ILO Conference in June, the report of the Director-General referred to problems of nutrition; statements were made by Miss Abbott and by Australian and New Zealand representatives. Australia’s Sir Frederick Stewart moved a resolution calling for continued investigation into the relationship between nutrition and productive capacity, and for cooperation, particularly on the social aspects of nutrition, with the League and the International Institute of Agriculture. It was ‘warmly supported’.

Australia, with much to gain, supported the move at every level. The Prime Minister and his wife visited Europe briefly that summer. In Geneva on 23 June, Lyons toured the new League building, then nearing completion, visited the ILO and lunched with senior officials. In Rome on 28 June, he had ‘a very nice chat’ through an interpreter in an audience with the Pope, but ‘found it difficult to discuss anything fully’. With the Cardinal Secretary of State, he discussed ‘the matter referred to in a memorandum re agriculture and production—the need for greater consumption of good food’. The memorandum was presumably McDougall’s. Lyons explained to the Cardinal his hope that the Pope might issue a pronouncement
drawing attention to the present mad policy of trade barriers [as a result of which] large numbers of people were suffering from the effects of insufficient and unsuitable food [although] there was actually overproduction in the world of all that they required. It was useless for any politician to draw attention to this, as he would be said to have an axe to grind, but if the Holy Father would speak to the world those in power might grapple with the evil.

The Cardinal Secretary requested a memorandum for consideration of the question. The memorandum was subsequently presented. McDougall was at
first ‘a little horrified’ to learn it had been issued to the press, but later amused by the ‘vivid, not to say sentimental’ tone of a leading article on the subject in the London Catholic weekly, the Table, and, in general, delighted by ‘the interest in the Agriculture and Health movement in this country’. Rivett responded that the idea was ‘getting some push from Canberra’ and that the Director-General of Health had been instructed to pay close attention to nutrition.56

McDougall would have worked closely with Bruce on his speeches for the League Assembly; it was their habit to work even as they travelled on the overnight train from Paris to Geneva.57 Inclusion of nutrition on the agenda of the Second Committee (Technical Subjects) was co-sponsored by Australia with Argentina, Austria, Britain, Canada, Chile, Denmark, France, Italy, New Zealand, Poland and Sweden.58

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56 NAA/CSIR, A10666, 30[4], McDougall to Rivett, 4 and 11 October; Rivett to McDougall, 31 October 1935.
57 Interview, Professor J. G. Starke, April 1988.
first that the dominating anxiety of the Abyssinian crisis—then threatening the principle of collective action to maintain peace and already referred to the League Council—should be avoided lest the problem be exacerbated. Instead, in a speech far more compelling than McDougall’s memorandum, he recalled that the League’s responsibilities extended to economic, humanitarian and social issues, and that the question of nutrition had been placed on the agenda of the Second Committee. National health, he said, was the basis of the wellbeing of every nation. Sanitation and infectious disease control had already been the subjects of government regulation to the incalculable benefit of populations. Now science, as shown in the League’s own Burnet–Aykroyd Report, provided new means of controlling disease and misery with adequate nutrition. The problem was to make the more expensive protective foods widely available. Yet ministers of agriculture were wrestling with problems of apparent overproduction:

Increased yields are being regretted and abundance is often officially deplored. At the same time Ministers of Health and their official and medical advisers are realising, more and more, that public health demands an increased consumption of many of the very products about which the Departments of Agriculture are so unhappy.

Millions of pounds are being spent annually in subsidies, bonuses and other forms of assistance to agriculture. Side by side with that expenditure millions of pounds are being devoted to combating disease. Is it not possible to marry health and agriculture and, by so doing, make a great step in the improvement of national health and, at the same time, an appreciable contribution to the solution of the agricultural problem.59

Introducing a draft resolution in Second Committee, Bruce argued the suggestion was neither idealistic nor impracticable. Economic, political and social sciences had lagged behind the physical and other sciences. Even in the United States it was admitted that six million children were malnourished. A first objective might be elimination of malnutrition in ‘the richest and most developed countries’, with improvement for the ‘teeming millions’ in undeveloped countries ‘a long-range objective’. Action should not wait until the economic situation improved; progress must be gradual but should start immediately. He listed some practical measures and ‘submitted that action to bring about the greater consumption of health-giving foodstuffs would not only be beneficial to public health and efficiency but would bring about greater demand, larger production, increased and freer trade, and better financial conditions’.60 Bruce would later emphasise

59 Ibid., Fourth Plenary Meeting, 11 September, pp. 51–3. Bruce’s speech was also published in The McDougall Memoranda, pp. 18–24.
60 Ibid., Records of 16th Assembly, Minutes of the Second Committee, 19 September, pp. 15–17.
that the nutrition case was not based on ‘high moral principles, but purely on economics’, quoting ‘an American’ who told Orr that ‘this idea of the marriage of food and agriculture is the starting-handle of the whole economic recovery of the world’. Bruce added: ‘That point has to be stressed, because it’s drifted away from hard economic fact and is now mainly governed by humanitarian considerations.’

Delegates appeared to turn with relief from a problem they seemed unable to solve, in Abyssinia, to action they could take. Seventeen delegations joined in, spreading the committee debate over three days, ‘to the surprise even of Geneva idealists’. Britain’s Earl de la Warr spoke of ‘a challenge to statesmanship no one could afford to ignore’: while Britain could not retreat from ‘the policy of planning the market’ undertaken in recent years, ‘such planning should be for the purpose of expansion rather than restriction’. Denmark’s Christiani endorsed Bruce’s ‘masterly speech’. Gautier of France ‘agreed entirely’, spoke of the need to improve the purchasing power of the agriculturalist, and urged the importance of education, ‘since mankind was confronted with conditions of existence which were entirely new and called for education of a new kind. Hundreds of millions of persons were living in a constant state of semi-starvation.’ Italy’s Fera admitted that his country had adopted measures of restriction, but was ‘prepared to co-operate most loyally’ with the governments that shared her determination to remove ‘the obstacles standing in the way of the natural interchange of goods’.

Some delegates offered examples of measures already taken in their own countries in provision of milk and other foods to children and the needy; all supported the need for further inquiry. The Second Committee appointed a drafting committee, including McDougall, to prepare the final text of a resolution, which it approved on 25 September. On 27 September the Assembly resolved that governments should examine the practical means of securing better nutrition and requested the Council

(1) To invite the Health Organisation of the League of Nations to continue and extend its work on nutrition in relation to public health;

(2) To instruct the technical organisations of the League of Nations, in consultation with the International Labour Office and the International

61 Edwards, Bruce of Melbourne, p. 416.
62 Hudson, Australia and the League of Nations, p. 177.
64 Ibid., 20 September, p. 18.
65 Ibid., p. 23.
66 Ibid., 21 September, p. 25.
Institute of Agriculture, to collect, summarise and publish information on the measures taken in all countries for securing improved nutrition and,

(3) To appoint a Committee, including agricultural, economic and health experts, instructed to submit a general report on the whole question, in its health and economic aspects, to the next Assembly, after taking into consideration, *inter alia* the progress of the work carried out in accordance with paragraphs (1) and (2) above.67

### The Mixed Committee

Action was rapid. The Health Committee appointed the Technical Commission, which met in November and produced a *Report on the Physiological Bases of Nutrition*.68 That same month the League Secretary-General requested member governments to submit information on action taken to improve nutrition. The League Council, of which Bruce was a member, acted immediately, rather than delay action until its next session in January, to establish a ‘Mixed Committee’ of specialist and lay members to report to the 1936 Assembly.69 McDougall reported encouraging press attention in Britain: there had been supportive articles in *The Times*, the *Economist*, the *Statist*, the *Spectator* and *Nature*.70 He wrote to every expert and interested person he could think of, seeking letters to the press worldwide.

Both McDougall and Bruce worked hard to establish the Mixed Committee. McDougall suggested to League officials that decisions about membership should pay some regard to geographical representation; it should include ‘the best available men’ from the United States, the overseas dominions, France, Scandinavia, Central Europe, the Mediterranean and South America. There should be representatives of the technical committee on nutrition, the ILO and a British chairman. Some members should have wide knowledge of world agriculture, others should understand commercial policy, yet others should be economists.71 By 18 December the membership was largely in place, composed as McDougall had suggested, and including McDougall himself.

70 Ibid., 1933–46, 8A, 50/20905/19868, McDougall to Stoppani, 9 November 1935. Articles had been published in the *Economist* on 31 August, 14 and 28 September; the *Statist* on 5 October; and in *Nature* on 19 and 26 October 1935.
71 Ibid., 1933–46, 8A, 50/20095/20095, McDougall to A. Loveday, 10 October 1935.
Bruce was responsible for finding the British chairman. He sounded out Austen Chamberlain. Winston Churchill was interested and would have taken the role, had he not been preoccupied with defence problems. He did offer to make ‘a big speech on the subject’ at any appropriate occasion. Bruce really wanted Lord Astor, but had to wait until 18 January to see him in person. Astor, Chairman of the Milk-in-Schools Advisory Committee and former Parliamentary Secretary to both the Ministry of Food and the Ministry of Agriculture, readily agreed.72

The Mixed Committee was expected to report quickly. Members with disparate backgrounds would have little information beyond their own specialities and the purely scientific work of the health experts. Responses to the questionnaire to governments could not be expected before the committee began meeting in February 1936. Therefore it lay with the few persons who had some concrete ideas on the subject, foremost among them McDougall (‘vous figurez au premier rang’) and the League Secretariat, to research and direct the committee along productive lines. The head of the League’s Economic Relations Section, Paul Stoppani, suggested McDougall, ‘qui êtes dans une certaine mesure le créateur de cette entreprise’, discuss a plan of action with the Secretariat.73 McDougall took with him to Geneva a draft of a preparatory document. Discussion of the document on 9 December centred on ways of avoiding minor factual difficulties and impolitic references and of giving the document more impact. By 14 December a shorter and simpler document had been prepared, in line with the ideas of the Secretary-General on the question. A further revision was taken to London by Godfrey Lloyd of the League Economic Section later in December.74

The League published a four-volume report on nutrition in 1936. Volume II was the Report on the Physiological Bases of Nutrition; Volume III, Nutrition in Various Countries; and Volume IV, Statistics of Food Production, Consumption and Prices.75 Volume I was an interim report76 of the Mixed Committee, which had decided at its first meeting that ‘it would be quite impossible for it to cover the immense field which its terms of reference required’ in time to present a comprehensive report that year. In 98 pages it did cover knowledge of nutrition and its relation to the health of various groups in populations, a survey by the ILO of workers’ health and social and labour legislation, and the relationship between nutrition, agriculture and the economics of farming. Its 15 recommendations included: continued study of and education on the principles of nutrition; cooperation and exchange of information; consideration of means of meeting the nutritional

73 Ibid., Stoppani to McDougall, 28 November 1935.
74 Ibid., notes of meeting on 9 December; Draft with annotations dated 14 December; letter from Stoppani to McDougall, 14 December 1935.
75 Ibid., 1936, II.B. 4–6.
needs of various sections of communities, especially the young and those on lower incomes; steps to improve and cheapen marketing and distribution of the protective foods; consideration of any need to modify general economic and commercial policies, including assistance to reorientation of agricultural production; coordination of the work of various nutritional authorities; and continuation and improvement of collection of national statistics on supply, consumption and adequacy of diets. It is a familiar list. McDougall had done his preparatory work well.

A final report of the Mixed Committee was never produced: after 1936 international events turned minds everywhere to more pressing problems. But the *Interim Report* achieved much: it was a mine of information and became a bestseller amongst League publications. It had put nutrition on the international agenda; national nutrition committees were established in many countries in response to the League initiative. Awareness of the science and importance of nutrition helped ensure that mistakes made in 1914–18 were not made in 1939–45 in countries that were able to avoid them; many British people, in particular, were healthier than they had been in peacetime.

The memorandum from which the *Interim Report* developed was a unique and inspired contribution to thinking on international commodity problems. It applied consumptionism to a problem of human health that could not be solved by any of the traditional policies. On the passing of the Assembly Resolution, Bruce, McDougall and de la Warr sent a telegram to Orr: ‘Brother Orr, we have this day lighted such a candle, by God’s grace, in Geneva, as we trust shall never be put out.’ The resolution represented a tiny speck of light in a darkening international world.

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77 This version of their paraphrase of Bishop Hugh Latimer’s advice to Nicholas Ridley at the stake is quoted in Hudson, *Australia and the League of Nations*, p. 177. Other versions of the story vary slightly.