Voluntary cooperation between independent nation-states to create a broad-based international organisation only became possible when the ultimate consequences of national rivalries had been demonstrated in the slaughter of 1914–18. All three principals in this study participated in that conflict, which must have influenced their thinking. On the Western Front, Orr served with distinction as a medical officer in the trenches and took part in military action in battles including the Somme and Passchendaele.¹ In 1939–45 his only son was to die serving in the Royal Air Force. In 1916 McDougall was appointed to the AIF Cycle Corps, intended for messenger duties and reconnaissance after shelling. The latter proved impracticable in the appalling conditions; after a period largely involving traffic control, his war service was spent just behind the front lines as a quartermaster. He reached the Western Front just before the Battle of the Somme. There, no-one escaped privation, fear or horror. He wrote of watching the ‘terrible blind groping’ of German artillery, ‘feeling with his shells for our batteries…as I wasn’t on duty at the time when his search came in my direction I made tracks for shelter and then away’. ‘I shall be very glad for a chance to sleep without my boots and clothes’, he wrote to his mother, and, in a less-restrained moment, contrasted the pleasant garden surrounds of their headquarters out of the line with the ‘dugouts, shells and the unspeakable smell of the partially buried’, adding, ‘where we were was quite hot enough for my liking but it wasn’t a patch on the front line’. He did think it necessary to write a letter for his wife in the event of his death.²

Bruce later revealed something of the horror he experienced at the Dardanelles. In 1921, while in England on PLB business, he was appointed Australian delegate to the Second Assembly of the infant League of Nations. There he spoke passionately in favour of arms reduction:

I want you to realize what it does mean to the soldier…to see the whole of his company, or even the whole of his battalion, wiped out practically to a man, for no result except that it is all part of the great strategy of war to make men attempt the impossible…If you had seen men mutilated and dying without the possibility of being helped, if you had ever heard the cry of a wounded man out between the lines with no possibility of assistance being given him, and with a likelihood that he may lie dying there for days…then I venture to say that you would look on this question with a different eye.³

² NLA, MS6890/1/6, letters to Kit, 26 July and 18 August; to mother, 6, 13 and 17 August 1916.
³ Lee, Stanley Melbourne Bruce, p. 20.
By the time Bruce attended his next League Assembly, in 1932, he had developed reservations about the League’s ability to provide for collective security. As Prime Minister, like his predecessor, Hughes, he had not been prepared to ‘surrender any part of [Australian] autonomy to an international organisation’, and was particularly wary of threats to Australian tariff policy in League attacks on trade barriers. But he was firmly in favour of extending its role in social, economic and technical areas, where he believed it could be effective. He ‘genuinely set value on the League as a forum for discussion between states, as a conciliator, as a trend-setter in humanitarian activity and…as an educator of opinion’.4 He was to take a very active role in the League throughout the decade and hoped its potential for social and economic reform might go some way towards defusing international tensions.

In what was ‘almost…an afterthought’, Article 23 of the League Covenant had authorised the League to deal with ‘the international aspects of social, economic and humanitarian progress’. The League developed a ‘double aspect…on the one hand the centre for world-wide co-operation in purposes which all could support, on the other a political agency closely bound up with a treaty which was far from being universally approved’.5 To meet the requirements of Article 23, bodies were established within the League to deal with economics and finance, communications and transit, health, traffic in drugs, traffic in women, child welfare, intellectual cooperation and refugees. In the 1930s the League’s social and economic institutions became ‘concerned more and more intimately with the ordinary problems of the life of individuals as well as of nations’, representing ‘in the aggregate an immense contribution to human welfare and a necessary element in the complex life of the modern world’.6

By 1939 more than 60 per cent of the League’s budget was spent on economic and humanitarian work.7 The greatest public impact was perhaps made by the League’s work on nutrition: it published a highly regarded scientific report on nutrition in the early 1930s, and the report of the Mixed Committee on Nutrition, resulting from the Bruce–McDouggall initiative of 1935, was a bestseller amongst League publications. This success demonstrates the strength of the League as a clearing house for information and statistics, as a meeting place for experts and as a focus of international cooperation and recommendations on aspects of public policy. Experts gathered at the League, whether as individuals or as representatives of institutions, drew on a variety of professional and occupational

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backgrounds and worldwide links to bureaucracies, political structures and academic communities. Citizens of non-member states participated in the technical work. The technical organs of the League formed a network of connections with administrative departments of member and non-member countries in fields such as health and social welfare; ‘the world’s best experts’ were prepared to serve on them ‘not only for the sake of the work itself but still more in the conviction that thereby they were helping the cause of peace and international co-operation’. The League Health Organization has been described as ‘a co-ordinating body—a sort of executive committee—for a worldwide biomedical/public health episteme that recently had acquired confidence in its ability to alleviate human suffering by reducing, if not eliminating, disease’. It enjoyed ‘a symbiotic relationship’ with the Rockefeller Foundation, which funded projects, including a bureau on epidemic diseases in Singapore. US expertise contributed to much of this work, the partnership enhancing ‘not only [the organisation’s] effectiveness, but also its legitimacy’.

Important as this humanitarian work was, it was never likely to prevent war. In the ‘first “realist” monograph on international relations in the twentieth century’, E. H. Carr proposed that international relations are primarily based on power—military, economic and political—and hard bargaining between conflicting interests. He shocked many believers in the classical harmony of interests, McDougall among them, though not the more politically aware Bruce. McDougall retained much of what Carr called ‘the optimism of the nineteenth century…based on the triple conviction that the pursuit of good was a matter of right reasoning, that the spread of knowledge would soon make it possible for everyone to reason rightly…and that anyone who reasoned rightly…would necessarily act rightly’. This was the essential basis of the Bruce–McDougall nutrition approach. The League of Nations resolution resulting from their initiative sought amelioration for international trade problems without resort to international compulsion. The measures it suggested lay almost entirely in the realm of national policy: no international body was to set prices, export quotas or limits to production. International responsibility was to collate and provide information, and to encourage. National bodies would collect information, educate to create demand for foods believed to promote health and devise creative policies to encourage cheap and adequate supplies of those foods. The process would be driven by an educated market.

11 Stirling, Lord Bruce, the London Years, p. 140.
12 Carr, Twenty Years’ Crisis, pp. 24–5.
In the short term, the idea failed: ‘it required fundamental changes in economic policy, in the role of the state in the economy and in the very structure of economic activity in individual countries. None of this… came to pass.’ In the longer term, and largely through the education on which McDougall relied, change did occur. Bringing public attention to the problem of inadequate nutrition

provided a valuable corrective to the confusion of thought which tended to turn shibboleths of ‘finance’, ‘economic laws’, and ‘free trade’, balanced budgets or gold standards, into ultimate criteria of economic policy, and pointed to a saner approach to economic problems.13

[It was] a ‘damning commentary’ that the nutrition approach sought to emphasize living standards. Such an emphasis should have been a truism.14

But it was necessary. Madeleine Mayhew has pointed to the policy conflict in Britain in the 1930s between nutrition scientists—notably John Boyd Orr—and the bureaucracy, centred on the question of the relationship between inadequate nutrition and income, a conflict between science and economics.15 Paul Weindling describes the nutrition research of the League Health Organization as ‘the product of scientific experts frustrated with the fundamental irrationality of the prevailing social order’. The League’s work on nutrition ‘exemplifies how scientists were keen to extend their expertise in support of radical reforms…British nutritionists could criticise the British government by invoking the new standards and perspectives on nutrition endorsed by [the League], but which they themselves had formulated’.16

An immediate result of the League resolution on nutrition was the formation of national nutrition committees in some 40 countries, including Australia. Early surveying of the state of nutrition by the Australian Advisory Council on Nutrition was marred by amateurism, ignorance of overseas sampling techniques and by a decision to avoid the contentious relationship of income to nutrition. Findings were ‘vague and ambiguous’. But the work was continued and steps were taken towards national food standards: ‘nutrition was now widely regarded as a national responsibility.’17 It seems very likely that the action of League

experts and others who promoted these bodies in many countries accelerated a process of education in nutrition that has become integral to public and professional thinking about health.

This section deals with the nutrition initiative and with the League’s sponsorship of conferences attempting to solve other international problems. One was the plight of the international wheat market in the early 1930s, where the only acceptable remedy seemed to be limitation of production. Its failure spurred McDougall, encouraged by Orr and supported by Bruce, to devise his ‘marriage of health and agriculture’. The proposal received overwhelming support in Geneva. Following that success, Bruce and McDougall devised plans to extend the approach of increasing consumption to a political solution for world tension and to a scheme for improving the effectiveness of the League's social and economic activities. The first idea generated little enthusiasm; the second was warmly received, but simply ran out of time.