

Book review

McCance and Widdowson: A Scientific Partnership of 60 Years

Edited by Margaret Ashwell

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This is a remarkable book about two remarkable people, one Elsie Widdowson, age 87, and the other, Robert McCance, having died this year, 1993, at the age of 94. They have many admirers some of whom have made insightful contributions to a book edited with sensitivity by Margaret Ashwell. In a generalized way it provides windows on many key developments in nutrition science this century – especially those to do with food and its composition and with the nutritional physiology of growth and development. For those beset by the contemporary constrictions applying to scientific enquiry, it is inspiring to see how sustained research has been in peace and war, from continent to continent, and amongst both the economically deprived and advantaged.

There are many tales told, and it is worth noting they have, through the students and co-workers of McCance and Widdowson become part of the nutrition legend of the Antipodes as well. In Australia, Ingrid Rutishauser, who worked with McCance in Uganda and who now has been a member of the Department of Human Nutrition at Deakin University, Geelong, Victoria for some 13 years – and in New Zealand, Marion Robinson (nee Harrison) who worked with McCance and Widdowson in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and became Professor of Nutrition at the University of Otago, Dunedin, retiring in 1989 – these two proteges alone would have made the contributions and lives of the redoubtable pair available

for Australasia. But, eventually, we were able, after her aged mother, for whom she cared, died, to entice Elsie Widdowson to Australia and New Zealand. On 19 May 1989 she opened the new Body Composition Laboratory at Prince Henry's Hospital, now the Monash Medical Centre, Melbourne, in the presence of an old friend Prof Donald Cheek, a distinguished Australian nutrition scientist and paediatrician. Afterwards she proceeded to the Festschrift in Dunedin of her former student, Prof Marion Robinson. Sydney's Human Nutrition unit, headed by Professor A Stewart Truswell, also had the pleasure of her distinguished company. A new generation of Australian nutrition students and scientists had made her acquaintance! For many years, when I was Professor of Human Nutrition at Deakin University, Professor McCance's greetings and encouragement would regularly be relayed to us by Ingrid Rutishauser, whom he much admired.

We used deferentially to refer to the physical differences between Robert McCance, and Elsie Widdowson, both endowed with longevity and each with a profound personal knowledge of food and human physiology (McCance the cyclist and massive consumer of vegetables; Widdowson the enjoyer of the delights of a Melbourne Chinese and many another table), as signalling the nutritional resilience of the human species as well as, perhaps, the great merit of enjoying life through the intellectual and professional pursuits of nutrition science!

Well into his 80s, I found Robert McCance interested, receptive and critical company. Elsie Widdowson wrote in our home guest book, 'I've had a busy day. . . (it) is finishing with a lovely evening and meal. . .', the perfect juxtaposition!

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