

BOOK REVIEW

McCance & Widdowson – A Scientific Partnership of 60 Years. Edited by MARGARET ASHWELL. London: British Nutrition Foundation, 1993. £19.95. ISBN 0 907 66707 4.

Margaret Ashwell is to be congratulated on compiling an absolutely fascinating collection of papers describing the life and work of Professor McCance and Dr Widdowson. The book starts with short individual autobiographies, followed by a list of one hundred of their publications, and twenty questions and short answers on a variety of topics. Then comes very useful reading for all young, and even some 'not-so-young', aspiring researchers in the nutritional sciences, namely advice on how to design experiments and interpret the results.

The problem that Margaret Ashwell faced when attempting to describe McCance and Widdowson's prolific research activities over 60 years was overcome with their help. They suggested classifying their achievements into six broad categories and nominated six former colleagues to review their main achievements, including the composition of foods (David Southgate), mineral metabolism (Douglas Black), body composition (John Dickerson), the physiology of the newborn (Brian Wharton), normal and retarded growth (David Lister) and Third World nutrition (Roger Whitehead). Although the reviews of their work are fairly comprehensive, one major achievement that does not receive adequate acclaim is their important work on iron in the mid 1930s (described by McCance on page 21) that led to a better understanding of iron homeostasis.

The next eight pages comprise day-to-day recollections of life with McCance and Widdowson in which thirty-two contributors have provided individual accounts of their own experiences with McCance and Widdowson, arranged chronologically. There is unavoidable repetition of certain scientific exploits, such as the salt deprivation studies, but this does not detract from the general enjoyment of the book because each person has his/her own personal slant, and as a bonus there is much to be learnt about the contributors themselves. There is an amazing similarity in the observations of all the contributors concerning the personalities and attitudes of McCance and Widdowson, and the loyalty, fondness and admiration of their former students and colleagues shine through. Finally four 'named' lectures, chosen by McCance and Widdowson, are reproduced. These cover the topics 'The Practice of Experimental Medicine' and 'Food, Growth and Time' (McCance) and 'Harmony of Growth' and 'Animals in the Service of Human Nutrition' (Widdowson). By the end of the book the reader has an extraordinarily vivid picture of what it must have been like working with McCance and Widdowson. In fact, the descriptions of those stirring times are so colourful and interesting that they would form the basis of a wonderful documentary.

McCance & Widdowson – A Scientific Partnership of 60 Years should appeal to a wide audience, and at £19.95 represents good value for money. The historical perspective and glimpses of a past era, including some wonderful photographs, are interesting enough to be enjoyed and appreciated by non-nutritionists. Middle-aged and older scientists who have been or are involved in the nutritional sciences will undoubtedly find the book nostalgic, since in addition to the stars themselves there is an enormous amount of biographical and anecdotal detail of many of the great names in nutrition. The book should be compulsory reading for young scientists studying the subject. Not only does it cover

some historical milestones, presented in an entertaining form, but there is also a wealth of down-to-earth advice on research scattered throughout the book. For example, on page 124 Roger Whitehead relays McCance's lesson on how to write a scientific paper: 'the results and discussion sections should be kept quite separate in their content... while the discussion would probably become out-of-date and be in need of modification as knowledge developed, the experimental data were a description of exactly what had happened, and as such should stand the test of time'. On page 141 James Robinson recalls the constant reminder from 'the Professor and Elsie' that 'cells are parts of people', and points out that in these days of increasing abstraction it is more than ever necessary to keep the whole animal in mind, a perspective that is, unfortunately, sometimes overlooked as an increasing number of specialists without a classical nutrition training move into the nutritional sciences.

Finally, I am taking note of Professor McCance's favourite expressions in my overall summary of this book (page 142, 'what are you really trying to say?' and 'Just say it'). It is wizard.

S. J. FAIRWEATHER-TAIT