

Foreword

This book contains the proceedings of a conference held on 21 October 1996. That day was a very important one for Dr Elsie Widdowson CH CBE FRS DSc. It was her ninetieth birthday and the conference was intended to be a very special birthday party for a truly remarkable woman who is admired and respected throughout the scientific community.

When I first had the idea to stage the conference, I had to check that Elsie hadn't made any other plans. So I asked, 'Are you doing anything on October 21st?' 'No,' she replied, 'Why?' 'So you haven't booked to go hang-gliding or to make your first bungee-jump then?' 'No, Why?' Then there was a knowing pause: 'What are you up to, Margaret?' I chuckled. 'Don't worry, Elsie, I can assure you it's something scientific.' 'Oh well, that's all right then,' she said, with a great sigh of relief.

As her 'official biographer', I knew Elsie well enough to know that she would prefer a meeting that was scientifically stimulating rather than one that was packed with nostalgia. Anyway, we had already looked backwards when we celebrated the 60 year partnership of McCance and Widdowson with a book (Ashwell, 1993) and a conference. So what could I plan that fitted the bill?

Luckily I remembered a conversation with Elsie when I was describing some of the exciting new findings in gene–nutrient interactions and she had pointed out to me that this was really '1990s speak' for what she would have called 'nutritional individuality'. We agreed that she would make a short list of topics of her special research interests and I promised to update them to their corresponding 1990s phrases. The list was stuck up on my office wall but it was to provide just the inspiration I needed to plan the birthday conference! The seven subjects in the list formed the basis of the titles of the seven conference presentations which have now become the seven papers in this book. I hoped this would be the perfect way of linking Elsie's most important scientific contributions with a forward-looking approach which is appropriate as we approach the new millennium.

Then I had to make decisions about the speakers at the conference and I decided that they should fulfil two criteria: they should be young and they should be personally known to Elsie. I showed Elsie my provisional list and she agreed with each one of my suggestions. 'I see they're all women,' she said. 'Yes, have you any objection?' 'No,' she said, 'I think it is highly appropriate.' And of course it is appropriate because it is one way of recognising how much Elsie has done for the careers of many women scientists as well as for nutrition science in general.

There were two standard responses from those I asked to speak. First they were honoured to be asked to speak at an event which honoured someone as famous as Dr Elsie Widdowson. Second, they were appalled at the task they had been given. To take a subject that Elsie had done so much for and to do it justice in 5 minutes was one thing. To bring that subject area bang up to date and then project it into the next millennium in the next 20 minutes was nigh on impossible and I was asking for a miracle!

I was confident that I had chosen speakers who were able to perform miracles, and I hope that when you read these papers you will agree with me. I am very grateful to them all and also to Professor Maureen Young who helped me to chair the conference.

The next thing to do was to arrange sponsors for the meeting and I'd like to thank Cow and Gate Nutricia Ltd, Marks and Spencer plc, Unigate plc, the Kellogg Company, Van den Bergh Foods, the Meat and Livestock Commission and the Ministry of Agriculture,

Fisheries and Food, who agreed readily to help me stage the conference. I'd also like to thank three companies, Cow and Gate Nutricia Ltd, the Kellogg Company and Nestlé UK Ltd, for making a substantial contribution towards the publication of these proceedings.

Now you can't have a birthday without a birthday present and I would like to mention 'The Elsie May Rose'. It's not easy to think of a present for someone who has been given so many Honours, awards, trophies and medals over the years, which is why I decided on something completely different. Any of you who are lucky enough to have visited Elsie's house in Barrington will know how much she loves her garden and that she is particularly fond of roses. So in the summer of 1996 I took Elsie to browse through the test beds of Harkness roses so that she could choose a brand new variety which would be grown and named after her. She chose a scarlet and gold floribunda rose which is suitable for mass planting in beds or as a rose hedge up to 1 m tall. If you would like to order it, please contact Harkness directly (The Rose Gardens, Cambridge Road, Hitchin, Hertfordshire, SG4 0JT, Tel: 01462 420402, Fax: 01462 422170). Elsie chose the name as well as the rose and I hope that you will all take the opportunity to buy one or more and watch Elsie May thrive in your gardens.

Finally, the publishers asked me to choose a co-editor for this book. That was easy. Elsie would never have let me edit this book without wanting to read the papers herself. So, I am thrilled to have the opportunity of sharing the editorship of a publication with her for the first time ever.

MARGARET ASHWELL, OBE

REFERENCE

Ashwell, M. (editor) (1993). *McCance and Widdowson – A Scientific Partnership of 60 Years*. London: British Nutrition Foundation.