

## Out of the Box

The burgeoning impact factor of *Public Health Nutrition* (let's hope the topic too) should mean that new readers start here. What's this column for? Thoughts, views, news, jokes. That's the snappy answer. Why the name? Ricardo Uauy said at the 2000 Congress of the Latin American Nutrition Societies (SLAN) in Buenos Aires: 'You're out of the box, Geoffrey. Stay that way'. After being told that this was not chiliarchic code for 'out of your mind', the phrase stuck. Editor-in-Chief Barrie Margetts assented.

This first column of the year includes reference to some of my preoccupations. I should 'fess up to my take on food, nutrition, health, life, the universe and everything. If you disagree with me, or wonder why a learned journal should publish what you think is claptrap, please say so, with reasons, in a letter for publication.

### Reject reductionism

To be inside the box is to be confined. The general trend in science is to know more and more about less and less (and eventually everything about nothing?). Facts can be the enemy of thought; knowledge can drive out wisdom. I commend a New Year browse of the Tao. Thus: 'Be really whole, and all things will come to you'<sup>1</sup>.

And now for an irony. The publication treadmill, the exhausting and stupefying system by which the status and salaries of scientists are now determined, was in effect devised by the epic ruffian Robert Maxwell, a character rather like Harry Lime – Graham Greene's Third Man. Yes, this is true! I met him more than once; he was indeed charismatic. In 1960 I published and edited a student magazine with pretensions. He invited me to Headington Hill Hall, his rented palace complete with peacocks on the lawns, and said he would buy me and give me freedom. He explained that as the owner of a Varsity journal he would be spoken of with respect at all Oxford college high tables. Having digested the relevant passage of St Matthew<sup>2</sup>, and also as an act of kindness, I turned his offer down.

Born Ludwig Hoch in Ruthenia, he learned cunning to survive the primeval horrors in Eastern Europe after Hitler's armies invaded the USSR. He created Robert Maxwell and adopted Britain. In public he was once a Labour MP and then owner of the *Daily Mirror*. In secret, under the guise of a self-created global statesman with direct lines to heads of state, he was a bagman for governments bold enough to use him.

That's the background; now to the point. His first stroke of genius soon after World War II was founding Pergamon Press, and inventing the system of ever more subdivided learned journals and thus ever more subdivisions of

scientific disciplines, as a laundry for his shady trade with Iron Curtain countries and to make more money from the icing on the wedding cake – the top tier of multi-layered journal subscriptions sold by his salesmen as indispensable resources to libraries whose archives are now stuffed with useless information (Mole R, personal communication).

So there you are. If you want a memorial to Robert Maxwell, look around you. 'Don't follow leaders, watch the parking meters'<sup>3</sup>; that is, be aware and beware of boxes.

### Value food

I also enjoy you to bear in mind the first aphorisms of the ineffable professor and gastronome: 'The Universe is nothing without the things that live in it, and everything that lives, eats... but only the wise know the art of eating'<sup>4</sup>.

When she gave a public lecture, Caroline Walker, who always introduced and signed herself 'Caroline Walker, nutritionist'<sup>5</sup>, placed fruits on the lectern. She said this was to remind herself that nutrition concerns food. It was not she who needed reminding. She also pointed out that most of the decisions that shape the food systems that determine what people buy and eat are made by middle-aged, middle-class men, most of whom do not shop or cook and who habitually eat out in restaurants and hotels. This remains true.

### Get personal

In this column I report on conferences: what is said from the platforms; and what is discussed in the bar and behind closed doors, often more diverting and illuminating. I hear that the Sage of Hillgate Street enjoys accounts of the hanky-panky discernible at international meetings. This year I will be reporting the UN Standing Committee on Nutrition (SCN) in Brasília; the International Conference on Preventive Cardiology in Igauçu Falls, also in Brazil; and the Congress of the International Union of Nutritional Sciences (IUNS) held in Durban, South Africa.

Why do most scientific journals rarely mention people? Is this in order to imply that science is *objective*? I guess so. But a proper understanding of all human activities requires balance between principles and personalities. Appreciations of John Waterlow<sup>6</sup> and obituaries of Vernon Young<sup>7</sup> remind us that dominant nutrition scientists are a vivid bunch, who may flame with passions and seethe with prejudices. These are covered up in articles presented in a set style obedient to the matchbox label collection theory of scientific discovery, which is that the methodical

accumulation and display of statistics will somehow of itself generate truths.

(If journals allowed notes, I would now expose the inductive fallacy, elaborated by Francis Bacon<sup>8</sup> and still perpetrated in ordinary nutrition science despite being refuted long ago by Bertrand Russell<sup>9</sup>, then Karl Popper<sup>10</sup>, then Paul Feyerabend<sup>11</sup>. All scientific investigation requires a combination of deduction and induction, but ideas come first. Data have no intrinsic meaning. Even matchbox labels are usually collected thematically. But I mustn't clog the text. Another time perhaps; and see below.)

I intend to aim some spotlights. Democracy requires scrutiny. Unelected international civil servants, as well as big bosses of transnational corporations, have usurped elected politicians in determining the future of the planet. The work of senior UN officials can be and is corrupted by secrecy, and by the revolving door that lets them work with and for those sectors of industry with most to subvert, before, after and – sorry also to say – during their terms of office. Watch this space.

### Be conscious

My columns may include a riff: a theme whose elaborations seem to waft like smoke but whose larger purpose may emerge, as a story told at dinner by a guest who has quaffed an idea and is encouraged by the company. Here is my riff on referencing.

I start with books. John Garrow (whom God preserve and may he live for ever) has queried my referencing of books. Why (he asked) no page numbers? Was he expected to read the whole thing?

The estimable sub-editor of this column once queried one of my book citations, which was to the Bible. I had given no author. So should it begin God, L? The Bible is known as the Word of the Lord. But this seems facetious. Should it begin Anon? This seems blasphemous. So how about for the Revised Version, Stokoe, Barnes, Greenup, Massey, Nutt *et al.* (trans, eds)? This seems fatuous. And would I then be requested to chase up the initials of the first names of the Rev Dr Stokoe and his committee? The answer is that there isn't an answer, within current conventions. Why not? Here begins the riff.

Let's think now how to refer to books. Journal articles are published once. But books often have more than one publisher, and come in different versions, editions, formats, bindings, impressions and indeed languages. So, which one, and what page numbers? Take for example *The Art of Living Long*, which I cite in its entirety, so there<sup>12</sup>. My copy, found at Books for Cooks (www.books-forcooks.com), is the English translation by William Butler, published by him in Milwaukee in 1905. I dare say you do not have this edition to hand. Besides, given the need to know when the author was writing, should I not cite the original *La Vita Sobria*, published in four discourses in the

mid-sixteenth century? But this would be helpful only to those with access to libraries in the Veneto.

One rule of thumb for books is to cite the most generally available version. But this will not do. It gives no information about the period of the author, and also creates a mild ethical problem. References have a dual purpose: to guide readers further, and also to show that writers of articles know their stuff, the idea being 'trust me, but if you don't trust me, check it out'. I feel uneasy about citing a book in a version I have not read.

So what I now do is this. First, I cite the version I have used, with the relevant chapter or section, unless I want to inspire John Garrow and you to read the whole book. Then I cite the date of original publication. To keep the word-count around 17.5 per reference I now drop subtitles unless these seem necessary. If there is a demand for ISBN numbers I will give these in future. I have been guided by my sub-editor, who tells me this method, while consistent with the system used by *Public Health Nutrition*, is an innovation.

(As an aside, you are likely to know that now the fastest access to much writing is by way of www.google.com, and lo, at the time of writing there are 7880 entries for Louis Cornaro and 4990 for Luigi Cornaro, with top 10 entries including some from a devotee who has posted all the treatises on his www.site. This reminds me to add references to electronic sources. Who can say, finger on key, that globalisation is all bad?)

So why do nutrition journals not have an agreed working system for referencing books other than textbooks? This is because nutrition scientists do not cite books. A current journal comes to hand<sup>13</sup>. The first five articles altogether cite 170 references, of which the great majority is to other learned journal articles published in the last 10 years, and of which just five or 3.4% are to books, all textbooks. I invite you to pick up any journal on your desk and make your own count. By contrast, 72% of the references in this column are to books.

(As another aside I propose Cannon's Law of Diminishing Volumes, otherwise known as the greasy pole hypothesis, which is that the less secure the authors and the more impacted the discipline, the greater the proportion of journal references to articles by the writers themselves and by others in their own field who they wish to impress, especially those who can get them better gigs. The hypothesis can be tested. For example, it would follow that the proportion of such references will be lower in articles written by academics with tenure. There: yet another juicy thesis topic.)

Why do nutrition scientists not cite books? The first answer is because they do not read books, being too busy writing applications for funds to write more articles. This may be called the Hoch-Maxwell Effect. Another excuse is that the real stuff is peer-reviewed, so books are shady – 'grey literature', in the telling phrase. Piffle. The main

function of peer review is to fortify orthodoxy; besides which, it would be easy for book publishers and organisations that commission reports to set up systems of peer review, and in effect some do so.

The second answer is what books? I feel free to make connections between public health nutrition and everything else I think is germane. Back in the box, let's assume (sadly) that writers of orthodox articles whose main purpose is to display original research will usually only cite literature in the field, and (horrible, oh most horrible) will avoid anything *historical*, which colleagues tell me means anything published more than a decade previously.

I can well imagine articles in natural history journals citing books by such as Richard Dawkins and Stephen Jay Gould. But what nutrition scientists other than Marion Nestle<sup>14,15</sup> are now regularly writing books, other than textbooks, reports, monographs, collections of essays, Festschriften and popularisations? If you can think of anybody else please let me know. David Barker? He is an epidemiologist. Michael Crawford? He is a brain chemist. Tim Lang? His field is food policy. For Tony McMichael<sup>16</sup> and Colin Tudge<sup>17</sup>, nutrition is one vista within a much wider landscape.

Why is this? I can think of some possibilities. One is that the wider public and therefore publishers are not interested in nutrition. But when I published three consecutive articles in *The Times* on the general theme of 'the food scandal', the letters editor told me that the volume of correspondence in response was greater than on any other subject in his experience, ever<sup>18</sup>, and I see no reason to think that interest has faded since that time. Or is the reason that there is no such subject as nutrition science, which really is a crossroads for many other disciplines? On this, see below.

Or could it be that nutrition scientists have lost the plot; have forgotten to ask questions like why and what for, and cannot imagine that nutrition science may have principles or any general theory needing the scope of a book? Indeed, has any other topic been more colonised and usurped by writers outside the field? Nutrition scientists who gripe about the influence of books on food and health written by j\*\*rn\*lists, cooks, vegans, hippies, greens, diet-regime panjandrum, crackpots, quacks, cranks, back-to-nature fanatics, life-extenders, pill-pushers and a-new-you-in-seven-days hucksters, have only themselves to blame.

(Another parenthetical point. The 1985 UN report on energy and protein requirements<sup>19</sup>, still current, concludes as follows, with a wise saying of the aforementioned Sage of Hillgate Street<sup>6</sup>. 'If the present judgements are thought to be inappropriate then it is up to the user, or the community of users, to offer more appropriate judgements. No longer can we bypass the question "*Requirements for what?*".' What is so striking about the last three words [my italics] is how

very seldom in nutrition science are such questions, which imply that quantity is always governed by quality, asked, let alone addressed.)

The third answer to why no citation of books is general. Much if not most conventional science stands indicted with the charge that it is Masonic, a conspiracy against the laity. With important exceptions, scientists believe that their success lies in keeping their secrets, and expressing them in ways not meant to be understood by those not received into the mysteries. One of the several reasons why Tom Kuhn became so jumpy later in his career<sup>20</sup> is that as a younger man he had the nerve to say: 'There are no other professional communities in which individual creative work is so exclusively addressed to and evaluated by other members of the profession. . . the most esoteric of poets or the most abstract of theologians is far more concerned than the scientist with the lay approbation of his creative work'<sup>21</sup>.

So here we have it. Books are meant to be understood by specialists in other fields, and also by lay people. Books spread the word. William Tyndale, who translated the Bible into English (accept no substitute)<sup>2</sup>, was put to death. Since the mid-twentieth century, scientists who write articles and books in plain English are also buzzed as heretics and renegades, while not being physically strangled and burned.

### Embrace variety

The final toot of my riff is on referencing systems in general. The agreement that Harvard, and Vancouver as used here, both have advantages and disadvantages (now a rare and precious attitude in human affairs) but are the only two conventions that may be used in scientific journals, has driven out other methods and systems, such as glosses and footnotes. I miss the subtlety and integrity of notes in which authors elaborate points that would clog up the main text, and introduce arguments that may support or attack their own views.

Some of the books I most value are stuffed with fascinating footnotes<sup>11</sup> or elaborated endnotes<sup>16</sup>, which may offer alternative and opposing points of view. Harvard and Vancouver both insinuate objectivity: it is as if we all lived by the rule that we can choose between Luther and Calvin.

The comparison is deliberate. The currently dominant doctrine of the supremacy of the individual, with its expression in English, is originally Protestant. The concepts that govern all systems of thought and action are metaphysical. If the main referencing systems were autochthonous Chennai, Beijing, Baghdad and Rome (all right all right, as well as Harvard), journals would imply and even hopefully state that there is no one right way to identify or interpret what we loosely call 'reality' or 'truth'. This would contribute to making the world happier, safer and richer.

## Think big

Now, another matter. That modern Maecenas Mark Wahlqvist, and Esté Vorster and her colleagues in South Africa, have asked Claus Leitzmann and me to give a lecture and organise a symposium at this year's IUNS Congress, on the theme of 'nutrition science and food policy according to new principles'. I advertise this in the hope of involving you.

Our ideas<sup>22,23</sup> are not new. Standing on the shoulders of other convergent thinkers<sup>16,17,24</sup>, we propose that current conventional nutritional science largely remains within a biochemical frame (or, it could be said, box...) first constructed over 150 years ago<sup>25</sup>. We see biochemistry as part of one of 10 dimensions of the nutrition science needed for this century.

Our first draft definition is that nutrition science is concerned with the study of interactions of foods and drinks and their constituents with biological and all other ecological systems; and that the application of nutrition science is to prevent disease and sustain the health and integrity of the human and the living and natural worlds all together, and to ensure policies that identify, understand, promote and protect rational, equitable and sustainable food systems. The inter-related dimensions of 'the new nutrition science' so far proposed are:

- Evolution/History
- Resources (natural, living, human)
- Ecology/Environment (including biodiversity)
- Food systems/Agriculture
- Tradition/Cuisine
- Technology
- Health (natural, living, human)
- Equity (including poverty)
- Economics/Politics
- Ethics (including rights).

Before and after an initial workshop meeting this April at Giessen in Germany, we will work with many colleagues to develop these ideas. If you feel that now is the time to expand the boundaries of public health nutrition, please write to me now.

## Enjoy surprises

As I complete this column, a letter arrives from the Nutrition Society offering me membership 'as a token of the Society's appreciation for your hard work'. How nice. Does this mean I can show up at annual general meetings and fulminate when (or let's hope if) employees of the Sugar Bureau are put up as officers? It seems so. Perhaps I will have to watch my own language.

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