

An appreciation

Dr R. G. Passmore
1910–1999



Dr R. G. (Reg) Passmore, who died in July at the age of 89, was elected as an Honorary Member of the Nutrition Society in 1983 and was one of the very distinguished band of nutritional scientists working in Scotland that dominated Nutritional Science in the 1950s and 1960s, when I first joined the Society. I had the privilege of working with him on a number of occasions and, while I was Editor of the *British Journal of Nutrition*, had the benefit of his very perceptive advice and guidance in the form of letters written in his spidery but legible handwriting.

Dr Passmore was, like many nutritionists of his (and my) generation, trained in another discipline. His was medicine,

and in the true sense of the term he remained a ‘student of medicine’ for the whole of his life. He brought his medical training and interest in the ‘whole person’ into his nutritional thinking and working, and this came through in his choice of research topics, his planning of experimental work, and his writing.

His interest in nutrition was aroused as a medical student at Brasenose, Oxford during a lecture by Sir Robert McCarrison, and he delayed continuing with his clinical studies to carry out biochemical research with Professor R. A. Peters. In an interview with Dr Widdowson in 1986 he felt that his subsequent research career had been an anti-

climax because he was a co-author on a key paper on the biochemical role of thiamin.

He left research to continue his medical studies at St Mary's in London followed by postgraduate work in Cambridge in the Department of Pathology. In 1937 he had the opportunity to go abroad to work in India where he worked under W. R. Aykroyd. This work gave him an interest in food and in the nutrition of populations, and an enduring love of India. When war broke out he served first in North Africa and then returned to India, to work at a large military hospital where he gained experience with the medical, physiological and nutritional problems of malnourished people. His time in India ended in 1947 when he returned to a research post in applied physiology at the University of Edinburgh, where he stayed for the remainder of his working life, retiring as Reader in Physiology. Through a chance contact he learned of the Kofrani Michaelis respirometer which had been developed in Germany during the war, an instrument that sampled expired air during a wide range of physical activities and thus provided a means of measuring energy expenditure during these activities, something which had not been possible before then. His previous experience had provided him with a wide range of potential research questions which could be resolved with these types of measurements. With John Durnin as a postgraduate, together with Professor Garry from Glasgow he began the classical study of miners and clerks at the coal mine in East Fife which I regard as a superb example of an applied physiological and nutritional study of working people.

This led on to a similarly classical study of the energy expenditure of officer cadets at Sandhurst by Otto Edholm and Professor McCance and Dr Widdowson.

I joined McCance and Widdowson in 1955 when one of the burning issues at the time was the energy conversion factors used in the *Composition of Foods*, and this led to my first meeting with Dr Passmore at the Diet and Energy Subcommittee of the MRC in 1958, when Dr Widdowson and I proposed that the dispute which had arisen at the end of the war over the use of the US and UK series of factors could best be resolved by experiment. Dr Passmore was enthused by this idea, as was John Durnin. A small working group which included Passmore was formed to plan the studies, although the study was to be a joint Glasgow/Cambridge one between John Durnin and myself. This planning phase showed me the depth of Passmore's understanding of people and what you could expect subjects to do (and more importantly what they would not do).

Passmore continued to show an active interest in the work as the studies progressed, although his love of golf did interrupt a meeting with John Durnin in Newcastle when he was invited by R. G. P. to a game in Edinburgh.

My next contact was in the early 1960s when a comparable problem to the officer cadets arose in submarines, in a dispute about the adequacy of rations. After extensive calculations my conclusion was that we needed to measure energy intakes and expenditure in a submarine to resolve the issue. Both McCance and Passmore, whose enthusiasm for experimental research were equally matched, agreed. However, the 'powers that be' decreed that David

Shirling, who had been an active technical collaborator with Passmore, should come to conduct the expenditure side of the work. Passmore was very helpful in our writing-up of the work.

My third contact was a much more direct one when as part of the International Biological Programme we went together to Khartoum to measure the physiological effects of a rapid and extreme change in temperature on a group of UK medical and other students.

Passmore had spent some years in the Sudan as a locum Professor of Physiology and he knew the local staff and customs very well. I found him to be a great companion and guide to the problems of working in a country where one had to negotiate over every piece of additional equipment one needed, and where one had to work at the local pace and with the local customs to complete one's planned work. Best of all I remember with fond affection our evenings in Khartoum sitting out under the stars hearing Passmore's tales of his experiences.

No appreciation of Dr Passmore's work would be complete without reference to his writing, for which as an editor I have great admiration. He was one of those rare scientists who can write accurately and in a style that the reader can enjoy. He was a very prolific writer of text books and 'Davidson and Passmore' became the standard textbook for a whole generation of nutrition and dietetic students and the monumental *Companion to Medical Studies* with J. S. Robson was an attempt to provide an overview of the range of topics that modern medical students are expected to cover.

Several years ago I was asked to undertake a revision of the food chapters in 'Davidson and Passmore' for a 9th edition which was planned to be a multi-authored text. I began by reading the early versions and as I read I could hear Passmore in the words, and realised his writing skill lay in telling a story about the topic and spicing it up with anecdotes drawn from a lifetime of working with people and studying their nutrition in real life rather than in the laboratory. This did not make the revision easy as the formal status of a textbook intruded and I often felt 'Passmore could write that, I could not'. I suppose that his strength as a scientist and writer was that he did not need to worry about offending any 'establishment', although he served many years with distinction on the Committee for Medical Aspects of Food Policy, the MAFF Food Standards Committee and several WHO/FAO expert groups.

He was elected to the Royal College of Physicians, Edinburgh in 1976 and was their Scientific Editor for several years, and developed a strong interest in the history and development of medicine. He remained an experimental scientist and teacher to the very end of his career, eschewing administrative niceties.

His wife Esme, a nurse from Hampshire, died in 1991 and he is survived by their three sons and six grandchildren.

In Passmore's death we have lost a nutritionist of great humanity, wisdom and continuing curiosity. I will retain many fond memories of him and give thanks that I was able to work with him.

David Southgate