

LIFE AND WORK OF SIR JOHN BOYD ORR

FIRST DIRECTOR GENERAL OF THE FOOD AND
AGRICULTURE ORGANIZATION WASHINGTON

HONORARY DOCTOR OF AGRICULTURE,
AGRICULTURAL UNIVERSITY WAGENINGEN
(NETHERLANDS)

MARCH 9, 1948

Prof. Dr E. DE VRIES



H. VEENMAN & ZONEN • WAGENINGEN

SIR JOHN BOYD ORR

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Sir JOHN BOYD ORR, the First Director-General of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, is a nutritionist, an agricultural scientist, practical farmer and humanitarian. Born in Kilmaurs, Ayreshire, Scotland, 23 September 1880, he studied at Glasgow University for ten years and is a graduate in three faculties: arts, science and medicine.

In the early years of his life, JOHN ORR was attracted by the new problems in the field of metabolism and nutrition. In 1914 he was named director of a new institute of animal nutrition to be established at Aberdeen, Scotland. After the war, in 1919 he returned to that task and helped to establish the Rowett Institute. He served for 25 years as its Director. Under his direction the Institute became an Empire clearing house of information, and when the Imperial Bureaux were set up the Nutrition Bureau was established at the Rowett.

In 1930, in connection with the work of the the Bureau of Nutrition, he established the journal "Nutrition Abstracts and Reviews" which gave an account of the research work in human and animal nutrition all over the world, and served as its editor-in-chief until he became head of FAO.

During the years when he was working on animal nutrition, JOHN ORR was also investigating problems of human nutrition. In 1925, he carried out a test with school children in the seven largest towns of Scotland, which showed that when children who were supposed to be in normal health were given a pint of milk at school each day, they showed a remarkable improvement in health and physique, and their rate of growth was increased by about 20 percent.

In 1929, JOHN ORR published "Minerals in Pastures and Their Relation to Animal Nutrition", a book which summed up much of the early pioneering work of the Institute in the field of mineral metabolism. The book is still used by experts, and has left its mark on thinking in many countries.

While JOHN ORR was at the Rowett, he was also interested in the operation by the Institute of a successful thousand-acre stock farm on which the results of research were applied on farm animals under farming conditions. He also owns and has actively operated a large mixed farm in the County of Angus in Scotland.

By 1935 ORR had gained practical knowledge of both farm and health problems, and his next step was to measure the relationship between the incomes of British families and their diet and health, in

his pioneer study "Food, Health, and Income". His figures showed that in 1934 more than one-third of the population of Great-Britain were living on a diet which could not support health, and the main cause of the resulting mal nutrition was poverty. The book caused considerable stir. The League of Nations set up an international committee to draw up a report on food requirements for health, and Sir JOHN was a member.

In 1935 ORR was knighted for his service to agriculture. He was also a member of the British Nutrition Committee, and was for 20 years a member of the Colonial Agriculture and Animal Health Council, and Chairman of the Scottish Scientific Advisory Committee which advised the government on matters affecting the health and welfare of the people of Scotland.

In 1945 Sir JOHN resigned as Director of the Rowett Institute and Professor of Agriculture at Aberdeen University and stood for Parliament as an independent. In a by-election he won his seat as representative of the Scottish Universities.

During World War I, ORR served with the British Royal Army Medical Corps and was awarded the Military Cross and in 1917 the Distinguished Service Order for bravery in action. He raised and commanded a combatant unit of the Officers Training Corps at Aberdeen University after World War I, and during the recent war was an officer of the home guard, and a member of the War Cabinet Scientific Committee on Food Policy. But with all his military background, he has an intense hatred of war and is President of the National Peace Council which has for its object the promotion of better social and economic conditions and world unity as a means of removing the causes of war, one of the greatest of which he believes to be hunger.

Sir JOHN has received many academic distinctions, he is a Fellow of the Royal Society, elected for his fundamental research in Physiology, and an Honorary Graduate LL.D. of St. Andrews and Edinburgh Universities, Scotland, and of Princeton University, USA. In 1945, he was appointed Rector of Glasgow University, and became Chancellor in 1946. Recently he was nominated for the 1947 Nobel Peace Prize. Sir JOHN and Lady ORR have two daughters. An only son was killed in action with the R.A.F.

In 1945, JOHN ORR was an adviser to the United Kingdom delegation to the Food and Agriculture Conference held in October 1945 at the City of Quebec. The Conference elected him as the First Director-General of FAO for a two year term ending December 31, 1947. This term was extended at the Geneva Conference in September 1947 till a successor would be found probably till the middle of 1948.

Under his direction FAO emerged from the initial stages of organization into an agency which has undertaken programs in many fields, and has taken an active part in both emergency and long-term international policy-making on food and agriculture.

SPEECH

BY PROF. DR E. DE VRIES ON OCCASION OF THE CEREMONY OF THE
INSTALLATION OF SIR JOHN BOYD ORR AS HONORARY DOCTOR
OF AGRICULTURE, WAGENINGEN, AGRICULTURAL UNIVERSITY,

MARCH 9, 1948

SIXTH LUSTRUM OF THE UNIVERSITY

Mr Gage, Ladies and Gentlemen,

We are here together to honor a great country fellowman of you, Sir, and a great civil servant of the world as a whole, JOHN ORR, born in Scotland in September 1880, now Sir JOHN BOYD ORR, the first director general of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.

We regret that Sir JOHN, being, as you all know, „one of the busiest men in the world at the present time” (1), was unable to attend our ceremony and we thank you, Sir, for your kindness to come tot Wageningen on his behalf.

JOHN ORR studied at Glasgow University for ten years and is a graduate in three faculties: arts, science and medicine. This broad scientific basis of his life and work may give some explanation of his tremendous activity in many fields of science, agriculture, human life and human relations, but on the other hand I see his attitude as a student to be the result of his broad and deep mind.

Somewhere, Sir JOHN wrote “Fortunately for agricultural science, the investigation of the normal metabolism of health and the abnormal metabolism of disease will never lack workers. These are the basic phenomena of life and the investigation leads to those ultimate truths which indeed may never be reached but the pursuit of which yields information of inestimatable value to mankind” (2).

In these words, he pays the highest tribute to agricultural science that can possibly be given and JOHN ORR proved by his work that he was a valiant fighter for this high standard of our science. He never lost sight of the ultimate aims of agriculture and stockfarming to raise the standards of health and living of man.

In 1914 he was named director of a new institute of animal nutrition to be established at Aberdeen, Scotland. After the war, which gave him the Military Cross and the Distinguished Service Order for bravery in action, he established the famous Rowett Institute and served 25 years as its director. In this period he visited several overseas territories to study malnutrition in cattle and man.

JOHN ORR states of himself “to be born and bred a farmer” (3). The Rowett Institute operates a succesful 1000 acres stockfarm and Sir JOHN himself owns and has actively operated a large mixed farm in Scotland.

The Rowett Institute did much of the pioneering work in the field of mineral metabolism and in 1929 its director published a book to sum up this work.

Important for agricultural science as this is — his bibliography contains not less than 117 different publications — still more important is the fact, that he was forced by his great human interests to study the food-requirements of men as well as those of animals, and to find the way for the implementation of a health standard as a goal for agriculture and for a national and a world policy.

In 1935 JOHN ORR was knighted for his outstanding work in the field of agriculture and this same year seems to be the decisive moment in his life through his co-operation in a League of Nations Committee for the establishment of normal foodrequirements.

From this time on, Sir JOHN BOYD ORR devoted much of his interest to the social aspects of nutrition and agriculture. I can illustrate this with the titles of some publications — Public health and agriculture (1936), Food, health and income (1936), What science stands for (1937), The physiological and economic basis of nutrition (1939), Food science in the future (1940), Food and the people (1943), Foundations of the new World Order (1942), The role of food in postwar-reconstruction (1942).

And I can show it from the forceful words he wrote: "The new science of nutrition has upset our ideas of the amounts of different foodstuffs required for health. At the same time mechanization, the increasing use of fertilizers, and improvements in methods have greatly increased our capacity to produce food. These two developments were of themselves sufficient to produce revolutionary changes in agriculture." He adds: "the world economic crisis, with widespread unemployment, decreased purchasing power and resulting collapse in the price of agricultural products made worse the confusion of the period of change" (6). And somewhere else "the necessity for reconciling the interest of agriculture and public health has raised questions of the utmost importance on Government measures affecting the foodsupply" (5).

"It is of little use for a committee to tell the farmer what he should produce: If he cannot see a profit, the committee cannot compel him to produce. The only way is to offer guaranteed prices which will induce the farmer to produce them" (6).

"It remains to adjust our foodpolicy so that the great wealth of food which we have or can produce will be brought within the purchasing power of the poorest. This is no easy task. It will require economic statemanship of the highest order" (7).

These words, dating July 1937 lead us to the most important work of Sir JOHN who became an international agricultural statesman of the highest order himself.

The Atlantic Charter and the Conference at Hotsprings in 1943 made him write:

"Each nation should undertake the primary responsibility for seeing that their own people have the food needed for health and life."

"Governments should co-operate with each other to achieve this end for the people of all nations."

"These are the first concrete steps to fulfil the promise in the Atlantic Charter to bring freedom from want all men in all lands" (8).

The conference of The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations at Quebec in October 1945, following the Hotsprings Conference, elected Sir JOHN BOYD ORR as its first director general.

In the course of two and a half year leadership of this organization Sir JOHN acted upon his principles, based upon a vast knowledge of agricultural and nutritional science, and a broad conception of the economic, social, moral and political problems related to food and agriculture.

He has achieved that everywhere in the world his ideals of food on a health basis and stable and fair prices for the farmers are the hope of peaceful nations.

Agricultural science became in a very short period one of the most important pillars of human progress and prosperity. We can compare the tremendous development of the acknowledged importance of our science for human welfare with the development of nuclear physics, the study of the structure of the atom, which promises to be a major factor in the future development of society. All we know, is that agricultural and nutritional science is bound to have beneficial effects on human relations, if the ideology of Sir JOHN BOYD ORR marks the road of scientists, farmers, nations and governments. It is an ideology of co-operation between nations, mutual responsibility of the highest order to ensure sufficient food for all men in all countries.

The Senate of the Agricultural University of Wageningen is convinced that this ideology can inspire our young generation of agricultural scientists to achieve "a sound basis of national and world prosperity and stability for our social and economic system" (9).

And for this reason it awarded Sir JOHN the highest honor it can give — the honorary degree of doctor of agriculture.

It is a great pleasure, Sir, for me to hand over to you the document which gives expression of the high esteem we have for this great man and I would like to ask you the favor to be so kind to forward it to Sir JOHN.

SPEECH

BY MR B. E. F. GAGE, COUNSELLOR, HIS MAJESTY'S EMBASSY
FOR THE UNITED KINGDOM AT THE HAGUE ON ACCEPTING THE
DOCUMENT IN BEHALF OF SIR JOHN BOYD ORR

Mr President and members of the Senate,

I have much pleasure in accepting on behalf of Sir JOHN BOYD ORR the Honorary Degree of the University of Wageningen which has just been handed over to me. I know that Sir JOHN would wish me to thank the Senate most warmly for the great honour thus conferred upon him and also for the tribute to his qualities and work so gracefully paid to him by Professor DE VRIES in his speech. I will see that the Degree is forwarded to Sir JOHN at once.

Owing to the necessity for his presence in Washington at this time it was unfortunately impossible for Sir JOHN to come to Wageningen personally to receive the Honorary Degree, to his deep regret.

Accordingly Sir PHILIP NICHOLS, the new British Ambassador, who has only just arrived in this country, instructed me to proceed here to receive it on behalf of Sir JOHN.

I understand that Sir JOHN hopes very much to visit Wageningen later on this year when you would have an opportunity of welcoming him personally. Meanwhile I am most happy to have had this chance of visiting your great university, which I understand is the only one of its type in Holland. I wish it all success in the most important human work which it is doing.

CITATIONS

1. The chairman, introducing Sir John on a lecture on Public Health and agriculture, Febr. 1936.
2. The mineral elements in animal nutrition. Br. Ass. Science Report 1925.
3. The economic basis of the minimum wage in agriculture. The agr. econ. soc. London, 1930.
4. Public health and agriculture, Febr. 1936.
5. Food, health and income, Febr. 1936.
6. Feeding the people in wartime, 1940.
7. Food, health and income, Febr. 1936.
8. Freedom from want of food, July 1943.
9. The effects of war on agriculture, 1940.

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F.A.O.

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