

A New Idea Each Morning: How food and agriculture came together in one international organisation.

By Wendy Way. Canberra: ANU E Press, 2013. Pp. xxiii + 349. A\$24.39 paper and free online

For an Australian in the first half of the twentieth century (albeit a new Australian who only spent ten years in his adopted country) the career of Frank Lidgett McDougall was *sui generis*. It took him from a Renmark irrigation block in 1909 to the higher levels of international civil service in a body, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), of which he could reasonably claim to be one of the main progenitors. Wendy Way's *A New Idea Each Morning* brings him out of the shadows for a general audience for the first time. Very few historians could be better qualified for this task. In the mid-1980s, she and the late Bill Hudson co-edited a fat volume of McDougall's letters from London to the then prime minister S. M. Bruce, entitled *Letters from a 'Secret Service Agent'*. Way's continuing fascination with McDougall eventually led her to a PhD at the ANU. This book is the final product. It is based on an unrivalled command of the relevant archives in several countries, her friendship with McDougall's daughter Elisabeth, and a deep respect and affection for her subject.

The book itself appears under slightly false pretences. Its subtitle, 'How food and agriculture came together in one international organisation', suggests a study that is both broader and more focused than it actually turns out to be. As Way explains in her introduction, this is largely a book about McDougall himself and the evolution of his ideas from early advocacy of imperial preference and sheltered markets for Australian farmers to the conviction that international action to raise global food consumption and guarantee a minimum standard of nutrition for all the world's population was the only way to secure world peace and prosperity. In essence, this evolution represented the transformation under the exigencies of war of the 'marriage of health and agriculture' Bruce and

McDougall had advocated at the League of Nations during the second half of the 1930s. Way's book charts this transformation.

What we are offered then is a detailed study of the activities of one remarkable man as he adapted his ideas and policy proposals to radically changing circumstances. The leit motifs are McDougall's desire to raise consumption for agricultural producers (beginning with the Renmark irrigation farmers), his boundless intellectual energy and optimism, and an almost unwavering idealism. Certainly an important part of this story is McDougall's contribution to the creation of the FAO via the Hot Springs Conference of 1943 and the Quebec gathering that launched the organisation in October 1945. This, however, is only the third part of Way's study. The preceding two parts follow McDougall's trajectory from Renmark in the first decade of the century to the High Commissioner's Office in Australia House in London during the 1920s – where he represented the Dominion in a variety of capacities but most importantly was Bruce's eyes and ears on the economic front (hence the facetious 'secret agent' sobriquet) – to the halls of the League of Nations in Geneva during the 1930s, where Bruce famously launched the 'nutrition campaign' at the 1935 assembly. Together, McDougall and Bruce worked for international recognition of the close interconnections between political, economic and social issues, helping to create the climate of opinion that led to the creation of bodies like the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations as well as the FAO itself.

McDougall's part in all of this after 1930 was as 'economic officer' in Australia House, with responsibility for 'political warfare' from 1939. He was energised by president Roosevelt's call for 'freedom from want' in his third inaugural address and found a ready audience for his ideas in Washington where, as 'a keen outsider', he acted as a valued bridge between the State Department

and Department of Agriculture. Way is careful not to exaggerate McDougall's influence on Roosevelt's decision to call the Hot Springs conference, but her conclusion that he 'was undoubtedly a key player, both in bringing together like-minded people from the warring principalities of Washington ... and in providing telling arguments to support it' (p. 270) is both judicious and reasonable. Ultimately, McDougall was rewarded with the post of counsellor (ranking second only to the Director-General) at the FAO, which he held until shortly before his death in 1958.

In recent year, the multilateral economic agencies created in the wake of the Second World War have received welcome attention from international historians, including Amy Staples' *The Birth of Development* (2006) and Patricia Clavin's *Securing the World Economy: The Reinvention of the League of Nations, 1920-1946*, also published last year. Wendy Ways' study is a valuable addition to this growing body of literature.