

PERSONAL REFLECTION

Dr Elsie Widdowson 2000-2020

Professor Margaret Ashwell

Introduction

This year, 2020, marks the twentieth anniversary of Elsie Widdowson's death. So much has been written about what this remarkable lady achieved while she was alive^{1,2}, I thought I would tell you about how her name has lived on all these years later.

Buildings and rooms in her name

Let's start with the Elsie Widdowson Laboratory. In 1998, as a result of the restructuring of the MRC Dunn Nutrition Unit in Cambridge and following the retirement of Professor Roger Whitehead, MRC Human Nutrition Research (HNR) was formed. Elsie was invited by the Director of HNR, Dr Ann Prentice, to turn the first sod on the building site in 1999 and the HNR building was named "The Elsie Widdowson Laboratory" when it opened in 2001. Unfortunately it was closed by the MRC at the end of 2018 (find out more on pages 18-19).

Not many people know that when the newly formed Food Standards Agency

moved into Aviation House in London, they wanted to call the building Widdowson House. Unfortunately their landlords, the Civil Aviation Authority, would not agree to this and so they named their library after Elsie in 2002. I was happy to contribute much of my Elsie memorabilia to this library and to help them prepare a poster about Elsie's life. However, with the move of nutrition to DoH and then PHE, the memorabilia were returned to me a couple of years ago. Luckily all the work on the poster is not lost because the Nutrition Society has stepped in. The poster has been adapted and displayed with the memorabilia in the Elsie Widdowson Conference Room within the newly refurbished Boyd Orr building. This will now be opened later this year.

Lectures and scholarships in her name

To my knowledge, two annual lectures have been set up in Elsie's honour. The BDA launched an annual memorial lecture in 2001 and in 2004 the Neonatal

Society decided to name one of its regular lectures in honour of Elsie too.

Elsie was always most supportive of women in research. She realised that it was often very difficult for women to keep their research careers going after they had children, especially if they had other commitments such as teaching. This is why Elsie asked that a Fellowship Award should be set up in her name at Imperial College London, where she had completed her own undergraduate and post graduate degrees. The purpose of the Award is to allow academic staff to concentrate fully on their research work upon returning from maternity, adoption, surrogacy and/or shared parental leave.

TV and radio programmes about her

The BBC Radio 4 "Archive Hour" approached me in 2002 for some recordings of Elsie to put into a programme about her. I had quite a few as cassette tapes (recordings made for Woman's Hour, The Food Programme etc.), and I'm pleased to say I used this as an opportunity to get the BBC to make digital versions of these which are all now in the safe hands of the Nutrition Society. There are two recurring questions in these interviews: The ease of simply deciding to do a piece of research without any applications for grants, and the absence of any ethical rules concerning human experimentation.

In 2013, I helped with episode 8 in the first series of "Absolute Genius with Dick & Dom" which was devoted to Elsie. Other episodes were devoted to famous scientists such as Isambard Brunel, Isaac





Professor Robert McCance and Dr Elsie Widdowson, outside Elsie's cottage in Barrington, Cambridgeshire, in September 1990.

In 2017, BBC Radio 4 devoted an episode of "Great Lives" to Elsie. She was the choice of our first British astronaut, Dr Helen Sharman, not only because she was food scientist before she went into space, but because she now directs the Chemistry Department at Imperial College. Dr Sharman was fascinated to learn more about the lady who had given her name to the Fellowship I previously mentioned. The programme was presented by Matthew Parris and the three of us had a delightful time recounting many stories about Elsie. I also enjoyed telling Helen how much Elsie had admired her when she went into space in the Russian ship Soyuz in 1991 because I can well remember Elsie's delight that Helen was a woman scientist. Although broadcast first in 2017, the programme is still available as a podcast on BBC Sounds.

Exhibition at the Science Museum

In 2015, I was asked to contribute information about McCance and Widdowson's testing of potential rations for an exhibition called "Churchill's Scientists" at the Science Museum in London. It was to commemorate Churchill's 140th birthday and look at

Articles written about the adventures portrayed in her personal diaries.

I was lucky enough to inherit several diaries that Elsie had kept of her trips abroad. One of these was about her trip to the USA and Canada in 1936.

I thought it would be interesting to follow up on some of these places and so I enlisted Professor Johanna Dwyer's help³. Elsie visited 17 different places from New York to Toronto and saw more than 50 researchers in a 2-month period. Incredible! All that planning with no phones or email! There are meticulous accounts of the science that was going on in each of the laboratories. My favourite conversation was with the compiler of the USDA Food Tables. Elsie remembers: "I remember Miss Chatfield and I discussed whether it was better for compilers like herself to prepare tables from the published work of others, or for people like myself, who had analysed the foods, to make the tables. I was in my 20s at the time and very much Miss Chatfield's junior. She was rather a forceful person and thought she had won the argument, but she did not convince me!" I was also rather taken by Elsie's comment that her trunk had still not arrived on May 6, even though she

this". Ursula Arens has written two accounts of this trip, the most recent focussing on some of the secrets revealed by the diaries^{4,5}.

A blue plaque in her name

Just after Elsie died, I asked Cambridge City Council for a blue plaque to commemorate her life. I discovered that the person has to be dead for 10 years before a plaque can be considered and I promptly forgot all about the idea – for nearly 20 years! Anyway, I resurrected the idea last year, raised the money required (thank you Nutrition Society, BNF and BDA), and the plaque is ready to go. We have decided to put it in Barrington, where Elsie lived, as everywhere she worked in Cambridge no longer exists. We were hoping that the unveiling ceremony would be in June 2020 to coincide with the 20th anniversary of Elsie's death, but it now looks as though it will have to be postponed (the Nutrition Society e-newsletter will publish the date when known).

Endpiece

Recalling all these projects has made me realise how, for the last 20 years, recalling Elsie's life has become a very important part of my own life. If asked, I always say that editing the biography of McCance and Widdowson was the best idea I have ever had. Doing the research for it allowed me to meet so many of her scientific friends who became my friends too. And, as you can see, the last twenty years have allowed me to become involved in a wonderful variety of different projects, which have all been great fun.