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Book Review

Food for the Future,

K. O. Campbell,
Sydney University Press, Sydney, Australia, 1979.

Pp. x, 178, \$6.00.

Written to counter the most recent wave of pessimism about agriculture's future ability to meet the demand for food, Campbell seeks in this short book, to reassure his readers that agriculture will again prove the doomsayers wrong. An initial qualification made by Campbell is that he has concentrated on the problem of food production rather than the distribution of food which is essentially an income distribution problem.

The early chapters in which Campbell discusses the dimensions of the problem and the prospects of agriculture meeting the challenge are the most interesting of the book. As has traditionally been the case, the crux of the food controversy is the anticipated relative rates of growth of food production and population. Campbell uses evidence that the birth rates in developing countries are declining (at an increasing rate) to argue that these countries will go through the same demographic transition as developed countries to near stationary population growth. If this happens, then the growth rate of world population will decline to replacement level early next century. Hence the greatest demands on food production will occur from now to the turn of the century when population growth will be most rapid at rates of 1.95 per cent per annum now and declining to 1.64 per cent per annum by 2000. Even at this rate of growth there will be an extra two billion people to feed by the year 2000.

Campbell then examines agriculture's ability to increase food production to this extent. He argues that historically food production has kept pace with demand and implies that past rates of growth in food production have been greater than the expected rate of population growth in the immediate future.

Two chapters are then devoted to discussing the possibility that scarcities of resources such as land, water, fertilizer and energy may limit the growth of food production. Campbell argues that much of the debate in this area overlooks responses that rising input prices evoke, particularly with respect to substitution. It is surprising that after espousing these principles and concluding that land, water and fertilizer availability are unlikely to constrain food production, Campbell should still be concerned that agriculture's dependence on fossil fuels may be a constraint. He suggests that alternative energy sources be investigated and developed so that other sectors may switch energy sources leaving fossil fuels to agriculture. His concern stems from the short time span and agriculture's need for "mobile" fuels.

The remainder of the book, in which Campbell outlines responses required of governments to meet the challenge of increased food production, is disappointing. It consists largely of a bland dose of the conventional wisdom about the need for and administration of agricultural research and the follies of government intervention. No doubt the author in defense would point out that the book was written for a general audience but even this audience may find him rather didactic and verbose in this part of the book. Campbell prescribes continued or increased levels of agricultural research in both developed and developing countries. He also pleads for a greater appreciation by governments of agriculture's role in economic development and of the role of prices in guiding production decisions both within agriculture and between agriculture and other sectors.

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