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J. R. CURRIE

JOHN ROBERTSON CURRIE

1891–1966

THERE can be no more fitting memorial to Jock than the story of his part in the growth of the International Association of Agricultural Economists . . . his was the only face to appear on every International Conference photograph from 1929 to 1964.

In the early twenties of this century the serious study of agricultural economics and of farm management by groups of graduates under skilled leadership was in its infancy. Outside a very few centres in Europe and a few more in the United States, most other countries were still struggling to get the status of research and of teaching in this field established in universities, among farmers and in centres of government.

It was in the fifteen years between 1925 and 1940, and especially during the great depression of the early thirties, that the building up of the International Conference of Agricultural Economists acted as a kind of ferment and as a stimulus to an accelerated increment in these fields of study throughout the world.

The two chief engineers behind this enterprise were undoubtedly John Currie ('Jock') and John Maxton. The Founder President took continuous guidance from both of them and stood by in the background with his wife Dorothy, offering material support and encouragement, when needed.

In commemorating Jock's death it is appropriate to recall to mind the services of these two pioneers to whom the very existence and survival of the I.A.A.E. owe so much.

Both men were true Scots. They had been bosom friends since their days together as students in the University of Glasgow. Both had proceeded for graduate study to Oxford under C. S. Orwin. Jock had then continued his studies at Cornell University, more especially in Farm Management techniques, under George Warren and Bill Myres, whilst John had entered the service of the Empire Marketing Board. In 1926–7 both were being seriously considered for top positions in the staffing of a new research unit at Edinburgh but a cautious Scots Minister of State was nervous. Their new learning and ideas might be upsetting to the orthodox and to the quiet running of the Establishment so he decided to seek help elsewhere.

From its founding in 1925, as an experiment in education and in countryside rehabilitation, the Dartington Hall enterprise drew upon advice both from Oxford and from Cornell, where I had also been a

student under George Warren and Bill Myers five years previously. It was Bill Myers whose advice I had been seeking who introduced Jock to me and me to Jock and who recommended Jock to accept a post at Dartington in 1926. The following year Carl Ladd, later Dean of the N.Y. State College of Agriculture at Cornell and at that time Director of Extension among the farmers of N.Y. State, decided to spend a part of his sabbatic year as a guest at Dartington and to use this visit as a means of contacting all the then centres of research in Britain in Farm Management and in Agricultural Economics. Jock arranged his tour and on his return Carl Ladd put the following proposition to us:

In Britain you are facing so many of the same farm problems that we face in New York State that there is much of our experience that we could share together and so learn from one another. But so often you use slightly different terms and language that in our respective bulletins and reports we don't easily comprehend one another. Could we not hold a joint meeting somewhere, of teachers, researchers, and extension men? Perhaps at Oxford or at Dartington?

Orwin was consulted. 'If you want peace and an undisturbed time for an informal get-together, don't come to Oxford. Why not hold it at Dartington?'

Ladd and Elmhirst next consulted with Warren at Cornell. 'But why only British and Americans?' asked Warren. 'If there's room and if we can find the money why not a Canadian and some of our farmer graduates who are mostly fighting lone battles in Europe and some of your Commonwealth people as well? Why not August 1929?'

It was then that Dartington asked Jock Currie to rope in John Maxton so that together they might plan a programme of contributions and a budget to enable some twenty nations in all to be represented. Of that Conference group a handful still survives and Henry Taylor is among them. It was not always a cordial meeting, but to ease the occasional tensions everyone was invited to learn cricket and baseball, and how to 'call hogs' and to sing Scots ballads with John Maxton at the piano. The careful recording of the discussions by John Maxton filled many pages of the proceedings and these were printed at Cornell.

Plans were laid at the Dartington meeting for the holding of a much larger gathering at Cornell the following year, 1930. Jock Currie and John Maxton took charge of the planning at the European end and Carl Ladd and George Warren at Cornell.

There in 1930 a formal constitution was hammered out, as short and as simple as Arthur Ashby, the chairman of the drafting committee, could make it. Once again the editing and publishing of the proceedings were handled by Cornell. Most of the burden fell on 'Frosty' Hill. Conferences were to be held every two years and Jock and John were asked to set in motion plans for a meeting in Germany in 1932. Owing to political disturbances in Germany this was in fact postponed until 1934.

It was about this time that John Maxton was finally released from his post in Oxford and was engaged by Dartington to set up an office at 3 Magpie Lane for the planning of subsequent conferences and for the editing of their Proceedings. Now at last Jock Currie and John Maxton were at liberty to work together, Maxton full and Currie half time, towards an international objective.

The terrific impact of World War I had burnt itself into the natures and had upset the lives and families of these two men and had fired them each with a determination to search out ways of healing the wounds that remained, and of multiplying any contacts or processes that might lead to cordial friendships and a sharing in civilizing efforts across national boundaries.

Invitations came from one country after another for the three officers of the Conferences to visit research institutions and to meet farmers on their farms. The President spent six weeks in 1932 in the U.S.S.R. with Professor Zorner from Berlin and with Dr. Schiller, then our Agricultural Attaché in Moscow. A kind of technique developed for such visits and the then President, in almost every case accompanied by either Jock or John, sometimes by both, visited nearly every country in Europe before 1940 when World War II closed the doors for five years upon peaceful travel for peaceful ends.

The main objective of these visits was on the one hand to meet members, on the other to be introduced to ministers and colleagues so that interest in a more objective study of local problems might be aroused and the study itself given higher status with greater financial support from public funds.

Our rules of procedure ran roughly as follows.

1. Let the local members make all the arrangements and never overstay your welcome or lay too heavy a burden on your hosts. Farmers, teachers, government officials are busy men. Be considerate in your use of their time and resources.

2. Travel two together, so that you can weep or laugh, as the case

may demand, over your attempts to cope with foreign food and liquors, languages and customs and so meet all the requests of your hosts. Record and discuss as you go, let one concentrate upon coping with the top brass and responding to polite toasts and speeches, and let the other be scouting around, to find who are the liveliest teachers and researchers in the field and who will make the most dependable correspondent for conferences in subsequent years. Now and then the younger generation in some countries seemed so crushed and dominated by the old guard, which controlled all funds and promotions, that it was not easy for a lone visitor to discover where the shoe was pinching behind the scenes.

In all the Conferences in the thirties John Maxton sat on one side of the Chairman recording the discussions and in his spare time editing the speeches as they came off the cylinders. Max Rolfes did all the interpreting and Jock did the general running around and the coping with upheavals and minor disasters. To realize what kind of an editor John was, compare the size of his volumes with those of his predecessors and of subsequent editors. He would take six pages of typescript along to a recent speaker of broken English, sit by him and say, 'Is this', offering a much shortened version, 'what you were trying to say?' 'Oh course', said the speaker, 'that is exactly the idea I wanted to put to the meeting.' The six pages were thus reduced to two and without any hurt to the speaker's feelings.

It was not until the early months of World War II that the University of Oxford fully recognized the serious worth of John Maxton's work in the international field and its relevance to studies in Oxford. By decree he was allowed to change the title of his office to that of Oxford University, Institute of Agrarian Affairs.

After the second war was concluded both men concentrated their efforts upon re-establishing the links that made international conferences possible. But would the same services be needed once the new F.A.O. agency of the UN had been set up in Rome?

A meeting was arranged with the newly appointed Director General of F.A.O.

Are we needed any more? [asked John]. Will you not be able to co-ordinate and review research work throughout the world without our help? We want no overlapping and we shall not be upset if you take the load off us and off our Conference.

[Came the answer] Official reports and figures I receive from countries all over the world, some of which are really dependable. Officials and experts are sent

to Rome by governments from every country that is a member, but I am free to establish unofficial contacts with the people, professor and researchers, who are doing the basic work behind the scenes in colleges, in extension work among farmers or in a private capacity. Yours is an organisation that, except from a few dictator countries, receives no official delegates or delegations. Your members are free men, free to criticise the official line of their governments and you bless freedom of discussion on any relevant topic or subject. Please continue, and establish your Conference as soon as possible.

By 1947 Carl Ladd and George Warren were dead, but Joe Ackerman and the American Committee stepped into the breach and we all moved forward together to bring the Conference once more to Dartington in 1947 and to Stresa in Italy in 1949. The files of correspondence in the Dartington Record Room bear witness to the variety of consideration of international dispute and discussion that were needed to get the necessary human contacts re-established and the old machinery into action again.

The need to strengthen personal ties of friendship became the more necessary with John Maxton's death in 1951, and Jock and his wife Florrie with him, deeply shocked by the loss of his old friend, laboured to the last to this end. Barriers of colour, language, creed political party or partisan politics meant nothing to either, and their home and hospitality and services were made available to all and sundry.

In 1963, at the request of the Executive of the IAAE, Jock and Florrie were asked to travel to Egypt and to Abyssinia and then south to the Cape to visit all the live centres of research and teaching in East Africa, to build up interest and membership there, and to encourage participation in the Lyon Conference 1964.

In the last ten years of his life Jock laboured to give practical expression to John Maxton's dream of an international centre in Oxford for graduate study and for research into international agrarian problems. The purchase by Dartington of a site in Oxford made possible the establishment there of WAERSA as a Commonwealth Bureau of Agricultural Economics, so that on the retirement of Dr. von Frauendorfer in 1966 this digesting service might find a permanent home. An agreement was finally reached just before Jock's death between the University and Dartington whereby the University would and could rent space in a new building to be erected by the Dartington Trustees to house the Commonwealth Bureau of Agricultural Economics and the two Institutes already functioning in Oxford in two separate buildings. This was for Jock a fitting seal to forty years

of labour for international peace and understanding and for the study of measures whereby humanity might peacefully pursue solutions for its farm and rural problems, and for its tangle of regulations in the international trade and exchange of farm products.

His many other services to farmers, institutions and societies in Britain have been noted elsewhere, but here in our Association's own Journal it is appropriate to record the unique contribution made by Jock and his fellow pioneer in the field of international understanding and co-operation and in friendship.

L. K. E.