Address given by the Rt. Hon. Lord Hankey, P.C. at the memorial service to Sir Edward Mellanby, G.B.E., K.C.B., F.R.C.P., F.R.S., held at St. Martin-in-the-Fields Church, Westminster, 17th March, 1955.

Address given by

THE RT. HON. LORD HANKEY, P.C.

AT THE MEMORIAL SERVICE

to

SIR EDWARD MELLANBY

G.B.E., K.C.B., F.R.C.P., F.R.S.

held at

ST. MARTIN-IN-THE-FIELDS CHURCH

WESTMINSTER

17th MARCH, 1955

EDWARD MELLANBY, to whose memory we pay tribute today, devoted his life to his fellow-men and became one of the most remarkable Scientists and Scientific Administrators of his time. That is attested by the long list of his academic and other distinctions and awards, to which I shall return anon.

I must, however, mention at once, that in 1914, when he was Professor of Physiology at London University (King's College for Women), Mellanby won the greatest prize of his life by marrying May Tweedy, thus doubling his efficiency, for she was already a research scholar and lecturer at Bedford College, and was ideally equipped to halve his troubles and double his joys.

By this time, Mellanby's predominant scientific interest was already in nutrition. He owed this largely to the influence of the late Sir Frederick Gowland Hopkins, and it continued to the end of his life. His first and best-known contribution was his work on rickets, which virtually abolished this disease, previously a formidable threat to the health and development of children in industrial communities and classified as a major disabling disease. Later came his discovery of the anti-calcifying effect of cereals, a matter of the greatest importance in planning a healthy diet.

In 1925, Mellanby became a Fellow of the Royal Society, and eight years later, at 49 years of age, he reached the zenith of his career, which, with characteristic modesty, he

described in his note for Who's Who in the following laconic terms:—

> "Member of the Medical Research Council 1931-34," and in brackets "(Secretary 1933-1949)."

That tremendous epoch, 1933-1949, which included the fatal drift of the nations to the second World War, six years at grips, and four years of aftermath, threw up a host of medical problems, the solution of which called for prodigious and unceasing efforts by the Medical Research Council, in which Mellanby held the key position. I doubt if anyone knows the full extent of his contribution, and all I can attempt is to throw sidelights on a few aspects from personal observation.

At the time of Mellanby's appointment, I was Clerk of the Privy Council, to which the Medical Research Council was attached for administrative purposes. I was also Secretary to the Cabinet and to the Committee of Imperial Defence.

In the latter capacity, soon after his arrival, I asked him whether something could be done to improve the health of volunteer recruits for the army, some 50 to 60 per cent of whom were being rejected every year for medical and especially dental reasons. Mellanby, as he recalled to me as recently as January 20th last, replied that the problem could be solved, but only on a long-term basis, and by drastic reforms in the national diet. I asked him for a Memorandum on the subject, and to his astonishment, as he also recalled on

January 20th, a day or two later it came back to him in the form of a Memorandum to the Cabinet. At the moment, he had been feeling baffled and exasperated, like many another distinguished Scientist has been, by the well-nigh insuperable difficulty in getting the results of research work translated into action. In terms of rare emotion, at this, our last meeting on earth, he told me that this episode had given him new hope and inspiration.

That was the beginning of our long and valued friendship. It was also a prelude to ever closer collaboration, in which Mellanby took a leading part, between the Medical Research Council and other Government Departments concerned, including the Committee of Imperial Defence [when appropriate], with a view to the common aim of safeguarding our people, should need arise, against those hidden foes of mankind, which in past wars so often brought nations and armies to disaster—disease, malnutrition, contaminated water, biological and micro-biological pests of all kinds—the risks of which had been greatly increased by the menace of air bombardment. In the five years before the war, and in the six war years, I was a privileged witness and sometimes a collaborator, as Chairman of Committees or otherwise, in much of that work.

During the war, among the public health measures on which Mellanby insisted were chlorination of water as a safeguard against typhoid; ample supplies of pure milk for children; the pasteurisation of these supplies; adding vitamins to margarine; raising and maintaining the

extraction rate of flour and the addition to it of calcium, as well as the initiation of the Emergency Public Health Laboratory Services. Collectively, these preventive measures proved a very important contribution to the health of the nation, and many of them survive to this day.

Besides keeping a vigilant eye on the ever-increasing activities of the Medical Research Council, including astonishing advances in therapeutics (as described in his Ludwig Mond Lecture of June, 1943), Mellanby was an active member of the Scientific Advisory Committee of the Cabinet, and he did not fail to warn us about the medical risks of modern warfare. He also rendered valuable services to the Air Ministry, as Chairman of their Flying Personnel Research Committee until 1949, and as a member of their Medical Advisory Board.

The vast extension of the work of the M.R.C. brought to light in Mellanby unsuspected gifts as a scientific Administrator of the highest order, but he never abandoned his direct contact with laboratory work. To quote a fellow-worker:—

> "In the early days of his secretaryship he kept experimental work going by week-end journeys to his old laboratory at Sheffield; after the building of the Nutrition Laboratory at Mill Hill, most of his week-ends were spent there, even during the war when the burdens and responsibilities of his official work were more than most men could carry as their entire occupation."

How this was accomplished is explained by the same authority as follows:—

> "Mellanby could never have maintained his own distinguished scientific output during his busy official life without the devoted help and support of Lady Mellanby, who organised his laboratory so that his experiments could be kept going during the week, and so that he found all prepared for him when he was able to come to the bench himself."

In such time as could be spared from official duties at the Medical Research Council, Mellanby now worked on vitamin A, revealing the profound effect of this nutritional factor on the growth of bone; it was to developments of this research also that he devoted himself in retirement, and to the end of his life he was discovering unsuspected effects of vitamin A and other factors on the process of growth. I have high scientific authority for saying that it is hard to exaggerate the importance of his achievement, both in its scientific interest, and in its practical application to the health of the community. Moreover, it was his unfailing personal devotion to scientific research that determined Mellanby's approach to the official work for the Medical Research Council.

In 1949, at the age of 65, Mellanby retired from his great office, without a murmur of regret, and perhaps with relief, to work with his wife in the seclusion of their laboratory at Mill Hill, "the world forgetting, by the world forgot . . ."

But no! not forgot; for his discovery in 1946, that white flour treated with "agene," the trade name for nitrogen trichloride, if fed in large quantities to dogs, caused canine hysteria, and ultimately death, had left an indelible impression on many minds. Thus, in both Houses of Parliament, groups of members came together informally, irrespective of party, to urge that the use of agene should be banned by law.

Throughout that long controversy, Mellanby meticulously observed the reticence proper to a recently retired public servant, which his vindicators scrupulously respected. It was only after success was in sight that I sent him, on Christmas Day last, the text of the Government's written announcement to Parliament, that effect was to be given to a decision taken in 1950 to discontinue agene. On the 28th he replied in a letter, from which I quote the following:—

> "I am glad that your missionary zeal has at last been rewarded, and that agene is going to be abolished, and I send you most heartfelt thanks and congratulations. As I have long been outside the great world, I know nothing of the great fight that has gone on so consistently apart from what you have told me on the rare occasions when we have met. I have often felt that if I had brought the agene film to show to our distinguished legislators, and really shocked them and made them realise the importance of the facts, action would have been taken much sooner."

The long delay, however, did not detract from Mellanby's unalloyed satisfaction with that decision.

Much has perforce been omitted from this brief address, including Mellanby's distinguished international work, and his long and arduous travels. Their value is attested by his vast collection, to which I referred earlier, of academic medals, prizes, honorary degrees and other distinctions from Universities, Scientific and Medical Institutions, not only in his own country, but also in the Dominions and many foreign lands. To these must be added the high honours lavished on him by Monarchs and Governments, including the G.B.E., the K.C.B., Officer of the French Legion of Honour, the American Medal of Freedom with Silver Palm, and Commander (1st Class) of the Swedish Royal Order of the North Star. These add undying lustre to Mellanby's career, and testify to the world-wide esteem in which he was held.

He died, as I am sure he would have wished to die, cheerful and bright, physically and mentally fit to the last, his researches progressing well, and after a life devoted to the welfare of mankind—AD DEI MAJOREM GLORIAM —TO THE GREATER GLORY OF GOD.

"Death came unheralded, but it was well,
For so thy Saviour bore
Kind witness thou wast meet at once to dwell
On His eternal shore,
All warning spared
For none He gives where hearts are for prompt change prepared."

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