

## An appreciation

ALICE MARY COPPING

(1906–1996)



Alice Mary Copping was born in Stratford, New Zealand, on 14 May 1906. Her parents had a strong belief in education and, after spending her schooldays at Stratford District High School, she entered Victoria University College, Wellington, with a University scholarship. She graduated in chemistry in 1925 and obtained an M.Sc. in organic chemistry in 1926. She won a travel scholarship and, in September 1927, she came to University College, London, to work under Sir Jack Drummond. Her research involved devising a method for determining the 'bios' requirements of different strains of yeast. This proved to be difficult, so she was sent to Berlin to learn the method from Dr Otto Warburg. An important outcome of this was that she not only learned to use his manometers, but also brought the first set of manometers back with her to London. She was now more successful with the problem she had been given,

and continued to work with yeasts for a further two years.

Her next move was to the Lister Institute in London where she was personal assistant to Dr Harriette Chick. This was interrupted in 1931 by her return to New Zealand because of the illness of her mother. She obtained a temporary post as lecturer in Physiology and Nutrition in the University of Otago, Dunedin. She returned to the Lister Institute in 1932 and, with Dr Chick, began to make her studies on the biochemistry, biology and microbiology of the B vitamins.

After the war started, Sir John Ledingham, Director of the Lister Institute, considered it unwise for experimental animals to be housed in Chelsea, so Sir Charles Martin, the previous Director, offered the animals, and the scientists using them, accommodation at his home in Roebuck House, Chesterton, Cambridge. In 1939 Dr Chick, Dr Hume, Dr Copping and Sister Smith, with the animals, moved to a large greenhouse and outbuildings in Sir Charles Martin's garden, where they continued their work until 1946.

In 1949 Dr Copping (known to her friends as Molly) was appointed Lecturer in Professor Yudkin's Department of Physiology, King's College of Household and Social Science, later Queen Elizabeth College. She, with Professor Yudkin, built up the teaching of nutrition to the graduate level. She was a good teacher and was respected and liked by her students. Besides teaching, she continued her research work on B vitamins, including the effect of pyridoxine and pantothenic acid on the blood, and on the gut bacteria of rats. In 1962 she was granted the D.Sc degree of London University for published papers in the field of nutrition.

Molly Copping was a great traveller, and she had friends all over the world. In 1957–58 she was Visiting Professor of Nutrition in the University of Connecticut on the Storrs Campus where, at the turn of the century, Atwater made his fundamental studies on the energy expenditure of man. In 1959 she served as Consultant in Nutrition for FAO. At the end of 1961 she was FAO Consultant for the Special Study of Nutrition Education at University level in six European countries, all of which she visited. In 1963 she travelled to UNICEF headquarters in Bangkok and the South Pacific Health Service in Fiji. While in Fiji she realized that there was a need for accommodation for the training of dietitians and, on her return to England, she raised enough funds to establish a small training department within the Fiji School of Medicine. In 1964 Molly went on behalf of the International University Council to Sudan to advise on the setting up of a course in home economics in Khartoum University, and in 1966 she acted as Consultant to the Ministry of Overseas Development to advise on a course in nutrition at Nairobi University.

After her retirement in 1968 Molly continued to travel, first to Indonesia, and then to Thailand, East and West Pakistan and Cambodia, helping and advising about nutrition education all the way. It is little wonder that her Christmas card list included 300 names and addresses. On her overseas travels an ex-student was often waiting to meet her. Molly was a good cook and a good hostess, and often held little parties for ex-students in her flat. She wanted them to learn something about social behaviour as well as nutrition. When Molly returned to England in 1969, she maintained her association with Queen Elizabeth College, continuing her own research and helping students from overseas.

From 1931, when the first volume of *Nutrition Abstracts and Reviews* was published, Molly Copping had been associated with its production, acting as sub-editor, and abstracting, particularly of papers from overseas. She was probably one of the publication's longest-serving contributors.

Another of Molly Copping's interests was the welfare of women students, and she served as Executive Secretary of College Hall, the first residence for women students in the University of London. She wrote a history of College Hall. The College authorities showed their appreciation of her work for the College by giving her an 80th birthday party. On this occasion they named one of the rooms the Copping Room. Molly was still involved in the activities of College Hall when she contributed to the book published for the Nutrition Society on the occasion of its 50th anniversary (Copping, 1991).

Molly Copping was the last living scientist of those who were responsible for the founding of the Nutrition Society in 1941. She describes this in her article 'The History of the Nutrition Society', published in the Society's Proceedings (Copping, 1978). Her loyalty to the Society continued throughout her life, and she attended the Golden Jubilee meeting

in Cambridge in 1991. She was elected Honorary Member in 1983. She became the Society's archivist in 1975 and spent many hours in the office in Chandos House, sorting out letters and papers that had been stored for many years, discarding some, but keeping those of historical interest. It is thanks to her that the Society has such excellent archival material, now neatly filed and labelled. It was during this time that her friendship with Mrs June Schulkes developed. June was Secretary of the Nutrition Society from 1967 to 1994, and she has told me about Dr Copping's interest in plants. Molly continued to go to the Royal Horticultural Society Shows as long as she was able. When walking became difficult June sometimes accompanied her to the RHS shows, and she writes: 'Her knowledge of plants was mind-boggling. She not only knew the popular names of all the plants, but the Latin names as well'.

Art and music were very important to Molly. She was a Friend of the Royal Academy. Her holiday travel was usually spent in Italy or some other country with great artistic treasures. Music was her special joy, and she regularly attended concerts and the Glyndebourne operas until the last year of her life.

Molly Copping, who died suddenly on 16 January 1996, was indeed 'a truly great lady'.

E. M. WIDDOWSON

#### REFERENCES

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