

## PROCEEDINGS OF THE NUTRITION SOCIETY

*The Two Hundred and Seventy-eighth Scientific Meeting (One Hundred and Eleventh of the Scottish Group) was held at King's College, University of Aberdeen, St Machar Drive, Aberdeen, on 11 April 1975*

### SYMPOSIUM ON 'FAMINE'

#### Chairman's opening remarks

By K. L. BLAXTER, *Rowett Research Institute, Bucksburn, Aberdeen AB2 9SB*

The subject of today's symposium is an emotive one: famine. It summons up thoughts of the four scourges of mankind, the four horses of the Apocalypse: War, Famine, Pestilence and Death. Such thoughts may arise in that very order too, for famine has commonly followed war and in its wake has come disease. Indeed, typhus used to be called Famine Fever.

These days we tend to discard older words which have a brutal, archaic directness for gentler, softer ones which cloak the stark and unacceptable. War thus becomes 'armed conflict'; the term 'pestilence' is replaced by 'epidemic disease', and instead of 'famine' some use the euphemisms of 'nutritional deprivation' and 'malnutrition'. Famine should not be so displaced for it is a reality distinct from the insidious drain on human health and dignity imposed by continued subsistence on diets which are nutritionally suboptimal. Famine is a calamitous happening due to the absolute failure of the staple food supply, and results in starvation. It causes a real hunger rather than the hidden one of deficiency disease for the simple reason that there is nothing for people to eat. We will deal in this symposium with the genesis of famine, using records from the past and modern experience to indicate both the nutritional problems and those of a social nature which result.

One might think that in our modern world, where communication is now so easy, where our technologies enable us to do unbelievable things, from sending satellites to the planets to tapping reserves of oil beneath the oceans, that famine would be unknown and we could regard it as something archaic and remote in the past. This is not so. Wars still occur and war has always involved destruction of food; crop failures over wide areas due to drought or flood or other natural catastrophe still take place, and it is these events which give rise to famine when unsophisticated people are involved.

Simple peoples in remote communities, often inadequately nourished to begin with, are those most at risk from natural or man-made disaster. Naturally those in more favoured countries have an earnest desire to help to mitigate the acute suffering which takes place there in times of absolute dearth of food, and considerable financial support is given to voluntary agencies who have the avowed purpose of providing relief. During the symposium we will not only learn about the

natural history of famine and its nutritional implication, and hear about the problems encountered in dealing with catastrophe, but will also have opportunity to discuss how we do and how we might best provide relief to communities subject to this age-long scourge.

*Printed in Great Britain*