

GUEST EDITORIAL



Dr Clive Balch was the second Honorary Editor of the *British Journal of Nutrition*, serving from 1965–1970 in that capacity, and for a total of 10 years on the Editorial Board. He is now retired and lives in Devon.

The early days of the *British Journal of Nutrition*

INTRODUCTION

My first awareness of the *British Journal of Nutrition* and its production was purely observational and, from the beginning, as a reader. This was followed by a period as a nervous would-be contributor and then by increasing involvement in the editorial process. Although I was working at the National Institute for Research in Dairying during the gestation period, I cannot claim any knowledge of what took place there. At what stage it became apparent to a passer-by that Dr Stas Kon was paying more visits to his rat house than might be justified by supervision of nutritional experiments is difficult to say. I do recall, however, noticing him hard at work behind the small window in the apex of the rat house roof – that will have been in 1948 or 1949.

I joined the Society and began attending meetings before 1950, possibly in the utterly mistaken belief that it might eventually ease the passage of my thesis work into print. However, the work was eventually submitted as several papers, rapidly resulting in a blunt direction to reduce them to one.

So began this contributor's astonished initiation into the art of writing Scientific English – language education from that kind, but inflexible, polyglot S. K. Kon, originally of course a Polish speaker. Like many other hopeful contributors I was surprised to be shown how many possible meanings could be put on the phrases I had so proudly coined.

How many long rambling sentences can Kon's precise mind have reduced to a few words, with no loss of sense?

Imagine then our much-loved nutritional pedagogue holding court in the tiny cramped attic over the rat house. To reach it one ran the gauntlet of Dr Kathleen Henry's laboratory, the rat house itself with breeding and metabolism cages, and a rickety, pull-down stairway. Thus the birth pangs of the *Proceedings* and later the *Journal* took place in a powerful aroma of the Norwegian Hooded rat. This could well have strengthened views, often expressed at AGMs, that the coverage centred on animal nutrition; more of this later.

At that time one dreaded those invitations to 'pop up to clarify a few points'. Now, like many who passed through the same mill, in person or by letter, I realise with gratitude that the result was a report much clearer and less ambiguous than the first draft.

It can be concluded that the pupil's progress was deemed satisfactory because after 3 or 4 years Kon began to pass me papers to referee, and in 1959 I joined the Editorial Board. While this was flattering, it soon resulted in a great deal of work since my field, ruminant nutrition, was expanding rapidly and was well financed in that period. The other editors dealing with this topic were A. T. Philipson and J. A. B. Smith, and we were kept busy.

METHODS

What were the objectives of the *British Journal of Nutrition* in those days; did they differ from those of today? If there were guidelines they do not spring to mind, and no policy was evident to me. Papers were accepted on any topic relating to human or animal nutrition provided the work was sound and presented in the approved form. From the earliest days Kon insisted on statistical vetting of practically all papers and G. K. Yates was the distinguished Statistical Editor. Kon never seemed to press for undue limitation of the Discussion section of contributions: surely this added to the value of the *Journal*.

This liberal approach was doubted by some members of the Society. At many AGMs discussion of the report from the Chairman of the Editorial Board concerned alleged partiality towards animal nutrition, at the expense of human nutrition, and on a supposed editorial insistence on a specific style of English. As far as I could find there was no basis for either claim; the Board insisted only on sound work and clear unambiguous expression in such papers as were submitted.

Kon engaged in amusing and erudite correspondence on grammatical questions with A. L. Bacharach, and in the latter's Presidency the AGM followed its usual course: half an hour's grumble about the editing. Eventually Bacharach, bored, making no attempt to sum up, said 'there you have had your annual discussion on that topic, we will now move on to the next item'. Democracy in action! In the same vein was Kon's insistence that meetings of the Editorial Board were unnecessary, and indeed on one occasion 12 years passed without a meeting taking place (C. C. Balch, unpublished observations).

RESULTS

Period 1 — The Kon Era (1947–1965)

Under Kon the business flourished, from twenty-nine papers received in 1947, with fifteen in Volume 1, the number of papers received had increased to 102 in 1966; in 1995 the number had increased to 249. From twelve editors in 1947 there were sixteen in 1966 and thirty-seven, including seven statisticians, at the present time. The rejection and withdrawal rate has changed little throughout the years.

Towards the end of Kon's era we faced a major decision: whether or not to adopt the *Systeme International des Unités*, as urged by the Royal Society. It was realised that this involved changing from calorie to joule as the energy unit. The change would be meaningless unless accorded international significance by nutritionists. Dr (later Sir) Kenneth Blaxter proposed the change at the International Congress of Nutrition in 1970; the response was lukewarm, but not negative. A decision was postponed to the next Congress.

Stas Kon retired from the National Institute for Research in Dairying in 1965 having been born on the first day of the century. He relinquished the Chairmanship at the same time and I cannot remember him ever again visiting the Institute or the Editorial Office, by then housed in a scarcely more palatial situation: a recycled wartime Nissen Hut. Mrs Barbara Smyth MBE, who had provided superb support as Editorial Assistant at least since 1948, continued for the next 5 years and provided the same help to this writer.

The Kon era ended, therefore, in 1965 with the *Journal* soundly established and widely accepted both nationally and internationally. With this great achievement he slipped quietly away never attempting to play Elder Statesman, although he was elected President of the Nutrition Society from 1965–1968. He died in September 1986 and an obituary was published in the *Journal* in May 1987.

Period 2 — Consolidation (1966–1970)

Our main concern was to deal with the steady increase in papers accepted for publication and the reports of the increasing number of Society meetings and Symposia published in the *Proceedings*. After much discussion among the Editorial Board and with Cambridge University Press it was decided that one volume of four parts should be replaced by two volumes each of three parts. The decision took effect from 1970. This eased editorial work and slightly reduced publication delays, but the load on some editors remained very heavy. Fortunately Mrs Smyth continued her heroic labours until I retired as Chairman. In those days her meagre salary and the office postage were the only overheads. No editor received remuneration and none ever claimed postage.

In 1974 the International Congress of Nutrition was held in Kyoto. The British Nutrition Committee asked me to lead the British delegation to the IUNS General Assembly and to press for final adoption of the joule as the energy unit; I was supported by Sir David Cuthbertson and Dr Dorothy Hollingsworth. We had to fight strong opposition, some astonishingly ill-informed, mainly from American nutritionists, some well-known. No resolution was reached and the choice of units was left in the unsatisfactory state that continues to this day. Fortunately the *British Journal of Nutrition* has stuck to its guns and one hopes some future international generation will recognize the merits of the *Systeme* in its entirety.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION (Kon would not have allowed this combination!)

The decision of the Nutrition Society in those early days to focus on a journal and publish its *Proceedings* was splendidly implemented on a sound basis by the foresight and diligence of Dr S. K. Kon. Growth of the *Journal* has reflected the increasing realization of the importance of nutritional studies in man and other animals. The founders, especially Kon, would have felt fully justified if they could see the current demand for sound nutritional information and the media scares that are stoked by its lack. One ventures to suggest they would have shared this writer's distress at the unimaginative decline in

funding for impartial research on the basic principles underlining those topical and political questions.

Several factors have surely contributed to the success of both publications, these include clarity, validity, and absence of cant. In my time, at least, a further important factor was the licence accorded to contributors to develop ideas and theories in the Discussion section of their papers, making the *British Journal of Nutrition* rather special. Long may the *Journal* and *Proceedings* flourish!

C. C. BALCH