

2013 January column

## Geoffrey Cannon



*My heroes for 2012: Visionaries of big pictures, lovers of good food, public health advocates, professors, naturalists, writers, activists, revolutionaries*

Writing just before the end of a hard year, and expecting harder times ahead, I've selected what I've said about my 2012 heroes, hoping that they can continue to enlighten us. Here they are, above. From left, the top row shows Lynn Margulis, Michael Pollan, George Orwell, Colin Tudge, Claudia Roden, Christopher Hitchens, and Inês Rugani, two of whom were heroes in the same month. The bottom row shows MFK Fisher (as a young and old woman), Patti Rundall, Caroline Walker, Barbara Burlingame, Rudolf Virchow, and José Martí. (You can access them all on google or wikipedia or through my 2012 columns, by using the links below).

*World Nutrition*

### **My heroes of 2012**

Now seeing them all together I am wondering if there are any general themes or connections here. There are more or less equal numbers of women and men, of living and dead people, and of colleagues (and friends) with people I know only from reading or reputation. They are all Americans or Europeans (unless places of birth and upbringing are counted). An equal imbalance is that all were born in the last 200 years. Some are or were nutritionists. 'Caroline Walker, nutritionist', Caroline always said, after rising to intervene in conference exchanges; Inês Rugani is a professor of nutrition at the state university of Rio de Janeiro; and Barbara Burlingame, a senior official at the UN Food and Agriculture Organization, identifies herself as a nutrition scientist. Michael Pollan, Colin Tudge, Claudia Roden, and MFK Fisher, are or were food writers, with interests that connect with or relate to nutrition, at least in the

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broad sense. In one way or another, George Orwell occasionally, Patti Rundall constantly, and Rudolf Virchow and José Martí frequently, saw or see the links between what people consume, and states of health and well-being. I have omitted references: for these, please access the whole columns.

*January. The female principle*

## **Not hunting but gathering**



Lynn Margulis died in November 2011, so I wrote in sorrow. Her understanding of the nature of evolution makes her an all-time giant. She rejects Darwinist theory (not the same as Charles Darwin's own theory) of the evolution of living things. She concludes that in certain ways Jean-Baptiste Lamarck was right (as Charles Darwin himself did). Thus: 'Lamarck was incorrect in saying that behavioural changes in the parent generation lead to inherited changes in the offspring... But dramatic new traits may be acquired in a single lifetime through adaptation and subsequent integration of genomes... The trait by itself is not inherited but the acquired genome that determines the trait is inherited'.

She is also sure that species develop typically not by warlike competition but by peaceful collaboration and that the adaptation of Charles Darwin's tentative conclusions, into the notion that nature, and the natural order of things, is 'red in tooth and claw', is a catastrophe. This ideology now threatens the survival of the human race, the planet, and the biosphere. Besides, as she makes clear, this 'alpha male' notion, is wrong. Usually comes naturally to women, especially as mothers, is right, in the senses both of moral and correct. Nature develops by nurture.

Terms used by Darwin, and the number of times these terms appear, include: 'beat/ beats – 17; death/ dying – 16; 'destroy/ destroyed/ destruction' - 77; 'exterminate/ extermination' – 58; 'individual' – 298; kill. killed/ killing' – 21; 'perfect/ perfection' – 274; 'race/ races' – 132; 'select/ selects/ selection' – 540; 'species' – 1,803. By contrast, the following terms are absent from *The Origin of Species*: 'association, affiliation, cooperate/ cooperation, collaborate/ collaboration, community.

*Lynn Margulis, 1938-2011*  
*Acquiring Genomes. A Theory of the Origin of Species*

February. Michael Pollan

## In defence of common sense



In *Food Rules* Michael Pollan says: ‘Nutrition science, which after all only got started less than two hundred years ago, is today approximately where surgery was in the year 1650 – very promising, and very interesting to watch, but are you ready to let them operate on you? I think I’ll wait awhile’. His take on food, nutrition, health and well-being is bracing. His 64 rules, refined and honed from thousands suggested to him, contain some gems. Thus ‘Avoid food products that make health claims’, ‘Eat only foods that will eventually rot’, ‘It’s not food if it’s called by the same name in every language’, ‘Eat animals that have themselves eaten well’, ‘Don’t eat breakfast cereals that change the color of the milk’.

Whom did we rely on before the scientists (and in turn governments, public health organizations, and food marketers) began telling us what to eat? We relied of course on our mothers and grandmothers and more distant ancestors, which is another way of saying our tradition and culture. We know there is a deep reservoir of food wisdom out there, or else humans would not have survived and prospered to the extent we have. This dietary wisdom is the distillation of an evolutionary process involving many people in many places figuring out what keeps people healthy (and what doesn’t) and passing that knowledge down in the form of food habits and combinations, manners and rules and taboos, and everyday and seasonal practices, as well as memorable sayings and adages.

*Michael Pollan, 1955 –  
Food Rules. An Eater’s Manual*

*March. George Orwell*

## **Thinking and writing straight**



George Orwell says: 'When there is a gap between one's real and one's declared aims, one turns as it were instinctively to long words and exhausted idioms, like a cuttlefish spurting out ink'. He is the master satirist of the speaking and writing that uses language to disguise and pervert reality.

We who profess the study and practice of food, nutrition and health need to watch language, for example when we read about 'lifestyle' (of widowed African mothers forced to grow cash crops?) or 'developing country' (of China, after six millennia of civilisation?). We should also think about 'public-private partnerships'. This conveys a sense of down-home folks from say the US State Department and GloboChow, sharing witty jokes and vintage wine in Davos with chums from the family farms of Kenya and Nicaragua and the shanty-settlements of Mumbai and Detroit, and then together making open and free agreements (for is this not what 'partnership' signifies?) for the good of all. But if the 'public' includes UN agencies starved of disposable funds, and the 'private' is dominated by transnational corporations whose interests are antagonistic to the public good, stuffed with money and offers of luxury locations and trained secretariats, where is the 'partnership'?

A human being is primarily a bag for putting food into; the other functions and faculties may be more godlike, but in point of time they come afterwards. A man dies and is buried, and all his words and actions are forgotten, but the food he has eaten lives after him in the sound or rotten bones of his children. I think it could be plausibly argued that changes of diet are more important than changes of dynasty or even of religion...Yet it is curious how seldom the all-importance of food is recognized. You see statues everywhere to politicians, poets, bishops, but none to cooks or bacon-curers or market gardeners.

*George Orwell, 1903-1950  
The Road to Wigan Pier*

*April. Colin Tudge*

## **Rational agriculture**



‘Forgive me’ said Colin Tudge, when I first met him in June 1983, in a south London pub of his choosing, ‘but I can’t be as excited as you obviously are. I feel I have done my bit’. Words to that effect. My date with him was to discuss the politics of food in the UK. He then was features editor of *New Scientist*. At that time I was a newspaper journalist, and had discovered that an officially commissioned national report on food and health had been suppressed by the Department of Health and Social Security (also known as the Department of Stealth and Total Obscurity). Its main message was that then typical British diet was a major cause of obesity and deadly diseases. (As it still is – even more so in some respects). The relevant government functionaries, and their colleagues in the food manufacturing industry, didn’t like this. Nor, it was rumoured (correctly) did then Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher.

This was hot stuff, and *New Scientist* did indeed follow up my story. But why Colin’s response to my revelation? Later I found out. His book *The Famine Business*, published in 1977, had exposed the kind of hanky-panky I was roused about – but on a world scale, following the UN Rome World Food Conference in 1974. All I saw was a national problem. Colin had solutions to the world food crisis. He still has. Essentially they are the same answers, encapsulated in his term ‘rational agriculture’.

A rational agriculture, leading to national self-reliance, is one that makes best use of the land, while meeting the nation’s nutritional needs and gastronomic aspirations. ‘Making best use of the land’ means producing the most and the best possible human food; but it also means farming conservatively, so that the land is not steadily run down... Farm land is not simply a food factory. Farms should provide many satisfying jobs – as opposed to a few harrowing ones, which increasingly is the case today... The schism between town and country, the lack of ‘feel’ among society in general and its leaders in particular for the land and the people who work on it, is one of the chief impediments to agricultural progress, and a major source of nonsense talked about food policy.

*Colin Tudge, 1943 -  
The Famine Business*

*May. Claudia Roden*

## **Nourishment of the heart**



The most imaginative conference I helped to organise was held in London in the late 1980s. At that time I was secretary of the Guild of Food Writers, also known as the foodies' club. The meeting was organised jointly with the UK Nutrition Society, where all the professors (and some food industry luminaries, but let's not go there) hung and hang out.

The Guild and the Nut Soc shared responsibility for the day's conference and its speakers. Guild member Prue Leith, then owner of a restaurant by Hyde Park's Serpentine styled as a big tent, did the celebration business. The event was a soaring success, because of the synergy between the two organisations. During the conference and over supper, some of the top profs were conspicuously star-struck by the leading food writers. It was sweet to see MD PhD FRCPs asking for autographs 'for their children'.

The star of stars was Claudia Roden. She may have had a television series on at that time. The erudition of her talk inspired awe and enthusiasm. It immediately became apparent that the best way to understand the history and culture of the whole Mediterranean littoral was through knowledge of the 4,000 evolving years of its food systems, and enjoyment of its food and drink. There are several Mediterranean food systems, overlapping and generally harmonious. These evolved in what are now Spain, southern France, southern Italy, Sicily, Greece, Turkey, Cyprus, Crete, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Egypt, Libya, Algeria, Morocco and Tunis. They had and have many points in common.

The governance and the nature of the whole lives of the peoples of the Mediterranean were delineated, almost defined, by the food systems of those times, from the period of first recorded history, until fairly recently. It was in this context that dietetics was first developed in its original meaning, of the philosophy of the good life well led, of which understanding how to sustain supplies of adequate and nourishing food is central and crucial.

When food supplies became unsustainable, empires fell. Territories were conquered because of the fertility of their soil and suitability of their climate. Family farmers and also great estate owners became founts of knowledge and wisdom, in tune with

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manual work, the rhythms of the seasons, the crops that grew best. Social and family life centred on the getting of food and the preparation of family and social meals, and occasional feasts. Food was not incidental to life. It provided nourishment in all senses. Claudia Roden changed my mind that day.

My grandmother, Eugénie Alphandary, spoke an old Judeo-Spanish language called Ladino with her friends and relatives in Egypt. They were descended from Jews who had been expelled from Spain in 1492... Their songs about lovers in Seville and proverbs about meat stews and almond cakes were for me, as I was growing up in Cairo, a mysterious lost paradise, a world of romance and glorious chivalry.

When I travelled to research *The Food of Spain*, traces of the old Muslim presence – Arabesque carvings, blue and white tiles, a fountain spouting cool water in a scented garden – evoked memories of the Arab and Jewish world I was born in... The way people cooked, the ingredients they put together, their little tricks, their turn of hand, were mysteriously familiar. A word, a taste, a smell, triggered memories I never knew I had.

*Claudia Roden, 1936 –  
The Guardian, 18 March 2012, on her book The Food of Spain*

*May. Christopher Hitchens*

## **Nourishment of the mind**



Lately I have been meditating on Christopher Hitchens, my second May hero, whose recent wake in New York was packed with friends and admirers. He was driven by cigarettes and whisky, and some wild wild women (and men too, in his earlier life).

Biographers and commentators who tut-tut about artistic types being toppers, as of their genius would have been better nourished by China tea and orangeade, may be – probably are – missing the point. Which is (yes a terrible horrible thing even to write in a public health context) that their genius was – and in some cases now is – fuelled by psychotropic substances, of which alcohol is one. Does booze impede or even

destroy human consciousness, or enhance or even create it? The answer surely is both. If we want genius to flower among us and to be longer lived, maybe we should be in the business of recommending magic mushrooms.

Inasmuch as we are mainly focussed on absence and avoidance of disease and on length of life, we have only some answers to what being fully human is and means. Why are we as a profession so focused on nutrition while paying so little attention to nourishment?

*June. Rio2012: What next*

## **Writers who inspire us**



In April and May *World Nutrition* carried a series of short communications mostly from Association members and speakers at the *Rio2012* conference, including its mastermind Inês Rugani (above). Among other things they had been asked to state what writer they most recommended. So this item here is about heroes identified not just by me but by almost 30 colleagues.

Four contributors chose our very own Carlos Monteiro. Four chose Michael Pollan, of whom Boyd Swinburn commented: 'Being able to cut through the cacophony of nutrition research to come up with 'Eat food, mainly plants, not too much' is brilliant – if only more academics had that level of incisive thinking'.

And the winner... Six contributors chose Tim Lang, who was my own hero of the month last November. Then I wrote that he is 'in the line of British radical academics...who have intriguing early careers, combine scholarship with action, are well aware of history, have an instinctive as well as trained commitment to justice and equity, serve indefatigably on committees including in bad times, and who think, speak and write vividly and memorably'. Of other writers, Raj Patel, author of *Stuffed and Starved*, was selected twice, as was Urban Jonsson. Other 'home' choices were Michael Latham, Marion Nestle, Boyd Swinburn; and me for these columns. Other choices included Paul Roberts, Josué de Castro, Paulo Freire, Amartya Sen, Colin Tudge, Pierre Bourdieu, Olivier de Schutter, Harriet Friedman, Philip McMichael.

Some of the writers selected are academically qualified in nutrition science. Many of the rest, whether academics or not, are people who often have become convinced of



the elemental importance of food and nutrition from their knowledge of other fields, such as economics, history, sociology, anthropology, philosophy, agriculture, evolution, or from their engagement in movements such as the struggle for human rights, equity and justice. In other words, they are not so much interested in nutrition, as in what states of nutrition signify.

*July. MFK Fisher*

## **A fisher of fish**



Here above is MFK (Mary Frances Kennedy) Fisher, early and late in her life. WH Auden once reckoned her as the best writer of prose in the US. She was – let's say is – a scholar of food and its preparation and cooking. Here is her comment on the views of French philosopher and gastronome Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin on thinness. "This pretty phrase "*la salade... qui réjouit le coeur*" is often quoted and misquoted...I do not think that salads gladden the heart, but that they are light in the stomach and easily digested, and that they bring a feeling of easiness and comfort to the whole belly and especially to the poor overworked organ that perches on top of it, the human heart. Anything that does that is, of course, a gladsome thing'.

The most meditative statement I ever read about Fish, not a fish or the fish but Fish, is a poem from the Japanese. In Japan the seventeen-syllable exercise known as a *haiku* is considered proper for kings as well as philosophers, and one I have always remembered... could almost as well have been written by an emperor as a thinker. It is, in its own restrained way, full of passion:

Young leaves ev'rywhere;  
The mountain cuckoo singing;  
My first Bonito!

...A bonito is a striped tunny about three feet long, found in tropical waters. It is contraband in California. I have often eaten fillets of it in a restaurant in Hollywood, where it is served grilled almost black on one side and doused with lemon and melted butter. I have always thought that I would like a chance to cook it myself, and not do it so thoroughly.

*MFK Fisher (1908-1992)*

*Translator's gloss on Brillat-Savarin Meditation 6*

*August. Patti Rundall*

## **In praise of direct action**



Hero for this month is Patti Rundall, policy director of Baby Milk Action. The first week of August is World Breastfeeding Week. This year celebrates its 20th anniversary, and also the 10th anniversary of the UN *Global Strategy on Infant and Young Child Feeding*.

Patti always emphasises that she is just one of a global network of people and organisations dedicated to the cause of breastfeeding. She is more a doer than a writer, and in any case it feels right to quote from somebody who in turn is one of her heroes. This is Halfdan Mahler, director-general of the World Health Organization from 1973 to 1988, architect of the Alma Ata ‘Health for All’ statement championing universal primary health care. He is the UN chief official who first gave the breastfeeding movement the presence and influence within the UN system, national governments, health professional organisations – and the baby formula and feed industries – that it continues to battle for and hold onto.

In the complexity of today’s globalised inequities, we need to hear about the energy of the International Baby Milk Action Network, the moral energy of public interest non-government organisations. You do have power! Don’t get discouraged. The notion that corporations need to be regulated flies in the face of neo-liberal thinking that sees transnational corporations as creators of wealth that can, through their own codes of conduct, nicely ‘regulate’ their own practices.

*Halfdan Mahler (1923 – )*

*Foreword to Fighting an Old Battle in a New World*

*September. Caroline Walker*

## **Nutrition is about food**



When lecturing, Caroline Walker usually showed up with a shopping bag full of props. The first thing she would do is pull out an apple, plonk it on top of the lectern, smile, and say ‘This is to remind me that nutrition is about food’. It wasn’t her she was reminding.

Most people who worry about additives focus on toxicity, sometimes with good reason. Not Caroline. Here is a typical passage: “Put yourself in the shoes of Sam Sludge, managing director of Sludge International plc, creator and sole purveyor of the Bulldog Brand Boil-in-the-Bag Soyburger, Iron Lady Wonder Whip, and Honey Krunch Rainbow Jelly Toppings... You pay a visit to your top secret Sludge Laboratories where Professor Crackling is putting the finishing touches to his latest creation, a new instant chocolate flavour pudding created with the lovely cheap ingredients found for him by Sludge International Research and Development Division, which constantly scours the globe in search of cheaper and better raw materials to turn into new and profitable foods. ‘A complex multiphasic hydrocolloidal system of water, lipids, protein, carbohydrates and air’ mutters Professor Crackling, tingling with excitement and doing a little skip as he deftly tips the brown powder into cold milk, does some energetic whisking with the Sludge Whisk-o-Pud (yours for just twenty Sludge Pudding packet tops) and artfully swirls the resulting light and creamy fluff into his best cut-glass test tube for an experimental morning snack. ‘Perfect’, he proclaims, savouring every last molecule of TFS/P/84/28, his new chocolate pudding flavour. ‘Organoleptic bliss! Now I can create twenty other puddings exactly the same, but they will all be different!’ For there is no tiresome chocolate in the mixture, to prevent the basic recipe being turned into peach, pear, strawberry, or his newest tropical tutti-frutti fizzy flavour: all the flavour is artificial. A quick shake of reliable artificial yumminess and the mixture can be endlessly transformed’.

You think her satire is off the mark? Well, it’s a bit homespun. But have a look at the labels of some of the lead lines of packet cake mixes and such-like products in your local supermarket. Caroline had a phrase for this: legalised consumer fraud.

The day-to-day breakfasts, lunches and dinners are the ones that count as far as your health is concerned. If you put these in order, a plateful of chocolates once in a while will do little damage. This is how traditional societies operate. They eat healthy food day to day, and for celebrations kill the fattened pig or cow, eat expensive sweets and fry their foods in oil. What we as a nation should do is to put the celebration foods back where they belong instead of eating them every day.

*Caroline Walker (1950-1988)*  
*The Food Scandal*

*October. Barbara Burlingame*

## **Meanings of food and nutrition**



Barbara Burlingame is a senior official at the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), and a leading authority on the composition of food. This is vital work, not least because there are more foods in the world, especially in the tropics, than those included in the ‘classic’ food composition manuals published in temperate countries like the US and UK.

More than this, Barbara is also one of the leaders within the UN system who advocate the food-based approach to nutrition and health, and who also believe that the best and most reliable way to alleviate food insecurity and nutrient deficiency is to give all possible support to small farmers, so that they can themselves sustain and nourish their families and communities.

It’s thrilling to read a senior nutrition scientist and food policy leader, speaking and writing about the mental, emotional and spiritual health of communities, as she does below. As well as these being a prime concern of Barbara Burlingame personally, this approach is a sign of things to come and things that have already arrived, at FAO.

So much knowledge of early cultures is contained within traditional foods and their cultivation, and they have a direct impact on the physical, emotional, mental and spiritual health of indigenous communities. Indigenous ...plant foods... provide important economic benefits, such as helping create self-sufficient communities and establishing a strong foundation of food security...

For example, we discovered in research that the Pohnpei district community in the Federated States of Micronesia was severely deficient in vitamin A, despite the fact that a species of banana rich in vitamin A beta-carotenes was indigenous to the region. Once we determined the nutritional composition of the banana, we were able to educate the people about its benefit and encourage them to eat the local fruit, which helped reverse the deficiency.

*Barbara Burlingame  
Indigenous People's Food Systems, 2009*

*November. Rudolf Virchow*

## **Meanings of food and nutrition**



Rudolf Virchow is a founding father of the public health movement. Trained as a medical specialist, in pathology, he nonetheless saw epidemics as ‘disturbances of culture’, warning signs against which the progress of states and civilisations can be judged. That is to say, mass diseases are symptoms of social and political pathology. The concept of ‘social medicine’ comes from him.

He speaks to us now. He realised that descriptions of disease are not enough. In his day the big issues were starvation and infection, both of which he saw as being driven by immiseration – deep poverty, physical, mental, emotional and spiritual as well as material. His point about warning signs applies equally to obesity and diabetes. These, just as much as food price chaos and the collapse of confidence in money, tells us that today’s great powers are driving in pathological directions. ‘Market’ politics and economics are the modern equivalent of the 19th century *laissez faire* doctrine that caused famines in Ireland, India and Brazil in which tens of

millions died, and also caused the immiseration of the urban and rural working classes as recorded in England by Charles Dickens, Elizabeth Gaskell and Friedrich Engels.

At the age of 27, Rudolf Virchow was asked by the Prussian government to investigate an epidemic of typhus in Upper Silesia, which his masters in Berlin knew could spread to important people like themselves. He found that the communities he investigated subsisted on a diet of potatoes, sauerkraut, and vodka. He concluded that a year of hard rain and bitter cold had tipped these wretched, insecure and impoverished communities into starvation. Huddled together in their huts, they had incubated the contagion that, as an epidemiological nemesis, had already started to spread to the wealthy classes. The appropriate intervention he proposed was radical social reform. He was fired. He then founded the weekly journal *Medical Reform*, proclaiming poverty as the breeder of disease, and throughout his life proclaimed politics as medicine writ large.

Medicine is a social science, and politics is nothing else but medicine on a large scale. Medicine, as a social science, as the science of human beings, has the obligation to point out problems and to attempt their theoretical solution: the politician, the practical anthropologist, must find the means for their actual solution... The physicians are the natural attorneys of the poor, and social problems fall to a large extent within their jurisdiction.

*Rudolf Virchow, 1821-1902*  
*Medical Reform* 2, 1848

*December. José Martí*

## **Good nutrition and land reform**



José Martí is a definition of his country's aspirations and identity. For Cubans he is as much the national hero and martyr as is Che Guevara. His own attempt to liberate Cuba, in his day from Spanish rule, ended soon after he and his companions came ashore in 1895. He was killed in his 43rd year, in the first battle. Fidel Castro, who

came ashore a little over 60 years later, has always acknowledged José Martí as his inspiration.

Very good, you may be thinking, but how does this relate to nutrition and to public health? José Martí and other liberators are relevant to our work. A reason is land reform, with the purpose of giving freedom for family and co-operative farmers to grow what's natural in the land in which they live, to feed their communities and their families and to nourish their country. This is the central purpose of socialism in agrarian societies. It was and remains the great issue in Cuba, whose economy since the Spaniards came, saw and conquered half a millennium ago, has depended on the export of sugar, tobacco and coffee. This changed as a result of the 'special period' in the 1990s following the collapse of the USSR and the reinforcement of US sanctions, as a result of which the Cuban economy was forced to become more self-sufficient. In and around towns and cities, people began to grow their own food, and Cuban agriculture became relatively low-input and diversified, plant-based and sustainable.

The nation that buys, commands. The nation that sells, seeks to balance trade in order to ensure freedom. The country that wants to die, sells only to one country. The country that wants to survive, sells to more than one.

*José Martí*  
1853-1895

### **Acknowledgement**

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