

Rockefeller International Health Division and Nutrition Studies

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My dissertation explores the science of nutrition in Britain in the first half of the 20th century. Archival research in the United Kingdom led me to explore further the Anglo-American connections related to the science of nutrition, and ask how American philanthropy came to shape the European scientific community working on public health. The Rockefeller Foundation (RF) was the single most influential American organization in the establishment of British nutritional labs, particularly those in Cambridge, and was also involved in educational programs in fields related to nutrition: agriculture, natural sciences and bio-chemistry. Many of the key figures I study in my dissertation, such as Harriet Chick, Clemens von Pirquet, and Robert Leiper, were supported by the Rockefeller Foundation. Understanding the nature of those American-European and American-British connections is a crucial part of my dissertation and will hone my contribution to the field of interwar internationalism and science.

I conducted research at the Rockefeller Archive Center during the 2017-2018 academic year and examined RF funding for British agricultural development and nutritional studies. I worked with several collections at the Rockefeller Archive Center. I examined project files on grants to nutritional studies, and grants in related fields, like agricultural science. The collection has very interesting documents in these areas from the 1940s to the 1960s, but due to the scope of my research, I focused on events and grants up to the end of World War II.

Large parts of my dissertation investigate the formation of distinct scientific communities within the United Kingdom, and, in particular, the genealogy of nutrition research and agriculture in Scotland, Ireland and England. As a way to clarify some of the material I found in the British archives, I examined applications for grants in the natural sciences during WWII, when governmental funding of research into this topic declined. Of particular interest to my work is the University of Aberdeen, which became an internationally influential center for the study of nutrition. I looked into Lancelot Hogben's application for an RF grant during WWII.¹ The main series I worked on was record group 1.1 (FA386), series 700 (Europe). This part of the Rockefeller Foundation archives documents different aspects of RF involvement in health in Europe, but following the outbreak of WWII, much of the Health Division's work in Europe concentrated on British science, I found this series

wonderfully useful. The transition from the Health Division to the European Health Commission in 1940 shifted the nature of the Foundation's work in Europe altogether, and enabled food and immediate aid to be part of the RF work.² I examined the emergence of the Health Commission and discussions about its work, with regards to the Red Cross and other humanitarian aid institutions in Europe.³ I was interested in two main aspects of the Health Commission: how it shifted the focus of RF work in Europe from all-European projects to British projects, and how nutrition became the main research project it decided to support in Britain. The answer to these research questions was found in series 700, boxes 3-5, and 9-10. These archival documents enabled me to reconstruct that rapid changes of RF involvement in Europe from 1939 to 1941. Reports and letters from RF officers show how the foundation had to close its Paris office and withdrew from medical projects in many parts of Europe after Nazi occupation of these regions. The Commission's medical agenda prioritized vaccines at the beginning of the war, but gradually shifted to interest in hunger and hunger prevention. After the US entered the war, the Health Commission retreated from all of its European projects and focused solely on nutrition in Spain and in England. The rationale behind the shift to nutrition was, as expressed in one letter, a way to change the nature of medical relief in Europe. The RF medical experts thought that the military was concentrating too heavily on emergency surgeries, but was failing to recognize the emergency of malnutrition. It was the opinion of RF specialists that post-war planning must rely on extensive wartime study of hunger and nutrition in Europe.⁴

The work in Spain is also part of the Anglo-American scientific collaboration that my dissertation explores. Research surveys in Madrid were designed to include British scholars, and were sometimes explicitly conceptualized with the thought of Britain as the proxy for American science in Europe. Of particular interest to my research was the RF's effort to establish scientific collaborations with individuals in the fascist countries –specifically Spain and Portugal - as a way to encourage political collaborations in the future. RF officers looked for “Loyal and enthusiastic supporters of England and America”⁵ in Spain and Portugal, and tried to maintain relationships with their scholarship recipients as a way to build power in the fascist block.



Series 700 includes expansive information on the history of the Oxford Nutrition Survey (1940-1942), a large scale nutritional study that shaped nutrition policy and austerity in the Britain.⁶ This wartime survey was funded by the Rockefeller Foundation Health Commission (RFHC), and correspondence between the foundation and the British scientists includes detailed description of methods, tools, and academic exchange in the context of nutrition studies. Dr. Arnold P. Meiklejohn was appointed by the RFHC to serve as a contact person and oversee the study, and the archive includes records of his visits and his work with Oxford specialists.⁷ Meiklejohn, who was himself British and an Oxford graduate, spent some time in the US where he worked on protein research at Harvard. While at Harvard, he learnt methods that he later brought to the UK (including the Copenhagen methods for protein study). I use him in my research as an example for the deep Anglo-American collaboration in the field of nutrition: a British scholar who established his career in the US and launched an international career by going back to Britain as an RF officer. Immediately after World War II, Meiklejohn became part of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA), leading a group of British nutritionists who treated starving survivors at the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. The archive includes several diaries he wrote as an RF officer. The diaries are of great value for anyone interested in the work of the Health Commission, and the particular trajectories that characterized the career of a British-American-International medical school like Meiklejohn.⁸

Box 9 of this series documents the centrality of the Oxford Survey and how it became the single most important project supported by the RFHC during the war. Discussions about nutrition study, its importance, and how Anglo-American networks of scientific knowledge should relate are documented in correspondence between Wilbur Augustus Sawyer (director of the Rockefeller Foundation International Health Division at the time) and Edward Mellanby (of the British Medical Research Council). Their correspondence also reveals RFHC's role in wartime circulation of knowledge, as experts affiliated with the foundation were sent to train British scientists. It is also noteworthy that the foundation enabled British scientists to access not-yet-published scientific studies from Copenhagen when it was under Nazi occupation. Academic research notebooks were shipped to the US and then to the UK.

Sawyer, Meiklejohn and Mellanby all express the ambitious goals of the Oxford Nutrition Survey. They mention that this project should not just create new knowledge in the research of nutrition in Britain, but, in fact, also set an example and a model for nutrition research and the methods it should use. The Oxford Survey was therefore a training project for British scientists as much as it was a research project. As a report from June 27, 1940 stated: “it was hoped that the Oxford study would demonstrate the usefulness of thorough nutrition studies, and would develop into a training ground for personnel assigned to similar work in other parts of the country.”⁹

My interest in scientific standardization, the emergence of international entities in nutrition, and history of technology led me to examine the role of technology in Anglo-American collaborations in the field of nutrition. RFHC support of nutrition study often took the form of shipment of technology to the UK. In box 9, I examined the specific American scientific machinery and technologies sent to the UK, and how they were selected and shipped. The Red Cross was involved in some of this technological support during WWII. Of particular interest to my work are the American calorimeters shipped to Britain, which replaced the local usage of other calorie measurement tools (such as indirect calorimetry, based on oxygen and heat measurements in a room). Another type of important American technology that found its way to Britain at that time were vitamin capsules. RFHC was not directly involved in the shipping or purchasing of these nutritional supplements, but was indeed involved in the scientific introduction of them. The British Ministry of Health and Ministry of Labor collaborated in winter 1940 in a study of vitamin supplements and their influence on factory workers, a study that was informed by the Oxford Survey and the way in which this survey imported American medical technics to Britain.

The reports also detail the combination of clinical studies (such as weight-height measurements, blood tests, physical exams) and family-based surveys (mostly interviews with housewives about consumption and cooking patterns). The combination of methods was intended to facilitate better studies of public health, and, as the report stated, to handle nutrition deficiencies earlier (clinical exams were considered good only for the diagnosis of severe malnutrition, whereas the more comprehensive surveys were considered to give indications for public health beyond severe illness).¹⁰



I plan to use my research findings at RAC to write a conference paper for the North Atlantic Conference in British Studies (NACBS 2018) and parts of my dissertation chapter on British nutritional studies in the context of international humanitarian organizations. The chapter brings together the abovementioned RF projects in Britain with the analogous nutrition projection of the Carnegie Foundation. In both the chapter and the conference paper, I examine nutrition, international politics and science and see how Britain gained its role as the center for nutritional science in inter-war Europe, partially due to the actions of the Rockefeller Foundation.

*Researchers and scholars interested in nutrition and agriculture in 20th century British Empire are most welcome to contact me at ai2298@columbia.edu

¹ Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC) Rockefeller Foundation records (RF), RG (record group) 1.2, series 405: Scotland Subseries 405.D: Scotland - Natural Sciences and Agriculture

² John Farley, *To Cast Out Disease: A History of the International Health Division of Rockefeller Foundation (1913-1951)* (Oxford University Press, 2003), 129.

³ RAC, RF, RG 1.1, series 700, box 3, folder 21

⁴ June 15, 1943. RAC, RF, RG 1.1, series 700, box 9, folder 59

⁵ April 13, 1943. RAC, RF, RG 1.1, series 700, box 9, folder 50

⁶ In fact, as nutritionists showed, this study and the data collected on pregnancy and nutrition informed medical policy in Britain at least until the 1990s. R. R. Huxley et al., "Nutritional Research in World War 2: The Oxford Nutrition Survey and Its Research Potential 50 Years Later," *The British Journal of Nutrition* 84, no. 2 (August 2000): 247–51.

⁷ RAC, RF, RG 1.1, series 700, box 9, folder 60

⁸ RAC, RF, RG 1.1, series 700, box 5, folder 31

⁹ Report to the RFHC, June 27, 1940. RAC, RF, RG, 1.1 (FA386), 700, 9, 60.

¹⁰ Report to RFHC, August 25, 1941. RAC, RF, RG, 1.1 (FA386), 700, 9, 60.