

No Animal Food: The Road to Veganism in Britain, 1909–1944

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There were individuals in the vegetarian movement in Britain who believed that to refrain from eating flesh, fowl, and fish while continuing to partake of dairy products and eggs was not going far enough. Between 1909 and 1912, The Vegetarian Society's journal published a vigorous correspondence on this subject. In 1910, a publisher brought out a cookery book entitled, No Animal Food. After World War I, the debate continued within the Vegetarian Society about the acceptability of animal by-products. It centered on issues of cruelty and health as well as on consistency versus expediency. The Society saw its function as one of persuading as many people as possible to give up slaughterhouse products and also refused journal space to those who abjured dairy products. The year 1944 saw the word "vegan" coined and the breakaway Vegan Society formed.

The idea that eating animal flesh is unhealthy and morally wrong has been around for millennia, in many different parts of the world and in many cultures (Williams, 1896). In Britain, a national Vegetarian Society was formed in 1847 to promulgate the ideology of non-meat eating (Twigg, 1982). Vegetarianism, as defined by the Society—then and now—and by British vegetarians in general, permitted the consumption of dairy products and eggs on the grounds that it was not necessary to kill the animal to obtain them. In 1944, a group of Vegetarian Society members coined a new word—vegan—for those who refused to partake of any animal product and broke away to form a separate organization, The Vegan Society.

In 1946, Donald Watson, editor of *The Vegan*, thought it “strange that for ninety years vegetarian literature contained nothing to question either morally or physiologically the use of animal foods other than flesh” (*The Vegan*, 1946, p.3). But Watson was wrong, for between 1909 and 1912 the Vegetarian Society's journal, *The Vegetarian Messenger and Health Review (TVMHR)*, published a vigorous correspondence on that subject, a correspondence that resurfaced after World War I.

Dietary habit in particular times and cultures is, of course, part of a much larger picture. For much of human history, people were restricted to a locally produced

subsistence diet and economically tied to the system of food production. In the nineteenth century, however—after the precursor of agricultural improvement—urbanization, industrialization, and transport revolutionized British eating patterns. A middle class with disposable income and a wider choice of lifestyle emerged. One of the choices was deciding what to eat as well as where and how to eat it. Ideas about healthy foods motivated some, and a small minority made the decision on ethical grounds to eat no slaughterhouse products. In the last two decades of the nineteenth century, there was a greater awareness of various aspects of cruelty to animals, and a vigorous anti-vivisection movement arose. In 1891, Henry Salt founded the Humanitarian League to campaign against injustice both to humans (including flogging in schools and prisons) and animals (Spencer, 1994, p. 287). The growth of Theosophy and other Eastern-looking sects also fostered the vegetarian ideal.

So vigorous was the movement in the closing decades of the nineteenth century that there were, in fact, two national societies: the original 1847 one, based in the north of England, and a breakaway London Vegetarian Society (Rudd, pp. 4-5). The Vegetarian Society in Manchester produced a monthly illustrated journal, *TVMHR*, with editorials and articles on different aspects of diet and ethics, news of vegetarianism in other parts of the world, recipes, and letters. The impression received from reading any issue in the first half of the twentieth century is of a solidly middle-class, conservative membership, eager not to be characterized as cranks.

In flesh-food-oriented Britain, declining to eat meat, poultry or fish seemed such an extreme step that few could contemplate going further. Yet, when the ethics of meat eating were questioned, the dilemma of where dairy products and eggs fitted into the scheme of things could hardly be ignored. True, they were not slaughterhouse products, but did they not involve cruelty? Correspondence in *TVMHR* (1909-1912) revealed that the Vegetarian Society already had members who were abjuring such products.

In 1910, C.W. Daniel published what must be counted as the first British vegan cookery book, Rupert H. Wheldon's *No Animal Food*. Daniel, who also published books on mysticism, radical feminism, and alternative medicine, presumably saw enough of a niche market to make such a publication viable. The book began with two essays on why eating animal food was not a good idea—emphasizing the physical (i.e. health) aspects but bringing in ethical, aesthetic, and economic considerations as well. The third part contained a hundred recipes. The book was favorably reviewed by the editor of *TVHMR*. The recipes showed that it was “not at all impossible to obtain a variety of palatable dishes without recourse to either

eggs or milk" (*TVMHR*, 1911, p. 142). The book was subsequently forgotten, and, in 1946, Fay K. Henderson's *Vegan Recipes* was believed to be the first animal-free cookery book (*The Vegan*, 1988, p. 11).

In 1912, Newcombe, the editor of *THMVR*, noted that the movement contained "two classes of vegetarians: those who use eggs and milk (and their products, butter and cheese) and those who do not." The latter were a minority but had strong reasons behind them (1912, pp. 129-131). Newcombe opened the journal to letters arguing the pros and cons. After summarizing the views of the 24 vegetarians who had written in, he concluded, "The defence of the use of eggs and milk by vegetarians, so far as it has been offered here, is not satisfactory. The only true way is to live on cereals, pulse, fruit, nuts and vegetables" (*TVMHR*, 1912, pp. 302-303).

Thus, in the period immediately prior to World War I, the Vegetarian Society appeared to be moving toward what would later be called a vegan diet. A cataclysmic war intervened, but the issue did not disappear. In 1923, editors of *TVMHR* commented, "We feel that the ideal position for vegetarians is abstinence from animal products, and that most of us are, like other reformers, in a transitional stage" (p. 77). Correspondence on the subject appeared at various times in the 1920s. It is impossible, however, to gauge how much pressure on the issue the Society's membership exerted, since the journal's editors obviously exercised their own discretion over what they published. In 1934, for example, the editors commented that they had "recently had a considerable amount of correspondence on the subject of abstention from dairy produce" (*TVMHR*, p. 118)—but none of that correspondence had appeared in the journal. In 1935, the editor remarked, "The question as to whether dairy products should be used by vegetarians becomes more pressing year by year," and he invited the testimony of those who survived without such products (*TVMHR*, p. 235).

After that spate of correspondence, however, there was a long gap until 1942. By this time there were talks and cookery demonstrations being given on vegetarianism without dairy products, and the Vegetarian Society was asked to devote a section of the magazine to this subject. The request was refused, and Watson, secretary of the Leicester Vegetarian Society, and inventor of the word, vegan, started a newsletter in November 1944, which led to the formation of the Vegan Society (*The Vegan*, 1965, pp. 5-6).

The period between 1909 and 1944 saw many changes in British society and attitudes. What, then, about the arguments for non-dairy vegetarianism—did they remain the same, or did they evolve over time? And what about the counter-arguments, which clearly prevailed within the Vegetarian Society? Were they static, or were they, too, modified over time?

Cruelty

The cornerstone of the arguments for what became known as a vegan diet was always the cruelty, inseparable from the acquisition of dairy products, and the linkage of the meat and dairy industries. “Vegetarians, so-called, are responsible for their share of the numbers of cows, calves, and fowls killed,” wrote one correspondent in 1909 (*TVMHR*, p. 104). In 1910, another wrote: “When the cows are old or too badly diseased to be further milched, they become the butcher’s property” (*TVMHR*, 1910, p. 209). In 1912, A.W. Duncan wrote: “As long as we drink milk, eat butter and cheese, or use leather, we are taking part in the slaughter and cruelty to which certain animals are subject” (*TVMHR*, 1912, p. 130). This point was also made in the first vegan cookery book:

It is quite as impossible to consume dairy produce without slaughter as it is to eat flesh without slaughter. There are probably as many bulls born as cows. One bull for breeding purposes suffices for many cows and lives or many years, so what is to be done with the bull calves if our humanitarian scruples debar us from providing a vocation for the butcher? (Wheldon, 1910, p. 60)

Decades later, Muriel Davies contended that “cattle must suffer abuse, captivity and ultimate slaughter so long as milk forms part of our food” (*TVMHR*, 1935, pp. 320-321).

The same connection applied to poultry. “You cannot have eggs without also having on your hands a number of male birds, which you must kill,” wrote one correspondent in 1909 (*TVMHR*, p. 105). Watson also emphasized this point in 1944: “Hens cannot be produced without also producing similar numbers of cocks. In order to maintain the stability of any poultry business most of these cocks have to be killed off.” By 1944, the battery system was appearing, so Watson had the additional argument of cruelty, on top of slaughter, to buttress his case (*TVMHR*, pp.48-49).

However, physical cruelty and the slaughter of male calves were never the sole humanitarian arguments against dairy products, for there was also the cruelty of separating a mother from her offspring. In 1930, Miss A. Fairbank thought it kinder to slaughter a cow “than to force her to calve—tearing away her calf for slaughter that vegetarians (so-called), among others, may be recipients of the stolen milk, cheese and butter” (*TVMHR*, p. 149). In 1943, Leslie Cross wrote that “in order to produce a dairy cow, heart-rending cruelty, and not merely exploitation, is a

necessity. Milk and its derivatives are products of pain, suffering and abominable interference with the law of love" (*TVMHR*, p. 184). In 1944, Dugald Semple wrote that his "experience on the land has convinced me that the use of dairy produce is even more cruel than the use of flesh foods" (*TVMHR*, p. 162). Watson also pointed out that most bull calves were either killed for veal or castrated and reared as bullocks for beef: "In both cases, users of milk must share the moral responsibility." He believed that "the cow feels the loss of her calf in much the same way that a human mother would feel the loss of her child.... Sometimes she will cry for days" (*TVMHR*, 1944, p. 48). By this time intensive farming lent additional weight to his illustrations of the cruelty involved in the dairy industry.

Prior to World War I, lacto-vegetarians tried to counter this argument. In 1911, Florence E. Sexton (who held the teachers' diploma of the Midland Dairy Institute and Kilmarnock Dairy School) insisted that there was "no need for cruelty.... A dairy cow should, and generally does, have a placid and comfortable existence." Although it was true that her calf would be removed each year, few cows "really fret after a calf, provided they are not allowed to see or lick it, and if it is placed so far away that they cannot hear it." As for the supposed interdependence of the meat and dairy industries, "If there was a demand only for milk and none for meat, the bull calves could be humanely destroyed at birth" (*TVMHR*, 1911, pp. 192-193). In 1912, Henry Kirk did "not think that either cow or calf suffer much from the separation when they never see each other. Both, when kindly and judiciously treated, seem to enjoy life" (*TVMHR*, p. 202). No such arguments surfaced later.

Health

In the early twentieth century the idea that eggs, cows' milk, cheese, and butter were inherently healthy foods for human beings was so ingrained that anyone arguing that people would be better off without them had an uphill struggle. Nevertheless, the idea that a dairy-free diet might be healthier than one that included such products dates back to the pre-World War I period, largely because of tuberculosis. In 1909, a correspondent wrote that milk drawn from a cow in a shed in winter entered "air thick with fetid germs, which the milk quickly absorbs....The conditions make the animal tuberculous" (*TVMHR*, p. 104).

In 1910, a correspondent wrote, "the domesticated bovine species is becoming generally tuberculous through centuries of bad feeding and abuse in the milking of cows" (*TVMHR*, p. 109). Whatever the reason, the transmission of this disease was still a major issue in 1944. According to Watson, between 40 and 70 per cent of the

country's dairy cows were infected with tuberculosis, and at least 40 per cent of the cases of non-pulmonary tuberculosis in children were due to infected milk (*TVMHR*, pp. 50-51).

There were, however, other arguments in favor of a dairy-free diet as healthier. In 1912, Semple did not believe that milk and eggs were natural foods for man: "Eggs were meant to produce chickens and not omelettes; and cow's milk is a perfect food for a calf, but most assuredly not for a grown-up human being" (*TVMHR*, p. 237). In 1934, H. Valentine Davis took up the same theme, "The custom of using cows' milk for infants, and for those who have outgrown infancy, is unnatural...in many ways it is a most undesirable and dangerous liquid" (*TVMHR*, p. 166). Others argued along the same lines.

Some provided evidence from personal experience, after giving up such products for ethical reasons. In 1923, A.H. Mitchell wrote that he had "always worked strenuously and long and I find an improvement on the past animal-product period of feeding, compared with the non-animal-product period" (*TVMHR*, p. 200). By 1944, W.H. White and C.V. Pink had reared children at the Stonefield Maternity Nursing Home without dairy products. Watson quoted Pink as stating that "as a result of close observation, we have no doubt at all that a diet derived exclusively from the vegetable kingdom is better even than one that contains dairy produce" (*TVMHR*, p. 79).

In the wider culture, however, dairy products were touted as healthy and natural foods for children and adults, and some lacto-vegetarians echoed this. In 1912, the editor of *TVMHR*, who accepted the moral arguments against their use, still thought that,

...eggs and milk when carefully selected, are pure foods....They have not been through the wear and tear of life and, therefore, do not contain the broken down tissues, the refuse of the body which is so objectionable a component of every piece of flesh which a meat eater swallows. (*TVMHR*, 1912, p. 131)

In 1923, H. Light, a vegetarian though not "a vegetable-arian," argued against the anti-dairy case that "the exceptional longevity of the people of certain nations is attributed to the fact that milk forms a very large proportion of their dietary" (*TVMHR*, p. 185).

Many decades later, large dietary studies proved the effect of cholesterol on the arteries, especially the coronary arteries, and scientists and public opinion turned from eggs and milk products as cardiologically incorrect.

Consistency versus Expediency

Those who adopted a dairy-free diet argued that to call oneself a vegetarian for ethical or humanitarian reasons while continuing to partake of any animal products was inconsistent. Determined lacto-vegetarians, however, contended that consistency was an impossible ideal. Light, in 1923, and G. Harry Lewin, in 1942, were two correspondents who used Emerson's denigration of "foolish consistency" as the "hobgoblin" of little minds (*TVMHR*, 1923, p. 186; 1942, p. 38).

The Vegetarian Society's journal, itself, tackled the charge of inconsistency on two occasions:

The vegetarian, to be consistent in relation to his philosophy of life, ought not to resort to dairy produce, but in doing so he may be regarded as taking one step at a time in the accomplishment of a great reform. (*TVMHR*, 1934, p. 403)

As far as we are aware, few vegetarians, however strict they may be, would claim the impossible, namely, absolute consistency.... The ethical argument against flesh-eating is unassailable, and thus, from the point of view of making most progress in eliminating the undoubted horrors of the traffic in flesh foods, a far wider, and more successful, appeal is possible if the public is asked to proceed "step by step." (*TVMHR*, 1942, pp. 8-9)

The contention that lacto-vegetarianism was merely a transitional stage between meat eating and true vegetarianism was made very early on. In 1912, A.S. Hunter wrote, "I have always considered these [eggs and milk] as transitory—i.e. to be used in moderation while we await a more humane diet" (*TVMHR*, p. 164). Kirk agreed in considering "the use of milk and eggs by grown-up people as transitory, to be used in moderation, while we await (and strive for) a more humane diet" (*TVMHR*, 1912, p. 202). Even at that time, a correspondent, Eric Mackenzie, commented that the trouble with this philosophy was that "people await a more humane diet until life has passed away. In the meantime they contribute largely towards the slaughter of cockerels and calves." He, himself, had "no sympathy or patience with those who say they cannot live without animal secretions" (*TVMHR*, 1912, p. 238). In 1935, William Langford wrote:

A "half-way house" may offer an excellent means of habituating oneself to the change over, and it may have to be inhabited for a fairly long spell;

but if we can never get beyond that, our movement is rather futile.
(*TVMHR*, 1935, p. 235)

By 1935, the Vegetarian Society had summed up the position: “The lacto-vegetarians, on the whole, do not defend the practice of consuming the dairy products except on the ground of expediency” (*TVMHR*, p.321). A correspondent in 1929 wrote that even with the use of dairy products “our flesh-eating friends look upon our diet as monotonous. How then are we to lead them into our more humane and healthier way of life?” (*TVMHR*, p.104). In 1943, in response to a strongly worded letter by Cross condemning dairy products, J. R. Clark wrote a long, thoughtful reply, agreeing with Cross that there was “no moral justification whatever for the use of dairy produce.” At the same time, Clark emphasized, it was a challenge to reconcile this position with living in the real world. Clark and his wife were keen on walking, cycling, and travelling to different parts of the country by train or—in peacetime—by car. Trying to find dairy-free products in villages without a health food shop, when milk was added to all vegetable margarine and even to some bread, was a nightmare. “Like Mr. Cross,” wrote Clark, “I do not crave for eggs, milk, butter, cheese...but I do want to live a full life” (*TVMHR*, 1943, pp. 163-164).

To the purist like Cross, if one did not give up all animal products one might just as well be a cannibal. A pragmatist like Clark, on the other hand, could see the risk of isolation. By renouncing eggs and dairy products a vegetarian could “hardly take any refreshment at the table of the orthodox feeder.” Clark asked if those who abstained from fish, flesh, and fowl but were able to travel about the world were not “in a better position to further the cause of vegetarianism by subtle propaganda, than are those who shut themselves off from the world like Trappist monks?” (*TVMHR*, 1943, p. 202). Ultimately, this was the view of the Vegetarian Society and explains why forming a completely separate Vegan Society proved necessary.

Conclusion

No correspondent in any period after World War I attempted to argue that cruelty was not a necessary component of the dairy industry; by then, the ethical argument for what became known as veganism had been won. A mistaken belief, however, was that lacto-vegetarians and the vegetarian movement as a whole somehow would automatically evolve to the next stage. Giving up fish, flesh, and fowl was already perceived as such a drastic step that the abstention from dairy products and eggs as well seemed too extreme to contemplate. Indeed, many of the letters written to *The Vegetarian Messenger* between 1912 and 1944 were about how, not

whether, to adopt such a diet. Accompanying Watson's powerful polemic in 1944 was the summary of a lecture given by Eva Watson entitled "Eliminating Dairy Produce: How the Difficulties can be Overcome" (*TVMHR*, pp. 38-39).

Always, a substantial minority of Vegetarian Society members at the very least minimized their use of dairy products and eggs. As the interim between World War I and World War II brought greater mechanization and brutality to animal husbandry, consciences that had tolerated subsistence farming were stirred into action. "Why did we do it then of all times?" Watson later asked himself about the formation of The Vegan Society. "Perhaps it seemed to us a fitting antidote to the sickening experience of the War, and a reminder that we should be doing more about the other holocaust that goes on all the time." (*The Vegan*, 1988, p. 11).

The above makes the break seem a positive choice, with the creation of a separate group identity for those who abjured all animal products. In reality, however, it appears that they were pushed rather than pulled into this. According to the Vegetarian Society's general secretary, "following a year of argument in *The Vegetarian Society's* official magazine and this Society's refusal to have an active non-dairy group within its organization" (Rudd, 1957, p. 112), Watson's only option was to form a completely new society. He asked his original readers for comments on a name, since *non-dairy* was too negative. His own word, *vegan*, won the day, has become internationally understood, and appears in modern dictionaries. At the time *The Vegan Society* was set up, his newsletter was being sent to 500 readers, and the first printed edition of its successor, *The Vegan*, 1946, ran to a thousand copies.

The Vegetarian Society has continued to claim that the priority is to persuade the largest possible number of people to give up flesh, fish, and fowl and that trying to convince them to give up dairy products and eggs as well would be counter-productive. The growing number of animal-free food products, an increasing readiness of restaurants to prepare such meals, proliferation of ethnic cuisine in which dairy products were never a major feature, and strong health arguments, however, have gradually been transforming the situation in Britain for those who want to eat no animal food.

Note

¹ Correspondence should be addressed to Leah Leneman, Department of Economic and Social History, The University of Edinburgh, William Robertson Building, 50 George Square, Edinburgh EH8 9JY, United Kingdom. The idea for this paper came about while I was researching an entirely different subject, generously funded by the Faculty Group of

Law and Social Sciences, University of Edinburgh. (The outcome of that project—which may also be of interest to readers of this journal—was published in Leneman 1997). Having subsequently discovered the existence of vegans within the Vegetarian Society some 35 years before the word was invented, I submitted an article based on that material to this journal; referees' comments encouraged me to take this research further, into the period between World War I and World War II. I am grateful to Richard Farhall, current editor of *The Vegan*, for sending me copies of articles in the more recent issues, as cited. Graham Sutton's comments on an earlier draft greatly improved the final version, as did the comments by the two anonymous referees.

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