

J. D. McDougall

Read to Lincoln College Farmer's Conference by Dr A. M. Nicol, 17 May 1982.

John McDougall's early contact with Lincoln College was during the 1960's in a search for information on crossbreeding in sheep. The College was quick to identify him as a bright, well-informed, articulate Wairarapa hill country developer and very soon Sunnyside Station became firmly fixed on the circuit for B. Agr. Sc. on their annual North Island student field trip.

These visits to Sunnyside were noteworthy to students and staff alike. John's infectious enthusiasm for his farm and farming practices could not but be appreciated. Not only would the techniques of North Island hill country management be explained in detail and the attributes of Border cross sheep in hill country be discussed, but there was usually a practical demonstration. For example, John always seems to manage to steer the visiting group onto the most exposed ridge of Sunnyside before advising that one of the highest daily wind runs in New Zealand has been recorded on the anemometer at Sunnyside.

Individual students have also been incorporated into John's farming enterprises for short-term practical work periods.

In 1965 John McDougall increased his sphere of interest by purchasing a hill property on Bank's Peninsula – Bowenvale, which was joined later by Mount Vernon. This was very thoughtful of him as Bowenvale is much closer to Lincoln than the Wairarapa and these properties were immediately used and continue to be used for Dip. Ag. And Dip. F. M. student field trips.

Until the appointment in 1969 of a manager for Bowenvale this property was supervised by Lincoln staff. Student labour erected all the subdivision fences which still stand and slashed gorse in preparation for farm forestry.

Meanwhile back at Sunnyside, John was pursuing his belief that the productivity of New Zealand sheep and cattle could be improved through the objective measurement of traits of economic importance. The challenge as he saw it was to identify the productive animals.

John McDougall's commitment to and innovation in applied animal breeding is well known. For example he established a unique screening programme for beef cattle. By offering commercial beef producers a market premium he purchased their top weight heifers, he screened 20,000 heifers buying 1,000 from some 70 different properties.

Intimate involvement in beef cattle improvement did not mean that sheep improvement was neglected. He fully records 1,000 Coopworth ewes and 5,000 ewe lambs are followed through their hogget and two-tooth lambing. In fact he claims to be the largest private user of Sheep and Beefplan and his commitment to livestock improvement has meant a deep involvement in the Federation of Livestock Breeding Groups, the New Zealand performance Registry and in the Coopworth Society.

I understand his faith in the productivity of New Zealand livestock is based to some extent on the fact that 18 out of 30 Melbourne Cups have been won by New Zealand horses – indeed one was called McDougall.

John's contribution to Lincoln has not only been through hosting student field trips. His enlightened approach to employment on farms has attracted young people. His early acceptance of the need for farm employees to own their own house, to live in rural communities with their associated services and not be tied to isolated farm cottages shows a most responsible and respectful attitude to farm labour.

His unique system of "block" managers who co-operatively yet competitively run particular parts of a property has given his managers real responsibility and decision making experiences which has developed in a number of cases into partnership arrangements.

This ability to pick the right young man and allow him to extend himself has not only given young farmers opportunities, but has allowed John to follow other interests. He is an inventor of some note. He developed in conjunction with Whitcull's a cardboard crate for air-freighting week old lambs around the world.

John's confidence in his staff gave him the opportunity of spending one year at Clay Centre, the United States Department of Agriculture beef cattle breed evaluation centre where he furthered his interest in breed improvement and took time to set-up a large commercial sheep enterprise.

His wide commitments have in no way removed John from practical farming. He is equally active in the shearing shed and the lecture room. His ability to tell exactly the same stories every year in the tailing pens is legendary. It is one thing to achieve what John McDougall has done but quite another to explain one's actions and philosophy fully and simply with patience and sense of humour. He has done this on many occasions to student groups, farmers and conferences. I understand that some of this well reasoned argument is due to his wife Marg who has acted as a very solid sounding board for his ideas.

John is most approachable. He is always willing to talk to, and be interested in even the most inexperienced student of Lincoln staff member and to pass on his opinions and knowledge. This has made student visits to him most relaxed and informative.

I have much pleasure on behalf of Lincoln staff and students in presenting John McDougall as the 1982 recipient of the New Zealand Society of Animal Production's Lincoln College Centennial Award.