



DONALD WATSON: VEGAN SOCIETY FOUNDER & PATRON

Interview by George D. Rodger on 15 December 2002

Q: Where and when were you born?

A: I was born on 2nd September 1910 at Mexborough in South Yorkshire, into a meat-eating family.

Q: Tell me about your childhood.

A: One of my earliest recollections is of holidays on my Uncle George's farm where I was surrounded by interesting animals. They all "gave" something: the farm horse pulled the plough, the lighter horse pulled the trap, the cows "gave" milk, the hens "gave" eggs and the cockerel was a useful "alarm clock" – I didn't realise at that time that he had another function too. The sheep "gave" wool. I could never understand what the pigs "gave", but they seemed such friendly creatures - always glad to see me.

Then the day came when one of the pigs was killed: I still have vivid recollections of the whole process - including the screams, of course. One thing that shocked me was that my Uncle George, of whom I thought very highly, was part of the crew. I decided that farms - and uncles - had to be re-assessed: the idyllic scene was nothing more than Death Row, where every creature's days were numbered by the point at which it was no longer of service to human beings.

I lived at home for 21 years and in the whole of that time I never heard a word from my parents, my grandparents, my 22 uncles and aunts, my 16 cousins, my teachers or my vicar on anything remotely associated with any duties we might have to "God's Creation".

On leaving school, I went to be an apprentice woodworker with another uncle. When I was 21, and due to become a craftsman, we found ourselves in the economic slump of the early 1930s and I discovered that craftsmen could become woodwork teachers by qualifying through the City and Guilds. With a bit of trouble I managed it and liked the job so much that I never tried to get any kind of promotion.

Q: You are 92 years and 104 days old as of today. To what do you attribute your long life?

A: I married a Welsh girl, who taught me a Welsh saying, "When everyone runs, stand still", and I seem to have been doing that ever since. That must be part of the answer, because so many people are running towards what I see as suicide, performing habits that everyone knows are dangerous. I've always accepted that Man's greatest mistake is trying to turn himself into a carnivore, contrary to natural law.



Inevitably, I suppose, within the next ten years one morning I won't wake up. What then? There'll be a funeral, there'll be a smattering of people at it and, as Shaw forecast for his own funeral, there'll be the spirits of all the animals I've never eaten. In that case, it will be a big funeral!

Q: When did you first become a vegetarian?

A: It was a New Year Resolution in 1924, so I haven't eaten any meat or fish for 78 years.

Q: Tell me about the early days of the Vegan Society.

A: In the two years before we formed a democratic Society, I literally ran the show. From the response that I had -

thousands of letters - I feel that if I hadn't formed the Society someone else would have done so, though it might have had a different name. The word "vegan" was immediately accepted and became part of our language and is now in almost every world dictionary, I suppose.

I can't help comparing our attractive quarterly magazine with my humble "Vegan News" which I produced at great labour. Normally I spent a whole night assembling the various pages and stapling them together. I'd limited the number of subscribers to five hundred because I couldn't cope with a bigger number.

Compared with democracy, dictatorship has obvious advantages. In the early days of "Vegan News" I could do everything my own way. I don't think I could have survived if I had had to write to the few people concerned and ask for their opinion. I had no telephone and no motor car - I could only hope that they would see my point, until I handed over the work to a committee.

Q: How does your veganism relate to any religious beliefs you may have?

A: I never had very deep ones. I've never been clever enough to be an atheist – an agnostic, yes. Some theologians think that Christ was an Essene. If he was, he was a vegan. If he were alive today, he'd be an itinerant vegan propagandist instead of an itinerant preacher of those days, spreading the message of compassion.

I understand that there are now more vegans sitting down to Sunday lunch than there are Anglicans attending Sunday morning service. I think that Anglicans should rejoice at the good news that somebody at least is practising the essential element in the Christian religion - compassion.

Q: What do you find most difficult about being vegan?

A: Well, I suppose it is the social aspect - excommunicating myself from ➔



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➤ that part of life where people meet to eat. The only way this problem can be eased is by veganism becoming more and more acceptable in guest houses, hotels, wherever one goes, until one hopes one day it will become the norm.

Q: And the other side of the coin: what do you find easiest about being vegan?

A: The great advantage of having a clear conscience and believing that scientists must now accept conscience as part of the scientific equation.

Q: How important has gardening been in your life?

A: When I lived in Leicester a friend let me use an allotment. When the crops matured, I had to wheel them back four miles to the other side of the city. When I was lucky enough to get a job in Keswick, I got a house with an acre of garden, which was a dream come true.

My compost bins are filled with all the weeds, grass mowings, vegetable waste from the garden, dead leaves - no animal manure. By the way, all my digging is done with a fork - not a spade - to preserve earthworms.

Q: What are your views on genetically modified organisms?

A: As the old saying has it, if a thing seems too good to be true, it probably is too good to be true, and I'm sure this is a classic example, quite apart from the irreversible genetic nature of what is our basic food supply in the future.

Q: What are your views on blood sports?

A: I think it's the bottom of the barrel. However necessary we may feel that, having got into this mess, we have to kill some creatures for their own good, to kill creatures for fun must be the very dregs.

Q: What are your views on animal experiments?

A: I said that cruel sports were the bottom of the barrel, but I think I'll have to move even them up one and put vivisection at the bottom. One thing we should always ask when we

think that cruelty is largely delegated to the people who perform it is the simple question, if these butchers and vivisectioners weren't there, could we perform the acts that they are doing? If we couldn't, we have no right to expect them to do those things on our behalf.

Most orthodox medicines are tested on animals, and this perhaps is the greatest inconsistency in vegetarians and vegans who take orthodox medicines - a more serious inconsistency even than wearing leather or wool because these are by-products of industries that are primarily there to provide meat.

Q: What are your views on direct action?

A: I've never become involved in it. I respect the people enormously who do it, believing that it's the most direct and quick way to achieve their ends. If I were an animal in a vivisection cage, I would thank the person who broke in and let me out but, having said that, we must always remember: is it just possible that our act could be counter-productive? I'd rather not say "yes" or "no" because I don't know the answer to that.

Q: What do you consider the greatest achievement in your life?

A: Achieving what I set out to do: to feel that I was instrumental in starting a great new movement which could not only change the course of things for Humanity and the rest of Creation but alter Man's expectation of surviving for much longer on this planet.

Q: Do you have any message for the many thousands of people who are now vegan?

A: Take the broad view of what veganism stands for - something beyond finding a new alternative to scrambled eggs on toast or a new recipe for Christmas cake. Realise that you're on to something really big, something that hadn't been tried until sixty years ago, and something which is meeting every reasonable criticism that anyone can level against it. And this doesn't involve weeks or months of studying diet charts or reading books by so-called experts - it means grasping a few simple facts and applying them.

Q: Do you have any message for vegetarians?

A: Accept that vegetarianism is only a stepping stone between meat eating and veganism. There may be vegans who made the change all in one leap, but I'm sure that for most people vegetarianism is a necessary staging post. I'm still a member of the Vegetarian Society to keep in touch with the movement. I was delighted to learn that at the World Vegetarian Conference in Edinburgh the diet was a vegan diet and the delegates had no choice. This little seed that I planted 60 years ago is making its presence felt.

Q: What do you think of the way the Vegan Society has developed since you were running it?

A: Better than expected, certainly. The genie is now out of the bottle and no one can ever put it back to the ignorant days before 1944, when this seed was planted by people full of hope. Now wherever Man lives he can have a vegan diet.

All the early work was done by volunteers. In a way, everyone the Society has ever paid to do the office work has all been volunteers. Even our Chief Executive is on a wage at the very bottom of anything that is paid in the commercial sector. Because we can afford nothing more. So the Vegan Society has always, in that sense, been supported by voluntary labour. And we're enormously grateful to these people because heaven knows what would happen if they all packed in.

Q: In what direction do you think the Vegan Society should go in the future?

A: I hesitate to suggest anything to a movement which seems to be going well and spreading world wide. The edifice that survived all attacks before we started our work is now crumbling because of the inherent weakness of its own structure. We don't know the spiritual advancements that long-term veganism - over generations - would have for human life. It would be certainly a different civilisation, and the first one in the whole of our history that would truly deserve the title of being a civilisation.